

This is where POWER lies

by L. CALLID KEEFE-PERRY

The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively . . . A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. ~Alfred North Whitehead, Aims of Education, 1929

[My plea for a new theopoetic] means according a greater role to the imagination in all aspects of the religious life . . . 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. ~ Amos Wilder, Theopoetic, 1979



It seems likely that Whitehead would declare that many of our nation's seminaries have no reason for existence and that Wilder would suggest the majority of our systems of theological education are ossified and empty. This is unfortunate. To this, Phillip Clayton adds his own voice, writing confessionally in *Transforming Christian*

Theology that, "I can no longer publish theology books that are written primarily for specialists. From now on I must write for a broader audience, one that includes ordinary people who are eager to speak clearly and passionately about their faith—and those who are struggling to find out exactly what in the Christian story they really do care passionately about." I hear Clayton's invigorating movement toward individual reclamation of expression and passion as an example of growth that would be more fully satisfying to both Whitehead and Wilder. My intent in this article is to offer the readers of *Creative Transformation* another lens beyond that of process thought with which to consider Clayton's call to transformation and the larger work of this great turning within Christianity: an understanding and cultivation of theopoetic perspectives may provide another means to creatively engage and revitalize our continuing explorations of God and Church.

The term theopoetics was first used by [Stanley Romaine Hopper](#) in the early 1970s, rising out of conversations that had been taking place within the Society for Art and Religion in Contemporary Culture and the American Academy of Religion. At that time, Hopper wrote with feeling that some new means of articulating our faith must

be found, or the whole of the theological project would collapse under the weight of its own methodologically anachronistic Greek constructs. During the speech which first saw the term theopoetics used, Hopper commented that “it is not even a question as to whether we can come up with a theology ‘in a new key’; it is a question rather as to whether theology, insofar as it retains methodological fealty to traditional modes, is any longer viable at all.” If theology was to remain viable, thought Hopper, it would need to become a theopoetic: a way of expressing knowledge of the Divine that was more sensitive to individual experience, more aware of the power of narrative and metaphor, and cognizant of the limitations of propositional logic to inform our faith life. In Hopper’s words, the shift to a new voice would acknowledge that our “theologies belong to the realm of mytho-poetic utterance and that theo-logos is not theo-logic but theo-poesis.” Since Hopper, a score or so of thinkers have taken up consideration and publication regarding theopoetics, and they, in turn, have led me to consider the implications that a theopoetic perspective brings to bear on my faith and calling to minister.

Whereas both Hopper and Wilder, the earliest proponents of the idea, conceived of “theopoetic” as a concrete noun used to describe specific texts that evoked resonances of the Divine, I have been more powerfully drawn to the word as an adverb. How do we go about living our lives more theopoetically, learning how to perceive our daily lives as parts of the grand dance to which God provides the melody? How does our expression of the Divine change our experience of the Divine? For those of us serving in the ministry, these questions take on even greater depth when we consider its implications not only for ourselves, but for those that we serve and work beside. How can we help and encourage the “ordinary people who are eager to speak clearly and passionately about their faith,” to do so, and to do it in a manner that engenders a further deepening of their relationship with the Divine and their engagement with others in matters of justice, righteousness, and liberation? This question, so close to Clayton’s strident self-appeal for renewal, seems equally tied to Whitehead’s “atmosphere of excitement,

arising from imaginative consideration” and Wilder’s plea for the reprioritization of the creative act within theological discourse.

When Amos Wilder wrote the 1976 book, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, he not only expanded on Hopper’s articulation of what would constitute a theopoetic, he also reframed and pushed the edges of what he saw as necessary for enlivening Christian service. Far from conceiving of ministry as merely performative, the theopoetic perspective suggests that ministerial work is most powerfully enacted when it also serves as means of recalibrating the models, metaphors, and stories by which we make sense of the world. What is being called for is not a performance, or a proposition, but a facilitation, an easy-making so that others can come to more fully see how it is that God is continually revealed not only in Scripture, but in the minute particulars of the world.

As ministers it is our task to enact liturgy in the worshiping community *and* engender the shift in perspective needed for individuals to more regularly see themselves as part of the Divine call. Wilder’s plea for a theopoetic approach to religious thought is a request to consider how we might envision the ministerial vocation as simultaneously more poetic and encouraging. We must move from gatekeeping, clerical mentalities towards prophetically energizing ones which not only instruct, but also inspire people to more fully engage with the Divine in their lives. Just as a fine piece of literature

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can be returned to repeatedly with varied meanings found at varying times, so too can we reexamine the direction, arc, and nature of our own stories, finding ever changing ways in which God draws us forth into the world.

Following this approach, texts like Malachi 2:7 take on a different timbre: “for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth.” “Guard” here is *shaamar*, the same word used as “keep” in Genesis 2:15 when “the Lord God took the man

and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Whereas more authoritarian readings of the Malachi text would suggest that the task of the holy servant is to dole out knowledge to seekers in measured amounts when appropriate,

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the theopoetic interpretation here would have us be more along the lines of keeping the Garden: we must tend to our knowledge, allow it to grow and flower and bear us fruit. We must make sure the light of day reaches it regularly and that it has air and water to take in and make into

new life. We want the knowledge to grow, want our relationship with the Divine to be ever deepening and sending forth pale shoots that may one day support works of mercy and acceptance of grace.

For the Church and our congregations to survive and thrive, we must find ways to nurture each other in a such a manner that the inspiration and integrity of the Gospel is maintained *and* encouragement is given to all men and women eager to explore and express their relationship with God. Their voices will not all sound alike and neither will their cadences, emphases, or conclusions, but if Tony Jones is correct in *Transforming Christian Theology’s* Foreward, and, “the salvation of progressive Christianity will be populist theology,” then it is essential that we begin to encourage all sorts of people to speak out and to develop discerning ears which can listen in tongues, seeking to hear that of God in each other’s voice. The resulting dialogue will be all the more rich for its diversity in language, articulation, and particularity.

While my understanding of process thought suggests that it tends to argue for models on the basis of their ability to be “consistent, coherent, applicable, and adequate,” and functions as a broad basis of support rather than as means

to produce contextualized praxis, I do feel as if there is room for a theopoetic approach at the table. When new voices, expressions, and interpretations begin to explore uncharted models and articulations, it is important that they be given acknowledgement on their particular merit, not just as some example of a generality. Knowledge of poetics may grant the reader of a poem some sense of it within the context of the art, helping to develop a greater appreciation, but it will always be the case that the compelling component of a line is not due to its austere relationship to an abstracted set of historical poetic guidelines, but the degree to which it captures some fragment of beauty and truth in the present.

If we seek to radically renew and transform Christian theology, we will need not only new systematics, but new songs, new stories, and new sight, each grounded in the liberating power of Christ’s message, and each a reminder of Wilder’s assertion that “human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas. This is where power lies and the future is shaped.” I do believe that Christian theology can transform as Philip Clayton thinks it can, but its transformation won’t come from the same old players. As clergy and lay ministers it is my hope that we can be part of this shaping of the future by encouraging others to shape it, that we can help to engender an atmosphere of passionate excitement, and that the Christianity which emerges from such passion will be nourishing, many-voiced, and in ever-deepening service. I pray we all find ways to take part in this, for God is indeed the poet of the world, and the poem of the days in which we live is beautiful and true.



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