

THE USE OF THE QUESTION MARK: IN THEOLOGY BY THE PEOPLE

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The title of my paper is “The use of the question mark”. By this, I am not referring to the emotions or stress, which that punctuation mark can evoke in many social settings, when it is raised as a symbol, apart from its routine language functions. I refer instead to a possibly useful and healthy place for the question mark as a provisional response, neither yes nor no, but probing, on the way towards needed answers, which may well be there to be found.

1. To propose the theme, *Theology by the people*, is to imply that theology, contrary to some of its critics, is no mere blip, no zero value; that, whatever exactly we may mean by it, theology is, or may be, an enterprise that *warrants* involvement by the men and women who make up current human society.

Using the words *anthropology* and *sociology*, implies a presupposition that human beings, and human societies, actually exist. Similarly, employing *theology* as a word, normally implies the assumption that God is there, whether or not anyone has seen Him; and that He has important links with human affairs. To speak of “Christian theology” is to go some distance farther. It calls up onto the screen of awareness an image of that God of the patriarchs, the prophets, and the apostles, in whom we all live and move, and have our being, and who calls upon everyone everywhere to repent and follow Jesus Christ.

“Theology” can stand for a host of things. For some, it means speaking a message, or messages, that have come from God. In that case, there is no real question of “theology by the people”, except in the sense of faithfully telling what has come from another source.

Perhaps, more commonly, theology stands for discourse about God, that has its origin within the human personality: discourse which is intended to expound the word of God, to apply it to this or that situation, to respond to

it; or simply discourse about God coming from a thinking, feeling, human being, as such.

Here there is a necessary place for theology by the people if “people” is used in contrast to the elite, the authorities, the apparatuses of secular and ecclesiastical power.

For one reason, there is no indication of God assigning to anyone, or any group, a monopoly on wisdom and His word. For another, scripture and human wisdom concur in affirming that no human person or society may properly, or justly, be restrained from addressing the issue of God, and of His relationship with man, society, and the world.

Still another reason for urging “theology by the people may be felt in an acquired disability of the elites and the structured authorities, the progressive atrophy of their powers of imagination. The elites, and the structured authorities in the churches, as in the secular domain are trained to be ruled by logic; they are expected to be judged by the norms of reason and order, i.e., of science. They cannot be blamed, then, if they keep trying to make theology fit the rules of reason and logic. The pity is only that sometimes they do not succeed.

But reason and logic are only half of the story. The other half is poetry, the first vision and language of the people.

2. In his essay, “Man and poetry”, Ivan Svitak wrote:

If the essence of poetry is life in its immediacy, then poetry resides, above all, in man’s own life processes, as an acute awareness of his own being. . . . Poetry reveals the world through the prism of a child’s sensibility. . . . The poet sees the world concretely, uniquely, apart from the sphere of abstractions, which do enter his world, but leave the integrity of his vision untouched. . . . From the point of view of exact science, the poem is a worthless thought structure with no logical consistency, a meaningless verbal artefact; but from the point of view of man – a point of view which is richer and more complete than that of science – the poem is full of meaning and deeply relevant. The poem integrates us into the universe, into the absurdity of being, into the chaos of existence, not through the operations of reason and logic,

but immediately and directly by evoking the world of values and deeper levels of meaning; the poem returns us to our place among mankind, in an ordered world, in the universe; it gives us back the consciousness of our humanity. Poetry is not a manifesto of man's antirational aspects; on the contrary, it is the burning bush of truth, it is a geyser of pure reason, which surmounts the limitations of logic. Poetry is thought in flames. . . . Poetry is man's rebellion against literal reality, it is the revolt of his imagination against a given order of facts. . . . So the poet is a man who is constantly in revolt. And he is constantly amazed by the jigsaw puzzle of his impressions, which reflects the joy and torment of existence. The poet proclaims the meaning of life, and the meaning of its paradoxes he creates in the exaltation of his own time. . . . His passion makes it impossible for a poet to be a skeptic; he believes in the world, and in the value of life, because he knows its miracles. The poet speaks for all men, and only when he speaks for the essential nature of his species, does he write well.¹

I suggest that when "the people" do theology, they should be applauded if they refuse to wear Saul's armour, or to fight with Gog's bow. When they turn to the persistent questions of God and the world, of truth and justice, of bread and life and peace, let no one discourage them from invoking that which is within them: the sight and the passion, and the images of the poet.

3. There comes a day, though, when you and I and the people meet in a common public forum, such as MATS, each having done his theology, and each bringing with him his analysis, his rational conviction, his insight, his poetic vision, his passion concerning the vital, pain-involving, sometimes life-threatening, moral issues that are before us. We meet, we compare. Alas, your syllogism and mine overlap, but they do not coincide. Your program seems incompatible with my operating system. The people read

¹ Ivan Svitak, *Man and His World: a Marxian View*, Jarmila Veltrusky, tran., New York NY: Dell Publishing, 1968, pp. 101-122.

their poems, and, behold, there are as many visions as there are poems. What now?²

As an *absolutist*, I may hold that, on the issue that is before us, there is one, and only one, moral reality, which can be described and defined in but one universal, true way. I now face the problem, however, that my private conviction on this matter, grounded, as I see it, in the absolute truth, is not shared by a large number of people, no matter how often I set forth my arguments to them. This may lead me to become frustrated and to withdraw from the discussion; or lapse into inaction; or, perhaps, to change my stance to that of a *relativist*.

As a relativist, I would hold that, on the issue that is before us, as well as on other issues, there is more than one moral reality. Your reality and truth will differ from my reality and truth, in ways related to how this issue has appeared and been experienced in your life and in mine.

That I am a relativist in the public forum does not automatically, and in practice, make me tolerant of your point of view. In my private mind, I am perhaps still an absolutist. “Your view and mine are both true,” I say, “let’s put it to a vote”, hoping that my view will gain a majority and become the universal law.

As the debate continues between your view and mine, the *reductionist* soon also steps in. This is not a moral issue, or a theological question at all, he says. This is a personal matter; a political issue; a power struggle. Or: this issue is not debatable, because the authorities have already spoken. By reducing the issue down to something else than it is, the reductionist does his best to remove it from rational discussion.

To keep discourse alive on the critical moral questions that we face, we might look at the option of skepticism, at least as a stance for the public forum at a time when strongly-held private convictions do not command universal agreement. Some skeptics in the past have questioned the

² For the following, I am indebted to James V. Bachman, “Of Pluralism, Truth, and Abortion: a Constructive Role for Skepticism in Public Discourse”, in *The Cresset* (March 1987), pp. 4-10.

possibility of really knowing anything for certain. A contemporary skeptic might, rather, start with some other propositions, i.e.,

There probably is one universal theological and moral reality in the world we live, and one universal, true way to describe, and to acknowledge, that reality; but

Contemporary human beings do not appear to be coming to any early consensus regarding that reality, and that way. Hence,

Ongoing public disagreement about many pain-involving issues of justice, peace, and development is a basic fact of life, to be forthrightly, if reluctantly, accepted for the time being.

Returning, then, to the title of our paper, the question mark can be seen as the symbol for a constructive and rigorous skepticism on all sides of the public arena, both civil and ecclesiastical. Such a stance would place all participants on an equal and just footing, and provide the basis for the people and leaders to maintain a vigorous, honest discourse in quest of a rational and mortal consensus, without loss of their hope of their deeply-held convictions, or of one another.

In conclusion, I have dealt here, for the most part, with that theology, which comes from many. By faith, I assert that, in the theology that comes from God, there are clearer answers.

“ ‘No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love Him’ –
but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit.”

1 Corinthians 2:9-10

Bibliography

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