

## VIII

Prayer and Action—Ian T. Ramsey 157

## IX

The Gospel as Power: Explorations in a Theology of Social Change—Thomas W. Ogletree 174

# Introduction

Our theme is "The Living God." That is the commonality in a highly diverse group of papers. There cannot be said, however, to be a clearly definable conclusion reached.

Not very much has been said to confirm the opinion held by some that God is dead. On the contrary there does run through the whole a conviction that God is powerfully active in contemporary history and not least in the revolutions and protests which are changing society in a direction not yet discernible. Nor is there a disposition to deny that God was active supremely in Jesus Christ, or even that he is still active in the church, for all the obstacles put in his way by our antiquated structures and privilege-ridden establishments.

But somewhere near this point our consensus tends to break up. Who is God, and how shall we speak about him? Not, it would seem, in static terms of substance; but is he other than the world? Is he so mysterious that we had best speak of Christ only? Should we speak of Christ's activity in the secular world, and not of God's? Is he in the process of history, or is he the Lord of history? Is he the process itself, or the energizing power that keeps the process in being? Is he the unchanging reality which stands behind all change and makes all change possible, or is he forever changing as his being is fulfilled?

And what is truth? Is it the exact account of what eternally is? Or is it the ideas, scattered or systematic, which come to us from the unceasing momentum of history? Or is there only the truth which the sciences unfold?

What is the Bible? The record of divine revelation, centered in Christ, open to all the properly established methods of criticism, but normative for the faith and life of the church? Or is it a collection of ancient documents which contain some surprising insights and the only available historical account of Jesus Christ, but are chiefly useful today as supplying illustrations for views we have already reached on other grounds?

And what is theology? Is it just a branch of philosophy, and a rather dubious one at that? Is it the explication of the biblical

revelation, or of personal commitment to Christ? Or is it the interpretation of social and national struggles from the point of view of those who are convinced in advance that God is the champion of freedom, selfhood, and nationhood?

To these questions each of us will give his answers according to his own findings; but the findings of each will be clarified and illuminated by what follows. Each one in his own place "does theology" in one way or another. Not one of us will do theology hereafter as a subject isolated from the world's agonies—whether or not we think, as some do, that the world not only sets the agenda for the church but also indicates the resolutions which it should pass.

So we come to the first paper, Dr. Runyon's on "Conflicting Models for God." He claims that we have inherited two models for God which have dominated religious thought for centuries. The first is that of the one overarching whole in which man and nature have their being; it is rooted in primitive animism and comes to its full expression in philosophical monism. Plato accepted and reworked this model. He rationalized the gods without breaking radically with the religious past of his nation; for him there still remains the fundamental mystery of that which is, in relation to which the visible world which we experience is only partially real; and for him the cosmos is God.

The other dominant model is that provided by the Hebrews, who by their teaching on creation separated man from God, and the world from God, and gave both to man and to the world complete reality, and an existence over against God and each other. The Hebrew nation was for a long period nomadic and could not therefore locate the activity of God in any particular place. Instead of this it found stability by affirming God's activity in its own continuing history.

The Greek world in due course collapsed, and with it the rationalized animism of the Greek philosophers. It became impossible to ascribe perfect rationality to the universe, or to assert the harmony of all nature with the human mind. The Hebrew world view, though it had been nourished in a cultural backwater, came into its own by its association with Christianity and showed how the demonic powers had been overthrown in the historical process. The Christian doctrine of the Resurrection was that it gave a preview and a foretaste of ultimate redemption. In the Middle Ages the Greek tradition reasserted itself by allying itself

to the Hebrew tradition in the scholastic synthesis: the disorderly, anomalous world of human experience was unified in the sacramental system, and the eschatology of the Bible was fulfilled in the church.

But this could not and did not last, and recent centuries have destroyed this synthesis. Charles Darwin, by his principle of natural selection, reduced the governance of the world to blind chance. Tillich tried to restore the marriage between the Greek and Hebrew models, but only succeeded in killing off the Hebrew partner. Teilhard de Chardin attempted a total view of the universe, which is developing as a giant organism toward the consummation which forever draws it on. But he slipped back into cosmic monism and spoiled his case by introducing the activity of radial energy as the force which propels all things toward the omega point. Moltmann, more persuasively, has urged that the evolutionary process transcends itself and becomes conscious of itself; he agrees that this contention cannot be verified, but urges that it works as a prophecy which fulfills itself by the hope which it engenders. On this view God is real and influential, and the world is autonomous; but where can we find the ground for the promise on which the hope of fulfillment is based?

Since the collapse of monism, no solution of the problem is finally convincing. There is, however, a good case, in the Hebrew style, for judging the whole historical process by the norm of God's accidental activity in what may be called the *promontories*, the significant events, of that process. Meanwhile, the task of the theologian is to clarify the two leading models, and keep them clarified.

Discussion of this paper in full assembly did not seriously challenge the existence and importance of the two models. Some members would have added other models as highly important. The derivation of rational thought from animism was questioned. Marxism was cited as an attempt to unite the two models. One bold suggestion was that it was not a Christian paper, since it did not mention Christ as a model. Other members suggested that we had been given no clue as to how we are to decide which are the promontories of history, the historical events which exhibit the activity of God.

Professor Charles Coulson, Oxford scientist and Methodist lay preacher, at a later session pointed out that responsible scientists

had given up the claim to know "things-in-themselves," and now content themselves with the use of models. He thus pointed out a useful analogy to the theological method pursued by Dr. Runyon. For scientific purposes, he said, models are useful for prediction, but even correct predictions do not prove that the models are right. Yet it seems inconceivable that the structures carefully built on the successful predictions made possible by the models are wholly wrong, e.g. in the case of the electrons. It is demanded of models that they should be consistent, meaningful, communicable, and above all fruitful. Scientists tend hardly at all to speak of "truth" in respect of their theories, but only of usefulness.

The question of "truth," however, began to rear itself as the discussion of Dr. Runyon's paper proceeded. Surely the all-important question is not, "Which of these models do we find congenial to our ways of thinking?" but "Which brings use closer to a knowledge of what is true about God?"

The second paper applied itself very closely to that question, as Dr. Pailin spoke on "Theistic Verification." He expressly repudiates the notion, put by some linguistic philosophers, that religious language is simply the use of words according to the rules of a particular language game, without relation to what actually is the case. He maintains that the questions, "Are religious statements true?" cannot be avoided by responsible thinkers.

But how are such statements verified? They are statements of a quite different kind from those made by scientists about their subject matter. They cannot be verified in the way in which such statements are verified. Religious statements assert necessary truths; they are factual, in the sense that they assert that "this really is the case." In brief, they assert that the universe is of such a kind that it is compatible with the existence of God and probably dependent upon it.

Reasoning on such a statement is spiral; we start with an insight, universalize it, modify it, universalize it again, and so on until we attain to a degree of clarity. Thus the statement is certified. We are not to be daunted by the fact that our statements are expressed in the terms of human mental structure—there is no other way in which they can be expressed, or in which God can reveal himself to man. We must be careful not to claim too much for too many religious statements. When

we say, for instance, that God acts here or there, this is not an inference from observation; it is an interpretation of events in the light of our faith, and we must not claim more for it than that.

In answer to the criticism that his approach was purely individualistic, Dr. Pailin said that he did not believe that religious statements were relative to the culture in which they were made. In answer to an appeal to declare himself a radical who was ready to speak of Christ but not of God, he said that the God of the Bible, or someone like him, could in fact be verified and spoken about. Discussions in the Institute showed a certain measure of dissatisfaction with Dr. Pailin's rejection of experience as a mode of verification, and it was fairly widely held that what he had spoken of was not so much verification as falsification or justification; that is, he had not shown that religious statements could be verified in any accepted sense of that term, but only that they could be seen to be intellectually respectable and tenable. It was doubted by some whether there could be a mode of certification which transcends all cultural and historical variations. Other members felt that verification is not a worthwhile exercise anyway; all that we are concerned with is a Christian style of life.

Dr. Paul Hessert next expressed a point of view very distant from that of Dr. Pailin. He indicates the two channels of the theological discussion of God as being "process theology"—an attempt to re-create natural theology—and "radical theology." It does not take him very long to dispose of process theology (though this certainly attracted the attention of the conference in many ways). Dr. Hessert shows that process theology recognizes the need of establishing at the outset a God-category with which to work. If the category is wide enough to include a Christology in the first place, no Christology is necessary. If it is not, no Christology is possible.

Radical theology means the rejection of natural theology and complete concentration on God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. This means the virtual elimination of the category of the living God. The danger of such a theology is that it tends to divinize the values of the contemporary world and call them Christ. Nevertheless, such a theology needs careful attention. It is in effect a focusing of theology, not on God, but on the mediator to

God, Jesus Christ, conceived not historically, but as engaged in specific action. In fact, on this view he *is* action.

Such theology takes various forms. Christ may appear as a zealot, as the organizer of a revolution. Thus student protest or black power is given a theological status. The blacks of America are the oppressed in every age, and the Christian is one who is with Christ for them, and Christ's action is the revolution. John Vincent's Christocentric radicalism finds Christ in the secular activity of the modern world—not the Christ of supernatural history, but the Christ of forgiveness and reconciliation. Kitamori identifies Christ with the love that in spite of rejection will not be rejected, and forgives the unforgivable, but always at the cost of pain. These three Christologies see the vital point that success and safety are not promised by the gospel, though often, implicitly, by the church. They all give up the church as it is, and theology as a system, and though they all represent powerful elements in the gospel they are in danger of coloration from current events and tendencies. Yet they may well be right in issuing a manifesto against the God-category and proclaiming that the gospel is not a harmonization of divine elements but an explosion and a cataclysm.

For an Englishman the Hessert paper was a fascinating expose of the effect on theology of the present ferment in American life. Dr. Hessert was asked whether the concept of a mediator did not imply that there is a living God to be mediated, and he was urged in one quarter to consider that if God is for freedom, pious talk about love and patience is not Christian at all.

On the following day Dr. William Strawson translated us into a world to which allusion had sometimes been made in the previous papers but into which we had not been invited to enter very far—the world of the Bible. His subject was "The Living God in the Living Word." Dr. Strawson declined the title of biblical theologian for himself, but claimed that the Bible must be seriously brought into evidence for the discussion of the living God. For theology to lose contact with the life of the church is to kill theology, not God. The Bible is concerned with God—not the proofs of his existence, but with his effect on those who believe in him. To them he is a disturbance and a challenge, routing them out of their security and putting them on the road to an unknown destination. To them

he is a summons to obedience, to the risk of defeat. They find him in situations where others do not find him, and build up and clarify their conception of him. Belief in God must not be held necessarily to rule out the possibility of his nonexistence. Indeed many gods in whom people have believed are now known not to exist. But for the Bible God *is*—above all else *God is*—making himself known by what he does.

Yet the Bible does not encourage us to worship a mini-God, or a simple God, or one who is only Father, or one who is thought of only in terms of Jesus Christ, or one who is stripped down to his bare essentials. The Incarnation and Christology are decisive for our view of God. We cannot draw up a list of the elements that constitute divinity and decide whether or not Jesus has them; we can only say what it is like to believe that he is divine. Altizer has equated God with Jesus because he believes that the transcendence of God as religion conceives it died with the coming of Jesus. This view is based very precariously on Hegelian dialectic. But Christomonism is not much better, for it relies on a picture of Jesus as a whole, full man, and then equates man with God. This is to turn Christianity into humanism. God became man in Jesus, but this does not mean that man and God are the same; on the contrary, God became man—that is, something different—in Jesus for our salvation. Nor does Christomonism Christianity have any place for the Holy Spirit.

So let us seek a better Christology! The question about the divinity of Christ is addressed to persons, and the answer must be personal also—the answer of personal faith. It is faith not in a human leader, but in one who is greeted as Lord and must be called transcendent. But this transcendent Jesus witnesses by his prayers to a transcendent Father, and we cannot stop short of a doctrine of the Trinity.

Such a doctrine is based on revelation alone, but no other doctrine, no lesser reality of God, meets human need. It is not a complete account of God, but it tells us that we depend on God, and not he on us; that we need the healing, fulfillment, and salvation which Christ gives, and the energy and enthusiasm which are the work of the Spirit.

The "living God" may not be a theological category, but the presence and power of the living God are asserted not only in the Bible; they are to be found also in the revolutions which

have swept across the face of Asia. This is the basic premise of Dr. Christie Rosa's chapter on "The Presence of the Living God Amidst the Cultural Revolution of a People." He takes the whole Asian scene into account and uses Ceylon as his chief example. He indicates the depth, the dynamic, the dimensions, and the direction of the revolution, which has overthrown the hierarchical social structure and the caste system, emancipated women, promoted the search for selfhood and nationhood, and at the same time opened the door to communalism and perhaps even to genocide. The dynamic of the revolution was nationalism, but the Christian gospel also has acted as a liberator. There is a revival of national faiths, and an increased interest in Christianity; the mass media is in full use, and Oriental languages and arts are being revived. Yet there is the haunting danger of relapse into communalism and sectarianism in the name of freedom.

Above all, the church must offer a theology relevant to this situation. Among the lines of its possible development the concept of God who confronts persons and situations at every level must take an important place. We are wrapped up, said Dr. Rosa, by the living God. For God is the creator who binds himself irrevocably to man, enabling man to find and be himself, and is at the same time lord and judge of every culture and every revolution. And his presence will not fail us; it is embodied in every Christian who is open and outgoing; it is there, incognito, in Muslims and Buddhists and others.

In such a situation Christians are committed to dialogue with men of other faiths, and dialogue is the spontaneous meeting of men with one another on equal terms. It has its own methods and its own purposes. Meanwhile the church should abandon its one-type ministry, bring lay men and lay women into full service, remove denominational barriers, and hasten the process of modernization in every country.

The theme of modernization was taken up and developed by Dr. Emerito Nacpil, but his treatment of it related not so much to the living God in whose name and power the process was to be carried out as to the new image of man which it creates. The title of his paper is, in fact, "Modernization and the Search for a New Image of Man." He first describes the total thrust of modernization, covering all areas of life—its determined swing away from tradition, its demand for radical

change without delay. Its goals are the rationalization of the means and methods of production and distribution, the planning of productivity, the raising of levels of living, and social and economic equalization. These go along with national consolidation and independence; whether they require political democracy is still in question.

Modernization on this scale requires a great change of mind and attitude, and a new image of man is emerging—man ready for change, as a natural and normal part of life; man rational and pragmatic; man personally responsible, but at the same time the member of a community of persons, accepting his civic and national obligations and the system of promotion by merit alone.

Here is the conflict in the mind and life of Asia. Asian man in large measure still values stability above change and wishes the unchanging character of village and soil to control his life; he is still enchanted with magic and myths, still ready to sink himself into the tribe and submit to its traditional authorities.

Religion for the most part in Asia is on the side of reaction and immobility. The Christian church can and should be the very opposite, pushing on the process of modernization with all its strength. For the new image of Asian man fits in with the Christian doctrine of the new humanity. Does not the New Testament speak of the one common humanity which was shared by Adam and Christ, and never so destroyed by sin that each man ceases to be the responsible representative of all men? Does not the New Testament speak of the man of faith as a pilgrim on the way from promise to fulfillment, like Abraham abandoning his social and family ties for a new order? Does not the Christian promise break the cycle of recurrent time and lay the future open? Is not man, in the biblical view, steward, trustee, and lord of nature? Did not Moses teach and find that being a man is being free—free in a community of persons? Human existence in Adam, according to Paul, is different from human existence in Christ. In Christ there is a new beginning, altering the movement of history and inaugurating the age in which the new man in Christ proclaims release to the captive, gives sight to the blind, and sets the oppressed at liberty.

It can be said by way of comment that Dr. Nacpil goes a long way toward overcoming the danger, never far away from the

discussions at Oxford, of identifying Christianity with a particular national or regional culture or movement. In reply to a request for an indigenous theology for his own country, he defined the task of theology as that of wrestling with the problems of one's own culture in the light of the truths of the gospel. This reply increased the significance of the statement which we heard that Africa is not so convinced of the value of modernization as Asia is, and refuses to believe that fulfillment means the destruction of the past. The question is, What are the elements in the Western Christian view of man which the Asian Christian finds unacceptable?

The Institute, having swung from reflection on God to the study of man, now is turned by the Bishop of Durham to the theme which brings God and man together—"Prayer and Action." Dr. Ramsey says that the function of the words used in prayer is to provide a verbal pathway into the presence of God and to furnish us with the meditation and discourse appropriate to being in God's presence. We need, therefore, in prayer to be articulate about the world and ourselves, about our anxieties and hopes, and to speak without restraint as we do in the presence of our friends. But our prayer has to be made our own, in a context in which it can lead to action and engage us in action. This is the way in which we can pray for the peace of the world. God responds to our prayers, for they provide the milieu for his activity, and indeed for the extension of the Incarnation, into which we are taken up as members of the Body of Christ.

If our prayer is to provide this milieu for God, certain principles need to be observed: (1) Our language must specify possibilities that are open in principle as far as we know. We can pray for fine weather as long as the meteorologists leave parts of the weather system still open. We are not to cease to pray because we cannot see how God can answer our prayers. (2) Our words must be consistent with our doctrine of God as loving and personal, and with our map of the world. (3) We must not expect to manipulate God or presume to change the world, we must believe that God's activity can achieve something new within the open texture of the universe. (5) If what we pray for does not happen, we must not say at once, "It was not God's will"; rather we should conclude that

the fault lay in our estimate of the situation. (6) In view of the vast possibilities of human personality still unknown to us, we should not set arbitrary limits on our power to cooperate with God's activity.

Prayer, then, is a speech-act moving into the silence where God discloses himself and his will, and emerging in our own dedicated action. It is a microcosm of the Christian life and brings spirituality and secularity into union.

To the question, certainly arising from this train of thought, "Is God influenced by us?" Dr. Ramsey replied by reminding us of his view that belief in God is founded on "cosmic disclosure situations" in which we see the facts of the world in a new and convincing light and in greater depth than before. Thus we recognize the *activity* of God, for God is known in activity. In what we call intercessory prayer—the name is not a good one—we must not exclude our own activity as praying from the context of God's activity. Our activity in prayer is part of the milieu in which God works, and we may expect him to act in response to our prayer in a way in which he might not otherwise act.

As in previous Institutes an evening debate was arranged to bring out into the open and to sharpen an issue which was seen to run through all the discussions. Dr. Lawrence Meredith affirmed that "the Christian gospel can be appropriately understood without the concept of a transcendent God." He claimed that the concept of God as it is usually expressed creates intolerable difficulties. How can God be called the Lord of history in view of what has happened in history? How can he be called "Love" after Auschwitz? In view of our ignorance, he must be thought of as revealing himself to man; but how can we decide when revelation has occurred? Real Christianity, he maintained, consists in commitment to freedom as providing the environment for man's development, and to love as providing its motive force. Jesus identified himself with freedom and love to the point of dying on the Cross. The doctrine of the Resurrection is that these remain as the signs and the inspiration of what human life ought to be.

The author of this Introduction disclaimed Dr. Meredith's pragmatist theory of truth and said that he was concerned with what really is the case, whether it is seen to confer benefits or not. The God of the Bible is transcendent, personal, active,

and loving; the heart of the Christian religion lies in allegiance to a reality other than man which has an absolute claim on man; worship is justified only if God is conceived in this way; and Jesus cannot be set up as a substitute for a transcendent God, since he is himself transcendent and related to a transcendent God, according to the witness of the whole New Testament.

The discussion which resulted in the Institute from this debate concerned itself with the question of how far Dr. Meredith's viewpoint can be called Christian; and with the grounds on which we believe in God in spite of the difficulties which are attached to belief.

The same set of problems is not far below the surface in Dr. Thomas Ogletree's chapter on "The Gospel as Power: Explorations in a Theology of Social Change." The right method of theology, says Dr. Ogletree, is not to get the gospel clear and then apply it, but to discover the gospel by engaging in Christian action. He accepts an avowedly pragmatist view of truth, though he pays great respect to the Bible. He feels himself obliged always to ask: does my theology help me to take part in the redemptive movements of history? Similarly, there is no Christology which stands by itself. The reality of Christ can be grasped only in the context of social events.

Jesus attacked the structures of death which had lain heavily on his people and went on attacking them until their defenders crucified him. His death was not simply an illuminating sample of a universal principle. The world took a different turn when Jesus died, because his death bore within itself an impulse to the liberating order which embraces all things, and so was able to leap over the frontiers of race and nation and time, and continue into our own century. It inaugurated a movement which presses on relentlessly and is now encountered by us in the concrete struggles of our world.

It is from Jesus that we learn the activity of God, and that God is the explosive power operating in the world. At this present moment in America it is the blacks and the radical students who are raising the fundamental issues of the Christian gospel. Their revolutionary proceedings are, of course, ambiguous and fraught with problems; they cannot be identified uncritically with God's work. But God is unfolding his being as

the concrete dynamic in history that drives man forward to freedom and empowers him to create a new order.

To the objection that if God is caught up into the ambiguity of human struggle there can be no solution to human problems, Dr. Ogletree replies that if he is *not* involved in the struggle he has no redemptive powers. God is not to be credited with an unchanging nature. Rather, he is himself, as many of the authors in this volume say, the energizing creative power which forever seeks new forms and patterns of activity and organization, thrusting forward in the progressive self-actualization of the divine being.

He lives!