

SEMINAR ON PRAYER: DO WE CONVERSE WITH GOD?

I. THE QUESTION

The question can be dealt with from several different perspectives:

1. *Religious experience*: to what degree and in what sense do the participants in the discussion profess to converse with God in prayer?

2. *Religious sociology*: e.g., do people (men-women, old-young, Catholic-Protestant, contemplatives-actionists, charismatics-secularists) follow a conversational model when they pray? How does this correlate with other significant aspects of their faith? What significant social and cultural factors are indicated by the correlation?

3. *Pastoral counselling and spiritual direction*: how does conversing with God in prayer enter into this conversing relationship?

4. *Linguistic analysis*: e.g., why is the question placed in terms of "do" rather than "can" or "should"? Who is the "We" who ask the question? Why do "we" want to know (what difference would it make)? What are the sense and connotations of "converse"? Is "converse" (the substantive) the same as "conversation," and is it necessarily conceptual and cognitive in character?

5. *Philosophical*: is the widespread practice of certain kinds of mental behavior solidly grounded in a rational grasp of reality, particularly with reference to the existence of a personal Absolute?

6. *Theological*: does listening to the sources of revelation with the help of a sound hermeneutic yield an understanding of the mystery of salvation such that an affirmative or negative response (perhaps qualified) is appropriate or even imperative?

II. THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMATIC

The theological problematic may be handled with the help of the following observations:

1. The more basic theological question raised today is not, it seems, whether the traditional conversational model for prayer (e.g., the Teresian description of prayer as conversation with God

by whom we know we are loved) is appropriate today. It is, rather, whether prayer can or must be conceived as relationship with a personal Transcendent. Is it possible that the reality of prayer can be verified without a basic intentionality or directedness toward a personal Absolute? Could the Christian understanding of God be sufficiently maintained in a *praxis* and *theoria* in which that which we call God were related to as an absolute ground, climate, or horizon, but not as a partner in dialogue? In fact, can and must it be said that conversing with God as this has been traditionally understood and practiced is no longer possible for a truly modern person of faith?

2. It is of interest that *Concilium*, in its "Dogmatics" issue of March 1977, will deal with the theme, "A Personal God?" in a way which makes that theme largely coincide with ours. It may be helpful to summarize here the problematic and development of the volume.

Recent currents: (1) Reaction against utilitarian individualism of Western society (Bellah) influenced by Eastern religiosity, and raising questions about an individualistic concept of person; (2) due to the philosophy of subjectivity, emergence in the West of a concept of the "impersonal divine" very different from the Eastern one; (3) recent criticism of the personalistic concept of God.

Hence *Concilium* will reflect on the problem of the "personality" and "impersonality" of God, analyzing why people react negatively to the traditional personalism of God, and seeing whether a synthesis is possible between the Eastern "impersonal divine" and the Christian "personal divine."

a. *Current Problems*: our inability to formulate the concept of person outside of a religious context; modern criticism of theism.

b. *The Personal Divine and the Impersonal Divine*: Asian concepts and experience of God; Jewish concepts and experience of God; the theological development of the concept of person in Christian spirituality.

c. *Renewed Theological Reflection*: the meaning of "naming God" or of giving him a name; the personal God considered from Jesus Christ, and from the *pneuma* or Holy Spirit; nature mysticism (the impersonal divine?) and bridal mysticism (the personal divine).

d. *Religious and Political Relevance of God's Personal Being*: the personal understanding of God as a prerequisite for the

history of liberation: The relevance of the personal understanding of God for the life of prayer.

e. *Chronicle*: process theology and God's personal being.

III. SOME QUESTIONS

In listening to the Judaeo-Christian and other sources, and to various thinkers and currents of reflection, here are some of the questions which arise:

1. In both Old and New Testaments it is manifest that God is presented as one who enters into dialogue with humans. Jesus himself is paradigm in this regard. But this clear and abundant data must be dealt with in a hermeneutically sophisticated manner. To what degree is it substantive and normative for our faith, and to what degree does it belong to the contingent cultural assumptions within which faith is necessarily expressed? And what are the criteria and tools by which a response to this question may be reached?

2. In what way might the proponents of a "non-personal divine" position find points of attachment for this position in Scripture, e.g., in God's refusal or reluctance to let himself be named or imaged by humans?

3. Are there grounds for a predominantly negative response to the question in an understanding of the parable form employed by Jesus in his teaching?

4. In traditional Christian spirituality, is there a constantly recurring polarity between a positive and a negative (apophatic) response to the question? Someone has suggested the following as contrasting in this regard: Cappadocians vs. pseudo-Dionysian, Cistercians vs. Scotus Erigena, Tauler and Suso vs. Ruysbroeck and Eckhart, Julian and Richard Rolle vs. Cloud of Unknowing, Teresa vs. John of the Cross. However, does not even the negative or apophatic current retain a basic intentionality or relatedness which points to an affirmative response to the radical theological question, whatever may be said regarding a conversational form of prayer?

5. Does not liturgical (especially Eucharistic) celebration need to be questioned for the light it can throw on our question? To what degree are sacramental symbols and other ritual gestures apophatic in character? Granted that the word element in liturgical prayer suggests directedness, is this not modified by the impact of ritual?

6. What ecumenical contribution can be made to the discussion? E.g., does the Calvinist tradition challenge Roman Catholicism and is it in turn challenged by Pentecostalism? What are the forms of silence that have evolved in the churches since the Reformation?

7. It is obvious that a new presence of Zen Buddhism and other traditions of the Far East is one of the major elements contributing to today's problematic.

8. The question may be dealt with from the perspective of the major reflective theologies of our times, e.g., neo-Orthodoxy, Tillich, Rahner, von Balthasar, political theology, liberation theology, process theology, "death of God" currents.

9. In view of the radical centrality of love of neighbor in Christian faith, is the action-contemplation polarity to be newly investigated to see if there is an apophatic converse with God verified in every commitment to the neighbor?

10. Finally, should a discussion of conversing with God assume that the participants are already in possession of a correct understanding of what it means to converse humanly with humans? And does the discussion itself, if it is to be fruitful, not need to verify the basic components of a humanly meaningful conversation or converse?

IV. A FEW PERSONAL INCLINATIONS

1. Ultimately I want to answer Yes to the question in its radical form. But I don't want to speak that Yes prematurely, i.e., without countering the tendency I feel within myself toward a too easy and univocal Yes. This would take place by a serious exposure to currents of apophaticism, traditional and contemporary, including the experience of the silence and absence of God in the massive tragedies of our time.

2. While I would see some kind of intentional directedness toward a personal God present inescapably in all prayer properly so called, there are different levels of felt experience of such directedness. Extending the classic description of the journey of the dark night beyond the willingness to let go of dependence on images and concepts, is there not a more radical letting go of dependence on the felt experience of directedness toward the personal Other which belongs to the full maturity of faith, or at least is a legitimate call of some, whose special vocation is to keep

present to the rest of us the impossibility of univocal dialogue with the hidden God?

3. Pastorally, the strong and sometimes naive currents of the prayer revival today, particularly in the charismatic movement and in the directed retreat movement, would seem to call for the counterpoint available, on the one side, in Zen and similar approaches, and on the other, in that letting go of religiosity which is required by some forms of presence and ministry within the secular.

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