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Incidentally

by Lillian V. Grissen

Religion and Commitment

“How do we deal with reality?”

“One’s religious commitment does not flow automatically into all scientific theories, so how do we deal with reality in scientific commitments?”

Dr. Elaine Botha asked these questions rhetorically of a combined student-faculty audience at Dordt College in March. Professor Botha is a member of the Philosophical Inter-Faculty at Potchefstroom University in South Africa. Presently on leave, she is teaching at The King’s College in Edmonton, Alberta.

Botha said, “We have grown up believing our religious experience comes to expression in all of our life and in our scientific beliefs, but recent developments prove that it is not quite that simple.”

We have to be concerned with the way in which people function. Just as a person cannot express himself fully in two different languages, so no one can speak two philosophical languages at the same time; so also scientific language differs from religious or juridical language.

Religion is the dynamic current that flows through our beliefs; it is the dynamic force which motivates man to serve God—or idols. Beliefs are one element of religion and they must not be confused with religion itself. Religion does imply a commitment; for the Christian it includes a confession that God is ultimate, and it implies that man responds to God.

The certitudinal dimension comes to expression also in one’s scientific endeavors, and therein it opens up human life to God (or whatever is ultimate) and it anchors everything in life.

This certitude, said Botha, integrates and guides human life. It takes place in terms of the reason for life and man’s vision of a world-view. It provides an interpretive framework and a way of categorizing language. “All world-views use a jargon and one must know that jargon in order to understand or be understood.” A world-view is a confessional vision which exposes what one surrenders to the ultimate. Such a vision is a true picture of reality for that person.

Certitude also provides a framework of beliefs commonly held by a community, and this framework can function in a religious manner. When a person says, “I believe this above all things,” he is making the same type of statement as “I believe in the Creator-God.” Sometime even the state can function as an anchor of certitude.

The study of science is just one way that man tries to serve God. In science belief comes to expression in the form of intellectual commitment, a commitment to analyze science as a metaphysical paradigm, a sociological paradigm, or a construct paradigm.

In summary, Botha said, no statement we make can be divorced from our religious beliefs because they

control the way we look at reality. Beliefs in scientific theories are analytically qualified, but it is possible to take these analytically qualified theories and declare them to be a full explanation of reality. Then they become an absolute and part of our world-view.

Thus culture or the state/nation can be absolutized and idolized. "One can make an idol out of everything—even religion, even God—by developing Him according to one's own image."

For South Africans this understanding has particular meaning. A person must be a patriot, but when is patriotism idolatrous? Civil religion is a belief system in which a group's ultimate allegiance is either to the state, or to a political or national community. Civil religion *is* a religion, allegiance not to God but to the state. The white people in South Africa are reckoned by themselves to be ultimate, and the problem lies in how that statement starts functioning. If it allows injustice and discrimination, it is not justified. Then it

functions as a secularized belief, and through it the South African sees reality. It even influences what he sees.

Botha stressed that Calvinists world-wide need to discern how religious beliefs come to expression in a qualified way. Christians need to recognize the religious commitment in scientific statement and in the culture of the state/nation. There is a legitimate and an illegitimate place for religion.

In a separate address to Dordt students and faculty, Botha described the "international mosaic of Calvinism" with appropriate illustrations and modest humor. She shared her impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of Calvinism as it expresses itself in Holland, Canada, the United States, and South Africa. Because Calvinists need each other, she said it is imperative for Calvinists in different countries to understand each other. The colleges could begin, she challenged, by initiating a student-exchange program.

Lillian V. Grissen

Allan Boesak Speaks of God and the gods at Dordt

Dordt College has been privileged to receive a wide variety of South Africans on its campus over the past three years. Allan Boesak brought a powerful challenge when he came to visit March 9-10. A campus minister at the University of the Western Cape in Capetown, Boesak is well acquainted with the United States and Europe, as well as his own country. His major address to the college community was a "theological and political analysis of South Africa," but it was pointed at Americans and Canadians as well as at South Africans.

At bottom, said Boesak, all problems and tensions come back to whether human beings serve the true God or the gods of their own choosing. The tragedy is that while Christians talk repeatedly about the service that should be rendered to God in Jesus Christ, they frequently spend much of their time manufacturing explanations to justify their idolatrous practices. The contradictions of life among South African Christians might appear to be more serious, but Americans should not overlook their own civil religion and racist practices.