

Towards the Heraldic:

A Theopoetic Response to Monorthodoxy

L. Callid Keefe-Perry

Abstract: The first task of this chapter is to detail the qualities of a theological position identified as “monorthodox,” articulating how it forms a worldview that is impositionally singular, rigid, and totalizing. This position is then critiqued and an alternative approach is developed as a corrective for it by means of an engagement with John Howard Yoder’s work in missiology and articulations of theopoetics and religious imagination as voiced by Stanley Hopper and Amos Wilder. This corrective position is termed a “Heraldic” theology, and is marked by gestures of invitation, space-making, and manifoldedness, without an abandonment of truth claims. Arguments from this position recognize that the expression of a transformational experience of the Divine will be necessarily multiplicitous and communally developed: they challenge proponents of a monorthodox worldview that demand acquiescence, without, in turn, imposing a perspective others must maintain.

Working from the Heraldic position, the chapter's second major move is to extend beyond formal boundaries of Christianity, considering the possible implications of an ethic grounded in the Heraldic perspective. The claim is that while *inspired* by Christian theological thought, the utility of the Heraldic stance in particular – and a theopoetic perspective in general— reaches beyond Church settings to contest numerous forms of onto-theology and hermeneutics that insist upon fixed and uniform interpretations of experience. The term “repentance” is reconsidered in this context, reconceived as the theopoetic basis of a generative, interpretative response to a totalizing monorthodoxy.

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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)

A theopoetic impulse... seek[s] 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.

--Roland Faber (God as Poet 318)

All across the spectrum of religious thought, theologians and lay people alike 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" (monorthodoxy¹). Conversely, I suggest that there is nothing which necessitates the collapse of those two positions into one, and offer that there is another stance which actively insists on the reality of truth while maintaining the present provisionality of *all interpretations* concerning the ultimate, challenging any assertion that right practice always requires same practice.

This chapter will attempt to explicate the qualities of common, totalizing, monorthodox theologies and worldviews, exploring how such positions exert their influence in religious settings, often self-interestedly. A corrective to monorthodoxy will then be considered by means of the development of a "Heraldic" theology, encouraging a dialogical and manifold articulation of experience and Divine revelation. In the first portion of the chapter I explore monorthodoxy

¹ I use this term in 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 *monorthodoxy* and *polyorthodoxy* 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.

primarily within the Christian tradition, extending in the second to a consideration of monorthodox thought beyond the traditional boundaries of the Church, suggesting that there might be an imperative, theopoetic response to such positions: a “roughing up of the unified appearances” that adherents to monorthodoxy claim are universal.

Monorthodox Thought

In a zealous desire for a clarity against which Whitehead's opening epitaph pointedly argues, many beliefs are formed into rigid positions, often relying on absolutism and an interpretive stance that assumes understanding is fixed and complete. While this is perhaps most visibly evident in claims of biblical inerrance and the authority of religious leaders to correctly, and wholly, interpret Scripture, it is not the mark of only a particular type of Christian. Indeed, a monorthodox perspective is found whenever the “true” religion is depicted as some continuous, uniform behemoth, when in fact it is as varied as its history and the faith of those who make it up.

When clergy and other arbiters of theology proclaim an understanding of a revealed God that is complete and/or closed, they position themselves to take on the role of gatekeepers of faith: if one is to come before God it must be done in such-and-such a way or it is not done at all. This happens just as much when Progressive arguments claim that Christians as a whole must do something, as it does when someone proclaims a Christian Exclusivism that asserts that individuals will suffer damnation unless they believe a particular theological point. In either case, taking such a position, even if well-intentioned, allows for far too easy of a slide into aggression, and in some cases, oppression. The presumption of a wholly understandable, closed, teleological, revelation maps well onto means of continuing control and systematic domination.

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 discrimination, 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 damaging, dominant

social mores and/or theological stances.

From the vantage of a Christian monorthodox position in which a concentration of power has been amassed, an individual's calls for reform and repentance carry with them the perceived weight of divine authority and insight. That is, since the claim is that an individual can be in near complete awareness of God's will, that same individual can make claims to having their desires also be God's. Interestingly, the certainty and clarity of God and God's support is often asserted by those already in a position of significant social capital and cultural weight, something which does not appear to be the normative mode within the biblical record, which typically inverts social structures², giving voice and power to those previously without it. Wanting to avoid being bound up in the negative implication of an authoritative, potentially, self-serving position that asserts singular truth and the capacity of individuals to know it, a conceivable Christian response might be to displace the authority of traditionally centralized power with that of those on the fringes of society. However, a continuation of this stream of thought quickly shows this response to be untenable.

Carried too far, the suggestion could be made that only the disenfranchised can extol virtue and value. This is unnecessarily exclusive and does not address what would occur should marginalized voices be brought to center. Under a "margins only" schema the only options would be either to remain excluded or to be silent upon recognition. Neither of these seem desirable, nor in resonance with the Biblical injunction to "teach all the nations." What it called for then, is not a censure of individual claims to truth, but a reframing of what it means to claim knowledge of ultimate truth, to confess experience of the Divine, and to spread the Good News. Some of John Howard Yoder's work in missiology suggests such a paradigm, one which allows for individual proclamation and yet refrains from coercion and the amassing of personal influence and power in the name of God.

The Herald

[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)

² For more on how Jesus' ministry calls society toward a revisioning of power and control, see Donald B. Kraybill's *The Upside-Down Kingdom*.

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. The Herald is the bearer of *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 contrast to monorthodox articulations of doctrine, revelation, and repentance, which strongly adhere to the certainty of a particular perspective as ultimate, Heraldic notions of proclamation accept that communities may need to regularly reexamine their own interpretations and expressions, moving from compunction to living a new way.

Yoder's offering calls for a Heraldic position wherein proclamation is not about adherence to "a doctrinal system," but rather an articulation of the Herald's experience of "contingent, particular events." His articulation of the Herald paints the picture of a post-colonial, invitational stance which acknowledges that knowledge of truth comes about through interpretation in the context of community and can persist without coercion. Furthermore, while Yoder's Herald proclaims some particular interpretation, 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 necessarily change the revelation itself.

By simultaneously admitting human fallibility in interpretation and the power and Truth of a Divine 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. Human interpretations are limited and it seems we can not hold onto perfect representation for any extended length of time. Those that are people of faith may strive after faithfulness and God, however a claim to have reached some level of certainty about the entirety of God seems misguided, especially for those of the Jewish and Christian traditions, wherein scripture in Isaiah 55:9 reads that "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 fractured human experience that people sense anything. Rather than this being considered a negative though, the acknowledgment that cultural conditioning can

influence experience, interpretation, and expression of God can open up possibilities for theological discourse. A community which is catalyzed into self-reflection, dialogue, and renewed expression would reach a place akin to 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). It is this kind of catalysis that a Herald's proclamation engenders.

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 scientism 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 serves as a model for others to bear witness to their own experience. He 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, offering her own expressions of "contingent, particular events," aimed at evoking resonance in the experience of others.

Rather than becoming an idol in the cult of celebrity, the Herald offers 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 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 stance is one which embraces the richness and variety of ways in which the Divine can be expressed and experienced, encourages individuals to speak the truth as they understand it, reminding them that their interpretations, doctrines, and claims to know God fully are somewhat less than complete. While people of faith strive towards the Divine and will ever consider new interpretations to guide them towards faithfulness, God will always have "a name written that no one knows but himself" (ESV, Rev. 19:12).

The Herald's announcement is not that there is a new royal dictat or some new truth, but that she has experienced some event she feels compelled to share. Even still, her goal is not to individually develop and promote doctrinal systems and formulae, but to speak of an experience she understands to be true, sharing with others and calling out to see if others discern it to be true, if it evokes change or response. 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). The Herald points toward an experience of the Divine revealed in such a way that he has come to believe it to be true, and brings this sense of truth to others for their consideration: not as the way that it *must* be for them, but the way that the Herald has experienced it to be.

A Heraldic approach to interpretation acknowledges that any human proclamation of religious experience, faith, sin, or judgment, is bound by the marks of fallible interpretation, context, and community. Rather than attempting to disregard this fact, the Herald 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 this way, the Herald is impelled by the theo poetic impulse "to roughen up unified appearances" (Faber 318). That is, in affirming her own experience, the Herald does not just share her story, but invites others to share theirs, raising question to any monophonic theology that suggests a wholly accurate, complete, and closed interpretation of revelation and the Divine.

Monorthodox theologies seem the result of an "insistence on hard-headed clarity," an impulse which yields easy answers³ and contributes to a form of cultural rationalism which encourages people to shy away from the creative and the risky in favor of certain and finished ideas that are sometimes at odds with individual experience. Aspiration towards the certain yields abstraction. If there is to be a move away from abstraction it will necessitate a corresponding shift towards the particular and embodied, a transition that still seeks clarity, but does not claim that the clear and true understanding of the individual directly corresponds to some universal clarity at which others must similarly arrive. In his own inimitable way, William Blake asserts this in a concise line: "to generalize is to be an idiot; to particularize is the alone distinction of merit" (Erdman 691).

A Heraldic approach to theology suggests that separate communities of faith will come to separate interpretations and that as the communities interact each 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. This can be clarified by means of an example.

³ 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 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 can leave the seeker still dry and wanting more.

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 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 reexamine his own stance, moving toward a fresh expression of theology issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, and class, as well as 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. Another example speaks to this point.

In a 1990 critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's analysis of sin, Daphne Hampson wrote 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, emphasis added). She critiques his attempt to extrapolate universal truths about sin and yet 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, operating within her own experiences and interpretive lenses. Regardless of Hampson's critique, given his name's conspicuous presence in copious articles, 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 interpretation of orthodoxy and will understand that other communities will as well. The context(s) of community deeply affect each hermeneutic, and it is understood that interpretation is not the same thing as that which is interpreted.

In attempting to develop universally applicable answers to religious questions, theologians have sometimes too narrowly defined what is acceptable, too quickly cut off possibility, and too rationally declined an abundant invitation to consider that there is power in the experience of the particular. That is, in the effort to find a unifying answer that is eternally applicable and wholly complete, theologians have been driven to a form of abstraction which has often distanced them from the events that originally inspired their craft. At least, this is what the Herald would assert, with support from the theo poetic thought of Stanley Hopper and Amos Wilder.

A Theopoetic Invitation

Stanley Hopper's speech "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology" is reflective of much of his work from the early 1970's and is the first piece of scholarship to make direct English use of the term *theopoesis* (Miller 3). In it he asserts that we must seek a "radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking" (Hopper, "Literary Imagination 207). He prompted that the question was not how to develop new, socially relevant theologies, but "whether theology, insofar as it retains methodological fealty to traditional modes, is any longer viable at all" (207). Furthermore, he argues that any successful attempt at reinvigorating a vibrant religious dialogue will essentially abandon attempts to logically systematize religious thought. Instead, he advocates shared expression of spiritual experiences that "evoke resonances and recognitions" (218).

The shift from theologies, which he characterizes as utilizing hollow language, will require first "the unlearning of symbolic forms" and then "the activation of a new archetypal

image” (220). Drawing on “What is Called Thinking?,” Hopper cites Heidegger’s statement that “we Moderns can learn only if we always unlearn at the same time ... we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally” (221). His claim then is that people must unlearn modern approaches to theology, arriving at that which is “not theo-logic but theopoiesis” (225). As Hopper's student, Amos Wilder succinctly puts it, “the dimension too often missing is... that of rooted-ness, creaturehood, embodied humanness” (Wilder 47).

Hopper's argument is that to the degree that modern theology has rigidly attempted to prove something absolutely and as distinct from experience, the whole project has been a fool’s errand. In his words, any “theology founded upon the mathematical models of propositional logic is founded upon a profound metaphysical error” (224). In some ways this can be seen as an energetic response to the Death of God theologies that were in vogue at the time: Hopper had to find some means to condemn the “hollow language” of theology that was currently under fire and then maneuver in such way so as to allow for some new resurgence of authentic Christian expression. While Hopper's claim of logical theology as “profound error,” can be seen as extreme given contemporary approaches to contextual and constructive theology – especially ones which allow for the power and validity of voices beyond the normative ones, and the general progressive acceptance that theology is done provisionally and for a certain people at a certain time – the theo poetic insistence for a more creatively engaged, particular, embodied expression of Divine experience yet remains powerful.

The suggestion therefore is that by supporting and validating the experience of others' conditions outside of our own, we might come to know more, not just of them, but of ourselves and God. Imaginatively articulating one's sense of the Divine and encouraging others to do the same affirms that new expressions of experience can serve some greater role than political correctness. In keeping with Levinas' assertion that “it is in the face of the Other from which all meaning appears” (Levinas 299), Jason Derr writes that, “to engage in the theo poetic is to tempt the radical nature of ourselves, it is to follow in the footsteps of the God-Speakers that could upset the Republic, could speak from the margins of our hungers and unspeakable truths” (Derr). The Herald engages others, speaks of her experiences, and encourages new articulations of the Divine – and interpretations of Scripture – not because she believes that that task will be accurately completed in her lifetime, but because there is something gained from meeting others in incomplete spaces. The study and production of language about, and for, God is not to “get it right,” but to engender more noticing of God and each other, and that of God in each other and Creation. Indeed, “the point is not to use the mind's eye to grasp and classify objects into discrete categories according to 'universal definitions,' [but to become] sensitive to differences and aware of empathetic connections between beings, subject to subject” (Victorin-Vangerud,

76). In his 1976 book, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, Amos Wilder asked this of his readers, hoping that it would forward a shift towards such a sensitivity:

My plea for a theo poetic means doing more justice to the symbolic and the prerational in the way we deal with experience. 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)

Wilder's support of the deeply personal expression of experience does not deny the relevance of doctrine or theology, it merely warns against the dangers of allowing those things to become self-serving and more supportive of "that system [and] those formulae," than the experience of the quickening spirit which inspired them. That is, when monorthodoxy exerts influence over communities, encouragement of individual articulations of experience is stifled unless those articulations support that which has come before. Questions calling forth a response about the Divine shift from eliciting a response drawn from experience to one drawn from a pool of information which has been inherited and is assumed correct because of its inheritance. 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 to share stories and build intimate community, seeing if God is doing a new thing among the people. It is as if "we tend to use information to feed the emptiness created by the absence of our imagination" (Wildman 627).

Conversely, the Herald engages communities in such a way so as to empower them to value their own 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 theo poetic one, that is, one which values particular stories and images, and leads to more conversation, exploration, and engagement rather than less. What Scott Holland writes of theo poetics 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).

A community encouraging a Heraldic practice of theology would be further and further removed from a monorthodox, 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 each life, home, and community. Furthermore, it is in each of those places that the Herald's new proclamations, interpretations, and expressions will be tested, for not every instance of proclamation is appropriate or valuable. Experience can be afforded more attention without giving all interpretations of experience *prima facie* equivalence to truth. That is, given that the Herald's proclamation is the unique expression of personal experience that she nonetheless believes will speak to others, what is the community to which she speaks supposed to do with her message? Do they accept her interpretations in entirety? Put another way, what does Yoder's condition "if others join the herald to carry the word along," look like, and by what means will they "with time develop a doctrinal system, to help distinguish between more and less adequate ways of proclaiming?" A consideration of the role of community in developing a hermeneutic stance is of use in exploring this issue.

A Communal Hermeneutic

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 new interpretation they agree upon, 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, not archaeologically uncovered Truth. While 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, the proposal here is not that there is no such truth, but that human 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, whether they come from a Herald, a clergy person, or an academic journal.

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 Founders Effect⁴. 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 people are inclined to place continued trust in the veracity of preexisting interpretations and tend to distrust encroachments on their extant fields of meaning, communities of religious interpretation can become increasingly monorthodox. When communities seem to want so badly to stay just the way they are, how can they 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 intellectual and interpretive life. Communities can develop hybridized doctrine and experiment with new ways of expressing themselves and their faith while not having to abandon central beliefs. Another, less positive, parallel can be drawn when it is considered that it is often the case that when closed communities are less than receptive to outsiders there is an increased likelihood that inbreeding can lead 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 interactions with one another might help to inform and reform developing interpretations. 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). The call is not to accept everything heard as truth. This would be nigh on impossible given the diversity of perspectives that abound. Instead, the encounter is to be one in which people have the opportunity to have interpretive lenses reformed and to more fully see in the Other some further call to move more deeply into faith. Indeed, these opportunities for reflection and interpretive reorientation can arise within the community itself.

Though members of a certain community may all consider themselves the same religion

⁴ 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 descendents 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 and the community had limited contact with outside sources of genetic variation. 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 "founders" effect (Provine).

or 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. Communal movement toward a Heraldic stance 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. 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 interpretation. This begs the question: does this mean then that anything that makes a community happy is an acceptable interpretation? Or that there is no such thing as right? Not at all.

As process theologian Russell 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, people of faith may be called to simply trust that something about the character of scripture, and the Divinity that inspired it, will eventually lead towards goodness and truth. Indeed, regardless of one's religion, the reality of the limitation of human interpretation is a valent issue with which all people must grapple. For people of faith this grappling must generally come to a place wherein they trust that somehow the wrestling will eventually yield useful interpretation(s). 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, a richness of faith, experience of unity, and the personal encounter with some mediated perception of the Divine will all remain inaccessible, driven off by a distancing maneuver of doubt given life by the misguided notion that faith must seek certainty.

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 interpretations are contingent and limited does not mean they must lack in power. As Richard Kearney asserts, "religions are imaginary works, even if what they witness to may be transcendent and true" (Anatheism 14). 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-critical⁵ moment, [to] be caught up in the text, lost in the text, [so that]... the text functions as transformative

⁵ 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*.

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 formulae, will not become what they proclaim." It is important that communities of faith learn the difference between tradition, which has been handed down across time and defines who and whose they 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 individuals find a balance between their history, personal experiences, and an allowance of others to voice theirs, accepting that while there will be a difference in perspective, perspective is not all that there is. The truth is indeed out there, it is just that knowing exactly the whole of what it is proves to be quite a challenge.

Some accord must be found between a community's desire to remain true to its 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 damaging to individuals or the knit of societal fabric. Given human limitations, this seems bound to happen. The hope though, the hope of many faiths, is that somehow, in spite of these failings and limited sight, incomplete interpretation, and proclivity towards exclusion, attempts to develop interpretations that lead to compassion and faithfulness will find a measure of success.

A Challenge to Any Totalizing Claim

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 empire's 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

with a paper that eventually smothered them. 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 light can't get at its leaves nor we at its 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 from over-valuing their interpretations at the cost of the source. The Herald's goal is not to singularly establish representational and unifying doctrinal system but to report "contingent, particular events," allowing the community to wrestle with, and seek transformation within, their journey to discover what they will come to believe and be.

Whether it be God or some other conception of Goodness to which to aspire, human attempts to work toward it will always result in various claims to authority and interpretations of things given authority in the past. 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 presently perceived specialness or naturalness, will be perpetually provisional until that time at which we are capable of seeing with God's eyes. Maps are but representations and Heralds will continually direct attention to that fact, calling for repentance in a way not often heard.

While normative 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 Greek word from which is often translated into English as "repentance." For example, in Mark 1:4, the rendering of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins," comes from *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), which Strong's Dictionary of Greek lists as a derivative of *μετανοέω* (*metanoēō*), the verb we see in English as "to repent" and is given as "to think differently or afterwards, that is, reconsider (morally to feel compunction)." In this light, the Herald calls for repentance, not as a euphemism for some particular doctrinally inspired behavioral adherence, but as an invitation to powerfully reconsider one's perspective. Heraldic proclamations that "shift interpretive stances," "refocus lenses," and "reorient within new stories" are all invitations to repent and to reconsider.

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 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, a community of faith and that way does not adapt to communities of difference. The Herald questions this, wondering aloud when her experience falls within proscribed perceptions, and calling for communities to consider if they draw lines inspired by the search for justice or those meant to reaffirm traditionalism.

Such questioning could 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. The Herald does not domineeringly assert that others are wrong, he places himself in a vulnerable position outside of normative positions of strength and speaks experience to power. 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 a faithful way forward 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..." (Raschke 153). The contemporary reality of our increasingly global culture is a natural polyphony that need not be viewed as an enemy. Indeed, it may well hold a profound opportunity to recall how tenuous our "hard-headed clarity" is and what power and transformation can come from a voice beyond the edge of what has come before. The 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 broader model of proclamation that discourages the development of any monorthodox perspective that supports monophonic oppression and coercion. Monorthodox thought is as readily found beyond the formal boundaries of the Church as it is within. The term is as applicable to "worldview" as it is to "theology," marking any situation in which orthodoxy is presented as a powerful and uniform collection of action, belief, and direction of thought.

The move towards the Heraldic calls not just for another iteration of postmodern

deconstruction, but an affirmation of the constructive power of particular, imaginative, and embodied articulations of experience: a power which follows Faber's theopoetic impulse to "roughen up unified appearances," and responds to Wilder's plea to accord a greater value to "the symbolic and the prerational... way we deal with experience." Heraldic interpretation functions as a critique of modes of thinking that demand acquiescence, encouraging communities of faith to further seek out callings to faithfulness and justice that may come from places other than on high. The Herald affirms the irreducible manifoldness of the world and calls others out into it, to experience, as Rilke wrote, what it means to be "lavishly flung forth."

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