

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A. FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF RAHNER AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The moderator for the first session, John Farrelly (De Sales School of Theology, Washington, D.C.) opened the session by noting that in the present seminar we were attempting to evaluate specific and different contemporary theological anthropologies (henceforth: TA) for their suitability for the needs of the United States in our time. To give focus to our effort, we chose an interpretation of widely held attitudes in the United States concerning the search for meaning and the place of religion, namely, that offered by the sociologist Robert Bellah and his associates. This interpretation was initially available to us in Bellah's address to the Catholic Theological Society of America in its 1982 Convention, "Religion and Power in America Today."¹ More recently, the whole study of which that article represents just a small part has been published in Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton's book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.² Two presenters in the first session and two in the second session initiated dialogue with Bellah and associates from the perspectives of differing TAs. These brief presentations were for the purpose of the discussion that followed.

James J. Buckley (Loyola College, Baltimore) brought a Rahnerian perspective into conversation with Bellah and associates. A "Rahnerian perspective" is one "for which it is axiomatic that God imparts self in Word and Spirit as the gracious fulfillment of self-transcendence." Bellah's claim is that there is promise for overcoming the fragmentation within and between our private and public lives—a fragmentation that largely derives from varied types of individualism (e.g., therapeutic and managerial) accepted widely as our 'first language,' our common sense. Bellah indicates the promise by "showing 1) how tensions *within* individualism require going beyond it, and 2) how biblical and republican traditions challenge individualism." Buckley's thesis was that we need a TA which generates "discussable differences" among TAs of American culture. To carry this out, he noted some similarities and differences between Bellah and Rahner. While they agree on the problem of therapist and manager, and so forth, they disagree on whether

¹Robert Bellah, "Religion and Power in America Today," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 37 (1982), 15-25.

²Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

the solution is found via narrative (Bellah) or self-transcendence (Rahner). There is, however, a discussable difference here between TAs which take narrative to be one kind of self-transcendence (Rahner) and TAs which take self-transcendence to be one kind of narrative (Bellah). While they agree that the individualist's practice (*Vollzug*, commitment) calls for more than individualism (i.e., the common good), they disagree over whether individualism is primarily a resource (Rahner) or rival (Bellah). But there is also a discussable difference between notions of the common good deriving from Jeffersonian republicanism and from the Catholic natural law tradition. Also, while they agree on pressing the issue of our sovereign good or Ultimate Concern, they disagree over whether "the mystery of being" (*Habits*, 295), or God's self-impartment in Word and Spirit is such an Ultimate Concern. However, there is a discussable difference on this issue.

Christine E. Gudorf (Xavier University, Cincinnati) introduced the perspective of Liberation Theology into the discussion. She noted that from this perspective, Bellah's social analysis seems that of the dominant class in a dominant society. Isolation and lack of community, which Bellah noted as the dark side of middle-class individualism, are not the chief oppressions of the poor and marginated. Their oppression is injustice and dehumanization. Bellah seems to advocate a return to models of society which do not exact this present cost from the dominant class, but to have no program for eliminating the cost paid by the poor and marginated. True community, liberation theologians say, arises from a commitment to the other which includes justice; and justice includes both equality and participation in social decision-making for all. Bellah insists, further, that only the church type (among Troeltsch's three types of religious institution) has the power to combat effectively the self-destructive tendencies of modern society. He should, rather, start with the prior issue of Christian faith, understood not in terms of systematic doctrine but in terms of praxis—that is, in terms of what the Church should be doing to change the face of the earth. Moreover, liberation theologians embrace aspects of sect and mysticism, without these undermining the church type of religious institution. Black and feminist liberation theologies would have special difficulty embracing Bellah's preference of church type, because his agenda is not clear. The common good has in the past been envisaged as requiring sacrifice of particular groups—especially, in our society, the poor, blacks and women. Oppressed groups need their own institutions; they cannot abandon their particular agenda for a universal agenda. The first priority must be committing ourselves to liberation from sin in a communal project and as an inner attitude.

In the discussion that followed, the questions of the openness of Bellah's book to the concerns of the poor and the openness of liberation theologies to an overriding common good that unites all were raised. Gudorf held that Latin American liberation theologians do see that others' development (e.g., that of Africa) is involved with their own. One participant noted that Bellah did make room for conflict in the interests of justice; Martin Luther King is one of his heroes. King spoke from a biblical tradition to the blacks, but from a Jeffersonian republicanism to the middle class. Bellah believes more in the model of the common good than in a revolutionary model.

Another issue in the discussion was difficulties raised about Rahner's "self." One participant noted that this self lacks some social props for identity; and it needs

to have a story with suffering and tragedy to fit it into life. Is some of Rahner's existentialism close to the "therapeutic subject" that Bellah finds destructively individualistic? If this is the case, this person added, is it fair to say that Rahner can be a danger in the United States? Buckley agreed with some of these criticisms, but he said that it was inaccurate to isolate the therapeutic moment in Rahner's work. Rahner was always against utilitarian individualism, and he has checks in his theology against excessive inwardness. Another suggested, however, that those who agree with Rahner tend to be apolitical.

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B. FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND VATICAN II, *GAUDIUM ET SPES*

At the second session, moderated by Christine Gudorf, the presenters were John Farrelly and William Spohn, S.J. of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. Robert Bellah offered a response to these presentations and took part in the discussion.

Farrelly discussed the question from the perspective of the theological anthropology of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, Part I, (henceforth, *GS*). He suggested that *GS*'s analysis of the current situation has much in common with that in *Habits*. An earlier draft of *GS* had a sentence, unfortunately later dropped, that stressed the individualism *Habits* described. It noted that: "Many adopt a passive attitude to the transformation [in society] they cannot control, and do not even try to understand it, seeking a refuge in the comforts and pleasures of life or in various forms of escapism."³ Part of *GS*'s response to this situation was to present a theological anthropology, dialoguing with modern men and women on the meaning of the human person and community. For this it relies on both Christian revelation and human experience and knowledge. It emphasizes the dignity of the human person—a dignity that finds its greatest fulfillment in God's call of the person to communion with himself. *Gaudium et Spes* underlines the fact that mankind is created and redeemed as a community and thus that there is an "interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society." Thus, "No one can allow himself to . . . wallow in the luxury of a merely individualistic morality" (*GS*, 25, 30). And it shows that human work and activity to master the world and shape history is in accord with God's plan, though such work is in fact deeply infected by sin, so that "the hierarchy of values is disordered, . . . every man and

³Charles Moeller, "Preface and Introductory Statement," in H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 5, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 105.