

## SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

### CONSTRUCTING LOCAL THEOLOGIES

The focal reading for this year's seminar was *Constructing Local Theologies*,<sup>1</sup> by Robert Schreiter, of the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. The first day's discussion addressed the book mainly from the standpoint of the social sciences (especially cultural anthropology) and philosophy. It began with a presentation by Ronald Chochol, of Kenrick Seminary, St. Louis, and a response by Schreiter. The second day's discussion considered the book expressly from the standpoint of Christian theology. It started with a presentation by Donna Geernaert, ecumenical officer of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Ottawa, and a reply by Schreiter.

Seminar participants were unanimous in lauding Schreiter's efforts to address the question of how Christians in some particular cultural context are to express their religious experience in a way that is faithful both to that experience itself and to a received Christian tradition cast in terms reflective of cultural contexts that, especially for those living beyond Europe or North America, may differ greatly from their own. Participants particularly appreciated the book's emphasis on the need for First World theologians to be sensitive to "outsiders," to listen and not just to speak, and in general, in light of the doctrine of the Incarnation, to grasp the significance and respect the worth of other cultures. The interdisciplinary, ecumenical, and collaborative character of Schreiter's theological approach also found favor.

Questions posed on the first day by Chochol included the following: In employing "dialogue partners" for theology, why does the book rely so heavily on the social sciences and so little on philosophy? Why, within the social sciences, does it rely so heavily on cultural anthropology and so little on, say, psychology? Why, within cultural anthropology, does it stress semiotics so strongly rather than, say, functionalism or structuralism? And why, in its consideration of religion in different cultures, does the book focus almost exclusively on religious language rather than attending as well to religious sculpture, painting, music, action of various kinds, and so forth?

In response, Schreiter argued that philosophy is a reflection—indeed, a paradigmatic reflection—of Western culture, and thus it has only limited usefulness for a theologian who is striving for the fullest possible encounter with non-West-

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<sup>1</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985).

ern cultures. He maintained that cultural anthropology, with its attention to societies as wholes, is a better tool to use in cross-cultural investigations than, say, psychology, with its immediate focus on individuals, particularly since in most cultures the notion of the societal whole is primary in any case and that of the individual is secondary. And he admitted that for any anthropological investigation of religion within a culture to be even approximately complete, it would have to employ a variety of cultural anthropological approaches, not just semiotics, and to include within its purview not just the linguistic but also the many non-linguistic expressions of religious experience.

Questions raised on the second day by Geernaert included these: If, as Schreiter avers, Christian tradition is a series of local theologies, then what constitutes the identity of that tradition from one cultural context to the next? By what means does he distinguish the core elements of the traditions, so as to know whether, for example, bread and wine as eucharistic elements or the trinitarian formula of baptism necessarily are constants or perhaps are mere variables? And is it not the case that in many respects the technologically advanced First World countries are fast becoming at least as remote from traditional Christian culture as the so-called "missionary" countries?

In his reply, Schreiter suggested that the cross-cultural ground of Christian identity is finally a matter not of distinctive conceptual or even symbolic contents but rather of distinctive operational procedures, distinctive manners of addressing the common human problems, distinctive ways of doing things. He proposed that, whatever the precise way in which these operational procedures be specified, they ought not be specified in such a way as to require that the newer churches rehash all the old disputes about transubstantiation, infant baptism, and so on. And he agreed strongly that there is a growing need to re-evangelize the historically Christian countries of Europe and North America.

Many other interesting observations and claims were made during the two-day seminar. Some examples: In the concrete, there is no such thing as a fixed and uniform culture, for every culture is always internally diversified and always in transition. What one people calls "magic" is often what another people calls "our religion." New Christians frequently confront a challenge not dissimilar to that faced by, say, Vietnamese immigrants to North America, namely, that of discerning how much of their original culture to give up and how much to try to retain. At its best the Christian Church is not bound to one culture but rather is a mediator of all cultures. For the sake of clarifying the issues and advancing Schreiter's project, it is crucial to distinguish two very different notions of religion: the earlier "modern" notion (e.g., Tillich) that sees religion as largely independent of culture, and the present-day "post-modern" notion (e.g., Geertz) that sees religion as an intrinsic dimension of culture.

Finally, three very important questions expressly regarding various kinds of cognitional and decisional *criteria* emerged during the course of the discussions but remained unresolved at the end. (1) Is it not inevitable that one invokes some philosophical criterion—if not explicitly then implicitly—as at least part of one's concrete justification for emphasizing some disciplines as appropriate "dialogue partners" for theology and de-emphasizing others? And, if so, precisely how is

that philosophical criterion itself to be made explicit and critiqued? (2) Is *religious experience* the ultimate criterion to employ in assessing a theology, or not? If it is, need it be *theistic* religious experience? If so, need it be *Christian* theistic religious experience? Or does this way of posing the latter two queries reflect a phenomenological mistake, since "theistic" and "Christian" are never intrinsic to religious experience itself but at most are just interpretations placed upon it? (3) By means of what criterion does one determine whether such ideals of Western culture as respect for individual rights and freedoms, democratic selection of community leaders, and regard for due process are *merely* cultural values or, on the contrary, are values implied by the gospel, such that any geographical or ethnic or ecclesiastical culture that does not esteem them is at least to that extent not thoroughly Christian?

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