

It is the worst of times to be a Christian theologian; it is the best of times to be a Christian theologian. That both claims are true is apparent by the fact that most people in America, Christian and non-Christian alike, could care less whether this is a good or bad time to be a theologian. Theology is a ghetto activity as insulated and uninteresting as the Saturday religion pages of the local paper. God knows, it is hard to make God boring, but American Christians, aided and abetted by theologians, have accomplished that feat.

Yet I love theology since I find nothing more exciting than the subject of theology, that is, the truthful worship of God. Moreover, it is a wonderful time to be a theologian. No matter how hard theologians may try to be “good academics,” they will be suspect among those who populate the more established “disciplines.” The study of rocks by geologists is legitimate, but God just does not seem to be an appropriate subject to constitute a respectable discipline in the contemporary university. Which creates a wonderful opportunity for those of us who remain theologians. Since we are never going to make it as academics, or anything else, we might as well have fun.

By fun, I mean that we do not have to be constrained by the “normalizing” character of most academic subjects in the contemporary university. The university exists, and the academic disciplines that constitute it exist, to underwrite the presumption that the way things are is the way they have to be. Yet Christians are schooled by a discourse that trains us to recognize the contingent character of *what is*. Accord-

ingly, theology not only must risk appearing funny, but it should risk being funny.

I have had a great deal of fun writing this book. I hope the reader will sense the fun or, perhaps better, the joy that being a theologian gives me. Theology or, better, God is so entertaining. Thus, I hope many readers will be entertained. That is, I hope they will discover, as I discover now and then, how wonderful it is to be creatures of a gracious God who is capable of beckoning us from our self-fascination.

By suggesting that this book aspires to be entertainment, I do not mean it is not “serious.” When you are discussing matters of life and death, to say nothing of war, you had better be serious. Yet part of the fun of doing theology is the way in which such matters are reframed once theological discourse is used in an unapologetic manner. If readers sometimes find themselves surprised by some of these chapters, they should know that I remain equally surprised, and thus entertained, by what happens when everyday Christian speech and practices are allowed to do their imaginative work.

With this book I should like to attract some readers who are not accustomed to reading Christian theology. Even though many of the current debates surrounding multiculturalism—which specific texts are to be read and interpreted, the moral status of liberalism—are conducted in secular terms, they are the result of past religious conflict, and ironically they continue to mimic theological disputes. For example, the debate over the status of texts is but the secular analogue of debates occasioned by the Reformation concerning the status of Scripture. I am not suggesting such analogies sufficient to rekindle interest in theology by those who believe Christianity has been rightly left well behind; instead, I am only suggesting that they may be surprised to discover that Christian theological reflection still has descriptive power.

One of the difficulties faced by the theologian in our time is the decline of religious knowledge. However, as I argue in this book, knowing about Christianity, and/or Judaism, does one little good, but certainly a great deal of harm. Far too often, people, whether they are Christian or not, “know” just enough to prevent any serious use, either positively or negatively, of Christian language. In the following pages I try to suggest some of the exercises necessary if Christians are to learn to speak truthfully. I hope some readers, who have largely given up on “religion,” may at least find this discussion a challenge.

I confess that part of the fun of being a theologian is locating the

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incoherences built into the secular. For example, the current fashion to identify with the “oppressed,” admirable though it may be, lacks moral intelligibility. We end up in the shabby game of trying to figure out who is the most oppressed. New readers may find my up-yours attitude about such cultural sentimentalities a bit off-putting, but I hope it is clear that I take no comfort in the moral confusion of our lives. Nor do I assume that Christians have any magic solutions to make our lives coherent. What I offer is not resolution, but a challenge that can only make our lives more difficult and interesting.

I hope readers of my past work also will find this book to be of interest. Those who have attended to my more abstract accounts of character and virtue should find here a thicker display of those themes. In particular, I think I have done a better job of showing, rather than simply saying, how theological convictions must be practically embodied. I have now been writing more than twenty-five years, and, while I certainly have changed my mind along the way, I also like to think that my work has continued to develop in some interesting ways. I hope that those who have been good enough to read what I have done in the past will find that these chapters add some interesting twists.

This book would not exist if Rachel Toor was not persistent. As a good editor, she made me imagine what a book with Duke University Press might look like. Then she, along with Paula Gilbert, convinced me that I ought to take the time to do it right. I do not know if it is “right,” but I know it would not have been nearly as good without Rachel’s good criticism. She was aided in that endeavor by two wonderful readers’ reports on the first draft by Robert Bellah and Scott Davis. They read the book in confidence, but confidently revealed themselves. Only they know how deeply I am in their debt for suggesting how the text should be reorganized as well as rewritten.

I have dedicated this book to four people, all of whom now work at the University of Notre Dame. Jim Langford is Director of University of Notre Dame Press. He not only has supported my work from the beginning, but he has been a good friend. He also quoted me (November 28) in the 1993 *Cub Calendar*, thereby making me as close as I will ever come to being immortal. Ann Rice was my original editor at the University of Notre Dame Press. She had to work over my prose when I did not even know how to write well enough to know I did not write well. To the extent that I write better than I did, I am in her debt.

The debt I owe Alasdair MacIntyre is obvious to anyone who knows

his work. His early work on the philosophy of mind and action was important for my dissertation. His ongoing project in moral philosophy not only is crucial for my own work but for many who attempt to do theology without apology. Alasdair is a good friend, even though we disagree about Trollope.

Thomas Shaffer teaches law at the University of Notre Dame Law School. He likes to style himself as a student of “my” theology, but if that is true, I learn more from how he uses me than I do from my own work. Simply knowing that a person like Tom is there makes it all worthwhile. He, and Professor David Solomon, also of Notre Dame, were the first to tell me I should read Trollope.

The many graduate students who have worked with me over the last years have immeasurably made me—and hopefully the way I think and live—better. For me, they constitute a community even though they do not always know one another, coming as they did at different times to study at Duke. They are Greg Jones, Michael Cartwright, Steve Long, Paul Lewis, Pat Browder, Jeff Powell, Reinhard Hutter, Steven Hoogerwerf, Therese Lysaught, David Matzko, Kathy Rudy, Mike Broadway, Carol Stoneking, Jim Lewis, Chuck Campbell, Phil Kenneson, Michael Baxter, Fritz Bauerschmidt, Michael Battle, Bill Cavanaugh, Dan Bell, John Berkman, David Jenkins, Gail Hamner, and David Toole. I am particularly grateful to Jeff Powell who is coauthor of the tribute to William Stringfellow. Dr. Jim Fodor, a Canadian postdoctoral student, has been kind enough to read, edit, and help me think through many of these essays. I owe Mr. Mark Baker much for the index.

I have been fortunate to be at Duke in a time of wonderful intellectual ferment. I have been taught much by my colleagues throughout this university. Ms. Wanda Dunn has typed and retyped this book. She combines skill and humor in a remarkable fashion. I completed the manuscript while on sabbatical at the National Humanities Center. It is an academic heaven, and I am deeply grateful for the support I received there as well as for the many colleagues who provided such stimulating conversation. In particular, it was a joy to learn from Professor John Wilson of Princeton University.

Finally, I thank God for Paula and for her willingness to share her life, and in particular her love of God, with me.