

Living before God

by [Paul E. Capetz](#) in the [May 10, 2000](#) issue

*Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology*, by Douglas F. Ottati

This engaging and elegantly written set of essays is the fourth book by Douglas Ottati, who teaches at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. While this anthology stands on its own, those familiar with Ottati's work will recognize that he is developing a distinctive theological program.

Ottati demonstrates the continuing vitality of John Calvin's Reformed tradition by mining its rich treasures for contemporary theology and ethics. More specifically, he is deeply influenced by the North American continuation of this tradition in the work of Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr and James M. Gustafson. In the best sense of the word, then, Ottati's theology is "conservative" in its deference to a confession rooted in a particular history.

At the same time, however, Ottati's theology is "liberal" in its willingness to reshape the church's inherited doctrinal and moral traditions in response to new situations. Like Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ottati believes that Christian doctrines and moral teachings must be reexamined in each age for their adequacy in expressing the authentic piety of the church. Fidelity to the gospel makes theology and ethics subject to continual revision. Ottati's liberalism is like that of the great 19th-century theologians who were thoroughly immersed in the historical materials but never lost sight of the church's need for faithful and relevant preaching. Such theology is not going to be popular with either the right or the left wings of the church (both of which are astonishingly ahistorical)—and therein lies its potential for cutting across the polarization occasioned by our contemporary "culture wars."

Ottati clearly and succinctly sets forth three convictions. The first is that theology works with the church's poetry. "Theology traffics in images, symbols, and themes that clarify life in its true depth and circumstance." The language of the church is not so much descriptive of the way things are as evocative of a dimension of our being that is beyond our ability to comprehend scientifically. For that reason,

theological affirmations are not subject to the sorts of reductive strategies employed by fundamentalists or scientists who share in our culture's penchant for trying to measure reality in quantitative terms.

Ottati does not believe "that Christian theology either can or should frame a dialectically correct discourse that leaves behind figurative expressions, poetic and rhetorical language." In this respect he distances himself from Schleiermacher's aspiration to find "the highest degree of definiteness" in the use of theological language. Ottati seeks "an appropriate degree of definiteness" and prefers "the more energetic and sermonic language of John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion." He wants to stay as close as possible to the first-order poetic language of scripture and the church's liturgy, while avoiding the intellectual distortions of the religious meaning of that language which result when its symbolic character is given a literalistic interpretation.

Ottati's second conviction is that theology has a practical aim arising out of its intrinsic relation to the church and its ministry. "Christian theology is a reflective enterprise whereby Christian communities attempt to envision in relation to God the many objects, situations, and realities with which we interact--everything from our biological makeups and our families to our societies and natural environments," he writes. Theology's job is to elaborate a vision of ourselves in the world and before God that provides a practical orientation for faithful Christian living. But unlike other advocates of a "church theology," Ottati insists that "the practical aim of Christian theology cannot come to rest in a narrow and isolated confessionalism."

Because theology seeks to interpret all things in relation to God, the responsible theologian is necessarily engaged in dialogue with complementary or conflicting interpretations of reality that construe our being and doing from other perspectives (such as those found in the academy). The Christian conviction that all things are always and already related to God, their creator and redeemer, precludes a sectarian ghettoization of theology in the name of fidelity to the church.

In this respect his project is sharply differentiated from the so-called "postliberal" theology of George Lindbeck. Ottati fully shares the postliberal emphasis on the necessity of preserving and cultivating the distinctive ethos of the church as the context in which Christian identity is formed and sustained. But he nonetheless believes that the Reformed tradition insists upon service to God as the end for which the church exists. In other words, "theocentrism" is the ultimate concern, in relation

to which "ecclesiocentrism" is a proper penultimate concern. According to Ottati, the critical methodological disagreements among contemporary theologians reflect crucial substantive differences in their theological visions.

Ottati's third conviction is that a theocentric vision of "life-before-God and God-before-life" issues in a particular stance, attitude or posture that he calls "hopeful realism." This affective disposition "encourages us to participate in God's world; to recognize that we are fitted for true communion with God in community with others; to acknowledge our significant but limited and dependent powers and capabilities; to expect diminishment, estrangement, conflict, fragmentation, and death; but nevertheless to look for enlargement, reconciliation, and life." Such an attitude is equally opposed to "easy optimisms and cynical pessimisms."

In an earlier book Ottati cautioned against the allure of two temptations besetting contemporary Protestantism: therapeutic spiritualities aimed at the well-being of the self, and communitarian enclaves focused upon the purity of the church. The former (represented by Howard Clinebell) is an example of an "easy optimism" in its affirmation of the possibility of personal wholeness apart from a realistic emphasis upon guilt, sin and finitude. The second (represented by Stanley Hauerwas) is an example of a "cynical pessimism" that considers the political, economic and cultural spheres of the wider society in which the church exists as beyond redemption. The former option is hopeful without being realistic, and the latter is realistic without being hopeful.

A "hopeful realism" critically embraces all dimensions of life as providing occasions for faithful participation in God's world. Neither the individual self in its quest for wholeness nor the church in its pursuit of moral integrity provides a large enough object of concern for Christian fidelity. Ottati affirms that the gospel calls us to envision the entire world as God's good creation, albeit fallen and in need of redemption. This posture is exemplified, embodied and incarnated in the life and death of Jesus, who provides the pattern for Christian fidelity. Jesus Christ calls all persons to acknowledge that God alone is God and that the true service of God enables and requires critical loyalty to the world.

As befits his preference for the first-order language of the church, Ottati's writing is free of academic jargon and easily accessible to pastors and churchpeople. His style reminds us that solid theology need not be arcane. (I once heard him say to a group of fellow professors of theology, "I write books for people who go to church.") He brings together a compelling interpretation of our contemporary circumstances with

a fresh appropriation of a classic tradition of Christian theology. Ottati's work points a way for mainstream Protestantism to move courageously into the future through a renewed engagement with its past.