

MODERNITY/POSTMODERNITY: THE STATE OF THE QUESTION FOR CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

In a recent report in *America* magazine (1 June 1991, 588) on the Omaha conference on "new religious movements," postmodernism was referred to as "a slippery concept." The reporter went on to specify the use of this term at the conference: "the widespread breakdown of certain icons of secular modernity—the belief in progress, in utilitarian reason, in science as cure-all—and along with this collapse, the sense that the mainline 'mother churches' are not capable of responding to the cultural crisis."

Fifty-five participants attended the CTSA workshop in which Thomas O'Meara, University of Notre Dame, and Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University, addressed from a theological perspective just such issues as those listed in the *America* report.

O'Meara addressed the question from the point of view of "The Postmodern and the Theologians," beginning with a brief consideration of architecture as the "Paradigm of Postmodernity." O'Meara explored what he perceives as four theological stances of postmodernity: (1) partial and floating reactions to cultural changes; (2) correcting and replacing the modern through the past; (3) the postmodern as radical or intense, poetic interpretation of quintessentially modern texts; and (4) the postmodern as a correction for, addition to, and expansion of the modern.

O'Meara further posited a number of questions concerning postmodern Christian theology, emphasizing, particularly, Catholicism's slow, reluctant, critical, partial, and independent relationship to modernity.

Lakeland chose to develop his presentation around three points: (1) the "thorny question of just what postmodernism is, if indeed it is anything at all"; (2) "a way of looking at present-day theological conflict in the church in terms of attitudes to postmodernism"; (3) the fundamental characteristics of a contemporary Catholic theology adequate to address postmodernity."

One of the more intriguing aspects of Lakeland's presentation was a grid identifying four general positions on postmodernism (antimodernist, promodernist, propostmodernist, antipostmodernist), with representative figures for each category. Following Frederic Jameson (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*), Lakeland further identified the "more or less progressive political conviction" of each of these figures. Moving into the arena of Catholic theology, Lakeland's assignment of candidates for each category from the Roman Catholic world was provocative, to say the least, especially in view of his suggestion that "both institutional Catholic theology and the more progressive and independent kind share a critical attitude to postmodernism."

Both presentations gave rise to a lively, stimulating discussion, involving workshop participants, O'Meara, and Lakeland. The enthusiastic interest provoked in the topic of postmodernity at this session is not soon to diminish.

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