

GOD/TRINITY

Topic: God in All Things
Convener: Elizabeth T. Groppe, Xavier University
Presenters: Paul J. Fitzgerald, Santa Clara University
Terence Nichols, University of St. Thomas

The unfolding ecological crisis and developments in the natural sciences present our generation with new theological challenges. At the root of our ecologically destructive practices, Paul Fitzgerald argues, is a reductionist anthropology of homo faber who employs Zweckrationalität in a strictly instrumentalist and utilitarian approach to the non-human world. His essay “Finding God in All Things: An Ignatian Environmental Ethic” used Ignatian spirituality as a foundation to develop a theology of God and a theological anthropology that can recover the sense of reverence before creation necessary to inspire the conversion and sacrifice that the ecological crisis require. Fitzgerald called for an Ignatian pantheism, which he carefully defined as the providential presence of the triune God to creation. The natural world is the condition of the possibility of the existence of humankind with its unique moral freedom and eternal end. Nature’s proper end is finite, but it is ennobled by its role in humankind’s eternal end and permeated by God’s grace and mystery. Humankind has the ability to discern this presence and can either respond to the call to participate in God’s providential intentions or reject grace. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius are a school of the affections that can form us in detachment from the manufactured desires of our media culture, free us from the pride that seeks to misuse other creatures for our own finite ends, and conform us to the kenosis of Christ that enables us to live in a self-giving love that can contribute to the repair of creation.

Terence Nichol’s essay “Understanding the Creator from the Things that are Made” offered a sustained reflection on Rom 1:18-20 in dialogue with developments in the natural sciences. After Newton, Galileo, Darwin, Sagan, Dawkins, etc., can we still know God from the things that are made? Nichols considered four challenges to Vatican II’s affirmation that God can be known from the created order by the light of natural reason (*Dei Verbum*, #6): 1) the position of some cosmologists that the universe is self-sufficient and has no need of a Creator; 2) the naturalist claim that the apparent design and order in nature can be explained by mechanisms such as random mutation and natural selection; 3) the stark reality of natural evil; and 4) the position that the universe is purposeless and directionless. Meeting these challenges, Nichols argued that questions about the origin and end of the universe cannot be answered with the method of natural science and that a Christian can legitimately make a philosophical inference to God as first principle and last end in a manner consistent with today’s Big Bang theory and cosmology. He also emphasized that the progress of evolution through random mutation presupposes a cosmos that is finely tuned with an exact and statistically highly improbable calibration of fundamental laws and physical constants. And, in the face of natural evil, he noted that a younger generation of

biologists including Lynn Margulis and Joan Roughgarden highlight the importance of cooperation and symbiosis in nature and critique interpretations of Darwin that overemphasize competition and struggle. Nichols concluded that in dialogue with the natural sciences Christians can indeed infer that a divine Mind or Designer God created the cosmos. At the same time, he emphasized that the fullness of what Christians mean by “God” can only be known by reason enlightened by revelation.

The two papers stimulated discussion of a variety of topics. Gloria Schaab noted that a Christian panentheism requires us to rethink the classical attributes of God and would be well-served by a trinitarian female procreative model of the God-world relation. Joe Bracken emphasized that a trinitarian model has great possibilities as a theological paradigm that allows us to approach the God-world relation through the kenosis of self-emptying love. Thomas Weinandy expressed concern that any form of Christian panentheism reduces God from Creator to demiurge and binds evil into the system of the cosmos. Robert Imbelli inquired as to whether an ecological panentheism requires a high Christology and, if so, why this is the case. Another participant asked the speakers for assistance in grappling with the tremendous suffering she has witnessed in her work for human rights, and Nichols replied that the only fully adequate response to the tremendous injustice of the world is the resurrection promise of a new creation.

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