

SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

THE RESURRECTION, RECONSTRUCTIVE HERMENEUTICS, AND FOUNDATIONAL THEOLOGY

The focus of this year's seminar was provided by Parts I and IV of *Foundational Theology*,¹ by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, of the Catholic University of America. The first day's discussion began with a brief expository presentation by Fiorenza, and a response by Johann Baptist Metz, of the University of Münster. The second day's discussion began with a short evaluative presentation by Fred Lawrence, of Boston College, and a reply from Fiorenza.

Summarizing major sections of his book, Fiorenza discussed the resurrection of Jesus in such a way as to illustrate something of his more general argument about the foundations of Christian theology. That general argument has a negative and a positive moment. Negatively, Fiorenza argues that the foundations of Christian theology are inadequate when they are conceived, with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanist-inspired theologians, as (1) the original and normative sources of the Christian tradition (for the determination and interpretation of such sources is a virtually endless task); or, with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century anti-deist apologetes, as (2) rationalist-historical demonstrations of supernatural facts (for such demonstrations are discredited by critical historiography); or, with nineteenth- and twentieth-century idealist-influenced theologians, as (3) explicated transcendental structures of human subjectivity (for such structures make no reference to the actual history of Christian belief and practice). Positively, he argues that uniquely adequate foundations for Christian theology are provided by the prudentially balanced interplay or "reflective equilibrium" of three elements: "hermeneutical reconstruction," "retroductive warrants," and "background theories." The "hermeneutical reconstruction" of the Christian tradition is the scholarly retrieval and articulation of those beliefs and practices which that tradition has deemed central and primary to Christianity. The fruitfulness of the Christian tradition for illuminating present experience when the two are in basic agreement and for challenging it when they are not is said to provide a "retroductive warrant" for the validity of that tradition; similarly, the fruitfulness of present experience for illuminating the Christian tradition when the two are in basic agreement and for challenging it when they are not supplies a "retroductive warrant" for the validity of present experience. And "background theories" are the best current thinking

¹Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

from physics, psychology, sociology, literary criticism, philosophy, and so forth, regarding those subsidiary issues on which at least operationally one must take some stand in one's effort at interrelating the Christian tradition and present experience.

Metz, though sympathetic with much of his argument, suggested that Fiorenza needs to give greater prominence to the practical aspect of theology's foundations—be clearer on his political option, show more obvious awareness of the critique of ideology, do fuller justice to the meaning of past suffering, and so forth. In reply, Fiorenza admitted that he does not begin with a political option, for such an approach could prove to be unduly partial and limiting. Rather, he begins "with the New Testament texts"; and they in turn imply a retroductively warranted political option, a critique of ideology, and so on.

Lawrence vigorously applauded Fiorenza's account of the historical evolution of traditional "fundamental theology," his elucidation of the inadequacy of all three versions, and—most crucially—his insight into the primacy of constitutive over cognitive meaning in everything that involves humans, including the foundations of theology. But he proposed that Fiorenza does not fully recognize the scope and implications of the latter insight, with the consequence that both his criticism of traditional fundamental theology and his attempt to fashion an alternative are ultimately flawed because they are insufficiently radical. Thus, he rightly rejects the "woodenheaded" version of truth-as-correspondence that usually underlies traditional fundamental theology. In his own constructive work, however, he replaces it not with the more refined and phenomenologically vindicated version of truth-as-correspondence that is highlighted in the works of such thinkers as Gadamer and Lonergan, but rather with a version of truth-as-coherence—the "reflective equilibrium" among hermeneutic reconstruction, retroductive warrants, and background theories. This version of truth-as-coherence has Fiorenza identifying the foundations of theology with systematically basic results of theologians' practices rather than with the practices themselves. It pushes him toward treating all differences of belief and practice as manifestations of nothing more than cultural and linguistic differences, rendering him unable to uncover any transculturally normative viewpoint. Hence it leaves him with foundations of theology that cannot adequately acknowledge the radical existential contradictions between truth and falsehood, good and evil, and holiness and sin, especially insofar as such contradictions affect the practices of the theological community itself.

In his response, Fiorenza expressed puzzlement that Lawrence should interpret him as totally rejecting truth-as-correspondence and adopting truth-as-coherence wholesale; for his treatment of traditional fundamental theology includes criticisms of the latter as well as the former, while his "reflective equilibrium" aims to incorporate the former as well as the latter in a way that transcends the limitations of each taken alone. He showed astonishment at the charge that his account of theology's foundations does not effectively differentiate between truth and falsehood, good and evil, holiness and sin. Background theories deal with the *idea* of such a differentiation; hermeneutic reconstruction, with its *actual history* within the Christian tradition; and retroductive warrants, with the *present experience* of it: what more could one ask for? He opposed Lawrence's effort to locate

the foundations of theology prior to systematics. And he opined that perhaps the underlying difference between Lawrence and himself is that Lawrence seems to make theology's foundations a matter simply of abstract transcultural ideals (background theories), whereas he, Fiorenza, envisions them as necessarily involving actual history (hermeneutic reconstruction) and present experience (re-ductive warrants) as well.

Further questions reflecting additional aspects of the differences between Fiorenza and Lawrence (and, to some extent, Metz) emerged from the presentations and subsequent discussions, questions on which, if I am not mistaken, Fiorenza would regularly opt for the first alternative and Lawrence the second. Is phenomenology of cognition methodologically simultaneous with metaphysics (or even posterior to it), or is it methodologically prior to it? Is any transcultural cognitional, moral, or religious norm necessarily abstract and theoretical, or are there transcultural cognitional, moral, and religious norms that are eminently concrete and practical? And are the foundations of Christian theology proper to Christian theology, or are they common to Christian theology and theology in other religious traditions?²

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²A disagreement on this third question does not necessarily indicate anything more than a difference in the *number* of things that persons take the expression "foundations of theology" to refer to. Thus, for example, an optimistic interpretation of the disagreement between Fiorenza and Lawrence on this question would posit some basic affinity between Fiorenza's "reductive warrants," "hermeneutic reconstruction," and "background theories," and the contents of the fifth, sixth, and seventh of Lonergan's eight functional specialties in theology, respectively—the functional specialties that Lonergan labels "Foundations," "Doctrines," and "Systematics." (See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1972], esp. chs. 5, 11, 12, & 13.) One would then simply take Lawrence to be using the expression "foundations of theology" more restrictively, in reference to the contents of Lonergan's fifth functional specialty alone, and Fiorenza to be using the expression more expansively, in reference (more or less) to the contents of Lonergan's fifth functional specialty and (at least key elements of) the contents of the sixth and seventh as well.

On the other hand, a disagreement on this third question can indicate, more profoundly, a difference in the *conceptions* of the things that persons take the expression "foundations of theology" to refer to. Thus, for example, a more sober interpretation of the disagreement between Fiorenza and Lawrence on this question would have Fiorenza standing at odds in some basic way with the Lonerganian conception of functional specialties in theology, a conception which Lawrence, by contrast, accepts.

Finally, a clue as to whether a difference on this third question is of the first and less profound kind or the second and more profound kind is whether the disputants ultimately can or cannot reach agreement on such important prior issues as those indicated in the two questions, above, that precede the third.