

Dynamics of Faith

John Knox in his "The Event and the Story" talks of the dynamics of the Christian story as ontological, historical and mythological and says that if the historical is left out, gnosticism results, which is ungrounded mysticism; if the mythological dynamic is left out, fundamentalism results; if the ontological is left out, modernism, with its lack of the sense of mystery and depth of meaning, is the result.

Even though he wrote this nearly fifty years ago, he helps us to see our basic contradiction today: namely, our society does not put much stock in the ontological and mythological, leaving us with "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" historical meanings. We have ended up with a depressing realism, a shallow liberalism, and with an other-worldly fundamentalism. Life comes to us as flat and arid, sort of in the vicinity of a wasteland. Using Knox's terms, life seems uneventful, and therefore our story about it is not motivating. We do not see much; we do not experience our experience as fulfilling, or we interpret our life as not worth much; we have little faith and therefore a diminishing commitment.

The church has been struggling with this contradiction of little-faith during the twentieth century, sometimes breaking through, going miles forward, and then falling back. Some say a theological revolution has happened, pointing to Barth (1886-1968), H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), Tillich (1886-1965), Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), and Bultmann (1884-1976). Norman Perrin, a seminary professor of mine, said that maybe Bultmann was the last great theologian of our time: no major breakthroughs since him.

Bultmann's theology of faith is most helpful for me to summarize the revolution of twentieth century theology. The dynamics of the faith process for Bultmann, existentially speaking, follows: the historical must become historic and encounter a man at the level of his historicity (his mundane existence) in order to confront him with the necessity for decision for or against authenticity. The "confrontation" or "encounter" or "event" or "address" are the words Bultmann uses to point to the "happening" of God through the event of Jesus Christ to bring us to the moment of decision to receive or reject authentic existence; if I say "yes," grace has brought me to faith, to a new self-understanding wherein I freely let God determine my human existence through obedience to his reign. God makes this process possible ever again, bringing an end to the old with the possibility for me to decide for a new relationship.

I use Bultmann because he came out of the historical Christian tradition as a Lutheran pastor, who spent his life researching and writing

about the New Testament. He was struggling to articulate the Word of God to his contemporaries in a way that would bring us to authentic faith. Through the help of the method and nomenclature of the existential philosophy of Heidegger, he was able to talk to the twentieth century in a powerfully new way, a way that talked about present existence here and now rather than through the mythology of the three-story universe of the New Testament times. Thus his "demythologizing" was intended to help bring us to faith. At the time in my life when I threw the Bible out because of the unbelievable myths, Bultmann, and the others listed with him above, brought me back to the church and to faith. I found that I could demythologize the Testaments and the creeds and hymns in a way that made sense to me.

Later, after our family joined with the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago (which later functioned along side its sister organization, the Institute of Cultural Affairs; the core group of both, The Order: Ecumenical, which I will refer to as The Order), I went further in understanding the dynamics of articulating the Word when I studied "The Christ of History" by Joseph Mathews (1911-1977), the first among equals of the founders. Mathews proudly stood on the shoulders of Bultmann and the others when he wrote

The JESUS-CHRIST is an historical event. It is a radical revolution in the interior history of men proceeding from an absolute reversal in human self-understanding. Originally occasioned by Jesus of Nazareth, it is first of all the experience of an offense. This offense is grounded in an actual disaffirmation of our creaturely phantasms which issues in a new possibility of living our bestowed existence as a great benefaction. It is secondly the decision to receive the offense and embrace the ensuing possibility as our own. This entails a dying to ourselves as defined by our mirages, which very death is experienced as the very life we were mistakenly searching for. Such is the radical transfiguration of the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT. The early Christians' pronouncement of it contained an inseparable promise and demand. The demand is to die. That this very dying is life is the promise.

At the same time he stood on tradition, Mathews broke new ground theologically. In the following quotes one sees the direction he is going:

The JESUS-CHRIST fronts man with the awareness that there is no messiah and never will be one, and furthermore, that this very reality is the Messiah. . . . The fronting is experienced as death itself; for to receive the JESUS-CHRIST is to put an end to my [false] Christ quest. . . .

For the New Testament people the Christ decision was transparently an election for or against life itself. The negative answer was at bottom a rejection of human existence as it is constituted. . . . When the human situation is nakedly exposed, there are but two choices: to affirm life or to negate it. . . .

The choice to give up our illusions and false hopes and hiding places is . . . (to die) This very death is life, they insisted. To die is to live. To use their figures, it is like being born all over again. It is like the healing of a mortal illness. It is like being forgiven a big lie at the heart of one's being. It is like a resurrection from a tomb. . . .

Surrender of the demand for final truth becomes quite the truth about things. Capitulation to the secret that there is no way out becomes the very door and way to being. This is the end of the road of self-understanding. . . ; for one can freely live in his negations, learn in his perpetual ignorance and walk in all his given creatureliness. In brief, the decision to die is at the same time an election to life. The JESUS-CHRIST is life abundant.

To follow in the steps of the (JESUS-CHRIST made flesh) is to walk out across the uncertain, ambiguous, anxious deeps of my life in gratitude, humility and compassion, with the sure confidence that this very walking is the meaning of life.

The direction is toward talking about the dynamics of life. The key sentences above are "The Christ decision was transparently an election for or against life itself. The negative answer was at bottom a rejection of human existence as it is constituted." The key word is "transparency," which he uses throughout his works, meaning that which is seen through and thus reveals final reality or truth about life. The reality is "human existence as it is constituted." There is a twist here, however: humans are seldom aware of human existence as it is constituted. Back to Knox in the first paragraph, for example, we fail to sense the mystery and depth of meaning in human existence; or as Tillich says, except when grace strikes, we are separated from the mystery, depth, and greatness of being, including our own being.

Many years before Mathews wrote "The Christ of History," he entered WWII as a chaplain in the Pacific. Neither he nor those he ministered to knew what the finality of death will do to a human being. They went in depending on their own strength, seemingly invincible and immortal as young men. When death came to their comrades-in-arms, they fundamentally changed through the resultant crisis of faith. They cried out to be delivered from death, to know the why and meaning of what was happening to them. Abstract theology and denominational trappings made little difference to them. The young chaplain came to know that he was ill-equipped theologically to deal with their crises and his own.

He entered graduate school to find some answers, to learn to articulate the faith that would sustain him and others in crisis. He was fortunate to study with the likes of H. Richard Niebuhr, who was also struggling to articulate the faith. (In Niebuhr's works, Mathews especially was struck by the dynamics of faith as radical monotheism and the dynamical understanding of the church.) At that time and after when he was teaching at SMU, where he became a part of the Christian Faith and Life Community, and still later when he became Dean of the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago, his passion was to allow the Word of God to be heard by his contemporaries in a life empowering way.

A pivotal moment in their understanding was studying The Image, by Kenneth Boulding. In it Boulding employs a secular manner as he articulates the process of image transformation. What became clear for

Mathews and company was that behavior changes (Boulding uses the analogy of "conversion") when one's operating image is altered by a new message, and leaves one with the decision to accept the message; however, our resistance to a new message is strong. The "aha!" for them was a secular articulation of life dynamics similar to the Christian articulation of the dynamics of the Christ-Event by Bultmann. When that life changing event happens to a person, they began to say, the "contentless Word" or "contentless Christ-Event" has happened.

They knew for sure that they did not have to take a twentieth century person through the maze of three-story world views and unbelievable myths for him or her to experience a life changing event. A new, and for them, a foundational method of imaginal education emerged, which emphasized holding up a strong alternative image with which a person's operating image could enter into dialogue. When the process works, new decisions are realized, and consequently deeper freedom. That method worked in lay and clergy seminars concerning twentieth century theology, with university students learning about the twentieth century revolutions, with local church experimentation, with kids in the ghetto who were opting for lifestyles, with seminars on marriage and family, and with community reformulation. They came to call imaginal education a life method.

Another foundational understanding for The Order was Kierkegaard's dynamics of consciousness: "By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it. . . ." The Order uses the phrase "consciousness of consciousness of consciousness" to indicate the above process described by Kierkegaard in Sickness Unto Death. Though he uses secular language here, he and The Order understand its meaning to include standing before God in sin/ despair, and the happening of grace and faith in the midst of disobedience when one obediently chooses, exercising freedom. SK is talking about authentic existence in much the same way as Bultmann writes about it.

Mathews and The Order spent most of their efforts developing and sharing tens of practical methods globally to help individuals, groups, and communities to interpret life's meaning in the twentieth century context. Three key practical methods that have been used in the work of The Order are the art form conversation, the states of being typography, and indicative planning. Through all three a participant can come to understand that this life is more than it appears to be. Depth of meaning is occasioned, hopefully, affirming one's life as it is, and often indicating the possibility of a new life decision, which can eventuate in a new life style.

The art form conversation method, inspired by Suzanne Langer, assumes that life is an art form, and that any object or situation can be

approached as an art form: namely, one can see it, feel in response to it, interpret it, and relate to it. The four steps are 1) objective, 2) reflective, 3) interpretive, and 4) decisional. One using this method focuses on a piece of art or a life situation in such a way as to see it as meaningful, as a "Thou" rather than an "it". Later, one can juxtapose such a self-conscious experience onto all experiences, knowing that all are meaningful in their own way, and therefore come to see that life is meaningful. A new consciousness about life's meaning and worth ensues.

The state of being typography method, inspired by Rudolph Otto more than any one else, asks a participant to focus on one of his experiences and to place it into one of 144 states of being or consciousness under four main human categories of being: 1) mystery, 2) freedom, 3) care, and 4) fulfillment. The genius of this method is that it allows a person to understand that there is no experience that is off the chart, so to speak, that every state of consciousness he or she has is experienced by humans and is therefore human, and therefore not an aberration of humanness. A person can come to understand himself or herself as in the right place at the right time, experiencing the right experience: as perfectly human, in the best sense of that word. Often such an awareness transforms one's existence.

These first two methods are an example of the next steps Mathews and The Order took in their helping persons interpret the meaning of their lives. They point to the theological understanding that life is what it is, full of mystery and depth of meaning, and therefore great just as it is constituted. The dynamics of life do not need improving upon. They are right and intended to bring us to meaningful existence. We need only be at attention. We may even be brought to a state of deep gratitude, even praise for what is.

The third method, indicative planning, is another method growing out of the dynamics of life, or as Augustine says, "that which is" (TWI). Indicatively, humans vision the future, ask what is blocking that vision, what strategically and tactically is necessary to deal with the blocks, and what forces--using what systems--will go forward in the implementing process. Humans operate this way somewhat naturally. When a third-world village and a first-world ghetto use this method to make a five-year plan, deep alterations in image and consciousness often happen to the people involved, especially those that live there. (Mathews and The Order intended that such foundational and practical methods be released to the masses.)

The new direction in theology coming from Mathews and The Order, as seen in their understanding of the dynamics of life and faith and transformation, is a profoundly secular articulation of the way life is and a life/community altering participatory methodology grounded in vocation and mission. As they have understood their task, they have been about

witnessing and justing love. More formally said, they have been pioneering in a secular theology of the Word and methods of its proclamation.

Using the following process flow

TWI>myth>demyth>TWI>remyth TWI: for the masses

one can begin to chart the course of their theologizing for the masses. "TWI" ("that which is" or "the way life is," as they more often say it) stands for life as it is constituted dynamically. As history unfolded, humans imagined elaborate myths to talk about TWI (the way life is), and in particular, the Christian movement, standing especially on the shoulders of the Hebraic and Greek traditions, spun their own mythology to interpret TWI, centered around the Christ-Event. As is always the case, the mythology of one group in time does not interpret itself as meaningfully to later generations, who in our century have held the Christian mythology suspect because so many have tried to interpret the mythology literally. Therefore, Bultmann "demythologized" the Christian tradition, attempting to allow the tradition to have deeper meaning again for Christians. Mathews and The Order have gone further by talking about the dynamics of the "contentless Word" and devising secular methods that allow Christians and non-Christians to understand life. In a sense, they have brought us back to an understanding of TWI (the way life is) and gone beyond that through such methods as the typology of the states of being, which allows for a new mythologizing about TWI to go on, or "re-mythologizing." The audience is the pluriform masses. If such a word and methods as these bring any human and groups and communities to more radical faith and mission, so be it. The testimony has been broad and positive. The major challenge at the moment is to commit more earnestly to profound re-mythologizing TWI (which Knox indicates in the opening paragraphs) for the people of the planet for the next millenium, though the job will have to be redone again several times before 3000 A. D.

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May 1995