

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

VISION, METHOD AND THE HUMANNESS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

The 1981 seminar achieved continuity with the previous session by fulfilling a portion of the multiple mandate given it by the 1980 participants: to approach theological anthropology by way of the annual convention theme—in this case, the local church; to give attention to matters of social justice; to attempt to order the confused content of theological anthropology by analysis of the structures of consciousness, expandable to interdisciplinary method, and by fresh recollection of the fundamental human experience of living in the “in-between,” in tension (cf. Voegelin) toward the divine ground.¹

Theologizing about humanness was to be initiated in the group (leaders included) by some raising to consciousness of the participants' own experience of law, of difference, of privacy, of prayer—as concretely lived in their local churches. It was expected that this *anamnesis* of lived experience would be richer because of the group aspect of the inquiry, and of course it was presumed that consciousness of personal experience in the local church would—given the adult, theologically-educated, expression-oriented character of the CTSA membership—already be close to controlled articulation.

Where the 1980 session had called attention to the danger that “theological anthropology” might be merely an addition to *topoi* (to a list of subject specializations), the 1981 seminar organizers wished to inquire what might happen individually and socially if tension (in the profound Voegelinian sense) were to become topical,² i.e., were to become a matter of public conversation and concern. Hence the pattern for the two-session discussion was an exploration of

what humanness is by reflecting on some critical human experiences, specifically on existential tensions (not simply conflicts between good and evil). The polarities to be examined concretely:

¹ Cf. *CTSA Proceedings* 35 (1980), 202-07, esp. 205, 206. In 1981, three of the participants were continuing from the previous year (and one of these for a third year). Voegelin readings had formed part of the 1980 seminar, as required reading and in excerpts for the sessions.

² Voegelin speaks pejoratively of *topoi*, but he speaks of “the question” become topical (cf. *The Question as Commitment*, ed. by E. Cahn and C. Going [Montreal: Thomas More Institute, 1977], pp. 112, 126) and of *metaxy* become topical (cf. “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme”) as of *desiderata*.

vulnerability/entitlements
 sexuality/equality
 autonomy/authority
 privacy/community
 formless prayer/public worship
 vision/method.

The tensions specified in the seminar description were to incorporate implicitly, not to repeat, the struggles of justice movements (as well as resources in the group would allow). Hence the emphasis was on fruitful experiences of tension, the resolution or elimination of which would diminish humanness.

One of the required readings for the seminar was a selection from *Theology and Political Society* by Charles Davis³ (chaps. 1, 3, 7: "From orthodoxy to politics"; "Faith and social policy"; "Pluralism, privacy and the interior self") which by its summary and critique of current critical theory, gave the discussion a political context, with consensus, tradition, authentic and distorted communication, and self-transcending subjectivity, as emancipatory concerns. Also the Davis selection made clear, for the seminar discussion as well as for experience in the local church, how crucial is attention to domination-free process. The other required reading, from Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology*,⁴ was "Communications" (chap. 14)—the eighth of the functional specialties distinguished by Lonergan and correlative to experience in his cognitional theory. (Chapter 5 was included for its sketch of "communications" in relation to the other functional specialties.) The Communications chapter contains Lonergan's reflections on the constituents of community and on church as self-constituting process.

Also offered for consideration at the seminar were selections from Eric Voegelin's "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme."⁵ Its contribution to discussion of the local church is suggested by the passage from T. S. Eliot, quoted by Voegelin, concerning those who "try to escape / From the darkness outside and within / By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."

Recommended further readings (though not required) were Raymond Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*,⁶ as an example, from the privileged area of New Testament history, of

³(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁴(New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

⁵*The Southern Review*, 12, 2 (Spring 1981), 235-87. Selections were offered to seminar participants at registration and at the first session. At the time of determining the seminar readings, this Eranos lecture of 1977 was not yet published. It appeared, as above, in advance of the *Eranos Jahrbuch*.

⁶(New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

the complexity of local community, and Victor Turner's "Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology,"⁷ as a reminder of some of the concerns of anthropology (implicitly claimed for themselves by those who speak of "theological anthropology") as well as a reminder that much experience of the local church is liturgical.

The seminar was not devoted to an exegesis of the required readings. It presumed them and—helped by Davis on emancipation, Lonergan on common meanings and Voegelin on the "in-between"—proceeded to a discussion of fruitful tensions lived within the local church.

Discussion of "vulnerability/entitlements" began by consulting our own experience of law in the faith-community in which we live: From what vulnerability are we protected, from what vulnerability closed off, by our "rights" in that community? To what extent are we made vulnerable by the rights of others in the Church (the aged, the ill, the poor) and by our own rights? Participants found, as had the leaders in preparation, that "tension" so powerfully evoked "frustration," or "stress," or (at best) successive emphases, that it took time to become aware of some instance of tension which would clarify our humanness not by dissolution of the tension but rather by its maintenance. Pushed again to our own experience (rather than to that of students, parishioners or counselees), we found that "experience of law" recalled struggles against law as a necessary element of maturing after periods of law-induced dependence and security (prolonged sometimes by parish or seminary or college), or—alternatively—experiences of the fearsome liberty of a liberalist environment. Some perceived it possible to try on the Voegelinian suggestion of tension and to recollect articulations offered them, at various stages of their development, of healthful balance: *epekeia*; love (described carefully as a "not-easy" love); death-life as the basic Christian polarity; an experience of legal theory similar to Rawls's "maximin" rule.⁸

The problem of understanding tension as fruitful, when one's own experience of church is consulted, recurred in discussion of "sexuality/equality," and a different polarity, "masculine/feminine," was given attention instead. "Privacy/community" suggested to imagination pendulum experiences (emphasis now on privacy, now on community) more vividly than it suggested some integrated experience of community within pri-

⁷*The Kenyon Review*, New Series 1, 3 (Summer 1979), 80-93.

⁸Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 136-37, 152-54.

vacy and vice versa. Some thought the misleading entailments of our usual vocabulary underlined the need of a new symbolic system.

The tension "formless prayer/public worship" was to be taken up early in the final session, with the understanding that we were already introduced to it by "privacy/community." However, the final session returned to misunderstanding of tensions as dichotomies, and stalled on disagreements about "formless" prayer, although a context for this delicate discussion was provided by chapter 7 of the required Davis reading, by the contemporary topicality of Transcendental Meditation, and by the excerpt (at hand for the session) written by Blessed Marie de l'Incarnation, expressing a traditional view on a tension within the experience of prayer.⁹

Discussion of "vision/method" was prevented by the difficulties mentioned above as well as by convention scheduling problems. The leaders had suggested (in the seminar outline) that the tension toward the divine ground gives existence and meaning to the other tensions, but they saw a problem in finding the right questions to mediate awareness of this more fundamental experience. Further, it was clear to them that the making of tension topical¹⁰ is helpful in articulating human life, but a hard question emerged from the seminar: Where culturally and religiously does emphasis on tension (in a faith-community) belong? (In a Voegelian context, struggle is fundamental within the "noetic" vision; the "pneumatic" emphasis—in the Jewish and Christian visions—is elsewhere.)¹¹ What methodological insights follow, for theological anthropology, from awareness of a "meta-tension" in the structure of consciousness/structure of reality, also remains a question.¹²

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⁹ *Autobiography (1674)* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1964), pp. 176-77.

¹⁰ See note 3.

¹¹ Cf. "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," pp. 282-83.

¹² Those who participated in the 1981 seminar in theological anthropology were: John Brezovec, Fr. Callistus, Peter Chirico, Peter Drilling, Thomas Foley, Cathleen Going, David Granfield, Fr. Gribbon, Maria Herrera, Thomas Kelly, Rev. Kraus, William Martin, Richard McBriar, Giles Milhaven, Ronald Modras, Joan Range, Gabriel Scarfia, Daniel Walsh. The seminar was prepared jointly by David Granfield and Cathleen Going; they worked together as discussion leaders and as authors of the foregoing report.