Doubting theology: Conversations that count

by William C. Placher in the June 29, 2004 issue

How do Christians understand their faith in light of insights gained from history, social science, natural science and other modes of inquiry? How, for example, do Christians understand the book of Genesis in light of scientific investigations into the origin of the universe and of the species? How do they understand theological references to sin in light of scientific accounts of genetically determined behavior? Such questions have been at the heart of modern theology and especially that sprawling tradition known as "liberal theology."

In An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt *(Fortress), published this year, James M. Gustafson considers the ways that secular modes of inquiry—and their results—have been absorbed, accommodated or rejected by theologians. The book reflects Gustafson's concern, evident through his career as a theologian and ethicist, to engage people in other professions and thinkers in other disciplines. It also reveals his dissatisfaction with recent "postmodern" or "postliberal" efforts that seek—in his view—to avoid scientific, social-scientific or other constructions of reality.*

In these pages William C. Placher, P. Travis Kroeker and S. Mark Heim comment on Gustafson's account, and Gustafson responds.

With characteristic clarity and quiet passion James Gustafson argues that theologians and ethicists should be regularly engaged in serious conversation with other disciplines: "It is not possible to avoid intersections between science and other secular knowledge on the one hand, and religious discourse on the other." When Christians address ethical problems, we should draw on the best expertise available. When we think about the world, most of us, most of the time, use the categories of contemporary natural and social science. If we do not connect our faith to those categories, we will end up compartmentalizing Christianity off in a corner and treating it as not about the real world.

The central target of Gustafson's polemics, prominently represented by John Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas and George Lindbeck and less prominently by me and others, is a kind of theology he variously calls postliberal theology narrative theology, or (using the title of one of my own books) unapologetic theology. He thinks those of us so labeled, lacking the courage to be straightforward Barthians, have borrowed from the arcane fads of postmodernism to justify our misguided ghettoizing of theology.

Those of us thus lumped together could justifiably, I think, protest the lumping and insist on important differences among us. But that's a conversation for another time.

Gustafson speaks to one central divide in contemporary theology. He raises important questions that apply in some degree to all of us on the other side of that divide, and they deserve an attempt at an answer. Let me organize my response around three topics where we seem to disagree: With whom should theologians be talking? What should we talk about? How should we talk?

If I and others seem unusually argumentative and defensive when discussing this book, it may be because we remember how wise Jim Gustafson was when we were young and callow. We are intimidated when we disagree with him by the recognition that Gustafson always arrives at his positions thoughtfully and judiciously.

With *whom should we be talking*? When Gustafson says theologians should be in conversation with those in secular disciplines, he seems to mean principally natural scientists and empirical social scientists. They are the people who change the world, who can provide the necessary background for informed ethical decisions, whose categories provide the dominant ways people today think. Even at the pastoral level, he believes, preaching and counseling will have little credibility if they are not related to the best knowledge generated by these disciplines.

In contrast, he thinks that dialogue with the philosophers and cultural critics usually labeled "postmodern" is generally a waste of time. Scientists cure diseases and develop technology; empirical social science contributes to public policy. But postmodern theorists are not taken seriously by sensible people. ("The same authors, Foucault, Kuhn, Feyeraband, Derrida, Lakatos, Lyotard and others, are cited almost as a litany of sacred names.") Gustafson assures us, "Nothing is this book charges anyone with deliberate dishonesty, self-deception, or deception of others," but some passages come close. He seems convinced that theologians in dialogue

with postmodern thinkers are playing tricks—appealing to these authors only because they might justify our odd ways of doing theology. Even if these are the current intellectual “fads,” he says, references to them are so “arcane” that they will not make any connection to the lives of ordinary people.

This is frustrating. As a theologian, I’m supposed to get out there and talk to my nontheological colleagues, but, when I try to connect theology to books widely influential among many of those colleagues, Gustafson tells me that that’s not what he meant. Sure, talk with natural science and empirical social science—but why not postmodern theory too?

I have not—honest!—latched on to these folks after a desperate search for somebody who might permit particular theological moves. Goodness knows I dislike the prose in which much of this stuff is written, and I would in some moods have welcomed an excuse to dismiss it. But this “litany of sacred names” figures prominently in many academic departments these days; their works appear in large numbers on the shelves of the local Barnes and Noble bookstore. My students may not in large numbers read Lyotard, but they have watched a show called *Postmodern Videos* on MTV, and many of their favorite movies (*Fight Club*, *Memento*) play with issues of time, reality and perspective parallel to those discussed by postmodernists. If they become architects, go to an Ivy League law school, or study the perplexing problems of race, gender and sexual orientation, they will likely find themselves engaged in debates shaped by some of these postmodern thinkers.

A generally accepted big theory—rational choice theory in the social sciences, or contemporary quantum mechanics, for instance—provides criteria for evaluating the truth of hypotheses within its purview. But how do we decide on the truth or falsity of fundamental theories? How can we decide who is winning when the rules of the game are one of the subjects up for debate? Is it just a matter of power politics, and those with the relevant institutional power decide? Or is it a more complicated matter, in which rhetoric and persuasion play their roles in the telling of alternative stories? Or can we recover a sufficiently qualified theory of rationality even for decisions among fundamental theories to survive contemporary objections? But has not “rationality,” with all its importance and all its virtues, sometimes been misused as a slogan to dismiss the radical and the marginalized?

Postmodernists confront us with questions like these. However we answer them at the end of the day, they seem to me good questions, not to be dismissed out of

hand. I concede that some of us engaged in such conversations—John Milbank seems to me particularly guilty on this score—often fail to make it clear whether postmodernism has unique affinities with Christianity, or whether we have adopted its language to talk about Christianity simply because it happens to be the current intellectual lingo. That is a complex question with which I've wrestled in much greater detail elsewhere. But concede the worst case—even if it is just a prominent language of the time, could Gustafson not concede intellectual integrity to those of us trying to speak in it of Christian faith? I thought that's what he said theologians are supposed to be doing.

What should we talk about? Gustafson keeps wanting to bring us down to earth. He recalls how, nearly 50 years ago, he was commissioned to study whether Standard Oil could reduce shipping costs without unfairness to its workers:

> I read the efficiency analyses of thirty-three oil barges and ten tugboats in the New York Harbor, spent several days on the barges and tugboats, and interviewed people from harbor personnel to middle managers, to board members of the international corporation. . . . Social ethics done only at abstract conceptual levels, or even through middle axioms, leaves a huge gap between theory, quantified information, and the role obligations of persons.

He keeps reminding us that, whether we are thinking about social problems, medical ethics or the doctrine of creation, Christians need to know the up-to-date facts about economics, genetic causes of disease, or astrophysics.

But another range of questions is surely also important, questions having more to do with what Aquinas called "the beginning of things and their last end, and especially of rational creatures." Faced as I am with an aged parent rapidly losing short-term memory, one of course wants to know about medications or forms of therapy helpful in delaying the effects. But also, late at night, one wonders about whether the meaning of life fades with memory, or whether the richness of an individual's experience is somehow preserved. Here the middle-level experts Gustafson usually urges us to consult offer little help.

Gustafson several times dismisses George Lindbeck's claim that the biblical world ought for Christians to "absorb the universe." The world we live in, Gustafson insists, includes "neurosciences and genetics, black holes and quarks," and the Bible has

nothing to say about them. No well-educated person today actually uses biblical categories as a first language for speaking about the world of his or her experience.

Lindbeck knows, however, that modern science has taught us all sorts of things of which the biblical authors were unaware. But does all this amazingly complex world make sense, and what kind of sense does it make? Does it have a purpose, and if so, what sort of purpose? Why is there so much tragedy in it?

I take Lindbeck to argue—and I would agree—that the basic framework provided by the biblical narratives still provides a way of thinking about the world helpful in answering such questions. Certainly the complexities and occasional brutalities of those narratives and all that we have learned about the mechanisms of the world since they were written render ambiguous their relation to the one world in which we live and move and have our being. The only way to define the meaning they give the world and show that it admits of having such a coherence is to work out enough details to make the argument plausible, and that is a big job. It took Karl Barth thousands of pages, and he never finished. Still, given some of the matters that haunt our hearts, it seems to me the alternative would be to search for some different framework for understanding the universe, not to think that, when we have talked with technicians about the details, we have answered all the important questions.

How should we talk? In his powerful concluding chapter, delivered as a lecture in Sweden shortly after 9/11, Gustafson ruminates on some lessons for our time. He has moved, he writes, “from boredom to frustration to anger with the exaggerated religious rhetoric” that afflicts us—whether from those sure that God is on their side or from those who make “promises that God probably cannot keep” concerning a better world soon to emerge. Repeatedly, he quotes Lincoln: “The Almighty has his own purposes.” Let us not too hastily identify them with our own, or suppose that we can confidently predict their results.

To this I can only say, “Amen.”

Gustafson is a man passionately worried about the dangers of passion. He summarizes his rhetorical conclusions:

> Politicians, don’t exaggerate!
> Theologians, don’t exaggerate!
> Social reformers, don’t exaggerate!

Christian clergy, don’t exaggerate!

Faced with the various idiocies of our time, the political talk shows that degenerate into shouting matches, the confident assurances that God is on our side, whichever side that happens to be, in every cultural battle, who could disagree?

Yet one of the topics on which I ruminate is how few students these days have been truly inspired by the liberal, mainstream Protestantism in which I grew up and of which James Gustafson has been and is so eloquent a spokesman. It seems as if most of the next generation of Christian pastors—and maybe of laypeople too—will have been raised in evangelical or fundamentalist churches or parachurch movements, even if they move somewhere else later in life. That’s where young people today seem to get excited about Christian faith.

I remember how thrilling Bill Coffin made liberal Christianity seem when I was in graduate school. I assume Gustafson has similar memories of the Niebuhrs. Whom will my students remember? No, we should not exaggerate. But we mainstream Protestants need to find and convey the poetry, the vision, the passion of our understanding of Christian faith, and to that end maybe too much rhetorical caution is a dangerous thing too.