

CONVERSATIONS

A NEWSLETTER OF THE SOPHIA CENTER

No. 1 December 2000

ABOUT THE SOPHIA CENTER

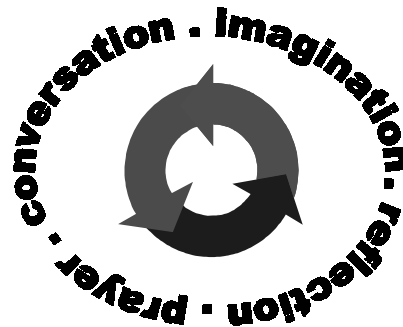
The *Sophia Center* is a very personal work in progress which I hope will become a place of welcome, offering other people the chance to enter the mystery of being human which has been the singular gift of my own life as a priest. The "place" of the *Sophia Center* is not fixed, but occurs anywhere that people find it possible to pay attention to one another, and to talk with one another the way friends talk to friends. This realization, that friendship is the place of revelation of the sacred, is at the heart of the most authentic spiritual response to the secular gift of pluralism.

I have been a Catholic priest for more than forty years. I have had the chance to live both at the heart of the Catholic community, teaching in a seminary for ten years, and in the creative secular communities of great universities. For seventeen years I had the privilege of entering the profound human world of the sick and those who accompany and care for them. For many of those years I was the companion of physicians, nurses and medical students as they tried to discover and integrate in their own lives the human dimensions of their technically demanding profession. For more than twenty-five years I have known as friends the Brother of Taizé, an ecumenical community in France that is one of the most vital centers of spiritual life in Europe. At the human and spiritual core of these experiences was the gift of friendship; not in some sentimental way, but as the imaginative encounter which allows each of us to sense the depth and horizons of human experience.

The *Sophia Center* projects are an attempt to pass on to others this gift that has been my own experience of the priesthood. They are meant to embody in dif-

ferent ways the core of this revelatory encounter with others: the attention which allows us to enter the world of the other and then return to our own. The framework within which these personal encounters take place is the meeting between contemporary culture and the religious traditions: full of challenges and possibilities.

Thus, all the projects of the *Sophia Center* have one goal: to help participants to develop an imaginative attention over time to the possibilities in contemporary and secular culture for living more authentically human lives within one of the great traditions of Faith: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All the projects have



one central means for pursuing this goal: conversation in the way friends talk to friends. The projects of the *Center* are organized around those aspects of contemporary culture which are significantly involved in creative contacts between religious and secular ways of being human.

Thus we have projects concerned with film, creative writing and visual art because all three contain expressions of contemporary life which deepen our attention and which invite personal reflection and conversation. We also have projects which develop interfaith conversations on the participation of believers in public policy discussions, and projects for conver-

sations among scientists and theologians on issues of ethics and fundamental understandings of reality. Details about these, and other projects, can be found in this issue of the newsletter, *CONVERSATIONS*.

REV. ROBERT SMITH

About CONVERSATIONS

This newsletter has one straight forward and simple purpose, and one more longterm and more challenging goal.

The simple purpose is to provide an effective means of informing people about the *Sophia Center* programs. In a world too filled with information and distraction, we hope to provide a vehicle which informs people of our programs in good time for their planning, and which, at appropriate intervals, reminds them of these programs. The longterm goal for the newsletter is to develop over time an adequate expression of the underlying ideas of the *Sophia Center*. Since the *Center* is trying to shape original responses to the complex situation of the tradition of the traditions of the Faith within a secular culture, we need regular opportunities to express what we are trying to do and to invite the participation of people interested in such a common project. We hope to use the newsletter as one form of the conversations which are the heart of the *Sophia Center* Programs.

To accomplish this goal, *CONVERSATIONS* will include both occasional short essays and letters from readers.

PROJECTS IN USES OF THE IMAGINATION

FILM

Film is not only among the most important contemporary forms for imaginative examination of our human experience, but the viewing of a film together provides an immediate common experience as a basis for conversation. A consistent sharing over time in viewing and discussing films may provide a particularly contemporary basis for community, especially a community crossing lines of belief and culture. Film discussions are held in the Auditorium of the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Lloyd Harbor, Huntington on Sunday afternoons from 1 - 4 PM.

Next Discussion –

December 17th, 2000

Kieslowski's Decalogue, Parts VII and VIII

Special Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival

"One of the indisputably great accomplishments of modern filmmaking."

--LA Times

Future film discussions will be held on the third Sunday of each month, January through May. Films to be presented will be announced in future issues of CONVERSATIONS.

CREATIVE WRITING

A series of three poetry readings and discussions exploring the role of imagination in the spiritual experience of Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious traditions. In the first program **Coleman Barks** read from his translations of Rumi, 13th century Sufi mystic.

Our next program, planned for **Sunday, April 29th, 2001**, will present **Eavan Boland**, acknowledged to be the pre-eminent female poet of her native Ireland.

Dr. Boland seeks to revitalize the image of women - out of their silent hiding places in history or out of the shadows of contemporary suburbs. Her recent work, *The Lost Land*, examines the impact of Ireland's history on a people and on the poet's imagination. She is Professor of English and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Stanford University.

The third program will be on **October 21st, 2001** featuring **Ali-cia Suskin Ostriker**. Her recent work is *The Little Space: Poems Selected and New, 1968-1998*. Her work has been anthologized in collections dealing with women's poetry, spiritual poetry and Jewish poetry. Ms. Ostriker teaches English and creative writing at Rutgers University.

"The projects of the Sophia Center come from the conviction that it is possible to be both a genuinely contemporary woman or man and a believer. We are convinced that a spiritually imaginative form of contemporary life can be developed, in part by a very simple means: conversations in which believers from differing traditions talk with one another as friends talk to friends."

PROJECT IN RELIGION AND SCIENCE

There is a small working group of scientists from the University at Stony Brook and the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory who have been meeting with theologians from the New York area in preliminary discussions of topics concerning fundamental understandings of reality and ethical questions which arise especially in technological applications of scientific research. A conversation was led last Spring by Dr. John Haught from Georgetown University, and another will be led in December by Dr. Audrey Chapman of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The working group's goal is to develop the plans for public discussions of issues in the relationship of science and religion. In future editions of CONVERSATIONS, we will also provide a bibliography for this rapidly expanding discussion.

THE SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

To offer a chance to examine how the faith tradition developed an understanding of the role of spiritual friendship in the human experience of the sacred, we will offer an informal retreat beginning Friday, February 9th at 7:30 PM through 12:00 Noon on Sunday, February 11th. There will be times for silence and small group conversations. Readings provided for the participants will be drawn from classical, medieval and modern authors in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions. Fee \$125 (reduced rate for students).

Fr. Smith has asked me to lay out some themes for discussion that relate to a line of thought that I have been pursuing for the last several years. Two themes have preoccupied me in particular: first, transcendence and how it enters into and shapes our experience; second, human culture, its future, and our responsibility in creating it. Before pursuing these two themes, let me lay out five assumptions that I hold, which need to be argued and discussed before anything meaningful can be developed from them.

First. I assume that we are in the midst of a critical historical transition, not unlike the shift from the medieval era to the modern era that occurred five or six hundred years ago. The cultural energy that gave shape to modernity reached its high point of development during the enlightenment period, but gradually diminished during the 19th century and vanished in the debacle of the first world war. And while today the ideals of enlightenment rationality continue to shape mainstream cultural institutions in the west, these institutions continue out of force of habit, not because the people who support them feel fervently animated by them.

Second. I assume that despite the many benefits that have accrued to humans during the modern era—significant widespread improvements in health, social welfare, and education; the development of social democracies and the widening of political freedoms; advances in technology and scientific knowledge—we also paid a price in what can only be described as a loss of soul, and this is a price that we can no longer afford to pay. The diverse cultural movements which focus in their various ways on the recovery of soul are where the energies lie that will shape the next cultural era.

Third. By soul I mean the realm in human experience where two non-human impulses—the super-rational (spiritual) and the sub-rational (instinctual)—commingle and become humanized. The main thrust of the modern impulse was to suppress or control the irrational focussing instead with great optimism on what could be accomplished through reason alone. Truth was reduced to what could be scientifically proven; everything else was rejected as speculative, mystical, or superstitious. While there has always been a minority, comprising mainly traditionalists and romantics, which rejected the limitations of enlightenment rationality, their voices were muffled by the roaring successes achieved by moderns in commerce and technology. The modern project was a profoundly masculine enterprise. Religion and the arts—the domains of soul, i.e., the arenas of human activity where that which is above and that which is below come together—were for women, children, and wimps. In a culture that is soul-centered, religion and the arts will regain their central animating role for the culture, and optimally will find a way to subordinate commerce and technology to its vision.

Fourth. History is meaningful and it has a goal. Evolution is not a random meaningless process driven only by unconscious instinctual survival strategies. The Darwinian narrative is incomplete insofar as it embraces only the sub-rational as its driving power while refusing to take into account the super-rational. In the long run it will be regarded as only marginally more sophisticated a theory than the even more crude creationist narrative. Evolution is a human project that takes place in the realm of soul, and its work is the gradual transformation of the earth. The goal of history, therefore, is the ensouling—the humanization—of the earth, and quite possibly of the entire cosmos.

Fifth. Conscience is the essential cognitive tool to be used in the development of soul and of culture, and our primary moral responsibility is to hone and develop it. By conscience

I do not mean superego, which is the collective moral code internalized during our socialization as children. The deterioration of the Judaeo-Christian Superego in the 20th century worries cultural conservatives who are more concerned with social order than with the authentic development of the soul and of the culture. Conscience is not a function of our social programming. Rather it is the function of our deepest spiritual identity which manifests primarily in our faculty for cognizing transcendence. Our freedom lies in our choosing to respond to it and work with what it gives us, and sometimes our response to it requires breaking the rules as defined by Superego. This is not an antinomian position, although it can be distorted to appear as such.

We are presently in a period of cultural decay, but this does not mean the end of civilization. It's understandable that people are preoccupied with forestalling the end and are concerned to preserve the past, but our attention should rather be focussed on what will inevitably emerge as the new cultural impulse that will shape the next era. Jacques Barzun, in his new book *From Dawn to Decadence*, describes decadence with reference to culture not as a pejorative term but a technical one. Decadence, he says, “. . . implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary, it is a very active time, full of deep concerns but peculiarly restless for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility.”

History's Future

The central challenge for all of us now is the task of imagining a future line of advance, to begin seeing what our collective possibilities are. And I would argue that this has to be done not with what Marshall McLuhan called the rear-view mirror approach to looking ahead, seeing the future in terms defined by the past, as if the future will only be an extension of what we have lived so far.

What comes to us from the future is fresh, and original, and surprising. It does not cancel out what comes to us from the past but rather renews it, revalorizes it, uncovers meanings in it that were previously invisible to us. In other words the past is not some objective thing that can be understood in some objective, rational way. The meaning of the past is linked to the meaning of the future, and its meanings are as unfathomable and as mysterious—regardless what we might think we know of the historical record or even what the historical figures themselves understood about what they created or achieved.

Imagining the future is not a programmatic task. It is not a question, for instance, of envisioning world peace or a world where there are no more hungry children. To envision the future in such a way is what Marshall McLuhan would have described as a rear-view mirror approach insofar as it uses the kind of abstract ideological thinking characteristic of the modern era. Peace and justice are transcendent values and as such are always at the center of our concern, but their meanings have become too boxed up, too much framed by the materialistic utopian concerns linked to the modern project which is now dead. Mother Teresa is a better guide for us here than Karl Marx.

The “program,” if properly conceived and then developed correctly, never rigidifies because its form is a dynamic pattern that develops organically out of authentic response to the transcendent future. The key, then, to our cognizing transcendence now is to begin thinking of it in temporal rather than in spatial terms. And some thoughts on what that might mean will follow in the next issue.