

The Innovating Covenant

Exploring The Work Of Charles S. McCoy

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ABSTRACT Key words: covenant, change, loyalty, liberation, pluralism, globalism, innovation, continuity, "seven deadly sins"

Charles McCoy's lifework calls for covenantal understanding and commitment as a call to innovation in theology and ethics. McCoy embraces liberation, pluralism, and globalism as the solution to the current difficulties of theology. As he looks toward the future, McCoy rejects positions which lament and tend to obstruct the movement toward liberation, pluralism, and globalism.

Our problem is never to bolster the power and vitality of an ineffectual, dying deity. Instead, it is finding ways to respond to the awesome power of God coursing through natural and historical occurrence.¹

From the time of his doctoral dissertation at Yale in 1956, a dissertation called, "The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius," Charles McCoy has plumbed the meanings of covenant in the broadest possible range of matters human and divine. From writing scripts for Radio Free Europe shortly after World War II, to organizing freedom marches in Mississippi with Martin Luther King, Jr., to a distinguished career in theological ethics, McCoy has never ceased developing and applying covenantal thinking to theological, ethical, and political problems.

While McCoy's covenant is always well informed by the past, his sense of covenant moves through history towards a future destiny. Covenant does not mean stolid loyalty to a past formula or creed. Choosing and acting well in the midst of change is McCoy's way of being steadfast and loyal to covenantal commitments of ultimate import. For McCoy, being steadfast usually means changing and adjusting to the new, sometimes even stimulating, catalyzing, or provoking the new. Much like the church Father, Irenaeus, McCoy sees growth and development as one of the primary purposes of the creation. God is to be met and responded to amid the demands of historical, embodied, community life. Hence McCoy remains an avid student and translator of past scholarship. For him, history is a vital instrument which must be studied, clarified, and constantly renewed in present applications. History is also the medium in which covenantal loyalties are fulfilled through faithful action.

Since McCoy has never published a systematic work (and given his dislike of anything too imperial, it would be out of character for him to do so), we must look to many of his varied publications to gain some sense of his overall direction. Throughout his career, liberation and pluralism play decisive roles; but we must also include his vision of global solidarity and culture to make sense of the liberation, and to give it a sense of direction.

I. McCOY'S COVENANT

In McCoy's thought, the notion of covenant is so fundamental that we can almost call it "metaphysical," at least in the sense that covenant functions to direct our thought to an understanding of ultimate reality. Portraying the

development of covenantal thinking in Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587), McCoy (along with co-author J. Wayne Baker) summarizes: “The covenant pervades the world as that which places the divine stamp of pattern, purpose, and grace on the whole of nature and history.”² Here the origin of life, the creation, is portrayed as the original covenantal action of God imbuing all that is with “pattern, purpose, and grace.” The divine stamp pervades not only what is (ontology), but also what is becoming (history). McCoy’s embrace of this part of the covenantal tradition suggests a covenantal “metaphysics,” but one that McCoy wants to distinguish from the scholastic tradition:

the created order is based on the covenant of God, so that the divine commandments permeate the nature of things. Federalism, therefore, has its *lex naturae* in a manner similar to what can be found in the scholastic tradition. But this moral order in creation derives from the faithful will of God in covenant, not from some rational or natural rigidity at the core of reality.³

As put here, the origin, purpose, and destiny of life is covenantal and so takes on a metaphysical character. However, since McCoy seeks to avoid metaphysical rigidity, he consistently eschews the language of metaphysics and ontology and replaces it with the language of covenant. The functions of the two languages are quite similar; the tacit differences are revealing.

In the covenantal tradition, covenant even precedes creation and history: “For Cocceius, the covenant existed prior to history within the Godhead; love, community, and faithfulness are, therefore, what Christians believe to be at the core of the divine reality.”⁴ “Love, community, and faithfulness” are the stuff of which covenant is made, even the “core of the divine reality.” For McCoy, the rational aspects of the natural world are a function of divine faithfulness, a personal quality of divinity which precedes the rational and gives it a more encompassing and more meaningful framework.

COVENANTAL EPISTEMOLOGY

For McCoy, the covenant not only is our best way of describing the ultimate nature and the ultimate why of things, it is also our best way of knowing them. Rather than retreating into skepticism when confronted with the difficulties of grounding knowledge vis-à-vis the subject/object distinction, McCoy synthesizes the thought of Michael Polanyi and the Federal theological tradition in arguing for a “communal basis of human commitment” that tacitly underlies all human knowing and acting.⁵ Rejecting “ecclesiastical limitations and philosophical bifurcations,” McCoy claims “the covenantal wholeness of human experiencing” for his starting point.⁶

In attempting to develop this more expansive, covenantal epistemology, McCoy warns against those systems which methodologically remove the possibility of religious or human meaning before the discussion gets underway:

There are locations which assure that the gods remain invisible and from which it is therefore unwise to begin if we wish to see the scene of human believing and discover the meaning of theological transformation.⁷

Something important about McCoy is manifest in this passage: while being cautious about affirming or denying specific beliefs of specific traditions, he has an ear for the melody of human believing and commitment. Thus he repeatedly asserts something like the following:

Covenants of human living are founded on believed-in *reality*, that final sovereignty or deity that is the source of original creativity, that defines consummation, assures coherence, and to which a root

metaphor refers. Humans live, not toward illusion, but toward what they are convinced is actual.⁸

Notice that what is here affirmed is primarily epistemological, not metaphysical. What is affirmed is the *belief* of reality, while apparently nothing is directly stated about the ontological accuracy of the belief, nothing, that is, with the possible exception of “the source of original creativity.” Below, we shall more fully consider the significance of McCoy’s ambiguity toward the referent while he affirms the fiduciary dimension of all human knowing, belief, and significant action. On the other hand, he clearly rejects the claim that “faith is a form of knowledge.”⁹

In contrast to what McCoy calls the dyadic paradigm of subject and object, he asserts that “Knowing is triadic, taking place within the covenants of human living that define communities of interpretation and provide the root metaphors and stories informing human understanding.”¹⁰ In this expanded paradigm, the knower is historical, social, and necessarily a recipient of, and a participant in, the communal quest for ultimate meaning, a quest which began before the knower and will, in all probability, continue long after the individual disappears from the community scene.

While one might be tempted to see a similarity between McCoy’s historical, communal epistemology and Stanley Hauerwas’ notion of the Church as the historical vehicle of the kingdom of God (See e.g., Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*), McCoy, unlike Hauerwas, specifically rejects any ecclesial privileging. To the contrary, McCoy cites with favor Rosemary Ruether’s global, all-inclusive understanding of “catholic”:

Theology is losing its confinement as an exclusively ecclesiastical science, but only because it is finding its place in a reintegrated view of the human community. It is losing its place as the science of a particular ecclesiastical tradition or even of a single historical faith, such as Christianity, but only because it is beginning to glimpse its place as the horizon of a human history that is truly catholic. It is losing its place as a science confined to the sacral of the “religious” sphere, but only because it is finding its place within the totality of human activities and the arts and sciences that reflect on and create these activities.¹¹

The plural voices which this “catholic” account admits into the conversation is central to McCoy’s entire project. He not only believes that each community can learn something from other ones (and that all communities *ought* to do so), he also sees yielding claims of ecclesial, epistemological privilege as a necessary aspect of ongoing faithfulness to the covenantal tradition. The specific challenges to covenantal participants in 1997 are not the same as those that Bullinger or Cocceius faced. As McCoy advocates the covenant, one cannot be true to current historical demands by simply repeating positions and solutions of the past.

COVENANTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Seeking to avoid individualism on the one hand and rigidity of communitarian belief and practice on the other, McCoy reaches back to the covenantal thought of Johannes Althusius (late sixteenth to early seventeenth century) and draws from it some of his key anthropological notions, particularly the identification of human beings as “symbiotes.” While Althusius was ostensibly writing works of politics, religion played a crucial role in his understanding. Althusius and McCoy alike refuse to segregate the dimensions of human life. Not only is there a symbiosis among human beings, there is also an implied symbiosis among all areas of human interest. Power takes many forms, but it arises from the symbiotic associations of humans living and covenanting together. In this symbiotic vision, human interaction is primary as it occurs within the covenanted groups of human life, whether familial, religious, political, or any other.¹²

When applied to the human relation to God, this symbiotic view takes on several developmental possibilities:

“God alone knows the whole of the divine will, so human knowledge may be true without being adequate or complete.”¹³ Over the course of McCoy’s career, the implications of the partiality of human knowledge of the divine leads McCoy to embrace pluralism as a moral ought and an epistemological aid. By listening to other communities and symbiotes, the limitations of our own viewpoint can be profitably expanded. This kind of expansion constitutes McCoy’s idea of covenantal loyalty.

Because humans can only attempt to enact the will of God on the moving stage of history, being stuck in any position can become a theological danger. In McCoy’s historical analysis, Augustine sees the restlessness of the human heart as a result of the Fall. Quite to the contrary, McCoy, après Cocceius, sees such restlessness as implanted in the original creation as part of the conditional possibility of human response to God through historical action, process, and openness to the new. According to McCoy,

In the rebellion and disobedience that constitutes [sic] the fall into sin, humans become immutable, resistant to change, denying the process in which they were created that leads toward fulfillment in God.¹⁴

Human beings, symbiotes, *ought* to be en route toward expanded understandings of God and other human viewpoints. The process of change is an intentional, *sine qua non* of a fully human life. In the midst of such change, the covenant, or rather, our understanding of covenantal loyalties, provides the necessary unitary element.

As we pursue the unitary element, we must do so from the particular perspective of our given and/or chosen location. As McCoy puts it:

Perspective does not seem to be a flaw or an embarrassment but a fundamental, constituting condition of human location. I am unable to understand my own experience if it is stripped of perspective. Nor can I understand how my fellow humans can claim to experience anything apart from their specific perspectives.¹⁵

In this manner, the particularity of human location is more like a gift than a burden, but it does require attending to others from other locations as we emerge toward an increasingly global culture. So, for example, while McCoy asserts that “Jesus Christ is the root metaphor of the federal paradigm,” at least as understood from a Christian perspective, he adds that “this paradigm also permits us to understand faith perspectives of other communities and thus to deal with the pluralistic context of human believing.”¹⁶

COVENANTAL CHRISTOLOGY

Criticizing much of traditional christology for its correlation of Jesus Christ with human sin, and equally criticizing those ethicists who attempt a different starting point than Jesus Christ (e.g., natural law or secularity), McCoy offers a *tertium quid*: “Jesus Christ as Lord of creation is prior to Jesus Christ as Redeemer, and the latter meaning must be affirmed as a function of the former.”¹⁷ The creational, incarnational meaning of Jesus Christ is primary and “is in no way dependent upon sin.”¹⁸ In an earlier work, written with his late wife Marjorie, McCoy puts it even more bluntly: “Jesus did not have to die on Calvary, but in every fragment of his life there was present the love that would be willing, if necessary, to be nailed to the cross.”¹⁹

The relational, covenantal action of the triune God is already present as grace in the creation. As we have seen

above, McCoy's notion of sin is more like resistance to the often painful processes of changing social responsibilities, rather than a once and for all ontological diminishment. As McCoy puts it:

Jesus Christ as Redeemer is the Incarnate Lord who continues and fulfills the process initiated in creation; the Incarnate One performs a task set in God's creative intention, a task achieved in the light of sin but not a function that would have been unnecessary without sin. For Christian faith and action, Incarnation directs our attention to the triune God, to creation in process toward a goal as well as to the Logos become flesh.²⁰

In this christological position, McCoy rejects anything that would interfere with the freedom which renders covenantal interaction meaningful. As incarnation redirects our attention toward a process, toward a goal, it intensifies and illuminates the steadfast purpose of God already present in the original act of creation.

But McCoy puts the connection between creation and incarnation much more boldly: "the act (Logos) made flesh reveals the act (Logos) made world."²¹ Having so strongly affirmed the connection between the Incarnate One and the world, two of his key themes, intellectual pursuit and the striving for social progress, naturally follow. Loyalty to Christ, which is to say, covenantal loyalty to God, includes loyalty to all humankind and all worthy human endeavor.

Nonetheless, McCoy recognizes that our communities are, especially in the quickened pace of the late twentieth century, constantly confronted and "apparently" threatened with onrushing developments. McCoy's christology is a tailored fit for these onrushing developments, since he sees the "Incarnate Christ" as the one who "can give hope and courage to confront an apparently threatening reality, insight for response, and strength to move into an uncertain future."²²

Throughout his work, McCoy avoids the rendering of *logos* as Word, insisting instead on *dabar*, an earlier term from the putative Hebrew. McCoy would have us translate this critical incarnational term from the Prologue of John as "*covenant action*." The best English equivalent for *dabar*, other than "covenant action," is, he contends, "I give you my word."²³ Polanyi's insight into the fiduciary dimension of all human knowing is here joined to McCoy's creative adaptation of the Protestant, covenantal tradition, a tradition which has always found salvation by faith as primary, faith being understood as in Martin Luther's usage as *trust*.

II. MCCOY'S SEVEN (or thereabouts) DEADLY SINS

1. THE ONTOLOGICAL PEAK

Anyone who adopts what McCoy calls the "imperial mood" in his writing or speech is likely to be asked, "And from what ontological peak do you make such a statement?"²⁴ Again and again, McCoy points to the provisional, historical, moving nature of human life and knowledge. As discussed above, he does not mean that human knowledge is not true—just that the greatness of the covenanting God is greater than any single, or collective, human viewpoint. The limitation of the human perspective before God calls for openness and cooperation with other human communities as the sensible way to broaden our limited perspectives. Pluralism is thus vital to McCoy's thought. Human beings need to hear one another in order to transcend their own limitations. Such cross-cultural listening is evidently part of the divine architecture. But in order to converse with other cultures, other religions, other races, we must speak as would be partners and would be friends, not as imperial conquerors. So when McCoy addresses the current state of theology,

he first asks: “How can religion and deity be reconceptualized without assuming a universal point of view or reducing the variety of faiths to fit a single definition?”²⁵ All expressed points of view must instead recognize their own historical limitations, the need for pluralistic discussion, and the goal of global solidarity.

According to McCoy, belief in Jesus Christ should keep those who believe off the ontological peak: “The confession that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life seems to me a confession of Christian faith that adjudges Christians as well as others as *not being* the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”²⁶

Proclamations from the ontological peak have undoubtedly done much damage through the centuries of human history. However, at this stage of human history, McCoy’s warning seems particularly apropos; for a truly global conversation among the world’s peoples and faiths is unlikely when one or more sides is speaking in the “imperial mood.” Christians most of all might remember that much of the Sermon on the Mount is about humility: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” For the wrath of McCoy is revealed against all who ascend and speak from the ontological peak.

2. INDIVIDUALISM

Undoubtedly taking a cue from Polanyi, H. Richard Niebuhr, and others, McCoy sees individualism as an unfortunate byproduct of the Enlightenment philosophy. McCoy’s covenantal theology and anthropology run directly counter to individualist tendencies. McCoy would contend that the breakup of the Enlightenment project and the problems left in its wake are due to the falsified, mythical notion of the individual from Descartes forward. The very posing of the subject/object distinction as a philosophical problem, as well as the philosophical skepticism which may be said to have arisen out of the failure to resolve such questions, questions which only arise when it is assumed that knowledge takes place between an isolated knower and a set of facts, McCoy would disallow at the outset. The fiduciary dimension of all knowledge and the way our community initiates us into its insights through its elaborate filtering mechanisms are prior, unaccounted for, and unpaid debts in the Cartesian and subsequent individualistic systems. As McCoy puts it:

Just as the experience of humanity generally is one of being in midpassage, so also emerging into self-awareness as individuals is discovering that we are joining a process already under way before we arrive.²⁷

3. TOO “CHRISTIAN”

McCoy wants Christian theology to rid itself of “narrow, impersonal conceptions of truth” and to open itself to a new kind of global conversation which encompasses the broadest imaginable range of human interest and commitment:

The diversity of academic viewpoints is opened to us through Christian faith, and the necessity of taking the variety seriously is affirmed. Not only do we learn to be grateful for the companions who confront us with the limits of our vision, but we see also that the academic context of rigor and disagreement may become an arena of God’s self-revelation and call to commitment . . .²⁸

From this unflinching openness to diverse viewpoints, McCoy actually opposes, at least on church-related campuses and seminaries, furtherance of the sense of Christian uniqueness. This concern, which he somehow got the Board of

Education of the United Methodist Church to publish in 1972, should be understood in its historical context, a context wherein McCoy's chief concern was Christian dominance. Paradoxically, McCoy is arguing that, in our current global context, Christian faithfulness requires more than Christian input.

As a medical practitioner might do, McCoy assesses the serious symptoms of Western theology and is led to his diagnosis: the culprit is the "Constantinian paradigm" which "has assumed and accepted the *dominance* of organized Christianity in society."²⁹ This Constantinian paradigm includes the tendency to restrict theology to the ecclesiastical sphere. Hence both Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth are equally flawed in this shared assumption, regardless of the materially different positions they take on other points. Bernard Lonergan and David Tracy are found to be somewhat improved over their Protestant brethren, but they are still faulted because their pluralism is limited to Christian pluralism.³⁰ But the strongest fire is directed at Thomas F. Torrance, whose Barthian, neo-orthodox interpretations are found to be emanating from the ontological peak.³¹ In his published works, his personal presentations, and his social efforts, McCoy truly celebrates the emerging global culture. Any proposed theology which is not pluralistic, all-inclusive, and ultimately global will not meet his approval. Christian orthodoxy or neo-orthodoxy he dismisses as something of a new fad, an understandable, yet inadequate and somewhat regrettable response to the current historical situation.

McCoy really wants to avoid separating what is Christian and what is fully human without having them be identified. His global vision would forbid no one from the conversation and would likewise have no one dominate that conversation.³²

4. WHINING

Perhaps because he is convinced that God is working through even the most problematic events of human history, McCoy does not despair at the vast changes thrust upon our current time; and he does not sympathize with those who do. So when McCoy heard Karl Rahner's remark that "theology is tired," he seemed to enjoy another Catholic theologian's response: "It is not theology but Rahner that is tired."³³ Delving beneath the humor of this interchange, we may glimpse the fundamental challenge which is now presented to theology. Rahner, by most all accounts, represents one of the most interesting and prolific theological writers of the twentieth century. Yet McCoy sees him, and most of the great theologians of our century, as more or less passé; for "Western theology is caught between the currents of pluralism and the forces of liberation emerging now in global society."³⁴ As McCoy sees it, one can either bemoan the shrinking domain of church and theology, or one can rejoice at the way God is working through the emerging pluralism and liberation. McCoy's theology and ethics clearly choose the latter and forego any sense of nostalgia for what is passing away.

Addressing the needs of the present, McCoy writes: "our own home cannot be identical with the one that our parents or grandparents occupied. Our task is to make a home of the place in which we now live." With a touch of his characteristic humor, McCoy quips about those who feel troubled by the difficulties of the present time: "My father got to marry my mother, but I must go out and marry a perfect stranger."³⁵ For McCoy, ours is an exciting time. We should respond faithfully, rejoice, and be glad in it.

5. RATIONALISM

The Polanyian influence on McCoy is evidenced by his consistent call for something more than rational in

addressing the most serious issues. Yet in saying this, it should be remembered that the tacit dimension of human knowing is not irrational or infra-rational. More accurately, it is pre-rational or perhaps supra-rational. McCoy, in his professed likes and dislikes of a given theologian or even of a theological school, seems to be influenced by such an understanding of the tacit power that energizes and drives the whole process forward.

Arguing for something more than the exclusively rational, he writes:

identity crises are not overcome by analysis and understanding exclusively. These procedures may lead to recognition of the dilemma and to rational comprehension of possible solutions. But life is more encompassing than reason, however broadly conceived. Real living is acting, meeting, responding with believing, reflecting, evaluating as a constant accompaniment.³⁶

McCoy's overall direction seems as much guided by intelligent hunches as by intelligent analysis. For example, when reading *When gods Change*, particularly the early chapters, one gets the feeling that he confronted the theological aporia of our time, felt the futility of attempting to rework the old system, and then just found something of a Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*) through the wholehearted adoption of liberation, pluralism, and globalism, three movements toward which he was already predisposed, if not actively involved.

Once McCoy has embraced liberation, pluralism, and globalism as solutions rather than problems, his dismissal of the discursive direction of certain Thomist writers (Garrigou-Lagrange) and of Barth and Eberhard Jüngel begins to make sense. The problem is apparently not in what is being advocated. At least some of what they are arguing for is similar to what McCoy would affirm. McCoy's objection seems to be in the mode of the discourse itself, which isolates itself through an excessive rationality targeted at a thin slice of church theologians and philosophers. As McCoy puts it:

it is necessary to recognize that we live, not in a time of the twilight of the gods or the death of God, but rather in a time of the reappearance of the gods and the manifest liveliness of God. The fears of theologians that religion and theology are fading away derive from the theologians' insularity. In the world outside sectarian and academic enclaves, it is a time of the dawning of new and multiple deities, a time when isolated religious communities are being drawn out of themselves by a globalization of culture. It is a time when the reality of religious believing is inundating the rational methods of the Constantinian paradigm. It is a time of changing gods and changing theologies.³⁷

So once again the problem, the crisis, becomes McCoy's opportunity and road to new insight. The gods are reappearing and "the manifest liveliness of God" is at work in our time, but the reappearance that McCoy envisions is embodied, where, for example, "a kiss may give meaning to forgiveness beyond the power of explanation."³⁸

6. RACISM

Just as a kiss may say more about forgiveness than a discourse about it, McCoy has done more about racism than he has written about it. In his earlier years in North Carolina, his pro-integration activities in church ministry and on the Duke campus brought him into heated conflict with some church authorities. Later, in July, 1961, he actually planned the Mission to Mississippi with Martin Luther King, Jr. and was briefly arrested there. As a probable result of the manner in which he organized the efforts, McCoy was not badly treated. Before any public appearances, he contacted the local authorities involved, informed them of his intentions, and called them to their highest understanding of the gospel.

McCoy relates racism to the failure to think pluralistically: “The ability to perceive plurality in the human community, rather than regard others as inferior versions of ourselves, is no small achievement.”³⁹ McCoy sees pluralism as a many faceted movement with philosophical, social, cultural, and theological possibilities of varied development. Its opposite would be a kind of monism, a “one size fits all” view which would fall into McCoy’s general distaste for the “imperial mood.”

7. THE FALLACY OF DICHOTOMOUS THINKING

One of McCoy’s favorite whips to crack, “the fallacy of dichotomous thinking,” appears wherever seemingly irresolvable bifurcations force thinking and believing into reduced avenues of expression. Here especially, McCoy sees the problem as the methodological starting point, particularly those arising out of the dreaded Constantinian paradigm. The problematic list includes subject/object and subjective/objective; essence/existence and substance/accident; noumenal/phenomenal and theoretical/practical.⁴⁰ However, one could easily add faith and biblical studies, science and religion and yet others. McCoy’s critique of neo-orthodoxy arises out of his conviction that Barth et al. have exacerbated the dichotomies:

First, it continued the dichotomies of Western thought, took them to radical theological conclusions, and thereby hastened the crisis of a theological paradigm based upon a split world. Second, neo-orthodoxy continued the well-established tradition restricting theology to the Christian ecclesiastical sphere. Indeed, neo-orthodox theology makes it clear that intellectual bifurcations and ecclesiastical limitations reinforce one another.⁴¹

In McCoy’s analysis of these bifurcations, different poles will be experimented with before the trend swings back the other direction. However, neither pole of the bifurcated world view will sufficiently address the current challenges. Instead, McCoy’s solution is to foster the stream of covenantal thinking which begins with Bullinger, reaches a peak in Cocceius, and is fostered by diverse thinkers closer to our own time, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Michael Polanyi, and H. Richard Niebuhr.

While interesting studies could be done on how each of these sources affects him, McCoy, like all competent theologians, is a unique synthesis of these various sources. What seems to be a common theme is the attempt to overcome the dualisms or dichotomies that have pervaded critical thought. So, for example, Niebuhr’s project of a relational ethics of responsibility is incorporated in McCoy’s development of covenantal commitment. From such thinkers as Niebuhr, McCoy grasps the significance of the problem of privileging one pole or another of a dichotomy. He then attempts to seize upon the problem as a clue to the solution, a solution which will involve an Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in which the framework is enlarged by pluralistic inclusivity.

III. A DELIGHT IN INNOVATION

Charles McCoy is a theologian who delights in the new, the fresh, the innovative. He really appears to thrive in the challenging arena of shifting paradigms and radical change, even threatening change. As such, he is one who was born at the right moment in history; for he does not fear change. He actually likes it.

Change is not only something in which McCoy sees possibilities for the good. Failure to adapt to changing conditions, clinging to an outworn past, he characterizes as sinful. In contrast to the Golden Age/Fall mythology of Genesis 3, McCoy counters: “humans are created not at the height of their potential, but mutable, in process toward a consummation hidden in God. Sin means a fall into immutability, into stasis.”⁴² In this view, immutability, blocking

the process intended for humanity, constitutes the corruption of human nature, which must be understood as mutable nature.

By implication, most churches would be characteristically guilty of this understanding of sinfulness: “Yet the activities and worship in the churches seem organized to insure that nothing new or unanticipated will ever happen again.”⁴³ McCoy’s *Transforming Cross* argues the point from the positive perspective: standing before the cross of Christ does not leave us as we were. The cross transforms us in the general direction of liberation, pluralism, and globalism. Resistance to the transformational process imprisons human life:

A living society requires diversity of commitments, values and purposes in order to make room for and encourage the recognition of the innovation without which the past becomes a noose and the changing present a scaffold trapdoor into oblivion.⁴⁴

As we saw above, covenantal commitment supports change once it recognizes the historical nature of all things human. The fundamental Christian insight and belief of incarnation likewise recognizes the particularities of historical human nature and in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth successfully addresses those particulars.

Throughout *The Responsible Campus*, McCoy advises Christian colleges to cease looking toward the sectarian past and to accept instead what he calls the “public present.” The implication, for both the church college and more radically, for Christianity itself, is that McCoy sees a role for church colleges and for Christianity writ large, but only if they are continually transformed, only if change is embraced instead of resisted:

Views of the cosmos held by churchmen in the past have been overturned, to the profit of man and faith. Cherished beliefs have been called into question, usually forcing Christian thinkers to discard spurious or irrelevant meanings. Painful as this process may be, it is essential if Christianity is not to settle into a mire of antiquated notions and replace faith in the living God with *idolatrous loyalty* to an ever dying past.⁴⁵

Such “idolatrous loyalty” to outworn notions of the past might even be considered for membership among McCoy’s deadly sins, perhaps as the most pernicious of them all.

From Polanyi, McCoy takes the insight that “the Christian understanding of God is not a static dogma but rather a heuristic impulse to break through and move beyond accepted conceptual frameworks.”⁴⁶ Religious belief serves to prepare its symbiotes for the exigencies of the required journey by the strengthening action of fiduciary relations. In McCoy’s view, the fearful will cling while the faithful will move forward in spite of apparent threat and danger. McCoy’s insight is that the greatest danger of our time normally lies in the status quo:

human communities *dwell* in their faith in order to *break out* toward God’s future. The absorption of change is always a central purpose of religion; and this purpose of religion means ever new beginnings.⁴⁷

According to McCoy, theological change is possible, historically demonstrable, and generally desirable. The hope for theology which he sees is based on theologians ceasing to bemoan the crumbling paradigms of the past, and instead, energetically embracing new possibilities thrust before us. He sees one era closing and another opening. Success or failure will depend upon how three testing conditions are met: liberation, pluralism, and emerging global culture.

IV. INTERLOCUTORY REMARKS

THE “WHAT” OF BELIEF

A repeated theme in McCoy’s work is that “believed-in reality” draws people forward in their covenantal living. But what role does the *content* of human belief play? Perhaps to pursue methodology with greater focus, McCoy’s statements seem to leave some ambiguity on the “what” of belief:

Covenants of human living are founded on believed-in *reality*, that final sovereignty or deity that is the source of original creativity, that defines consummation, assures coherence, and to which a root metaphor refers. Humans live, not toward illusion, but toward what they are convinced is actual.⁴⁸

As we briefly touched upon above, what is the reality of the referent? Is it the belief that generates “original creativity,” or is it the reality of the living God that does so? No one would deny the considerable power of human believing, but can anything more be said about the what or the who of belief? How much ontology is behind the epistemology? How important is it that the belief be based on, and then again and again be increasingly based on, the reality of the referent itself?

By way of analogy, scientists have many theories or beliefs about the physical universe. While these beliefs also have a shaping power, some of them have proven to be wrong and to have been harmful to those who had assumed their validity. Such was certainly the case with the now discarded medical practice of bleeding. Just as science continually reshapes itself on the basis of new discoveries about its referent, what role, what interaction is there between the actuality of God and religious belief?

Consider McCoy’s statement: “We must remember that a god becomes God in human believing.”⁴⁹ Several points come to mind. The first is the generosity of spirit in which McCoy insists upon addressing all human faith commitments. Furthermore, his understanding of the fiduciary aspect of religious faith reminds us that *trust* and *value* are at the center of such human faith, wherever it is placed. But what happens when the trust is misplaced? Can the values be wrong? And since I am sure that McCoy would agree that values can be wrong and that trust can be misplaced, does this not imply that the *content* of belief is a vital part of the entire quest? Dramatic episodes of faith gone awry abound—Waco, Jonestown, Cheiry, Switzerland, Hale-Bopp, etc. In each of these destructive events, a strong fiduciary element, and perhaps even a covenantal one, was present. Was it not *what* they believed that led to disaster? After all, without some cognitive content to religious belief, ethics itself is not feasible.

Is the God that we believe in also capable of speech? If God is not to be thought of as deaf and dumb, then what role, if any, is there for revelation? McCoy believes that God has/is an “awesome power . . . coursing through natural and historical occurrence.” In addition to natural and historical occurrences, is direct, personal interaction possible with God? an interaction that leads to what Eberhard Jüngel has called a *Sprachgewinn*, “a speech gain”?

As an advocate of “dynamism and becoming,” McCoy writes: “Change is a constitutive element of all human understanding of God and therefore also of all theology and ethics.”⁵⁰ I believe that this advocacy of change in theology and ethics implies that content can be wrong, that it often is wrong, or more positively, given the historical nature of human life, however good our thinking may be, it can improve. But progress in this or any other sphere can only be measured by the relative approach toward or regression from the referent.

LIBERATION—ITS MEANING AND VALUE

While appreciating McCoy's stated and implied understandings of liberation, some questions still arise. Is all liberation good? Should some change be resisted? Has McCoy ever met a liberation he did not like?

McCoy's advocacy of change predisposes him toward the new, but as a theologian who stands within the covenantal tradition, what are the values of the old that he would have us maintain? What is the relation between liberation as a general principle, and *what* people do once they are liberated? Taking Aristotle's criterion from Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is liberation for the sake of something else, or for its own sake? So, for example, should liberation be complemented by the pursuit of aretaic ideals, such as the true, the beautiful, and the good? What happens to liberation sought apart from a steadfast ideal?

GRACE, PERSON, AND CONTINUITY

In the final analysis, McCoy, who is an unflinching advocate of human thought, effort, action, and change, does offer a stabilizing word about something more than human effort:

When all that we can do is done, however, we must remember that we rely not on human energies alone but on a sovereign power at work in the reality of historical process, a power making for liberation—"new every morning; great in faithfulness" (Lam.3:23). And strange as it may seem, when we commit our lives to that sovereign reality we experience a surge of power greater than our own efforts, greater even than the synergistic power experienced in community.⁵¹

After so much emphasis on human effort, this *fiduciary* confession of something which comes to us beyond our own work, something which may bear the venerable title of grace, is a welcome balance. Is this something also and perhaps primarily a some *one*? If so, what are the ongoing, personal qualities of Deity that might be understood within McCoy's covenantal framework? Certainly, becoming, change, and transformation are human imperatives in McCoy's theology, but what of God? How much continuity is in God?

A CONCLUDING APPRECIATION

Polanyi's great metaphor, "Dwelling In and Breaking Out," might be the best way to summarize McCoy's lifelong commitments and career efforts in theology, ethics, church affairs, politics, social relations, and consulting with business leaders. A sense of excitement, enjoyment, and hope is often manifest in McCoy's work, qualities which arise from his eye for creative possibilities. And these creative insights are most likely to appear during moments of general crisis and confusion. In this light consider McCoy's assessment, published in 1980, of the theological situation:

Theology as practiced in the Western world exists between one era now drawing to a close and another just dawning. A profound transformation in theology is taking place around us.⁵²

Charles McCoy has already been an influential part of that transformation.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Charles S. McCoy, *The Responsible Campus: Toward a New Identity for the Church-Related College* (Nashville: Division of Higher Education, Board of Education, The United Methodist Church, 1972), 61.
- ² Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* With a Translation of *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno (1534)* by Heinrich Bullinger (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 39.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 52. Much recent neo-Thomist thought cannot be said to fall into metaphysical rigidity. See the analysis of W. Norris Clarke's and David Burrell's work in my *Analogical Possibilities: How Words Refer to God* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁵ Charles S. McCoy, *When gods Change: Hope for Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 172.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 178. See also, *Ibid.*, 191, 198.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.
- ¹¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), 2, as cited in McCoy, *When gods Change*, 24.
- ¹² McCoy and Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism*, 59.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁵ McCoy, *When gods Change*, 105.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.
- ¹⁷ McCoy, *Responsible Campus*, 60.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Charles S. McCoy and Marjorie Casebier McCoy, *The Transforming Cross* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 84.
- ²⁰ *Responsible Campus*, 60.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 61.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ²⁴ See, for example, *When gods Change*, 29.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁸ McCoy, *Responsible Campus*, 65-6.

²⁹ McCoy, *When gods Change*, 28. Emphasis added.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³² *Ibid.*, 214, 221.

³³ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁶ McCoy, *Responsible Campus*, 42-3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴² McCoy, *When gods Change*, 215.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴ McCoy, *Responsible Campus*, 100.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 64. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁷ McCoy, *When gods Change*, 148.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 238. In *The Responsible Campus*, p.63, McCoy borrows a phrase of H. Richard Niebuhr in referring to God at work in creation, "the grace of doing nothing."

⁵² *Ibid.*, 166.