

SOLICITED SESSIONS

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Postmodern Theology: Between Secularity and Plurality:
Some Western European Methodological Considerations
- Convener: Vincent Miller, Georgetown University
- Presenter: Lieven Boeve, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- Respondents: Gerald Boodoo, Xavier University of Louisiana
Bradford Hinze, Marquette University

Lieven Boeve offered an extended argument for the need to reconceive theological method in a Western European context of the decline of the modern theological synthesis and the emergence of cultural and religious plurality. He highlighted three assumptions of modern correlation theologies: a clearly delineated modern secular dialogue partner, the embrace of modern epistemological standards as regulative in the criticism and reconstruction of the Christian tradition (which was portrayed as the fullest realization of universally available truths), and a still existing factual overlap between the modern context and Christian faith. In the postmodern era, all three of these assumptions have been called into question. While modern epistemology has come under heavy criticism, the (presumed) unitary modern secular dialogue partner has fragmented into a plurality of voices. His analysis of the decline of the secularization thesis and the emergence of pluralism and detraditionalization focused on the Western European context in general and Belgium in particular. Boeve proposed a recontextualized theological method marked by a distinction between *ad intra* and *ad extra* perspectives (a distinction deemphasized by modern theologies out of a desire to ensure the plausibility of Christianity). The *ad extra* perspective brings awareness of the difficulties that cultural plurality poses for communicating the Christian message. It also brings reflexive awareness of the particularity of this message. This poses a challenge to the observer's perspective implicit in the dominant positions concerning religious plurality (i.e. inclusive, exclusive, pluralist). Changes in context require renewals of tradition. Thus from an *ad intra* perspective theology must struggle to articulate the Christian message in a way that is adequate to contemporary Christian experience. Boeve proposed confrontation with the irreducible otherness of the other as a good avenue to engage in this recontextualization. From such a dialogue the insight can be gained that, from within a Christian hermeneutics, the encounter with irreducible otherness may be the place where traces of God become manifest. Boeve

concluded his paper by sketching the outlines of a "theology of interruption" that attended both to continuity and discontinuity in the Christian tradition, and embraced both a hermeneutics of contingency and of suspicion.

Gerald Boodoo agreed with Boeve's overall critique of correlation theologies, but criticized his attempt to retrieve and revise correlation through the use of a "theology of interruption" and a hermeneutics of "contingency." This revisionist framework (itself a correlation method), that attempts to answer the question of how theology can be understood as relevant to contemporary existence is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the contemporary Western situation. Boodoo suggested that it rests upon a false dichotomy that sets theology in opposition to the contemporary Western situation, when, in fact, the latter flows out of the former. To support his claim, he referred to contemporary historical scholarship in the field of theology and science, to Vattimo and Derrida's Capri seminar *Religion*, and to Antoine Vergote's reflections on "Monotheism: Event and Rupture." Boodoo claimed that these sources indicate that the contemporary Western postmodern (and/or post-Christian) context is not discontinuous with the theological context out of which it flows; as Vergote states, the "broken unity between religion and culture does not mean a separation." The task of theology in this context is to find ways to express the "disconnection without denying it."

Bradford Hinze likewise agreed with the overall thrust of Boeve's project, engaging it from the perspective of developments in the construal and practice of dialogue in the postconciliar era. He questioned whether Boeve gave sufficient attention to the critique of modern culture offered by correlation theologians. Their attempts to identify affinities with the modern subject were combined with a recognition and critique of the limitations and corruptions of the modern view of the self. These early critiques are in continuity with later, more radical questioning of the theological dialogue with modernity. Hinze argued that an engagement with the postmodern context must take account of not only the rise of pluralism and detraditionalization, but also of distorted discourse. The refined hermeneutics of suspicion offered by postmodern theory suggest that liberation perspectives have much to offer to contemporary reflection on dialogue. Hinze accepted Boeve's notion of "interruption" as a laudable development of an important strand of correlation theology, but asked whether its emphasis on the extraordinary does not ignore the importance of the quotidian, the practices of everyday life where faith is lived concretely in every context.

VINCENT J. MILLER
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.