

## SEMINAR ON THE NATURE AND METHOD OF THEOLOGY

The theme of the conference was addressed under the rubric "How is Experience Normative for Theology?" in three presentations by John R. Sachs (Weston School of Theology), Patricia Wismer (Seattle University), and Kathryn Tanner (Yale University).

Sachs's presentation, "Transcendental Method and the Normativity of Human Experience," sought an answer to the session's question in Rahner's theology. Rahner, Sachs argued, neither defined a transcendental method with precision nor claimed its methodological exclusivity. It is incorrect to understand Rahner's method as ahistorical, even though Rahner gives some cause for this misunderstanding. In seeking the a priori conditions of knowledge of God, the transcendental method proceeds a posteriori, following upon the actual events and experience of God's graceful self-communication in history. Ignatian spirituality is an important resource for Rahner's understanding of the Christian experience, which insists upon the commensurability of nature and grace. Experience is better described as a source than as a norm of theology. But to the degree that transcendental experience is revelatory in concrete instances, all good theology takes experience seriously in one way or another. Thus, Rahner's attention to the particularity of experience even when speaking of its transcendental dimensions suggests the contextuality of the transcendental method itself, and, when rightly understood, its openness to the insights and even procedures of other methodological approaches.

Wismer began her paper, "Negative Experience as a Norm for Theology," with Rabbi Irving Greenberg's observation that "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children." This observation, she proposed, can be extended to all sufferers and serve as a heuristic for theological method and discourse. Insisting that such methodological construction needs to be faithful to the experience of actual sufferers, Wismer recounted the story of a survivor of childhood and adult sexual abuse included as a first-person narrative account in James N. Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (1991). The experience of this anonymous survivor illustrates the consistent psychological, sociological, and even theological profile of abuse: that it is about control, largely perpetrated by males, and often associated in the experience of abused believers with the patriarchy of God. Since our understandings of fatherhood are so in need of correction, response to, rather than rejection of, the patriarchal conception of God would be the most valuable interpretive course. To that end, Wismer commended the proposal of Janet Pais that the anger of the abused child be understood as the

wrath of God and so render meaningful an otherwise vexing image. Wismer concluded with two normative guidelines for valuing the experience of sufferers in the theological method, and what she judged to be an essential prerequisite for the practitioner of that method: "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of abused children and adult survivors"; "Priority should be given to listening to the voices of survivors and to action to end the cycle of abuse"; and "The theologian must acknowledge and work through repressed or denied childhood suffering" in order to be sensitive to the suffering of others both personally and theologically.

In her paper "Experience as a Norm from a Cultural-Linguistic Perspective," Kathryn Tanner argued that, contrary to the opinion of some, experience is normative in cultural-linguistic interpretation. George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984) regards experience generically as what a cultural framework reinterprets, and specifically as the product of Christian efforts at reinterpretation. If experience is normative in this latter perspective, then it functions as a criterion of adequacy within the Christian framework or at least as a valid influence on that framework. The question of the normativity of experience also raises the concerns of the role of creative agents in the cultural-linguistic model, the susceptibility of the Christian framework to change, and its openness to a diversity of opinion that reflects the individuality of its practitioners. Tanner argued that the very purpose of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model is to affirm the realities of creativity, change, and diversity, albeit within Christianity's interpretive framework. Moreover, experience is normative in Lindbeck's model. Since Christian experience is not wholly determined by its cultural-linguistic framework, it can and does present a norm for selecting particular aspects of that framework's diversity for circumstantial application. Lindbeck, however, rejects the normativeness of experiences outside the Christian framework. Tanner concluded by noting that Lindbeck's emphasis upon the stability, uniformity, and structural character of the Christian framework tends to run counter to the possibilities for experience within his own cultural-linguistic model. Cultural-linguistic theology will be all the more illuminating for the Christian life if further attention is paid to the diverse experiences of Christians, even to their disagreements and conflicts.

Discussion of the papers developed in several directions. One auditor questioned why Wismer did not enlist the aid of postmodern commentators in order to clarify the normative view of experience she commended, while another suggested that negative experience could not be the first moment in theological interpretation. Wismer responded that postmodern commentators tend to treat experience individualistically and overlook the communal proportions of suffering to which theology must attend. Beginning theological analysis with, or even moving too quickly to, positive experiences easily trivializes the reality of suffering or encourages the tendency to deny it. Solidarity with the abused through action, she noted, properly follows from the experiential sympathy the

theologian needs. Sachs observed that even analogical theologies, if true to the etymology of their approach, are rightly attuned to the negative dimension of experience. One auditor noted that academic institutions are settings defined by the profile of abuse and so naturally resistant to hermeneutical approaches like Wismer's. Finally, several auditors noted similarities in Wismer's and Tanner's approaches, their shared concern for the particularity of experience and for method understood as heuristics rather than as system. Good method, Wismer responded, proceeds from dialogue, and from one in which human suffering both speaks and is heeded.

JOHN E. THIEL  
*Fairfield University*  
*Fairfield, Connecticut*