

*TOWARD AN AMERICAN THEOLOGY*  
A SYMPOSIUM ON AN IMPORTANT BOOK

*Editorial Note:* Herbert W. Richardson's book *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967; xiv + 170 pp.; \$ 3.95) blazes new trails in the field of theology. The last chapter, which emphasizes the sanctifying influence of Sabbath observance in the realm of the theological experience of the modern Christian, is a refreshing and uniquely thought-provoking essay on the subject. Believing that the book for this reason deserves more than an ordinary notice in the Book Review section of *AUSS*, the editor requested an ethicist, who is also a close friend of the author of the book under review, a theologian, and a NT scholar, to discuss the implications and merits of Richardson's thesis as presented in his final chapter. The three contributions of this symposium appear in the alphabetical order of the reviewers' names.

I

This symposium of reviews concentrates on the final chapter of Herbert Richardson's *Toward an American Theology* because it is in his final, longest chapter (almost one-third of the book) that the author presents his ideas on the Sabbath. It seems appropriate, however, before discussing the last chapter to give a brief description of the rest of the book so that readers can put the reviews in perspective.

It is a paradox that Richardson makes unity the fundamental principle of his metaphysics, only to write one of the most varied books for its size to appear in recent theological literature. Although he repeatedly tries to argue the unity of his book, he admits that "I have developed my arguments in relative independence of one another" (p. 161).

Richardson has been severely criticized for writing a book

that pursues several ideas at once. But why is it not appropriate for a young theologian in his first constructive work to invite the general Christian community to consider how he is making up his mind? If Richardson's protestations that the book has an intrinsic consistency can be brushed aside, the reader should be delighted by the opportunity to pursue one of the most original minds on the American theological scene. System and organization can begin later when Richardson is on the other side of middle age. Now is the time for him to experiment, and for Richardson's readers to delight in his courage.

The author uses different styles and levels of discourse in his book. His first two chapters are written in the form of Christian apologetics. He attacks both the death-of-God theologians and Christian secularists, such as his Harvard colleague Harvey Cox. In these chapters his method is history of ideas. He outlines the periods of intellectual history assumed by the death-of-God theologians and Cox, and shows how their arrangement can lead to a sense that the future does not lie with relativism and secularity but with unity and religious presuppositions.

Richardson's third chapter, "The Myth is the Message," is a venture in philosophy of language. It is perhaps his least original essay, and therefore some would say his most sound. Even so, his relating of Jerome Bruner's theory of language to Christology puts traditional Christian statements in an arresting context. Christ becomes the necessary word, making the story of the Scriptures intelligible.

In Richardson's fourth essay, he makes no compromises with his reader. Up to this point, Richardson seems to be wishing to talk to those church members or secular fellow-travelers who have been excited by Cox's *Secular City*. Now he launches into the most rigorous sort of metaphysical discussion. He outlines what he clearly thinks could be developed into a major philosophical alternative.

Richardson argues that unity is the most basic metaphysical

principle, more fundamental even than being. The principle of unity is distinguished by the categories of individuals, relations and wholes, each with its appropriate language. At the end of the chapter, Richardson points out that his philosophical analysis coincides with such orthodox Christian doctrines as the Trinity. In its original form, as an essay in the *HThR*, Richardson promised a second article developing further the implications of his philosophical analysis for theology. He should be held to his promise. Of all the directions in which Richardson's originality might take him, surely an explication of his "henology" would be the most important.

Although in his final chapter Richardson leaves the discourse of apologetics or philosophy of religion to write theology, he cannot get away from certain polemical concerns. One that he picks up again from his first two chapters is secularism. He reacts to those who say that American technological society, and therefore eventually world civilization, is moving towards greater individual freedom from both nature and God's immediate sovereignty (for example, Cox and the death-of-God theologians). On the contrary, he says, "God's activity is as omnipresent as ever. We simply are not aware of His personal presence with us."

Richardson considers the preoccupation of the theologians of secularity with "what God is doing" to be a typically American concern. He puts it in the form of a question, *cur creatio?* Richardson's answer, a Sabbath perspective on creation, Christ and the Spirit, is consistently teleological. Every act of God leads to another, until once again we reach God, our true end.

The institution of the Sabbath at the end of creation week emphasizes that the creation culminated, not in man's appearance, but in God's presence. The Sabbath shows that the creation has been made to be a receptacle for God's holiness.

Not only creation but Christology is understood teleologically. "Since, therefore, God created the world for Sabbath

holiness, He must personally enter the world and dwell therein" (p. 126). The purpose of the Sabbath is a microcosm of the purpose for creation. Both must be filled with God, who is most present when He is personally present. Eventually, according to Richardson, there had to be an incarnation. Until the incarnation the Sabbath served as the formal bearer of God's presence. "The Sabbath is, so to say, the world's aptitude for the incarnation" (p. 126).

Even the incarnation is not an end in itself. "Sending the Holy Spirit is the chief thing that Jesus seeks by His ministry of obedience to God... the aim of His ministry is to send the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts... the indwelling of the Holy Spirit effects what the incarnation requires" (p. 146). So, creation is for the Sabbath, where God dwells. The Sabbath continues as the opening in time and space for the personal coming of God. Christ, that coming, that God with us, is for the Spirit.

But the Spirit, too, is for something else. It is for taking us to God Himself. Richardson believes the Holy Spirit is "the very perichoresis that unites the persons of God with each other. Hence, when the Holy Spirit indwells us, we are lifted into the very life of God Himself" (p. 146).

In retrospect we can see that creation, the Sabbath, Christ and the Spirit have all gained their significance by their end, God Himself. "We may say that God's purpose in creation is to manifest His triune holiness to Himself by making a world and bringing it into His own holy life" (p. 153).

Richardson looks at this entire process as sanctification. Creation, Christ's incarnation, and the outpouring of the Spirit are all part of God's bringing the world to Himself, which is sanctification. But sanctification is not simply a sequence of events. It is not just history. Sanctification is a present possibility for every Christian. It is an ontological reality.

But how can we know the world is not secular, but sanctified? How can we feel even more than human freedom, divine

holiness? How can we realize that sanctifying is what God is doing? Richardson anticipates such questions from his fellow theologians, and in response points to the Sabbath. It is in experiencing the unseen, but real, presence of God in this sacrament, that we can know and feel the holiness and glory of God. In the fellowship, the oneness among believers and their God, sensed on Sabbath, there is a microcosm of the oneness and fellowship of all creation with and in God, which is true sanctification.

Richardson's discussion of sanctification is a helpful antidote to the death-of-God and secular theologians. But he tries to kill two polemical adversaries with one doctrinal stone. He tries to show the shortcomings of not only American secular theologies, but European theology as well. He says Europeans distort Christian theology by emphasizing the sinfulness of man so strongly they are forced to overstress the doctrine of redemption. Christology overwhelms the doctrine of creation and pneumatology. Within Christology the crucifixion supersedes the incarnation. What is Richardson's corrective? His omnibus doctrine of sanctification, highlighted by creation, the incarnation, and the Spirit.

The question arises, of course, Does the Sabbath, Richardson's sacrament of sanctification, need to get caught in a transoceanic crossfire among theologians? To be a symbol of sanctification, does the Sabbath have to be excluded from being a symbol of redemption? To be a time when we realize our ontological relationship to God, does the Sabbath have to cease being a period when we remember God's mighty acts in the history of redemption? Why do we need to limit ourselves to Exodus 20 (Sabbath as a symbol of creation) and exclude Deuteronomy 5 (Sabbath as a symbol of God's redemption in the Exodus)?

Richardson's reply is arbitrary, to put it mildly. "According to the canon of Scripture, the 'creation interpretation' of the Sabbath is affirmed to be theologically prior to the 'redemption interpretation.'" Since when does an account become

theologically prior because it appears a few passages before another? Does this mean that the gospels are less important than Is 53, or the flood narrative? This theological method seems especially strange for a theologian who stresses pluralism within unity as much as does Richardson. Would not our view of the Sabbath, and by extension our understanding of sanctification, be richer and more complete if we considered creation and redemption as equally important? In fact, Richardson's discussion does assume a history of salvation within his doctrine of sanctification. Richardson's instinct to be inclusive in theological method has been betrayed by his polemic against European theology.

The opposition of redemption and sanctification seems unnecessary, even alien, to Richardson's discussion of Christology. In some of his most effective passages, Richardson talks of Christ's mission in terms of friendship. "To know Christ is to enjoy the presence of His person, to take delight in His nearness, to love Him as a friend 'being with' whom is its own sufficient reason" (p. 131). Richardson says this is sanctification. Is this kind of friendship all that different from the overcoming of estrangement, which European theologians wish to describe as redemption?

Because Richardson's writings are so original and creative, questions concerning his inconsistencies are far less important than requests for further elaborations. These could all be gathered under the single question, How is the last chapter related to the rest of the book?

For instance, is the Sabbath a sacrament that is equally relevant for all kinds of *intellectus*? If not, is it most appropriate for a faith of reconciliation responding to the *intellectus* of relativism? Furthermore, is the Sabbath the message? If it is an image according to Richardson's particular definition, does the Sabbath have the same status as a symbol as does the crucifixion?

In terms of the chapter on "A Philosophy of Unity," is the Sabbath more a word specifying an individual, a sentence

appropriate for describing relations, or a capsule story conveying the unity of the whole? If it partakes of all three levels, for which is it most appropriate? Or does the Sabbath symbolize unity itself, the unity of particulars, relations, and wholes, and the unity of their unities?

As we have seen, Richardson employs different modes of discourse in his book. In the future, when he comes to expand his essays into "a comprehensive theology, integrated by a sustained single argument" (p. 161), he will have to decide whether his language will be ordinary, philosophical, or theological. If, as I suspect, it will be more philosophical language than any other, it will be interesting to see how Richardson relates Sabbath to unity and freedom, to history and time. That enterprise may lead other thoughtful Christians to agree with what is now Richardson's testament of faith. "The Sabbath is no minor article of religion, but a key to the whole of life—its very sacrament" (p. 117).

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## II

"Toward an American Theology," the final chapter in Herbert W. Richardson's book of essays, is a wide-ranging constructive statement whose most obvious features are its bold creativity, tangled organization, and sometimes-careless formulations. Fortunately the first of these characteristics need not be obscured by the other two, especially if they are recognized for what they are. The organizational confusion arises from the complexity of the author's intention, which is to outline a theology that will integrate many of the distinctive elements of American religious experience and at the same time be a "full and comprehensive" statement of the Christian faith. These goals are legitimate enough; the problem is that Richardson tries to do everything at once. Probably it would have been better to do first the historical task of identifying the distinctive characteristics of American religion, then the

constructive task of interpretation and integration, and finally the apologetic task of demonstrating its adequacy as a Christian theology. In any event, once it is discovered that in spite of its continual references to American religious history, the primary intention of the essay is constructive rather than descriptive, its glib generalizations (such as the judgment that in American religion the Sabbath has replaced the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper) are less distracting. Then can begin the more edifying reflection on questions concerning the essay's success and significance.

Richardson wants to formulate a theology that is systematically coherent, distinctively American, and authentically Christian. Therefore the first question is: How well does his construction succeed in exhibiting each of these qualities? About systematic coherence there is no doubt. Richardson has a single, central motif—namely, the question *cur creatio* and its answer, the idea of sanctification within the world—to which he relates the disparate religious expressions which are the materials for his theological structure: the Puritan Sabbath, the glory of God, incarnation, Mary as *theotokos*, etc. The creativity with which these relationships are developed is the chief source of interest in the essay. Moreover, the main themes form a progressive elaboration of the central idea: (a) as a symbol of sanctification by the presence of God within the world, the Sabbath is the first answer to the question *cur creatio*; (b) in fulfillment of the divine purpose in creation, the work of Christ is grounded in the incarnation (as "God with us") rather than the crucifixion ("God for us"), and Jesus must be understood to be God Himself; (c) the coming of the Holy Spirit is implied both by the incarnation, through which God obligates Himself to permanent, personal union with man, and by the Sabbath, which expresses the divine intention to bring the created world into God's own life. "*Cur creatio?* For the sake of the indwelling Spirit, for the sake of the sanctification of all things, for the sake of holiness—the glory of God" (p. 155).

In the process of being incorporated into the theological structure, however, some of the original materials are transformed. For example, the Puritan Sabbath with which Richardson begins is useful systematically only as it points to creation and the dignity of man. Although to the Puritans it may have been a chronologically discrete segment of experienced time, a separate day of "holiness" in opposition to the inevitable "worldliness" of the rest of the week, to Richardson it is instead the experience of the personal presence of God to man, which makes 'holy worldliness' possible. A similar transformation occurs in regard to the key idea of intramundane sanctification, which at the beginning of the essay is synonymous with the creation of the Kingdom of God in a righteous society, but which at the end is the becoming-holy of the creature through the mystical indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Such shifts in meaning leave the reader wondering just what Richardson has in mind when he talks about keeping the Sabbath holy, and how "the sanctification of all things" might be recognized, objectively or subjectively, as actually taking place.

Richardson's claim that his theology is "American" means that "its primary themes are unique to, or persistently characteristic of, American religious history," and that "the unique perspective [*i.e.*, *cur creatio*] which governs their systematic arrangements is suggested by American religious experience" (p. 157). Now it might be objected that the Sabbath is neither "unique to" nor "persistently characteristic of" American religion; but that would be a quibble about Richardson's terminology. A case could be made to support the judgment that sabbatarianism has been *relatively* more important in America than elsewhere, so that it would qualify as a "distinguishing characteristic" of American religion. In the long run it is difficult to dispute Richardson's general claim that what he has outlined is a distinctively American theology, for it reflects both the typically American concern to make the world better, and the typically American

feeling that the dignity of man is more fundamental than his sinfulness.

Although Richardson has evidently been successful in offering a distinctively American theology, it is not so evident that he has succeeded in providing "a full and balanced interpretation" of Christian faith. His difficulty here is a direct consequence of his theological ground rules. By choosing as his materials only those religious expressions which reflect the difference between "American" and "western European" religion, Richardson has *ipso facto* abstracted them from the total American religious experience, as well as from the total Christian history. What is distinctive may not, after all, be most important: maleness distinguishes a man from a woman; but even though he never exists apart from this distinctive sexuality, what is truly fundamental in the existence of any man is not his *masculinitas* but his *humanitas*. A distinctively American theology can be considered a "full and balanced interpretation" of the Christian faith only if the religion of western Europe is such a distortion of Christianity that any "European" elements in American religion can be disregarded as not authentically Christian. Richardson is willing to make this judgment; he is sure that the Christianity of western Europe has overemphasized the NT and the doctrine of sin, underemphasized the OT and the work of the Spirit, and distorted Christology. To be convincing, this evaluation needs to be supported by an appeal to some broader criterion such as Scripture or the whole Christian tradition. While such an appeal would certainly show up deficiencies in the distinctive religious tradition of western Europe, it would also disclose a one-sidedness in the distinctively American tradition. A theology founded on the uniqueness of American religion is very likely to be blind to some of the richness of the Christian faith.

The most glaring weakness in Richardson's proposed theology is, in fact, one of its distinctively American elements: an overly optimistic view of man and a correspondingly super-

ficial view of sin, an outlook which is no more shared by the OT than by the NT. In a generation that has witnessed extermination camps and nuclear incineration, and that even now watches the world's mightiest military establishment justifying the devastation of a small and faraway land in the interest of "national honor," and at home sees white adults screaming their hatred at black children on their way to a formerly all-white school, Richardson's confidence that "secular therapies" are on the way to "the vanquishing of sin within history" seems very dubious. His frankly Pelagian view of human nature seems out of touch with the blunt actuality of human experience as it is abstracted from the total Christian tradition. A theology fundamentally concerned with redemption may not be guilty of having a "vested interest" in man's sin and weakness, as Richardson charges; such a theology may simply be understanding the human situation as it is.

But if Richardson's offering is something less than an adequate expression of the Christian faith, and even of its American actualization, his constructive effort is by no means wasted. For he has helpfully illuminated the various elements in his structure by bringing them into a new set of relationships. In particular, the essay is valuable for the contribution it makes to an understanding of the Sabbath.

Only rarely is the idea of the Sabbath in any form taken seriously in modern theology; nowhere else does it have the systematic importance it is given in Richardson's essay, which is therefore an important addition to the previous interpretations of the Sabbath by Karl Barth and A. J. Heschel. Richardson makes the following points: (a) as the answer to the question *cur creatio*, the meaning of the Sabbath is primarily ontological rather than soteriological, more a matter of sanctification than of redemption; (b) it directs man to a higher goal than the fulfillment of man, that is, to the holiness which is the glory of God; (c) it is the ground of "holy worldliness," as the means of sanctifying ordinary life by the personal

presence of God; (d) it is not repudiated but affirmed by the Christian observance of Sunday, which is an indication of the establishment of the eschatological Kingdom of God.

The distinction between the ontological and soteriological meanings of the Sabbath is valid, and Richardson is right in emphasizing this dual orientation in the OT. It may be questioned, however, whether it is either necessary or helpful to subordinate one meaning to the other; it is quite possible to maintain both in a polar tension. According to the Genesis narrative, in which the divine designation of the Sabbath is the climax of Creation, distinct from and prior to the Fall, the fact of the Sabbath is not dependent on the fact of sin; but this does not imply that the fact of sin is irrelevant to the meaning of the Sabbath. On the contrary, the existential predicament of man makes the ontological symbolism of the Sabbath all the more significant.

The relation of the Sabbath to the currently fashionable idea of "holy worldliness" is also an important suggestion. The experience of the Sabbath enables the Christian's participation in the ongoing life of the world to be a "holy" participation. And it is just here that the "negative," separative function of the Sabbath is significant: only on the basis of a distinction from the world is a "holy worldliness" possible; otherwise there is nothing but secularity (although perhaps at a high humanitarian level). Richardson tacitly acknowledges this kind of "separation" when he affirms a goal for human existence higher than man's own good. It is more than coincidental that in the OT the Sabbath is closely related to the vocation of Israel, whose separateness from the world was a necessary condition for blessing the world. On the other hand, those for whom the Sabbath is religiously important are often inclined to forget that Sabbath holiness is empty apart from an appropriate involvement in the world; they should be benefited by, and hence grateful for, Richardson's connection of the Sabbath to "holy worldliness."

In all of his talk about Sabbath holiness, including his

affirmation of Sunday as a holy day, Richardson does not take into account a crucial characteristic of contemporary American religion: its decreasing sensitivity to the transcendent. Without such a sensitivity, the whole idea of holiness collapses. Does a culture that has so much trouble making sense out of the idea of God have any way of comprehending a Sabbath made holy by His "personal presence"? Richardson is not alone in needing an answer to this question.

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### III

Herbert W. Richardson is to be thanked for his penetrating study of the meaning of the Sabbath and for his originality in discerning it as a central feature on the contour of his futuristic view of American theology. Not only does much of what he says represent a conscious reaction against both Reformation and neo-Reformation presuppositions, but his pages are filled with a succession of new insights. And this makes exciting reading.

As this reviewer read Richardson's chapter on the Sabbath, however, he repeatedly found himself saying "yes" and "no" at the same time: "yes" to a provocative idea, "no" to its being set over in an altogether exclusive way against that which Richardson sees as its opposite. In setting up an "American," creation-oriented theology as an alternative to the Reformed, cross-centered theology, he seems to err at least as badly as he feels the Reformers did, in that he also provides too narrow a basis for his structure.

Richardson rightly claims that Reformed theology has neglected the Old Testament. He proposes therefore to turn from "the western theological concern with the question *cur deus homo*" to the question *cur creatio* which he sees to "contrast sharply" with the former (p. 118). The question of creation is a frequently needed counterbalance to an exclusively cross-centered theology; however, to consider creation

and cross as sharply contrasting alternatives is to fragmentize biblical theology and overemphasize the OT at the expense of the NT. Although too often neglected, nevertheless the OT assumes its full meaning for the Christian only when it is understood in the light of the NT. We can adequately understand *cur deus homo* only when we also ask *cur creatio*. Yet for the Christian, creation can only be looked at in the light of the incarnation. To do otherwise is to ignore Jn 1:1-3, 14, 15 which asserts the incarnation of the Creator.

Richardson proposes to "allow our answers to the question *cur creatio* to guide our reflection on Jesus Christ. This means, of course, that Christology will be the second rather than the first topic in the doctrinal system" (pp. 126, 127). He goes on to demonstrate that "the theology of the cross can actually be shown to be a western accommodation to Arianism and naturalism," because it makes "the chief end of Christ's work less than the chief end of God's work in creating the world" (pp. 127, 129). This reviewer agrees that the *historia salutis* does indeed have a deeper and broader purpose than just the salvation of man, the restoration of the *imago dei*. There is a cosmic dimension involved which cannot be divorced from the question *cur creatio*. Richardson is right when he declares, "The incarnation is, therefore, not a rescue operation, decided upon only after sin had entered into the world. Rather, the coming of Christ fulfills the purpose of God in creating the world" (p. 130). But this can, and must, all be said while maintaining the centrality of Christology and incarnation precisely because it is Christ who is the Creator, "slain from the foundation of the world." The fact that incarnation cannot be limited to the single purpose of the redemption of man, but must be understood in the light of creation, raises it to a cosmic level that makes it the overarching theme of the whole *historia salutis*. From a biblical standpoint the question *cur creatio* cannot be asked or answered apart from *cur deus homo*.

Much the same is to be said of the "conflict between the creation and the redemption interpretations of the Sabbath"

(p. 115), with reference to Ex 20:11 and Dt 5:15. Ostensibly in conflict, the basing of the Sabbath in creation and in the redemption of Israel from Egypt may be seen as complementary when cast in the perspective of the whole biblical history of salvation: the biblical creation story is told for the sake of the *historia* to follow and can only be understood in the light of it; from the biblical point of view, to ask *cur creatio* is also to ask *cur testamentum salutis*—and that is *cur deus homo!* And the liberation from Egypt is a moment in the *historia* which captures within itself the significance of the whole. That the Sabbath can be connected with both, far from involving a contradiction, means that it stands as a symbol of salvation in its fullest dimension.

Another point at which this reviewer believes Richardson has provided a valuable insight, but has made too sharp a dichotomy, is in the characterization of the Sabbath, and particularly of it as having eschatological implications, as American. While Sabbatarian observance was clearly a hallmark of American Puritanism, and carried over into other areas of Protestantism in this country, such as nineteenth-century Methodism, yet it is by no means distinctively American. In this regard the Puritan tradition derives from the very Reformed theology and practice against which Richardson sets up his "American theology." To assert the distinctive Americanism of the Sabbath, while in a sense correct, is nevertheless to oversimplify its history.

Furthermore, the connection of the Sabbath with eschatology, with "the sanctification of all things" (p. 113), is a theme that may be traced through rabbinical literature to the Jewish apocalyptic notion of the "world-week," in which the Sabbath stands as a symbol of the Messianic Age.<sup>1</sup> This theme carries over into the early patristic literature.<sup>2</sup> Later the

<sup>1</sup> Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, IV: 2, 989-991; W. Rordorf, *Der Sonntag* (Zürich, 1962), pp. 49-51.

<sup>2</sup> Barnabas 15: 7, 8 ("Then only [*i.e.*, on the eschatological Sabbath] will we truly rest and sanctify it . . . because we ourselves have first been sanctified"); Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5, 30, 4; 5, 33, 20.

notion of the hereafter as an eternal Sabbath is a familiar theme.<sup>3</sup> Here again "American theology" draws on a rich and ancient heritage.

Although Richardson sometimes draws his lines too sharply and narrowly, at the same time he has said many things to broaden our understanding of the Sabbath. The notion of the Sabbath as a sacrament (but not to replace "the Christological sacraments characteristic of European Christianity!" p. 118), the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Sabbath, and the holiness of the Sabbath as the glory of God (p. 119) are emphases that give the Sabbath its rightful position in Christian theology.

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<sup>3</sup> Origen, Hom. on Num 23, 4; Eusebius, Commentary on Ps 91 (92); cf. H. Dumaine, "Dimanche," *Dict. d'arch. chrét.*, IV: 1, 921-924.