

CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY THEORY

Topic: Incarnating Dialogue in Postmodernity
Conveners: Michele Saracino, Manhattan College
Vincent J. Miller, Georgetown University
Presenters: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University
Bradford Hinze, Marquette University

Jeannine Hill Fletcher spoke on “Embracing Our Multiplicity: A Feminist Strategy for Interreligious Dialogue.” She argued that ‘resurrecting the body’ as a factor within interreligious dialogue provides a distinctive way of relating to people of other faiths. While actual encounters indeed take place among persons who inhabit bodies, the theoretical frameworks that might structure interreligious exchanges and the subsequent theological reflections on them all too often ignore the body as a factor in the discussion and instead are conceived as disembodied conflicts of intangible ideas about God or salvation. Constructing dialogue with a disembodied focus on belief and/or truth carries with it the assumption that the expert spokesperson can speak from a neutral standpoint about the belief and truth of all members of his/her religious tradition, which masks the actual diversity within the group. As this paper demonstrates, recognizing particular bodies in dialogue safeguards the diversity within the religions while also providing a means of connection across religious traditions.

Fletcher’s major theoretical concern was to demonstrate how theologies of religious pluralism perpetuate the myth of the objective spokesperson in disembodied dialogue as they see religions in their ‘specific difference’—that is, each religion is seen as homogeneous in order to sharpen the differences among the various religions. This line of thought has brought theologies of religious pluralism to an impasse in their response to religious differences. To address this problem, she proposed following patterns of feminist thought on identity, in order to conceive of the construction of religious identity as “hybrid.” That is, embodied persons come to the dialogue with all aspects of who they are and hybrid identities constructed at the intersection of religious outlook, race, gender, ethnicity, profession and multitude of other markers of social location. Unlike dialogue conceived as disembodied, embracing our hybrid multiplicity provides a theoretical framework for structuring dialogue as the meeting of embodied individuals where the encounter simultaneously embraces both the sameness *and* difference of the other.

Bradford Hinze presented a paper entitled “The Role of Lamentation in a Dialogical Ecclesiology.” He addressed the many cries of lament about the state of dialogue in the Catholic Church since Vatican II by local bishops about insufficient collegial dialogue with the Roman Curia, by theologians about the lack of collaborative dialogue with bishops, and by many subgroups among the people of God who complain that there is too little consultative dialogue with theologians and bishops. He argued that lamentations have an important role to play in ecclesiology

and in ecclesial practices. Lamentations are constitutive of the church's unfolding identity and mission, realized through dialogical discernment and decision making.

His argument developed in three parts. First, he began with an exploration of how the genre of lamentations at work among the polyphony of biblical genres sheds light on the phenomenon and dynamics of lamentations in the church. Second, he turned to the experience and praxis of a group of seventy-two women in the Roman Catholic tradition who have followed the lead of Nancy Sylvester by "engaging impasse" through contemplation and dialogue is offered as a confirmation and enrichment of his thesis about the role of lamentations in the church. Third, he advanced a deeper philosophical and theological claim that dialogical intentionalities are not overturned or jettisoned, but rather deepened and expanded by the purgative and purifying process made possible by lamentations. Here he drew from Emmanuel Levinas's laments about the limits of Martin Buber's views on dialogue without renouncing the importance of dialogical intentionality. Hinze seeks to offer an alternative on the one hand to a Catholic version of dialogical personalism that commends stronger leadership by bishops who guide, govern, and guard a restricted dialogue within the church and on the other to those who lament the bankruptcy of the Catholic Church's exercise of authority in governance and teaching and leave the sacramental and institutional church out of frustration.

Spirited discussion followed both presentations. Fletcher was asked what degree of generalization is necessary to speak of specific religions, and thus of dialogue; and whether she reduced interreligious dialogue to an exchange of individuals. Hinze was questioned about the relationship between protest and lament, and whether lament was too therapeutic a category in the face of clear power imbalances. Both were asked whether their positions "gave up" too quickly by accepting difference or impasse. Both clarified that they were addressing the shortcomings of extant approaches, not dismissing the ultimate goals of dialogue.

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