

## THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY IN A POST-MODERN WORLD

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### Introduction

One can hardly begin a discussion of any area of theology without acknowledging that what we call theology has a parent called religion. Sometimes to understand the child, the offspring, we have to first of all try to understand the parent. To discuss 'The Role of Theology in a Post-Modern World' one must venture into a discussion of the role religion has played and continues to play in the development of humanity.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, will help us understand the role of theology; especially in relation to one of humanity's primary endeavors, that has not changed throughout the ages and is still at the heart of human quest in this post-modern age. This is the quest for purpose and meaning. This need is articulated well in Norman Pittenger's claim that "human life requires (also) a growing sense of belonging, of fulfillment, of self in acceptance... it requires some glimpse of a deeper, shall I say cosmic acceptance so that he can feel that his 'subjective aim' is identified with what a Christian would call a 'subjective aim' of Deity itself..."<sup>3</sup> A discussion of our topic must therefore address the issue that is central to the theological enterprise, which is the search of purpose and meaning in the human experience. This is as central today as it ever was, in our present time that is deemed

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<sup>2</sup> Norman Pittenger, "Process Thought: A Contemporary Trend in Theology," in *Process Theology, Basic Writings by Key Thinkers of the Major Modern Movement*, ed. Ewert H. Cousins (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1971), 23-35.

<sup>3</sup> Pittenger, "Process Thought: A Contemporary Trend in Theology," 33.

as the Post-Modern World.

Our discussion must also ask the question of whether purpose and meaning are still treated as legitimate dimensions of the human experience; and if so, can religion, and consequently theology, still play a central role in understanding human experience. We will proceed with the discussion of our topic under five headings:

- The place and the role of Religion in human experience
- Religion and Theology: The relationship
- Post-Modern: Understanding the term and its affiliates
- Post-Modern thinking and the teachings of Jesus
- and the place of theology in the discourse on human expectations and experience in the twenty-first century

### **The Place and Role of Religion in Human Experience**

Let us therefore begin with where I think our discussion should start. We start with the phenomenon that has dominated human experience probably more than any other. This phenomenon is religion. It is one that would not subside, and would not go away. Religion just will not die in spite of the reading of its eulogy at several points in history. One of the loudest voices in this assault on religion was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). He once wrote, "God is dead: but considering the state of the species Man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown."<sup>4</sup> Religion persists and the belief in God stands firm in spite of Nietzsche's expectations. Not that the quest to rule it as archaic and irrelevant has not persisted. Nietzsche's sentiments have been reflected in the writings of several persons down to our own time.<sup>5</sup> If the questions raised by religion were totally irrelevant to human

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die frohliche Wissenschaft* (Chemnitz: Verlag von Ernst Schmetitnet, 1882), Book 3 Section 108.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Harries, *God Outside the Box* (London, England: SPCK, 2002), 72.

existence, then this peculiar human experience along with all its questions would have long disappeared. It would have been reduced to a 'shadow', to quote Nietzsche. That it, along with its sibling theology has persisted would seem to suggest that religion and theology and the bundle of questions about human existence and experience that they pose are as relevant today as they ever were.

The variants and the twists and turns in the human journey have not yet developed a formula to kill it off. It survives at its worst moments and triumphs at its best. In spite of the reading of its eulogy at several points in history, it is very much alive, it just will not die.<sup>6</sup>

Religion has history and time on its side. It has been embedded in the human psyche and manifested in human behavior as far back in history as we are able to trace. One track of the fascinating journey of the History of Religion takes us to Africa, to ancient Egypt, where we find some of the earliest manifestations of religion. There is evidence from the Ancient Egyptian collection termed '*naqada 1*' that dates between 4400 to 3000 BCE, that indicates that religion was a significant phenomenon in Egyptian society in this early era.

Religion and religious activity were deemed as the primary concerns of the community. The Pharaoh was deeply involved in the function and preservation of the religious experience. One writer claims "...all the way back in Archaic and Predynastic times, when the cult place was a simple reed hut, the places were in essence the "Home of the God" and thus a place where only Pharaoh as the Son of God and those he appointed as his deputies, could meet with the god."<sup>7</sup>

From then until now, religion has dominated the human

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<sup>6</sup> Harries, *God Outside the Box*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> K.M. Jonsson, "Ancient Egypt Online," *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, <http://www.philae.nu/akhet/history/html> (accessed February 7, 2011).

quest for purpose and meaning. The efforts to relegate it to the realm of irrelevance in this human quest, efforts to destroy it, and in its place implant humanism, Marxism, Communism and secularism have not worked. The communist experiment collapsed and religion persists. The prevalence of religion in the world is reflected in a survey of 2005 that lists religious adherents in relation to the world's population as follows:

Christianity	2.1 Billion – 33% of world's population
Islam	1.5 billion - 21%
Hinduism	900 million - 14 %
Chinese Traditional	394 million - 6%%
Buddhism	376 million - 6%
African Traditional	300 million - 6%
Sikhism	23 million - 0.38%
Judaism	14 million 0.22 % <sup>8</sup>

These figures indicate that some eighty-six percent of the world's populations are adherents of some form of religion. Only fourteen and sixteen percent are categorized as 'non-religious'. But even here some fifty percent of these would classify themselves as theistic; that is, they believe in a supreme-being but are non-religious, that is, they do not adhere to any religious tradition. Religion persists and just will not go away, but why?

Religion will not go away because it touches on an area of our humanity that nothing else seems capable of adequately addressing, no matter how hard we try. It responds to a niche in the human psyche that nothing else seems capable of fulfilling and satisfying.<sup>9</sup> It raises the type of questions about meaning and

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<sup>8</sup> "Major Religions of the World," Adherents, [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html) (accessed February 7, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Burke, *The Major Religions* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2004), 2ff.

purpose and destiny for which other human pursuits fail to provide adequate answers. The questions will not go away and religion persists. The reduction of the traditional indicators of religion, like going to worship should not be interpreted as a decline in religion.<sup>10</sup>

Religion matters. It continues to influence and shape the world in a way that few other things can. Just take a look at the present confrontation between the Western world and radical Islam as represented by 'al Qaeda and the Taliban. This is at the very core a religious conflict. It can be interpreted as a conflict between those who deemed themselves the guardians of Western Christian values and those who are convinced that their role is to adhere tenaciously to the values of Islam, spread these values, and remove all those who stand in the way. The issues are religious ones with political and economic implications. It takes a bit more than a good working knowledge of current affairs and politics to understand the issues that are at work here. They are about far more than politics and financial hegemony. At the heart of it all is religion.

### **Religion and Theology**

It is out of religion that theology emerges. As defined by John Macquarrie, theology is, "...the study which through participation in reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the context of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."<sup>11</sup> If religion is more about the structural basics: belief, cult, ritual, and moral behavior, then, theology is about the reflection on these and the construction of theoretical/philosophical structures that seek to understand them and explain them and the relationship between them. Where there is religion there is

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<sup>10</sup> Harries, *God Outside the Box*, ix ff.

<sup>11</sup> John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, England: SCM Press, 1966), 1.

theology and vice versa.

It is against this background that we can discuss the topic of this paper. Out of the topic leap two important terms, these are “Theology” and “Post-Modern”. Let us, at this stage, create a working definition of theology in relation to its parent, religion. The definition that will take us forward sees theology as: a reflection on belief, cult, ritual, and moral behavior and the construction of theoretical/philosophical structures that seek to understand them and explain them and the relationship between them. The above is a good working definition of theology that can assist us with our discussion of our topic.

### **Post-Modern: Understanding the Term and its Affiliates**

Our topic links ‘theology’ to ‘post-modern’. But what do we mean by the latter? The term ‘post-modern’ leads us to three related terms, ‘modernism’, ‘modernity’, and ‘post-modernity’. An understanding of these terms can help us to grasp, even better, the term ‘post-modern’. Indeed the word ‘modern’ has some interesting understandings that can be useful for our discussion. When used as a sociological or historical term, ‘modern’ denotes the era of history and all the developments stretching from the end of the Middle Ages to present day. It however, connotes more than a time line. It captures the spectrum of activities that have combined to move humanity from the Middle Ages to the present. Science and technology, theology and philosophy, culture and sports are all part of the package.

Out of this understanding of the term ‘Modern’, emerges ‘modernism’, and ‘modernity’. These two have acquired some subtle nuances of meaning that can distinguish them for the term ‘modern’. Modernism can be given a strictly sociological definition or a more nuanced theological one. The Oxford Reference Dictionary offers the first type of definition:

Modernism is a broad term used to refer to a whole range

of individual artistic movements and artists, mostly in the first half of the twentieth century. The emphasis tends to be on form rather than content and represents a deliberate program to challenge traditional (often nineteenth-century) forms of expressions associated with narrative and representation, to the often questioning basic tenets relating to Western civilization and human progress.<sup>12</sup>

In the theological use of 'Modernism,' this term is used to refer to a theological movement in the Roman Catholic Church that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. It represented a radical departure from traditional Roman Catholic theology and argued that its dogmas and liturgical forms were 'only symbolically true'. Its basic aim was to promote liberalism in theology.<sup>13</sup>

The elements of challenge and change surface in each definition. Modernism is to be understood against a background and indeed in a context of traditional understandings and patterns of life that are deemed to have outlived their relevance. It can be placed in the grove of the process of constant change that characterizes history.

It is this element of challenge that agitates for change that is at the same time a reaction to previous traditions and understandings of life that is the bond holding 'Modern' and 'Modernism' together. It is the same bond that links them to our other term, 'Modernity'. Anthony Giddens provides for us a more extended definition. He describes modernity as a shorthand term for modern society, or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, he claims, it is:

1. A certain set of attitudes toward the world, the idea of the

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<sup>12</sup> Angus Stevenson, ed., Joyce Hawkins (Oxford University Press, NY, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Alan Richardson, "Modernism," in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Allan Richardson (London, England: SCM Press, 1972), 221.

## *The Role of Theology in A Post-Modern World*

- world as open to transformation, by human intervention;
2. A complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy;
  3. A certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society--more technically, a complex of institutions--which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past.<sup>14</sup>

For some persons, however, 'modernity' signifies a negative understanding of life and reality. According to Hutson Smith, Modernity induces us to believe that there is no right higher than the right to choose what one believes, wants, needs, or must possess.<sup>15</sup>

There is surely an affinity linking the three terms, modern, modernism, and modernity. The same link leads us to the term 'Post-Modern'. At face value the term would mean the condition existing after the conditions of modernism and modernity. Let us look at the term 'Post-Modern'. One writer has argued that: "...post-modernism, particularly as an academic movement, can be understood as a reaction to modernism in the Humanities. Whereas modernism was primarily concerned with principles such as identity, unity, authority, and certainty post-modernism is often associated with difference, plurality, and skepticism."<sup>16</sup> Some of the characteristics sound like a number of the basics of

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<sup>14</sup>Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 94.

<sup>15</sup> Hutson Smith, *The Soul of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2005), xxiii.

<sup>16</sup> "Post-modernism," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/postmodernism> (accessed February 7, 2011).



Christianity, especially as these are enunciated by Jesus in the Gospel tradition. His outreach to the poor and the gentiles and his denunciation of pharisaic piety all seem to bear a stamp of difference, and plurality with - . If so, the thinking called may not be too modern in more ways than one. There are other definitions of post-modernism. It can also be described as: “a general and wide-ranging term which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism among others. Post-modernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality.”<sup>17</sup> It espouses a different understanding of reality:

Reality - according to is not simply mirrored in human understandings of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. Or this reason, post-modernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person.

As Francis S. Collins has claimed, post-modernism (post-modernist philosophy) “...argues that there are no absolute rights or wrongs and all ethical decisions are relative. In other words, there is an emphasis on the freedom and indeed the right of the individual to make decision unencumbered by traditions and customs. There seems to be some affinity here to ‘situation ethics’.”<sup>18</sup> is a reaction to modernism that had evolved into a condition that is not too modern. It is a question of what was radical change yesterday can become the rigid quo today.

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<sup>17</sup> “Postmodernism,” PBS: Faith and Reason Glossary, <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreasongloss/postm-body.html> (accessed February 7, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966).

All this suggests a shift in focus away from a rigid structured community format to the individual. Post-modernism puts up a red flag in response to the 'one size fits all' approach to reality. It underlines the value of individual thought and shows an appreciation for diversity. The 'one size fits all' approach has of course been the foundation of some of the most despicable acts of humanity; Racism, Genocide, fascism, and many forms of extremism have found a home in this approach. These leave no room for the peculiarity of the individual.

Post-modernism ensures that the individual does not become lost in the crowd with its preference for what has been described as "...playful attitudes and individualistic innovation more than a formal school of thought."<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis on the experiential and individuality of course runs counter to what the world may deem as necessary for survival and stability. Societies of all shades and shapes do not take kindly to the experiential and individuality. We are easier to manage in groups. The herd mentality can function as one of the most effective means of control. The other side of this is that the world does not cope well with difference. The history of humanity is full of persons who dared to think and act differently and were deemed threats to their society. "From Jesus to Gandhi, from Martin Luther King to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar from Galileo to Hans Kung, the story is the same. Differences can be deemed as threats and eliminated, incarcerated or deemed illegitimate."<sup>20</sup>

### **Post-Modern Thinking and the Teachings of Jesus**

But our understanding of as emerging out of our definitions seems to suggest some similarities with the teachings of

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<sup>19</sup> Mortimer Chambers, et al, eds., *The Western Experience* (Boston: McGraw Hill 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2003), 1154.

<sup>20</sup> Harries, *God Outside the Box*, 47ff.

Christianity as hinted earlier. Should this be the case then that there is surely a place for theology in the Post-Modern world even if we have to be clear about this place.<sup>21</sup>

When we place the teachings of Jesus within the context of first century Judaism, and then try to read them through a post-modern prism, they seem to focus on the place of the individual in God's plan of salvation. Attention is paid to the individual as in . Jesus' ministry as laid out in the Gospels was a ministry that drew the individual out of the crowd and addressed his/her issue. This is graphically illustrated in the story of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) and the story of the sick woman in (Mark 5:24-34). It is made in an even more profound manner in the question posed by Jesus to Peter in the story of Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi as set out in St. Matt 16:13-20:

**But who do you say that I am**

(vv. 15b)

Or to do a bit of Midrash here:

Yes, yes, I hear and I know what all the others are saying

But what are you saying, what is your opinion

**Who do you say that I am?**

This approach of Jesus must however be placed within a wider context, that of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of a communal concept that emphasizes the love and care of the other person.<sup>22</sup> The parable of the Good Samaritan, that of Dives and Lazarus, and the Sermon on the Mount all emphasize the central importance of communal/brotherly responsibility that Jesus proclaimed as one of the qualifications for entry into the kingdom.

The same point is made in the story of the encounter with

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<sup>21</sup> David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," in *Readings in Modern Theology*, ed. Robin Gill (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 225-235.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1975), 107ff.

God as judge in Matt 25. Here the recurring theme "... as you did to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to me..." emphasizes the importance of communal/brotherly responsibility.

Christian theology, as built on the teachings of Jesus, holds together in tension a strand that pays attention to the individual - the one that can synchronize with post-modernism - and one that emphasizes communal responsibility - the one that may be at variance with. It is not an 'either/or' but rather a 'both/and'. It is this tension between these two legitimate understandings of life that provide theology with a relevance that post-modernism has not been able to replace.

### **Post-modernism and Human Experience and Expectations**

At this stage we can safely say that Post-modernism raises some legitimate questions about human experience and expectations that lead us to revisit some inherited assumptions about the place and the role of the individual in society. However, it does not, and indeed, cannot negate the questions raised by theology and most likely does not intend to do so.

We have seen that there is some commonality but there are also some significant differences. The questions raised by theology remain relevant and legitimate in a postmodern world. They do because the world as we experience it does not seem to provide or is even capable of providing all the answers to a wide range of questions raised by the experiences it generates. These are questions that theology can legitimately address and for which it can provide some insights that other areas may not be capable of providing. Theology is still very relevant in the postmodern era. There are, for example, the questions and issues relating to the purpose and meaning and significance of life to which it seems theology can provide the most adequate response in this Post-modern world. Let us now take a look at some of these questions and issues.

There is, first of all, a cluster of question and issues

in relation to human origin, purpose and destiny, questions that are still relevant in the post-modern world. They are relevant because they take us through the façade of the material world to the very core of human existence and experience.

Religion has long resisted the theories that seek to interpret the origin of humanity solely on terms of the convergence of certain forces of the natural world. Without denying the value and findings of science or the somewhat reductionist truism of the writer of Genesis 3:19 that "...you are dust, and to dust you shall return..." religion and Christian theology have insisted that there is more to life than death. This 'more' has been articulated in terms of life beyond death but also in terms of the value of life before death. These are two of the foundational pillars upon which Christian theology has been constructed. The conviction that there is life beyond death of course predates Christianity, but Christianity picks up the conviction and presents it in relation to the beliefs about Jesus as Lord.

There is, of course, a close link between the belief in life beyond death and the need to treat life as having value before death. This is another of the important points made in the St. Matthew passage quoted above. Of course the understanding that great value must be attached to life is peculiar neither to religion nor theology. It exists outside of both. It can be numbered among what Kluckhohn has termed six 'Ethical universals', which are:

1. Prohibition against murder (wanton killing within the in-group)
2. Prohibition against stealing within the in-group
3. Prohibition against incest, and other regulations on sexual behavior
4. Prohibition under defined circumstances against lying
5. Regulations and stipulations regarding the restitution and reciprocity of property
6. Stimulation of mutual obligation between parents and children

These he describes as "...the product of universal human nature

which is based in turn, upon a common biology, psychology, and generalized situation.”<sup>23</sup> When they are embodied in religion and theology, a dimension is added that transforms them into far more than a collection of ethical norms that function to relegate behavior in a community. They are linked to the divine and so become part of the prism through which human activity is to be viewed and assessed.

This understanding that runs counter to the humanist approach establishes a foundation on which the values that guide humanity as well as the agitation for these values can be grounded. These values can be encompassed within what we deem as human rights.

We can argue that theology has a role to play in a discussion of any of the critical issues of human origin and destiny that confront humanity today. It is to maintain a perspective to ensure that the discussion is maintained at a level where humanity is seen to be far more than a product of the forces of nature.

A second critical issue of the post-modern world to which theology can speak with a powerful and probing voice is the issue of Human Rights. Post-modernism with its bias towards individualism, will also connect naturally to the human rights issue.

It can be pointed out, however, that although the issue of human rights has been with us from the very dawn of time when they are grounded in religion and theology they are given a status that cannot be annulled no matter how often they are discarded by humanity. They are treated as supra-human, that is, divine.

Theology lifts the issue to another level and argues for a dimension to the struggle that connects it to the belief in a God of justice. As such, theology transforms the struggle into one that is

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<sup>23</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn, “Ethical Relativity Sic et Non,” in *Culture and Behavior*, ed. R. Kluckhohn (Oxford, England: Free Press Glencoe, 1965) 285.

built on a moral imperative that stands firm no matter how often or by whom it is violated.

Given the continuing concerns for Human Rights in this Post-Modern age, there is a place for theology with its convictions about the divine connection to humanity through the traditions of creation and incarnation. These traditions affirm the importance of each individual in the world and place the grounds for this importance outside of the confines of humanity. The creation tradition not only highlights the love and power of God, but also the value of humanity. The same can be said of the Incarnation.

The ongoing discussion on human trafficking (which is a Human Rights issue) and other violations of Human Rights can find sound theological support in the biblical tradition. In other words, there is relevant theological input that can be drawn into the discussion.

We are all appalled by the recent revelation that between 1946 and 1948, the USA, in research on STD's, infected over seven hundred persons in Guatemala with STD's. Prisoners, mentally challenged persons, and prostitutes were infected without their knowledge. They were used as Guinea Pigs. In our post-modernism work, there is an outcry against this injustice. Theology has a legitimate voice in this.

Theology is able to ground its voice of protest in a solid biblical theology. The Priestly declaration of Gen. 1:26-27 is a section of the cornerstone:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The theology of the incarnation is the other cornerstone. Together they constitute a solid foundation upon which theology can stand and protest the human rights violations in all their many manifestations.

Theology, therefore, has a role to play in preventing any reductionist understanding of the value of human beings. Its role is keeping the discussion on Human Rights in the realm of the moral imperative and so ensures that the correct questions are put when these rights are violated.

A third issue of the post-modern world to which theology has a legitimate call is the discussion of the environment. Standing firmly on the creation tradition we are to be seen as guardians of the earth and not its owners.

In the creation story, the divine command to humanity, placed in the garden that is on earth, is to take care of God's creation *leahbedah we leshamerah* - reads the Hebrew which can also be translated as: to cultivate and to preserve and protect. The charge here is that given to a steward. There is a heavy responsibility laid upon humanity. We are answerable to the one who owns the earth (garden) and has placed us in it.

A similar idea that can support an environmental theology is found in Deuteronomy. In this book the land (earth) is Yahweh's. It is leased out to humanity (Israel) who remains *ger*, "tenant" but never becomes owner.<sup>24</sup> Deuteronomy articulates this responsibility in the care for wild life, that is, the care for the environment:

If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young.

(Deut. 22: 6)

The Psalmist in Ps. 104 emphasizes an unbreakable link

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (London, England: SPCK, 1978), 45ff.



between God and the environment. Vv. 10-14 captures the very essence of the bond:

You can make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth.

This powerful bit of creation theology portrays Yahweh as creator and benefactor. The Yahweh speeches in Job 38-41 make the same point. Yahweh is not only creator; he is also provider and sustainer. Our Lord's comment of the birds and the vegetation in Matt 6:25-33 makes a similar link between God and the environment. All this creates a solid base upon which we can construct our theology of the environment. It is a theology that protests the destruction of the environment for selfish gain. Deforestation, over-fishing, contamination of water supply, and over-mining (or doing so in the wrong places) are all affronts to the creator.

The present threats to the Arctic and Antarctica, rainforests, oceans and other delicate environmentally balanced sections of God's creation are not only environmental concerns but theological ones as well. They represent these threats, a human arrogance, a *hubris* that is driven by selfishness and political hegemony.<sup>25</sup> There is a role for theology here.

As *ger*, we have no right to destroy. Our role, the mandate given by the creator is to protect and preserve and pass it on to the

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<sup>25</sup> On the Biblical understanding of this, cf. Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (London, England: SPCK, 1969), 111,128, 274, 347.

next generation. In the words of the chief character of the film *'Lilies of the Field,'* Brother John, played by Sydney Poitier, "We are just passing through."

In the context of post-modernism, with its individualistic approach to life, a theology of the environment points us to the communal responsibility for our greatest charge, the earth.

The fourth area in which theology can engage in an enlightened discussion in our post-modernism world is the present economic condition of the world. Theology can address the recent economic meltdown, a situation that reflects many traits of post-modern thinking.

Over the last few years we have been following the economic challenges that have cropped up around the world with some devastating fall-out. The condition in the USA is the one we are following closely and most likely, it is the one that will have a greater impact upon the rest of the world. It is good to hear that things are beginning to improve.

Efforts are being made to correct what has gone wrong. We have heard the many interpretations of what has gone wrong and why things have gone wrong. We have been offered many solutions to put them right. From the position of one who is not trained in economics or business, or politics, I would tend to identify a somewhat obvious player in all of this, humanity, as where we should look to find the primary problem. I would go on to say that it is an unwholesome human element that is at the core of what has gone wrong. The greatest and most efficient systems we create are in the hands of human beings who are prone to all types of weaknesses. The dictum of Murphy's Law: *Anything that can go wrong will go wrong*, seems to find support in the current financial crisis.

The economic crisis touches on one of the basic convictions of theology. It is the conviction about human sin. This theological concept is articulated in many varied ways, but it touches on the point of human limitations. Any analysis of the

conditions of humanity must take this on board. Because of human frailty, things can go wrong. What we think can work well and should work well can attract some very negative human elements that can pit it wrong. The Wall Street crisis is a case in point. But there can be no simplistic analysis that ignores the complexity of the world's economic systems on one hand, or the complexity of humanity on the other hand. I would argue that the most complex element in it all is humanity. The minds that put the vulnerable complex systems together must surely be more complex than the systems but just as vulnerable. Here is a factor that we still cannot fully understand and whose actions and motives we cannot accurately predict. Humanity is a complex enigma.

Theology approaches the present condition of the world while paying attention to the human element. It is this context that theology's effort to hold the positives and the negatives of humanity in tension becomes relevant. The consciousness of the tension prevents us from taking our feet off the ground and closing our eyes to reality, as it never allows us to abandon hope; hope built on the conviction that what is today, as bad as it seems, need not be the same tomorrow. It is this tension that bedevils humanity that is captured in St. Paul's wrestling match in Rom 7: 19-27

- (v. 19) "... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."
- (v. 23) "... but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

He almost surrenders to the opponent:

- (v. 24) "... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

But concludes on a note of victory:

- (v. 26) "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our

Lord!”

So then even is the complexity remains:

- (v. 27) “...So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”<sup>26</sup>

There is a sense in which for the Christian and, consequently, for theology, there should be few surprises in relation to human behavior. If we live conscious of the tensions in humanity so clearly articulated by St. Paul, our surprises will be minimized. Those who carved out the theology of the fall many centuries ago were wrestling with this tension. A dimension to the tension was holding in tension a good and gracious powerful creator God and frail humanity.<sup>27</sup>

It is within this theological context that the Church can respond to the present economic crisis. It does so standing on a tradition that can speak to the two broad approaches that can be placed under the two banners of the capitalist approach and the socialist approach.

We can embrace the parable of the talents where the right attitude and proper investments reap good profits. We can also embrace the parable of the laborers in the vineyard where things are tightly managed so that all may benefit. In the latter parable, there is a strong socialist conviction that each person in the community deserves a fair share of the pie and there is no automatic right of one group to have an excess over the other.

The world has moved and drifted between two positions. We have had the strong socialist approach of the seventies with

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<sup>26</sup> Gunther Bornkamm, *Paulus* (Stuttgart, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1969). 126ff cited by Brendan Byrne, “Interpreting Romans: The New Perspective,” *Interpretation* 58, no. 3 (2004) 241 - 252.

<sup>27</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962-1965), 154-160.

Michael Manley, Forbes Burnham and liberation theology, all against a backdrop of a strong socialist Eastern Europe and Cuba. We have had Thatcherism and Reaganomics and, to a lesser extent, Bushism with the free and wild market that was proclaimed to be the salvation path for the world. The collapse of the managed socialist systems of Eastern Europe only served to cement this conviction. And now we have been pushed to the edge of the precipice and the questions about the very nature of capitalism that can be driven by a strong element of human greed, are being asked again. The approach of world leaders like President Obama is in many ways a tempering of the rabid capitalist approach. Marx is probably laughing in his grave.

The irony, however, is that the greed that brought capitalism to its knees can be the primary driving force that rebuilds it. We are driven by the call for more in the *Oliver Twist* story. We are greedy by nature. Greed touches on a number of theological convictions. This human weakness was identified very early in the history of the Church as one of the seven deadly sins (wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, gluttony).<sup>28</sup> Here theology attempts to connect some areas of negative behavior to the belief in a good and gracious creator who wants his creatures to be only the best. It connects these types of behavior to dire consequences, primarily beyond this life. But there are also consequences this side of heaven. If greed creates a system that is almost a type of free-for-all where people are driven by profit and greed with little concern about the welfare of the weak and vulnerable and even the environment; such a system sows the seeds of its own destruction with the type of disastrous consequences we saw recently.

Capitalism, left unchecked, develops into a beast that gobbles up the weak and vulnerable. It creates a moral problem

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<sup>28</sup> On the place of sin in modern theological discourse, see David Kelsey, "What ever happened to Doctrine of Sin," in *Readings in Modern Theology*, ed. Robin Gill (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 236-246.

and consequently a theological challenge. We need to keep it in check. In spite of all its many good points, it plays on a side of human nature that can create a wave of problems. Of course, the same can be said of a system that stifles our God-given freedom, dulls human initiative, and seeks to control every element of human endeavor. Here, there is no space for creativity and experiment. The elements that can lead to self-destruction are also present.

There is, therefore, the need for the balance as Jesus preached. We need to hold the lessons of the parables of the talents and the laborers in the vineyard in tension. These parables are as relevant in the post-modern world as they were when first spoken.

The slowdown in the world's economy raises not only economic questions but theological ones as well. It is a development that has effected most, if not all of our institutions, including the Church. There are the questions about the moral responsibility of those most responsible for the condition. This leads us to a fifth area in which theology has a natural place in our post-modern society. This is the area of morality. There are two assumptions about humanity that are critical for this area of discussion. One is that each human being has a conscience and so can make moral choices between right and wrong.<sup>29</sup>

The assumption connects naturally to the second which is a theological one. This is that God has created humanity in his image and so has granted to each human being this sense of morality. As such, therefore, theology anchors morality outside of the realm of humanity, so that no one can claim to escape its demands.

Immanuel Kant is one of the philosophers who has helped us to clarify this area of human thinking. He developed the theory

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<sup>29</sup> Ronald Preston, "Conscience," in *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie (London, England: SCM Press, 1974), 66-68.

of the 'categorical imperative' which is sometimes referred to as the 'moral imperative'. Kant argued the imperative to be a dictate of pure reason, and claimed that not following the moral law was seen to be self-defeating and thus contrary to reason.<sup>30</sup>

When we take the moral imperative idea into theology, it is understood to be a 'divine voice' speaking through humanity. For the theologian, therefore, the moral imperative points us beyond all that we can construct or imagine and lodges the origins and the demands of morality outside of the dictates of human power and control in God.

This thinking places morality at the very center of the human endeavor. As such, it supersedes every changing age and outlives every human fad. In our post-modernism world, morality is still central to human behavior. It remains an indispensable factor in every human action.

## **Conclusion**

We can safely claim at this point, that given the matter with which we are dealing on one hand, and the role and nature of theology on the other, there is a place for theology in the present post-modernism world. The basic issues and concerns for humanity have not been removed, indeed cannot be removed by post-modernism thinking. We of course can bring different and fresh interpretations to bear on these issues and concerns. But the specimen to whom these are directed remains the same throughout the years.

The voice of theology has been one of the powerful voices in human history. It has raised the type of issues and posed the type of questions that cannot be ignored. It continues to be powerful and relevant. Post-modernism may invite us to look again at our understandings of society and humanity. It can pose

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur Rogers, *A Student's History of Philosophy* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1971), 376 - 403.

some creative and probing questions about these issues. But it can never provide all the answers.

Theology provides a range of answers that remain relevant simply because they create a perspective of human experience that other areas of human thinking may be tempted to ignore or relegate to a secondary position. Theology forces us to ask questions about purpose and meaning in a manner that other disciplines do not. It accepts human frailty and understands its strengths. It posits a power outside of the realm of human frailty. This power is God who functions as our bedrock of hope.

Humanity at all stages of its development, in every era has found it difficult to function without hope. Today, in our post-modernism world, we too need hope and the one in whom it is grounded, God Almighty. In spite of all our developments and discoveries, human experience raises a number of questions for which theology can still provide the most adequate answer.



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