

CONVERSATIONS

A NEWSLETTER OF THE SOPHIA CENTER

No. 2 January 2001

FROM THE DIRECTOR

The aim of the Sophia Center is to develop forms of conversation which will over time draw people from many traditions into a common exploration of the spiritual possibilities present in contemporary culture: film discussions, working groups, public forums, etc.

This newsletter is meant to become one of these conversational forms, to allow people to share in an ongoing informal community.

We include in this issue of *CONVERSATIONS* some initial responses to the essay by Jack Whelan printed in Issue No. 1. For those who have access to the Internet, all of this material is available on our website: www.sophi.org. (There is a simple procedure for registering, which will allow you to comment or ask questions.)

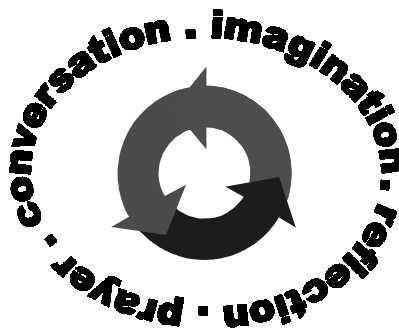
I would hope that either by writing to *CONVERSATIONS* or on the web, many people would make brief observations, or just raise questions, because we will eventually develop public forums that will grow out of these initial written conversations.

* * *

On Sunday, May 6, 2001, *The Sophia Center* will sponsor a public forum on the challenges and possibilities for religious believers participating in discussions of public policy. A study - conducted by Public Agenda, a non-profit research organization, and funded by the Pew Charitable Trust - was reported in *The New York Times* on January 10th, 2001. It suggests widespread but nuanced support for such religious contributions to policy debates.

We are putting together a distinguished panel of journalists, religious leaders and academics to lead the con-

continued on p. 3



Sophia Center Calendar

February 9 - 11

Retreat on the practice of Spiritual Friendship (Seminary)

February 11

2:00 PM Public Lecture "Kafka's THE TRIAL - Dartmouth Prof. Peter Bien (Seminary)

February 18

Film Series 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM (Seminary)
Decalogue 3 and 4

March 18

Film Series 1 PM to 4 PM
Decalogue 9 and 10

April 22

Film Series (TBA)

April 29

Uses of the Imagination Second Poetry Discussion with Eavan Boland, Irish poet, Stanford University

May 6

Public Forum on Religion and Public Policy

May 20 - Film Series (TBA)

USES OF IMAGINATION IN CREATIVE WRITING - POETRY

On November 5th, 2000, *The Sophia Center* hosted the first in a series of poetry readings and discussions to explore the role of imagination in the spiritual experience of Muslim, Jewish and Christian religious traditions. In a program entitled "The Music of Our Meeting: Exploring the Soul's Imagination," Coleman Barks read from his translations of the works of Jelaluddin Rumi, the great Sufi poet of the thirteenth century. Improvising with Steve Paysen, a gifted local musician, Barks elucidated Rumi's ecstatic verse through reading, anecdote, humor and silence, bringing out its timeless appeal as well as its contemporary relevance. For four hours, Barks moved freely within the wide range of Rumi's writing. One aspect of Rumi he took particular care to uncover was his profound lifelong friendship with his mystical guide, Shams-i Tabriz.

How does imaginative attention reveal the sacred in our time? This question, central to the *Sophia* project, lay at the heart of Barks' presentation. To answer, "Be like Rumi!" might beg the question. Yet the event left us marveling at the possibilities of making our secular time acquire depth and meaning through an attentiveness to the deepest connections, not unlike the friendship between Rumi and Shams, that underlie our lives.

continued on p. 2

A Letter from Ralph Nazareth

"Dear Bob:

Let me see if writing this letter to you will help me get going. It ought to, because conversation, which you've held as the core ideal of *Sophia* - the way friends talk to friends - seldom fails.

I don't know if I told you that I was invited to read my poetry at a literary conference in DC last Friday. There were only six people in the audience. More to relieve them of their embarrassment than to assuage my own disappointment, I valiantly told them I was from a tradition that believes that wherever two are gathered in the name of the Word, a world comes together. Ha!

I read with as much passion as I could muster, but couldn't entirely get over the sinking feeling of being marginal and dispensable as a poet. And to think that just a few years ago I had let myself hope that my poems would be posted in large curlicued print on the chalk board at the entrance of the popular Starlight Diner in Norwalk, right next to the Specials of the Day! No, I wasn't dreaming of filling football stadiums and holding campesinos and revolutionaries spellbound as Mayakowski and Neruda did in their time. Vox populi. That's a reach. But to have my words heard and appreciated by ordinary folks has always been a fond hope. Jonathan Wilson recalls how at a reading at an Oxford college, Denise Levertov, uncomfortable in the exclusive company of dons, told the gathering that her deepest wish was to see her 'books carried in the back pockets of workmen's overalls.' OK, there's a touch of the sentimental in this yearning to be embraced by people, to be loved in the street for one's craft vision. But there's also a certain wisdom in this desire. It speaks of a wish to be grounded in the world, and not to fly away into 'circumambient gas.' To come down from the mountain as seer (Lat. vates) and to mingle in the marketplace with other craftsmen, makers (Gr. poietes) - potters, bricklayers, and glassblowers, oneself weaving with word-strands of ordinary time and life - there's something real about it all.

Which brings me to Rumi and Barks and the procession of poets we've lined up for *The Sophia Center*. In short, the program has something to do with reality - the seeking, the knowing and speaking of reality in simple ways. Especially at a time when it's getting increasingly difficult to tell it apart from its virtual copies wavering the humming haze of silicon.

When we decided about a year ago to invite Coleman Barks to read Rumi at *Sophia*, it was not because Rumi-via-Barks was the best-selling poet in America today. Rather, it was because Rumi held the promise of a wisdom for our time, pointing beyond the conflict among religious positions, especially the Abrahamic faiths which form the primary focus of *The Sophia Center*.

We were taking a slight risk in choosing to present a medieval Sufi mystic. Rumi's a great poet no doubt, but he provokes, as do Sufis in general, ambivalent feelings among the Muslim orthodoxy. Also, there was a question about Barks who has been criti-

cized in some scholarly circles for serving up Rumi lite.

But now looking back on Barks reading Rumi at *Sophia*, it seems to many who attended the event that there couldn't have been a better introduction to Rumi or a more effective way of realizing the centrality of poetry to the *Sophia* project. Barks seemed deeply attuned to Rumi's vision, inseparable, it seems, from his profound friendship with his mystical guide, Shams-i Tabriz. Their friendship was 'clear and miraculous and essential,' says Barks, 'like water.' Their friendship became 'a way.' Through poem, comment, and anecdote, through humor and silence, Barks elucidated this extraordinary friendship.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoings,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

when the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
ideas, language, even the phrase each other
doesn't make any sense.

(Trans. Coleman Barks and John Moyne)

Beyond the friendship, a mystical union. And then a striking paradox! A way of words leading beyond themselves. Yet it is obvious that Rumi is not a mystic of the high meadow and the mountaintop. He is a poet of the dusty streets. He knows well the Arab who drags his camel from town to town. He knows the feel of coarse wool, the smell of basil being cut for a bouquet. Wooden bowls nestle among his things. He knows his vinegar as well as his wine. Rumi moves, and sings of the spirit moving, among the things of this world - free of fantasy and rigid doctrinal strictures. Rumi illuminates the ordinary, reveals the sacred in time. Barks helped us see this, lightly, deeply.

Reflecting on Barks' rendering of Rumi, I begin to see important links to the *Sophia* project. Down-to-earth singer and ecstatic holy seer, Rumi's a sign of contradiction. So are the seekers of wisdom who must pick up signs of transcendence in our time-kept lives. But more importantly, Rumi's imaginative attention lifts the ordinary out of itself to be placed again in its extraordinary ground. Similarly, *Sophia* is an ongoing, essentially poetic reflection on our passage on earth, thinking through our differences, the reality of our particular histories and conflicts, constantly trying to uncover the depth that upholds us as well as holds us together. Finally, the friendship that was the basis of Rumi's mystical vision forms the single most important element in the *Sophia* hope for a gathering of friends mindful of the gifts of creation.

That sounds like it ought to be an ending, but if I were to leave it there 'in a time of violence' (to invoke the title of a book of poems by our next guest at the *Sophia* poetry series, the noted Irish poet Eavan Boland), I might be guilty of a piety out of touch with reality. Rumi's Konya is but a few olive groves away from

continued from p. 2

the land of Palestine where brothers are in a terrible conflict with each other. This struggle affects us all. It ought to. Especially those of us who espouse the Abrahamic faiths. What might Rumi say to Mahmoud Darwish of Palestine or to Yehuda Amichai of Israel, both great national poets, both of whom have spoken passionately of their love for their people, their land, the big and little things that make up their painfully tangled lives? Here, take this bread, this clod of earth, break it and share. Or, here, take these words, let them hold the bread of your earth. Or, stay awake, do not distort, imagine beyond the self. Don't sing, your voice might tear, you may be misunderstood. Better, speak to each other, as brothers, friends. And look at the sky. How she broods over you both, children of her deepest hopes and imagination!

There is earth, and there is bread. There are words and imagination. Our wisdom, traditions - and our poets know of their intimate connection, their power. We recognize them in the great narratives and rituals of our religions. It is time we recognized them in our daily lives as well, in the simple, nurturing conversation among friends, and were able to say with Rumi, 'I'll meet you there.'

From the Director - continued

versation. If you have an interest in taking part in the development of this forum, I would very much like to hear from you.

[Fr. Smith – (631) 425-6114]

* * *

The Working Group on Science and Religion, which is made up principally of scientists and theologians, has met during the last year to explore projects *The Sophia Center* might develop for the Long Island community. We met with Professor John Haught of Georgetown University ("God After Darwin," 2000; "Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation," 1995), and with Dr. Audrey Chapman of the American Association for the Advancement of Science ("Unprecedented Choices: Religious Ethics at the Frontiers of Science," 1999). The preliminary conversations covered a wide range of topics, with a special emphasis on the questions which arise for religious understandings of human nature in the light of the continued development of our knowledge about evolution and the rapid explosion of genetic knowledge and technologies.

In the next issue of *Conversations*, I will report on several books which I have found helpful in my own efforts to think about these issues.

"Dear Bob:

You'll notice an exuberant essay by Natalie Angier in the *Sunday Times* magazine (January 14, 2001) called "Confessions of a Lonely Atheist." The sheer buoyancy of her style and wit might belie her claims to being lonely, and her blithely cavalier assertion - 'So, I'll out myself. I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God, Gods, godlets or any sort of higher power beyond the universe itself, which seems quite high and powerful enough to me' - as well as her concluding credo - 'I may not believe in life after death, but what a gift it is to be alive now.' - in an essay in the glossy magazine of arguably the most influential newspaper on the planet makes me think that this is not some forlorn soul in imminent danger of being exiled or nailed to a church door for saying, 'Here I stand.' It's true that, as she points out, compared with blacks, women, Jews, and homosexuals, atheists occupy the cellar in voter polls for choice of president, but their approval rating is on the rise, however slowly. If she must know what real loneliness is, perhaps she'd better talk to Pascal. Or grandmothers in AIDS-ravaged sub-Saharan Africa.

Anyway, her truthfulness and charm aside, I like her for caring to talk about God, life, meaning and transcendence, especially at a time when the Christian Right in this country is stepping up its drumbeat for Jesus. In accepting an honorary degree in May 1999 from Bob Jones University, noted for its Christian fundamentalism, the President-elect's nominee for Attorney General, John Ashcroft, said, 'Unique among the nations, America recognized the source of our character as being godly and eternal, not being civic and temporal. And because we have understood that our source is eternal, America has been different. We have no king but Jesus.'

The buzz of the Election from this group frightens me. It whines with the rhetoric of transcendence but serves to divide. In comparison, whether I agree with her or not, Angier invites me to wonder again about the mysteries of creation, about community between us and nature, about time and the future, about meaning and purpose. At the end of her essay, she refers to "The Sacred Depths of Nature" by Ursula Goodenough, a cell biologist who articulates a 'profound appreciation of the genuine workings of nature, conjoined with a commitment to preserving that natural world in all its staggering, interdependent splendor.' Angier calls it 'transcendent atheism.'

Bob, pardon my strong language. I guess it comes from my increasing anxiety about the direction this country is going in. Anyway, I'd like to use this simplified contrast, between the atheist Angier and Christian Right, especially between their differing ideas of

transcendence, to say how much I like the line Jack Whelan is following in his first reflection.

He is so right in pointing out that conscience 'is not a function of our social programming' as much as the cultural conservatives who have internalized the Superego of the Abrahamic faiths would have us believe. It is not a tool for chastising the self or accusing the other, for either breastbeating or browbeating. It is the function, he says, 'of our deepest spiritual identity which manifests primarily in our faculty for cognizing transcendence.' And at the heart of this function is our privilege and responsibility of imagining a future, not a 'programmable task' but an act of delving into the depths of our being, attentive to community with the other and nature, with creation as a whole.

And what do we find in these depths? I believe Jack is saying (and I agree) that there we find the imperative and invitation to be peaceful and just. The intuition of being within a creation gifted to us, which we recognize through our uniquely human faculty of imagination as being a whole we participate in (an 'interdependent splendor' in Goodenough's words) gets clarified in acts of friendship, attention and caring, in reaching out in charity and love. Now, this can be done, not by invoking the 'godly and eternal,' as does Ashcroft, or a spatial utopia as might a materialist, but by deeply entering time, 'our' world without end. Jack, in exploring how transcendence shapes our experience, traces a continuous line in time from conscience and imagination to peace and justice.

Jack's reflection serves, I believe, to deepen our sense of the 'loss of soul' in our time as well as a way to recover it. I am looking forward to his further elaboration of the idea of thinking of transcendence in temporal terms. I don't know if you remember Walter Benjamin's brilliant essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In it he says that what withers in an age such as ours 'is the aura of the work of art.' I sense there are important connections between his ideas and the well developed tradition Jack is thinking out of. I must return to it one of these days."

—from RN

"Dear Bob:

For a college teacher who spends so much time reading authors who don't even recognize they are making assumptions, much less articulating them, Jack Whelan's short essay was a pleasure. Yet as a rhetorical device, articulating assumptions is problematic for at least two reasons that are pertinent here. First, by calling something an assumption, custom seems to allow an author the freedom to proffer propositions of almost any sort without even attempting to defend them. I would like, for example, to have heard more about the assertion that our commitment to enlightenment rationality 'continues out of force of habit.' Or that the loss of soul was somehow tied to the benefits of the modern era. Or that 'The modern project was a profoundly masculine enterprise,' whatever that means outside of fashionable feminism circles. Assumptions should be sufficiently plausible so the reader isn't stopped by them. These and some others were arresting and I would like to have heard more.

The second characteristic of a safe assumption is that it doesn't internally violate laws of logic. Jack's (I am taking advantage of the lack of tradition in this forum and using JW's first name) fourth assumption begins with the assertion that history has a goal. OK. It's an assumption. It's explicit. Plausible? Not very since humans are its storytellers; but, hey, I'll let it go. But by the time we get to the end of the paragraph we find out that 'The goal of history, therefore, is ensouling.' It is the 'therefore' that causes trouble. No evidence or reasoning is offered to support this claimed inference, and even in assumptions the laws of logic can't be ignored. I certainly can't blame Jack for leaving the supporting steps out. How one would establish what the goal of history is — even after accepting *arguendo* that there is one — is a knotty bit of business.

I think Jack is very wrong about the demise of the modern project and, were he right, I would mourn its passing. The Enlightenment has given us another way of understanding what it means to be a human being, and a rich and productive description of what we are about. It gave us some rules of discovery and discourse that have enabled peoples of different cultures and ideologies to talk and collaborate in achieving common ends. The task of reconciling wildly different sets of values would not have been possible without the continued acceptance of these rules of thought. "Moving on" to a stricture free, postmodern Babel bodes ill for continued collaboration.

Like any other approach to life, rationalism and empiricism necessarily draw an incomplete picture and Jack properly points out some of their lacunae. Materialism and reductionism are definitely yukky and leave much of what sort of creature we are behind. It seems to me a mistake, though, to expect a fundamental approach to human experience to be complete; so finding essential aspects of our lives not accounted for by a given approach -- enlightenment, mysticism, or whatever -- should neither be a surprise nor a cause for concern. Even if we want to move toward transcendence, there is little reason to discount that from which we are transcending.

These somewhat critical observations aside, I enjoyed this piece. As a call to arms for creativity and imagination it is very stimulating. I was much more captivated by Jack's account of history's future than persuaded by his interpretation of its past."

— from PCW

"Dear Jack:

I would like to reflect a bit on what you refer to as 'conscience.' I am not sure how useful this particular word choice is (despite your attempt to reconfigure it) given how most people use and understand the word. For the sake of the discussion, however, I will stay with it. It seems to me that conscience as a 'function of our deepest spiritual identity' must work, in its highest expression, much like contemplation. In my experience of meditation/contemplation, I have noticed a few defining notes which might be helpful to the discussion.

First. Contemplation plunges you into a radically personal process. When you meditate -using any of a range of methods from Zen to Vapassana to centering prayer - you are moved very quickly into your personal psychic soup. People commonly experience this 'soup' as a stream of images and often intense emotions. The initial work of the contemplative process is to loosen and bring this material to the surface of consciousness. We can then 'observe' it, as they say, and let it go. Only then can the deepest parts of us (including conscience) really function.

Second. Precisely because the dynamic of contemplation moves us into surrender in the presence of the mystery of God and of our own depths, we can not control the outcome of the process. Rational, logical thinking allows for a more predictable road map. For the contemplative, faith and hope are inevitably involved.

Third. The kinds of knowledge this process produces resembles - as you have suggested- art more than science or discursive thought. Viewing artistic material is like looking into a pool of water which changes with the available light and becomes clearer or more opaque with the wind. The manifestation of 'conscience' is provisional and sensitive to time and context. Obviously, the contemporary ego - hungry for useful, verifiable facts - can all too easily lose patience with the process by which conscience operates and toss aside its results as false, undependable or quirky.

Fourth. Even though the process of releasing conscience is very personal, I have found that its fruits are meant for communities of people. Groups and pairs discerning together illuminate and deepen the experience. The process works best when it is not muddied by willfulness and personal agendas.

Fifth. The whole person is involved in the activity and the manifestation of 'conscience' - the mind, feelings and the 'bodily intelligence.' Whenever pure, abstract intellect is operating alone, we are not dealing with conscience as I understand it.

Sixth. The process requires vulnerability and openness to the virtues. Likewise, in operation it tends to make you more honest.

Seventh. The contemporary world both hungers for this and is profoundly uncomfortable with its discipline and its resistance to ego manipulation. Consequently, we get a lot of bogus, trivial, false and even dangerous versions of conscience - 'business management training' spirituality, psychic hot lines. The realm of the imagination which seems - as you have said - key to the operation of 'conscience' can be dangerous territory. It is - as Shakespeare reminds us - the field of the madman and the fool as well as the poet and the lover. I think that is one of the reasons why religious institutions have always insisted - often at the cost of human decency, as well as access to soul and Spirit - on authority and tradition."

from JH

* * * * *

First, I would like to have heard more about the assertion that our commitment to enlightenment rationality continues out of force of habit. Or that the loss of soul was somehow tied to the benefits of the modern era. Or that "The modern project was a profoundly masculine enterprise."

Second, Jack's fourth assumption begins with the assertion that history has a goal. OK. It's an assumption, but is it plausible? Not very since humans are its storytellers. But by the time we get to the end of the paragraph we find out that "The goal of history, therefore, is ensouling." It is the "therefore" that causes trouble. No evidence or reasoning is offered to support this claimed inference and even in assumptions the laws of logic can't be ignored. I certainly can't blame Jack for leaving the

supporting steps out. How one would establish what the goal of history is — even after accepting arguendo that there is one — is a knotty bit of business.

Jack Whelan Responds: The idea of presenting assumptions before the discussion was to provoke exactly the kind of challenges that Peter Williams has posed. My hope is that an online discussion might develop out of these short exchanges in which I could develop fuller responses than what is possible here. The best way I know how to frame my response to PW's questions is to say that first I am a believing, practicing Catholic who accepts the postmodern critique of modernity, its assumptions and worldview, but am mostly interested in imagining where we go from here.

There is simply not room enough here for me to argue the validity of my position, but I will say that my ideas are influenced more by Marshall McLuhan

than by people like Jacques Derrida. Like McLuhan I think that the shift into modernity at the time of the Renaissance was deeply linked the introduction of the printing press, the ensuing growth of literacy, and with that the growth of a dynamic literate bourgeoisie or knowledge class. I am convinced that we are undergoing a similar shift now into what McLuhuan called a post-literate era that is similarly linked to the introduction of new technologies, particularly electronic information and biological technologies.

Just as the medieval institutions and attitudes persisted well into the modern period, so will modern institutions and attitudes persist into this new era, but these now older attitudes are not where the culture's creative dynamism even now lies. This persisting of the modern is what I mean by habit. McLuhan's idea that we are moving into a post-literate culture does not mean that people will stop reading, just as the new literacy that came with modernity did not mean

continued from p. 5

that people stopped talking. But the differences between a predominantly literate culture and a predominantly oral culture are significant and are well described in Walter Ong, SJ, *Orality and Literacy*. And so will the differences be between literate modern culture and the new post-literate culture that is just now emerging.

I would also refer you to *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* by Catherine Pickstock. This is not an easy read, but it supports my position that while Modernity brought many benefits, we paid a price for them because of its over-reliance on a particular kind of eye and space centered knowing which stresses differences, disconnections, mechanistic processes, the subject-object split, and the devaluation of what cannot be seen, which includes almost all of the non-rational dimensions of human experience. This in turn has led to the disenchantment or reification of nature and to the growing view of the human as a machine, a cyborg—all cybernetic mind and no soul. Now I'm not proposing a regression into the premodern, but I do believe that our best future depends on our retrieving what Modernity rejected as irrational nonsense. This is a bigger subject than we can get into here, but it points to what I mean by

“ensouling”

Regarding the second point about whether history has a goal. I accept the Judaeo-Christian idea that history, the space/time box in which we live out our lives on earth, is where it's at. This is a different idea than the Hindu/Buddhist understanding that space/time is illusory, and that the goal of human existence is to break out of the illusion, to get out of the box to the really real which lies outside of the box. Now, Christians and Jews also believe that the really real is outside of time/space and until the modern period, if they were devout, thought that the point of their activity in space/time was to earn a good spot outside of it when they died. But one of the gifts of modernity was to historicize our imagination of transcendence, so that it isn't just something that we imagine coming only from eternity above, but also from the future ahead, whether we imagine this future to be Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point, Karl Rahner's Absolute Future or just the good, old biblical New Jerusalem.

This eschatological theme is at the heart of the Judaeo Christian narrative, but it has not yet been effectively developed. The combination of Enlightenment rational progressivism with biblical eschatology has led to the development of all manner of naïve utopian schemes, including Marxism. Our job now is to develop an outline for

the next chapter in this grand historical narrative. Essential to this task is our need to develop a postmodern, religious, ensouled, humanism that stands as a contradiction to the cyborg humanism that I fear will otherwise capture the culture's imagination by default.

So I agree. We humans are storytellers. But some storytellers are better than others because they tell deeper truths. Dostoyevski is better than Danielle Steele; Shakespeare is better than Michael Crichton. And I believe that the Judaeo Christian narrative is a deeply true story that is only partially written, and that it is up to us work out how the rest of the story turns out. I think that the chapters in this story are written in cultural eras; that we've already begun to write the next chapter that comes after modernity, and our chances for developing a story with a happy ending are far greater if we have some sense of where we human beings want to go, and that there is a goal no matter how far distant in the future. Right now we're mostly clueless about how to proceed, but the clues abound if we have the eyes to see them.

Sophia Center
PO Box 525
Huntington, NY 11743

