

Draft for the last chapter (a reply to my commentators)
in Hermans, C, Immink, G., deJong, A. and van der Lans, J.
(Eds.) Social Constructionism and Theology,
Boston: Brill, 2002

Reflecting on/with My Companions

Kenneth J. Gergen
Swarthmore College

My encounter with these offerings from my theological colleagues has been one of the most gratifying experiences of my scholarly career. In many respects writing is a lonely and fearful activity. One carries into the act a community of dialogue, and one imagines a caring audience. But the actual reader is never present, and one can never be certain that he or she will not respond with indifference or disdain. Beyond the manuscript lies the void. Thus to encounter the work of eleven scholars from neighboring domains of inquiry, all of whom have devoted themselves to a serious dialogue with my writing - and those to whom I am closely related - is a joyous affirmation of relationship. To be sure there are many differences and disagreements; yet in the caring way they have been offered here, they are to be cherished. But most exciting for me is the many ways in which these scholars have creatively extended the range of ideas. In their dialogue with constructionist ideas new vistas are opened - both conceptual and practical. Do we not approach the ecstasy of dialogue when our conjunction brings forth realities never before imagined?

And now the conversational turn falls to me once again. I am blessed with the enormous riches represented in these chapters. Yet, the same plenitude also defies the possibility for a fully responsible reply. By virtue of publisher's requirements I am forced to be selective. In what directions shall the dance then move? I find myself drawn in three particular directions. In part these choices reflect themes centrally wound through many of the essays. However, my colleagues also stimulate and invite me to extend a range of concerns latent within my initial offering, but important to the future of constructionist thought and practice. First I address the problem of moral action. Many of the present papers are directly or indirectly concerned with the roots of morality and the place of religion within moral development. Many have also found constructionist ideas useful in generating accounts of morality. At the same time we are left with what appears to be a theory itself without moral investment. What are we to make, then of the moral relativism that seems inherent in constructionist theoretics? Second, and more briefly, I take up the question of The Real. Perhaps the most frequent criticism raised by my colleagues stems from their investment in realities that are so very obvious to them, and yet seem wholly disregarded or discredited by constructionism. There is special resistance in these chapters to what seems to be a constructionist demolition of the self. How can we productively move past these differences? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I address the challenge of the sacred. Here we confront a major question for social construction and for many of my theological colleagues: is the realm of the sacred

simply a construction, and if so, does this not lead to an ultimate delegitimation of theology and its manifestations in religious practices? I shall argue quite the contrary. In my view a sophisticated constructionism will lead to the abolition of the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and in doing so open new possibilities for the sacralization of everyday life.

Toward Morally Generative Practices

Religion and morality are often viewed as two sides of the same coin - with religion serving as a chief vehicle for generating and sustaining moral action, and the necessity for moral conduct in society serving as a major justification for religious institutions. It is within this context that theologians have long attempted to articulate moral principles or foundational rationales for ethical conduct, and religious institutions have offered codes, dictums, or commandments to guide our actions. The need for such foundations has become all the more acute in recent decades. Increasingly we find the value neutral stance of the empirico/scientific orientation - so central to cultural modernism - to be ethically infertile. In splitting is from *ought* we have lost ethical compass. In any case, the outcome of almost all attempts to provide such direction have been *content-full* ethics. That is, the efforts culminate in articulated accounts of the good - honoring *this* and not *that*, favoring certain kinds of conduct while condemning others. Rendered rationale are guides to specific forms of moral being.

These concerns with ethical foundations have also played an important role in several contributions to the present volume. In his offering, for example, Mark Wallace writes in support of a Levinasian view that establishes as a first principle, "taking responsibility for the welfare of the other." Favoring much the same idea, Hermans and Dupont argue for the "subjective irreducibility of the other as the groundless ground" for what they propose as a "concrete ethics." James Day's analysis of religious development is also apposite; for him a constructionist account of development is viable replacement for traditional cognitive views of moral development. For Day, the challenge of building toward a more morally secure society is paramount. Much the same concerns are reflected in Friedrich Schweitzer's exploration of religious education.

At the same time, in the intellectual world more broadly there is abiding concern with the limits of content ethics. For example, Alisdair MacIntyre (1984) has described ethical theory as rife with conflict among incommensurables, and in a later volume labors over the question of Whose Justice, Whose Rationality?. In his volume, Ethics After Babel, Jeffrey Stout (1988) also struggles with the problem ethical commitment in the context of competing claims. More radically John Caputo's Against Ethics (1993) proposes that ethical principles can neither dictate nor account for the sense of obligation that binds people together in specific circumstances. Social constructionist writings have added further dimension to such misgivings. Elsewhere I have written, for example, about problem of deducing specific actions from abstract principles of the good; given a set of ethics, nothing necessarily follows in terms of action

(Gergen, 1994). Indeed, many contributions to the present volume also echo doubts in the possibility of a foundational ethic. Wallace proposes that in light of much postmodern/constructionist thought, "theology becomes a vital undertaking" primarily when it "avoids the temptation to ground its enterprise on a philosophical foundation." Hermans and Dupont worry that their attempt to establish a concrete ethics of nearness may be just one more ethical standpoint among many competitors. This concern with multiple, competing standpoints also informs Schweitzer's views on religious education. He makes excellent use of Berger's (1979) "heretical imperative" in arguing for religious education sensitive to the "context of multicultural and multireligious society and of the interreligious communication needed in this situation." In a similar vein, Chris Hermans argues for a conception of a polyphonic as opposed to an authoritative vision of God in religious communication.

With a strong impetus toward affirming a moral society, on the one hand, and rampant doubt in the possibility of univocal ethical codes on the other, how are we to proceed? How can we, in effect, have morality without moral standards? In my view constructionist thought can carry us past this impasse and into a more promising and viable space of possibility. It can enable us to press beyond commitments to singular (authoritative) ethical codes or credos, while simultaneously honoring those commitments. In particular, it can provide us with a means of addressing issues of moral traditionalism in the face of global incommensurability. Interestingly, it is precisely in what has been assailed as a pernicious "constructionist relativism" (see chapters by both Wallace and Hermans) that this potential is to be located. It is first in its lack of commitment to any one content ethic, and second in its focus on the communicative process from which ethics derive that we locate a means of orienting ourselves in a pluralist world.

To appreciate the possibilities, consider again the various ways in which constructionist accounts have been used in this volume to describe and explain moral and religious development. James Day, for example, provides an excellent account of religious development in terms of discursive construction; this account is quite congenial with Ulrike Popp-Baier's understanding of religious conversion through narration, and the importance placed by Wallace on narration and the vitality of theology. In a similar vein, Hans Schilderman provides a sensitive portrait of the way in which religious identity may be formed within an extended process of relationship. Finally, on a more communal level, Aad de Jong demonstrates how a constructionist approach can be used to understand the emergence of religious organization.

In all these cases we find an emphasis on the patterns of coordination from which spring valued patterns of relationship. We must also suppose that when people wish to protect such patterns from erosion or defection, from outside interference or annihilation, they may develop codes of conduct. Such codes are often unwritten and informally maintained - as in the case of standards for moral behavior. However, they may also be publicly articulated in systems of rules, regulations, organizational values, ethical standards, and laws - in effect, content ethics. We must realize,

however, that the codes are not themselves "the good," which the participants wish to sustain, but rather, serve as security or policing measures. This is to say that content ethics are not in themselves the ethical conduct that is so important to our lives; they are but a possible means to an end that lies elsewhere. There is no principled need, then, for codes of good conduct - for "ethical principles," "value clarification," "the bill of rights," or a "code of professional ethics." Such efforts come into play primarily when there are threats to the valued order.

At this point we are positioned to ask whether such codes indeed function to sustain the cultural forms we so deeply value. If they are optional in principle, we may be justifiably explore their shortcomings and their alternatives. I scarcely wish to propose that content ethics are inconsequential. In many cases, particularly in matters of societal laws, their existence may be enormously important, both to sustaining tradition and in the achievement of social change. The argument here is in no way intended to challenge the development of abstract prescriptions - particularly when these are pressed into the service of dialogue. However, we must also confront the following difficulty: Content ethics are created within social enclaves for sustaining its own ways of life. In this sense they always stand in a potentially alienated or antagonistic relationship to that which lies outside.

Exacerbating the potential for conflict is the fact codifications of principles, ethics, or standards are not easily negotiable. They function as articulated limits - "beyond this point we do not go" - with the implicit subtext, "if you go beyond this limit and you are no longer one of us." In other terms, codifications serve as terminators of conversation. Additional words - of critique, reflexivity, doubt, or emendation - are often threatening and unwelcome. There are "principles at stake," as it is said. Such terminating tendencies are especially problematic in a world in which there are multiple and disparate enclaves of meaning making. If we look across the array of ethnicities, religions, geographical regions, sexual preference groups, professions, and specialized political communities that make up any nation, we are likely to find vast differences in the sense of the ethical. To the extent that content ethics function as matters of principle, productive dialogue across the borders is curtailed. Antagonism and hostility prevail, and impulses toward suppression (or eradication) set in motion.

In this sense, while content ethics may function to secure traditions within groups, they simultaneously lend themselves to alienation and conflict between. Or to put it another way, ethical stipulations may have a corrosive effect on the very forms of relationships out of which ethical value can take root. Commitment to content ethics may imperil the forms of coordination from which values are birthed, and unleash processes of mutual destruction - the very silencing of the ethical impulse. It is at this point that we begin to appreciate possibility of moving beyond the tradition of content ethics. Rather, our attention is directed to those processes of relationship that can provide the *ethically generative moment*. We require means of conversation - and related actions - enabling us to move more felicitously across the boundaries of colliding commitments, to open possibilities for growthful dialogue across otherwise

antagonistic communities. It is at this point that social constructionism joins the dialogue of process ethics, concerned as it is with the achievement of ethics within ongoing relationships. We draw sustenance, for example, from Carol Gilligan's (1982) attempt to locate moral decision making within dialogue as opposed to abstract principles. We are challenged by Jurgen Habermas' (1979) articulation of ideal speech conditions, and its implications for settling conflicts among competing claims to the good. And we take inspiration from those attempting to locate within Martin Buber's (1947) work guidelines to ethically informed dialogue.

At the same time, process ethics are only a beginning. From a constructionist perspective much of the literature on process ethics still carries strong remnants of the foundationalism that imperils the content tradition. That is, there remains a pervasive tendency to establish ethical foundations - imperatives or first principles - for securing generative dialogue. From a constructionist standpoint we must again avoid such tendencies. Foundations of practice function much like content ethics, only one step removed. They place *a priori* limits over "the good" in human relationships, and thus lead ultimately toward division and antagonism. Of course, one might argue that the present account suffers from this problem; does constructionism not invite us to place a transcendent value on forms of action that are responsible to the sustenance of relatedness itself? Or, in other terms, do we not affirm here the priority of *relational responsibility*? Perhaps, but not in a way that demands any particular form of practice. At any point a promising form of relational practice creates an antagonistic other, the invitation to re-create is reinstigated. We may view relational responsibility not as an ethical imperative, but rather, as an invitation for continuous and mutual exploration. Here indeed is a challenge for a *practical* theology.

Much may be said about the forms of practice that may contribute to the generative process of relationship. The discourses of conflict resolution, mediation, and consensus building are all rich in possibilities. Much that I have described as transformative dialogue (Gergen, 1999) is similarly dedicated. Whenever our actions take into account the communities of which we are apart, and communities act so as to realize their interdependency with those outside, and as a community of the whole we act in ways that appreciate the environments giving us sustenance, so do we establish a space for *ethical generativity*. However, the search for ethically generative practices must remain forever unfinished; we must avoid concretizing the possibilities for each solidification of practice may be a silencing of yet another tradition of relationship. It is to the human capacities for improvisation that we must look for sustenance. It is improvisation that enables new adjustments to be continuously made, and thus the possibility for a continuous prizing our lives together.

Recalcitrant Realisms and the Self

One of the most radical aspects of constructionist thought is its destabilization of all truth claims and/or foundational ontologies. Rather, we are constantly entreated to

explore the communal processes from which our taken for granted worlds emerge. All that seemed *natural* we may now understand in terms of *cultural* location and function. And in doing so we thereby open new worlds of potential. By and large my interlocutors in this volume have drawn significant sustenance from this liberatory aspect of constructionist thought. They have demonstrated the culturally contingent presumptions of a bounded self (Wallace, Hermans, Schweitzer), cognitive development (Day), the psychology of religion (van der Lans), psychological conversion (Popp-Baier), and more. At the same time, I am especially pleased that most of my colleagues have looked beyond the deconstructive moment to explore the more positive potentials of constructionism. As they variously demonstrate, the same forms of argument used to destabilize the potentially stultifying voices of monologic authority can also be used to understand the positive creation of beliefs, morality, religious experience, conversion, and church organization.

Yet, I am also unsettled by a certain tendency within many of these contributions. It is a tendency that sometimes gives rise to unnecessary distances and doubts, or misleading grievances with one or another aspect of constructionist thought. It is also a tendency that can ultimately undermine the positive potentials of these offerings. And finally, it is a tendency that gives rise to one of the major issues of contention within this volume: the status of the self. The tendency may usefully be viewed as a vestigial commitment to a realist epistemology. A particular form of realism lies somewhere toward the center of modernist institutions of science, education, and governance. Put simply, it is a belief in the reality of a material world, a world that exists independently of the minds of those seeking to understand this world. Science, as an institution, is dedicated to establishing knowledge of this world, education seeks to impart such knowledge to new generations, and government decision making (within the West) is largely carried out in terms of "real world" parameters. The declaration of "the real" also establishes the grounds for what is "true." True propositions are those which accurately reflect or picture the real. Truth and reality walk hand in hand.

In an important sense the drama of constructionism derives from its contrast to the realist tradition and the allied conception of truth. For constructionists the distinction between a world "out there," and a mind "in here" is already subject to question. Scientific knowledge is not an accurate reflection of what exists, but a communal tradition of representation with deep roots in cultural suppositions, values, and institutions. This is scarcely to abandon the realist tradition, but rather, to realize that it is indeed a tradition. Such realization creates a context in which we can reflect on the implications of its practices for western culture and the world. At the same time, what for me is one of the most important elements of a constructionist orientation is often disregarded by those carrying out constructionist inquiry. It is an element also obscured in many of the preceding chapters. This is the caveat that *constructionist proposals are not themselves truth bearing* about such matters as mind/world dualism, material reality, knowledge, and the like. There is no foundation upon which constructionism rests. Rather, constructionist proposals constitute a domain of intelligibility that invites, enables, or facilitates certain forms of cultural practice. The

question is not whether constructionist proposals are accurate or "true," any more or less than realist claims. Rather, we are moved to reflect on the value we place on the forms of cultural practice variously invited.

In my view, many of the minor vexations appearing in these chapters can be traced to the tendency of the authors to read constructionism in realist terms. That is, constructionist writings are assumed to be truth posits of the traditional realist kind. It is in this fashion that Aad de Jong, for example, takes me to task for my insufficient attention to "institutional facts," such as the reality of the Catholic Church as an organization. Garret Immink faults me for "underestimating the role of illocutionary force." And, in an interesting variation on this form of criticism, he finds constructionism deficient because it fails to recognize metaphysical facts. He holds to the view that propositional content is noetic, which is to say "neither in the mind nor physical reality" but inhering in "ideal objects." These forms of objection are unnecessary, in a certain sense, because my view of constructionism would not reject talk about institutional facts or ideal objects. Again, the question is not whether such exist but what are the consequences of putting things in this way. Or, more broadly, we may inquire into the ramifications of realist discourse. For my own part, I fear that pronouncements of what is "real" and "true" too often function to terminate dialogue. They tend to set limits over what can be admitted into the realm of possibility; they suppress those traditions for whom these realities and truths are not self evident.

I fear that this same tendency to reify constructionist theory may also serve to undermine the significance of many of the positive proposals offered by my colleagues. We have here compelling accounts of religious development (Day), the conversion process (Popp-Baier), the act of preaching (Schweitzer), religious education (Schweitzer), and the organizing process in religion (de Jong). But one must be cautious in generating such accounts, because the very form of our scholarly/scientific discourse is itself realist. Whether we subscribe to realism or not, common language use serves to declare "X is the case and not Y." If the reflexive moment is deleted from such discourse, it will enter the world in the form of a truth posit. (This has been a problem in my own writing as well, even when I have been at pains to add the necessary disclaimers). And when such proposals are cast in realist terms they become simply one further entry into the vast compendium of social science hypotheses. They place us again in the role of the expert - the monologic authority - and undermine the possibilities for genuine dialogue among traditions. It is in this same vein that many social scientists participating in the constructionist dialogues have sought means of simultaneously saying and unsaying, situating their claims within traditions or contexts, or calling attention to their own participation in the constructions. And, to reply to Jan van der Lans concerns (Chapter) with methodology, it is also in this context that numerous constructionist investigators are contributing to a virtual renaissance in collaborative, performative, and reflexive methods (cf. Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Vestiges of the realist commitment are especially significant to an issue central to a

number of the preceding chapters - the status of the self. By and large, my colleagues join in the constructionist critique of the traditional conception of the "self-contained individual." They add fascinating new chapters to our understanding of the ways in which self is embedded within and inseparable from relationship. At the same time, there is a strong reluctance to abandon the private, agentic, psychological self. Although Wallace's account of conscience is deeply relational, he wishes in the end to preserve room for a personal conscience that can "tear apart the fabric of one's social relations in an effort to work out the meaning and truth of one's ownmost, radically individualistic, and oftentimes antisocial sense of the good," and that can "press beyond the limited confines and orthodoxies of (one's) communal groups in order to realize new expressions of truth and goodness." Echoing Wallace's Levinasian treatment of conscience, Hermans and Dupont's concrete ethics proposes a "subjective irreducibility of the other..." In Day's account of successful religious development, the culmination is an individual who is competent to speak as an author. While agreeing in some degree with Day, Schweitzer does not wish to see an abandonment of cognitive development. Similarly, van der Lans wishes to retain the assumption of "human beings" as "conscious, reflective animals." And both deJong and Immink hold to the view that words and actions are in the former's terms, "realizations of intentions...of individual people."

I can well appreciate the desires of my colleagues here to retain something of the essential self so central to the western tradition - its theologies, its dualist epistemology, and its humanism. And I deeply admire the steps taken in many of these essays to explore the socially constituted character of individual being. Their deliberations on the work of Bakhtin, Levinas, Taylor, Harre, Searle and others are welcome additions to the current dialogues. At the same time, if we foreground the self-reflexive moment in constructionist theory, we realize that we do not confront a problem here of whether and to what extent there is an autonomous self, a social self, or no self at all. We need not ask whether there is, in reality, individual cognition, an autonomous consciousness, the sense of irreducible otherness, or human intention. We need not be concerned that in the social/discursive accounts of self certain constructionists (myself included) are "blind" to psychological process. Rather, the significant questions concern the implications for societal life of constructing the person within these various forms of intelligibility.

Thus, I have deep respect for my colleagues' wishes to sustain various elements of the western ethnopsychology of the self. I also live within the forms of life of which these elements are an integral part. In no way do I wish to see us abandon the vocabulary of love, hope, experience, intention, and the like. And we must savor those theories - psychological and theological - that offer support for these discourses and their respective institutions. However, with this said we must also be prepared to address the limitations. There is abundant and growing concern over the extent to which the reification of the mental world lends itself to loneliness, narcissism, antagonism, and instrumentalism in society, and the ways in which it impedes the development of cooperation, commitment, and community. Such issues have been addressed in many of my previous writings (cf. Gergen, 1994, 1999), and by many

before me. So, for me the important challenge is to hammer out alternative conceptions of the person that do not recapitulate the problems inherent in the traditional views of private minds. As I see it, our special charge is to articulate and render intelligible a conception of persons as inherently related one with another. Various chapters in the present volume surely move in this direction. I tend in my own writings, however, to go somewhat beyond what many of these authors are willing to permit. I do this not because I somehow "know" about the true nature of the self, but because the further we can press into the space a relational intelligibility, the greater the reflexive challenge to the existing traditions. And with this challenge also comes an opening to new, more communal forms of practice. Already such practices are beginning to emerge within the worlds of narrative and postmodern therapy, community conflict programs, collaborative educational programs, and appreciative inquiry in the organization. And there are signs within the present chapters of their emergence within religious institutions. I shall return to the implications of these practices in addressing the challenge of the sacred.

The Relational Real/ization of the Sacred

In his widely acclaimed volume, The Sacred and the Profane, Merceur Eliade (1959) argues cogently for the significance of sacred experience in human history. For Eliade the sacralization of space is essential, for example, because "it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation." (p.21) The experience of the sacred is set against the tradition of the profane, in which all "space is homogeneous and neutral." (p. 22) It is simply there to be dissected by various rational tools. This is the space that we typically identify with the "common stock of philosophical and scientific thought" (p. 22). We might suppose that Eliade was moved to justify the significance of sacred experience primarily because such experience was under siege. This was Carl Jung's (1933) view, as he wrote with passion about the loss of the mysteries of the spirit through science. "It is easy enough to drive the spirit out of the door," he wrote, "but when we have done so the salt of life grows flat - it loses its savour." (p. 142). Even more trenchantly, Morris Berman argues in The Reenchantment of the World that the modernist vision of the world - most fully represented in the scientific perspective - has robbed humanity of its major source of valuing. As Berman sees it, the scientific perspective distances the person from nature. We observe nature as if independent from us, and as a result, we study and use nature for our own purposes. The result has been disastrous for the ecology and for human relationships. Again, we are drawn to the call of the sacred.

In my view the domain of practical theology carries with it a tension between the traditions of the sacred and the profane. There is within the preceding chapters a strong impetus to realize the sacred. Intimations of the sacred are especially pervasive in the contributions by Wallace and Hermans. For Wallace the significance of the sacred may be carried by narratives, and for Hermans by silence. Both Schweitzer and Immink hold fast to an ontology of the sacred in religious and ministerial practice. At the same time, most of the contributions to the present volume are framed in the common argot of contemporary social science: a language of the

profane. The discussions of religious development, the relational construction of the self, the conversion process, religious organizing and the like, would be congenial companions to dialogues within the social sciences more generally. In my view there is an important tension here: as in the scholarly world and society more generally, the discourse of the profane is in ascendance. As it expands to fill the domain of intelligibility, so does the realm of the sacred recede. Sacred discourse is squeezed into "quaint" corners; its profundity is translated as mere performance.

In the same vein, those concerned with the realm of the sacred might also be resistant to social constructionist ideas. After all, constructionist texts largely grow from secular roots, and in this respect (among others), share much with 20th century science. And certainly one's resistance might be reinforced by the way in which constructionist arguments remove any fundamental warrant from ontological, logical, or moral claims issuing from religious or theological spheres. Constructionism casts a suspicious eye toward serious eschatology.

Yet, in my view this account is incomplete. Further probing reveals a far more promising relationship between constructionism and "the realm of the sacred." This is so, in part, because the constructionist dialogues restore parity between the scientific and the spiritual worlds of understanding. The traditional binaries used to elevate science over religion - with the material over the spiritual, objectivity over subjectivity, determinism over voluntarism - are rendered invalid. Such distinctions create our realities rather than reflect them. Constructionism not only invites the scientific and religious traditions to the table as equals, but simultaneously asks us to consider the societal consequences of religious and spiritual discourses. The question here is not one of truth, for both science and religion generate their own truths within their own spheres of practice. The primary question is how do scientific and spiritual discourses (and practices) function within our relationships; what are the reverberations for our lives together - here and now and beyond? And, if we find that some of these consequences are unfortunate, we should open new dialogues, generate new interpretations, and consider alternative practices. One might venture that the discourses and practices of the sacred have contributed more to cultural well-being than the practices of science. However, the ways in which this may be so - or not - should be the subject of continuing dialogue. And these dialogues should be open to a multiplicity of evaluative criteria. In this way we remain responsible to the very process of meaning making itself.

Yet, in my view the constructionist dialogues can carry us still further. The preceding chapters have demonstrated a variety of ways in which constructionism can be used to explain religion, morality, worship, and so on. As pointed out, these efforts have rendered the otherwise sacred in a profane language. Is there a way in which the opposite case can be made, in which the constructionist dialogues may contribute to the realization of the sacred - giving the spiritual world a palpability rivaling that of the secular? I believe there is. For me the pivotal concept in the constructionist movement is *relational process*. The significance of social construction largely derives from its replacement of the individual as the fundamental atom of cultural life

with relations in action. To bring this view into full intelligibility, and to secure a range of congenial practices, would transform the face of cultural life. Yet, we may ask, given its critical role in societal life, what is the nature of relational process? Here the constructionist falters. Surely, there is much that has been said about relational processes, and the vistas of future exploration are enormous. The chapters of the present volume bear important witness. However, the constructionist also understands that anything said about relationship is inevitably issuing from a particular culture, tradition, and historical era. The reflexive moment in action. Thus, we may develop compelling discourses of relationship, but such discourses can in no way picture, map or contain the phenomenon. In fact, to presume that relational process is "a phenomenon" is already to objectify the otherwise inarticulate, that which must inevitably remain beyond our descriptive possession.

Let me offer a provocative reconstruction: that source from which all meaning is made possible - all that we deem to exist, that we hold valuable, that we cherish, that gives our lives a sense of worth and direction - issues from a source that is unfathomable. Placed in these terms, we locate a significant space for dialogically linking the domains of the profane and the sacred: daily life is altogether in immersion in relational process, but simultaneously a process that is the unfathomable source of being. In confronting the enormity of the impenetrable source, we approach the register of the sublime - resistant to logical limning - and commanding of our awe. And it is in precisely this space of wonderment that theology and social construction begin to merge. For this sense of the sacred - as an indescribable font of existence - is itself a theme entwined with centuries of theological sensibility. The view is certainly present in the Judao-Christian tradition. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" we find in the book of Romans (11:33). It reemerges in the 4th century writings on negative theology, in which humans are deemed incapable of direct comprehension of the Deity. We are linked to our fellow beings by bonds of love, it was advanced, and we cannot ascertain the source of this communion through acts of reason. Much the same theme now emerges in postmodern theology (1). As Mark Taylor (1984) avers, "The *radical* codependence of all things negates the possibility of an absolutely primal origin from which everything descends." (p. 154). And there are important links as well to Chris Hermans' vision of "ultimate meaning" as residing "in silence as unuttered truth." Many will also find in these recognitions of the relational unfathomable echoes of the Asian traditions of Buddhism and Taoism.

As we move into this space of understanding we are prepared as well for a transformation in our sense of relationship to a Deity. We can understand the traditional conception of God as Supreme Being - an identifiable entity possessed with power, love, anger, wisdom and other attributes garnered from our discourse on human agents - as a communal construction. However, as we are sensitized to the sacred dimension of relatedness, we can glimpse the possibility that God is not a separate Being, but that God is immanent in a *process* from which we cannot be separated (2). We need not view God as distinct and distant from humankind, as our relationships in the here and now possess hierophanic potential - the capacity to

manifest the sacred. In this sense, God is the reality "in (which) we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17: 28) In our every action we possess the potential to share in this process. Nor, must we view the relational process as limited to the human domain. In the generation of meaning we cannot ultimately separate that which is human from the non-human. Required for the creation of meaning - and thus the immanence of the sacred - is a generative relationship with all that we call natural and material. In Martin Buber's terms, "the relation with God...includes and encompasses the possibility of relation with all otherness." (1958, p. 81) And, as we extend the conversation of construction, we see that "all otherness" becomes "one" in relational process.

The implications of this view for a *practical* theology are significant. Rather than understanding the realm of the sacred as distinct from daily life, we are invited to see our participation in daily life as potentially an emanation or realization of the sacred. In particular, when when our actions contribute to the continuous generation of meaning - which is to say, to generative as opposed to destructive coordination - we are with God, participants in the divine. We are contributing to those very processes from which domains of value, morality, and theology issue forth. In this sense, living with God is not a postponement to some future and unspecified time; in Christian terms we need not await Christ's coming. We have the potential to reveal Christ in every momentary action. In Taylor's (1984) terms, "Within the unending play of the divine milieu, 'waiting is the final losing game.'" (p.155) The sacred inhabits the full flowing of relatedness, and is thus most apparent in those actions that rescue the flows from the inevitability of opposing cross-currents. Thus, we approach the sacred in forms of ethically generative practice, of relational responsibility, of moving from singularity of self to co-construction - as outlined above. And I believe, we may participate in the living deity in many of the practices described by my colleagues: in religious and moral development, preaching, church organizing, and religious education. Aad de Jong's chapter ends with an exhortation for "practical theologians to cultivate participatory attitudes and skills." In extending and realizing the call, so do we cultivate the sacred.

Footnotes

- (1) See, for example, Coward and Foshay (1992).
- (2) See also Marion (1991).

References

- Arnett, R.C. (1986) Communication and community. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Berger, P.L. (1979) The heretical imperative: Contemporary possibilities for religious affirmation. New York: Doubleday.
- Berman, M. (1981) The reenchantment of the world. Ithica: Cornell University Press.
- Buber, M. (1947) Between man and man. London: Kegan Paul. p. 65
- Caputo, J. (1993) Against ethics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Coward, H. and Foshay, T. (1992) (Eds.) (1992) Derrida and negative theology. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (2000) Handbook of Qualitative Methods 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Eliade, M. (1959) The sacred and the profane. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Gergen, K.J. (1994) Realities and relationships. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gergen, K.J. (1999) An invitation to social construction. London: Sage.

Gilligan, C. (1982) In a different voice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Habermas, J. (1979) Communication and the evolution of society. Boston: Beacon Press

Jung, C.J. (1933) Modern man in search of a soul. New York: Harvest.

MacIntyre, A. (1984) After virtue. 2nd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Marion, J. (1991) God without being. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McNamee, S. and Gergen, K.J. (1999) Relational responsibility, resources for sustainable dialogue. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.

Nishitani, K. (1982) Religion and nothingness. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stout, J. (1988) Ethics after Babel. Boston: Beacon Press.