

THEOLOGY IN THE SEMINARY CONTEXT

This year's workshop considered "The Challenge of Theological Education in a Multicultural Context." The opening speaker, Peter C. Phan (Catholic University of America), stated that the basic work of theology requires a correlation between the Christian tradition and a particular cultural context. Especially in the United States, this task has been complicated by the multicultural context of both Church and society. The fact of multiculturalism therefore makes it urgent to reexamine how we do theology, and particularly to reconsider the goal of seminary formation, its curricula, and the role of its professors.

Today, historical consciousness has helped theologians to realize that despite occasional claims to universality, all theologies are local, indigenous, or contextualized. This raises the problem of how theologians are to mediate between a faith rooted in an ecclesial tradition and people who are situated in one or more particular cultures. Following Stephan Bevans, Phan noted five different models that describe how this mediation can be carried out. The translation model upholds fidelity to the Christian message in its activity among contemporary societies. Taking the opposite tack, the anthropological model assumes that theology should accept and seek to identify with the specific culture being addressed. The praxis model attempts to encourage social and cultural transformation in light of the Christian message. The synthetic model seeks to meld the strengths of the first three approaches. Finally, the transcendental model takes as its point of departure neither the tradition nor the culture but the subject doing theology, and expects that subject to work out of a thorough personal conversion. These five models, each with their strengths and weaknesses, are not mutually exclusive. One or another may be more effective in a given sociocultural setting.

In light of the expectations of the *Program for Priestly Formation*, Phan offered several general suggestions to help seminary theological faculties promote in students a readiness for ministry in a multicultural setting. First, it is important to help them distinguish between their personal faith and its concrete expression in language, rituals, and ways of life. Second, the local and limited quality of all theologies, including those of the ecclesiastical magisterium, is to be fully appreciated. Third, when expounding a theological theme, it is often helpful to show how particular ethnic or racial groups might approach it. Fourth, professors do well to give due emphasis to the religious component of their students' cultures. Finally, basic to all the preceding suggestions is a formational task: the development of the ability to set aside prejudices in order to bring a respectful openness and a willingness to learn from all of our encounters with an alien

culture. Phan concluded his remarks with a number of practical suggestions for members of seminary theology faculties.

In his own presentation, Roger E. McGrath (St. Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore) agreed that a multicultural context raises issues for all theological educators in whatever setting they work. However McGrath proposed that the workshop consider a basic problematic that the multicultural context of theology seems to present. In general terms, if all theologies are inevitably local and limited, can there ever be a theology that is truly universal or normative? Or is theology destined to be no more than an irreducible series of local theologies? This question has a particular relevance to seminary theologians on account of their ecclesial responsibilities. If all theologies are local, how can the theology of the hierarchical magisterium claim a privileged and normative position with respect to other theologies?

McGrath then suggested three avenues of thought that might prove helpful in examining the basic problem he outlined. The first is based upon the fact that official Church texts themselves employ several different, competing, and even contradictory theologies of the magisterium. Might the relationship between these "sublocal" theologies and the theology of the magisterium itself offer a way to understand the relationship between the many theologies in the Church and the normative status claimed by magisterial theology? Another avenue of approach would begin by considering the relationship between the many local churches and the one universal Church. Might this relationship be a useful analogate to use in trying to gain deeper insight into the interplay between many local theologies and a normative theology identified with the magisterium? A third avenue of inquiry examines the self-transcending subject as suggested by the fifth model of contextualization noted earlier by Phan. This approach considers a theologian, culturally specified and working out of an authentic conversion, who considers the experience and source of divine revelation. Such a theologian's context is conditioned by the transcendent reality that is being considered as well as his or her own particular and limited cultural background. The work of theology thus includes both a limited and local experience of revelation and the horizon of that experience that transcends all cultures and is adequately contained by none. If a transcendent ground of theology lends unity to the theological enterprise, might a similar unity also be accessible and communicable among local, culturally conditioned theologies?

In the discussion that followed, the participants contributed a number of observations and suggestions on issues pertinent to the subject. One general problem is the tendency of some students to defend a particular theological outlook as if it were complete and fully adequate in itself. Historical studies are useful in addressing this difficulty because they allow students to see that their own views do not embody the whole of theology or all religious truth. Similarly, a sound hermeneutical examination of magisterial statements can disclose the particular profile and limits inherent in them. A related difficulty is the prefer-

ence of some students to view the Church as a pyramid, thus militating against efforts to present the Church as communion with all its multicultural implications. Here too students will find it difficult to say that their own experience and outlook is normative when they have to relate to others who bring different cultural and ecclesial experiences to the discussion. A multicultural class can also be effective in showing how different groups sometimes view one traditional doctrine, for example, the just war theory, in very different ways.

A further issue was the tension between faith content and cultural particularity. On the one hand, in order to be effective with another cultural group it is helpful to know something about its language, history, and religious background as well as its worldview and categories of thought. At least some appreciation and respect for these elements is needed in order to foster communication and understanding. On the other hand the Gospel has a content and integrity that are to be respected, a point of special importance in the preparation of students for ministry in the Church. It is a challenge to know how to bring the Gospel and a particular culture together in a way that honors both and diminishes neither.

Although the multicultural texture of society and Church indeed generates acute and sometimes daunting challenges, the workshop recognized that the local community often has many assets that can help us respond, notably the devotional life, history and resources of particular cultures, and the benefits of diversity itself. These and an open mind, humility, and genuine respect for others should allow a reasonable approach to theology in a multicultural context.

WALTER J. WOODS

*St. John's Seminary
Brighton, Massachusetts*