

RELIGION

The Journal of Kansas School of Religion at The University of Kansas

Volume 10, Number 1; October, 1972



ON STYLES OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FOR THE FUTURE

A report on and response to a Consultation

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How do we think about, reflect upon, "do" theology in this strangely up-rooted period of human history? As social structures groan under the demands for radical change, as human individuals agonize in the midst of what seems to be a universal instability, how does the Christian determine "what God is doing" and point the way to an appropriate human response? These questions, and more like them, provided the basis for a Consultation held at the Kansas School of Religion and the United Ministries Center a year ago. The responses to the questions, the asking of new questions and the pondering of their possibilities took place in a dynamic which is still in process, one year later. This article will describe some of what was said during that week of August 1-6, 1971, and develop some of the continuing response which has come since then.

One of the four "resource persons" for the week was the internationally-recognized Roman Catholic theologian, Gregory Baum, O.S.A. Immediately after the Consultation, he wrote an item for *Theology Today*, a journal of whose Editorial Council he is a member. Baum put it this way:

It is rare that theological workshops are exciting events, but the Consultation on Styles of Theological Reflection for the Future, sponsored by the United Ministries in Higher Education and the Kansas School

of Religion at the University of Kansas, was an exception to the rule. The resource persons invited to the workshop, held between August 1 and 6, were Sam Keen, the author of *To a Dancing God* and *Apology for Wonder*, Rubem Alves, author of *A Theology of Human Hope*, James Cone, author of *Black Theology and Black Power*, and *Black Theology of Liberation*, and myself. The participants numbered over one hundred and fifty.

Since I am still under the impact of the exchange and conflict that took place in an unusual atmosphere of trust and candor, I find it difficult to give a balanced report of the Consultation. The presentations did not supply us with answers. On the contrary, what happened throughout the discussion was the deepening of the questions. Yet to be in touch with the crucial questions, however painful they may be, is to be delivered from superficial questions and to move forward toward the truth that saves.¹

To be "delivered from superficial questions" was a major objective of the Consultation planners. Members of the United Ministries (campus ministry) staff who had recently attended international theological conferences were especially concerned with the tendency of such conferences *not* to enter into the kind of discussion which provides, in Baum's words, "the deepening of the questions." It was the determination of those of us from the School of Religion faculty and United Ministries staff planning the Consultation that it *be a consultation*—that it have an internal dynamic of exchange and creativity which is in itself a style of "theological reflection." We set out to bring together some "resource persons" (rather than "speakers" or "presenters of papers") whose credentials for theological scholarship are widely recognized, and whose approach is, to



Dr. Rubem Alves has revealed another very human aspect of his "Style of Theological Reflection," to the amusement of (l to r)—James Cone, Sam Keen, Gregory Baum. The four theologians were the major resource persons for The Theological Consultation held at Kansas School of Religion.

say the least, open and growing. The announcement of our effort through various media and the National Campus Ministry Association brought together some 175 persons from across the United States and several other countries who wished to participate in such an enterprise. *Participate* they did. As Baum put it, there was "exchange and conflict" taking place in "an unusual atmosphere of trust and candor." Later in his article, he went ahead to say that the discussions were "never dull, often significant, and sometimes quite vehement." The experience was a *personal* one for most who were there; anyone who takes his academic discipline seriously knows that some of his most important, most fundamental reflection and growth takes place at the point of *personal* entanglement with and immersion in the issues and questions basic to the discipline. That is not all, of course. There is a considerable standing-aside and reflecting-upon which must be done in any discipline, and theology is no exception. Both things happened during that week and, for many who participated, have continued to happen.

It was decided that each of the "headliners" would have a day that was *his*—to present whatever he decided, in whatever structure seemed most appropriate to him. The others would enter into an exchange with him, on his grounds. The last half day was set aside for an all-out free-for-all among them, based on questions and responses from the participants. The opening evening was a time designed to get conferees ac-

quainted with, involved with, each other and the resource persons. Evenings along the way provided opportunities for conferees to be in small groups of 20 or so, in homes, with one of the four leaders.

This description of consultation assumptions, mechanics, and detail is provided because it was so essential to what happened, what came out of the experience. It was a part of the *style of reflection*. It included some presuppositions about what theology must do and be at this point in human history. It assumed an open community of persons, a broad range of personal experience feeding into the enterprise, a wide spectrum of traditions informing the discussions. (Participants included a large number of Roman Catholics along with a wide range of Protestants.) It assumed that theology is a part of life, of action—never, in Baum's words, "an abstract and objective statement about reality."

The first to "have his day" was Sam Keen. Keen is called by some a "theologian of the Human Potential Movement," partly due to his work with the Esalen Institute and his current grounding in psychoanalytic insights on human growth. Those who sought out his writings before the Consultation discovered a fascinating variety: first, a book on Marcel; then a study of wonder; finally the call for a "visceral theology" in *To A Dancing God*. Having taught in academia, he is now a consulting editor with *Psychology Today* and a free-lance writer. It made sense, then, that Keen would press us on the

necessity for each person to know his own "story." Personal history is basic, he insisted, to the way one perceives reality and, therefore, to one's thinking about God and religious interpretations of that reality. It is in searching for one's own story that the first step can be taken toward the recovery of the theological task. (The old cornerstones of theology, Keen pointed out, were revelation and authority. The recognition of the legitimacy of competing religions and the accompanying decrease in authority for a special community have created the necessity for asking again, in new ways, what theology has in its authentic history tried to do.) Thus that first step, the asking about and telling one's own story, deals with the first question, "where am I grounded?" Community follows not from the abstract unity of allegiance to shared symbols; rather, it is created in telling each other our "stories."

Just as the first half of theology is "grounding," the other half is "soaring." At the same time that one knows that one is rooted in a certain limited reality, one also knows that in some way one's time, place and history are not limited to the present by experienced reality. Ecstatic experience has always been important to religion; those in the contemporary counterculture and those of Eastern religions can remind us of the "soaring" aspect of one's reach to the outer limits of the universe. We have to learn again to "play," to be open to playful experience, to have a language which adequately communicates that experience.

We know more about who we are when we seek out our grounding through self-examination, and when we allow ourselves to "soar" to the possibilities of what might be. Having laid hold of ourselves, we are free to understand what Jesus was about and what God is about in us and through us, rather than be defined by some externally created Jesus-God language and concepts which actually constrict and perhaps deny our humanity.

Keen's concern with "oppression," therefore, was much more individual than that emphasized by Alves and Cone. The experience of being oppressed or the sickness of being an oppressor are conditions both of which are common to all persons, are universal across distinctions of sex, race, class and sanity. He was not denying the urgency of social issues and concentration on social ills; he was insisting that a realistic theological approach to them had to be able to speak directly to the location of such illnesses within each individual. Barriers have to be broken down for growth and change; that breaking of barriers begins within the individual personality; the only *real* change in social structures, he insisted, must follow the same model.

By having participants pair up and tell their individual stories to each other, by fantasizing the future in small groups, and by work with death fantasies, Keen helped us to begin working on the "grounding" and "soaring" about which he talked. When we are "out of touch," we go to extremes, to absolutes, to desperate solutions . . . (and then create gods); for that reason, it was helpful to concentrate on our own histories and accept who we are.

The emphasis on biography was carried out in each succeeding day, with each person speaking from the background on his personal history as it feeds into his theological thinking. For Gregory Baum, it was important to know that he came to Roman Catholicism at the age of 23, having grown up in a secular Jewish family in Nazi Germany. The values of German culture crumbled beneath him, and he turned to Catholicism in his "search for a view of life and a source of wisdom that could outlast catastrophe."² Baum's studies have

taken him from an initial satisfaction with Thomism as theological method, to a more "tentative and provisional" method which recognizes the reality of transition and renewal in which the Church finds itself. His analysis of both scripture and historical anti-Semitism in Christian tradition led him to recognize the dangerous developments of ideology in Christian teaching. The "rhetoric of exclusion" growing out of the anti-Jewish trend became a part of the "social unconscious," that process at work in a society or group (in this case the Church) and most often hidden to individual members. Some very real similarities to Keen's insights emerged in Baum's recognition of the social (as well as personal) unconscious which develops hidden purposes and weaves them into the symbols cherished and celebrated by a society. Baum noted Marx's analysis of the destructive function of this process as well as non-Marxist elaborations on it. The importance of this concept for theology is the demand it places on the theologian to "realize the possibility of an ideological deformation of the truth." The question of false unconsciousness must, Baum insisted, be raised by anyone engaged in theological reflection. Examples which he gave included the awareness of deep theological assumptions fundamental to white oppression of Blacks, as well as fundamental male ideologies revealed by the movement for liberation of women. "Shock" and "conversion," then, become basic to the seeing of things as they really are.

Baum echoed Keen's recognition of the demise of revelation and community authority in theology's contemporary task: "religious experience and ecclesiastical consensus, the important guides in understanding revelation, must be examined anew. They are not immune to unconscious ideological deformation." The theologian, therefore, must attempt to situate himself in a way that provides freedom for criticism and "repeated transformations of consciousness." It is this positioning for self-critical freedom which has played an important role in making Baum a most significant resource to Roman Catholic re-examination and renewal.

One of the factors in Baum's being a major source of irritation to traditional ecclesiastics is his awareness, through his pastoral experience, that there is not much difference between Christians and non-Christians (thus a major challenge to the notion of the uniqueness of God's redemptive action in the Christian Church). "The same inner and outer drama . . . the same fears, the same hopes, the same struggles, the same loves" went on in all persons, regardless of religious (or non-religious) identification. His study of Karl Rahner and Maurice Blondel led him to affirm that God is in no way *extrinsic* to human life. God's graciousness is operative *within* human life—all human life. The perfect humanity which is recognized by the Church as being in Christ is a redeemed humanity available to all persons in history and recognized in varying ways and degrees by men of all faiths and cultures with their own experience. He put it this way:

Theology, therefore, not only studies the divine gifts in the Church, it studies the gift-dimension of the whole of human life. What scripture tells us about the Word of God addressing us in Christ and his message is in a sense also applicable to the summons addressing men in the significant situations of their lives. What is revealed to us in the Christian sacraments is not only the grace they mediate in the Church but also the grace offered to all men in the human gestures by which they relate to another in the ways of trust and love. The doctrine of ministry does not exhaust its meaning within the ecclesiastical community: it brings out the truth

about leadership in the wider human family. Here God's revelation in Jesus Christ becomes the key for the understanding of the whole of human life. This sort of thinking became part of my theological methodology.

Christian faith, for Baum, is an "open humanism"—that is, it trusts that God's presence in the midst of all human experience assures a constant possibility of newness, of radical change, of surprising creativity. Furthermore, the presence of the transcendent God in all human experience means that the Church needs the "world outside" in order to be the Church; it must avail itself of the wisdom of others in whom God lives and is at work, or it has only a partial glimpse of the Gospel.³

The awareness of both the political and personal categories of self-understanding, as emphasized by Baum, was given particular focus in the contributions of James Cone. Some of the context of Cone's personal story is immediately apparent from reading his first two books—*Black Theology and Black Power*, and *Black Theology of Liberation*. Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary, Cone has attracted widespread attention by his efforts in writing theology from the perspective of the Black experience in America. His story has its own individuality, but the urgency which he brought before us applies most directly to that larger part of his history shared by millions of Black Americans. The vehicle by which the Biblical story is understood is oppression suffered by Blacks at the hands of whites. Those who are white may have the luxury of looking at some of the various forms of oppression being experienced by all persons (a la Keen and Baum). American Blacks, Cone insisted, are so deeply victimized by and (now) revolting against the one oppression which dominates their historical situation, that they cannot be side-tracked by other considerations. Just as the Hebrews did not seek to dialogue and compromise with the Egyptians, Blacks in America today cannot be distracted by false "reconciliation" as they make their exodus into the separate land of peoplehood and liberation.

A significant part of the Black past is the scriptural religion. From in that past, rather than away from it, revolutionary power is available. White Christians "gave" their slaves that part of their religious tradition which they wished them to have; often the slaves understood the story of deliverance from bondage, so fundamental to the Biblical message, better than did their "teachers." The God who is a major resource to the demand, "Let my people go!", is a different reality from that which allows a people to define existence and its religious symbols in terms of superiority and inferiority. The "god" talked about by whites as a not-always-subtle supporter of the dehumanizing systems of slavery and segregation is not God. As Cone put it to the whites during one discussion session, "you really ought to go on a campaign to get rid of your God."

To the oppressed, the task of God's presence in Jesus Christ is liberation from bondage. In Cone's view, God-talk, or Jesus-talk, can be carried on only in the language of liberation. Those who are oppressed must grasp their liberation, their freedom held out to them as a promise from their Creator. They cannot wait for those who've stood on their backs to offer—or participate in preparing—the terms of reconciliation. The source of reconciliation is the Biblical God. The present historical situation is such that the terms of reconciliation can only be initiated and developed by those who have been oppressed, those who are Black. The nature of the illness of the oppressor leaves him incapable of stating any of the terms of

reconciliation. Black Power can well be understood as the grasping of humanity, the acceptance of liberation.

For some who are white, it is not a particularly pleasant experience to listen to or read James Cone. The "false consciousness" explained by Baum was dramatized in Cone's insight that one's ideology is often built into one's selection of geniuses. Since white American theologians of recent decades have concentrated their attention on the likes of Tillich, Niebuhr, Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, Luther, Calvin, etc., Cone felt it necessary to ask, "what have they to do with Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas?" Being cast without qualification into the role of Egyptians is not consistent with the ways in which white Christians prefer to think of themselves. Cone suggested, however, that since whites *are* the "Egyptians," God must be *against* them in order to be *for* them. Liberation from whiteness—from the historical experience of being the oppressor—may find help from Blacks, or from a rejection of the system commitments to which one in the superior position is inevitably tied. (One of the "official" reactors in the Conference was Valerie Russell, a black staff member of the National YWCA, working with their program on racism. It was Ms. Russell's observation that to be liberated as a white person is not to *reject* the past of whiteness, but, as Cone had pointed out, to lose the identity with the oppressive structures, loosening oneself from institutionalized whiteness.)

A gift to the consultation was Cone's lecture presentation of portions from a book he was writing (now published),⁴ in which he provided theological interpretation of Black Spirituals. After putting forth a brief perspective on slave history and the role of the spirituals in emotional and spiritual survival, as well as political resistance, Cone identified "the divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery" as "the central theological concept in the black spirituals." Slavery contradicts God; God is liberator. God will act for slaves, just as he did for the Biblical Hebrews: "Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you moan . . . Pharaoh's army got drowned . . . oh Mary, don't you weep!" Central figures in spirituals are those of scriptural history who affirm human liberation from bondage: Moses, Daniel in the lion's den, and the Hebrew Children in the fiery furnace. If God can deliver those weak from the oppression of the strong, it can certainly be done for these slaves as well. The spirituals, in their affirmation of liberation as being consistent with revelation, are a denial of the claim by some that the slaves accepted their condition. They expected to be freed, even in this temporal life, and the liberating God is active in, known in, often imperceptibly blended with, Jesus Christ. Blacks could identify with this suffering: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble. . . ." Christ's resurrection is the divine guarantee that their lives are in the hands of the Creator and Sustainer, the Liberator of life. The experience of pain, suffering, and despair is lived out in the supporting context of the community, and the promises of Heaven re-affirm the somebodiness, the right and the power to *be*, as ordained by God.

For Jim Cone, his personal story is clearly intertwined with his "style of theological reflection." At this point in his life, at least (and the future of American theology is enhanced by the promise of his youth), Cone can interpret the ways and means of divine reality and action only in terms of his people's experiences.

A Protestant theologian from Brazil, Rubem Alves, came as one whose "story" emanates from the "Third World." The

author of *A Theology of Human Hope* (Corpus Books, 1969),⁵ Alves continued the theme of alienation begun by Keen, tending to cast the alienation of self and reality in terms more similar to the Marxian emphasis on the oppressors and the oppressed. Because religion tends to be used by the dominant groups in culture, in defending things as they are, social conditions must be altered in order to change the consciousness of the people. Alves thus sided with Cone in focusing theological reflection on human liberation. In addition, he sided with Baum and others in denying the extrincism of God. "Theology is reflection about life, as the Biblical language is reflection about life. There is nothing else given . . . For me to talk about God is not for me to talk about a being out there. It is to talk about life. In the Bible, God talk is a description of certain historical events." Alves' further comments on the Bible included his observation that, unlike most history, written by the victors, the Bible is written by the defeated. "The reading of the Bible introduces us to a sort of subversive historiography in which all the roles are reversed." Thus, the Bible is revolutionary literature written by those who are exploited and weak, and look forward to deliverance.

Alves' theological-personal biography begins with the anomie suffered from moving from a small village to the large city. He understands his turning, at that point, to fundamentalist religion as the desire for a Relevant Other to replace the relevant others lost in the transition. The language of certainty and solutions to anomie provided by fundamentalism carried him through that time of need. In the community of others like himself in the seminary, the need for such language diminished—the anomie was solved. He and his friends turned to new insights and understandings of their world, discovering the social roots and "neurotic origin" of their religion. "The denial of the world, the absolutization of eternity, the fear of life itself, the uneasiness about anything human, anything sensual, anything bodily, the rejection of freedom, the hatred against provisionality—did not all these elements run counter to life itself?" With their new love of the world, however, friends were found outside the Church as much as inside. Like Baum, Alves expanded his awareness of the divine functioning to the secular realm. Secular heroes, however, are as disappointing as the religious ones, and the biography moves into a present in which there is the constant tension of hope and frustration. In his most recent writing submitted for a publication deriving from the Consultation, Alves describes the situation within which he now does theology:

I am stretched between the anthropological need for hope and the historical impossibility of hope. In other words, I do not know how to put together story and history, the personal and the structural, the existential and the material. I do not have any paradigm to rebuild my cosmos. . . . Theology . . . is a search for points of reference, for new horizons which would make it possible for us to make some sense of the chaos which engulfs us. It is an attempt to put together in a new way the fragments of a whole which was destroyed. It is the problem of hope, i.e., the question as to the plausibility of one's human values in a world which denies them. Theology and biography, thus, belong together.

Alves rejects some of the assumptions growing out of the Enlightenment and the scientific era. Objectivity and the assertion that knowledge is duplication tend to eliminate the

creative imagination. It is devalued as "mere imagination." Religion, insists Alves, *is* imagination, attempting to transfigure "the given according to the logic of the heart," rather than taking "snap-shots" of what "*is*." It is the "creation of a world with a human meaning." The beauty of Alves' language puts it this way: "Theology is man's attempt to put together again the petals of his flower, which is over and over again mercilessly destroyed by a world which does not love flowers."

In his own growth and maturity, Alves now sees the theological task as a broadening of the "relevant others" with whom we converse, "so as to go beyond the narrow limits in which life has entrapped us." His version of Baum's "transcendence" is indicated by a recognition that "there is no hope for man if he tries to solve his problem without going out of himself." This means that the "rules for the game" of theology cannot come simply from one's own experience. "It is not my story which gives meaning to history. It is history which gives meaning to my story. I am not the horizon of the world. I am in the world, and it is me who needs to find horizons." The search for horizons narrows the focus of theology in a helpful way: "Christian theology is nothing more and nothing less than a conversation about the business of life, which goes on as against the background of the biblical horizon." For the sake of self, we learn from the Bible, the self must not be chosen as one's criterion. "One must exchange one's navel for horizons."

There were remarkable combinations of continuity and discontinuity in the Consultation. The four men agreed that it is of questionable value . . . perhaps impossible . . . to speak of God within the framework of contemporary language. They agreed that there is a transcendence which is real only *within* human experience, in the world. There was marked diversity as to primary direction, whether it is to be for individual, personal growth and understanding, a new approach to "conversion," or whether our clues come from social structures and revolutionary thrust for social change. There was agreement that *change* must come, and an abiding faith that what is most divinely human is man's capacity to make creative change.

The dialogue was electric. Sam Keen spoke of the necessity to recapture play and pleasure and his hero was Zorba; Rubem Alves exemplified Keen's message in dancing like Zorba when the conferees relaxed and entered into an evening of play. What some might read as anger in Cone had to be re-evaluated when basking in his warmly human smile, a smile matched only by the personality of Gregory Baum described by so many as "a beautiful man."

Perhaps this week said a great deal about the style which reflection upon the nature of God and man, and their interaction in the world, must take. It was a week of openness of one to another, of depth of personal sharing, of the demand for the best of one's thought and scholarly skills as tested in human experience. Emerging from it is a recognition that we are all left to make choices, to take the *risk* of choosing options. Perhaps Rubem Alves speaks for most when he asks, concerning such risk,

So what? Is there any way out of this situation? One thing I know for sure. In the business of living one must not live by certainties—but by visions, risks and passion. Maybe this is what Paul had in mind, when he said that we are saved by hope, i.e., by that which we do not see. The tragedy of our decadent civilization, it seems to me, is due to its fear of losing itself. This is the sin

of both nations and individuals. It is tragic to see the sin of nations—their arrogance of power—being reenacted in the sphere of individuals—the absolutization

of one's own experience. And when we are entrapped in our heart which is bent upon itself, can we have any hope of rebirth and new life?

FOOTNOTES

1. Gregory Baum. "Styles of Theological Reflection for the Future." *Theology Today*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3, Oct. 1971. Pp. 354-355.
2. This and subsequent quotations not footnoted are from remarks of the speakers at the Consultation.
3. Further discussion of Baum's understanding of God in secular experience is available in his *Man Becoming*. (New York: Herder and Herder), 1970.
4. James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1972.
5. The most recent book by Rubem Alves, published since the Consultation, is *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity and the Rebirth of Culture*. (Harper and Row, 1972).

RELIGION

Published quarterly in October, January, April, and July by Kansas School of Religion at The University of Kansas at Lawrence, Kansas 66044.

Editor, Lynn F. Taylor

Subscription 50 cents per year.

Second class postage paid at Lawrence, Kansas

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