

## **Topic 21: Religious Authority and the Dynamics of Theology**

**I. Experience as Constitutive of Revelation:** A) We begin with human experience. Human experience itself gives rise to the religious question and all religious responses to the question must be mediated through some historical medium. Moreover, experience represents every person's dynamic, active presence to him- or herself in the world. The religious question arises as the ground and goal of human striving. This means that the roots of religious experience lie within the human subject and his or her experience.

The religious dimension of experience emerges as a dialectic of positivity and negativity. The negative experience of contrast: we raise questions about something we experience implicitly as lacking or wrong. If there were no negativity, no question would arise. At the same time, human existence is driven by positive desires; it strives for wholeness that it lacks in itself. Therefore, if we had no positive hope, no question would arise.

The theological position that "revelation constitutes a form of human experience" depends on an understanding of a self-communicating God who, as Spirit, works within human subjects in a way that corresponds to the structure of human existence itself.

**II. Religious Authority and Theology:** Theology unfolds as a discipline within the church, the Christian movement and its traditions which witness to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

- Regarding the question of the authority of the church (in its institutional form) over theology, it is important to distinguish religious authority from the practical, disciplinary authority exercised by Church leaders for the good of Church order.
- In an intellectual climate suspicious of external authority, what objective, external authority can claim to speak with God's voice and govern the faith life of believers?
- Fundamental theology aims to redefine religious authority as religious by showing that it shares in the humility, compassion and salvific healing of Jesus' authority.

The sources of systematic theology - scripture, tradition, liturgy, witness of martyrs and mystics - can only be such for one who participates in them through experience. "Experience is the medium through which the sources „speak" to us" (Tillich). They function as such because the "knowledge" of faith is a participatory,

practical knowledge, a knowledge that we not only know but also do. "Christ must always be thought of in such a way that he is never merely thought of (J. B. Metz).

- As we affirm the possibility that experience can and does serve as the medium through which the objective sources of religious faith are revealed, at the same time we must insist that this personal experience is not itself a theological source, whether experience is conceived in an ontological, scientific, or mystical sense.
- As Tillich argues, "Christian theology is based on the unique event of Jesus the Christ, and in spite of the infinite meaning of this event it remains this event and, as such, the criterion of every religious experience."

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does your belief in Jesus Christ answer your own personal religious question?
2. "If there were no negativity, no question would arise. If we had no positive hope, no question would arise." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?