

PHILIP HEFNER AND THE MODERNIST/ POSTMODERNIST DIVIDE

by Jerome A. Stone

Abstract. Philip Hefner is part of neither the dominant Western paradigm nor the usual postmodernist reaction against it. He belongs within an Anglo-American viewpoint that also is within neither the dominant Western nor the postmodernist paradigm. Herein I sketch the differences between these paradigms. I elaborate Hefner's theology of the created co-creator to show where Hefner contrasts with them and then contrast his ideas with those of two contemporary theologians who fit into the second paradigm, George Lindbeck and Mark C. Taylor.

Keywords: created co-creator; Philip Hefner; George Lindbeck; religion-science dialogue; Mark C. Taylor; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen.

In the reading of Philip Hefner that I offer, he is not part of the standard Western paradigm as often portrayed. Nor is he part of the standard postmodernist reaction against this Western paradigm. He belongs rather to an Anglo-American viewpoint that is neither part of the standard Western nor the common postmodernist viewpoints.

In this essay I outline the differences between the Western and postmodernist paradigms and then sketch Hefner's theology of the created co-creator to show how he differs from these approaches, a point sometimes overlooked in reading Hefner. Then I contrast his theology with those of George Lindbeck and Mark C. Taylor, who fit within the postmodernist paradigm.

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THREE PARADIGMS

The dominant Western paradigm has involved (1) a simplification of experience by means of dichotomies (self/other, nature/freedom, mind/body, and so on), (2) a valuing of abstraction and stability, (3) the quest for certainty, (4) a search for foundations and proper method, and (5) a desire for precision of language. An alternative approach, often called postmodernism, including Nietzsche, Heidegger, and poststructuralists, developed counterthemes: (1) an overthrow of dichotomies, (2) a focus on the particular and transitory, (3) a recognition of uncertainty, (4) antifoundationalism and antimethodologism, and (5) a polyvalent language. Because these are mirror images of the first set of themes, they support, ironically, the dichotomous tendency of Western thought.

There is a third approach found in many American and British writers (and a few Europeans) including pragmatists, process thinkers, and the Chicago school theologians of the first two-thirds of the last century. This approach advances beyond the older Western tradition without falling into the excesses of the newer Continental paradigm. Many contemporary thinkers ignore this approach. Their position would be strengthened if they could show in their arguments that their thought is more adequate than this Anglo-American approach. By ignoring it and concentrating on rejecting the older paradigm, their arguments involve a false dichotomy. At worst their positions both suffer from the excesses of a one-sided rejection of an old viewpoint and fail to draw from the resources of the newer Anglo-American approach.

Philosopher Calvin Schrag, in *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge*, points out that postmodernism “seems to offer a liberation” from dichotomous thinking, but “postmodern reflection buys back into the original dichotomy by setting the universal, the metanarrational, and the consensual against the multiple, the local, and the dissensual” (Schrag 1992, 172). A number of writers respond to the postmodern challenge by rethinking the rational and scientific demands of human inquiry. Process thinkers generally and many pragmatists, including Richard Bernstein (1983; 1992) and Jeffrey Stout (2004), seek to give appropriate due to both the resources of modernism and the varied critiques of postmodernism. Other philosophers and theologians, with differing vocabulary and varying strategies, do likewise, including Harold Brown (1988), Frederick Ferré (1996; 1998; 2001), Sandra Harding (1986), Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990), Kai Nielsen (2001), Robert Neville (1981; 1989; 1992; 1995), J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (1999; forthcoming), Schrag (1992), and myself. I claim that Hefner belongs in this variegated company. This aspect of his thought, particularly his rootage in the complex tradition of Chicago empirical theology (Arnold 1966; Dorrien 2003, chaps. 3 and 4; Miller 1974; Peden 1987; Peden and Stone 1992), is often overlooked. My ap-

proach to Hefner is to analyze and appreciate him as one who draws upon the strengths of this Anglo-American approach, which avoids the overly simple dichotomy of the traditional Western and the extreme postmodernist paradigms.

The central concept of Philip Hefner's book *The Human Factor* is his theory of the created-co-creator: humans are the

created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us—the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God's will for humans. (Hefner 1993, 27)

I make three major claims in my analysis of Hefner: his theory of the created co-creator is (1) a sustained move beyond the traditional Western dichotomies, (2) involving falsifiable and tentative hypotheses which avoid the highest levels of abstraction. Although he is close to a foundationalist reliance on genetics and evolutionary theory, (3) his interplaying of science, myth, and theology finally refuses to privilege any one discourse and valorizes both myth and discursive language.

MOVING BEYOND TRADITIONAL DICHOTOMIES

My way of stating Hefner's overcoming of the traditional dichotomies of the Western paradigm is that he offers a strong triple thesis: (a) methodologically, science is an essential component for doing theology, (b) ontologically, there is a kinship between humans and the rest of creation, and (c) practically, the meaning and purpose of human existence is to fulfill the whole biosphere. I call this thesis strong because he has integrated the theological and scientific dimensions of his work in a tighter synthesis than almost any other theologian past or present. This has been a consistent thread throughout Hefner's writings. For him theology must "insist that science and religion are both essential to the whole truth of what is and what ought to be." Theology "must respect authentic manifestations of what is and what ought to be wherever they arise" (Hefner 1981, 74, 76).

Methodologically, theology is not on track, nor God rightly obeyed nor the spiritual life understood, unless we study the processes of nature and their future. Hefner finds that the question of God is relocated for contemporary persons in the question of the trustworthiness of the processes of inorganic and organic evolution.

The new set of God-questions . . . moves the theologian inevitably toward "empirical theology," in the sense that it sets before him the imperative to deal with the data from the sciences—natural, physical, and social—and the humanities that throw light on the question of survival. It is difficult, for example, to see how theologians can any longer be ignorant of, let alone indifferent toward, the data of history, sociology, psychology, biology, astronomy, and other fields that pertain to the processes of the world, natural selection, the demands of personal interaction

and society, and the arts because it is in these areas that we see precisely what the nature and demands of the world processes are, as well as the evidence as to whether in fact these processes are trustworthy. These data are immensely rich, beyond the grasp of any single man, and open to contradictory interpretations, but that does not relieve the theologian of the responsibility to be both a well-informed student of these disciplines and also an active participant in the interpretation of their findings. (Hefner 1970, 17)

Ontologically, nature has a central place in Hefner's theology. Nature is a medium of both the knowledge of God and the grace of God. "Encounter with God takes place within the processes of nature" (Hefner 1993, 45). The evolutionary process, including the mechanism of natural selection, is God's process of bringing into being a creature who is a more complex phase of freedom. The evolutionary matrix is "the work of God to allow for the emergence of that which is necessary for the fulfillment of God's intentions" (p. 45). Our secular and religious traditions are ambiguous about the "nonnegotiable message of the sciences that we are part and parcel of nature" (p. 69). Some aspects of the Christian tradition, the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments, for example, predispose us to accept this message, but they are balanced with aspects that speak dualistically of humans as different from nature.

This kinship of humans with the rest of creation is seen very clearly just at the point where the distinctiveness of humans is delineated. The biocultural sciences show us that humanity is composed of the nodal point of two information streams, the genetic and the cultural. "*Homo sapiens* is a two-natured creature, a symbiosis of genes and culture" (1993, 102). Indeed few theologians in my reading have studied so much evolutionary theory or integrated it so tightly into their theologies.

An implication of this emphasis on kinship with the natural is found in Hefner's treatment of freedom. Conditionedness and freedom have co-evolved and constitute the evolutionary basis for morality. The evolution of the central nervous system brings in the biological basis of morality—choice, feedback, and response to feedback. The legacy bequeathed to us, our "capacities for thought-out action, interpretation, and justification," are part of being created and also co-creators (Hefner 1993, 100).

Finally the practical point is that the human purpose is to contribute further to the wholesomeness of natural processes. "The purposes for which God has intended the freedom and co-creatorhood of the human species pertain . . . to the entirety of the process of evolution and the terrestrial ecosystems. . . . Human culture is . . . a possible instrumentality for the fulfillment of the divine purposes for both humans and the rest of the created order on earth" (Hefner 1993, 48). Hefner suggests that this is the most far-reaching conclusion of his book in its rearrangement of the images that govern our perceptions. We often think of human purposes in terms of obedience to God's will or in terms of upbuilding the human community: love, justice, and so forth. But human fulfillment must be

defined within the larger framework of the natural order. "The direction God-ward leads us reflexively to nature" (Hefner 1993, 60). In technical terms, we need a noninstrumental valuation of nature. In theological terms, Jesus' life and death have intrinsic value, as do the elements of the communion service. This can be a model for our seeing intrinsic value in nature.

Our responsibility to the rest of nature is parallel to our responsibility to our children. We do not mold them to become what we want them to be, rather we contribute what will provide the greatest possibility for a wholesome future. "If nature is God's great project, then by devoting ourselves to its care and redemption we are pouring our resources into the same effort" (Hefner 1993, 74). Other creatures are more essential to the ecosystem than humans. Humans are unique in that they self-consciously make decisions that affect the rest of the ecosystem (Hefner 1993, 119).

STRIVING FOR A MIDDLE POSITION

My second analytic claim about Hefner is that he seeks a middle position between a quest for certainty and epistemological nihilism by searching for tentative and falsifiable hypotheses.

One aspect of this is the hypothetical nature of religious convictions. Specifically, the Christian faith represents a body of information which, although it has the form of proclamation, of direct discourse, is an hypothesis to be tested (Hefner 1987, 40). In this respect the Christian faith parallels the information of myths generally. Myths contain a bundle of information which, although given in the form of declaration and command, are hypotheses to be tested (Hefner 1991, 126).

These hypotheses are serious attempts to say something about "the way things really are" (Hefner 1991, 133). Such attempts are fraught with risk. The God-question today has moved into "the realm of risk and uncertainty" (Hefner 1970, 16). In particular Hefner sees the question of God today as related to the questions of the trustworthiness of the evolutionary processes and of the survival of humanity. "The theologian must recognize that he is treading on questions whose answers could indeed demonstrate the non-existence of God and the error of his belief. If man in fact destroys himself by the violation of his physical and social environment, if he fails to survive, it will mean . . . either that there is no God or that the Christian tradition has not pictured him satisfactorily" (Hefner 1970, 16).

Hefner's concept of the testability of theological theories further illustrates his striving for a middle position, searching for the relatively reliable and tentative between the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism.

He draws heavily on the tradition of Karl Popper and even more of Imre Lakatos that a good theory needs to be falsifiable. Hefner's way of making this criterion flexible is that "*theory is a set of concepts that is capable of*

interpreting a range of phenomena. This set of concepts must meet satisfactorily two further criteria: first, *it must in principle be falsifiable, and second, it must be fruitful for stimulating further thinking and interpreting new data*" (Hefner 1993, 258). In clarifying this concept, Hefner adds,

Obviously, theological statements do not aim at empirical content with the same degree of precision that scientific statements do, nor do they prize prediction in the way that scientific discourse does. . . . I suggest that theological statements . . . must be potentially falsifiable—that is, they must have a class of potential falsifiers that is not empty. How full that class is, is subject to variation, case by case. Theology's success in extending its explanatory field is directly correlated to how full or empty its class of potential falsifiers is. (Hefner 1993, 259)

In fact, "the final test of truth . . . may well elude . . . falsification." It is "critical that the import of any faith proposal be clear so that its significance can be assessed even if it is not easily tested" (Hefner 1993, 15). The theory of the created co-creator is "a candidate to be considered as theory . . . a hypothesis to be tested. . . . A theory cannot be demonstrated with finality or validated conclusively, even though it can be falsified. It is considered to be viable or useful as long as the attempts to falsify it (or test it) are productive for our understanding." We check to see if it possesses explanatory power, that is, gives us "comprehension of a large body of data that otherwise would be raw and uninterpreted" (Hefner 1993, 18).

"Christian faith does not ordinarily speak of its insights and their theological elaboration as theories to be tested or falsified. . . . To the human community at large, however, as well as to the reflective members of the believing community, even revelation is a theory to be tested" (Hefner 1993, 18). Hefner uses the concept of falsifiability to indicate that "theological theories should be referred to the world of possible experience and that it is desirable to discern what a proposed theory negates as well as what it affirms" (Hefner 1993, 24).

"The Lakatosian appeal to fruitfulness [is] . . . a welcome proposal for enabling public discussion of important issues" (Hefner 1993, 27). "Hypotheses in theology should . . . meet Popper's two criteria of falsification—that the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses should be grounded in correlations with or deviations from knowledge drawn from the world of possible experience, and that the discussion of the adequacy or inadequacy of the theological hypothesis should be carried out in publicly available discourse" (1993, 28). Hefner speaks of testing hypotheses in a less than formal and rigorous way, as seeing if they make sense of what is known. It should be noted that the potential falsification involved in falsifiability need not involve conclusive falsification or knock-down arguments but can include the accumulation of counterevidence to the point of straining credulity.

In the Lakatosian approach a research program involves two types of methodological proposals: a "positive heuristic," which suggests new inter-

pretations or paths to pursue, and a “negative heuristic,” which suggests potential falsifiers for the theory or paths of inquiry to avoid (Hefner 1988, 268).

POSITIVE HEURISTIC. Hefner claims that the positive heuristic of the created co-creator theory involves two sets of new interpretations: those concerning human experience in general and those concerning the Christian faith (Hefner 1988, 272–76). The first set includes five new interpretations:

1. the coadaptation of genes and culture in the symbiosis that makes us humans, including seeing religion as a transmitting agency for culture analogous to genes as transmitting agents, the possibility of religion promoting altruism beyond the kinship group, and the possibility of cooperation and peace replacing hostility and war
2. interpreting technological civilization within the context of the entire evolutionary process, so that the function of technological civilization is to stretch the evolutionary processes in new directions
3. relating freedom to its origin in the evolutionary processes
4. understanding natural selection as the instrument for producing the creature of freedom and culture
5. interpreting the purpose of human being as being the created (evolved) co-creator

The second set of interpretations concerns the Christian faith. The main new understanding here extends the claim that human existence occurs within the ambience of God’s will so that both the evolutionary process and the realm of technology are seen in terms of ultimacy. In addition, several Christian doctrines receive new interpretations.

Christology. “Jesus Christ becomes the central event for understanding what it means for humans to be God’s proposal for the future of the evolutionary process” (Hefner 1988, 274). Jesus’ life is a proposal for the power and desirability of love, of trans-kin altruism as a new direction for the future of cultural evolution.

Sin. The concept of original sin witnesses to the discrepancy between what we formerly did in our evolution on the basis of preprogrammed genetic information and what we learn to do through culture. We cannot retreat to the prehuman past, but we do wish that “our culture would respond as immediately to the requirements of God’s evolution as our prehuman nervous systems did. . . . The discrepancy between the instinct and the act and the unrelieved uncertainty which characterize the co-creator taint all that issues from human culture. The co-creating process thus becomes demonic on all too many occasions” (Hefner 1988, 275).

Redemption.

The reality of redemption is the fact that the artifacts of our co-creating are acceptable. . . . [N]othing is useless or unimportant for the work of God's evolutionary creation. The mutation and adaptation which appear to be "failures" are essential for the process. . . . The failures are no farther removed from the heart and soul of the evolutionary process than are the successes. . . . In the language of the cultus, this is expressed in the thought that our sacrifices are acceptable to the Lord, and they are united mystically with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. (Hefner 1988, 275-76)

Evil. Drawing upon John Hick, Hefner maintains that evil often results from an evolutionary system. "Apparently, in order for freedom to emerge, creation must be such that a certain epistemic distance must be traversed by all individuals and groups. In our world, that traversing is according to the design of natural selection" (Hefner 1988, 276).

NEGATIVE HEURISTIC. The negative heuristic involves three sets of considerations.

1. *Hypotheses for which there clearly are potential falsifiers.* There are within this group, first of all, a set of empirically falsifiable hypotheses. These include hypotheses concerning *Homo sapiens* as a conjunction of genes and culture, hypotheses pertaining to cultural evolution and its role in trans-kin altruism, and the empirical components of the concepts of evolution, natural selection, freedom, and technological civilization. Second, there is a group of reinterpretations of classical Christian doctrines that may be tested with the conventional methods of theological analysis to see whether they are innovative to the point of discontinuity with the tradition.

2. *Positions which the co-creator theory forbids.* Among these are theories that separate humans from the evolutionary processes, separate the human being from technology, and separate technology from nature and the process of evolution; conceptions of God that separate God's purposes from evolution and technology; conceptions of redemption that view nature or the works of the co-creator as unimportant; concepts of the co-creator that underemphasize the co-creator as dependent on God or that do not appropriately articulate human autonomy; and concepts that suggest that human beings can create *ex nihilo*.

3. *The role of evil and theodicy as falsifiers.* The theory of the co-creator deals with evil by placing the theodicy problem in the hard core of the program, which is immune from falsification. This relies on two strategies: first, showing the validity of other aspects of the theory, and, second, emphasizing that answers to ultimate questions about the existence of God and the overcoming of evil are not capable of demonstration.

It is helpful to note that for Hefner the essence of testability is not predictive power but rather the drawing of specific implications on a lower level of abstraction to be subject to public scrutiny. This scrutiny can be to

determine the accuracy and adequacy of these implications or their usefulness in understanding an area of life. Testing can even be done by reference to an entire body of relevant scientific literature (Hefner 1993, 41, 42, 45, 48). "What is at stake in the falsification of theological theories" is whether in public scrutiny they "lead to interpretations of the world and of our experience in the world that are empirically credible and fruitful—that is, productive of new insights and research" (Hefner 1993, 261).

A fuller elaboration of Hefner's theory of falsification would involve his Lakatosian distinction between core and auxiliary hypotheses, it being the latter which are subject to falsification because lower in abstraction, more concrete, specific, and precise (Hefner 1988, 269). Hefner is quite clear about his core and auxiliary hypotheses (1988, 270–72; 1993, 32, 39–50). The hard core of Hefner's position, as he elaborates it, is the concept of the human as God's created co-creator (1988, 270; 1993, 32, 39). The protective auxiliary hypotheses include (1) the premise that *Homo sapiens* has two natures, coadapted symbionts, genetic and cultural, (2) the understanding of technological civilization as the phase of evolved existence in which all life on Earth is shaped by and dependent on the cultural artifacts that are the products of human decision and action, (3) the interpretation of cosmic, terrestrial, and biological evolution prior to *Homo sapiens* as the instrumentality for the fashioning of freedom and the created co-creator, (4) the notion that freedom is nature's way of stretching itself toward newness, and (5) the classical Christian anthropology of sin and redemption, thus incorporating the first four hypotheses within Christian theology, thereby extending the interpretative significance of theology beyond the bounds of the Christian community.

In this entire discussion of testability, Hefner is constructing a middle position between a quest for certainty and a despair of finding any good reasons for theological affirmations. His remark concerning one hypothesis can stand for his view of them all. When these theories are subject to public scrutiny, "even though scientifically certain consensus may not be possible, not all such proposals are equally valid" (Hefner 1993, 41).

We have seen that Hefner's approach to testability of theories is an area where his search for relatively reliable, tentative theories seeks to avoid the choice between a quest for certainty and epistemological nihilism. Another area of search for the tentatively reliable is his study of myth and ritual, a key component of his view.

There are two levels of tentativeness here. The first level is that, even though "cultural information in the form of myth concerns that about which we cannot speak with certainty," it is necessary information (Hefner 1993, 186). Humans need to know whether the nature of reality is such that hard work and commitment make sense, whether love beyond the kinship group, which is costly and often not pleasurable, is justified on the grounds that it is commensurate with the fundamental character of reality.

Myths are information packets about the nature of reality. Underdetermination by the data is often cited as grounds for dismissing myth and ritual. However, in their early history “humans faced the necessity of acting on the basis of cultural information in circumstances that hardly allowed for hypothesis formation and testing” (Hefner 1993, 204). Myth provided precisely this kind of information. “Humans still require this kind of information about the nature of things, and they must act upon it even before they can gather data for demonstrating or falsifying it. . . . We cannot hold the behavioral consequences of myth and ritual in abeyance until such time as we have them recast in more credible intellectual form. Humans require the motivational dimensions as urgently as they need conceptual adequacy” (1993, 204–5). That such information is necessary for survival suggests that some of it, at least, has a degree of reliability.

Finally Hefner comes to the theological point that the love command is to be understood within the myth-ritual-praxis complex he has elaborated. “These questions call for intense consideration in the face of the obvious breakdown of our cultural motivators in the present time. The significance of the so-called religion-and-science field that has developed in this century lies in its recognition of these issues and its efforts to deal with them” (Hefner 1993, 205). At this point Hefner refers to Ian Barbour’s *Religion in an Age of Science* (Barbour 1990). The influence of Ralph Burhoe (1981) may also be at work here. “Although the Hebrew-Christian concepts of love and the love command are relatively late arrivals in human history, they are to be understood within this myth-ritual-praxis complex of ideas, and their nature and function may thereby be illumined. The theological concepts of love are to be considered as elaboration of the myth and ritual complex” (Hefner 1993, 205–6).

The second level of tentativeness in Hefner’s treatment of myth and ritual is that he develops his own discussion of myth and ritual by a detailed reference to several recent studies of prehistoric cave art. In recognizing the conceptual character of these interpretations he explicitly recognizes the tentative character of his own interpretation of this art.

REFUSING TO PRIVILEGE ANY ONE DISCOURSE

My third analytic claim is that while Hefner is not a foundationalist, for him science, especially genetics and evolutionary biology, is crucial in that it opens up “new vistas for understanding human existence” (Hefner 1993, 16). Unlike extreme antifoundationalism, Hefner gives science an important role in understanding humans.

It is not that “science determines what may or may not be believed religiously.” Rather, whether a traditional religious symbol or formulation of a doctrine is enhanced or rendered obsolete when juxtaposed to science depends on whether that symbol renders significant human experience,

including science, adequately (Hefner 1993, 141). In short, what we need is scientifically informed religious discussion.

The role science plays for Hefner can be illustrated by his discussion of trans-kin altruism. "Humans face a distinctive evolutionary challenge. . . . [They] must live cooperatively in large communities of persons who are not kin relatives—that is, who are genetic competitors" (Hefner 1993, 198). Hefner focuses on the question formulated by E. O. Wilson, "How can altruism, which by definition reduces personal fitness, possibly evolve by natural selection?" He goes on to say, "From the first moment that I read Wilson, I felt that a religious tradition that centers on a man dying on a cross for the benefit of the whole world could not responsibly ignore a scientific discussion about the emergence within the evolutionary process of the possibility of living viably so as to put the welfare of others so high on the agenda that one creature would put its own welfare in jeopardy for the sake of others" (1993, 191).

Hefner's answer to Wilson's question is that the ancient myths and rituals that carry the cultural information packets for trans-kin altruism possess reliable information. Even though they are blatantly underdetermined by the data, can be subjected to reasonable processes of falsification only with difficulty, and even appear to be falsified in the light of contemporary science, they continue to serve the survival and flourishing of human communities. Indeed, even in secularized societies, the usefulness of myths and ritual, in modern as well as ancient forms, are far from being eliminated.

We should think of "a reciprocal impact, which consists both of mutual critique and possible reinforcement" between the myths and rituals of ancient information systems and scientific theories (Hefner 1993, 195). In fact, there are three modes of reflection appropriate to the study of trans-kin altruism: "the biocultural evolutionary sciences, the study of myth and ritual in human evolutionary history, and theology" (p. 196). Indeed, Part 4 of *The Human Factor* is a detailed elaboration of these three.

In light of this discussion, Hefner's postfoundational vision of the role of theology can be summarized thus: "Theology is motivated by its innate thrust to interpret reaches of experience that extend outside the formative events of the community of faith. . . . The created co-creator theory is intended to enable an extension of the explanatory power of Christian faith so as to provide genuine knowledge of wider human experience" (Hefner 1993, 258).

The interplay of science and theology means that no one discourse is privileged and both myth and discursive language are valued.

Today, science and myth/ritual must function to . . . provide the information that will serve the natural order, and us humans within it, as it struggles under survival-threatening conditions. It is science that sets forth the fundamental descriptions of our human teleonomy, but it is myth and ritual that makes the basic proposals concerning the direction, meaning, and purpose of the structures and processes whose fulfillment shapes the form of human being. (Hefner 1993, 21)

We need both to trust “in the good sense of myth and ritual, on their own terms, and also in our good sense to appropriate or reject them critically” (p. 216).

In summary, Hefner’s theory of the created co-creator is intertwined with the biological theory of evolution at its core and involves falsifiable and tentative hypotheses that avoid the highest level of abstraction. Although he is close to a foundationalist reliance on genetics and evolutionary theory in general, his interplaying of science, myth, and theology finally refuses to privilege any one discourse and valorizes both myth and discursive language. In all of these respects he is a representative, in his own fashion, of an alternative paradigm to both the typical Western tradition, including its modernist versions, and most versions of postmodernism. His roitage in the Chicago tradition of theology, including Joseph Sittler (1961) and Bernard Meland (1988), if we were to trace this, would place his intellectual genealogy within what I have described as the Anglo-American alternative to the modernist/postmodernist divide. (For Meland see also Inbody 1995; Stone 1995.)

HEFNER IN FOCUS

The significance of Hefner’s thought can become clearer by contrasting it with that of two other contemporary theologians, George Lindbeck and Mark C. Taylor.

George Lindbeck. Yale theologian Lindbeck sets up a false dichotomy between the intra- and extrasemiotically referenced language, allowing him to downplay the reference of religious language beyond itself. He also has a false split between “inner” experience and cultural symbols.

In *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984) Lindbeck tries to develop and defend a cultural-linguistic theory of religion and doctrine in which doctrines are seen as primarily second-order statements—as regulations or rules governing (but not specifying) religious affirmations. He proposes this theory as an alternative to the traditional theory, in which religious language is basically propositional, and to the liberal’s experiential-expressive theory, in which doctrines are expressive symbols of an inner religious experience.

According to this cultural-linguistic theory, religions are “comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embedded in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world” and which are used for the intention of “identifying and describing what is taken to be ‘more important than anything else in the universe’ and to organize all of life, including both behavior and beliefs, in relation to this.” To become religious, on this view, is to interiorize a set of skills by training and practice. To put it slightly differently, a religion is “a communal phenomenon shaping the subjectivities of the individual, not a manifestation of them” (Lindbeck 1984, 33).

A key issue for Lindbeck is whether religion should be seen as the product of the experience of the divine (the experiential-expressive theory) or whether, as he claims, religion produces the experience (1984, 30). Lindbeck briefly grants that there is a reciprocity between “inner” experience and “external” religious and cultural factors and claims merely to stress the latter as the primary factor (1984, 33–34). However, in developing the thesis he drops the interplay between the “inner” experience and the communal-linguistic network of symbols and instead lays exclusive emphasis on the social network. Because symbol systems are primary, there is no experience without interpretation. It is not necessary to use the hypothesis of private experience in order to understand religion (1984, 36–37).

In Lindbeck’s theory, religious language is intratextual or intrasemiotic—that is, a second-order language. It says nothing either true or false about the object of religious language (1984, 68–69). The best theory of the Trinity, for example, is not the one that corresponds with the real nature of God. No one can answer that question. Rather it is the one that best organizes the data of scripture and traditions with a view to its use in worship and life. In other words, for Lindbeck confirmation and rejection of religious assertions occurs through the accumulation of successes or failures in making coherent sense of relevant textual data.

Now, from my perspective, when we see the false dichotomy between the modern and the postmodern paradigms (or, better, extreme versions of them), Lindbeck falls into this trap. He has made a dichotomy between inner experience and outer religious and cultural factors. A more adequate approach would maintain that there is an interplay between these factors, between the social network of symbolized experience and the individual creative use of it in explaining one’s own experience. By not recognizing the transactions between symbols and the world, Lindbeck has left no room for the exploration of the world through a disciplined and open sensitive discernment.

Lindbeck assumes the near-isolation of communities of tradition and their grammar of faith and practice. Hefner, on the other hand, stresses the dialogic nature of disciplines and communities, especially theology and the sciences, and the partial commensurability of the grammars of overlapping communities. At this point he is closer to Burhoe (1981) and Karl Peters (2002), his dialogue partners over the years, as well as such thinkers as Michael Cavanaugh (1996), Niels Henrik Gregersen (1998; 2003), Arthur Peacocke (1984), John Polkinghorne (1994; 1998), Gerd Theissen (1979; 1984), and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (1999; forthcoming). This is especially clear in van Huyssteen’s 2004 Gifford Lectures. If one can speak of such matters, Hefner is rooted more in the Chicago than in the New Haven theological orbit. This comes out when the data of theological inquiry are specified. For Lindbeck the data are the texts (and, to perhaps a lesser extent, theology being an intellectual discipline, the rituals and

practices) of the Bible and the church traditions. For Hefner the data of theology include the well-established theories and the worldviews of the sciences, held in creative tension with the Christian tradition.

Mark C. Taylor. In the 1980s this radical theologian developed what he calls an “a/theology,” in which he attempts to reflect on religious issues after the “death of God,” of which so much was said at the end of the 1960s. Taylor seems to have taken as his starting point the position of Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov that without God everything is permitted. The trouble is that Taylor does not seem to have examined the dichotomy involved here, that either God exists or everything is permitted. Without God (Hefner might add, “as traditionally conceived”), *is* everything permitted?

In his postmodern a/theology, Taylor’s argument assumes a dichotomy between the so-called ontotheological perspective, from Augustine to Hegel, and a postmodern viewpoint which moves to the opposite extreme. Taylor deconstructs the former notion and is left with the opposite alternative. As often happens with dichotomies, this one turns out to be false. More choices are available than the two considered. There is, for example, an entire range of options clustered around both the process viewpoints and the related positions of radical empiricism. It is surprising that Taylor does not consider these options, since he delineates a process-relational view in chapters 3 and 4 of *Deconstructing Theology* (Taylor 1982, 45–85). The point is that there are alternatives to both the ontotheological tradition, which he rightly rejects, and the extreme a/theological view he espouses.

Taylor starts with a rejection of classical theism. He identifies the God of classical theism as the transcendent and eternal First Cause. “According to the tenets of classical theism, God, who is One, is the supreme Creator, who through the mediation of His divine Logos, brings the world into being and providentially directs its course. This Primal Origin (First Cause or *Arche*) is also the Ultimate End (Final Goal or *Telos*) of the world” (Taylor 1984, 7).

Taylor bases his view of traditional ontotheology on what he sees as the main Christian dualism, or dyad, which results in the suppression of one term of the dyad by the other.

Most of the Christian theological network rests on a dyadic foundation that sets seemingly exclusive opposites over against each other. Furthermore, these paired opposites form a hierarchy in which one term governs, rules, dominates, or represses the other. For example, God governs the world, eternity and permanence are more valuable than time and change, presence is preferable to absence, spirit more worthy than body, etc. The grounding principle of this exclusive network is an abstract notion of identity, difference and non-contradiction. (Taylor 1984, 108–9)

Taylor seeks to contrast this dyadic hierarchy (the ontotheological) with a free-playing, multivalent erring (the a/theological). The problem with Taylor’s view is that there are a great many religious options available be-

sides the ontotheological and a/theological. We can see this if we pursue the development of his thought in four main sections in his book *Erring* (1984). These sections each take the form, first, of a dichotomy, and then the rejection of the historically older alternative.

Taylor's first dichotomy is between God as the absolute Author/Creator/Master of ontotheology and the view with which he identifies, the God incarnate of a/theology inscribed in writing which errs in an unending play of interpretations which marks the death of God in an eternal kenosis (Taylor 1984, 19–33, 97–120). His second dichotomy is between the idea of the sovereign self made in the image of the self-identical, self-conscious, absolute God as Master and his own option, the notion of the self as an erratic trace, a generous communicant, able to take delight without possessiveness (1984, 34–51, 121–48). The third is between history as a linear, logocentric, imaginative construction, an attempt to deny death and overcome the despair of the unhappy conscience (a reference to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1977]) over the opposition between "reality" and "ideality," and history as an endless erring, willing to affirm the real and breaking the power of the ideal, a purposeless erring that breaks the psychology of mastery and the economy of domination by spending generously. Erring, which is Taylor's preferred stance, is beyond good and evil, affirming the stance, or orientation, of what he calls "carnival" (1984, 52–73, 149–69). Taylor's fourth dichotomy appears in his theory of meaning. Taylor rejects what he refers to as "the book," a typical product of Western civilization in the past few centuries. He rejects "the book" as an ordered, logocentric totality, the author of which limits the proliferation of meanings, and rejects truth as unified, singular, simple and abiding. The alternative is "writing" as incessant erring, forever vague, without a foundation to anchor its proper meaning. The task of interpretation is not to discover the true meaning of something but to produce new ones (1984, 151).

Taylor affirms that axiological transcendence, the separation of the ideal and reality that accompanies traditional theism, results in perpetual discontent and furthermore is a sign of a hatred of all that perishes.

The quest for truth represents a futile attempt to escape the world of appearances and to discover (or uncover) the fugitive transcendental signified. In spite of protests to the contrary, this pursuit is never disinterested. "The will to truth" simultaneously expresses "hatred for all that perishes, changes, varies" and gives voice to a longing "for a world of the constant." (Taylor 1984, 176)

This is to accept Nietzsche's view of Platonic transcendence uncritically. A will to truth is not necessarily a hatred of the perishing. It is a longing to understand it and perhaps to love it more fully. Here again Taylor sets up a false dichotomy, this time between love and hate. But are there not some things worth transforming? Are ignorance, prejudice, disease, and hatred worth contending with, despite the possibility of imperial arrogance in the

struggle? While being worldly, must we wallow in everything? To love the finite does not mean to accept it without change. Taylor thinks that suppression is worth struggling against. If so, that is one major finite thing that is unacceptable. Therefore we cannot simply accept the finite. Between toleration of everything including evil and the rejection of all things except one's parochial notions lies a vast range of options where we must exercise responsible decisions.

Perhaps it is not too much of a simplification to say that Lindbeck represents the conservative and Taylor the radical possibilities of theological postmodernism. Lindbeck's postmodernism follows the linguistic turn and assumes the near isolation of language games. Taylor's postmodernism is that of a reaction against the theistic foundation and metanarrative of Christendom in the name of freedom and what Taylor calls *jouissance* and which might be translated as "joy." Hefner's conversational stance across the divides of world perspectives and disciplines attempts to overcome the isolation of language games from each other and the corrective of experience (for Hefner experience is understood more as interpreted by empirical science than as experience of the ultimate, though this should not be overstressed). In contrast to these other two, Hefner is more of a reformer, neither accepting nor rejecting the Christian grammar but revising and at the same time strengthening.

CONCLUSION

Hefner belongs in the number of those who do not buy into a simple dichotomy that sets postmodernism against modernism (which, ironically, perpetuates the dichotomous thinking of the Western paradigm). We have in Hefner the edifying spectacle of a Christian theologian who takes science seriously and who values and encourages empirical inquiry.

To investigate how much of this is a result of his Chicago training, particularly the influence of Meland and Sittler, as opposed to the education of Lindbeck or Taylor, would take us beyond our present topic. However, such a genealogical investigation into the particularities of historical influence, much as it might play into the hands of those who view intellectual history as a network of contingent and particular filiations, would overlook two things. One is that each of us must be responsible for what we make out of the particular contingencies of our situation. We need not stay in our intellectual hometowns all of our lives. The other is that, as a Christian theologian, Hefner takes seriously the Christian claim that God is the Creator and Christ the Logos of all creation, so that theology includes among its tasks an exploration of the world through scientific and other modes of inquiry, coupled with theological reflection on this exploration, not a defense against the invasion of secular modes of thought. It is this sense of exploration, rooted in the affirmations of his Christian faith,

rather than the contingencies of his education, that is the basis for his lifelong generous encouragement of the religion-and-science dialogue as well as for his own contribution to this conversation.

NOTES

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1. The following section is adapted from Stone 1992, 139–42, 210–14.

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