

SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

For its seventh year and the year of the quincentenary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas, the seminar invited papers on the topic "Community or Chaos? Theological Readings of the American Experience." William D. Lindsey, convener of the seminar, and Judith Merkel co-moderated the session. Presenters were Alfred Hennelly, Judith Merkle, and Stephen Schäfer.

Hennelly's papers were entitled "500 Years, Columbus, and Liberation Theology" and "Does Liberation Theology Have a Future?" Both papers summarized recent debate about the future of liberation theology and the upcoming fourth CELAM conference. Hennelly focused particularly on Latin American literature on these subjects, including essays by Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff, and Ignacio Ellacuría, and Gustavo Gutiérrez's forthcoming book, *The Sixteenth Century: God or Gold in the Indies*. A common theme of these theologians is that the "christianization" that was a concomitant of the European conquest of Latin America was superficial and problematic, and that the fundamental task of the Latin American Church today is to evangelize in a critical dialectic to the "christianization" process introduced in the conquest period. The theologians cited make this claim to counter the insistence of the working paper for the CELAM conference that the primary need of the Latin American Church today is to turn back to a solidly Christian culture that pre-existed the arrival of secularization and modernity.

Merkle presented a paper entitled "Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: The Future of American Religion*." The paper summarized the central tenets of Lasch's critique of the ideology of progress that underlies much American cultural self-understanding, and asked five questions about how American churches can apply this critique in its response to American culture today. These questions asked about how religion should respond to the drive of American culture to dominate nature, what critical faculties religion can bring to discourse about the new world order, the kind of person the culture of the 1990s is creating, where we look for a new paradigm of community, and whether any class in society is its savior.

Schäfer's paper was entitled "Community and Eschatology in Hegel's Lectures on Religion: A Working Paper on Some Ideas for the American Context." Schäfer argued that Hegel's lectures on religion present at least seven theses regarding the role of community as a critical dialectical eschatology within historical processes, and that these offer a starting point for constructing an understanding of community that can function as a countervailing to the powers of domination and marginalization in American life. These theses maintain that

community is concreteness, human subjectivity is foundationally intersubjective, community is solidarity and reconciliation for all people, community is the speculative community of philosophy, and community rests on a "discordant note," i.e., it exists always to "pass away" in preparation for other more comprehensive concretizations of community.

After presenters had given a brief summary of their predistributed papers, a lengthy discussion ensued. Questions and interest focused particularly on the theological warrants presumed by Lasch in his critique of progress, and on his claim that the work ethic of American working-class people would provide a better basis for a society solicitous of the common good than does the ethic of self-indulgence he thinks to have supplanted that ethic.

Attention also centered on the topic of community in both Schäfer's and Merkle's papers, on how it is to be concretized in American culture today, and how cultural co-optation of the term is to be avoided. (Merkle had argued provocatively that "community is what we Americans constantly say we need, but what we hate; we want community and not its bonds.") A European participant observed that American fascination with community had struck him as he taught and traveled in the U.S. in the past year. He asked why this fascination exists, and what it signifies. Finally, interest also centered on Hennelly's argument that the strong reaction of liberation theologians and some Latin American bishops to the working paper for the CELAM conference illustrates that the liberation theology movement is far from moribund.

After the meeting, seminar members held a short business meeting and decided to ask for at least one slot on next year's program. Since the seminar is now discussing its future with the CTSA board, it passed around a sheet at this year's meeting to ascertain whether there is interest in continuing the work of the group. Among those signing the sheet, four participants stated that they would be willing to make presentations in the future.

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