PROVIDENCE AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The workshop, moderated by John Thiel, centered on papers by Paul Lakeland and Christopher Mooney, S.J., which were followed by discussion among those in attendance. Both papers sought resources in contemporary methods and intellectual movements for new appreciations of the doctrine of providence and its relationship to human action in history.

Paul Lakeland's paper, "Who Cares? Praxis in an Age of Apocalypse," argued that the thought of the German social critic Jürgen Habermas offers a philosophical position more capable of theological appropriation than the more customarily employed views of Hegel on history, human agency and relationship to the future. Hegel's understanding of history is predicated on a view of the human subject that so identifies divine providence and political responsibility that talk of genuine human hope and historical expectation grounded in human action becomes difficult in the Hegelian system. Theologically interpreted, the result has been a view of providence that overshadows human agency in a grand vision of God's purposes at work in the broad strokes of history. It is this understanding of history in its presently exhausted state that has led to what some critics call the postmodern condition, a situation in which the very possibility of meaningfulness has become culturally questionable at all levels, be they social, environmental or the integrity of human subjectivity itself.

Lakeland, though, claimed that the very fragility of the postmodern condition provides a setting which allows for a renewed vision of Christian praxis in an age of apocalypse. Habermas' critical theory provides a better alternative to Hegel's in its attention to the postmodern experience, in its development of a hermeneutics of suspicion, and, above all, in its eschatological awareness. Lakeland based his constructive use of Habermas on the social theorist's important distinction between "system" and "lifeworld." Communicative reason's enhancement of the lifeworld of particularly human values and concerns raises the community of reasoned actions above a state of fealty to mere functionalist reason in the technological world, and so above the inhuman system that has been characteristic of the postmodern condition. Communicative reason's building of the lifeworld takes place through a social conversation that aims at the ideal speech situation, the abstract goal of reasoned discourse in which the systematic distortion of communication characteristic of technique is dispelled by human commitment to the process of building the lifeworld.

This eschatological dimension to Habermas' thought, in which the ideal speech situation functions as a secular analogue to the kingdom of God, grounds the preference for Habermas over Hegel as a philosophical basis for a doctrine of providence and political responsibility. Lakeland suggested that God's providence might well be conceived as God's willingness to engage with human beings in a com-

municative praxis in which their freedom and dignity is respected, and affirmed in the invocation of the ideal speech situation in every exercise of human responsibility in the world. In such a model, a providential vision of the present's relationship to a fulfilled future would assume a historical struggle towards the ideal speech situation, one in which human agents would play a tentative, though co-creative role.

Christopher Mooney's paper, "Political Responsibility within a Teilhardian Model of Providence and a Cybernetic Model of Society," sought in Teilhard's evolutionary spirituality a resource for a contemporary revision of the doctrine of providence and its implications for human responsibility in the political world. In the Teilhardian corpus, Mooney argued, one discovers an understanding of providence which insists on the divine presence within the creative process, particularly within the process of evolution from less to more complex biological configurations. This process culminates in the phenomenon of human consciousness and Teilhard's conviction that human consciousness possesses both the religious and the political responsibility to engage in action which pushes the evolutionary process to its culmination in the christic omega point, the end and goal of the evolutionary process. Teilhard's understanding of the providential movement of history thus sees God's action as largely immanent and at work in an anthropology that accentuates human free choice and responsibility since humanity represents the furthest advancement in a cosmic process that is both evolutionary and salvational.

As a test case for the accuracy and viability of this Teilhardian vision, Mooney considered the new science of cybernetics. Since the publication of N. Wiener's groundbreaking *Cybernetics—or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948), we have become acutely aware of the degree to which both social and biological evidence support Teilhard's claims regarding the mutual relationship between consciousness and complexification. Technological sophistication has produced a world compacted by the availability of channels through which information may flow, and, paradoxically, stretched by the infinite number of ways in which information can be practically applied.

Cybernetics' attention to the way that the processing of information functions as a reality sui generis has global implications for the world of knowledge and how that knowledge is used in the world. The prospect of extensive information control, whether in the forms of computer bytes or DNA, provides a systematic means of understanding the plethora of information that modern society has produced and a concrete example of the Teilhardian expectation that the human community could assume responsbility for being the governor of an evolving creation. Cybernetics offers direction that could be put to the service of either the use or the abuse of information, and so realistically offers a setting in which the social and political responsibility demanded by the Teilhardian vision could be exercised. Mooney suggested that this particular technical application of Teilhard's evolutionary world view concretizes the understanding of providence that a contemporary theology would need to construct if it is to remain faithful to the claims of Christian tradition and to the shape of a modern world view. In a doctrine of providence so understood, technological advancement need not be seen as an alienation from divine purposes. Responsibly exercised for the good of the human, the complex in-

strumentalities of the modern world function much more as embodiments of the biblical theme of stewardship.

Questions following these presentations were constructively critical of the categories posed by the presenters. One auditor questioned the advisibility of seeking a postmodern alternative to Hegel in Habermas' work since, as some critics of Habermas have noted, his theory of communicative action simply presents another metanarrative which is equally subject to the postmodern critique. Would not, the auditor questioned, it be more advisable to seek theological grounding in a thinker who attempts to thematize not only the social but also the individual which the postmodern world has primarily deconstructed? Lakeland denied that a new narrative grounds the Habermasian vision, insisting instead that the rules of rational discourse provide such a grounding and that Habermas employs these rules effectively to inveigh against the postmodern trajectory. Lakeland agreed that Habermas emphasizes the social over the individual. Lakeland, however, did not find this emphasis disquieting, but an effective way to counter the postmodern critique.

Another auditor questioned whether it was possible to speak as optimistically as Mooney had of the world as a global village in light of materialistic disparities between affluent and poor nations. Mooney responded that the recognition of that disparity as problematic was itself evidence of proliferating information and a heightened awareness that justified the Teilhardian perspective. The same auditor questioned whether the categories used in both presentations needed to be expanded if they are to be theologically adequate. Does not Habermas' concern with language need to be complemented by listening, and Teilhard's concern with control need to be complemented by balanced cooperation? The presenters regarded the question as rhetorical, as a valuable observation that could only merit an affirmative response.

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