

SPIRITUALITY AND CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THEOLOGY

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This workshop was developed by scholars working in both the field of systematics (Ashley and McIntosh) and the field of spirituality (Dreyer and Burton-Christie) in order to enhance dialogue between the disciplines and to explore more thoroughly the possibilities for constructive collaboration. The organizers were concerned to present positive proposals for a closer relationship which would envision each discipline as an integral part of the other.

The first two presentations were designed to examine methodological issues and rationales for the constructive role of spirituality in the theological enterprise. The second two papers then took up some concrete examples (exegesis) of this approach for examination (John Donne).

Elizabeth Dreyer began by discussing developments that have moved us toward this dialogue between theology and spirituality. The experience of the faith community itself has testified strongly to the "deleterious effects of the separation of the theological enterprise from the living faith of the people." Attention has come to be focused on the partnership between the disciplines during the patristic and medieval eras. Awareness has grown that historical-critical exegesis alone is less than satisfying. The recovery of women's history and experience has led to a new appreciation for the role of affectivity in theology, issues of embodiment, and the complex role of symbols and metaphors.

Yet there are a number of impediments to the dialogue. Many scholars prefer to avoid the daunting hermeneutical problems encountered in moving from poetic or imagistic texts to more systematic and philosophical formulations. The mystical impetus towards divine ineffability seems to some to conflict with the theological drive for intelligibility. Some theologians may also fear that their status within the academic community may be undermined by appeals to the "fuzzy" discourse of the mystics. Nevertheless hermeneutical advances should alleviate many of these apprehensions. Dreyer remarked that she is "less sympa-

thetic with those who dismiss the corpus of spiritual literature simply because they fear its affective, participative, and self-implicating nature."

She went on to note four arguments in favor of the theology-spirituality dialogue: (1) All theological field specializations should in any case develop closer conversation with each other; (2) contemporary theological developments such as the turn to the subject, focus on experience, awareness of the constitutive and metaphorical nature of all language, new appreciation for the role of praxis, etc. have all made a retrieval of the spiritual traditions not only timely but necessary; (3) the saints and mystics appropriate the tradition and then reexpress it in ways that are fresh and affectively appealing across a wide range of the Christian community; and (4) the mystical tradition can help theology explore aspects of religious experience that have been ignored or marginalized and do so in a way that fosters concrete response for the good of the world. Dreyer concluded with examples arguing for deeper appreciation of how profoundly *theological* spirituality actually is.

J. Matthew Ashley then approached the same questions from the point of view of the systematic theologian. Beginning with the standard division between systematic and fundamental theology, Ashley noted that spiritual classics can offer creative and provocative formulations of Church symbols and doctrines: these breathe new life into systems of theology that have become too closed in on themselves "and too obsessed with the drive to logical consistency and technical articulation." They bring insights that are deeply corrective to academic habits of thought. In terms of fundamental theology, Ashley called on theologians to be more self-reflective of their own spiritual horizons and assumptions, an awareness that could be enhanced and enriched by intentional exposure to spiritual classics. Often theologies cannot even be properly understood unless the constitutive role of spirituality in those theologies has been surveyed.

Employing an analogy from the history and philosophy of science, Ashley noted that it was "careful *historical* study of 'lived scientific experience' that has led and continues to lead to . . . fruitful insights into the nature of science. . . . So too can the careful historical study of spirituality aid in our comprehension of how theologies are born and develop." These historical studies often reveal how spirituality has created a new "attunement" to self and world which in turn has led to a new theological perspective. Many difficulties remain: how does one adjudicate theological disputes whose roots lie in quite different spiritual apprehensions of reality? By what criteria can one judge whether a mystical image of God "had passed beyond the provocative and has begun to contradict" Christian faith? Nevertheless such questions are more likely to be susceptible of resolution if both disciplines take more counsel with each other.

Douglas Burton-Christie began the concrete explorations by examining the history of biblical interpretation as a resource for theology. He drew attention to an emerging postcritical mood in which biblical interpretation is again understood as including ritual and prayer, martyrdom and politics, etc. and can take the form

of commentaries, homilies, hymns, frescoes, poetry, visionary literature, and aphorisms. He noted that besides recalling this great diversity of forms, it is good to "consider the possibility of retrieving aspects of the hermeneutical strategies that gave rise" to this diversity.

In a section on innerbiblical exegesis, Burton-Christie showed how the work of Michael Fishbane highlights the divine status of the interpretive process, both within the canonical text and in later stages. Similarly Richard Hays' work on Paul suggests that the latter envisioned a lived interpretation and appropriation of the biblical world of meaning in the formation of the early Christian communities. In the realm of ascetic biblical interpretation, Burton-Christie pointed to a culture whose deep appreciation for the power of spoken language and the elder-disciple relationship led to an inherently dialogical and living sense of scripture. Scripture becomes an interior possession and source of contemplation, and the process of interpretation requires the transformation of life.

These examples suggest five reasons why the history of biblical interpretation can contribute to the theology-spirituality dialogue: (1) the diversity of forms helps to avoid artificial constrictions of method; (2) "the ongoing tension between adaptation and revision of the tradition reminds us of the endlessly creative (and destabilizing) power of genuine interpretation"; (3) the link between moral growth and exegesis keeps before us the need to interpret the text in concrete lived acts; (4) "the suggestion that commentary shares in and extends the revelatory power of Scripture gives heightened value" to the community's exegetical struggles; and (5) "the interpretation of scripture is seen as a charged religious encounter, providing the ground out of which genuine theological reflection can arise."

In the final paper, Mark McIntosh offered an analysis of John Donne's mystical christology from the point of view of systematics. The question was how Donne's homiletical spirituality can contribute to contemporary issues in christology. McIntosh argued that Donne's mystical understanding of Christ's relationship to humankind generally could be analytically appropriated in answering the contemporary question about that relationship.

In Donne's sermons Christ always appears as a transformative figure, "with the power to drive the soul into an ecstatic amazement" which is "the very melting and undoing of the soul necessary for its new creation." There are three grounds for this effect of Christ upon the soul in Donne: (1) eschatological, in that Christ in glory is able to draw the believer towards him as the believer's own proper future; (2) unitive, in that Donne understands the soul to have been bonded to Christ eternally by the desire of God and so destined and created to be fulfilled in this relationship; and (3) existential, in that Donne emphasizes the continual power of Christ to come into the world by birth in the believer's soul. In all these ways Christ's interaction with the soul permits the believer to develop a new sense of identity, "a new understanding of self as permeated by the entire historical existence of Christ."

McIntosh then showed how Donne views the very existence of Christ as self-bestowing, self-liquefying. The sacrificial fullness of Jesus' historical acts render him free and open to all; Christ's sufferings enlarge the scope of his identity so as to encompass the world. So Donne effects a transition from metaphysical Christology to existential-historical modes of thought, in which Jesus emerges as the focus of a living historical personal reality, supremely accessible to humankind, and supremely transformative of all who venture into this relationship. In this way Donne's mystical Christology, as an example, might direct contemporary christology to a more concrete interpretation of Christ; one, moreover, that takes fuller account of his continuing interaction with humanity.

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