

SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

The theme of the conference was addressed under the rubric "Theology and the Challenge of Culture" in two presentations by Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., Catholic Theological Union, and Michael J. Buckley, S.J., University of Notre Dame. Illness prevented the session's third presenter, Gregory Baum, from attending the conference. Schreiter's and Buckley's presentations were based on articles they had published the previous year in the fiftieth anniversary volume of *Theological Studies*.

Schreiter's presentation, "Faith and Cultures: Challenges to a World Church," briefly sketched the ways in which the concerns of missiology have shaped the church's approach to faith and culture. The relationship between faith and cultures has been conceived variously as the adaptation or accommodation of faith to culture, and more recently as the inculturation of faith, a more dynamic conceptualization which stresses the encounter between faith and cultures as an ongoing process. While the term "inculturation" has found a place in recent papal pronouncements, its use by the magisterium has not called attention to the theological issues and difficulties implicit in the inculturation of faith. In the brief time available, Schreiter outlined five areas on which reflection might center in order to appreciate the theological issue of inculturation more fully.

First, we need to be aware of the limits that impede our thinking about, and acting upon, the issues involved in the encounter between faith and cultures. From a theoretical point of view, there seems to be no method at hand with sufficient power to account for the pluralism of culturally transferable knowledge. From a practical point of view, this limitation is seen in a reluctance on the part of church authorities to sanction tentative, local attempts at inculturation. Second, we need to assess the differences between philosophical and empirical approaches to culture. The former has the advantage of compatibility with more customary approaches to Catholic theology, while the latter is more in keeping with the accepted canons of social-scientific analysis. We need not adopt a disjunctive approach to these alternatives, but do need to be aware of their respective strengths and weaknesses in elucidating cultural realities. Third, we need to articulate the cultural dimensions of our own ecclesial teachings and theological methods. Can one identify a core of faith that cuts across cultural and temporal differences? And how might cultural sensitivity influence Western expectations about the proper arrangement of the hierarchy of truths? Fourth, we need to investigate the issue of pluralism thoroughly, even at the most basic levels of our noetic (post-foundationalist philosophies may prove helpful here) and linguistic categories. Fifth, we must be willing to think through the traditional theological and doctrinal loci in terms of the issue of cultural difference, and be open to the difference this might make to

reflection on themes such as the doctrine of God, christology and theological anthropology.

Buckley's presentation, "Experience and Culture: A Point of Departure for American Atheism," sketched the development in the history of ideas that led to Western atheism in general, and then considered the particular circumstances of American atheism as represented in the thought of John Dewey.

The development of atheism in the West can be charted in terms of shifts in fundamental thinking about God, world and self. While Enlightenment and Romantic forms of rationalism held that God was necessary, at least as a postulate, to assure the meaningfulness of the human, the nineteenth-century atheistic stances of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud decried the divine as destructive to the human. Whether they judge the existence of God to be necessary for, or destructive to, the affirmation of self and world, both positions took for granted the close association between meaning and the integrity of human mental states. In the twentieth century, various philosophical stances such as pragmatism, existentialism and the many varieties of the "linguistic turn" reacted against the accepted concomitance of subjectivity and meaning, whether understood theistically or atheistically. Dewey's understanding of experience and culture bespeaks this perspective and illuminates the climate in which American theological thinking takes place.

For Dewey, experience is not limited to mental states but involves passivity and activity, suffering and doing. Culture can be conceived as the most enduring of these experiences. Dewey conceives of cultural experience as a self-enclosed, meaningful environment, and one in which the traditional concerns of theism can be reduced to moral inquiry and matters of practical action. In this view of experience as culture writ large, meaning can only be measured by the canons of empirical verifiability, a standard which defines the noetic expectations of the educated elite and leads to their indifference toward the claims of faith. American atheism is characterized by this indifference, and in spite of the prevalence of religious practice in the U.S., this indifference poses a serious challenge to theology as an intellectual endeavor in American culture.

This situation suggests several areas of concern for theological inquiry. First, American theology should not see its task as answering atheism, but as assessing adequately the problem of atheistic indifference. Second, if American culture does indeed pose difficulties for theological reflection, it also should be recognized as a possible resource for such reflection. Third, and finally, American atheism should be adjudged an ecclesial problem, one which calls for an honest evaluation of the church's own role in the prevalence of atheism in American culture.

Discussion of the presentations tended to focus on the specifically American cultural setting that was of particular concern in Buckley's presentation. Many of the auditors wanted to expand on the diagnosis of the American cultural situation that Buckley had offered. Analyses of American higher education, the place of the Catholic university in that educational system, the rise of historical consciousness, the attractiveness of fundamentalism and the prevalence of secular forms of spirituality were suggested as possible ways of explaining the challenge to theological inquiry in American culture. Buckley and Schreier pointed out the reductionistic pitfalls of any attempt to identify a single cause for the challenge posed to theology by American culture. They stressed the opportunities these very prob-

lems provided for searching for cultural forms of meaning that could redound to the benefit of theology. Two constructive proposals for theological inculturation in an American setting emerged from the discussion: the use of a scientific model informed by the physical sciences to enhance reflection on the doctrine of God; and the need to analyze what counts for authentic and inauthentic desiring in American culture as a resource for an inculturated theology of the Christian experience of salvation.

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