

SEMINAR ON SPIRITUALITY

Anticipating the CTSA convention theme for 1986, "Theology in a North American Context," the seminar on spirituality chose American spirituality as the focus for its deliberations. Presenters were John Farina, general editor of *Sources of American Spirituality* and editor-in-chief of the *Classics of Western Spirituality* published by Paulist Press, and Doris Donnelly of St. John's University in New York, who has taught and written on a broad spectrum of issues in spirituality.

John Farina's paper, "The Study of 'Spirituality' in North America: Some Problems and Opportunities," dealt with the fundamental issues of the definition of spirituality and the methodologies used, especially in the area of the history of spirituality. After a brief overview of the history of the word, the author offers several theses as to why the term "spirituality" seems to be preferred over, for example, the term "religion." He sees spirituality as a subset within the larger field of religion. The former most often refers to the personal, internal dimensions, while the latter also includes the institutional, external dimensions. The term "religion" carries with it overtones of *Religionswissenschaft* from the nineteenth century—a synthesis of religion and science that is incomprehensible to the modern person and one which emphasizes a kind of positivism at the cost of the "heart" or the "mysterious" in human experience. "Spirituality" suggests a critique of modern reductionistic tendencies and rejects claims that its methods yield a kind of positivistic knowledge.

Another reason to choose "spirituality" over "religion" is that much twentieth-century critique is aimed at the latter. Freud, Marx, H. L. Mencken attacked "religion" and its institutional expressions which spirituality can skirt by focusing on the experiential rather than on the theoretical or institutional which can limit horizons and put constrictions on the open boundaries of the transcendent and mysterious. "Spirituality" also avoids the negative connotations of over-rationalization sometimes associated with "spiritual theology."

"Mysticism" also seems to lose out in popularity to "spirituality." There is the historic disdain for the term in Protestantism and the suggestion that the term is reserved only for an elite with extraordinary experiences.

Current methods employed in doing the history of spirituality make use of a broad spectrum of related sciences—the theological-historical approach, a social history methodology that highlights borrowing techniques from anthropology, sociology, economics, and so forth. These approaches stress the concreteness of

spirituality and ground it in specific historical situations.¹ Earlier histories of spirituality prove unsatisfying when judged by such historical-critical methods and interests.

A further complication in dealing specifically with American spirituality involves that method wherein one relates standard characteristics of American life such as optimism, belief in progress, pragmatism and experimentalism with religious experience. More recent research has challenged what has been called the "national character" school.² The proposed thoroughly homogeneous American character turned out to be the White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant mind of the literate, educated class. The only generalizations that can be made about religion in America are that it is diverse and derivative, and so it seems wise to talk about American "spiritualities" in their specific historical-cultural context.

The term "spirituality" is alive and well and will probably be around for the immediate future, at the least.³ It is a term that focuses on the fundamentals of religious experience, that is acceptable to a wide variety of world religions and that focuses on *praxis* and its relationship to religious belief.

Lively discussion followed, and while some expressed a desire to move beyond definition and method, others acknowledged the need to be precise about what is involved in the discipline of spirituality and its relationship to the larger theological enterprise. The term "spirituality" is so widely and diversely used that it seems at times to be devoid of any concrete meaning.

One definition offered was "the interdisciplinary study of religious experience *qua* experience." The object of study includes at least four levels: 1) the originating experience of God; 2) the expression of that experience in texts, lifestyle, institution, and so forth; 3) the academic study of the second with the awareness of its relationship to the first level; 4) the philosophical question of the human capacity for religious experience.

It was noted that the starting point for the academic discipline of spirituality is a specific problem or question. It is only upon reflection on the task at hand that one searches for an appropriate methodology. Methodologies can vary greatly from those of the social sciences, historical criticism, linguistic analysis, phenomenological approaches, and so forth. As theology, the discipline of the history of spirituality contains several moments, from situating a given text or movement in its historical context to making judgments about the truth/falsity of a given position and its relevance to contemporary spirituality.

¹Some examples are Charles Hambrick-Stowe's *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) and Joseph P. Chinnici's *Devotion to the Holy Spirit in American Catholicism: 1875-1901* (New York: Paulist, in press for *Sources of American Spirituality*).

²Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

³Paulist Press market research led to the rejection of the term "mysticism" in favor of "spirituality" for the title of their series of classic texts.

On the second day of the seminar, the group moved to a specific topic, author and work in the American tradition. Doris Donnelly's paper, "American Religious Experience: Discerning the True from the False: The Contribution of Jonathan Edwards," relates the criteria of discernment of Jonathan Edwards to the mainstream of classical discernment literature, using Teresa of Avila as the primary focus. Donnelly's thesis is that, for the most part, criteria for evaluating Christian religious experiences know no national or denominational boundaries. She acknowledges distinctions but sees these as secondary to the major, foundational criteria used to judge the authenticity of religious experience.

After a brief biographical sketch of Edwards, Donnelly situated Edwards' work, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in the context of the Great Awakening and Edwards' desire to respond in both an intellectual and pastoral way to those voicing severe criticisms of the revival. While he saw the revival as the work of the Holy Spirit and was therefore sympathetic to it, he proposed accountability to both detractors and enthusiasts. Since affections were essential to religious experience, it was imperative to set up critical tests by which to judge their truth or falsity.

The body of the paper explicates the twelve signs of discernment proposed by Edwards and correlates them with similar expressions in other classic texts of the tradition. Donnelly concludes by proposing three principles underlying Edwards's criteria, and six further criteria that might be extrapolated from them.

The discussion surfaced some important historical issues which need to be acknowledged in any analysis of Edwards's work. His involvement in the repudiation of the Halfway Covenant and the popular error which associates Edwards solely with his "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" need to be considered. There was agreement that at one level there seems to be a consistency in the marks of discernment that crosses cultural and denominational boundaries, but that differences do occur at the level of expression and of circumstances specific to a certain historical period.

Several concrete examples were raised in which discernment might be called for today—a child joining a sect such as the Moonies or a spouse who wants to involve the entire family in a call to be a missionary in a distant country. It was suggested that the locus for discernment was primarily interior and relational and secondarily related to external activities, for example, Edwards cautions against using criteria too liberally for others and counsels using them above all for oneself. In the last analysis, it is the individual who must judge whether her/his motive is loving or egotistical, freeing or grasping.

The discussion underlined the perennial importance of discernment issues and the ongoing need to understand and articulate criteria appropriate for our time. Ultimately—however it is expressed—religious experience is judged by its fruits and their congruence with the ideals expressed by any given tradition.

The group will continue to discuss issues of American spirituality at the next meeting specifically in works of Dorothy Day and Jean Vanier.

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