

CONVERSATIONS

A Newsletter of the Sophia Center

No. 6 November 2001

From the Director

IN this issue of Conversations we offer two contributions by regular participants in Sophia Center projects. Our hope is that this newsletter will become a place - along with on-going projects of the Center - in which the dialogue crucial to living as believers in contemporary culture will grow deeper and more inclusive.

The long essay by Jim Marley represents some of his reflections on the Forum we held last April on how believers ought to participate in discussions of public policy. We are also printing a letter from Jack Whelan about September 11, and a letter from Claire Nicolas White responding to the essay on Imagination in issue # 5 of Conversations. (All the previous issues of the newsletter can be found on our web site: www.sophiacenter.net)

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The visit of Alicia Suskin Ostriker was the third in our series of readings and discussions exploring the role of imagination in the spiritual experience of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions. Her visit included both a public reading of her poetry and an evening of conversation bringing together scientists, theologians and professors of literature to explore similarities and differences in the uses of creative imagination by writers and scientists.

Ms. Ostriker's poetry and essays have a remarkable range from explorations of Jewish mystical and biblical traditions to evocations of the most ordinary things of contemporary life. Those who heard her reading, I'm sure, are already looking for more of her books. For those who did not have a chance to hear and speak with her, discovering her work will introduce you to someone whose company you will treasure. Her comments on inspiration in the work of the poet have raised important questions for us to pursue in our thinking about the role of creative imagination in human activities, especially in the spiritual life and

Film Series:

"As We See Ourselves: American Directors on America"

Bringing Out The Dead, Martin Scorsese, director



A visually stunning Dantesque meditation on American urban life, technology, and questions once asked in terms of the human soul. This film provides for an especially valuable continuation of our conversations about the religious dimensions of American experience following on Coppola's "The Conversation" and Allen's "Crimes and Misdemeanors".

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 5, 2001 7 P.M.

Auditorium, Seminary of the
Immaculate Conception,
Huntington

in the necessary conversation between science and religion.

We will be announcing soon the next poet to be invited to the Sophia Center in this on-going series.

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I would like to get some initial reactions to a proposal that has been made that we develop a project for people who are interested in deepening their own spiritual practice through creative writing. We would offer workshops at different locations on Long Island, led by teachers of cre-

ative writing who themselves belong to different religious traditions, for participants to explore through their own work the role of imagination in the spiritual life. The workshops would be for people who are interested in serious, though not professional, creative writing. Each workshop would be limited to five or six participants and would meet for about six two-hour sessions during the Spring of 2002.

Is this a realistic and valuable suggestion for us to pursue? Let me know your thoughts: sophiarvc@aol.com or Sophia Center, PO Box 525, Huntington, NY 11743

Religion and politics are separate though not mutually exclusive projects. Religions explore and interpret the nature of reality and they shape human experience and behavior. Religious experiences lead to stances about what is real and what is false in human life and direct a certain kind of approach to life based on that stance.

It seems that politics aims at a different (lower?) target. It does not seek to interpret reality, it seeks to manage it. Whatever assumptions there may be about the nature of things, politics is focused on the organization of the structure of society and the practical management of the day to day.

In real life of course, the lines between what things mean and how things should be organized exist in dynamic relationship and, even when formally separated, the lines frequently get blurred. Religion and politics always wrap around each other because they both involve statements about the way that human beings ought to live. While religion and politics interact everyday in almost every place in the world, our contemporary experience is that this interaction is usually relatively innocuous.

But not always. Not everywhere

Not long ago a young man named Mahmoud Marmash, wrote the following words about two hours before he killed himself and five others in the suicide bombing in Israel.

“Whoever thought that God and religious would prevail without blood and body parts was living an illusion. They didn’t know the nature of the religion”

To Western ears these sentiments are fanatical and terrifying. They seem more suited to the world of the Crusades or the Inquisition. But even though the current world episodes of violence and passion related to religion are powerful, they’re not the common pattern in the West or even in the rest of the world.

One could make a strong case that in most of the world, people’s common daily experience is more likely to be shaped by family needs and shopping than by religious passion or vision.

In that context, it is the lack of passion in the current discussion in America about faith based communities becoming partners in government funded program services that I find so interesting. The mix of religion and politics in America is familiar ground with a long history of accommodation and of partnership. These are essentially comfortable relationships adjusted over time and adapted to new and emerging needs. It is not usually the stuff of passion.

Living in the culture of America (and the West) with its heady blend of individual autonomy and personal choice, expanded opportunity for consumer goods, and mass-market competition for disposable income, the conversation about politics and religion has no edge. It is the argument without combatants. It hasn’t really

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been much of a problem and the truth of the matter is that there is hardly time to pay attention to it.

American culture likes religion. It likes it the same way it likes the March of Dimes, Alcoholics Anonymous, and the American Red Cross. Do good work. Help everyone. Believe what you want. Don't be too pushy and you are home free in the USA.

Of course, the potential is always there for religious life to exceed these limited bounds. It is the nature of religion to lay claim to the passions, imagination, and life choices of its members, but that capacity is always shaped and sometimes counterbalanced by the prevailing culture.

So, for me, the conversation about politics and religion leads directly to a very perplexing problem now facing religious communities.

How do these communities develop a powerful common life while surrounded by such a vibrant consumer-driven and increasingly individualized secular society in which pluralism is the social goal and personal freedom and individual consumer choice are the highest values?

It is a very difficult question and many religious communities, aware of the difficulty, have been struggling to develop experiences that provoke and engage contemporary people so that religious imagination can be nourished and religious experience is possible.

These efforts have had varying results, and in many religious communities the situation has become critical because many of the inherited patterns of their common life are in the process of breaking down or have already broken down.

Even the kinds of choices implied in religious commitment can be somewhat problematical in our society. In a transient and provisional culture that is so much more comfortable with the relative than with the absolute, life-defining choices stand out. Contemporary culture might support choices for religious involvement but it will also support almost any kind of choice a person might make and it will most certainly be hesitant to value one kind of choice over another.

In that kind of atmosphere it is hard to say that anything can really lay claim to anyone and this kind of cultural ambivalence is having a profound effect on religious communities. Without the social construct of ethnic identity and the deeply shared values of a common life supporting those communities, the religious prospect is much more individualized and much less frequently validated by the immediate general culture. There is much less insulation from the competing values of society and a greatly increased potential for a loss of membership and a weakening of leadership roles in the community. Catholicism is now experiencing this in a very profound way as its traditional religious communities have radically declined and its priesthood is now aging out at dramatic levels.

One logical response to all this is to attack contemporary culture head on in all of its

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aspects but this runs the danger of proposing an early 20th century (or 19th or 18th or some other) cultural ideal as the only appropriate vehicle for understanding the intervention of God in history. It may do for some but it won't do for most and ultimately it's not logical. Additionally those cultural vehicles are also subject to very severe critiques in such areas as intolerance, violence, bigotry, coercion, sexism and racism.

So if going back is not really that much of an option, and the current situation is so problematical to religious traditions and religious experience, how do these communities move forward?

One answer is to make the attempt to accelerate and intensify the problematic and difficult struggle to fully engage the patterns of contemporary culture in a search for religious meaning. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all assert the presence of God in history- 21st Century included. On that basis, they need to reaffirm a commitment to explore the human possibility of encountering God in this culture and promote a community life shaped by God's presence and committed to compassion mercy and justice. In the face of the daily contradictions of life and death, they need to speak hopefully and determinedly in the language of freedom and liberation and not coercion.

It is always a struggle to do this. This is true both in the lives of individuals and communities no matter what the times might be like. All three great religious traditions confidently assert the presence of God in history but on a day-to-day basis or century to century basis the nature of that presence can be difficult to perceive. If it was difficult in the Sinai and in Galilee why are we so surprised that it is still difficult in our cities and towns and our churches. The history of all three religious communities also documents that human folly is an enduring partner of the search for the presence of God. Inevitably and repeatedly these communities lose their way and bless corruption, stagnation, wars and contempt as markers of the divine presence. But even folly plays its part and many of the great religious figures of these communities have been reformers reacting to the catastrophes of their community and finding meaning significance and the presence of God where others have seen only failure.

So for all of the real difficulties, the assertion of the presence of God in history means that the communities formed to attest to that presence and to be defined by that presence must go forward. The conversations with the broader culture need to assert that human beings are born to dream more than they are to shop and that they are born to imagine more than they are born to consume. They ultimately need to assert that humans are called to a shared life with their creator and that this shared life lays claim to their identities and to their resources.

Religious faith, and the life of communities joined by faith, are not the only way to speak about values of justice, compassion, equality, freedom and destiny. However, I think it is fair to say that these are the open doors in our nature and these are most certainly open doors of our culture.

The urgent task of religious communities is to engage these realities in a dynamic and compelling fashion and to and walk hopefully along these paths in the search for God.

Jim Marley
Nyack, New York

Dear Friends,

As it's true I'm sure for all of you, my thoughts and emotions about the events of September 11 have evolved significantly over the past weeks. Maybe our experience of this disaster will awaken us not only to our solidarity in grief with other Americans but also to the grief of those who continue to suffer everywhere.

America was targeted because America represents something that is actually much bigger than America, which is the inevitable cultural homogenization that accompanies globalization. This is an unstoppable historical cultural process, and American political and economic institutions play a leading role in its development. But here's the point: the deepest and most explosive kind of violence is triggered by threats to personal and cultural identity. The first leads to the shootings in schoolyards; the second to Northern Ireland and the Taliban. When someone feels a loss of identity, it's an excruciatingly painful experience and one that often leads to the most explosive forms of violence.

I think this is at the heart of the recent rash of schoolyard shootings, Timothy McVeigh, and the Unabomber. It also goes a long way to explaining why globalization poses a similar threat to people whose identities have been formed within the context of rigidly traditionalist cultures. It's hard for contemporary Americans adjusted, more or less, to life in a pluralistic society to appreciate how threatening globalization is to traditionalist societies. The secularizing forces that drive globalization are powerfully seductive and traditionalists are quite right in seeing that its effects corrode traditional beliefs and traditional cultural forms.

If we had it to do over again, wouldn't we try to find a way to deal more humanely with the American Indians? As modernity all but annihilated native American culture, so traditionalist societies like those in the Mideast rightly understand the danger from globalization. The globalization process doesn't require territorial occupation; just economic, political, and cultural acquiescence if one wants its seductive benefits, benefits that we Americans take for granted as the normal things that everyone in his right mind would want.

Some individuals within traditionalist cultures make the adjustment, even welcome it. But for many, it's not easy to adjust when their sense of self derives from being integrated into a coherent political religious social structure. One flails out at the forces that work to corrode it. The Taliban-style Islamists in the Mideast are like the crown and altar traditionalists in Europe during its modernization process which began in the 1500's. As most rigidly traditionalist Europeans eventually learned that it was possible to live as Christians without the cultural forms that shaped life in the medieval era, so inevitably will traditionalist Muslims. But like their earlier European counterparts, they are not going down without a very bloody fight.

Our real responsibilities lie elsewhere. America has a critical moral role to play in leading the rest of the world, the huge populations that want what we have. The world longs to live the American lifestyle, and the world cannot sustain the world living such a lifestyle. Adjustments will come whether we choose them or not.

It would be so much better if we could choose them rather than have them forced upon us, but that's not likely.

When we're older, we mature to think that our purpose in life is to work to give our families a better life. But to often that just means to indulge in other sterile pleasures enabled by our power to buy things—huge SUV's and houses, newer and more up-to-date appliances, and soul-sapping entertainments. Why? Because even though the best among us long for a nobler way to live, we don't know how to do it. And the sad thing is that this "nothing better to do" is what most of the rest of the world lusts for. We've got to find a better way for our own sake and for the sake of the majority of the world that wants to be us. This is the real moral challenge of the next century. And it's not up to the government; it's up to us.

Jack Whelan
Seattle, Washington

Dear Ralph,

Your essay about Imagination in the Sophia newsletter appealed to me and clarified for me the validity of poetry, which at times seems a trivial, egocentric pursuit. Your point of view makes it still seem relevant, without being just “magical” or pretentious.

You quote the scientist saying that imagination is the ability to see similarity in disparate things. This is like the poet’s obsession with metaphor. This need has been called, I think by Richard Wilbur, the urge for unity, which is God. Even the dictionary describes imagination as perceiving “the basic resemblance between things.” Poetry is, according to Robert Frost, to say matter in terms of spirit, to describe one thing in terms of another.

If not using metaphor, as in Chinese poetry for instance, or, as William Carlos Williams views it, “No ideas but in things,” the mere image invoke in the reader a recognition, an echo of his own perception. When a poem moves one emotionally, it is again when the reader identifies with that emotion that a connection is made. So poetry is a connecting element.

Your mention of ecology as evoking the ultimate unifying imagination is a very hopeful one to me, for it should ideally eliminate all difference between races, religions, countries, in the concern for our single ecosystem. Typically, contemporary poetry is overwhelmingly concerned with nature. When teaching children in public school, where religion is not allowed to be mentioned, I have been struck by the unifying sense of morality children respond to ecologically. Perhaps it could be a religion for our time.

So in this troubled, divided world of ours, you offer a hopeful possibility. For in the increased multi-racial mix of our population, the world-wide communication systems, the opening of boundaries and frontiers and continuous traffic between nations, we have all become essentially exiles. If we see this as not a short-coming, a banishment from our origins, it becomes, on the contrary, part of the general unification process, to which poetry, I hope to think, contributes.

With friendship and admiration,

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