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## **Towards a Heraldic Gospel:**

From Monorthodox Doctrine to Theopoetic

Perspectives on Revelation and Repentance

*[The] Herald announces an event... Yet, no one is forced to believe. What the herald reports is not permanent, timeless, logical insights but contingent, particular events. If those events are true, and if others join the herald to carry the word along, they will with time develop a doctrinal system, to help distinguish between more and less adequate ways of proclaiming; but that system, those formulae, will not become what they proclaim.*

--John Howard Yoder (256)

*In the study of ideas, it is necessary to remember that insistence on hard-headed clarity issues from sentimental feeling... Insistence on clarity at all costs is based on sheer superstition as to the mode in which human intelligence functions. Our reasonings grasp at straws for premises and float on gossamers for deductions.*

--Alfred North Whitehead (Ideas 72)

The major task of this paper is found somewhere between its opening epigraphs: to develop a model for interpreting revelation that is community-affirmed<sup>1</sup> and acknowledges that

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<sup>1</sup> This issue of what exactly it is that constitutes a faith community is a significant one. For the purposes of this article, some flexibility in numbers is presumed. While much of this content applies directly to congregations, the

(a) truth is always articulated in a contingent and gossamer context, (b) contingency of articulation is unavoidable and does not necessarily lead to relativism, and (c) the proclamation of such a truth can be the grounding of a faithful, inclusive, Christian life. The impetus for such a task originates in the belief that many issues of aggressive, and potentially colonial theology are, regardless of their expressed and explicit doctrinal stances, undergirded by a particular understanding of revelation and how such revelation informs notions of repentance. In addressing this issue, this paper will attempt to explicate the qualities of common totalizing, uniform, *monorthodox*<sup>2</sup> doctrines of revelation, explore how such doctrines influence contemporary articulations of repentance, and conversely, propose possible constitutive components of a Heraldic theology of dialogical, relational, manifold articulation. Such a theology would give rise to the proclamation of a Heraldic Gospel which affirms the liberating and transformational experience of the Divine while recognizing that the expression of that experience will be necessarily multiplicitous and communally developed.

A Heraldic theology of the nature addressed above would stand in sharp contrast to most current mass media representations of Christianity, which portray the Church with a highly charged and polarizing *modus operandi*. The unfortunate result of the tendency to present Christianity as a monolithic, monorthodox enterprise instead of a polycentric<sup>3</sup> one is that those

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term itself could encompass anything from small house churches to entire denominations and theological traditions. There are, of course, differences to be found on any spectrum that broad, however it is my hope that the particular qualities of Heraldic proclamation laid out here provide some possible models for groups of varying size.

<sup>2</sup> I use this term in conscious awareness of Catherine Keller's work with the term *polydoxy*. While I appreciate what I understand to be the thrust of that term, I am eager to maintain the justified *rightness*, which *orthodoxy* conveys, while yet allowing for a multiplicity of what potentially constitutes that rightness. Thus rather than *monodoxy* and *polydoxy* I employ the slightly more unwieldy *monorthodox* and *polyorthodox* in the hopes that it makes clear I have no desire to obliterate the categories of right and wrong, only to challenge who it is that interprets and polices the boundaries of those descriptions.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to the work of David Tracy, whose development of theological polycentrism has paved the way for my own consideration of contingent truths that are not wed to absolute relativism or solipsism. He suggests that perceptions of solid cultural continuities are misguided and are, in fact, residual forms of structural thinking derived from totalizing essentialist philosophies. In place of such thought, Tracy proposes that there are simultaneously persisting worldviews that have been developed by, and continue to serve, specific communities, and that issues occur when this is not understood and outsider communities are presumed to either (a) think the same as insider communities, or (b) be wrong for not thinking like insider communities. A response that acknowledges this situation would not be a *laissez-faire* acceptance of any thought or belief, but one that acknowledges that our very systems of thought and theological stances exist in relatively stable, simultaneous, separate spheres which must be taken into account before pronouncing judgement. For more on this, see Tracy's "Fragments."

on the margins of church life, or those not involved in church at all, are barraged with the results of theologies that are not only unappealing to many of these individuals, but also likely to push them further from communities of faith.

The Heraldic approach is one that does not back down from engaging others and yet attempts to do so without the hubris of attempting to argue that human perceptions of the Divine can somehow be completely correct. The Herald is at heart a missionary that longs to find a way to engage others in exchanges that are not colonial, but invitational. The mission field then, is not some foreign, "unchurched" land where the natives "don't know any better," but the very ground of the religious traditions in our own backyard. The mission? To spread the good news that all voices are called for in the Kingdom of God, that each life is valued and brings something precious to table, that monorthodox religious support of oppression is simply unacceptable.

### **1. Monorthodox Revelation and Repentance:**

*That Human Control is not the same as Divine Authority*

By construing a very rigid, often infallible, literal, inerrant form of Christianity as the only valid form, both extreme fundamentalist Christians *and* the New Atheists are served well. For those in power within the more fundamentalist traditions, the threat of being less than Christian is always available to meet those who raise challenging questions. For those attacking Christianity writ large, it is useful to paint a picture wherein the Church's mission is a very narrow-minded, exclusive endeavor because it encourages people not in that extreme segment to believe they shouldn't be Christians. In both cases though, the Church is represented as some continuous, uniform behemoth, when in fact it is as varied as its history and the faith of those who make it up. This paper describes a methodological approach by which such monorthodox representations of "authentic Christianity" can be shown to be a collusion of clericalism and gatekeeping, in other words, a means for those in power to maintain power and deny voice to those on the margins who might challenge by the very act of seeking recognition.

While many contemporary, aggressive, liberal Christian reformers point to conservative Christian theology itself as blame-worthy, this approach seems to miss the mark somewhat. In the end, such a charge results in yet another dichotomy of right and wrong without actual dialogue or community building. What seems to be called for is not more finger pointing, but something akin to what Brian McLaren calls a "generous orthodoxy," a term which "does not mean a simple merging, conflating, or reconciling of the two schools of thought [liberalism and evangelicalism], but rather... disagrees with both regarding the 'view of certainty and knowledge which liberals and evangelicals hold in common'(McLaren 28). All across the spectrum of religious thought, theologians and lay people fall victim to the pitfalls of a position which presupposes that a "correct form of belief and practice" (orthodoxy) will always manifest as a "uniformity of belief and practice" (monorthodoxy). Conversely, a Heraldic theology would actively insist on the present provisionality of *all interpretations* and challenge assertions that right practice always requires same practice.

When clergy and other arbiters of theology proclaim an understanding that is complete, and/or closed, they position themselves to take on the role of gatekeepers of religion: if one is to come before God it must be done in such-and-such a way or it will not be done at all. Placing oneself in such a position, even if well intentioned, allows for far too easy of a slide into oppression. The certainty and clarity of God and God's support is often asserted by those in positions of human power regardless of their place in Jesus' Gospel, which typically inverts social structures<sup>4</sup>. The presumption of a closed, teleological, revelation maps well onto means of continuing control and systematic domination. Indeed, the relationship between revelation and repentance revolves around this very issue.

When repentance is construed with toeing a party line, or simplified to exist *solely* as uniform lists of acceptable, appropriate activities, the result is that polity replaces prophecy and those which exert control over it are given marked privilege. Such gatekeeping positions are

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<sup>4</sup> For more on how Jesus' ministry calls society toward a revisioning of power and control, see Donald B. Kraybill's *The Upside-Down Kingdom*.

buttressed through claims to piety and fixed adherence to doctrine, both indirect indications of an understanding of a revelation that is closed, correctly interpreted, and fully appropriated. For this position, orthodoxy is also monorthodoxy, that is, there is a specific and fixed right way to do, and be, church and it does not adapt to communities of difference.

While the intentions of this type of methodological approach are likely to orbit around ideas of theological purity, adherence to proper theology, and/or the correctness of tradition, it is also unfortunately true that these methods can easily be bent towards tyranny and injustice. As Walter Brueggemann has noted, "you cannot build a great empire on dialogue. You can only build an empire on monologue. You have to have a voice of certainty to amass a concentration of power..." (Brueggemann). Thus, while it is doubtful that adherents to monorthodox positions consider it their direct objective, the result of such a vaulted, monophonic theology can be the accumulation of social power that excludes others from participation in any dialogue which might bring about some change in dominant social mores and/or theological stances. What is at stake here is the very nature of repentance.

While lay perspectives on repentance are likely to revolve around ideas of sin having to do with remorse, regret, and penitence, it is interesting to consider the etymological origins of the New Testament Greek word from which our English "repentance" comes. For example, in Mark 1:4, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," Strong's Dictionary of Greek lists repentance and repent as follows.

G3341: From G3340; *μετάνοια (metanoia)* - (subjectively) compunction (for guilt, including reformation); by implication reversal (of [another's] decision): - *repentance*.

G3340: *μετανοέω (metanoēō)* - to think differently or afterwards, that is, reconsider (morally to feel compunction): - *repent*.

Biblically then, repenting seems somehow related to a realization of sin and an acknowledged turning away from it, a profound change of mind away from that which is sinful towards that of God. This all presumes our human capacity to discern that which is of God and that which is not. That discernment in turn must rest on one or the other of two possible presumptions. Either (a) our natural senses and human experience of the world are sufficient for directly recognizing sin without the need for interpretive confirmation, or (b) through the correct interpretation of Scripture we can come by some knowledge of what it is to sin and what it is to be faithful. It is with the latter of these that I am interested.

The belief that a finite, earth-bound human can know that another finite, earth-bound human needs to repent, first tacitly requires the belief that a finite, earth-bound human can correctly interpret Scripture to a degree wherein they feel confident that their interpretation is accurate enough to justify potentially damaging a sense of solidarity by claiming to have access to transcendent knowledge that marks the other party as sinful. What seems to be at stake here is a wager that one party understands scripture well enough to proclaim their interpretation of it as truth over and against another party that does not see it similarly. If the wager goes "in favor" of the proclaiming party, then they were right in their attack (which may or may not have resulted in repentance), while if it "goes against" them they have unnecessarily broken off ties with others and proclaimed something to be wholly true which is not. Either way though, the outcome of this wager weighs heavily upon the capacity of individuals to correctly interpret scripture and cannot be known while the parties involved yet still live.

What the Heraldic approach offers to missionary thought is a means of witnessing to belief in a way that attempts to mitigate the divisiveness of monorthodoxy by forgoing such a profound gamble without moving to the extreme of rejecting the entire category of sin. The Heraldic Gospel presumes that (a) interpretations of Scripture are bound by community and context, (b) Truth will prosper in communities of faith, (c) interpretations of revelation are not

the same as the revelation itself, and (d) the Herald can proclaim truth and remain vulnerable, for "indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted " (NRSV, 2 Timothy 3:12).

## **2. Theopoetic Perspective:**

### *That Proclamation is Bound Interpretation*

One of the challenges in living in the postmodern reality of the 21st century in the United States of America is the ease with which data is accessible and the degree to which scientism has been equated with wisdom. From Federally mandated standardized tests which are far more effective on examining recall and retention than creative thinking and skill, to the wild popularity of Quiz Show style television programs, this country seems engrossed with the acquisition of data. It is as if "we tend to use information to feed the emptiness created by the absence of our imagination" (Wildman 627). Unfortunately, it sometimes seems as if the Church has also fallen into this same slump when what the Gospel offers is not just intellectual information, but personal transformation and societal liberation.

When a certain amount of *de facto* societal authority is given to clear, factual responses, the temptation of the Church is to follow suit, providing rote answers to questions instead of using those questions as the catalyst needed to share stories and build intimate community. When living the Gospel message seems to be more about believing the right things instead of allowing it to transform us, one begins to wonder if it is being lived at all. This is understandable. The message of the Gospel is a radically outrageous turning upside-down of everything known. Leaving parents, walking away from work, and dying to live are not easy things to ingest, and yet they are harbingers for the message of change and the joy of creation even in dark times.

Perhaps it is *because* of the appeal of easy answers<sup>5</sup> and the nearly overpowering

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<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the answers given within the monorthodox framework are easy to live into or to follow. In fact, often times they feel impossible to follow. Rather, the answer given to the earnest inquiry of

momentum of cultural rationalism that people shy away from the creative and the risky. Our aspiration towards the absolute has yielded abstraction when the Gospel overflows with particular examples of such an imaginative power and liberative possibility that simple summations and distancing doctrine seem a poor fit. Perhaps in attempting to develop clear answers to religious questions theologians have sometimes too narrowly defined what is acceptable, too quickly cut off possibility, and too rationally declined Jesus' abundant invitation to consider that there is more than can yet be seen. Perhaps. In the very least, this is what Amos Wilder would have suggested.

In his 1976 book, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, he writes as follows:

*We should recognize that human nature and human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas. This is where power lies and the future is shaped... Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope, and love. When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic... Philistinism invades Christianity from within wherever the creative and mythopoetic dimension of faith is forfeited. When this happens doctrine becomes a caricature of itself. Then that which once gave life begins to lull and finally to suffocate us. (Wilder 2)*

What I suggest is that the proclamation of a Heraldic Gospel, an interpretation of revelation in contemporary times, will best be done with an ear turned towards the "creative and mythopoetic dimension of faith," that which Wilder terms the *theopoetic*. Furthermore, the way in which the Herald will engage communities should empower them to value their own

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religious seekers is often too pat of a response to contain within it the boundless possibility offered. These types of answers are easy for the answerer to give and leave the seeker still dry and wanting more.

experiences and take the risks of using their own voice and dialect to speak out for acknowledgment and justice. A Heraldic hermeneutic would be a theopoetic one, that is, one which leads to more conversation, exploration, and engagement rather than less. What Scott Holland writes of theopoetics is equally applicable to the words of Heraldic proclamation: "It is a kind of writing that invites more writing. Its narratives lead to other narratives, its metaphors encourage new metaphors, its confessions invoke more confessions, and its conversations invite more conversations" (Holland 327).

This is similar in approach to what some theologians refer to as a "process hermeneutic," which asserts that interpreters must, "be prepared to treat the text as open-ended and evocative, pointing beyond itself not only to an extra-linguistic word, but more proximately to propositions... that engage the imagination" (Pregeant 74). A theopoetic approach to interpretation acknowledges that any human proclamation of sin, faith, or judgment, is bound by the marks of fallible interpretation, context, and community. Rather than attempting to disregard this fact, the Heraldic approach acknowledges that this is simply part of the human condition and proceeds with this knowledge in full view. There is something sublime in our limitations, something about our finite sight that is nonetheless in the image of an eternal God. In speaking theopoetically, the Herald "seeks to roughen up unified appearances by differentiating the various deep-lying, multiple voices hidden under various powerful contenders of an alleged "orthodoxy" of content, method, and direction of thought" (Faber 318). A Heraldic perspective on theology would necessitate the rejection of any systematic or doctrinal claims that suggest a wholly accurate, complete, and closed interpretation of revelation and the Divine.

The universalization and totalizing of experience tends toward the establishment of an articulated experience that resonates with those whose voices are already heard. The Herald is one whose task it is to creatively "roughen up" attempts to portray experience as singular and monophonic. Where doctrine has become caricature and proclamation wooden, there is likely

to be an imposed monorthodox approach, which some supposed followers of the doctrine find uninspiring and off the mark. When we encounter religious thought of any stripe, be it liberal or conservative, that attempts to paint experience with too broad a brush stroke, we find that, as we Quakers say, "it does not speak to our condition." The Herald asks how else things might be considered or portrayed and what would happen to practice and doctrine were new interpretations considered. She raises these questions and encourages others to do the same, theopoetically offering expressions grounded in her own experience, and aimed at evoking resonance in the experience of others. For those who consciously fear the beast of moral relativism and utter subjectivity this may be a challenging assertion.

When we articulate God by means of our own experience aren't we near Feuerbach's charge in *The Essence of Christianity*, in which all doctrine is just a projection of a society's values? Absolutely. Dangerously near it. But what other choice is there? Our interpretations are limited and it seems we can not hold onto perfect representation for any extended length of time. It is as the LORD says in Isaiah 55:9, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, / So are My ways higher than your ways / And My thoughts than your thoughts." It is only through our brokenness and human sense that we experience anything. The acknowledgment that, in fact, our experience and cultural conditioning influences our interpretation and expression of God opens up possibilities of theological discourse. A community which is catalyzed into self-reflection, dialogue, and renewed expression by means of some theopoetic engagement would be reflective of Bonhoeffer's view of the "communion of saints," as a group of "persons in profound and God-centered and God-inflamed relationship with one another, where revelation of the other is the revelation of the holy, and vice versa" (Raschke 168).

A community as articulated above would begin to practice a theology further and further removed from a scientific discipline of proof and proposition and closer towards a passionate exploration of how God is seen to be ever-renewing in all that is, in our lives, our homes, communities, and all across this wounded world. And it is in those communities that new

interpretations and expressions will be tested, for not every reading is appropriate or valuable.

### **3. Constructivism in Community:**

#### *That Truth Will Prosper in Communities of Faith*

That "Truth will prosper," suggests that there is, in fact, something that is true, an assumption for Christians that goes quite well with Jesus' John 14:6 proclamation that he is "the way, and the truth, and the life." What is less clear is how it is we are to recognize this truth when we come upon it and how it is that we are to interpret and express this truth to others. Indeed, the fact that even the disciples are warned to beware of false prophets suggests that discerning truth can be a difficult task. In spite of this challenge though, Christians are called to believe that in the end, the Lamb's War will, in fact, be won by the Lamb. Consequently, the task before us is to consider how we might live in the interim, prior to that final judgment, be it in the next moment or an indeterminable time in the future. Yoder's conceptualization of the Herald provides a sketch of how it is that we might be called to bear witness until that time.

The Herald is one for whom the presence of God has become a reality which is personally undeniable. As a result, this experienced perception of God becomes an event which propels the Herald towards a reporting of the experience of the event(s) which transpired. Whether the revelatory experience is direct or mediated through some text, "if those events are true, and if others join the herald to carry the word along, they will with time, develop a doctrinal system." "They" in this context is incredibly important as it indicates the necessarily vital role of the community in developing interpretation and doctrine.

In his book, *Is There A Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, the literary theorist Stanley Fish makes the clear argument that "strictly speaking, getting 'back-to-the-text' is not a move one can perform, because the text one gets back to will be the text demanded by some other interpretation and that interpretation will be presiding over its production" (Fish 354). What he suggests is that all attempts to "just read what the text says, without interpretation," are flawed because, as Fish cheekily notes, "like it or not, interpretation

is the only game in town" (355).

What Fish offers is an understanding that "while there is no core of agreement *in* the text, there is a core of agreement (although one subject to change) concerning the ways of *producing* [interpretation of] the text" (342, original emphasis). When a community has come to a realization of what it is a text means, Fish argues that what they have come to is not *the* meaning, but an agreement that for their community such-and-such will be the meaning: they have agreed on an interpretation. Fish goes further than most theologians would be comfortable in that he discredits that there is such a thing as the truth of a text. What I propose is not that there is no such truth, but that our attempts to interpret and express it will always somehow fall short of the mark. Knowing this, it is vital that communities be aware of the contingent nature of theological explanations and of interpretations of revelation.

Given the proclivity of human communities to convince themselves of many things so as to avoid cognitive dissonance, the issue of valid interpretation becomes problematic: to some degree there is an interpretative corollary to the Founder Effect<sup>6</sup>. Communities tend to want to dialogue among themselves or with other communities they already know to express things in a manner similar to them. Even given the contingent nature of interpretation, since we like to place continue trust in the veracity of our interpretations and tend to distrust encroachments on our fields of meaning, our communities of religious interpretation can become increasingly monorthodox. When we seem to want so badly to stay just the way we are, how can we possibly change? At least one corrective, by way of the analogy of the Founder Effect, is apparent and deserves acknowledgment

Just as the inclusion of other people into a previously closed community increases the genetic variability of the offspring, so too does the presence of new perspectives invigorate new

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<sup>6</sup> In the field of genetics, in particular the study of contained populations, there is a noted decline of genetic variation when a new population is created and/or maintained by a significantly smaller segment of a larger population. For example, the Afrikaners of South Africa are descendants of a small number of Dutch colonists. In contemporary times, Afrikaners have an unusually high frequency of the gene that causes Huntington's disease because some among the original colonists carried that gene with unusually high frequency. This result has been clearly observed in numerous situations such as new colonies which had a fixed and small number of colonists with which to contribute to the gene pool, hence "founder" effect (Provine).

intellectual and interpretive life. Communities can develop hybridized doctrine and experiment with new ways of expressing themselves and their faith. Another, less positive, parallel can be drawn when we consider that it is often the case that closed communities are less than receptive to outsiders even as inbreeding leads to possibly unhealthy offspring. Communities of interpretation are just as dependent upon new input as are the reproducing humans of which they are constituted.

The charge here is to seek out the Other not simply for the sake of social justice, but to encounter the Other so that in the meeting our interactions with one another might help to inform and reform our developing interpretations. Our shared expressions of experience and hope are invaluable, because "concepts of person, community, and God have an essential and indissoluble relation to one another" (Bonhoeffer 22). We are not called to accept as true everything we hear, indeed, this would be nigh on impossible given the diversity of perspectives that abound. Instead, the encounter is to be one in which we have the opportunity to have our interpretive lenses reformed and to more fully see in the Other some further call to become more Christlike. These opportunities can arise within the community itself.

Though members of a certain congregation may all consider themselves the same denomination, it is unlikely that they all interpret scripture and experience the same way. Unfortunately though, if adherence to polity and tradition is emphasized for the sake of adherence, the likelihood of hearing differing experiences and expressions is greatly reduced. Congregational movement toward a Heraldic Gospel means making liturgical and dialogical space to earnestly consider divergent views, with an acknowledgment that these views may very well come from within the tradition itself. Our Heralds need not come from foreign lands to bring new thought that shifts that which has come before. Whenever and wherever it is that such shifts occur another opportunity has come to reconsider our interpretation. Does this mean then, as conservative critics charge, that anything that makes someone happy is an acceptable interpretation? Or that there is no such thing as right? Not at all.

As process theologian Rusell Pregeant writes, not "all texts or strains of meaning [are] worthy of positive valuation. Although it is theoretically possible to create a positive pattern of meaning out of any set of complexes, the dialogical and persuasive character of Biblical authority mitigates against any hermeneutic of unqualified consent"(76). At some level those of us who consider ourselves Christian may be called to simply trust that something about the Biblical character, and the God that inspired it, will eventually lead towards goodness and truth. We can choose to trust that something about the task will eventually yield useful interpretations. And this trust can be a difficult thing to come by, given the surrender of any notion of an absolute, objective interpretation. In spite of this, it seems that at some point, some measure of faith is required to accept the imperfection of our sight and directly reengage the text. If this is not done, the richness of the Biblical narrative, the experience of communion, and the personal encounter with some mediated perception of the Divine will all remain inaccessible, driven off by a distancing maneuver of doubt and uncertainty.

The text, and its interpretation, can be distanced for a time with a hermeneutic of suspicion, but eventually they must be accepted and brought close again or no transformation or religious experience can take place. Knowing that our interpretations are contingent and limited does not mean they must lack in power. It is still possible to be deeply affected by actors upon a stage, though all know it is not "real" as such. While any interpretation is possible, something about Scripture, when approached in faith, and with room made for a theopoetic multiplicity of voices, allows us, "in a post-critical<sup>7</sup> moment, [to] be caught up in the text, lost in the text, [so that]... the text functions as transformative mediation of meaning" (Schneiders 172).

A community which allows itself to become lost in the text in light of new perspectives may find itself destabilized. In the transitional moments of communal reflection it is again useful to recall Yoder's reflection on the Herald: people will "develop a doctrinal system, to help distinguish between more and less adequate ways of proclaiming; but that system, those

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<sup>7</sup> For more about the post-critical moment, see Paul Ricoeur's writing about "the second naivete," specifically his concluding chapter in *The Symbolism of Evil*.

formulae, will not become what they proclaim." It is important that communities of faith learn the difference between tradition, which has been handed down to us across time and defines who and Whose we are, and traditionalism, which is the doing of what has been done because it has been done before. Traditionalism breeds monorthodoxy. That being said, it is not worth purging traditional thought simply because it is traditional. What is important is that we stay close to our experiences and allow others to voice theirs, accepting that while there will be a difference in perspective, perspective is not all that there is.

A balance must be struck between a desire to remain true to our heritage and to appreciate Whitehead's warning that "religions commit suicide when they find their inspiration in their dogmas. The inspiration of religion lies in the history of religion" (Whitehead "Religion" 144). "History" for Whitehead here functions as a reference to embodied experience, the same type of event which inspired the Herald in the first place; when communities take seriously a catalyzing, theopoetic, voice from beyond their prescribed tradition, they step ever further away from monorthodoxy. The danger then becomes that in an earnest attempt to be inclusive and/or progressive, a community may unwittingly throw the baby out with the bathwater, experimenting in a manner that is potentially sinful or damaging to the knit of societal fabric. Given our human failings, this seems bound to happen. Our hope though, our uniquely Christian hope, is that somehow, in spite of these failings, our limited sight, incomplete interpretation, and proclivity towards exclusion, our attempts to be inclusive and loving disciples will somehow be right in the world. This hope is challenging to hold, and yet we are called to nothing less.

Though we cannot accurately see the evidence of the foundations upon which a city is laid, its architects and builders certainly can see the marks of its making (Mangis 200). No matter how well we come to know an architect we will not see things exactly as he sees them, for now we but see in a mirror, darkly. What remains is for us to trust that beyond that which we can see and understand there is a basis for belief. Given the apparent functionality of non-

representative fiat currency, which serves as legal tender because our government has decreed this to be the case, it appears that this approach is reconcilable with the human condition. How do we know money works? Because it gets us things. How do we know that an interpretation is reasonable? Because when we work with it we get things; things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And yet, even with the evidence of the fruits of the spirit, we can maintain a hermeneutic of humility that insists our interpretation cannot be final. Our communities are constantly reinterpreting revelation and experience: though there be but one Truth, there are many articulations of it, none complete.

#### **4. Polycentrism and Orthodoxy:**

*That Interpretations of Revelation are Not the Same as Revelation*

In his very short fiction piece, "Of Exactitude in Science," Jorge Luis Borges sketches the folktale of an empire in which detailed cartography became so highly valued that the whole of the territory was papered with a map whose scale was 1:1 (Borges). Their love for maps came to drive them so greatly that they covered over the land which was the origin of the map. In his book, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard builds upon this story to suggest that contemporary society exists in such a state as Borges' empire. He argues that we place such value in our representation of things that we no longer are capable of interacting with the things which they represent: the tree itself is so covered with the map of the tree that we can't get at its leaves or fruit. While Baudrillard's case seems too extreme in its extent to serve a theologian, it does offer a warning that can function to keep communities of faith from over-valuing their interpretations at the cost of the source.

When the theopoetic proclamation of a Herald has catalyzed a community into conversation with its constitutive parts, and those beyond its boundaries, some new sense of interpretation and doctrine will eventually merge. Not all community members will personally experience or express it the same way, but some new understanding or insight into how or what they are called to be and do has been developed which the community self-acknowledges as

different than before. The Borgesian warning then, is to remember that the process is yet ongoing. Owing to our own imperfection and the vastness of the Divine, any community's interpretation of any revelation, regardless of its specialness or naturalness, will be perpetually provisional until that time at which we are capable of seeing with God's eyes. Our maps are but representations.

An early articulation in resonance with this idea is found in Robert Barclay's 1676, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, in which he writes, because the Scriptures "are only a declaration of the fountain, and not the fountain itself... they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all Truth and knowledge"(Barclay Pr. 3). While Scripture is indeed an issuing forth of God's Word, that word cannot contain all that is within God. So much more then, must we be aware that our interpretation of that word is all the more removed from the source. Thus, while we may seek some solace and inspiration in Scripture and its interpretation, God alone is "that Guide by which the saints are led into all Truth... the Spirit is the first and principal leader" (*Ibid*). Luckily for us, there appear to be moments when God does provide, for some, clearer glimpses of that which is right and true, moments in which we are persuasively lured towards justice and a more intimate relationship with the Divine.

A Heraldic approach to theology suggests that separate communities of faith will come to separate interpretations and that as the communities interact both will be changed. This does not imply that they will become more like one another, or that they will necessarily agree with one another more and more as time goes on. It does, though, suggest that communities will find means of interpreting revelation and theologically expressing themselves that better allows for (a) individuals within those communities to come to a greater faithfulness and the means to articulate it and (b) *other* communities to see that new sight can be gained. In the latter example, it is important to note that the models provided by other communities need not be replicated in entirety for them to be inspirational.

In an interview at the 2009 American Academy of Religion Conference, James Cone

acknowledged that while he was pleased with the wider attention *Black Theology and Black Power* received, it was essentially written for "his people, because they were dying in the streets" (Cone). Regardless of the intended particular focus, his clear voice paved the way for others to consider *themselves* in the light of what Cone had written. Forty years after its initial publication, one would be hard pressed to get through seminary without coming across Cone's work somewhere, regardless of race. What Cone had to say, people needed to hear.

While the particulars of his situation led him to write particular content in a particular voice for a particular audience, the power and truth in his articulation has led to countless others finding inspiration in it. Some portions of *Black Theology and Black Power* are difficult to read for those of us who are white, and yet in spite of this difficulty, it offers a powerful example of a Heraldic voice unafraid to challenge normative views, and willing to allow for a development of position. As a professor of theology at Union, Cone has not simply continued to reiterate the contents of his first book, but has continued to seek words with which to express his current sense of things, allowing him to advocate for a liberatory perspective on issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race (*Ibid*).

Cone's call for a new way to think and act was a critique of a church he saw as standing in apostasy. His call was indeed a call to a new orthodoxy. It was however, particular and did not universalize experience. What can be true and needed for one group to more fully seek out God is not necessarily something applicable to all others. Communities will come to different understandings of experience depending on where they stand. Just because an experience and/or expression is not universalized does not mean that it cannot reflect some part of a larger truth. Indeed, sometimes it is the case that in an attempt to generalize an expression beyond the reach of experience, interpretation may lose some significant measure of its appropriateness.

In a 1990 critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's analysis of sin, Daphne Hampson writes that, "the argument is not that Niebuhr's analysis is false, but that it is inapplicable to the situation of all humanity, while failing to recognize that this is the case" (Hampson 121). She critiques his

attempt to extrapolate universal truths about sin and simultaneously acknowledges "that Niebuhr's analysis contains deep insights" (122). While his expression of sin results in some resonance for Hampson, where Niebuhr saw his expression as true for *all* humanity, she notes that what he "described was a peculiarly... male propensity" (124). His conceptualization of sin as tied to pride did not wholly ring true to Hampson given her own experience and interpretive lens.

Given his name's conspicuous presence in copious articles, seminary syllabi, and conferences, Niebuhr's theological expression and interpretation appear to have articulated enough of an aspect of truth to bear further consideration: ideas that Niebuhr put forth have found their way into earnest sermons and congregations. He also articulated himself in such a way that the experience of women is often glossed over: this too has found its way into the notes of pastors and ministers. A Heraldic approach suggests that a multitude of varying voices will be raised in an equally diverse number of communities, and that each will have come to rest (still contingently) in different doctrinal stances, settling on those which seem to best articulate the experiences and hopes of that community. Each will have its own sense of orthodoxy and will understand that other communities will as well. The context(s) of community deeply affect interpretation, and the the interpretation is not the same thing as the revelation itself.

## **5. Heraldic Revelation and Repentance:**

### *That the Herald Will Be Vulnerable*

Yoder's articulation of the Herald in the opening lines of this essay paint the picture of a post-colonial, invitational stance which acknowledges that truth, and knowledge of it, exists in the context of community and can persist without coercion. Furthermore, while Yoder's Herald proclaims a truth, it is an admittedly time-bound and provisional one. This allows for a permeability of thought and *praxis* adapted as required to meet the dialectic needs of the community in which one resides. Truth need not change for the articulation of it to shift: that revelation can be interpreted multiple ways does not change the revelation.

By simultaneously admitting human fallibility in interpretation and the power and Truth of the Gospel message, communities of faith can attempt to perceive and proclaim what the Good News is for *them*, in their place and their time, without feeling like they are rewriting scripture or performing mass, communal *eisegesis*. This model does not call for a *de facto* abandoning of doctrinal positions or traditional expressions of faith for those of some other group. It asks only that some measure of a hermeneutic of humility be enacted when engaging in interpretation of that which possesses an entirety beyond human grasp.

Such a proposed hermeneutic would allow communities of faith to maintain their present traditional practices and doctrinal stances while simultaneously providing means by which those positions could gradually develop without fear of apostasy. This would not immediately provide safe or welcoming grounds for marginalized voices, but it *would* insist upon the contingency of the proclamation and the provisional nature of interpretation, and the doctrinal systems upon which interpretations are built. This, in turn, establishes the *possibility* that an unusual, dissimilar belief, i.e. one outside of a closed, monorthodox system, might be as in line with the Gospel as older more traditional practices.

The voice of the Herald is one which stands in theopoetic opposition to a closed, monorthodox perspective wherein a single valid interpretation is understood to be correct in entirety. The Herald would agree with Carl Raschke that "what anti-postmodernists brand as the danger of embracing relativism amounts to nothing more than a refusal to acknowledge the overwhelming fact of cultural heterogeneity and social pluralism... [this view] is no more a threat than it is an opportunity for ongoing and amazing triumphs of ministry and the miraculous workings of God" (Raschke 153). The contemporary reality of Christianity is that it is but one perspective among many and that those who do understand themselves to be uniquely Christian will be met by an increasing number of alternative views which depart significantly from Christian thought.

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life finds that

"large numbers of Americans engage in multiple religious practices, mixing elements of diverse traditions... Many also blend Christianity with Eastern or New Age beliefs such as reincarnation, astrology and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects" (Pew Forum). Given circumstances such as these, even a broadly spread hermeneutic of humility will not resolve all conflicts. Nor should we expect it to: "but with the help of our God we dared to tell you the Gospel in spite of *strong opposition*" (1 Thessalonians 2:2). A Heraldic approach to theological and doctrinal expression is not seeking to simply create "an-easier-to-get-along-with-Christian" (Raschke 160), but to engender a model of proclamation that discourages the development of monorthodox perspectives supportive of monophonic oppression and coercion. The Herald is, after all, still the bearer of the New Testament's *kerygma*, "an act of linguistic communication, as well as an occurrence or event meant to change the hearts and minds of those who experience it" (Moore). In some ways, Heraldic interpretation will always function as a critique of current modes of thinking, encouraging communities of faith to further seek out callings to faithfulness and justice.

In contrast to monorthodox articulations of doctrine, revelation, and repentance, which strongly adhere to the certainty of a particular perspective as ultimate, Heraldic notions of accept that a community may need to repent of its own interpretations and expressions, moving from compunction to living a new way. Often times it becomes challenging to embrace that turning around in the face of tradition: as we tend to cling to our cultural vestiges more than we do to that which inspired them. The Herald is there to remind us that if we do lose a part of ourselves in new expressions of the Divine, it was either meant to be lost or it will be returned to us. "No one whose life has been transformed by the power of the risen Christ need fret about being seduced by relativism" (Raschke 154). The Herald encourages us to seek out other voices for the image of God that we find there, with a faith that we will hear what is needed when the time comes.

This encouragement rises from experience and invites community into dialogue within

and between religious traditions, Christian denominations, congregations, and individuals. The power of this dialogue arises from the focus of its reflection, which should always be driven back toward expression of the Divine, to a questioning of how it is that God is guiding us in the world, and what it is that we are called to do in charity and solidarity with one another. Throughout it all we must recall that while it may be the Herald that broaches the topic(s), the emphasis must not come to rest on them and they must not attempt to force belief.

The Herald is not some messianic senator but a *kēryx* messenger desiring to enter into multiplicitous "God-centered and God-inflamed relationships" which will leave her vulnerable to attack from from rationalism and *realpolitik*. As Yoder writes, "what makes the herald renounce coercion is not doubt or being unsettled by the tug of older views. The herald believes in accepting weakness because the message [she carries] is about a Suffering Servant whose meekness it is that brings justice to the nations" (Yoder 256). The Herald's example will serve as a model for others to bear witness to their own experience.

Rather than becoming an idol in the cult of celebrity, the Herald will offer his experience to the community in such a way that "he guides their eyes from himself to the spirit that quickens him" (Alcott 357). The quickening spirit then, though it be fleeting, is that which inspires further theopoetic proclamation, consideration, and proactive deliberation regarding what is needed to best express and encourage the way God is drawing communities out into the world. The Heraldic Gospel is one which embraces the richness and variety of ways in which the Divine can be expressed and experienced, encourages individuals to seek out other voices, reminding us that our interpretations, doctrines, and claims to know God fully are somewhat less than complete. While we strive towards the Divine and ever more considered interpretations to guide us towards faithfulness, God will always have "a name written that no one knows but himself" (ESV, Rev. 19:12)

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