

At the January 8, 2009, Convocation of Meadville Lombard Theological School's Modified Residency Program, the Rev. David E. Bumbaugh, B.D. '64, Professor of Ministry, presented "The Marketing of Liberal Religion." The Rev. Jennifer Crow, M.Div. '04, the Rev. Dr. John H. Weston, M.Div. '88, and the Rev. Dr. Jerome A. Stone, Adjunct Professor, delivered responses to his paper, and Prof. Bumbaugh gave his reply. All of the proceedings are published in this issue of The Journal of Liberal Religion.

Reply to the Responses to "The Marketing of Liberal Religion"

David E. Bumbaugh

Jerry suggested that I am on the cutting edge. I have trouble recognizing myself at that location. However, I would note that being on the edge is inevitably off-center; that off-center is, by definition, eccentric. There I can recognize myself.

Let me begin by saying that Jen describes a church that seems to be taking seriously a concern for clarity about belief. I would not want to suggest that I think my statement should be turned into a banner to be hung in every church vestibule. I offered it only as a place where many of us have sufficient agreement that a conversation can begin. I would also suggest that Jen and I seem to be in agreement that growth is not a goal; it is a consequence—a consequence of clarity and competence.

Jerry is right to note that the concept of the sacred is an important element in my thought and one that I have not really defined. He is correct that it functions for me as more than a homiletical device or trope and therefore demands more careful explication. That is a task for another time. But I would begin by saying that in my thinking, the sacred is that which drives me toward veneration—not as a substitute for rational, ethical, critical scrutiny, but as a consequence of that kind of scrutiny. The more I understand of the world and its workings, the more I am driven to awe and wonder. I discover that all existence is so exquisitely interconnected and interwoven and so deeply referential that in exploring any piece I am at once engaged with the whole. I am reminded of Indra's Net in which all of existence is fully reflected in every one of its constituent parts. No part of existence is irrelevant or insignificant. All of existence embodies a revelation. Something of this kind of awareness is what underlies my use of the term sacred.

Both Jerry and John demur at my suggestion that the moral impulse is threaded through the universe itself. I would argue that if you accept my claim (derived from Wieman) that there is a process at work in the world that has the power to transform us as we cannot transform ourselves, and if that process is (again using Wieman's words) the source of human good, then it is not too great a leap to suggest that the moral impulse is a function of the universe. This is not to suggest that the universe is everywhere kind or moral or constrained by our categories, or that morality always triumphs. It is to suggest that the drive toward a moral existence is not a lonely choice or solely the consequence of cultural, social, family imprinting, but that our thirst for justice, mercy, compassion has a universal resonance. It is, I suppose, another way of affirming Theodore Parker's claim that the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.

John, I do not deny the tragic element in existence, but neither can I embrace a vision that defines our existence as a set of fangs attached to an alimentary canal. That despairing distortion of reality has been around for a long time. To quote that great

theologian Oscar Hammerstein, “I’m caught like a dope with a thing called hope and I can’t get it out of my mind.” So maybe you are right, I am a romantic. I suppose if one can embrace naturalistic mysticism, one can also embrace tragic romanticism. Indeed, in some sense the one demands the other.

I am reminded of two images. Loren Eiseley tells a story of an occasion when he stumbled and fell and cracked his head on concrete. After he cleared his head, he struggled to his feet and then noticed that he had been bleeding and there was a small pool of blood on the ground. Eiseley reports that he was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of compassion and grief over all the tiny life forms dying in that pool of blood, the victims of his unintended clumsiness. This sense of the integrated reality of existence may be romantic, but it is also tragic and embodies a deeply moral understanding of being.

In a less romantic vein, Lynn Margulis has suggested that life, from the beginning, has been largely symbiotic. She reminds us of the mitochondria, those small structures in every one of our cells. Once upon a time the mitochondria had an independent existence. Engulfed by neighboring cells, they set up shop within the walls of the surrounding cells, and became the engines that produced the energy those cells needed for an expanded life. And there they are to this day, complete with their own DNA, their own life cycles, oblivious to the hopes, dreams, fears, accomplishments, and defeats they enable and make possible. I sometimes wonder whether we might be serving a similar function in this resonant, reflexive universe, part of a larger process that we cannot begin to envision. At the very least, the world is defined as much by symbiosis as by conflict—perhaps more.

Jerry, you challenge in a gentle way my claim that the world is everywhere alive. As you suggest, I am deeply indebted to the Gaia hypothesis, particularly its insistence that life is not something that lives on the planet, but that it is a function of the planet. However, putting that claim aside, I would simply suggest to you that the more I learn about the universe, the less clear are the distinctions between life and non-life. At gross levels, I know the difference between me and the rock—at least most days. But the more finely and deeply I engage the nature of things, the less clear that distinction becomes until, ultimately, at the micro level the distinction disappears. I and the rock and the grain of sand are all congeries of patterned energy held together for shorter or longer periods of time. I remain convinced that life is a function of the universe and that in subtle ways, the world is everywhere alive.

John, I am delighted that the survey instrument on which we worked is producing some important insights. However, I would want to suggest that the results of the surveys taken by congregations when seeking a minister do not really answer my central concern. They are still surveys of individuals, making individual choices about their idiosyncratic convictions. I am asking for an ongoing conversation about the beliefs commonly held among us, not because I think we will arrive at a final, definitive, all-embracing statement, but because our idiosyncrasies will enter into a common discourse where they can be challenged, refined, explored, enlarged. I don’t think that is happening in most of our churches.

Thank you all for your thoughtful responses. They will engage and enlarge my thinking in significant ways.