The Hartford Appeal: A Symposium—Part II

At the end of January eighteen theologians gathered in Hartford, Connecticut, and issued an "Appeal for Theological Affirmation." The Appeal received widespread attention in both the secular and religious press, and the full text was published in the April issue of Worldview. The May issue included critiques of the Appeal by several prominent theologians (Harvey Cox, Gregory Baum, Gabriel Moran, John C. Bennett). In this issue we offer more criticisms, plus responses by five who participated in formulating the Hartford Appeal. The entire symposium will soon be available in pamphlet form from Worldview.—Eds.

For Another Transcendence

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Consider the first theme: Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality, and is therefore normative for Christian faith and life. Certainly most Christians will agree that modern thought is not to be eulogized. It is as conditioned, relative, and limited as the thought of other periods. If it has an advantage it is that it is more conscious of its own limits. But what affirmation can we gather from this negation? Is there some other way of thinking as Christians that does not accept the modern way of understanding reality? Does Christianity have its own form of understanding reality that can be opposed to modern thought? If so, what is it? If it is available today, must it not be some form of modern thought even if not the dominant one? The affirmation that a distinctively Christian vision of reality can be defended and lived in our time would be moving if persuasively explained.

The attack on the second theme—Religious statements are totally independent of reasonable discourse—is no more helpful. In denying the obviously untenable view that religious statements could be totally independent of reasonable discourse, nothing of interest is being asserted. The explanatory paragraph seems to be chiefly engaged in arguing, rightly, that rationality should not be identified with scientific rationality. Apparently it is still necessary to reject the Ayer of Language, Truth, and Logic. But having rejected that, all the serious options of our time remain.

Fortunately, in some of the subsequent explanations affirmations do appear. In the rejection of Theme 3—Religious language refers to human experience and nothing else, God being humanity's noblest creation—we are told that "We did not invent God; God invented us." It is too bad that the opposition is caricatured; for there is a real issue dividing the
theological community on which the Appeal intends to take a stand. That issue is whether what the word "God" names has its own actuality and agency independently of human acknowledgment, or whether "God" is an idea or a symbol invested with efficacy only through its human use or its function in human imagination. My sympathies are with the Appeal, but our real opponents do not suppose that people "invent" our ideas or symbols. And we on our side must avoid the simplistic realism that supposes an immediate correspondence between language and objective reality.

There is no space to comment on the other items individually. In the form in which the themes are stated I share in the rejection of all. But the Appeal seems to mistake these themes for serious options. As formulated, most are not, although there are serious positions suggested by some of them. When I try to formulate these I find that in some cases I may indeed be on the side of the intended enemy, although I cannot be sure.

Consider Theme 5: All religions are equally valid; the choice among them is not a matter of conviction about truth but only of personal preference or lifestyle. If it is directed against those who do not believe that truth about objective reality matters or that the great religions are bound up with beliefs about this reality, then I wholeheartedly share in the intent. But I fear that in attacking these it tends to support the continuation of Christian theology in isolation from the inward encounter with other traditions, whereas I believe that the future of Christian theology lies in the deepest possible assimilation of the spirit and findings of the history of religions. Precisely in faithfulness to Christ we Christians need to transcend our Western and Christian parochialism.

This picky response to a document of this sort is probably unfair and inappropriate. Clearly the Appeal does not intend to be a serious theological statement in itself. It formulates what it rejects in extreme and yet vague ways in order to point to dangers in recent trends. It addresses the Church rather than professional theologians. It sets a direction and mood rather than a program. Hence in closing I shall try to respond to the direction and mood rather than to additional specific formulations.

The direction and mood are that of recovering something that has been lost. This is identified as a sense of the transcendent, but is given specificity as a sense of the reality and objectivity of God, of God's action in the world, of evil, of the Church, and of salvation beyond death. I share the view of the importance of what we believe about the way reality actually is in its transcendence of our experience of it. I cannot live or think without this transcendence. Since there is a trend in modern theology and church life toward evading the issues raised by such transcendence through subjectivistic and idealistic procedures, in this respect I align myself with the Appeal.

But the note of "recovery" in the preamble is supported throughout by a suggestion of returning to some earlier stage of Christian history and proclamation. In this respect the Appeal is all too much a reflection of the contemporary mood. If it is addressed to theologically unsophisticated church people, its stress on transcendence could all too easily encourage trends to return to naive supernaturalism. More generally, it can suggest to conservative readers that the time of radical questioning is past.

Perhaps at the height of influence of radical theology a statement of aid and comfort to traditionalists would have been appropriate. But today, when the radical voices have left the Church or are muted within it, when the forces of reaction are on the rise, when transcendence is too easily associated with escapism, when anti-intellectualism is rampant, our need is for a bold call to go forward in the name of Christ rather than to return to something we once had and have lost. The transcendence that is most important for us is the transcendence of the future over the past, the transcendence of God's given possibility over actuality, the transcendence of God's call over our beliefs about it and our response to it, and the transcendence of grace over judgment. If we hold fast to Christ's transcendence in these ways we can responsibly avoid allowing the world to set the agenda for the Church.

Breaking Ground for Renewed Faith

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In modern times Christian thought has veered toward two temptations. The first is to compromise with the intellectual fashions of the day in the hope of gaining at least temporary relief from the growing tensions between secular thought and the Christian tradition. The second, which arises especially when the potential dangers of compromise are realized, is the temptation to throw the Christian fundamentals into the face, so to speak, of modern thought.

Both courses represent a surrender. Neither comes to terms with the requirements implicit in the fact that the affirmations of the Christian faith make a claim to truth. Spineless compromise with the conventional wisdom of modern thought deprives Christian faith of the particularity by which it can contribute to a contemporary understanding of reality. The sectarian seclusion of Christian claims from any intrusion of mod-
An Appeal for Theological Affirmation has already proved to be an important statement in the contemporary context. Its historical and sociological significance seems assured. But whether the Appeal is theologically all that significant is still an open question. That the individual theological contributions of many of its distinguished signers will merit a secure place in the history of American theology seems sure. But to ask whether this statement itself is theologically accurate is to formulate a question that, for my part, must be answered negatively.

My basic difficulty with the document is that the understanding it conveys of the role of the theologian and thereby of the character of theological reflection seems a mistaken one. More exactly, I hold to the view that it remains the role of the churches, however constituted in terms of specific church orders, to proclaim theological affirmations and negations (ordinarily called “beliefs”). It is the role of the theologian qua theological affirmations and negations (ordinarily called “beliefs”). It is the role of the theologian qua conclusions, but as conclusions that do or do not follow from adequate theological argument.

Strictly as theologians, should we not in principle be opposed to announcements about any conclusions forbidden to theologians? The theologian’s task is a concern with the evidence (presumably from the tradition and from contemporary experience), the mode of argumentation and warrants that any other theologian puts forward to back his or her specific conclusions. On that basis (surely not all that strange) the present “appeal” is theologically inadequate. Conclusions (themes and theses) it surely has; argument and evidence, as far as I can see, it well-nigh completely lacks.

For example, from my own theological position (and, indeed, that of most theologians I read) a legitimate affirmation of “transcendence” (the central theme of the Appeal) can be both defined and defended theologically. But if any theologian wishes to argue for the “loss of a sense of the transcendent” (whatever that means exactly), then, in principle and in fact, every other theologian should pay attention not to the conclusion as such but to the evidence and arguments advanced to back that conclusion. Surely we would all agree that the theologian in question may not be simply presenting a strange and unwelcome conclusion, but providing theological evidence to challenge the conclusions formerly held. It seems to follow that any attempt at theological closure of any theological issue should be opposed by theologians strictly in their role as theologians.

To rephrase what remains for me the central difficulty here: Every theological disagreement on specific conclusions should, from the very nature of the discipline as a reflective, second-order, properly critical one (like philosophy or literary criticism or political science), never disallow a conclusion prior to the theological discussion itself. Would any philosopher or sociologist simply announce that the following conclusions or themes are “false and debilitating” and thereby should not be advanced in the future by philosophers or sociologists? Would not he/she immediately and legitimately be challenged by the rest of that particular community of inquiry as engaging in, at best, extracurricular activities? The theologian, like the philosopher of religion or the sociologist of religion, seems, if this is at all correct, to bear no intrinsic responsibility or right to claim to speak for the Church.

As a member of the Church, of course, he/she has a sense of responsibility to, and within, that particular community of moral and religious commitment, just as the philosopher or sociologist is also, but not by profession, a citizen of the polis. But unless the roles of theologian and church member are kept clearly and systematically distinct, theologians may trap themselves into a mistaken self-image with unfortunate if unforeseen consequences. For example, the present “appeal” seems to have encouraged—despite the authors’ clear intentions and explicit statements to the contrary (cf. Theme 2)—certain factions in the Church itself that, as members of the community, they probably oppose. Is it merely the cunning of reason that has already led to the present curious situation wherein, as far as I can see, those in the churches probably most comforted by the Appeal are the already too comfortable members of the right?

My basic theological difficulty with the statement is, I hope, by now clear: Its prevalent concept of the role of the theologian and of theology seems, to me at least, mistaken. That difficulty, I fear, is increased rather than lessened by an examination of most of the specific “themes” chosen for renunciation. The problem here seems to be that either the theme seems to mean very little substantively or it means too much. In the latter case it becomes “false”; in the prior case close to “debilitating.”
Consider, for example, Theme 13: The question of hope beyond death is irrelevant or at best marginal to the Christian understanding of human fulfillment. What, exactly, does it mean? Does it mean only that any serious Christian theologian will address the "question of hope beyond death," since that "question" (note) has been traditionally considered "relevant" to the Christian understanding of human fulfillment? If that is all the theme really means, it simply states a tautology. Any Christian theologian, by the very nature of his/her task as critically studying the Christian tradition, should address this question, since it is clearly present in the central texts and traditions of Christianity. Yet the paragraph clarifying the theme seems to say much more than that. It states: "This [what exactly?] is the final capitulation to modern thought. If death is the last word, then Christianity has nothing to say to the final questions of life...." Now this is strong language, harnessed, curiously enough, to vague concepts. The theme speaks of "the question of hope beyond death": a "question" and a "hope." The clarifying paragraph seems to formulate an "answer that expresses something far more specific than a "hope."

If the latter is the correct reading, does it then follow that those process theologians, for example, who make strictly theological arguments against the traditional answer to this "question" are now to be informed that their arguments will not be heard because their conclusion is false and debilitating? A strange and, for me, nontheological response to theological arguments, especially in those cases when, as in this example, the theologians take care to formulate the "question" with the utmost seriousness and attempt to provide not only evidence of a strictly "modern" sort, but also evidence that appeals to a radically Christian theocentrism and to a specifically Christian ethical position. That seems enough to make one fear that this theme, among others, is either sufficiently unclear in its meaning to prove intellectually "debilitating" or so clear in its specificity that the theme disallows not only any other theological conclusion but any further theological discussion.

To end on a more positive note, however, the Appeal, however unappealing it may be as a theological affirmation, has stirred up authentic theological discussion better than any document of recent years. For that remarkable achievement its sponsors and signers deserve every theologian's sincere and indeed unmitigated thanks.

Barth and Debunking

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In commenting on the Hartford Appeal Gregory Baum made some very thoughtful observations on some of my own work. I shall limit myself here to replying to these observations, though, by implication, my reply touches on several points made by other commentators. I would also like to say that I am very grateful to Baum: Few things are as gratifying to an author as having a critic who understands him.

Baum very ably puts his finger on two persisting tensions in my work—the tension between transcendency and humanism on the one hand, and the tension between a radically debunking perspective on society and a distrust of revolutionary ideologies on the other. These tensions, I believe, are not just personal idiosyncracies of mine, but rather are inherent in the phenomena at issue. The same tensions are to be found in the Hartford Appeal. It is all the more important to understand that there is a big difference between tensions and contradictions.

Baum speaks of my "neoorthodox religious imagination," and he suggests that I continue to be afflicted with this malady despite my repudiation of the neoorthodox positions of my younger years. I think he is mistaken. It is hardly evidence of "neoorthodoxy" if one insists on the transcendency of God. Rather, it is insisting on the very core of religious experience in general and of the biblical version of this experience in particular. There are, of course, quite different ways in which Christian thinkers have understood the relation between the transcendent God and the immanent sphere of human life, and I share with Baum the conviction that the understanding of the Barthian movement in Protestant theology is finally not acceptable. But the radical immanence of much recent theology is equally unacceptable. God is the Totally Other; God has entered this world, suffers, and manifests Himself in it. Both these statements are central to Christian faith; a one-sided emphasis on either is distortive. In recent years, it seems to me, it is the latter distortion that has gained ascendency among Christian thinkers.

I believe that there are, indeed, "signals of transcendency" in the human world. It is this fact that makes for the wonder and the mystery of this world. The error at issue is the confusion of the signals with Him who is signaling, the reduction of the divine to the movements of human history or the human psyche. There is a curious side effect here: When this kind of reduction is undertaken, not only does the biblical God disappear but so does the wonder of the world. I think this accounts for the odd triviality, the "flatness," of so much immanentist theology.
Different things need to be said at different times and in different places. I can imagine that Baum, when he thinks about these issues, has in mind miscellaneous milieux of intact, inert orthodoxy, and I can appreciate his unwillingness to give any kind of comfort to those who continue to have their intellectual habitat in such milieux. But this, of course, is not my "reference group"; neither is it that of the Hartford Appeal. If Baum and I were jointly addressing a gathering of reactionary Curia officials—or, for that matter, of their Protestant spiritual cousins—we would, I think, say very similar things to them. Were I explaining the Hartford Appeal to them, they would not like it one bit. But this is not the situation out of which the Appeal came. Rather, it is the situation in which, with monotonous regularity, every fashion of the secular intelligentsia is quickly legitimated as a central Christian concern. To this, I firmly believe, one must say No!—even at the risk of sounding like a Barbian. And that, quite simply, is what the Hartford Appeal says, and why I was very happy to sign it, even though there are monumental theological differences between me and some of the other signers.

Then there is the other tension, that between a debunking vision of society and what Baum calls my "vehement disapproval" of various revolutionary doctrines. (Incidentally, the article cited by Baum does not deal with liberation theology, but since the concept of "conscientization," with which it does deal, is quite central for that school, Baum is right in surmising that I am less than entranced by it.) The tension, in the end, is between an uncompromising intellectual posture and a political posture that, inevitably, must seek compromises. Once more, though, it must be stressed that this tension is not tantamount to a logical contradiction. On the contrary, my major intellectual objection to most of our current crop of liberationists is that they are not debunking enough. Their critical faculties are sharply exercised against whatever status quo they dislike; by the same token, they almost invariably become uncritically credulous when they deal with situations or movements with which they sympathize. That, Gregory, is definitely not "the sociological lesson" you have learned from me! I am enthusiastically in favor of "seeing through" the cant and the fictions of Western capitalism, but my enthusiasm does not come to a reverent halt at the gates of the various socialist utopias with which the contemporary world is blessed.

However, there is also a moral objection, and it is the more serious one. It is shameful when the same people who quiver with outrage at the atrocities of one political side are consistently silent about the atrocities of the other side. It is precisely this I "vehemently disapprove" of in the currently fashionable liberation-talk. I refuse to accord moral respect to people who condemn terror in Chile but accept it in Cuba, or who denounce South Korea or the Philippines while having nothing but praise for China. Such a posture is contemptible in anyone. When it is taken in the name of Christianity, it is blasphemous.

Now, I am not assuming that everyone who signed the Appeal shares my own "vehemence" on this point. Indeed, there were probably as many political differences as there were theological ones among the signers. But the Appeal does one thing very clearly: It takes a stand against the facile Christian legitimation of ideological and political causes. Baum should pause before he objects to that too strongly. Today, admittedly, this stance seems to cut principally against the "left." It might be a very different story tomorrow, especially in North America.

Let me sum up: As I understand it, the Hartford Appeal does not come out of an "unwillingness to recognize the human as a locus of the divine." It does manifest an unwillingness to identify the divine with its various human loci. In this, I believe, it is right, intellectually responsible, and very much needed today.

Of Sanity and Judgment

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My comments focus primarily on Harvey Cox's criticisms of the Hartford document, since his comments touch on the major areas in which the document has been criticized. One area has to do with aesthetic concerns in relation to the style and tone of the affirmation. Cox is especially blunt on these matters, using such words as "flaccid," "dull," "bland," "clichéd," and "provincial." There is little to say in response to such charges. Professor John Wisdom once suggested that all philosophical theses are either true and trivial or false and illuminating; perhaps some similar principle operates in theology. If so, Cox's descriptions need not be considered insulting.

A second area has to do with the motivations of the Hartford group in issuing the document. Cox's "hersy hunt" charge seems to fall into this category, as does Professor Moran's suggestion that the document is "reactionary." Here again there is little to say in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox. If "false and debilitating themes" are in response to Cox.
inconsistency in calling for a radical activism and at the same time insisting that such activism be based on careful, even “orthodox,” theological reflection. I was not alone in that conviction at Hartford.

Two further areas deserve more extensive consideration. One has to do with the “straw man” type charge. These were themes, says Cox, that “no sane theologian would want to defend.” The Hartford group, one might observe, did not intend to limit its criticisms to the views of sane theologians. The question is: Were we correct in observing that these themes have not only been expressed within the current religious scene, but that their influence is “pervasive”?

The Hartford document is surely a fallible one, and it is possible, if not likely, that some of the themes have never been stated in the precise formulations offered. Nonetheless, we were in unanimous agreement as a group that the themes generally expressed actually held positions. I find it difficult to believe that eighteen people, apparently conversant with contemporary religious thought, were misled in this sense, that none of the thirteen themes accurately reflects a position that has wide acceptance. It is possible, of course, that this points to a critical communication problem in the contemporary Christian community.

But much of the response to the Appeal indicates that the Hartford group is not alone in viewing these themes as pervasive.

Let us put the question in its most poignant form: Has Harvey Cox himself been a popularizer of some of the themes condemned at Hartford? It is not difficult to find comments in his writings that indicate he has been. Compare, for example, Theme 5—All religious are equally valid; the choice among them is not a matter of conviction about truth but only of personal preference or lifestyle—with his testimony in The Seduction of the Spirit:

We celebrate a Seder at Passover. We often attend Catholic Masses....A straw Mexican Indian crucifix blesses our living room, and a Jewish mezuzah...stands watch at our doorway. A serene Buddha gazes from just over the inside windowsill of our front room. Nearby stands Ganesha, the elephant god.

Or consider this observation in his Secular City:

Secularization rolls on, and if we are to understand and communicate with our present age we must learn to love it in its unremitting secularity. We must learn, as Bonhoeffer said, to speak of God in a secular fashion and find a nonreligious interpretation of Biblical concepts. It will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day religion and metaphysics will once again regain their centrality. They will become even more peripheral and that means we can now let go and immerse ourselves in the new world of the secular city.

To be sure, Cox often qualifies statements of this sort—for instance, he tells us in Feast of Fools that an “alert theology” is necessary to guard against “the snares of uncritical presentism and futurism.” But there can be no doubt that many of his readers have seized upon his calls to throw off the “outmoded” forms of past theology without attending to his qualifying remarks. And even when one so attends, it is often difficult to see what the “safeguards” amount to. If (to follow the argument of On Not Leaving It to the Snake) a “two-story dualism” has finally been “abolished,” so that we must no longer view Jesus “as a visitor to earth from some supraterrestrial heaven,” what is to be our guide in discerning the divine will for the world? For many of us Jesus is an incarnate expression of the will of the eternal God who is distinct from the world he has created. If it is no longer possible to say of this God (again, On Not Leaving It to the Snake) that he “is” or “was,” but only that he “will be,” if “the death-of-God” syndrome...opens the future in a new and radical way,” then it is difficult to see why Themes 10-12 of the Hartford document would not constitute a close approximation to Cox’s position.

Similar suspicions about parallels between the Hartford themes and Cox’s theology are stimulated by his comments about the Appeal itself. It lacks, he insists, “a Christological dimension.” Instead of “juggling” notions of “transcendence,” we should have affirmed the simple “core Gospel message: that in Jesus Christ ‘that which was afar off has come nigh,’ that the transcendent God has chosen to be Emmanuel, God-in-the-midst-of-us.” There are, of course, different ways of stating “the core of the Gospel,” for example, Jesus’ own formulation in John 17:3: “And this is the eternal life, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” This way of putting it expresses what seems to be the issue between the perspective of the Hartford group and Cox’s view of what it means for God to have “chosen to be Emmanuel, God-in-the-midst-of-us.” Cox seems to think that the nature of that “choice” has been illuminated by “the ‘God-is-dead’ syndrome.” If so, then his religious epistemology is perilously close to that of Themes 3 and 4.

The final area of criticisms, those having to do with the positive theological statements put forth by the Hartford group, involves similar issues. The theology of the Appeal, Cox claims, is “a bland admixture of conventional theism, ecclesiastical triumphalism, two-kingdoms piety, and neo-clericalism.” I am not quite certain what “conventional theism” is, but I suspect that it is something to which I hold. (I agree with Archbishop Temple’s “God-minus-the-universe-equals-God” formula.) However that may be, I think that many of us want to dissent from those current objections to traditional theism that assume there are
certain necessary links between traditional conceptions of God and specific social and political patterns. (See Frederick Herzog's charges, in Christian Century, that the Hartford group's conception of "transcendence" is "the transcendence of the rich and the powerful."). The necessity of these links has not been demonstrated. Take Cox's disparaging remarks about a "two-story dualism" and Jesus as a "supraterrestrial visitor." Can't one hold that God is ontologically distinct from the world and still believe that God loves the world? In order to love my wife, do I have to become her? Could not the "visit" of Jesus have been a profoundly liberating one, whereby he initiated, and continues to guide from "the right hand of the Father," a program of healing and reconciliation on behalf of the poor and oppressed? Was the writer of the Book of Revelation's salutation wrong in thinking that a God who "is and was and is to come" could offer "grace, mercy, and peace" that is adequate to the building up of full humanity?

As for clericalism, "Church/World dualism," and the like, such views are not incompatible with serving a Christ who works and suffers in all areas of human life. As Jonah learned from the sailors who awakened him in the ship, the "world" often has legitimate messages to preach to the Church. Hartford is not pleading for a Church which "proudly sets its own agenda"; it asks the Church to recognize that it has been entrusted with an agenda from God, an agenda that cannot be decisively ascertained by sociological or political surveys, or by introspection. The Church must actively seek to serve a world it views in the light of categories revealed by God. God has chosen to work in and through a people who consciously confess his Lordship. A recognition of this fact should not stimulate pride but humility and a willingness to suffer with those who are oppressed. To hold that there is a distinct people whose identity consists in a conscious acceptance of that calling as the will of God may be a kind of "Church/World dualism." If it is, so be it.

Cox asks: "What about that 99 per cent of the Church, the laity whose mission is to work in, with, and under worldly forms? Are they to be told again by their clerical betters that what they do must never be confused with the Church's mission, or that at best the two "sometimes coincide"?" For that part of the Church I labor in, I would say that people do have to be told something of this sort. For businessmen who often identify financial success with Kingdom triumphs, self-styled "personal evangelists" who peddle "four spiritual laws" as the whole gospel, members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes for whom clean tackles are the work of Christ, the "Hartford theology" speaks a necessary, prophetic word of judgment. No doubt the Hartford Appeal also has a word of judgment applicable to the part of the Church and of the world where Harvey Cox labors.

Attacking on Two Fronts

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Except for the diatribe by the panreligious secular citizen Harvey Cox, the critiques of the Hartford Appeal published in the May issue of Worldview seemed to me constructive and tended to move the discussion ahead. Unfortunately, Cox's response appeared simply to be a wild exaggeration. To recall Torquemada, the Index, and the Scopes trial because some people have taken a dim view of the theological mishmash hawked by the mod-theologians and so dramatically exemplified by Cox's The Seduction of the Spirit seems a little extreme. Even a mod-theologian should not expect constant adulation. But the other writers seemed to raise some important issues.

Moran's distinction of theological statements and religious statements is a return to the separation of Christianity from religion—a distinction once popular in Barthian circles but always a form of special pleading. Whatever else Christianity may be, it is also a religion and raises religious questions in a certain way. The Hartford Appeal welcomes an open and honest confrontation of the differences among religions. It did not want to avoid the issue by taking refuge in an alleged ontological difference between religion and theology. Moran's appeal for greater clarification is a response that in my judgment will be welcomed by the Hartford signers as the proper next step in a meaningful dialogue.

John Bennett's concern that the statement gives aid and comfort to the enemy I take as a warning by a man who has fought the enemy for a long time. Professor Bennett has been my teacher in the past, and I still consider him to be so. I did not see any retreat from Christian responsibility in the statement when I signed it, nor do I see it now. We called for relentless criticism of oppressive institutions, and it would be my judgment that a certain kind of enthusiastic anti-institutionalism is in fact counterrevolutionary and subverts the Christian obligation "to participate fully in the struggle against oppressive and dehumanizing structures and their manifestations in racism, war, and economic exploitation" (Theme 11). I simply do not see the one-sidedness Dr. Bennett perceives. But his criticism demands further clarification.

Father Baum argues against the Christ and Culture perspective of the Hartford document. By compressing H.R. Niebuhr's options into three and forgetting "Christ against Culture" and "Christ above Culture," he makes it too easy for himself. While he sees the problem of Christ and Culture in paradox, namely, that it might deteriorate into Christ against Culture, he does
not face the problem of Christ as the transformer of Culture, which may easily become what Niebuhr called Christ above Culture, or even the Christ and Culture perspective the Hartford signers tried to oppose—namely, the Christ of Culture, whether this is The Man Nobody Knows or "Comrade Jesus."

It seems strange that only Professor Pannenberg saw the Hartford Appeal as I saw it when I signed it, as directed against two fronts simultaneously, and therefore attacked quite rightly by Carl Henry (Christianity Today) and by Harvey Cox. Pannenberg observed that the Hartford Appeal is trying to build Christian social concern and action on a firmer foundation than naive optimism about human nature and enthusiastic utopianism. It is the transvaluation of all values brought about by the resurrection (Theme 13) that gives Christians hope and thus the alien power, a power not of their own, to stand against all the dehumanizing forces that threaten the abolition of humanity. Revolutions may be necessary and unavoidable, but they will only rearrange human misery. Utopia is precisely what the word says—no place. Neither rhetoric nor revolution will produce it. We will be better servants of the women and men who are in need everywhere if we live in faith and obedience to the Christ who is the ultimate hope of the world.

But perhaps the most important result of the Hartford Appeal has been its reception by the nontheological world. Both believers and unbelievers have found that it clarifies and offers the possibility of discussing the Christian faith without having to choose between Christian fundamentalists and Christian secularists. A distinguished philosophy professor of my acquaintance suggested that he found the statement a contribution to a better understanding of Christianity and a step away from the religious miasma that threatens to suffocate us. A student writing in the Daily Iowan against what he called "the opiate of transcendent meditation" and a former meditator himself, observed: "In the Hartford statement, several theologians have taken the belief in God as a central reason for social action." It is also this kind of response by nontheologians that makes the continuing discussion so worthwhile.

Locating the Divine

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A n appeal for theological affirmation is precisely what the words indicate: It calls away from the negative trends of much recent religious and theological thought. (The distinction between religion and theology does not seem useful here, though the themes in question are found in both.) Such negations have been: the extreme negation of death-of-God theology, the reactionary negation of the main insights of Vatican II by Catholic traditionalists, the unbalanced negation of institutional religion in favor of the rights of conscience, the practical negation of Christian social commitments in the name of some vague Jesuistic or Pentecostal charisms, the implicit negation of worship in the urge to celebrate life and nature.

That an appeal for affirmation has been couched in the negative language of thematic denunciations was a whimsical touch that has escaped most of its critics. But the theological community has never been known for its sense of humor. That a negative appeal for affirmation was a dialectical document requiring a dialectical approach could have been more obvious. It was not unexpected that, while the Appeal formulates a "no" to each theme, it is also possible in each case to formulate a "yes." The point should not be that the proper position is either "yes" or "no," but that "no" necessarily includes an affirmation and that "yes," if it is maintained as the dominant pole of the dialectic, must also be qualified with a "no." Thus classical theology worked out the process of knowing God through a via affirmativa qualified by a via negativa and leading to a via eminentea.

My analysis of the text is confirmed by Gregory Baum. Gregory Baum begins with a resounding endorsement of the Appeal: "It seemed to me that every Christian theologian would reject the theses proscribed in this document." Then, after the somewhat hazardous exercise of tracing the origin of the Appeal to the "neoorthodox religious imagination" (whatever this may be), he proceeds to explicate the "yes" contained within the "no." This was exactly the Hartford method. The difference appears, however, in that Gregory Baum's "yes" is not sufficiently dialectical and tends to eat away the substance of the "no."

The Hartford Appeal brings attention to three areas of concern where a loss of the sense of divine transcendence has been felt in recent Christian thought: faith and culture (Themes 1-4); faith and the individual (Themes 5-9); faith and eschatology (Themes 10-13). It does this, not by condemning theses, but by deploring themes. Theses are clear-cut positions that are believed, taught, professed. Themes are assumptions that are harbored, lived with, lived by. Since the problem of transcendence and immanence pervades the thirteen themes of the Appeal, I will, like Gregory Baum, focus my remarks upon it.

It is a truism that transcendence should be read together with its dialectical correlate, immanence. The problem raised by the Appeal is: How can one affirm immanence without denying transcendence? And, relatively: How can one affirm transcendence without denying immanence? It is the former question that
dominates the Hartford Statement, because it seems at
the moment—rightly, I think—that, of the two poles of
the Christian kerygma about the Logos made flesh, it
is the transcendence of the Logos rather than the flesh
as the locus of his immanence that is in danger of
being misunderstood in the current breakdown of
metaphysical thinking, or forgotten under the crowding
pressures of secular concerns, or passed over lightly
for fear of giving offense to anonymous Christians.
Other times may need appeals for the affirmation of
immanence and the flesh. But to each day its toil and
to each time its problems.

It is not really a fruitful exercise to name names. But
self-examination is a useful exercise. "Who holds
these views?" I do, whenever I let my professorial
sense of the comfortable overshadow my sense of the
risk of faith in the world in which I live. I find comfort
in my belief in "incarnation and immanence." Yet I
do know the emptiness of such a belief and the delu-
sion of this comfort if they do not stand in permanent
confrontation with my being judged by the God who is
incarnate, by the Absolute which is immanent in cre-
ation and grace.

"Who holds these views?" At least Gregory Baum
shows that I am not alone in finding myself, in my
worst moments, condemned by the Appeal I have
signed. His response is very useful in that it points up
the subtlety of the loss of transcendence in current
thinking. Gregory Baum escalates immanentism in a
significantly topical way. He blames the Appeal as
being "unwilling to recognize the human as a locus of
the divine" (italics mine). Then he states his convic-
tion that "The search for greater humanization is the
locus of God's self-communication." These two posi-
tions are not identical. The Appeal is not unwilling to
recognize the human as a locus of the divine. There is
even nothing particularly Christian about the human
being as a locus of the divine. Any theodicy that takes
"immensity" for one of the attributes of the Divinity
affirms the human as a locus of the divine. But the
specifically Christian thing is to trust that the man
Jesus Christ, the Logos made flesh, is the locus of the
divine in a sense that is true only of him. The Christian
thing is to trust that the "body of Christ which is the
Church" is associated by divine graciousness, without
any merits or achievements on the part of its members,
to the unique reconciling presence of God in Jesus the
Christ. The debilitating temptation is to identify the
human in general, or humankind, or the "come of
age" men and women of today, or the current strug-
gles for liberation, or "the search for greater human-
ization" as the locus of the divine and of God's self-
communication. God communicated himself to
humankind in Jesus the Christ in a place and at a
moment where no one—except perchance an eccentric
Greek poet or philosopher—was searching for greater
humanization. The locus of God's self-communication
was not and is not humanization. It was, and is, the
subhumanization of the man Jesus in the tortures of the
Crucifixion.

Indeed, Christ transforms culture. Indeed, the
Catholic tradition holds that grace transforms nature.
But such assertions make sense only if culture is not
Christ and if nature is not grace. Culture, as well as
nature, is a locus of the divine and of God's self-
manifestation. But the false position is to declare these
to be the locus. And the ultimate fallacy would be to
confuse this locus with that which is manifested in it.
Whatever cultural loci there may be for God's self-
communication, the uniqueness of the locus that Jesus
Christ is stands in judgment over all achievements of
man-made humanization. In Jesus Christ alone the
locus of manifestation and the God who manifests
himself in this locus are identical. In him—and not in
any evolutionary or revolutionary stage of humaniza-
tion, and not even in the highest experiences of divine
grace or in the most devoted reception of the charisms
of the Spirit—the immanence of God in the flesh is
identical with the transcendence of God over the flesh.
The Hartford Appeal is a protest against the loss of the
sense of the transcendence of God because it is a
protest for the Incarnation.

It does not really help to try to place the Appeal in
relation to H. Richard Niebuhr's theoretical typifica-
tion of the relationships between Christ and culture.
For in the historical reality and complexity of Christian
thought and praxis types are meshed together.
Niebuhr's type 3 (Christ transforms culture) could not
exist without type 2 (Christ in paradox with culture).
For Christ transforms culture while he stands in judg-
ment over it. That "anthropocentricity is theocentri-
city" is neither the Good News (the Gospel), nor even
good news in the trivial sense of the term. It is bad
theology, for it amounts to opting for a via affirmativa
without the corrective of the via negativa, and thus it
makes it impossible to discover the via eminientiae. It
is also bad apologetics. Christians gain nothing from
stealing Zarathustra's thunderbolts.

Following Through

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The response to the Hartford Appeal has far
exceeded the expectations of those who
initiated it and of those who participated in drafting the
final document. Whatever its faults, it shows every
sign of becoming a point of reference that can enliven
the kind of debate both its critics and admirers say they hoped for.

The two most frequent misunderstandings of the Appeal are: (1) that it is aimed mainly, if not exclusively, against the left; and (2) that it is supposed to be some new kind of ecumenical statement of faith. To the second misunderstanding it should be enough to note that the Hartford group had no intention of saying all we believe about God, nature, the Church, the Christ, and human history. We did intend to say some things we thought needed saying about the current state of theology and religion in America.

The first misunderstanding, that it is aimed too much at the left, does indeed present difficulties. The group anticipated this misinterpretation and tried hard to avoid it. When it is said that the repudiated themes are "pervasive," that is exactly what we meant. As a careful reading of the Appeal should reveal, and as some of the discussion in this symposium makes explicit, the debilitating assumptions are as evident in the preachments of Billy James Hargis as in the "liberation theology" of, for example, Juan Luis Segundo.

Yet it is true that these themes, or reasonable approximations of them, are probably stated more frequently by those who are viewed, and who view themselves, as liberal or progressivist. While the common sin—left, right, and center, wherever the last may be—is putting Christianity in the service of goals that do not emerge from, and may indeed be hostile to, authentic Christian witness (whether the goal is political revolution or the attainment of peace of mind), the right is more inclined to disguise such goals in traditionalist language. Thus conservatives deceive others, and frequently deceive themselves. The very transcendence they so passionately affirm is itself taken captive in support of their own worldviews and is robbed of its power to bring their assumptions, or the world, under judgment. The left is more forthright in stating the critique of things as they are, but equally prone to packaging religious symbolism (transcendent or other) in support of their programs, albeit radically alternative programs. To bless the Great American Way of Life in the name of God is, theologically speaking, little different from blessing whatever revolution "in the name of Jesus the Liberator." Both would domesticate, and thus deny, the transcendence that would keep both the present and our projects for the future under judgment. The ills reflected in the themes repudiated are, well, pervasive.

In tactical terms, the misunderstanding may be inevitable. Most of the Hartford group are correctly viewed as being on the progressivist side of things, both theological and political. Their community of discourse is primarily to the left. In addition, they assume, perhaps wrongly, that professed reactionaries or conservatives are not likely to be molding the new shape of American religion, at least not at the intellectual level where the metaphors are minted and marketed by which people understand themselves. It would have been pointless, for example, if such a group repudiated "a religion of pure subjectivity" by launching an assault on biblicistic or traditionalistic fideism. "Theologians say Fundamentalism is False and Debilitating." Such an announcement might have been cheered by "enlightened" friends, but would make little contribution to our thinking together in the Christian community. Equally important, it would not have claimed the attention of the professed conservatives, who, for the most part, have written off whatever might be said by the kind of people gathered at Hartford.

Any fundamentalist—Protestant or Roman Catholic—who takes comfort from the Appeal profoundly misunderstands the Appeal. The hope of the Hartford group is that those on the right who initially hailed the repudiation of these themes might be engaged in a reflective process that would lead them to see how pervasive these themes are in their own circles. That hope has in part been vindicated by the discussion to date. Implicit in all this is the belief of the Hartford group that terms such as liberal, conservative, right, left are increasingly sterile and misleading. That might have been the subject of another theme, as might many other false and debilitating notions current in American religious thought. We stopped at thirteen because we had to stop somewhere, and it seemed clear to us at least that most of the other topics proposed were implicitly addressed by these thirteen.

Some—John Bennett, for example—wonder why the signers were "silent" on many other ideas and social injustices in need of protest. I do not think we were prepared for the frequency of this criticism. Most of us assumed that Hartford would be interpreted in the light of our other writings and public statements. Nobody had a conversion experience or "switched sides" at Hartford, at least not to my knowledge. It is perhaps a sign of how debilitatingly frivolous contemporary theological discourse has become that so many critics thought it possible (and apparently not morally objectionable) that these thinkers would act in such radical discontinuity with their own work. In short, I think we may have made a mistake in hoping the Appeal would be interpreted in light of our track record, so to speak, both theological and political.

It should not be necessary, but it apparently is, to say again that the Appeal is just that, an appeal. It is distressing that so many took their cue from a newsweekly's headline rather than from the document itself, which results in their reciting all the most conventional pieties against "heresy hunting." The document does appeal for further discussion of "the outside lines" of what can be called Christian theology, or what can be called theology at all. Here one must disagree with David Tracy. Such lines can be drawn, just as one could draw similar outside lines for what can meaningfully be called political science or literary criticism (Tracy's analogies). Many of the
themes deal with the question: Since God has become man, is not theology identical with anthropology? There is a sense in which that can be answered positively, but only in a revolutionary way that transforms anthropology into theology. Short of that revolution, it is best to keep the terms discrete, since, at present, the alternative results in anthropologizing theology rather than theologizing anthropology.

Richard Mouw has responded adequately to the various criticisms that fall into the category of "style." There is some amusement in watching all and sundry hasten to dissociate themselves from the repudiated themes. Everyone seems to agree that these were indeed fads at some time or another, but it now appears nobody espoused them. After the initial and perhaps inevitable silliness about who is welcoming whom aboard whose bandwagon, one hopes the conversation will move toward more elevating and useful topics. Happily, there is every sign that is happening.

I agree most heartily with Bob Jewett's focus on the absence of "transcendent righteousness" in American religion. The revitalization of the pilgrim and covenantal character of the American experiment is the core of my most recent book, Time Toward Home. The argument in that book is certainly not what everyone at Hartford had in mind about the connection between transcendence and social change, but it at least explains my intention in subscribing to the Appeal.

Finally, Pannenberg's "two front" thesis is precisely on target. The Hartford Appeal is a challenge to those who, in order to make the Christian message respectable, sell out the very distinctiveness for which they would presumably gain a hearing; and it is a challenge to those who, fearing the vulnerability of Christianity to modern thought, retreat into a self-authenticating religion that has no serious claim on the attention of reasonable human beings.

This symposium is but one part of an ongoing discussion. It will not end or come to absolutely definitive conclusions short of the Kingdom of God. No doubt five or ten or thirty years from now another appeal will be issued by another group, accenting the dimensions of Christian existence that will have been neglected by another time. For the immediate future, the Hartford group will be meeting again in the fall of 1975. It is hoped that a book of essays will be produced that will elaborate and clarify the original Appeal. The Hartford group is conscious of its responsibility to follow through. We believe we are dealing, in a very limited and modest way, with an enterprise that belongs to the whole of the Christian community and in which the final follow-through is contingent upon the promise-keeping of the Absolute Future who is God.