

SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

TWO WAYS OF PROCESS THOUGHT

The 1983 Seminar focussed upon the ways in which process philosophy affects theological method. Bernard Lee of St. John's University, Collegeville and Michael Vertin of St. Michael's College, Toronto provided the papers and initial discussion. There was considerable time for the participation of the group and summation by the leaders of the seminar.

Lee's paper (available prior to the meeting) argued for two authentic interpretations of Whitehead: the first empirical and the other more abstract and rational. Two sorts of process theology emerge from these emphases, one primarily experiential — describing experience, generalizing, and systematizing it into schemes of universal import; the second, more structurally oriented, stressing clear conceptualization about the ultimate character of things. Although Catholic thinkers tend to gravitate (due to scholastic background?) to the more abstract philosophical procedures, Lee believes that it is the empirical wing's affinities with the probable, the ambiguous, the sensitivity to resistant sinfulness and human limitations which will prove to be more fruitful for theology.

Vertin outlined several substantive questions concerning Lee's paper and the role of process thought in theology. He asked whether empirical and rational were elements of any theology or viewpoints from which theology may be accomplished. He wondered whether these two modes of thought are not complementary rather than antithetic, perhaps even genetically related, in the sense that there is a legitimate transition from the empirical to the abstract. In his final comments, he argued that process philosophy may not be able to ground itself without a more self-critical self-appropriation of its own performance as thinking. He articulated the problems of cognitional theory which he understands to be at the base of process thought, questioning whether (in the end) such philosophy and its theological counterparts are not a "benign materialism" which remakes God in the human image.

The first day's discussion involved a lively exchange, attempting to understand the components of process thought which might be helpful to theology and the presuppositions which make it difficult for Christian theology to assimilate it. Much of the conversation revolved around the relationship between the reformulated subjectivist principle of Whitehead and the problem of self-appropriation as non-world-related in Lonergan. Is the focus of philosophy and theology upon understanding the world and God or upon understanding the one who is thinking? Is the foundation of theology metaphysics in Whitehead's sense or method in Lonergan's understanding of the term?

The second pole for discussion turned upon the role of ambiguity, insecurity, loss, insufficiency and sin in the world-process. Where do normative criteria emerge in consciousness? Are we victims of a process? If one is to say that God is morally unambiguous, then where is the empirical data to support such a claim? Or must one not re-think the being of God?

A general consensus by the group believed that the following topics should be part of the ongoing collaboration: 1) the presuppositions of process thought; 2) the nature of analogy — its origins, qualities, and the empirical possibility of a normative religious language; 3) an open discussion between the neo-transcendentalism and critical subjectivity of Lonergan and Rahner and the metaphysical and cosmological approach of Whitehead in theology; 4) an examination of the methodological results of taking one position or the other; 5) the possibility or necessity of multiple methods in theology; and 6) the relationship between a somewhat contemplative process thought and the transformation of the individual and community in praxis-oriented Christian conversion.

In the concluding summary of the first day's conversation, the group asserted the fundamentally aesthetic categories of Whitehead's thought. At the base of the philosophy is a post-enlightenment, post-classical cosmological metaphysics which refuses to capitulate to the Kantian turn to the subject. The latter seems only to be able to produce a constantly reworked philosophical (and theological?) anthropology. Theologies based upon the subject never seem to take seriously the world of technical science and the empirical transformations of philosophy which stem from Hume and Locke.

The summation on Friday morning was meant to alert the partners in dialogue to the primary issues of the seminar. Tilted toward listening carefully to what process thought can contribute to Catholic theology, the seminar hoped to begin a conversation which still has few participants. Lee argued that the metatheoretic issues are basically unresolvable, that there are no presuppositionless philosophies. Vertin believed that there is a way of discussing the self-explication of the performance of the knower which will provide a principle of discrimination about such issues which is in principle invariant. General agreement was reached that while such methodological issues are of concern, how they become part of differing descriptions of grace, gospel, etc. will be the testing ground. The complex interrelationships between revelation and philosophy are much at stake here. Lee continues to see process thought as fruitful for theology, though the problems of Trinity (what is the Trinitarian experience?) and the claims to normativity in theology remain difficult to resolve within its categories. Much of what is crucial in process thought (self-as-relational reality, historical change as part of human and cosmic identity, all reality as process, the shaping of the world and basic order of things as affective rather than rational) has been assimilated into contemporary visions of reality. Such moments are also helpful to Christian understanding. Questions remain concerning the philosophical articulation of these insights and their ability to enter dialogue with Christian theology.

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The major issues raised by this year's seminar are to be continued. The perennial question in this ongoing seminar of the relationship between, and the role of, reason within faith is the recurrent theme for next year's discussions. The convener of this seminar for the next three years will be Michael Vertin. All enquiries and suggestions for next year's program should be forwarded to him.

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