

NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY SEMINAR

The North American Theology Seminar addresses the issues of theological inculturation by attempting to come to terms with the dominant culture in the United States through dialogue both with classical North American religious philosophy and with issues of importance in contemporary American culture. The seminar selects each year a major work in classical American religious philosophy or theology that fits the theme of the convention. This year the seminar discussed Alfred North Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* and Ian Barbour's assessment of Whitehead in *Religion in an Age of Science* (San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1990).

Joseph Bracken (Xavier University) opened the discussion by raising two key issues in Whitehead's thought that need critical revision if Catholic theology hopes to make creative use of Whitehead's theism, namely, the status of creativity in Whitehead's system and the relationship of the extensive continuum to God. Bracken argued that in *Science and the Modern World* Whitehead spoke of an underlying activity that functions as an ontological ultimate, actual only in its incarnations. In the same work God appears as an ethical ultimate, or principle of limitation. In *Process and Reality*, however, Whitehead identified that underlying activity as creativity and, together with the notions of the One and the Many, called it the category of the Ultimate. Whitehead thus clearly subordinated God to creativity by making God "the aboriginal instance of creativity" and "the aboriginal condition which qualifies this action."¹

As for the extensive continuum, Whitehead defined it as "one relational complex in which all potential objectifications find their niche. It underlies the whole world, past, present, and future."² Like creativity the extensive continuum has actuality only in its instantiations.

Building on Jorge Luis Nobo's suggestion that creativity and the extensive continuum constitute in Whitehead's system differentiable but inseparable aspects of the ultimate ground of the organic universe, Bracken suggested the theological legitimacy of understanding both creativity and the extensive continuum as the divine nature, or ground of being, for the three persons of the Trinity as well as for all created being. Such an approach to trinitarian theology within the context of Whitehead's philosophy would require distinguishing notionally in God between God as existent (the three divine persons) and the nature of God (creativity and the extensive continuum). It would also require reworking Whitehead's understanding of a society as an environment.³ These modifications of Whitehead's

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1978) 225.

²Ibid., 66.

³Ibid., 90.

metaphysics would allow Christian theology to conceive the Trinity as an unbounded field of activity, identical with the extensive continuum and creativity. It would also sanction a pantheistic understanding of the relationship of God and creation, since the creatures that would spring from the extensive continuum also atomize it.

The discussion that followed raised a variety of questions: (1) Does Whitehead's system allow for the simultaneous existence of many different worlds out of causal contact with one another? The seminar deemed that it does. (2) Does Whitehead give an adequate account of continuity at a macroscopic level? Here the seminar remained divided. (3) In Whitehead's system is process greater than God? If so, does creation create the Trinity? Bracken argued that one can allow creativity to create the persons of the Trinity if one identifies creativity with what a more traditional theology called the divine substance or essence and if in one's trinitarian construct one elevates relationships of mutuality above relationships of origin. Others felt that such an approach lay open to the objection that there exists within the Trinity a kind of God beyond God. (4) Does Whitehead account adequately for the very possibility of process, or must one expand his scheme to include a more adequate account of law than he proposed. On this point too the seminar remained divided. (5) The seminar reflected in an appreciative way on Whitehead's understanding of civilization and probed the implications of grounding pantheism in an understanding of God as an infinite field of creativity. In reflecting on this issue, the seminar discussed different notions of "infinity" and their relationship to the idea of pantheism.

J. J. Mueller, S.J. (St. Louis University) focused the second discussion on the way in which process theology has to date handled the question of suffering. He called into question process theology's ability to deal adequately with issues raised by liberation theology. He insisted that active cooperation with God needs to be redemptive and salvific and that the lens of science through which Whitehead viewed the world tended to filter out through abstraction the complexity of human religious experience. He called for process theology to develop an adequate hermeneutic of suffering by exploring different types of suffering and by developing criteria for identifying dehumanizing forms of suffering. He insisted that we need to critique the work of science from the experience of suffering more systematically than process thought has done. We also need to call the scientific community both to shoulder greater responsibility in dealing with human suffering and to acknowledge the cultural imperialism of the scientific community in Third World countries.

In its discussion the seminar reflected on several interrelated issues: (1) Among the points of contact between process thought and liberation theology one finds the idea that God acts in history. While liberation theologians insist on the divine action, process thought offers an explanation of how God acts. Some felt that greater attention to the issues raised by process thought could help liberation theologians avoid a false option between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Some also noted that process thought and feminism often stress similar kinds of issues: the avoidance of dualism, the importance of the body, ecological concern. The influence of Henry Nelson Weiman on the thought of Martin Luther King was noted. (2) Some suggested that suffering poses a practical but not a speculative problem, in

the sense that we need to eliminate suffering rather than understand it. Others thought this too one-sided and pointed out that we do need to distinguish different kinds of suffering, understand the positive function of some forms of suffering, but eliminate meaningless suffering to the extent that we can. Still others saw the problem of suffering as part of the mystery of evil, which includes more than evil acts. (3) The seminar explored the possibilities of using the insights of Teilhard de Chardin to open process thinking to the concerns of liberation theology. Some thought that the spirituality of suffering developed in *The Divine Milieu* offered an opening within process thought to the kinds of concerns that Mueller had raised. Others thought that the rhetorical orientation of process thought toward cosmology could have little in common with the rhetorical orientation of liberation theology toward anthropological concerns. (4) The seminar discussed the different notions of praxis developed in liberation theology and reflected on the need to clarify the different senses in which this term appears in the writings of liberation theologians.

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