

SEMINAR ON SPIRITUALITY

Along with at least three other group sessions at the 1987 meeting, the Continuing Seminar on Spirituality chose to focus on *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah et al. This year was the third in which the seminar has discussed some aspect of spirituality in a North American context. Previous specific topics have been: (a) method in the academic discipline of spirituality; (b) discernment in Jonathan Edwards; (c) the spirituality of Jean Vanier; and (d) that of Dorothy Day. In accordance with the group's desire for ample discussion time, we chose not to have any formal presentations this year, but rather to go directly to the text in order to raise key issues and criticisms as we related the material in *Habits* to the understanding and practice of spirituality in North America today. The following outline provided a starting point for our sessions:

Day 1:

1. Identify two or three major criticisms of the text—positive and/or negative.
2. Do you think that the presentation of individualism in the text is accurate?
3. How is American individualism an asset/liability to the spiritual life?
4. How do you see the relationship between American individualism and religious authoritarianism, intolerance and repression?
5. What would a narrative culture of coherence look like? Is it possible? desirable? What are our bases of solidarity?

Day 2:

1. How does the relationship between culture and spirituality come into play in your own teaching and research?
2. Are there other symbols in addition to those of the biblical and republican traditions that are operative in our religious experience and structures of meaning?
3. What would you consider to be major characteristics of a North American spirituality?

Since our dialogue took on a stimulating, but wide-ranging life of its own, this report will reflect neither a rigid adherence to the outline, nor the rigor that characterizes a tightly reasoned argument. Rather, I have tried to gather together its salient features under a number of separate headings, ordered in a somewhat random but I hope clear manner.

I. The Appeal of Habits of the Heart

Early on in the discussion, a participant raised the question about why this particular text seemed to be so popular. He inferred that the response to the book was disproportionate to its actual content and value, which to many did not appear to

be that earth shaking. Four possible reasons for the book's success were offered: (1) Many persons see themselves clearly in the portraits, a situation that provokes a strong sense of identification with the life experience presented. Some participants had experienced a strong defensive reaction to the book, a fact which also suggests that the book is striking a chord of some kind. (2) A few members noted a sense of nostalgia in the text, a hint of a Golden Age, or of "the good old days" to which we hanker to return. This appeal is not unlike that of Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" that presents a simpler, more virtuous time in this country. (3) The authors of *Habits* avoided a more technical, quantitative approach, opting for discourse on the level of meaning in a broad sense. It is possible that persons are hungry for discourse on this level and that scholars often choose to avoid the wider picture in favor of a more narrowly conceived focus. (4) Recent cultural developments, e.g., the nuclear threat, corruption at many levels of society, an out-of-control deficit, the destruction of our ecosystem, etc., produce a sense of being under siege. Persons aware of this state may be seeking resources that help to make sense out of what to many appears to be a hopeless and absurd situation.

II. Major criticisms

There was a consensus that the book deals creatively with a topic of serious concern in this country. The authors make no pretense to be comprehensive and have succeeded in one of their goals which was to initiate a dialogue about individualism in a public sphere. While reading the book, one participant found herself repeating, "Yes, but . . .", an experience that led to further analysis of the material presented.

Several commented on the way in which *Habits* treats the therapeutic model. For some, the text heightened awareness of the myriad ways in which psychological language has dominated and in some instances replaced theological language. Others saw a disparaging attitude toward psychology, one that minimizes the value of individual growth and the subsequent contributions to community. Sufficient attention was not given to a model of human development in which an authentically integrated self can make enormous contributions to society.

There was some concern about the narrowness of a sample that excludes ethnic minorities, and does not do justice to the nuances of community life in urban areas with strong neighborhoods, in rural America, and in religious and humanitarian communities of all kinds.

Finally, there was agreement that a variety of subtle dualisms are present throughout the book—dualism between theology and psychology; between the sacred and the profane and between matter and spirit. To the extent that this is true, the book may be propagating on one level what it is trying to curtail on another. It is hard to see how the biblical tradition provides a foundation for community awareness and need in a worldview that separates matter/world from spirit/religion.

III. The Portrayal of Individualism

Several participants agreed that individualism was rampant in our society to an extent that threatens its coherence in dangerous ways. Extreme utilitarianism, egoism and consumerism were seen as contributors. But perhaps the most fre-

quently echoed critique of the portrayal of individualism in *Habits* was its monolithic aura. The range of meanings of "individualism" is extensive and needs to be kept in the forefront of the discussion. It was noted that some behavior that looks like individualism on the surface is, in fact, a mask for conformity. One also needs to take note of the obvious traits of generosity in American people, of the vast attendance at religious services that results in some measure because of the voluntary nature of religious participation in our history.

A basic distinction that was not made clearly enough in the text is that between "good" and "bad" individualism. One member commented on the progression of meanings of the term itself, from something of enormous value, a quality that an entire society tries to cultivate, to a pejorative term, something we need to avoid in order to survive as a people.

A second issue that was raised but not thoroughly discussed was whether the problem of individualism presented in *Habits* exists primarily on the level of experience/reality or on the level of language. Is community awareness and action actually present in the society, but masked because of a lack of language, or is this kind of awareness virtually absent?

Legitimate reasons for a retreat into the private sector that were not emphasized in the text include past and present religious authoritarianism and intolerance as well as the siege mentality described above. Also, a kind of individualism may be indirectly supported by theologies with a strong anthropological focus and the history of Western monotheism behind them. The language of the tradition of spirituality is also very individualistic, preventing any kind of uncritical return to that tradition as a panacea for our present problems. The past is both a cause and a corrective resource for our present difficulties.

Many correctives to a destructive individualism may already be in place. For U.S. Catholics, Vatican II's turn to the world is creating a turn away from self-preoccupation, symbolized most dramatically by the recent pastorals in the U.S. and Canada. Networking and movements of solidarity are emerging, (e.g., the many groups that come together to solve problems from alcoholism to eating disorders with the help of variations of the 12-step method) although still perhaps an experience of the minority. Church attendance remains healthy and growing, a forum that has as a goal the telling of the Christian story with the resultant exposure to a common language that it provides. Action for a more humane society can also be a source from which a common language may emerge.

The seminar members voiced a desire to continue with the theme of spirituality in a North American context. Topics will be: (a) method in spirituality; (b) the relationship of spirituality and psychology.

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