

## SEMINAR ON NINETEENTH CENTURY THEOLOGY

This year the nineteenth-century theology seminar sought to interrelate the historical and the systematic. The first session explored Johann Sebastian von Drey's contribution to theological method, whereas the second session used the confrontation between David Friedrich Strauss and the Catholic responses of his day to bring to the fore Christological problems still affecting us. Both sought to relate to the world Church. Both speakers sought to elaborate how the problems raised by Drey and Strauss were not problems limited to nineteenth-century theology but affect the world Church today.

### DREY'S CONCEPTION OF THEOLOGY

Wayne Fehr, professor at Marquette University and author of the *The Birth of the Catholic Tübingen School: The Dogmatics of Johann Sebastian Drey* (AAR Academy Series 37; Chico, CA.: Scholars Press, 1981), proposed that Drey's theological method was significant for it took seriously the modern question of the relation between history and theology. Jesus is the event in history in which God's reality is manifest and his history is the object of theology. The question is: How does the historical particularity of a single event have a universal significance? How does the historical positivity of Jesus have meaning for us today? This question, raised by Lessing and central for many nineteenth-century theologians, was important for Drey's own theological work.

Theology has the task of interpreting history. Borrowing Schelling's notion of "construction," Drey made the concept of construction central to the interpretation of history. Moreover since he stood within the Romantic and Idealistic conceptions of history, he sought to relate the individual and the particular as a part to an organic whole or totality. As Hegel, he developed and employed a notion of universal history. Christianity must be situated within the total context of history. It was therefore necessary to develop a philosophy of religion and a history of religion and to situate Christianity therein. Drey developed his apologetics not only as a general theory of religion and of the history of religion, but he also argued for the necessity of revelation, for the necessity of the foundation of religion upon a divine revelation. With obvious reference to Lessing's idea of the education of the human race, Drey interpreted Christianity as the culmination and the center of revelation and as the key to the meaning of universal history. His conception contained a double emphasis: he underscored the uniqueness of the history of Jesus as God's definitive plan. And yet he also emphasized the openness to all histories of the world. God is present in definitive way in the concrete history of Jesus and yet this history is open to development. The Church as a social reality and as a social organization makes actual the presence of God's

kingdom within history. Consequently, the Church is a continuation of the concrete history begun in Jesus and as such is open to the future.

The participants expressed much appreciation for Professor Fehr's informative presentation. The questions focused on the philosophical and theological presuppositions of Drey's theological methodology. Fehr pointed out that Drey's apologetics as a philosophy of revelation was based on a theology of creation. Drey related the concrete historicity of revelation to universal history by relating revelation to creation.

The significance of the notion of "construction" within Drey's theological method was the object of some discussion. The question was raised whether such a "construction" makes theology dependent upon a philosophical criterion. Fiorenza suggested and Fehr concurred that Drey's use of construction should not be understood as merely philosophical but was theological, for it took into account the history of Christianity in order to develop the ideal potential of that history and to elaborate what might be called an "essence of Christianity." Another member suggested that Drey's notion of construction could be related to the endeavor within Vatican II and within contemporary theology to develop a hierarchy of truths.

The seminar discussed also the relation of Drey's theological methodology to Schelling and Schleiermacher as well as his relation to Johann Adam Moehler. Moehler became more well-known and influential than Drey himself. Was it possible that Drey not only influenced his student Moehler, but that Moehler influenced his teacher Drey? Was it possible that Moehler's more "ultramontane" position occasioned Drey's shift to a more ultramontane position? These questions are difficult because the general atmosphere of the time favored the more ultramontane position. The discussion ended with Fehr's exposition of Drey's conception of "living tradition" and how central such a concept was not only to his theological methodology but also to his view of the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism.

#### DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS AND THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE

William Madges of Xavier University in Cincinnati assigned readings from contemporary theology, e.g. Schillebeeckx and Kasper, since he sought to relate David Friedrich Strauss's challenge to present-day Catholic theology. He did so in three steps: first he described Strauss's work; then he analyzed the response made to Strauss by the Catholic theologians of his day; and finally, he related both Strauss's position and the Catholic response to current Christological endeavors.

David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* challenged the historical and the supernatural character of the gospel materials. He did not want to deny the truth of Christian faith, but its reliance on a series of supernatural historical events. He had attempted to demonstrate that Christianity was identical with the deepest philosophical truth. He did not intend to destroy truth of the gospels, but to show that they express in mythic representation the religious idea of the union between the divine and the human as the

true essence of humanity. Strauss's mythical approach sought to overcome the weakness of the orthodox as well as the rationalist approaches. The mythical approach preserved the meaning, the Idea, of the biblical accounts, but eliminated their historical and factual status. The union of the divine and the human within a single historical individual was a representational manner of expressing the idea of the divine and human unity for popular consciousness. In order to raise the representation (*Vorstellung*) of the Christian incarnation to the philosophical idea (*Begriff*), it was necessary to exchange the idea of humanity for that of the historical Christ.

Madges then described the Catholic theological responses to Strauss's *Life of Jesus* — a book that received wide publicity and at the same time killed Strauss's academic future. Leaving aside the more personal and polemic critiques, he analyzed the more scholarly and theological responses by Catholic theologians to Strauss. In general, the Catholic response viewed the historical as essential to Christian faith. Christianity was not based upon an idea but rather upon a historical person.

The historical was central for exegetical as well as theological reasons. Exegetical: gospels were written in a historical, not a mythical age. Insufficient time existed for the development of myths. The actual origin and existence of the Church itself so soon after the life of Jesus demonstrated the historical significance of this life. Individual exegetical flaws in Strauss's method were also pointed out.

Theological: The historical is integral to Christian faith. The core of Christian faith is the historical Jesus and not some idea. The history of Jesus is our religion. Johannes von Kuhn argued that the gospels had two sides: a historical and a didactical. Strauss had only one side. Moreover, his move from the literary genre of a writing as a whole to a critical evaluation of a specific pericope as unhistorical. Moreover, he alleged that Strauss went from the intrinsic impossibility of miracles to a critical and negative evaluation of the historical description of supernatural events. Critical presuppositions determine his interpretation of literary genre. In contrast, Kuhn argues for the historical veracity of the core of the gospel materials. The oral transmission focuses on events. Evangelists use non-factual elements to elaborate the theological significance of these events. These mythic and non-factual elements used within the theological interpretation do not vitiate the significance of the historical within the gospels.

In a final section Madges dealt with the relation between the Catholic theological response to Strauss in his own day and contemporary Catholic Christology. Several characteristics are common to both: The link to the historical Jesus is important for Kasper and Schillebeeckx just as it was central to the Catholic respondents to Strauss. Although they acknowledge the importance of the historical critical method and its application to the gospels, they underscore not an idea, but a person. Neither Jesus' teaching nor the meaning of Jesus can be divorced from his person. Even though

current Christologists acknowledge the gospels as confessional rather than historical documents and even though they limit the possibility of getting behind them through historical reconstructions, they affirm the link to the historical Jesus as essential.

Discussion focused on several points. (1) Strauss's location within the nineteenth century. His conception of history, myth, and idea can be placed not only in relation to Hegel, but also to broader currents within the period. The place (or lack of it) of sin and redemption within the framework of a progressive conception of history.

(2) The emphasis in Schillebeeckx's Christology on the historical reconstruction was seen as a strong counter-point to Strauss's mythic interpretation. The discussion touched on a possible ambiguity. On the one hand Schillebeeckx's introductory and hermeneutical reflections underscore that the starting-point of Christology is the Christian community's faith-response to Jesus. On the other hand, he seeks to go back to historical Jesus and his *abba*-experience as the foundation of this faith-response.

(3) It was debated to what extent Tracy's position approximates or differs from that of Strauss. He argues the historical method does not validate the faith in Jesus as the Christ and that the role of the historical method is more corrective rather than constitutive of faith. Nevertheless the historical is at the basis of the theological and not merely a vehicle for the ideational as with Strauss.

(4) The Christology of Schubert Ogden was debated within the seminar. One member proposed that Ogden's Christology with its emphasis upon existential understanding represented a twentieth century version of Strauss's emphasis on the idea. Others countered that Ogden's emphasis upon the Jesus-kerygma and upon the earliest Christian testimony gave a historical rooting to faith. He does not dissolve faith into an idea but rather argues that the earliest Christian reception and faith in Jesus is normative for the Christian interpretation.

Much appreciation was expressed before, during, and after the discussion for Willim Madges' presentation, since it covered much material: the interpretation of Strauss, the immediate response to Strauss, and present-day Christology. The possible positive relevance of Strauss was the final point of the discussion. What is the importance of myth and how does our contemporary intellectual situation differ from Strauss insofar as we have quite a different understanding of mythic language? It is for us no longer the representational vehicle of a more universal conceptual language, but it is rather what gives rise to thought.

*Future Plans:* At the end of each session, as well as in private meetings between the sessions the future of the nineteenth-century theology seminar was debated. Since the attendance was limited to a select few, two future options was proposed. One would be to have a historical theology seminar that would rotate: patristic one year; nineteenth century another year; perhaps medieval a third year. Another suggestion would be to have the

nineteenth century theology meet as a special interest group. This would enable individuals interested in nineteenth century theology to attend also the particular seminars of their interest.

FRANCIS SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA  
*The Catholic University of America*