

CREATION/ESCHATOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Identity and Difference, Unity and Fragmentation.”
Convener: Ernesto Valiente, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Moderator: Brian Robinette, Boston College
Presenters: Heidi Russell, Institute of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University
Chicago
Daniel Minch, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

In her paper, “And God Saw that It Was Good: Complexity and Unity from Creation to the End Times,” Heidi Russell explores recent scientific developments in our understanding of the cosmos in order to propose “the idea of creation as movement from order to disorder, simplicity to complexity, with eschatology unfolding as the ultimate meaning of that complexity.” She begins by explaining how concepts such as chaos theory and the development of non-linear systems help us understand creation. Chaotic systems are non-linear, extremely sensitive to initial conditions, and impossible to predict. The smallest change in their initial conditions has incalculable consequences. These systems also have fractal properties—that is, they exhibit a common self-repeating pattern at every scale. Hence, these concepts help us recognize the complexity of creation and of our human interactions, and unveil the beauty inherent to creation. Russell goes on to explain that maximum entropy only takes place in closed system. Disordered systems open to their environment, like our world, create order spontaneously. For Russell, this creative energy evokes the biblical images of creation as the ordering of chaos and describes the universe’s evolution from a state of simplicity to the present one of exuberant complexity.

Russell’s paper then turns to science’s contribution to our understanding of the eschaton. She notes that theologians such as John Polkinghorne and Robert John Russell understand Jesus’ resurrection as the event that indicates the transformation of the present universe, and see the new heavens and new earth not as a new creation *ex-nihilo* but rather as a re-creation of the world—a creation *ex vetere*. Robert John Russell, for instance, sees the eschaton as a combination of the movement of historical time into eschatological time, and the movement of eschatological future back to the cross. At the moment of death, in this non-linear understanding of time, the human person passes bodily into the ordinary future, and simultaneously transformed, through the power of Christ, passes as a new creation into the eschatological future. As Heidi Russell explains, Andrei Linde’s concept of eternal inflation offers a somewhat similar understanding of the cosmos’s fate in that the theoretical physicist describes individual universes emerging from one another in a never ending chain reaction. Heidi Russell is careful not to equate the eschaton with the physical destiny of the universe, but notes that these two are not entirely separate. A self-reproducing universe, moreover, is coherent with the pattern that we see throughout creation, in which complexity arises out of simplicity and order out of disorder. She concludes by stating that such a vision of the universe stresses both the plural and interrelated nature of the created order, does not deny the significance of human existence, and reflects the beauty and endless creativity of God’s activity.

Daniel Minch presented a paper titled “The Fractured Self and the Primacy of the Future: Edward Schillebeeckx and the Eschatological Horizon.” The paper argues that recent and profound changes in the notion of human subjectivity have led to a contemporary crisis that is reflected in the fragmentation of the subject and the loss of a common future horizon as a primary source of interpretation. He proposes that Edward Schillebeeckx’s reading of Christian eschatology and the “new image of God” offers vital resources for the ongoing process of Christian identity formation. According to Minch, the problem of being Christian without the perception of a common eschatological future must be located within the wider problem of the collapse of modern meta-narratives, which have not delivered what they promised. Minch then argues that today these meta-narratives have been replaced by market narratives: we become insofar as we participate in the market, and each one of our transactions reflects an image of the self that we want to project. This is evident in social media sites where people construct manicured images of themselves in order to elicit the affirmation of others. For Minch, this all results in a largely unreflective and fractured subject who has both uncoupled the connection between his or her present actions from the future as primary horizon and has reduced his or her understanding of praxis to that of consumption instead of a means for self-transcendence.

Building on the work of Schillebeeckx, Minch proposes an eschatological model rooted in God as the universal subject of history and source of human transcendence. God as revealed in Christ provides the basic paradigm to grasp God’s salvific work in history and grounds what God has promised for humanity’s future. For Minch, this Christian vision of eschatology offers four advantages for the contemporary situation. First, it advances an authentic way of understanding and interpreting the human reality and temporal condition; one that fosters human striving and self-transcendence. Second, the Christian narrative enables us to interpret our experiences within the context of God’s salvific activity. Third, because this eschatology understands temporality and history as radically open, it enables us to remain available to God’s transforming grace. Fourth, this eschatological openness shapes our understanding of the future and informs our present praxis calling us “to live authentically in a way that has consequences for all of history.”

ERNESTO VALIENTE
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Brighton, Massachusetts