Teaching theology in anxious times

“In God’s world, there are always new possibilities—some of which reside in things we find threatening.”

Stephen Healey interviews Douglas F. Ottati

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(Photo courtesy of the Center of Theological Inquiry)

Douglas Ottati teaches at Davidson College; previously he taught for many years at Union Presbyterian Seminary. His new book, A Theology for the Twenty-First Century *, is a systematic theology that mines deep theological traditions and applies them to the contemporary moment. The capaciousness and humility of Ottati’s theological project reveal his indebtedness to some of the Christian tradition’s most compelling teachers.*

Tell us about your background.

My father was from Brazil and was Roman Catholic, and my mother was from a Lutheran family in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We ended up being Presbyterian. My mom taught Sunday school, and we went to church. My dad would stop at the deli on the way home, and we would argue about the sermon over sandwiches. Now I think that if you can preach a sermon that's clear enough for people to argue about, you've got them where you want them.

I went to college in 1968: civil rights, Vietnam, the pill. An increasingly wealth-oriented commercial culture emphasized successful careers, but the social unrest and the heightened moral and personal questions gave me the impression that there was more to an education than getting a good job.

Who have been your intellectual mentors and guides?

When you work on a book like the one I just wrote, you become acutely aware of how much you owe other people. My teachers helped me develop thoughts and read important texts I wouldn't otherwise have chosen.

I read Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud with Van A. Harvey at the University of Pennsylvania, someone who thinks their critiques of religion work. We also read Karl Barth, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich together.

Robert F. Evans, a Pelagius scholar, taught a course on Augustine's *The City of God*. To me, a kid from New Jersey who used to work in gas stations, it was a very strange book. But the course convinced me that whatever else was going on in 1968, Augustine's questions were close to my own.

James Gustafson ran a storied seminar on Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas at the University of Chicago. A number of Jesuits, one or two Franciscans, and a smattering of Protestants—a nondenominational Kentuckian, a stray Episcopalian, and me. Gustafson was able to get this diverse group to have genuine discussions.

And David Tracy was interested in all sorts of religious and philosophical inquiry.

Speaking of Tracy's capacious sensibility, we are living in a period now where capaciousness is less valued. Many people are more strident, less inclusive. How do you bring together all these influences—Luther, Calvin, Augustine—many of which have absolutist strains?

Tracy represented the best Catholic sensibility. He was open to truth from all quarters: the incarnation, God's reality suffusing all things with truth and beauty. He also helped me see that my tradition has a similar capacity: God is sovereign, the source and fountain of all good and truth. This is God's world, all truth is from God, and you can engage it without being defensive. Of course, when you engage other perspectives, you may end up revising your own—and you may draw some wrong conclusions, too. But we're not saved by being right; we're saved by grace.

How do you engage people who don't share this capacious attitude?

We are creatures, not God, and we don't know the whole truth. The Christian doctrine of sin means not only that people are unjust and sometimes difficult but also that we chronically prefer our own interests and often hold other people's positions in contempt. We can learn from Reinhold Niebuhr, when he says forgiveness means "willingness to bear evil in the other without vindictiveness, because evil in the self is known."

I am not completely righteous: when I'm in conversation with someone, I ought to listen and allow them to challenge me. Contemporary culture really lacks anything equivalent to Christian doctrines of creation, of creatureliness, and of sin. Without those it's hard to see that our understandings are chronically corrupted and that we need to continue, with grace, to revise and improve them.

Most of what you've laid out here are basic theological coordinates—they might apply to all people and all times. Is there something different now? Are people more anxious?

People develop a falsely intense notion of certainty when they are anxious. In our contemporary social circumstances in this interconnected world, anxieties are intensified because we often find differences threatening and then try to defend the imagined absoluteness of our stances and standards.

We also have to look at long-standing injustices. They make for long-standing resentments. Sooner or later, those resentments will come out—and they ought to come out. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond has an exhibit of Fabergé eggs that were owned by the czars. Each one is worth more money than a community of Russian peasants earned in a year in 1916. That resentment came out. In our culture, we have treated whole populations chronically unfairly and unjustly, and resentments are growing, and we need to commit to justice as a

solution.

Today, we need people not to become too hardened in their own views. We need to have confidence that, in God's world, there are new possibilities, some of which reside in things we find threatening.

In the midst of these social complexities, what do you see happening in the rest of the 21st century?

A tough call. One thing we need to grasp is that the evolution of life on our planet is fragile and interdependent. We need to be attuned to how much we and other creatures depend upon a certain set of balances.

You probably work with a lot of people, students certainly, who don't agree with this reference to a scientific account of origins. How do you talk to them?

I start with a number of biblical texts and ask what's going on. When you read the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, it's clear that not everything is centered on us. It's clear that we are involved in a large, interdependent system under God.

It's tempting to read the Bible as a series of empirically verifiable, scientific texts. But that's a modernist, not a conservative, reading. Did God literally stretch out the heavens like a tent and erect God's chambers on the waters (Ps. 104)? Some traditionalists read the Bible as if it were written by men in white coats working in laboratories. That fails to take account of the forms of biblical literature and the many ways in which they have been read faithfully by Christians over the ages.

Three themes from your book are consolation, truth, and piety. How do you tie them together?

Truth means that there are things you need to acknowledge and that you can't simply alter. Consolation means that we understand God to be the source and fountain of all goods and benefits. But neither truth nor consolation mean God simply sets up and governs a world where my goods are always immediately looked after. Experience shows that not everything works out in accordance with our immediate interests.

True piety recognizes the truth, recognizes your worth as a good creature, and recognizes that you're limited and also corrupted. Piety is grounded in a recognition

that God, the mystery that bears history, is also sufficiently faithful to sustain us and redeem us. It's consolation in the face of suffering and uncertainty. Truth sometimes can set you free from hurtful falsehoods, but it doesn't simply render concerns irrelevant. We can know the truth and remain anxious. As pastoral caregivers, we don't tell people they shouldn't be anxious because they know the truth; we go to them and try to accompany them while they are anxious. God is faithful, and we can also be faithful to each other.

Who do you write for?

The book is primarily for the guides, the pastors and theologians. They are inclined by vocation to reflect on these things in detail, and my systematic theology tries to clarify things by showing the interrelation of different beliefs.

I'm working on a book tentatively entitled *An Introduction to the Christian Faith*. It's a write-up of a course I teach to undergraduates here at Davidson College. It will be keyed to the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Lord's Prayer. That was the introductory catechetical setup for much of Christianity in the West. It's a starter set that is inherently more accessible than my systematic theology or any other.

But I'd also like to revisit the theme of teachers. I once called Father Nicholas Ayo to thank him for translating a book of Aquinas's sermons. He accepted my thanks, but he added that we're all indebted to St. Thomas. Well, that's right. Theologians stand in relation to people who have gone before. When I teach Aquinas or Luther, they're not in the room. I try to let students encounter them through their writings. That's what my teachers did for me, and I try to thank them by encouraging my students to do the same.

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