

## MEDIATING THE SOURCES OF THEOLOGY

This workshop was intended to address various issues raised by asking how the various possible sources of theology actually reach the stage of producing theology. Four different speakers opened the session by making brief presentations: Roger Haight spoke on "Praxis as Theological Mediation"; Paul Lakeland addressed "Critical Theory as Theological Mediation"; John Thiel read a brief paper on "The Theologian as Authorial Mediator"; and finally James Buckley responded to some of the ideas expressed by the first three speakers, under the heading of "Mediation as Means or End of Theology?"

Roger Haight very briefly summarized a rather lengthier paper in which he distinguished between five possible roles for praxis in the act of theological mediation. Praxis could be viewed as the indispensable context of meaning, or as authoritative witness to truth. It could, thirdly, be a reality principle for theological truth, akin on this understanding to Blondel's notion of "possessive knowledge." Fourthly, praxis might be seen as a generator of both theology and doctrine. Finally, praxis could be understood as a mediator of ultimate reality. Obviously, in any and every one of these respects praxis would exercise some kind of interpretative influence over the formation of theology.

Paul Lakeland prefaced his own presentation by with a brief explanation. The particular form of social theory that informed his paper was that of the more recent writings of Jürgen Habermas, specifically the idea of discourse intrinsic to Habermas's "theory of communicative action." Rather than try to give some inevitably superficial overview of this theory, Lakeland proposed instead to offer an example of how the idea of discourse might be valuable in theology, and chose the topic of tradition. How was it that bishops, theologians and lay Christians each contributed to that process of ongoing reflection on the inherited tradition? He argued that the specific roles of theologians and bishops must be seen as support for the essential work of the church in which all are involved, namely "the efficacious witness to the salvific love of God at work in the world." In this support, theologians "quarry at the coalface," while "bishops are engaged in a species of quality control." The episcopal charism is one of oversight over the conformity of the ongoing discourse to the rules of "communicative action."

John Thiel's paper addressed the mediating role of the experience of the theologian. Only in defending against the Reformers' insistence on *sola scriptura* did Trent and later Vatican II recognize a plurality of sources for divine revelation. Where Trent recognized Scripture and Tradition, it opened the way for the acceptance of experience as a source of theology. Thiel proposed to focus on the specific experience of the theologian. He distinguished between two paradigms for understanding the role of the theologian, the classical and the romantic. The former, understanding the task of the theologian as "the mimetic representation of

scriptural revelation," excluded personal qualities or "talent" from a role in theology. The latter, arising in response to Enlightenment criticisms of religion, saw the theologian engaged in discerning a developing revelation in the historical faith of the church. Thus the theologian came to be seen as a creative author, even sometimes as a romantic hero. Thiel suggested a need today to develop a "theological anthropology of theological talent." He suggested the possible use of Genesis' notion of creativity or Trent's *Decree on Justification* in accomplishing this task.

James Buckley's challenging response to the first three speakers began by distinguishing between two understandings of mediation. We could be talking about mediation in the sense in which we might use the word, for example, to justify mediating between Christians in conflict, that is, using mediation as a means to an end. Or mediation could become an end in itself, when it is a matter of needing mediation "when something immediate is lost." This second sense grows out of a loss of confidence in the ability to "preach Christ fearlessly," and a search for a new immediacy. Buckley's critique was motivated by the belief that although Haight, Lakeland and Thiel talk about the first sense of mediation a lot, they are primarily interested in the second sense, mediating the Gospel to the world. They are, in other words, trying to compensate for modernity's loss of the sense of the immediacy of the Gospel.

The ensuing discussion focused around two principal issues. A number of those present wanted to discuss matter arising from Thiel's discussion of the romantic hero, and relate it to problems of the relations between the magisterium and theologians today. A second level of the discussion was principally between several of the presenters. Haight and Thiel both challenged Buckley on what they perceived to be his negative attitude to the general issue of mediation.

Thiel's discussion of the romantic paradigm in which the theologian's personal talent for discernment and construction operates as a kind of charisma was accompanied by the observation that this can sometimes lead to a deformation of the paradigm into a self-understanding on the part of the theologian as a "romantic hero." This results in the subordination of the tradition to the insight of the theologian. Thiel suggested that this is partially what has led the magisterium to take issue with some contemporary theologians.

Participants in the discussion raised a number of issues here. Wasn't it possible that this model of the theologian was too individualistic, typical of bourgeois-liberal self understandings, and that an idea like that of Gramsci's "organic intellectual" might be more helpful? Others wanted to "name names": was Charles Curran a romantic hero? Thiel suggested that in fact Curran was an excellent example of the romantic model of the theologian in a thoroughly positive sense. Another speaker asked how we could use the romantic paradigm to mediate the past. Could Julian of Norwich, for example, be considered a theologian of "talent" if she predated the romantic paradigm? Thiel explained that in his view it was not that theologians working under the classical paradigm did not possess or utilize theological creativity, but that they did not understand their own talents as important in the theological process.

Buckley came under counter-attack, particularly from Haight and Thiel, for his treatment of the idea of mediation. He seemed to them to be suggesting that a

mediating theology was of its nature a bad thing. But didn't all theology somehow have to be mediated? Was it not possible that Buckley had defined mediation in two ways and assumed that speakers using the term mediation meant it in one of these two senses, when they might have a third meaning for the term? It was clear that Buckley thought of mediation as resulting in a kind of "cultural theology" in which theological truth was distorted in order to be acceptable to the interpretative categories of the times, where Haight, Thiel and Lakeland thought of mediation as a necessary moment without which "preaching Christ fearlessly" might fall on uncomprehending ears. To use a term current in CTSA meetings, the issue was one of "reception."

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