

PARADIGM CHANGE IN THEOLOGY

Topic: "Paradigm Change in Theology" Revisited
Convener: Anthony J. Godzieba, Villanova University
Moderator: Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Manhattan College
Presenters: Lieven Boeve, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Anthony J. Godzieba, Villanova University
Respondent: Terrence W. Tilley, Fordham University

The convention's theme provided the occasion to examine theological reactions to broader shifts in context, the adequacy of previous assumptions regarding continuities/discontinuities within the Christian tradition, and the relation between Christian tradition and contemporary contexts.

Lieven Boeve's paper was read in his absence by Dr. Jürgen Mettepenning, a member of Boeve's Leuven research group. "Assessing the Küng-Tracy Symposium: A Late-Modern Paradigm Challenged by a Postmodern Context?" revisited the 1983 Tübingen conference on "Paradigm Change in Theology" led by Hans Küng and David Tracy. Boeve specifically examined Küng's use of Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts and questioned its adequacy for the contemporary theological context. At present, Boeve argued, there is a clash between two paradigms, one a "neo-Augustinianism" that "relates to the present context in a rather oppositional way," the other advocating a "critical correlation" between the Christian tradition and present experiences and challenges. The key elements of this clash are the ongoing reception of Vatican II (innovation vs. continuity) and the question as to how the Christian tradition itself develops (continuity vs. "paradigm change"). A future Leuven symposium on this topic will consider three questions: what is at stake in Küng's theological application of Kuhn's theory, what a contemporary application of Kuhn's theory to theology would look like, and whether the "neo-Augustinianist"- "correlationist" debate can be described as a paradigm conflict. Boeve offered a "provisional assessment": (a) Küng's "selective" use of Kuhn's theory obscures its "radical hermeneutical character" (e.g., Küng's identification of the historical Jesus as the "kernel" of theology which persists despite contextual diversity); (b) Küng's theology remains "profoundly modern" and correlational, while its "modern partner" has been "deconstructed" by postmodern criticism; (c) Küng's approach cannot account for neo-Augustinian arguments that define Christian faith over against the contemporary context, nor for the persistent appeals to Augustine in times of "paradigm crisis" throughout Christian history. A more productive alternative would be a theology of recontextualization that acknowledges the particularity, plurality, and ambiguity of the contemporary context, as well as the relation between truth-as-incarnation and historical contingency.

Anthony Godzieba's essay ("On the Paranoid-Critical Method in Theology, and Its Overcoming") focused on a particular contemporary shift: the recurring

“apocalyptic critique of ‘modernity’” within some recent theological discourse. These critiques, he argued, stem from a paranoia about modernity that has been raised to the level of a theological method. The phrase “paranoid-critical method” comes from Salvador Dalí’s surrealist theory of art: pushing one’s imagination to the point of extreme anxiety and delirium (thus “destabilizing” reality) permits the artist, in this hallucinatory state, to experience the creative transformation of objects. As used here, it describes a theological method practiced by some Catholic theologians and philosophers whereby one develops an obsessive counter-narrative about Western culture—resulting from an overwrought fear of anthropocentrism and human autonomy—that uncritically and univocally equates “modernity” with implicit atheism. These narratives ignore and even disavow Catholic theology’s successes in engaging critically and productively with modern views of person, society, history, and the natural world (e.g., the overcoming of extrinsicism in theological anthropology signaled by the work of Blondel and Rahner). As examples, Godzieba noted the recent identification of “liberalism” with the “culture of death”, David L. Schindler’s criticism of John Courtney Murray, and R. R. Reno’s dismissal of contemporary Catholic theologians for being “captive” to modern continental philosophy and for having “destroyed” the “coherent culture” of Neoscholasticism and its brand of certainty which could serve as a model for explaining theological truth. These anti-modern arguments, Godzieba suggested, rest on surprisingly modern presuppositions. To overcome “theological paranoia,” he argued for an emphasis on the Catholic incarnational and sacramental imagination which assumes intrinsic connections between creation, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection of Christ and thus “looks for grace everywhere”, as well as the recognition of the various “modernities” in play during the post-medieval period.

Terrence Tilley’s response analyzed in detail some elements of Kuhn’s paradigm theory, its emphasis on problem-solving practices, and its effect on truth-claims. He agreed with Boeve that Küng’s use of the theory is inadequate. In fact, by insisting on “invariants” beneath all theologies, his “late-modern theology” ignores the theory’s implications. What Küng calls “paradigm shifts” are really “shifts in the locus of religious power and authority.” Rather than highlight abstract paradigms, Tilley suggested that we try to understand “other practices” within Christianity “and allow them to confront ours—and then do our theology.” With regard to Godzieba’s point, Tilley noted that condemnation of liberal and progressive theologies did not destroy their insights. Rather, they were resurrected when the context changed and live on in “very different, perhaps incommensurable, patterns of theological work.” Apocalyptic discourse stems from “despair over the present,” but such despair denies the Incarnation, which is the basis for our hope “that God has not abandoned the redeemed world.” Tilley’s suggestion: “the apocalypticists’ disease will be cured by tincture of time. Why spill ink over them?”

Once the speakers were given a chance for follow-up comments, the ensuing

discussion raised the issues of continuity/discontinuity in a theology's approach to the tradition, the relation of truth to history, and the concept of "apocalyptic" that lay behind the critique of theological discourse.

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