

Invitation to Theology

Hall opens Thinking the Faith, the first volume in his systematic trilogy, with what he calls “A Summons to Contextualization,” and moves from there to ponder “The Meaning of Contextuality in Christian Thought” and how we might discern our current context. Here, however, leading with Hall’s argument for the necessity of theological thought in the first place will help us understand better how he understands the nature of such thinking and how it functions in Christian life—particularly in a context that is often content to try to eschew the disciplined practice of theological thought. For Hall, theology is in many ways a reactive discipline, which must respond to the needs of the moment, which are often recognized in the questions being asked. As he writes just prior to this selection, “Perhaps theology will become possible only when we have developed a distaste for answers, i.e., when we have come to know better the depths of the questions. Yet for those who are prepared for such an exposure to our context, there exists today—and in a way unique in our history—not only a summons but also an invitation to theology” (1989:169).

Source: Hall 1989:169–77.

SOCIAL EXTREMITY/THEOLOGICAL OPPORTUNITY

The old adage that “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity” has been applied in questionable and even despicable ways—for instance, by “evangelists” who operate on the principle that you must first break the human spirit and then offer it the “balm of Gilead.” If the proverb is understood in a descriptive rather than a prescriptive sense, however, it makes considerable sense. It is the same kind of sense Jesus made when he said, “Only the sick have need of a physician.” Those who are in good physical and mental health, with money in the bank, a promising career, and two lovely children, may have some additional comfort from the “consolations of religion”; but they are not likely to

cry out for help, forgiveness, salvation! The same thing may be said of societies. Surely the reason why Christianity has operated in our society primarily as a “culture religion” (Peter Berger), a blend of religious denominationalism and nationalism, is that few have needed it for what it really is—a religion of radical grace. The dominant culture of our society has felt no overwhelming need for the realistic reading of the human situation that is presupposed by a theology of radical grace.

It does not lie within the power of the disciple community to *engineer* such need in its host society. However fervently prophetic spirits within the disciple community may wish for the kind of depth and vitality of faith and theology that great social transitions have often evoked, they cannot cause such transitions to occur. All the admirers of the pivotal Christian figures of such epochs (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, the young Barth), who want the world always to be ready for such ringing messages as those epochs called forth—all such persons are frustrated, because the world will move at its own pace. Its crises cannot be ordered up by prophets! In this sense, theology is dependent upon society, upon the world. It has to take what is there, what is given in the moment, including what may indeed be hidden and should be brought to light. It cannot manufacture shakings of the foundation.

But when such shaking occurs; when in the course of society’s unfolding the thinly veiled chaos that its “culture” just managed to cover begins to show through and the ancient unrest of *homo sapiens* is no longer contained by the careful conventions of the ages, *then* the disciple community must prepare itself to wake from its dogmatic slumbers, reach more deeply into the resources of its tradition than it has been accustomed to do, and see what can be found there for the healing of the nations. In *this* sense, the extremity of a human community is the *opportunity* for a new attempt at telling God’s story of the world.

THE SITUATION

This, I believe, is how we should regard the context in which we find ourselves on this continent today. The worldview out of which our society has evolved has reached its extremity. It is a theologically evocative situation, and for our province of the universal church it is the first situation of this kind that we have experienced. For that reason alone it is difficult enough, of course. Christians in North America have known hardships—for instance, the hardship associated with the settlement of this vast continent. But on the whole ours has been one of those “peaceful” epochs, during which a certain domestication of the faith

occurs. Religion has been a comforting and comfortable thing, imbibed in the quietness of small-town Sunday mornings.

Moreover, we are the products of an age which thought that upheavals of the kind that is now brewing in our midst were things of the past. There are, to be sure, tens of thousands who would be content to have us play our conventional role as pacifiers and alleviators of the little pains of existence. The disciple community is always under this temptation in such times—to preach “peace, peace, where there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). But, on the other hand, there are problems of such enormous proportions that no amount of pacification will make them disappear: the crisis of resources and the environment, of population, of economic and social injustice, of violence, of the threat of nuclear war, and other specific issues. . . . And beneath and in them all there is a monumental shift in the mood of our society at large which, if we have ears to hear, sounds like the clear announcement of human corporate extremity. This mood is articulated, not only by historians, anthropologists, political philosophers, but in widely circulated literature and the most accessible forms of art. Even Hollywood movies are no longer “Hollywood.” A popular journalist describes the mood shift in the following provocative statement:

The entire American proposition has been built upon the premise of ever expanding opportunity, upon a vision of the future as a territory open-ended and always unfolding, upon ascendant history. “We are the heirs of all time,” said Herman Melville. What happens if the future seems to be closing down, to be darkening? If nature, first an enemy to be subdued and then a resource to be exploited, is now an endangered victim of technology? The classic American salvation (clear the land! build! disembowel the mountains!) threatens to invent damnation . . .

All the furniture of the American myths is being dismantled and stored. Psychologically, if not yet financially, a stale air of foreclosure has wafted around . . . , Americans feel themselves sliding towards triviality, and beyond that toward an abyss that might swallow the whole experiment like a black hole . . .

. . . Many of them remain sunnily confident. But the old interpretations, the old American theology, no longer works very well. Americans invented themselves in the first place, and then were interminably reinvented by the rest of the world. Perhaps more than most peoples, they need to possess an idea of themselves, a myth of

themselves, an explanation of themselves. It is time for them to start inventing and imagining again.¹

The sense of dislodgment is also the tone adopted by Sydney E. Ahlstrom in the final chapter of his monumental work, *A Religious History of the American People*. “The Turbulent Sixties,” he writes, witnessed “the sense of national failure and dislocation [which] became apparent to varying degrees in all occupational groups and residential areas.”²

Americans, whether conservative, liberal, or radical, found it increasingly difficult to believe that the United States was still a beacon and blessing to the world. . . . One could only be assured that radically revised foundations of belief were being laid, that a drastic reformation of ecclesiastical institutions was in the offing, and that America could not escape its responsibilities as the world’s pathbreaker in the new technocratic wilderness.³

For a historian of American religion and life, Ahlstrom concludes, to contemplate our society in the sixties and beyond is to consider “a time of calamities.”⁴ To reflect on the American experience in such a time, “whether as amateur or as professional,” is to know oneself to be “a pioneer on the frontiers of post-modern civilization.”⁵

The question that this situation poses for thoughtful participants in it is whether the “postmodern” society that may come to be will be worthy of the lofty term “civilization.” Many of our contemporaries have already concluded in their hearts, if not openly, that we are witnessing the inauguration of a new barbarism in the Western world generally.⁶ There is indeed a growing feeling among us—almost a popular expectation—that neither the meek nor the strong will inherit the earth, that “of these cities, all that will remain is the wind that blew through them” (Bertolt Brecht). For the extremity of modernity is not like the extremities of earlier civilizations. We can pull down the whole world along with us into the abyss.

1. Lance Morrow, “On Reimagining America,” *Time* (March 31, 1980), 38–39 (emphasis added).

2. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 609.

3. *Ibid.*, 617.

4. *Ibid.*, 618.

5. *Ibid.*, 620. See also Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Towards a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

Apocalyptic, it has been said, is the mother of religion.⁷ Christianity not only finds human endings evocative, but it dares to announce that real *beginnings* are made only at the point where endings are experienced, or anticipated. Can this “logic of the cross” (Reinhold Niebuhr) apply also to the extremity of our civilization? Let us attempt to explore that possibility, and to see what it may hold for us by way of detailing the character of the invitation to theology implicit in our context.

ALTERNATIVES FOR A SOCIETY IN DESPAIR

The life of a society undergoing the collapse of the system of meaning upon which its laws, institutions, moralities, and unspoken values have been based presents to those within it a choice among three rudimentary *types* of response: they can capitulate to the hopelessness entailed in such an event; they can refuse to admit its occurrence; or they can look for ways to be realistic without becoming immobilized.

(a) The first alternative is the most fearful, and for that reason is less common a response than the second. For it means the more or less conscious abandonment of hope. At least hope *for the society* is abandoned, and whether personal hope can be sustained without the support of a system of meaning which transcends the individual is a matter of grave doubt. That a significant number of people in our society have found it impossible to maintain hope for their personal destinies is borne out by recent statistics concerning suicide (especially the rate of suicide among the young) and mental collapse. That the line between personal and social hope is at best a fine one is verified by the necessity of regarding very private matters like suicide and mental health as special *social* phenomena on account of their frequency. The resort to self-destruction, whether through deliberate acts or in more subtle ways, is only a final resort—the tip of a very large iceberg. It must be assumed (and most

6. E.g., Alasdair MacIntyre concludes his book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263, by noting that in many respects there are parallels between our society and the decline of Rome. “What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time.” See also Jacques Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Seabury, 1978).

7. In this connection, see J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

social analysts do assume) that a much larger number of persons in our society experience the same symptoms which lead their contemporaries to such drastic “solutions,” though not in as acute forms. . . .

Hopelessness of an advanced and pathological sort also expresses itself in the violence and vandalism marking our cities, highways, and entertainment world. But the most common and most fearsome dimension of this phenomenon is neither overt self-destruction nor the spoliation of the environment, but a pervasive cynicism.

Cynicism can be adopted by the respectable citizen who would not go in for graffiti on the surfaces of public monuments, and for whom madness and suicide are constitutional improbabilities. The cynic does not even have to voice his or her cynicism. The cynic can carry on nicely within the officially optimistic society, mouthing the necessary platitudes and going through the motions of business, professional, and social life. An unspoken convention in the public realm anticipates and even encourages these attitudes in persons. The open articulation of cynicism is contrary to the social code. But the *living* of cynicism is a well-documented phenomenon in North America today. Its most familiar garb is shallow hedonism: the jogger who concentrates on physical well-being and whose devotion to the cult of the body has the convenient bonus of squelching persistent questions of the mind; the tourist who is able to find Calcutta and Mexico City “interesting”; the spectator who can observe life’s pathos with eyes as dry as the protective glass covering of his television screen. It is very difficult to gauge the extent and the consequences of the covert cynicism in our society, for we have come to expect so little.⁸ One can glimpse something of its hold upon us, however, if one compares a typical Hollywood film of the 1940s or 1950s with most films produced in North America today.

(b) Overt hopelessness, however, requires a certain daring, and therefore the second alternative open to persons in communities whose foundational beliefs are being eroded is without question the more common among us: repression and the nurture of false hope.

8. In his disturbing book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Christopher Lasch writes: “After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to ‘relate,’ overcoming the ‘fear of pleasure.’ Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past” (New York: Norton, 1978), 4–5.

Repression, as psychiatry since Freud has shown, is an automatic defense mechanism of the human psyche. The subconscious intuits dimensions of reality that the conscious mind cannot bear, and stifles them. It is natural and necessary.⁹ We could not bear “naked exposure to anxiety,” said Tillich (in the context of his discussion of the Christ’s cry of dereliction from the cross).¹⁰

Yet the repressive mechanism, however necessary, can never be utilized without cost; and when it is adopted as a way of coping with very sizable segments of experience, perhaps even the most decisive segments, then the cost is very great. A person or a collectivity that draws upon the repressive mechanism consistently and deeply is probably expending more emotional energy in this activity than in any other. For it requires a great deal of psychic energy to blot out unpleasant or unbearable realities.¹¹

Part of this psychic energy is expended on exaggerated tokens of belief in that which is not spontaneously believable, but which must be believed in order to reduce the threat of what *is*. The cost of such an exercise is not just the draining of personal and public resourcefulness which it necessarily entails. It is also the forfeiture of the quest for truth, and the suppression of things (and persons) through whose presence unwanted truth continues to assert itself.

This alternative is the apparent choice today, not only of a vociferous minority in our society—persons and groups whose noisy insistence upon the retention of old values and ways is too ostentatious to be true; it is the pattern of many who are less demonstrative—perhaps, indeed, “the silent *majority*.” It is not accidental that observers representative of a wide variety of expertise have dubbed our society “the repressive society.” Nor is it accidental that this alternative becomes more popular the more conspicuously the “old” values and

9. “We cannot repeat too often the great lesson of Freudian psychology: that repression is normal self-protection and creative self-restriction—in a real sense, man’s natural substitute for instinct” (Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* [New York: The Free Press, 1973], 178). Humanity, whose nature and destiny it is not only to be mortal but to be vulnerable to the debilitating consciousness of mortality, must repress a great deal simply in order to function. “The animals don’t know that death is happening to them. . . . They live and they disappear with the same thoughtlessness. But to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one’s dreams and even the most sun-filled days—that’s something else. . . . I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man’s condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right. . . . ‘Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another kind of madness’ [Pascal]” (*ibid.*, 27).

10. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 39.

11. “We know very well that to repress means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it. It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness” (G. Zilboorg, “Fear of Death,” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 12 [1943]: 467).

ways are harried by events. The advocates of this path have become increasingly defensive, one-sided, and militant. Repression under intense pressure expresses itself in suppressive activities. The consequences are seen today in the face of governments that promise a speedy return to rhetorical virtues and verities, are elected to office on the strength of these promises, and then can make their promises appear practicable only by adopting economic and international policies that further victimize oppressed minorities and endanger the peace of the larger human community.

And by outright lies! The way of repression pursued as a way, especially on the part of a collectivity, is the tacit decision that false hope is better than no hope. And in theory this may be so. But false hope defending itself as true can be as dangerous as cynical despair in retreat from public life. It is in fact only so far removed from cynicism as the subconscious is from the conscious mind. As a temporary measure, it may seem to succeed. But under continued and prolonged duress, its truly cynical aspect will become increasingly visible.

(c) Neither of these alternatives commends itself to a reflective and responsible Christian faith. The Christian can recognize in certain types of hopelessness (for instance, in the classical pessimism of a Camus) the advantage of a preference for realism. But because the realism of the pessimist or the cynic is no longer goaded by any persistent vision of the good, its honesty about evil is finally, literally, meaningless. The second path—repression and the pursuit of unworthy hopes—wards off the threat of meaninglessness and despair temporarily, but only at the expense of truth. The faith it saves is “bad faith” (Sartre), and its hope is cheap hope—hope as a shield from life. The first alternative makes it necessary to dispose of the questions of being and meaning which *will* assert themselves and can be silenced only through prolonged and concentrated effort; the second makes it necessary to lie about the world in order to believe in “the System.” The one courts the night, the other throws up artificial light before it has really experienced real darkness.

This leaves a third alternative, and we can infer from the analysis of the first two, *via negativa*, what requirements it has to meet: It must provide the possibility of being truthful about what is happening in the world, to the self, to society. Persons must be able to feel a certain permission to orientate themselves towards the truth. At the same time it must hold out the prospect of a good which transcends this present reality, and permits the spirit to explore it without falling victim to ultimate despair.

Both of these things are necessary: The human spirit needs, on the one hand, the freedom to be truthful about the perceived realities of its condition. Not only for our intellectual integrity, but for our mental and moral sanity,

“we have to be as hard-headed as possible about reality and possibility.”¹² Without this capacity, the spirit soon finds itself mired in the constraints of self-deception. Wisdom, as we have already agreed, admits the necessity of repressing some of the truth for the sake of health, even for survival. But if repression becomes the habitual manner of coping with the most conspicuous realities of one’s world, then it destroys the self whose happiness it has been invoked to protect. This, surely, is as true of the macrocosm as of the microcosm. A society which silently commits itself to a kind of programmed indifference toward the sorts of life-and-death issues confronting us today in the Western world is engaged on a course of self-destruction. “A society based on happiness cannot survive; only a society based on truth can survive.”¹³

On the other hand, the human spirit cannot survive either on sheer unalloyed honesty about the world—especially when “the world” presents bleak and futureless images of itself. In times of social extremity, such truth as thrusts itself into our conscious or subconscious minds can more readily be oppressive and damning than liberating. “There are ultimate problems of life which cannot be fully stated until the answer to them is known. Without the answer to them, men will not allow themselves to contemplate fully the depth of the problem, lest they be driven to despair.”¹⁴ The human spirit, then, needs not only the freedom truthfully to contemplate what *is*, but the courage to believe that such contemplation can help to bring about a better state. Indeed, unless they are able to trust that something good can come of truthfulness, most men and women will always prefer half-truth or downright falsification—not, of course, as a conscious ploy, but intuitively, recognizing that the truth which under certain conditions “makes free” under other conditions makes one infinitely sad, or simply terrified.¹⁵

Thus the invitation to theology sharpens itself and becomes more explicit. It becomes a kind of echo of Job’s invitation to his religious advisors, “Oh, that I knew where I might find him!” (Job 23:3). Is it possible to find in this faith

12. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 280.

13. C. F. von Weizsäcker; see *Die Zeit drängt: Eine Weltversammlung der Christen für Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und die Bewahrung der Schöpfung* (Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser, 1986).

14. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner’s, 1964), 75.

15. “Why are groups so blind and stupid?—men have always asked. Because they demand illusions, answered Freud, they ‘constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real.’ And we know why. The real world is simply too terrible to admit; it tells man that he is a small, trembling animal who will decay and die. Illusion changes all this, makes man seem important, vital to the universe, immortal in some way. . . . The masses look to the leaders to give them just the untruth that they need” (Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 133).

tradition a foundation for the spirit and mind to discover the courage to be open to the negating and overwhelming realities of our societal extremity—but without despair? How, under the conditions of a society sliding toward triviality, shall we sustain an orientation toward the truth (*Wahrheitsorientierung*) that is also in some authentic way a theology of hope?