

NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY SEMINAR

The North American theology seminar this year continued its examination of classics of the North American tradition. The two texts discussed, William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Josiah Royce's *Sources of Religious Insight*, were chosen for their close connection to this year's convention theme. The first session discussed *Varieties of Religious Experience*. William C. Spohn (Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley) led a discussion based on his paper, "William James on Religious Experience: An Elitist Account?" in which he replies to Nicholas Lash's criticism of James in *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*. In *Varieties* James focused on the experiences of religious geniuses who live their religion "first-hand." Lash claims this account devalues most believers' religion, which depends on the teachings and rituals of institutional religions. Such an appraisal, according to Lash, falsely separates personal experience from participation in institutions which embody and carry forward specific religious traditions. Spohn concedes that James' account does ignore the linguistic, symbolic, and ritual dimensions of religion. He argues, however, that Lash's overall critique is deeply flawed because he interprets James as a philosopher of consciousness, who, as such, has reduced religious experience to certain states of consciousness, mystical states of "pure experience" that are primarily forms of sensation. Spohn argues in detail that this reading distorts *Varieties* and he shows that a reading more faithful to James' overall project reveals him to be rather a philosopher of action. James' pragmatism is thus the hermeneutic key to *Varieties*. Spohn shows that the ascetical element, understood by James to be engaging evil and helping to save a universe in which the struggle between good and evil is not settled, dominates James' account of religious experience. This reading of James, Spohn notes, locates him squarely in the tradition of American Protestant Augustinian Christianity.

The discussion focused on the strengths and weaknesses of *Varieties*. Lash's criticism of James derives, it was suggested, from a Catholic view of grace as the matrix in which one encounters God. Protestants view justification as individually experienced. Institutional affiliation flows from conversion. James quite obviously has developed the Protestant emphasis. Pushed too far the Catholic approach risks spiritual mediocrity. The Protestant and Jamesian view rightly insists on personal conversion (or at least, personal appropriation). This is inevitably elitist in that some convert and some do not. But this is no criticism.

James' image of God is vague in *Varieties* and in later works gets even more vague. Rejecting an explicit appeal to a tradition, James turns to human needs to define God: what kind of a God do we need? James concluded that an infinite

God would undercut the motivation to act strenuously for good and against evil. The orthodox view of the free self-limitation of God in creation and incarnation was unavailable to James because of his rejection of appeals to any particular religious traditions. James' self-understanding as a public philosopher speaking to the whole community seems to have motivated his rejection of appeals to specific traditions. His reading of Eastern religious also seems to have pushed him toward thinking of God in less personal terms.

James' overall account of experience contains problems. James makes experience dipolar: percepts and concepts make up experience. Missing is what C.S. Peirce identified as interpretation. Here is the root of James' rejection of community and tradition as integrally constitutive of all experience, including religious experience.

The seminar's second session discussed Josiah Royce's response to James' *Varieties*, his 1912 *Sources of Religious Insight*. John Markey led off with his discussion stimulant, "Royce Contra James: Social Dimensions of Religious Experience." Markey showed how the kind of criticism Lash makes of James' neglect of the social and symbolic constituents of religious experience had early on been made within the North American tradition itself by Royce, James' Harvard colleague.

Royce differs from James in making the foundational religious experience the sense of *need* for a relationship with some higher life, rather than the actual felt sense of presence or relation with such a life. While as individuals we may experience our ideal and our need for help to achieve this ideal, only through social experience, the experience of human love, do we obtain a direct glimpse of a higher life.

Royce also corrects James in seeing a rational element (interpretation) as integral to experience, including religious experience. For this reason Royce writes of religious *insight* and not religious experience. Insight encompasses an intimate acquaintance with many facts united into a whole, i.e. a unity of empirical, intuitive, and rational elements. Markey suggests that Royce's account of experience would be of help to theologians such as Schillebeeckx who take experience as central, but have problems with the place of theological assertions.

Markey's paper sparked a broad-ranging discussion of the relevance of the North American tradition to contemporary North American Roman Catholic theologians. The texts and figures of this tradition are relatively unknown and unused by North American Catholic theologians. The point was made that this tradition contains very useful resources for properly interpreting the concepts "experience," and "religious experience," so central to current Catholic theology. A variety of reasons for this neglect were proposed and bemoaned.

The discussion focused in particular on the potential use for ecclesiology and pastoral planning of Royce's views on communities and loyalties: persons belong to multiple communities because of their multiple loyalties; the Church of the Spirit is the universal community, which encompasses all communities at the

same time as it relativizes all of them. Royce was sympathetic to the Catholic emphasis on community and tradition, while at the same time he was quite critical of the actual Catholic community of Boston which he knew first hand.

This session also continued the discussion of the larger question of how adequately to understand the category "experience." Again the essentially linguistic and communitarian character of experience as understood by Royce (and fellow North American C.S. Peirce) was articulated and elaborated in response to requests for further explanation.

The buried treasure of the classical North American tradition in philosophy and theology had again been unearthed for a few Roman Catholic theologians to see. Full-scale mining operations will soon begin, we hope, when the word gets out!

STEPHEN C. ROWNTREE, S.J.
Loyola University, New Orleans