

Topic 5: Doing Theology Today

I. "What's new in theology today?" In response to this question one might respond in all seriousness, "the fact that we ask questions like what's new in theology?" In a classical framework, theological truths are timeless. The question about the new is at best peripheral or irrelevant; at worst, it is irreverent, dangerous and even idolatrous.

Our contemporary framework is dominated by historical consciousness. Something has shifted and theology needs to respond to that shift if it to help people live their faith. To put it very generally, the focus of theology is no longer an unchanging God of timeless truths but the God of Jesus as God-for-us, God of the Reign of God, the Lord of history.

The image of God-for-us touches something important and real: revelation (the self-disclosure of God) occurs in and through historical realities. We could ask, where is God revealed? The answer is, in is the real-life situations of God's people. This is why we need to ask how can our situation today best be characterized?

II. The Situation of Theology Today: Eight factors that characterize our global situation today

1. The impact of historical consciousness: Historical conscious results from the awareness that human beings only grasp reality in partial, culturally conditioned and time-bound ways. Each place provides its own point of view; every point of view is changing through time; even if one repeats exactly a "truth" from another time, one is not saying the same thing as those who spoke before. Hence, every truth is historically situated and culturally conditioned. The watchwords for this situation: plurality and ambiguity.

2. Historical Consciousness and Jesus Christ: With historical consciousness there has emerged a new interest in Jesus as a historical human being and new questions about the meaning of the divinity of Jesus. From within historical consciousness, the divinity of Jesus cannot be presupposed. The problem: how can a historically conditioned human being be understood as divine?

3. The new awareness of the earth and of ecological concerns: Not only developments in the philosophy of science, but developments in science itself continue to affect theology: we are constantly learning about our planet and our cosmos. This leads to a changing and expanding cosmic consciousness.

4. The new awareness of the poor and the victims of history: Our world today is

marked by an intolerable amount of social-historical suffering that is humanly caused and could be avoided or changed. The theodicy question (why does a good and all powerful God allow suffering and evil) takes on a new sense of urgency. In the light of so much suffering and the apparent cheapness of human life, on what grounds can one claim that life is meaningful at all, much less that Jesus Christ is the source of its meaning?

5. The new awareness of women and the historical reality of the suffering of women: Feminism in its various forms arose in response to a particular form of social-historical suffering and oppression, that which is directed against women because they are women. Sexism, for example, takes a variety of forms as institutionalized oppression often leads directly to violence against women. Various forms of feminism raise challenging questions for our understanding of Jesus - can the man Jesus be savior for women? And particularly trenchant questions for the Church.

6. Jewish-Christian dialogue and Christian theology after Auschwitz: We have a new awareness of the reality of Christians anti-Semitism in history. How has that affected our theology? There is a new awareness of the Jewishness of Jesus and Christian affinities with Judaism. The bottom line is this: we can't be Christian except in relation to Jews and taking seriously our role in the historical atrocities. Further questions arise in relation to the Christian conquest of the Americas, colonialism, slavery, etc.

7. Inculturation, the relationship of Christian faith to the situation of other cultures: Language and meaning are always inculturated: there is no perennial philosophy or universal language. To represent and to communicate to specific people, Christian theology must take up the "ways of being in reality" of other cultures. An example of the kind of theological questions that can arise: How do we speak of the "two natures in one person" of Christ in a language that has no such concepts or parallel terms for "nature" and "person?" How do you speak of the Logos in Asia? Is it permissible to speak of Jesus Christ in terms of Tao?

8. Jesus Christ and the savior figures of other religions. This is directly related to the previous point. A key element of historical consciousness for Christians lies not simply in the fact of religious pluralism, but the positive religious value of pluralism. Part of our new situation today is an awareness that other religions are valid before God and are real mediations of God: they can teach us something about God.

III. Doing "Good" Theology Today: Theology finds its bearings in revelation, tradition, and the magisterium as its primary sources. It takes its central symbols, concepts and principles from these sources. However, if theology is to articulate the living connection between the transcendent God and historical reality, it must be aware that it always stands in danger of sliding into abstraction. Hence, it must pay attention to the place where we live and from where our questions arise.

A contemporary Catholic theologian from El Salvador, Jon Sobrino, argues that every Christian theology must seek to confront suffering, to determine its fundamental form or forms, and then ask what can be done about it. Finally, the task of theology involves not only knowing but doing God's will by following Jesus in his mission to proclaim and inaugurate the Reign of God.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do we do theology?
2. What has shifted in the way we do theology today?
3. What are some of the key factors that influence the way we do theology today?