

# REDEEMING HEFNER'S "DISCERNING THE TIMES"

1) While I acknowledge that the critics of Phil Hefner's "Discerning the Times" do have grounds for their criticisms, I want to rehearse those criticisms only in order to draw a reverse conclusion from them, that is, to argue that the criticisms need not follow from what Phil says. In other words, I would like to redeem what Phil says (or at least what I take him to be saying) and to radicalize it. That may entail taking some liberties with his explicit statements, but only here and there.

2) Of the four major criticisms which seem to me to have a point, the first was one which was raised at the ecumenical colloquium at McCormick Seminary recently by Phil's respondent, Professor Franklin of the Divinity School. Hefner, he said, accepts the so called scientific worldview far too uncritically—shall I say, unscientifically?

2a. In support of Franklin's point, consider Phil's extravagant announcements that "the fantastic development from the hydrogen atoms of the Big Bang to ... [the latest in] planetary culture ... is fully subject to material explanation" (p. 4) or, for that matter, that "the world ... is developing from simpler, primitive beginnings toward a complexity that is as yet beyond our vision." (p. 3) Really? How about the prospect of a planet nuked into permanent winter? How about scientific worldviews which obviate any need of a Creator? Neither of these prospects is hardly "beyond our vision." And both of them would seem to be heading us not toward greater "complexity" but toward a very exquisite simplicity.

2b. Really, Franklin faulted Phil's uncriticalness on other

grounds. The latter's favorite "scientific worldview," said Franklin, especially when that reaches the world's poor and the marginated, frustrates the very aspirations it excites in them. In any case this much I would have to concede to Franklin, Phil's insistence upon fitting the gospel "within the understanding of reality that is shaped by this scientific world view" (p. 3) could easily be construed as credulity. "We must trust," Phil bids us. "We must trust that our [scientific, multi-cultural global village] idiom is God-bestowed and that it is therefore a fit vessel into which we can contrive the Gospel to be poured' (sic!). (p. 12) To ascribe to the prevailing Weltanschauung such non-negotiable autonomy—German Lutherans in Nazi German just fifty years ago were calling it Eigengesetzlichkeit—requires a bit more critical candor than that, particularly from those of us who are their ethnic-religious heirs.

3) A second criticism, again from Franklin, and one which I cannot altogether deny, is that Hefner's view of the multicultural global village is "sanguine" in the way it imagines the global "parts" interacting with the global "whole." Especially sanguine, in view of how the whole in fact is being dominated nowadays by just two "superpower bullies."

3a. I must say in Phil's defense that he does explain, by logic of definition, that "'global village' does not imply harmony or peaceful unity" but "conflict," maybe inevitable conflict (p. 6)—war as well as peace. (p. 7) Still, isn't that what such Hefnerian sentences about war and conflict seem to be, logical explanations, not judgments? They are not so much theological or moral or even political judgments by some partisan against the global village's oppressions and tyrannies but are more like a spectator's Olympian reflections upon how we might make sense of all this or, as Phil says, "shed light on it."

3b. Never mind about such explosive, near-sighted battle-cries as “liberation” or “feminism,” Phil seems to be saying. These are after all only “intensifications of individuality and group identification.” Rather keep your eye on the grand scheme, on “the underlying dynamics of these happenings” (p. 5), on the “evolutionary passage” as a whole. (pp.9- 10) And why there? Because “it is God’s evolutionary history we are experiencing.” (p. 8) I can only guess that it was such grandiloquent Hefner sentences as these which drove poor Professor Franklin to resort to an epithet like “sanguine.”

4) Not sufficiently critical of scientific worldviews. Too sanguine about the globality of the multicultural village. Comes now a third criticism, this time from within our own collegium, specifically from Walther Michel. The objection is to Hefner’s exalted description of homo sapiens as “created co-creator.” Originally I was inclined, as Sr. Lynn Osiek still is, to approve of that Hefnerian description, that is, if all I had had to go on were Phil’s printed text. Within that bare text his term “created co-creator” still strikes me as defensible, if ambiguous.

4a. Unfortunately, in our faculty’s colloquy Phil proceeded to explain his controversial term orally. It was those disappointing oral midrashim that raised the suspicion that, for Hefner, human beings are co-creators merely because they are causal agents, co-operators in making creation happen. But that much, as Wilhelm Linss pointed out, could be said about any creature: a dog, the weather, cancer. If so, then my objection to Phil’s term is almost the reverse of Walt Michel’s: not that “created co-creator” is too godlike for humans but rather that it is sub-human.

4b. On the other hand, it was in the later colloquy at McCormick that Hefner again supplied a midrash, but this time

one which helped again to vindicate his term. My notes from that conference record him as saying, about the created co-creator, "...who is responsible to whoever it is who makes this world go." That addition about human responsibility coram Deo now rescues, for me at least, Phil's "created co-creator" as a viable Christian concept. To that rescue effort I want to return in a moment.

5) Before I do, let me insert a fourth criticism This one, because it is in my judgment the most telling, I'll not blame anyone else for having made (though some of you did) but shall accept full responsibility for it as my own. It is a criticism, I should say to Phil's credit, which he himself invites precisely by his repeated refrain, "Whatever promotes Christ." Yet for all of Phil's urging was Christum treibt, as endearing as that is to Lutheran ears even as a ritual formula, my impression is that Phil's paper does not rise to its own biggest challenge, the christological challenge, and may not even reflect what that challenge is. I say, that is an impression, though the impression (as I hope to conclude) is not incorrigible.

5a. Meanwhile the christological questions, the very ones which Phil's formula excites, do seem to go begging for answers or even for clarification of what the questions are. In the resulting vacuum, simply to reiterate was Christum treibt could well sound like a sophisticated kind of fundamentalism, sheer arbitrary assertiveness. Why Christ, in the first place? And if there truly is something which promotes Christ, something about reality which "necessitates" him, then what, pray, might that be? What, in the "scientific worldviews?" What, in the "multicultural global village?" And what, since these are insufficient fully to "show the need of him," in the biblical-christian "tradition?" Moreover, the other, at least as urgent question is, which Christ is it who is being

“treibt?” Certainly not just any old Christ symbol which can be poured into the precast “vessel” of the current Weltgeist. Christ, assuming we mean Jesus Christ, is not an ideological wax nose.

6) Now, by way of vindicating Hefner’s intention (at least as I understand it) permit me to go back to the colloquy at McCormick Seminary and there to seize upon his oral, unprinted aside. That may seem to be grasping at straws, though I have reasons to think that that aside was revelatory—revelatory also of Phil’s own sensus plenior. Phil, as I said earlier, was reading from his prepared text about “created co-creator,” and then adlibbed, “...who is responsible to whoever it is who makes this world go.” But doesn’t that make all the difference, at least anthropologically, namely, that human creature, whatever else may distinguish her, is related to the Creator as response-able, as answerable, as accountable?

6a Doesn’t that element of absolute accountability relieve Phil’s “co-” (in “co-creator”) of the apparent arrogance to which Michel objects? There is then no suggestion of God being but one creator among others, we being the others, as when we speak, for example, of coequals or co-pilots. But co- as in “correspondents” or as in “covenanters”? Yes. For there the parties need not at all be equals, side by side, but rather face-to-face, vis à vis, prosoopon pros prosoopon, I and Thou. The one is Creator who demands an accounting and the others are mini-creators who, for their very survival, must be able (to) give to that One an account of their stewardship sooner or later—maybe sooner but for sure later, eschatologically.” Isn’t it that dimension of Godward responsibility, that persistent surd of the imago Dei amongst the most fallen of us, which while it indeed dignifies our human lot, does anything but flatter us and in truth is our most mortifying

burden—and not only as persons but as groups, as genders, as nations, as classes, as races, as species?

7) Once that definitively human feature of responsibility coram Deo is noted, there is no longer any reason for a Professor Franklin to demur at Hefner's worldview as being uncritical. The truth is, that world view is all too critical, at least implicitly. For example, consider Phil's observation that "evolution is increasingly subject to the decisions of human beings." If it is true, and patently it is, that never before has so much of creation come under the control of the human race, for good or ill, then it is likewise true that never before has the human race had so much to answer for. One need not be particularly biblical (though that helps) to observe: "from those to whom much has been given much shall be required." The very creation, right within its evolutionary passage toward increasing complexity, is not only creative but, being creative, is massively indebted and, being indebted, is accusatory.

7a. If the Lutheran Hegel tended to forget that, as did the Catholic Teilhard, there are neoHegelians—Jewish ones, in particular, hurt deeply by the Holocaust, like Hefner's Frankfurter Schule—who have begun at least to recover that old biblical reminder of an utterly critical creation. The same goes for any "sanguine" illusions about the multicultural global village. And Phil, as I see now, has his own built-in safeguard against such sanguinity as well. Pace, Professor Franklin.

8) What safeguard? Well, there is another kind of sanguinity—I mean the sanguis Christi, "the blood of Christ"—which is not sanguine at all but is realistic in the extreme. Such a christology is dictated by the most abject of human necessitas, the need which we co-creators have for coming up with a viable answer, a responsum to our critical Creator. That is at least

one durably biblical idiom for necessitating Christ, for making him credible—was Christum triebt.

8a. For isn't it he, Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen for us, who affords the one adequate response in our behalf? And isn't that in turn, that faith in him, our own response as well—likewise cruciform and Eastered—(call it our confessio) in behalf of the whole groaning creation? And isn't it that solidarity with this New Creator, far more than with any global village, where the multi-cultures can find not merely equality but oneness—"the one in Christ Jesus?" And isn't this new creation in Christ, in which the Creator's very self has recently become humanized, not just a clue to the future but an antithesis to the future, a whole new alternative future?

8b. And doesn't Phil Hefner's very dogged refrain about the one Christum invite just such an ambitious treiben? I, for one, could see building a seminary curriculum on that.

Robert W. Bertram  
Prof. of Hist./Syst. Theol.  
Chicago  
8 December 1983

[redeeming \(PDF\)](#)