

# Responses

## **Our June Comment on radical and prophetic theology: a question**

*Dr Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor of Divinity in the University Oxford:*

I am puzzled by what you say in your editorial to the June number of *New Blackfriars*, 'Being Honest to God', in which you discuss observations I made in my review of *Gods's Truth*, published in the same issue.

You take me to task for suggesting that radical theology might have a future. One objection you raise is that such a theology is of little interest outside the narrow realm of its practitioners. I acknowledge some force in that objection, though I think it applies more widely to other forms of theology, and some other academic studies too, and does not necessarily rule out their 'having a future'.

But you then go on to argue that our present world is not one for the affirmation of secular values—a task you see taken on by the conservative evangelicals in the United States. What puzzles me is the ground of your assumption that the unqualified affirmation of secular values ('embracing secularism as the true faith') is of the essence of 'radical theology'.

The argument in my review had been that a radical and a prophetic theology (one indeed that is highly critical of the values of our present political establishment) need one another. But on your assumption that would have been to ask for a self-contradiction, a squaring of the circle. I admit that radical theology often runs the risk of too easily accepting contemporary secular values, but what is the basis for your apparent assumption that such acceptance is integral to radical theology as such?

**Christ Church, Oxford OX1 1DP**

**6 July 1988**

*The Editor:*

I quoted you as saying failure to answer the questions radical theology poses has been 'total'. Then, though, I shot off at a tangent with a general question to the reader: 'Who, in the world outside seminaries and theological departments, is going to bother to listen to *any* theology, however intelligent, unless it promises to lead one somewhere?' And I went on to say that the capacity of a theology—*any* theology—to do that 'partly depends on what the wider world is like.' Only then did I make an observation specifically on radical theology.

At this point, however, I now realise that what I was saying got

much too compact. I quoted from what Altizer published in the mid-60s about the possibility of coming to 'an epiphany of the sacred' through saying 'Yes' to the secular world, and went on to say such a theology is only believable in the 80s 'by an utterly different group of Christians'. But the 'theology' I was referring to here was not all radical theology, but the theology underlying that quote. I now can understand how, here, you could have been 'puzzled'.

I was not, then, intending to contest your view that 'unqualified affirmation of secular values' is not 'of the essence of "radical theology"'. At the same time I do feel there is a problem. Because radical theology stems from taking society's secularism seriously, the practitioner of radical theology is likely to have a *predilection* to affirm current secular values and assumptions, sometimes all too uncritically. But is this so different from what you have said yourself?

Having said that a theology based on 'unqualified acceptance of secular values' was only believable in the 80s by 'an utterly different group of Christians', the conservative evangelicals (above all those in the U.S.) I briefly wheeled on and off the American 'electronic church'. All I was intending to do here was to issue a warning, conveying in encapsulated form the idea that some of the very drives which in the 60s-context took the form of 'liberating' drives have, in the 80s-context, become 'oppressing' drives. 'Affirming secular values' can mean different things in different times and situations. I was certainly not claiming that there was no future for *any* type of radical theology.

It is my own view, for what it is worth, that your statement 'a radical theology and a prophetic voice ... need one another' is true. But I believe that it is possible for two things to need one another and yet to be in severe tension.

10th July 1988

*Dr Wiles:*

Perhaps I was particularly sensitive to the issue through reflecting on the remark made to me recently by a South African visitor that Desmond Tutu was far more conservative in his use of scripture when justifying his opposition to Apartheid than when writing or speaking directly about scripture itself. I think this is symptomatic of a general tendency which concerns me.

I entirely agree that it is a characteristic of radical theology that it believes there is truth to be learnt from contemporary insights of a philosophical, social and political kind. I also agree that that means it always runs the risk of too easily affirming contemporary secularist values; the German Christians contrasted with the Barmen declaration can always be quoted as a cautionary tale. But all faith involves risk. In practice it seems to me that radicalism and conservatism in theology bear a pretty

random correlation with the corresponding attitudes in social values. I think it is very important not to allow to become part of accepted wisdom the suggestion that only a non-radical theology can support the kind of spiritual challenge that prevailing attitudes in society call for.

Two final small points. The remark you quote from me, which drew me into the editorial in the first instance, was in fact a summary of John Kent's position. While I agree with it substantially, I would not myself have expressed it so uncompromisingly. Secondly, I do think some of the work of theology should be self-questioning, in a way which is not too concerned with where it will lead in the *short* run; that part of theological work should not be too worried at not commanding a wide audience. But I agree that theology as a whole must offer the prospect of leading people somewhere. But that is only another way of emphasising the complementarity and tension of some aspects of radical theology with a prophetic theology.

14 July 1988

### **On Gramick & Furey's *The Vatican and Homosexuality***

I wonder why you published in your September issue that (to me)almost unintelligible article by C.R.A. Cunliffe, 'The Homosexuality and the Vatican: an American attempt at dialogue' (pp. 392—9)? It is a long review of a symposium edited by Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey. From what it says, it does not seem that this symposium adds *anything* to the debate.

There cannot be any real parallel between sexuality in the marriage relationship and sexual activity between men or women of the same sex. Even if every sexual act in marriage is not open to procreation and even if procreation is deliberately prevented by contraceptive means at least the possibility is there, whereas sexuality between people of the same sex cannot of its nature be open to procreation and is entirely masturbatory.

What seems to be at issue here is that Christians, especially Catholic Christians, who are homosexually orientated have a problem because the moral vision of the Church sees such sexual activity as disordered. Shorn of all its sophistry, what they appear to want is approval. They will never get it, and if they think they will they must all be stark staring bonkers.

Pastoral work is difficult in this kind of situation and at the personal level those of us engaged in it must approach the issue with compassion and prudence, but hard cases do not make good laws and in this as in other sexual matters the attitude of the Church seems to be based on solid morality and sound commonsense.

**Denis Geraghty OP, Prior  
Holy Cross Priory  
Leicester LE1 6HW**

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