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THEOLOGICAL WORLDS IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Collision, Chaos, or Complementarity?

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The United Church of Christ has been accused of theological vacuity and doctrinal amnesia, often being dismissed as "Christianity light" or the "Untied Church of Christ." Frequently the complaint is that the UCC has substituted the uncritical evocation of religious sentiment or political fervor for rigorous theological reflection. As Roger Shinn has observed, critics have scoffed that theology in the United Church of Christ is little more than "a series of ad hoc opinions usually added on to some practical concern," with "an occasional invocation of biblical and doctrinal proof texts on a basis of convenience."¹ According to some critics, this alleged tendency to use theology to justify positions adopted for ulterior reasons is rooted in the UCC's antiquated habit of regarding the truth of certain religious experiences and socio-political values as being self-evident. According to the UCC's detractors, the naïve "modernist" belief that the meaning of concepts like "love" and "justice" is immediately clear to all right-thinking people dissuades the denomination from engaging in any serious theological conversation that presupposes the contested nature of all religious convictions.

This caricature misdescribes the actual theological situation in the UCC. The problem with the UCC is not a paucity of theology, but is rather an embarrassment of theological riches. A kaleidoscopic superabundance of theology has characterized the UCC from its inception, generated by the irenic experiment of uniting four very different traditions and a multiplicity of "hidden histories." Inspired partly by the Reformed view that God transcends all human efforts to formulate divine truth, the UCC has exhibited a commitment to the revelatory freedom of the Holy Spirit and has resisted

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the definition and enforcement of doctrine by a coercively authoritative ecclesial magisterium. As a venerable UCC mantra puts it, creeds and confessions function as testimonies, not as tests, of faith to guarantee doctrinal uniformity.

As a wedding of very different ecclesial traditions, the United Church of Christ has always been hospitable to a variety of very divergent theologies. Interestingly, the individual components of this variety do not neatly correlate with the different heritages of the four major predecessor denominations of the UCC, for they were already flourishing in each of the ancestor traditions. In spite of this shared ancestry in each of the predecessor denominations, these trajectories are so different that they may be said to constitute different "theological worlds,"² animated by different visceral hopes and fears. Each world revolves around a different assessment of humanity's most fundamental problem, proposes a different form of ultimate satisfaction, and encourages a different type of religious experience. Each one has practiced a different theological method, corresponding to the specific passions that propel it. Each one has construed the essence of Christianity differently, with different understandings of God, Christ, humanity, and salvation. Each one has left an enduring legacy, evolving over time, sometimes waxing and sometimes waning, but showing no signs of disappearing. This essay will attempt to sort out the major differences among these worlds and trace a bit of their histories. The nature of each world is not primarily evident in the type of arguments advanced to defend their respective claims, or even in the doctrinal propositions that typify them. Rather, the essential features of these worlds are most clear in the imagery that informs them, the vocabulary that structures them, and in the rhetorical strategies that advance their purposes. In identifying these worlds, the nature of the assumed audience, the voice of the writer/speaker, and the underlying affective mood are just as important as the explicit theological affirmations. Attending to these features leads to a somewhat different classification system than the older and somewhat misleading categories of "conservative," "liberal," "neo-orthodox," "fundamentalist," etc., and more easily accounts for the porous nature of the boundaries between them. In order to illumine the distinctive characteristics of these worlds, this essay will examine the work of ecclesial leaders and theologians who have been influential in the public life of the United Church of Christ, often serving on crucial committees, organizing movements, and generating denominationally sponsored writings.

THE WORLD OF ESTRANGEMENT AND RECONCILIATION

One of the most prominent and pervasive theological worlds in the history of the UCC is animated by the dialectic of "estrangement" and "recon-

ciliation," terms which recur with regularity in the works of its proponents. Here the central problem afflicting humanity is alienation and hostility, for individuals have cut themselves off from God, from the cosmos, from the human community, and from themselves.³ Social groups have fared no better, but have constructed formidable barriers of suspicion and enmity across the globe. Without grace, citizens of this world are lonely, haunted by the suspicion that the universe may be indifferent or unfriendly.⁴ The craved resolution is the demolition of all the barriers of fear, guilt, and selfishness that isolate individuals from God and one another so that a cohesive cosmic community, vibrant with mutual affection, trust, and delight, can flourish. Humanity yearns for an ultimately secure and intimate environment in which the polarities of finite/infinite, self/other, and Creator/creation are experienced not as dichotomies but as complementarities. In describing the human problem, the rhetoric of this world is disjunctive, juxtaposing polar opposites in order to set the stage for the resolution of the dialectical tensions. The good news is that God, who alone has the power to heal these divisions, is at work in individual lives, in human history, and even in nature transmuting division into unity-in-difference, a process that will be consummated either in the temporal future or beyond time. All reconciliation at the horizontal level of human society must be rooted in a more fundamental reconciliation at the vertical level with God. Exemplars of this world have gone by many names, none of them adequate, ranging from "neo-orthodox" to "post-liberal." Often it has been associated with the orientation of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, although its scope is much broader, including many who would otherwise be labeled as evangelicals or neo-liberals. This theological orientation encompasses the Christocentric pietists of the Evangelical Synod, who in some instances were more indebted to Schleiermacher than to Barth, as well as the proponents of the Mercersburg movement, whose theology predated Barth. Many of the architects of the UCC, including most of the authors of the *Statement of Faith* shared this world, guaranteeing that its language would be very prominent in the denominations' founding documents.

Each theological world possesses a different understanding of the authoritative guidelines and norms for Christian life and faith, and a different understanding of how these guidelines and norms function. Given the profound sense of human incapacity, including cognitive incapacity, this world gives priority to Scripture as the basic source of Christian truth. However, the notion that the words of Scripture are directly identifiable with the Word of God, conveying inerrant propositions about all matters of fact is alien to this world. Rather, the revelation of God to Israel and the early church is mediated through human words and therefore through culturally situated language. When Scripture is used worshipfully and illumined by

the Holy Spirit, the human words function as the indispensable vehicle of God's Word. As William Bradley, a professor at Hartford Theological Seminary, observed in 1962, this view of Scriptural authority enabled many UCC members to avoid the extremes of liberalism's reduction of the Bible to an expression of human religious experience and fundamentalism's undialectical identification of the text with the Word of God.⁵

This understanding of Scripture as God's Word in, with, and under human words has a long history in the UCC. Many of these themes were implicit in the article on "Faith" in *The Basis of Union* of 1957 with its declaration that we bear witness to "that faith in God which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments set forth," and which we are "duty bound to express in the words of our time as God Himself gives us light."⁶ Similarly, the "Preamble" to the *Constitution of the United Church of Christ* affirmed that "it [the church] looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures."⁷ This theme has resurfaced in the history of the denomination whenever the appreciation of the authority of Scripture has seemed to be waning. The first Craigville Colloquy held in 1984, organized to promote grassroots theological reflection, expressed concern that listening for God's word in Scripture and the Christian heritage was being neglected, reaffirmed the Bible as "the trustworthy rule of faith and practice," and maintained that "Christ speaks to us unflinchingly in the prophetic-apostolic testimony."⁸ Similarly, in 1993 the founders of Confessing Christ, a movement initiated to foster "joyful and serious theological work" within the UCC, issued a letter reminding the church of its commitment to "listen to God's Word in Holy Scripture."⁹

In this theological world the church's ongoing life of prayer, proclamation, and service provides the indispensable hermeneutic context for the interpretation of Scripture. The high valuation of the historic confessional and liturgical traditions of the church is evident in the foundational documents, including the *The Basis of Union* which lauds the ecumenical creeds and evangelical confessions of the Reformation.¹⁰ In the same way the Preamble to the *Constitution* and Article V uphold the continuing value of the ancient creeds and insights of the reformers.¹¹ The Mercersburg Society, founded in 1983, as well as the Order of Corpus Christi, founded in 1987, both emphasize the need to embrace the confessional and liturgical traditions of the ecumenical church as they have evolved through the centuries.¹² The first Craigville Colloquy presented the creeds as aids in interpreting Scripture and appealed to the historic consensus of the church on theological basics.¹³ In the 1980's the impact in the seminaries of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* and the "linguistic turn" in philosophy and cultural studies revitalized the appeal to doctrinal traditions, on the grounds that all knowledge and religious experience are culturally constructed and therefore dependent on some inherited conceptuality.¹⁴

In the world of estrangement and reconciliation this emphasis of the Bible and the confessional tradition has functioned to counteract appeals to the independent authority of individual or corporate experience. This world is deeply sensitive to the ease with which the church can uncritically absorb the "common sense" and values of the enviroing society and fall into cultural captivity. This anxiety was evident in the *Statement of Faith* and other founding documents that intentionally echoed the "no other lord" language of the Barmen Declaration and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1979, the Biblical-Theological-Liturgical Group organized by Frederick Trost issued a brief statement warning of the church's bondage to civil religion, bourgeois culture, managerial techniques, and other ersatz authorities that beguile the church away from Scripture and tradition.¹⁵ Along the same lines, in 1983 thirty-nine UCC faculty persons signed "A Most Difficult and Urgent Time," expressing fear that theological reflection in the denomination had degenerated into utilitarianism and ideological posturing and calling for more theological grounding for the policies of the church in the gospel as mediated by the confessional heritage.¹⁶ In 1984 the letter of the Craigville Colloquy also cited the Barmen Declaration in calling for theological reflection that avoids identification with any ideology.¹⁷ Similarly, in 1993 the founding document of Confessing Christ summoned the church back to the theological basics in order to prevent subservience to cultural fads.¹⁸

In this theological world, the meaning of Scripture is often sought in its narrative structure. Scripture is neither a compendium of doctrinal propositions nor a reservoir of evocative symbols expressing the religious experience of ancient peoples. Rather, the Bible recounts the story of God's deeds from creation to consummation. Although the story may not refer in all instances to empirical events in time and space, the pattern of the narrated activity accurately illumines the true character of God and invites believers to situate themselves in this cosmic epic. This interpretive orientation was inspired partly by the biblical theology movement of the 1950s, epitomized by G. Ernest Wright's construal of the Bible as the recitation of God's mighty acts, and by Karl Barth's interpretive practice, treating Scripture as the portrayal of the unique identity of Jesus Christ. As Roger Shinn has argued, the prominence of narrative hermeneutics was evident in the very structure of the 1959 *Statement of Faith* that reflected the sequence of the "economic" activities of the persons of the Trinity in creation, redemption, and consummation.¹⁹ Similarly, Elmer Arndt²⁰ and Allen Miller,²¹ two influential theologians at Eden Seminary, observed that the statement testifies to God's deeds and thereby invites our response. The missive from the first Craigville Colloquy also described theology as the recital of God's mighty acts.²² Gabriel Fackre's many books concerning the Biblical "story" have kept this narrative approach to theology in the limelight, giving this

theological orientation a new methodological sophistication through the use of literary critical theory.²³

This foregrounding of God's mighty acts has been inspired by the conviction that the problem of estrangement is so deep and pervasive that only the agency of God can ultimately remedy it. Eschatological images and the language of "new creation" and "consummation" pervade the discourse of this theological world, for humanity must be reassured that God is powerful enough to remove all the daunting obstacles that block intimacy with God. Accordingly, God is described as the ontologically perfect, superlatively powerful "Wholly Other," qualitatively superior to humanity in being and value, whose desire to have fellowship with humanity is purely gratuitous.²⁴ God is imaged primarily as a strong parent who welcomes back the prodigal, offering intimacy and protection.²⁵

When read in this narrative fashion, the fulcrum of the Biblical story is located in the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The Bible, including the Old Testament, must be viewed from a Christocentric perspective. In much of the literature of this theological world, Christ has been described as the point of contact between divinity and humanity, and therefore the doctrine of the incarnation has been explicitly foregrounded. For Elmer Arndt, the center of Christianity is God's self-giving love enacted in Jesus, for "he is the bridge which God has thrown over the chasm which separates us from God."²⁶ Apart from Christ, the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humanity would leave humanity feeling lost and alone.

This Christocentric sensibility was powerfully operative in the public language of the new denomination in its formative years, as is evident in the description of Christ as the church's "sole head" in the Preamble to *The Constitution of the United Church of Christ*.²⁷ The importance of the doctrine of the incarnation (although without the conceptuality of "nature" and "person") is implied in *The Statement of Faith's* affirmation that in Jesus Christ God "has come to us and shared our common lot."²⁸ Elmer Arndt's small pamphlet on the *Statement of Faith* declared the doctrines of incarnation and reconciliation to be the foundational tenets of the church.²⁹ Similarly, in 1962 Douglas Horton described Jesus as God's entry into human life in order to disclose God's self and impart a share of the divine life.³⁰ This Christocentrism has endured in the denomination, becoming explicit whenever the centrality of the person and work of Christ has seemed to have been jeopardized. The letter of the first Craigville Colloquy reminded the church of its Christocentric nature and elaborated the ethical and social consequences of this incarnational orientation.³¹ Similarly, the General Synod of 2005 resoundingly reaffirmed the confession that Jesus Christ is sovereign over the church and reaffirmed the cross, crown, and orb as symbols of the denomination.

The Christological focus undergirds the construal of Christ's work as the "reconciliation" necessary both because of the ontological gap separating the Creator and the creature and because of the barrier that sin has erected between humanity and God.³² The language common in this world suggests that the condition from which we are saved is not so much God's retributive justice as it is self-imposed isolation from God and neighbor, motivated by the simultaneously anxious and prideful desire to secure our own private well-being in a seemingly indifferent universe. The movement of the Christian life is from self-generated estrangement from God to joyous reincorporation into God's family. God's gracious enactment of solidarity and intimacy with humanity was basic for most of the leaders of the founding generation.³³ Accordingly, the theological principles articulated in 1961 for the new UCC curriculum stressed the good news of God's love that heals the breach and restores relationship with God.³⁴

In all of this early literature, metaphors of intimacy between God and humanity abounded, suggesting that the reconciling God takes the lonely into fellowship, awakens trust in the anxious, and reassures the discouraged.³⁵ The Christian life in this world is typically described as an "I-Thou" encounter with God in Christ, a personal relation of such extraordinary value that it confers meaning on all of life.³⁶ Allen Miller maintained that God does not reveal truths about God's self, but rather manifests God's own loving personhood. In this world God is not an object to be known but a mysterious presence to be acknowledged with appreciation, commitment, awe, and wonder. Faith, this profound trust in God's empathy, is certainly not produced by the human spiritual quest for transcendence, but is elicited by God's initiative through the Holy Spirit, from which flow all godly virtues, values, and actions. Out of gratitude, the reconciled individual will embrace a reconciling way of life. Faith is the indispensable root of the joyful obedience whose fruit is the pursuit of shalom.

Given this world's focus on reconciliation, the church is described primarily as a community that celebrates the removal of all barriers between humanity and God.³⁷ The word "fellowship" recurs regularly to characterize the essence of the church.³⁸ As Robert Paul observed, "...our ecclesiology must point to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, or it will compromise its essential testimony . . . it is to point to a **communal expression of what God revealed to us about the divine nature in Jesus Christ.**"³⁹ Because the message of reconciliation seems counter-intuitive, the church's mission must involve the explicit proclamation of the surprising news of God's love for the alienated world. As a witnessing community, the church's own instantiation of communal care and concern is a witness to God's relatedness to all human beings.⁴⁰ This evangelism by means of both word and deed presupposes that the message of reconciliation is both explicitly taught and

also caught from those already celebrating it.

Among the heirs of the Mercersburg movement this connection between the doctrine of reconciliation and ecclesiology has been expressed even more strongly and was given institutional form through the founding of the Mercersburg Society in 1983. Proponents of this sacramental and incarnational spirituality have typically stressed the organic union of the church with Jesus, made accessible through the church's central act of worship, the Eucharist, and all Christians' common baptism into Christ's one body.⁴¹ Fragmentation is overcome through incorporation into the body of Christ, the foundation of all reconciliation. The Mercersburg tradition's expansive ecumenical vision is rooted in its core convictions about the reality and power of the incarnation rather than in any Enlightenment-style toleration. The unity of the church is not the product of a shared quest for justice or of a common religious experience, but is grounded in Christ's very real presence in it. In the Mercersburg tradition the language of reunion and home-coming becomes extravagant. The reconciling work of Christ in the church will expand beyond the ecclesial sphere and catalyze the healing of the rifts in society, eventually effecting the renovation of the entire cosmos. The whole world will be infused with the love of God and all enmities, all forms of alienation, will be healed.

THE WORLD OF BENEVOLENCE AND REFORM

The theological world of estrangement/reconciliation was by no means the only powerful theological impetus in the new denomination. In fact, some Congregationalists vociferously denounced "neo-orthodoxy" or "the Barthian viewpoint" as an old-fashioned return to an obsession with sin and a consequent failure to support social progress.⁴² An equally powerful and persistent stream in the history of the United Church of Christ perpetuated many of the impulses of the older Social Gospel and "modernist" movements in spite of the blows to human self-confidence dealt by two World Wars and the Great Depression.⁴³ Sometimes labeled "neo-liberal," its central passions were two-fold: the celebration of God's creative benevolence and the commitment to the moral reformation of the individual and society.⁴⁴ Of course, the world of estrangement and reconciliation had also stressed the theme of doing God's will in the world, but it had regarded such endeavors as the fruit of God's restoration of friendship. The inhabitants of this world of "benevolence and reform" did not share the experience of an alienation and incapacity so devastating that only the recreation of the human heart by grace and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth could even begin to heal it. For them, the "Barthians" had underestimated the continuing operation of God's creative power in all the processes of nature and history.⁴⁵ The theologians of benevolence and reform saw more

continuity and less disjunction between God's creative and redemptive work. They did not express a yearning for a cosmic reconciliation of such magnitude that only God's sovereign agency could secure it, but rather felt relatively at home in this created order. However, the theologians of benevolence and reform were troubled by the realization that individual lives have been stunted by fear, shame, and sloth, and that the social order has been poisoned by systems of injustice and selfishness. By refocusing on God's love and creative energy, wayward humanity could begin to overcome these forms of vice. As Daniel Day Williams remarked, "God has lent us a spark of His creative power, so that within limits we control the conditions of our life."⁴⁶ These neo-liberals, like their nineteenth-century forebears, were motivated by a sense of being loved by God to strive to grow spiritually and to rehabilitate human society. For them, Jesus' proclamation of God's love for the individual and the "Kingdom" (or "Reign") of God displaced the doctrine of incarnation as the heart of the Christian gospel. Here the powerful legacy of one strand of nineteenth century German theology, that stretching from Albrecht Ritschl through Adolf von Harnack is evident. In the early twentieth century the influence of Ritschl and various German "mediating" theologies was particularly strong at Union Seminary (New York), Oberlin, and Eden Seminary, with the twin emphases of Christ's love for the individual and the imperative to enact the gospel in the public arena. Through exposure to various adaptations of these theologies, several generations of ministers were immersed in the theme that Christianity is not a doctrine but a life of personal sanctification and social reform. However, unlike the (often erroneous) caricature of the nineteenth-century liberals as naïve enthusiasts for human progress and moral prowess, the "neo-liberals" were sufficiently cognizant of human sin to insist that the ultimate remediation of the human predicament does require a special revelation of God's love and internal empowerment by God's Spirit.

This more positive assessment of life in the world has had inevitable and enduring epistemological consequences. Trusting in God's presence in human cultures, the citizens of the world of benevolence and reform have continued the earlier nineteenth century liberal project of reconceptualizing traditional theological concepts in light of modern knowledge and values. Their intended audience has been educated, socially concerned, and largely prosperous participants in the humane traditions of Western culture. For Yale theologian Robert Calhoun, traditional appeals to revelation can only be accepted if they resonate with reason and experience.⁴⁷ Although revelation is essential, truth claims based on external authority must be justified by correlating them with the depth dimensions of human experience and culture.⁴⁸ Consequently, it has been imperative for these theologians to develop an analysis of the most general dynamics of human experience in

order to distinguish enduring, progressive, and healthy values and convictions from culturally relative, reactionary, and pathological ones. Accordingly, the Bible was construed as an expression of the religious experience of ancient Israel and the early church inspired by God's Spirit.⁴⁹

In this correlation of experience and revelation many neo-liberals have perpetuated Ritschl's and Harnack's distrust of metaphysical claims about the universe, preferring to interpret Christianity in terms of ethical striving. Implicitly, they have followed Kant's appeal to "practical" reason in matters of Christian faith, distinguishing science, which deals with matters of fact, from religion, which deals with matters of value. To this disjunction of theoretic and practical reason, the theologians of benevolence and reform have often added a Schleiermacher-like appeal to a dimension of religious feeling underlying all subjectivity. However, not all "benevolence and reform" theologians have sharply distinguished moral and religious experience from metaphysical speculation. Some, unconvinced by the skepticism concerning metaphysical systems spawned by both analytic philosophy and phenomenology, have embraced sweeping interpretations of the universe borrowed from process and personalist philosophers. In their view, human theoretic reason could indeed support Christian values; in fact, the values of Christianity definitely imply a metaphysics. Within the United Church of Christ Daniel Day Williams appropriated the process thought of Charles Hartshorne and Alfred North Whitehead, while Nels Ferré of Andover-Newton modified the personalist metaphysics of Borden Parker Bowne in order to articulate and ground the faith.⁵⁰ Theology is the thematization of Christian experience in the light of the most basic dynamics of the universe, which are freedom, change, relationality, and the drive for more complex forms of satisfaction. The ultimate goal in this theological world is to live this life on earth to the fullest, freely actualizing potentialities in the midst of an interactive ecological community. Life is an adventure of self-fulfillment, in which a harmony should obtain between individual aspirations and the needs of others.⁵¹ The Christian life should exhibit love as mutual concern, mutual delight, and the enjoyment of free, creative action in communion with others. Extending this tradition, UCC process theologians David Stowe and Bruce Epperly have sought to bring the spirit of this movement to a wider audience.⁵²

The God-language of the benevolence/reform theologians diverged from that of their estrangement/reconciliation colleagues. Rather than describing God in terms of sovereign, gracious power exercised paradoxically through divine self-giving, this movement understood God as a dynamism immanent in the spiritual maturation of individuals and in the evolutionary processes of history and nature. "Spirit" became the most popular designation for God, with "Source of life" as a close second.⁵³ When describing the

sacred, images of internal energy and teleological propulsion abounded.⁵⁴ While some interpersonal vocabulary lingered, particularly the frequent citation of Jesus' use of the intimate term "Abba", this language was employed to combat the conception of God as a coercive feudal monarch ruling the cosmos by external fiat. God is more like a facilitator who acts within all creatures, motivating them, empowering them, empathizing with them, and generating novelty.⁵⁵ According to Nels Ferré, God is that which "has so ordered and so controls the world that there is a lure for harmony of being in the self and among selves," and which nurtures "co-operative community within the creative resources for common fulfillment."⁵⁶ "Love" has been interpreted as the divine intention to promote the well-being of God's creatures. According to Ferré, "God is continuously working in our behalf... God loves all, is always doing what is best for each and for all."⁵⁷ This theological orientation tended to shun numinous adjectives to describe God and saw little tension between God's love and God's justice, which is always remedial and restorative. God is not described as perfect aseity or immutability, but as the universal power of creative mutuality vivifying all things and luring them forward.

In this world Christ as the embodiment of love reveals both the depths of God's benevolence and the glorious possibilities that God intends humanity to actualize.⁵⁸ Consequently, the vocabulary used to describe the significance of Christ shifts from ontological language concerning the dramatic bridging of the gap between the finite and the infinite to language suggesting the revelation of perennial aspects of the nature of God and humanity. This revelation is not the mere communication of information, but is an evocative transmission of the "spirit" of Christ. The rhetorical strategies employed by writers in this theological world have attempted to convey a sense of Christ as a living power who reveals the character of God as creative love.⁵⁹ Most of these theologians preferred a psychological or agential model of incarnation, locating the presence of God in Jesus' spiritual experience or in Jesus' pattern of action. For theologians like Daniel Day Williams, Jesus' human life was so in tune with God's intentions that it manifests what the love of God looks like. The cross does not so much effect reconciliation as it discloses the empathic depths of God's love, a love that is willing to suffer with and for humanity.⁶⁰ Because this Christology did not involve unverifiable claims about the "natures" in Jesus, it could ally itself with the second and third quests for the historically reconstructed Jesus. For many, the interest was not so much in what Jesus taught about specific matters, but rather in the broader values that he inspired, particularly his devotion to the Kingdom. The focus on Christ as the revealer of human possibilities had both an individual and a corporate dimension, enabling these theologians to perpetuate the ethos of the Social Gospel.

In this theological world, sin has been typically defined as the elevation of self-protective and self-aggrandizing proclivities above the imperative to love, a spiritual distortion rooted in a fear-based unwillingness to be open to the full impact of God's love.⁶¹ This self-protective tendency infects both the heart of the individual and the social structures that encourage competition, aggression, and acquisitiveness. The deleterious social environment reinforces the individual's tendency to pursue a life dominated by self-interest, making it fruitless to attempt to sort out the respective culpabilities of the individual and of social groups in the genesis of sin. Although the self-ascription of some responsibility for sin remains, the consequences of sin are felt by the individual not so much as guilt as they are experienced as "emptiness" or "lostness," the failure to find a meaningful direction and center for one's life.⁶² In this theological world, the issue of guilt and retributive justice is displaced by the yearning for spiritual health and wholeness.

Consequently, salvation must possess both an individual and a corporate component; it must include both personal regeneration and social reform. The individual must experience the enlivening spirit of Christ, and be filled with an appreciation of the intrinsic value and worth of every individual. This, of course, requires a sense of being valued by God in spite of past lapses, and of being welcomed by God as a contributing agent to God's projects in the world. Salvation has been conceived not so much as a transformation of the individual's relationship with God or objective status, but rather as a subjective transformation in the individual's experience of God and in the individual's system of values. In general, a psychological model of redemption replaced an ontological one. The Christian life that flows from this is not governed by general laws and regulations, but by the spirit of love that must manifest itself in different actions in different specific situations.⁶³

Of course, in this world the message of Christianity involves not only the regeneration of the soul but also the reformation of the social world. The introjection of the value system of Jesus into the individual's heart catalyzes a yearning for the actualization of the Kingdom of God. Reformist efforts flow naturally from the love neighbor, for if the neighbor is suffering because of deleterious political and economic structures, the regenerated Christian is obligated to strive to transform them through communal action. The spirit of Jesus is operative in the slow, gradual, and erratic building up of God's Kingdom. Writers in this world have cautioned that this focus on social transformation does not obviate the need for personal transformation, for a prosperous, egalitarian society without regenerated individuals would be nothing more than the triumph of corporate hedonism.

In this theological world the church is understood to be a conduit of

God's revitalizing energy, a fellowship of love, and an agent for change in the contemporary world.⁶⁴ God's love for humanity should be incarnated in the corporate experience of the living, historical community of faith. With the spirit of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus suffusing congregational life, the church should function as God's task force in the world, characterized by openness to "new ideas" and "progressive values."⁶⁵ The church is a kind of revolutionary elite, God's moral and political avant garde. This tradition of activism, shared with other theological worlds, became ingrained in the ethos of the United Church of Christ. In 1959 the UCC Council for Christian Social Action issued "A Call for Christian Action in Society" attacking racism, supporting the United Nations, championing human rights, and demanding the reduction of armaments, all in response to God's activity in history and the love commandment.⁶⁶ Continuing this theme, in 1967 the "Statement of Purpose and Mission" by the Committee on Structure identified the church with its mission to "declare that God is at work in the world and to be his servants in the service of men, to meet human need, to undergird institutions of freedom, to preserve human values, and to effect the social change required to secure justice and freedom for all men."⁶⁷

Of course, the social vision of this theological world was by no means monolithic; the understandings of justice and the strategies necessary to implement it diverged and evolved. Back in the 1930s a rift had already developed between those who remained optimistic about the moral reformation of individuals and society, and those who, chastened by war and the Great Depression, were becoming more pessimistic about human nature and its prospects. While admitting that unjust systems make it difficult for individuals to behave virtuously, some theologians like Daniel Day Williams and Douglas Horton continued to advance rather optimistic projects for the Christianization of the church and society. In opposition to this sensibility Reinhold Niebuhr became the public face of the less sanguine camp, objecting that the older "liberal" theology had failed to appreciate the depths of human sinfulness, and had consequently succumbed to an unrealistic utopianism.⁶⁸ In a fallen world, politics will always involve the struggle of human groups for power, rendering idealistic projects based on moral suasion ineffective and often dangerous. Although love may be the Christian ideal, more pragmatic calculations of achievable justice should guide Christian decisions about public policy. Although the differences between relative optimists and relative pessimists concerning the assessment of human nature ran deep, both parties shared the conviction that the purpose of Christianity is to cooperate with God's purposes in the world.

THE WORLD OF OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION

Within a decade of the birth of the United Church of Christ, yet another

theological world had emerged, equally intent upon the transformation of society. Although it shared the concern for social justice typical of the previous theology, its passions, rhetoric, intended audience, and voice differed markedly. The previous theology had aimed at the spiritual regeneration of individuals in order to mobilize their moral energies for the transformation of society. In so doing, it assumed that its audience enjoyed a position of sufficient social power to have an impact on the dynamics of history. Its literary strategies were designed to foster a sense of altruistic concern in response to the personal experience of God's love. When expositing the story of the Good Samaritan, it identified with the Samaritan, rather than with the victim. The world of benevolence and reform exhibited a middle-class perspective, convinced that the quest for a sense of life's meaning and value is the well-spring of behavior and social change. However, as the 1960s progressed, marginalized groups who had been the objects of altruism demanded to be heard. The civil rights movement itself shifted from the language of "integration" to the language of ethnic pride and identity. The old rhetoric of universal human values and experience was displaced by a new discourse celebrating the irreducible particularities of race, gender, ethnicity, and culture. To these constituencies, solidarity, survival, and empowerment in the face of social victimization were more central than generalized altruism. Their communicative style became more provocative and conflictual as the language of liberation displaced the language of redemption and reconciliation. Attention was directed away from the spiritual transformation of individuals and the amelioration of social ills to the action of God in the struggle for justice. The older implicit concentration on the mobilization of the privileged for benevolent action gave way to attention to the poor as the agents of transformation in history. The demand that the poor should have a voice redirected theological reflection away from issues of growth in benevolence to analyses of the ways that the situation of the poor is structured by baneful historical dynamics and to strategies for the empowerment of human groups. This political emphasis could not be a mere addendum to the theological task, relegated to a subordinate position in social ethics, but demanded the revision of every traditional theological doctrine, from God to eschatology. From this perspective, the perceived theological conservatism of both the Social Gospel and Christian realism with their limited political goals merely reinforced the functioning of the current system. The mood of urgency also spawned a fear that the denomination's concern for ideological pluralism and the desire to be ecumenically sensitive might dampen the zeal for social transformation. The old yearning for ecclesial unity must not be allowed to muffle the cries for justice.

An early intimation of this new theological style was evident in the 1966

"Washington Consultation of Negro Clergymen of the UCC" that met to respond to the black power movement and called for a more forceful voice within the church and society.⁶⁹ By 1983 racial and ethnic minorities within the UCC had formed COREM to articulate their perspectives. This concern was emphasized through a variety of public documents and events, including Dean of the School of Divinity of Howard University Lawrence Jones' critique that the UCC *Statement of Faith* was not sufficiently clear about Jesus' identification with the victims of systemic sin.⁷⁰ The 1985 manifesto of Christians for Justice Action was saturated with the language of solidarity with the poor.⁷¹ Even more dramatically, in 1987 the "Houston Statement on Mission" called the church to join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.⁷² This impetus toward more emancipatory ways of doing theology was both strengthened and rendered more complex by feminist cries for justice in matters of gender. By 1985 Sharon Ringe was drawing attention to the sheer multiplicity of new feminist voices in the UCC, arguing that even feminist theology was no single thing.⁷³ Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Latinas, gays, lesbians, and many other cultures and populations added their unique voices to the exhortation to do theology from the concrete situations of oppressed and marginalized people.

These voices within the denomination increasingly influenced the rhetoric of theology in the national setting of the UCC and in the seminaries. In the early 1970s Frederick Herzog and M. Douglas Meeks began exercising and promoting the method of Latin American "liberation theology," calling the church to do theology in solidarity with the poor for the purpose of societal transformation.⁷⁴ In 1978 "Toward the Task of Sound Teaching" prepared under the auspices of the Office for Church Life and Leadership declared unequivocally that God sides with the poor and defined the church as a people called to share in God's struggle for justice.⁷⁵ The paper exhibited a rather prevalent convergence of the neo-orthodox distrust of culture and liberation theology's suspicion of middle-class piety, a confluence culminating in the demand that the UCC not function as the court chaplain of civil religion. In 1985 the language of Latin American liberation theology informed the UCC's self-identification as a "just peace church" that stood in solidarity with the oppressed.⁷⁶

All the diverse forms of liberation theology embraced an understanding of the theological method as critical reflection on praxis. As Roger Shinn and Frederick Herzog insisted, theology must begin with the experience of the poor and clarify this experience of suffering through an analysis of the conditions of oppression.⁷⁷ Of course, the situation of oppression and the hope for transformation must be considered in the light of Scripture, and vice versa. In this version of the hermeneutic circle, contemporary political context and text must be read together, with the aim of inspiring and inform-

ing transformative action. The dangerous memories encoded in Scripture can unleash a buoyant zeal for participating in God's on-going project to fashion a society of shalom on earth. When the epistemological priority of the oppressed is honored, the Bible can be read in a non-ideological way. Such a perspective protects the reader from the deleterious sexist, racist, and imperialist messages that suffuse the text. For example, Sharon Ringe maintained that authority resides in the textual motifs that encourage resistance to systems of domination, not in those that distort the full humanity of women.⁷⁸ Most liberationist thinkers have remained confident that the most foundational themes in the Bible do support the empowerment of the marginalized and not their exclusion.⁷⁹

Although the world of oppression and liberation does correlate text and context, it does not rely upon an analysis of any putatively universal human experience, as did the world of benevolence and reform.⁸⁰ For example, the proponents of liberation have not been interested in existentialism's dialectical of angst and authenticity that allegedly informs all human subjectivity, regardless of the particularities of the socio-political situation. These new theological voices rejected such universalizing claims of the bourgeois subject. In their view, the situated nature of all discourse, the positionality of all language, restricts theology to speech from particular contexts. By the 1980s some proponents of this theology had begun to emphasize the theme of the particularity of epistemic contexts so much that they became suspicious of any universalizing theories or programs, even those apparently liberating. Womanists like Valerie Russell, and some feminist theologians objected that the notion of universal female experience is really an attempt to make the experience of white, middle-class women normative.⁸¹ Many newer emancipatory theologians, using the thought of Foucault and post-structuralist theory, have argued that such essentialist reductionism is itself the source of most oppression.⁸² Pragmatic local visions of human flourishing, always on behalf of those denied power in particular contexts, should replace the grand world-historical narratives of liberation.

In these various theologies of liberation, God is described in dynamic and agential language, as the generative source of life, battling injustice and all the powers and principalities that block human flourishing. When God is personified, God appears as a sort of senior partner in the co-operative struggle to create a society of love, peace, and justice.⁸³ God is often described as the creator who does not want to be alone, but freely limits God's power, making room for humanity to share in the sorrows and joys of responsible creativity. At all costs, God must not be construed as a cosmic despot whose tyrannical authority suspiciously resembles that of a human oppressor.

In these theologies attention is directed away from the individual dynamic of sin/sanctification to the more corporate, systemic dimensions of human evil. Sin is embodied in all social structures that turn people into commodities and deny them the opportunity for responsible agency. Pernicious social dynamics like sexism and racism hurt both the oppressor and the oppressed by destroying the possibility of shalom and generating mutual hostility and anxiety. Because such dynamics make it easy for individuals to develop vicious habits and distorted values, the key to the spiritual health of all individuals, relationships, and communities is the transformation of the entire social system.

In this theological world Jesus is usually conceived as the human being who enacted the way of life appropriate to the reign of God. Consequently, the presence of God in Christ should be reconceptualized with agential rather than ontological or psychological categories. God was present in Jesus's praxis in that Jesus performed the liberating acts of God. By so doing Jesus functions as the definitive demonstration of God's solidarity with the poor and the ground of the hope that a just, peaceful society is a genuine possibility. Jesus' willingness to call sinners to participate in God's emancipatory projects reveals God intention to forgive, liberate, and empower all who will respond to God's call for justice, in spite of past complicity in oppression.

Salvation in the world of conflict and liberation is not primarily forgiveness, or the overcoming of a sense of alienation, or growth in holiness, but is rather the transformation of the social world and therefore also the transformation of the network of persons who inhabit it. Forgiveness is God's willingness, reflected in a corresponding human willingness, to allow the past to be truly past so that a new socio-political reality can emerge. Salvation involves hopeful participation in God's work in the world, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, in which a penultimate sense of fulfillment and dignity is found in the struggle itself. The Christian hope is directed toward the fruition of the emancipatory project of God in a society of reciprocity and mutuality, in which all people will enjoy friendship with one another.⁸⁴

This orientation dramatically reconceptualized the understanding of the nature and purpose of the church as an intentional community of transformative praxis.⁸⁵ Avoiding any suggestion of corporate Pelagianism, the church is envisioned as a community of resistance and solidarity called forth by God out of nothing. Differing somewhat from the view of the older liberals, the church in this view is not so much God's converted and inspired revolutionary elite as it is the loyal and co-suffering companion of all genuinely emancipatory movements throughout the globe. The church provides material support and spiritual depth, courage, and hope to all who oppose injustice.

THE WORLD OF SIN AND REDEMPTION

A fourth major theological world, often loosely named "evangelical," has been continuously present in the history of the United Church of Christ. This world is animated by the twin dialectics of sin and salvation and of chaos and order. While the boundary between this world of "sin and salvation" and the world of "reconciliation" has often been porous, the citizens of this theological world have typically highlighted the phenomenon of "metanoia," the heart-felt experience of God's forgiving love that transforms the individual's spiritual life. This evangelical impetus had been present in each of the predecessor traditions and was articulated in the early days of the denomination by such UCC leaders as Willis Elliott and Henry Yorden.⁸⁶ The voice of this world could be heard in the recurring calls for more attention to piety and evangelism in order to balance and ground the social activism of the 1960s. A similar spirit animated the formation of the UCC Charismatic Fellowship in 1977 that affirmed evangelism in word and deed, the significance of the gifts of the Spirit, and the centrality of an experiential personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In a different guise, this theological sensibility motivated the organization of United Church People for Biblical Witness in 1978 in response to the perceived erosion of Biblical authority.⁸⁷ In 1983 the group formulated the Dubuque Declaration and reorganized as the Biblical Witness Fellowship, reconceiving its task as the mobilization of a grass-roots constituency rather than as the lobbying of the denominational leadership.⁸⁸

The proponents of the world of "sin and redemption" have championed a high view of Biblical authority. Like the neo-orthodox party, they remain deeply suspicious of appeals to the authority of experience, fearing that this would engender bondage to the cultures of either the left or the right. Most UCC evangelicals have not equated the sentences of scripture with revelation and have rejected assertions of the faultlessness of the historical recording in Bible. Avoiding the inerrantism of Carl Henry-style fundamentalism, the *Dubuque Declaration* affirms only the infallibility of the Bible as a rule of faith and practice and makes no mention of inerrancy.⁸⁹ In spite of being a human book, with human limitations, Scripture is also a divine text.⁹⁰ It is culturally conditioned regarding its form, but culturally transcendent regarding its content, being more like a prism of God's truth than like a mirror. The Bible only becomes translucent to revelation when the Holy Spirit works to illumine the reader and the text. Because of the shared Christocentric way of reading Biblical narrative, UCC evangelicals could often find more hermeneutic common ground with Barthians than with scholastic fundamentalists. Some theologians of this world have even expressed fears that fundamentalism has been infected with the spirit of modernity, particularly the habit of treating the Bible as a collection of empirical

data from which theological conclusions could be generated through the application of a rigorous inductive method. Nevertheless, the evangelicals differentiate themselves from what they take to be the "neo-orthodox" position that the Bible is a non-propositional human witness to God's saving acts in history, as well as the "post-liberal" view that Scripture functions as a cultural-linguistic framework for interpreting life. Over against these themes, UCC evangelicals, while avoiding merely propositional views of revelation, have usually maintained that Scripture does disclose divine messages that have metaphysical implications. Although revelation is not to be reduced to a set of propositions, revealed theological truths and moral principles can be stated in propositional form, even though these propositions cannot be perfectly organized in a neat deductive system.

For the advocates of this theological world, God's power, sovereignty, and righteousness are emphasized as essential divine attributes.⁹¹ Given the acute sense of the world's fallen nature, the accent must fall on divine power sufficiently potent to rectify the damage. God is the awesome creator and governor of the universe, forging order out of chaos, enacting the divine purposes in nature and history, and commanding human beings to follow God's directives. God's "holiness," the incompatibility between God and all that is unclean or disordered, is often emphasized as a divine attribute that is different from human conceptions of love.⁹² The good news for fallen creatures is that God is not only holy and righteous, but also loving and forgiving. Consequently, law and gospel, sin and grace, justification and sanctification become the axes around which this theological world turns.⁹³

Sin casts a long shadow over this world; the problem of guilt is one of its most tormenting worries. All individuals and societies are prone to rebel against God's principles and purposes, preferring their own self-will to the glorification of God and the good of the whole. Rather than interpreting sin primarily as a blockage in the relationship with God (although this theme is certainly present), this world more typically emphasizes the culpable violation of God's principles and the incompatibility of God's righteousness and human rebellion. Tragically, this sinfulness infects the deepest recesses of the human heart, distorting all inclinations, and transmitting itself from generation to generation.⁹⁴ While individual acts of vice must be evaluated and condemned, the human situation will not improve through the regulation of specific behaviors. The recalcitrance of sin can only be overcome through a transformation of the individual's basic orientation and motivational core.

Given our sinful predicament, the work of Christ must be two-fold. Christ must be the one who secures forgiveness through an atonement that restores the just order of the universe and the one who makes possible

moral and spiritual regeneration. In order to accomplish this work, Jesus must possess the power of God that created humanity in the first place and also be the locus in which the restoration of human nature occurs. Because Jesus must be ontologically both divine and human, the incarnation must be highlighted as the necessary condition for the soteriological work of Christ accomplished in the drama of crucifixion and resurrection.

Given the guilt and the debility of sin, our redemption must include both forgiveness (justification) and spiritual/moral healing (sanctification). The *Dubuque Declaration* declares that we are not only saved by Christ's sacrificial atonement, but we are also empowered for justice.⁹⁵ Most citizens of the sin/redemption world stress the need for the creation of a new set of passions in the depths of the soul through an experiential union with Christ. Against the perceived liberal reduction of religion to social activism, theologians in this camp often object that the pursuit of justice requires the transformation of the heart, not just new policies and programs that will accomplish nothing without inward spiritual regeneration. Once the union with Christ in faith is operative, the power of Christ's righteousness enables the regenerated individual to grow in sincere enthusiasm for obeying God's precepts. Consequently, Jesus' words and deeds function as an example to be joyfully emulated. The non-ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, the exhortations of the prophets, and the admonishments of Paul also serve as sources of moral principles in the struggle against rebellion and chaos. Accordingly, many inhabitants of this world exhibit an intense concern for specific Biblical regulations, including those pertaining to sexual behavior.

For theologians in the world of sin/redemption, the church's main responsibility is to broadcast the good news of Jesus Christ to the world in order to awaken faith, transform lives, and promote obedience to the principles of righteous living in every sphere of human existence. The church cannot be the church without pursuing the task of evangelism. Many evangelicals have come to fear that the evolution of the UCC has encouraged an idolatry of social-reformist causes, subordinating all aspects of church life to the political dimension. According to the citizens of this theological world, genuine moral passion has degenerated into a self-righteous accommodation to cultural fads and secular ideologies superficially arrayed in religious trappings.

CONCLUSION

No single theological world, no single construal of the essence of Christianity, has ever characterized the United Church of Christ. Several worlds have always thrived, each one with different vocabularies, different moods, different audiences, and different primal hopes and fears. These worlds

have sometimes collided, sometimes co-operated, and sometimes formed alliances with one another. The theologians of reconciliation and the champions of benevolence and reform could often agree on the magnitude of God's love revealed in Christ. The theologians of benevolence and reform and the advocates of liberation could often agree that the essential telos of Christianity is the transformation of human society. The theologians of reconciliation and those of salvation have often converged on the centrality of the saving work of Christ. All the worlds could unite in being suspicious of the church's potential captivity to bourgeois culture, although they would disagree about exactly which features of the environing culture should be resisted. All could coalesce around specific programs of social amelioration, although they would harbor different motivations and goals.⁹⁶ On the other hand, the advocates for reconciliation and the champions of salvation would often find the liberationists to be too narrowly this-worldly, while the liberationists would condemn the others for being too ethereal and escapist. The theologians of salvation would find the other groups to suffer from an insufficient appreciation of God's holiness and order, while the theologians of benevolence and reform would find many of the others inadequately to value God's love manifested in creation and history.

Some have decried this situation, dismissing it as the theological equivalent of the war of all against all, and have longed for a unity based on a commonality of vision. However, another attitude to this theological pluralism has been present in the United Church of Christ, one that embraces the variety and flux as symptoms of health. According to this view, the oneness of the church need not be constituted by a shared set of homogeneous religious passions and aspirations, but by a common commitment to engage in a process of mutual admonishment and affirmation. From this perspective theology is construed as a sweeping conversation among ideologically divergent constituencies. The hope is that a healthy cross-fertilization will occur, in which the partial truths and insights embedded in many different perspectives will complement one another and promote a more multi-dimensional grasp of the gospel. Because such a conversation among multiple perspectives has not yet been fully realized, it would be premature for any theologian in the United Church of Christ to declare a *consensus fideorum*, for no such consensus yet exists. Theology must be tentative, humble, and hospitable, seeking to promote the interaction upon which a future fuller vision of the faith will depend.⁹⁷

In different guises such an interactive, pluralist view has periodically resurfaced during the history of the denomination. During its early days many of the ecumenically-mined proponents of the motto "united and uniting" assumed that a rich theological cross-fertilization of the predecessor confessional traditions would occur, without any of them sacrificing their

distinctiveness. The ideal was not the reduction of the particular traditions to an anemic lowest common denominator theology. Douglas Horton lauded the theological latitude of Congregationalism because it permitted a variety of theological perspectives to check and balance one another.⁹⁸ For many in the founding generation, the goal was neither homogenization nor a relativism of disparate positions, but an interaction of complementary views, each enriching the other. In a statement to General Synod of 1971 John Esch argued that the denomination should promote a diversity of positions on complex social issues, encouraging individuals to think for themselves in an interactive community.⁹⁹ In 1986 Reuben Sheares argued that the UCC was based neither on mere toleration nor on a compromise of two very different traditions, but on a willingness to argue in love.¹⁰⁰ In 1985 the deans of the seven seminaries called for a theological journal, which became *Prism*, not to promote a single viewpoint, but to allow a variety of perspectives to interact with one another. The launching of the seven volume *Living Theological Heritage* in 1989 also drew attention to the sheer variety of theological voices in the UCC.

Ecumenical developments supported this view of theology as a continuing conversation. In the 1970s a new appreciation of the significance of doctrinal differences among denominations became widespread. Consequently, ecumenical initiatives like COCU gravitated away from the goal of organic union to that of covenant communion, in which mutual recognition did not require doctrinal agreement. In 1997 the Formula of Agreement among four Lutheran and Reformed denominations celebrated the positive function of some theological differences, seeing the distinctive emphases of the Reformed and Lutheran groups as reciprocally necessary correctives. The theme of "mutual admonition and affirmation" suggested that the Reformed theme of the sovereignty of God beyond human culture should be held in dialectical tension with the Lutheran emphasis of God's solidarity with humanity in Christ and the sacraments. By themselves, the respective traditions could become distorted, with Lutheran solidarity domesticating the presence of God, and Reformed transcendence dissolving God's presence entirely.

Meanwhile, in the academy, several developments converged to promote the notion of theology as dialogue. In the 1980s the first generation of "post-liberals" concluded that the effort to discover some universal essence of religious experience had failed and argued for the irreducible particularity of religions as language-games that construct different intelligible worlds. The second generation of post-liberals extended this theme of particularity to Christianity itself, doubting the conviction that Christianity has been a monolithic, unified linguistic culture. Kathryn Tanner proposed that cultures have porous boundaries and fluid identities, producing diverging,

shifting sub-groups held together by loose networks of family-resemblances rather than by a common essence.¹⁰¹ Consequently it is not possible to talk about "the" Christian theological system or Christian doctrine as a stable set of linguistic rules. The generation that had not been raised in the pervasive pietist ethos of the early twentieth century, as the founders of the denomination had been, found the notion of a common Christian ethos or hermeneutic to be implausible. In the experience of the children of the 1960s and later, Christian theology had always been an on-going conversation among disparate viewpoints.

Perhaps the plethora of construals of the nature of Christianity is not something to be lamented. Given the magnitude of the God that Christians worship, it makes sense that no specific rendition of the Christian "essence" could claim exclusive validity. Perhaps that is why Scripture contains four different gospels, each with their own emphases and perspectives. The church in its wisdom has usually resisted efforts to reduce the multiplicity of stories to a single narrative. Perhaps the essence of what is Christian can be found only in the fissures, dialectical tensions, and centrifugal forces among the divergent interpretations of the good news.

If this is so, the efforts of any of these theological worlds to invalidate the other options should be resisted, even in the name a collective prophetic voice. As Gabriel Fackre has frequently suggested in lectures, theology should be done with the lead end of the pencil, not the eraser. The vitality of the United Church of Christ may reside in the continuing push and pull among these theological worlds.

NOTES

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