

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

Topic: The “Linguistic Turn” and Contemporary Theology
 Convener: James Le Grys, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
 Moderator: Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
 Presenter: Anselm Ramelow, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
 Respondent: Bruce Marshall, Southern Methodist University

This session offered a discussion of the relationship between the “linguistic turn” of twentieth-century philosophy and contemporary theology. In his paper, “Toward a Nonreductionistic Account of Language: Aquinas and Lindbeck on the Linguistic Turn in Theology,” Anselm Ramelow pointed out that the linguistic turn of twentieth-century philosophy has also entered theology. Here it has been taken up by postmodern theologians in order to emphasize the particularity and diversity of religious experience, so that, in contrast with modern approaches, religious experience comes to be viewed not as univocal and as only subsequently expressed in language, but as shaped by language from the outset. An example is the “post-liberal” theology of George Lindbeck.

Ramelow maintained that a Thomist philosophy of language would not side with either the moderns or the postmoderns. In the semantic triangle of word, mind, and object, both postmoderns and moderns forget the object, while they battle over whether mind (religious experience) or word (linguistic expression) should be seen as prior. For a Thomist, on the other hand, there is indeed a priority of mind over expression; however, it is not just to the mind, but to the whole relationship of mind and object that priority must be ascribed. As Aristotle recognized, the relationship of the word to its object is dependent on and derivative from the relationship of mind to object, i.e., the relationship of intentionality.

Religious language games and their relationship among each other can therefore not be adjudicated from an abstract religious experience (vs. modernism). Nor are they incommensurable “linguistic prisons” (vs. postmodernism). Rather, they are dependent on an encounter with objects. These objects preserve the particularity and plurality of religious experience, while at the same they are commensurable in an analogy of being. For a Christian understanding, the *primum analogatum* of religious experience would be the Word Incarnate, in whom religious experiences as well as religious language games become commensurable. In addition, even the God of the philosophers will naturally find his place in the Thomist scheme.

In his response, Bruce Marshall raised three questions about Ramelow’s paper: (1) Ramelow’s suggestion that Lindbeck wants to sever any connection between language and reality runs counter to what Lindbeck actually says on this point. (2) The traditional picture of language, on which Ramelow relies, holds that the meaning of words in a natural language depends on purely mental words or thoughts in the mind of the speaker. This appeal to mental language is both unnecessary and implausible. (3) Ramelow’s conclusion, which rightly stresses that

the universal Logos is the particular human being Jesus, seems inconsistent with the main argument of his paper.

An informative discussion followed.

JAMES LE GRYS

*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Washington, D.C.*