

THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS AND CRITICAL THEORIES—  
INTEREST GROUP

Title: Fifty Years After the Council  
Convener: Anthony J. Godzieba, Villanova University  
Moderator: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University  
Presenters: John Thiel, Fairfield University  
Dominic Doyle, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry  
Susan Abraham, Loyola Marymount University

This was the second year of a three-year seminar on the immediate past, present, and future of theological hermeneutics and critical theories in Catholic theology. The administrative team (Brad Hinze, Tony Godzieba, Fernando Segovia, and Robert Schreiter) plans to publish the papers as a way of documenting the development of the use of hermeneutics and critical theory in theology since the Second Vatican Council and pointing the way to the future. This year's speakers were asked to address the present state of these disciplines by identifying and examining current hot-button issues from a hermeneutical or critical-theoretical perspective.

John Thiel ("The Aesthetics of Tradition and Styles of Catholic Theology") considered the post Vatican II "conservative-liberal" divide by appealing to the interpretive category of aesthetics. He distinguished two aesthetical sensibilities toward Catholic tradition in the contemporary Church and argued that these styles give rise to somewhat differing understandings of the theological task. The first is a classical aesthetics of tradition, which privileges the sense of sight in appreciating the beauty of tradition. The second is a developmental aesthetics of tradition, which values the sense of hearing in appreciating such beauty. Thiel explored the features of these aesthetics and the different kinds of Catholic taste associated with them. He warned that even though these styles "appreciate the same divine beauty from different perspectives, they all too easily become markers of Catholic difference" and conflict, the result of "errors of aesthetical reductionism." He concluded by emphasizing the need on the part of each style of theology to recognize the Catholic beauty which the other style finds compelling, thus appreciating "the rich unity of the Church that only appears in the wholeness of the traditions' beauty that each Catholic sensibility grasps in its own limited way."

Dominic Doyle ("From Dialectic to Disjunction: A Paradigm Shift in Catholic Interpretations of Secularism") traced a significant hermeneutical shift in Catholic interpretations of secularism, from a portrayal of dialectical opposition (exemplified by Bernard Lonergan's account of the redemptive value of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity in countering the ideology, despair, and hatred seen as the fruits of mid-twentieth-century atheism) to the diagnosis of internal disjunctions (exemplified by Charles Taylor's account of the origin of exclusive humanism and Michael Buckley's account of modern atheism). In response to this shift, Doyle argued that "'dialectic' can be retrieved in a way that both avoids oppositional triumphalism and includes the insights of this new 'disjunctive' hermeneutic," as illustrated by a reconsideration of the theological values as not only transformative *ad extra*, but also corrective *ad intra*. This is necessary because of the current need "to reconceive of Christian identity *simultaneously* in terms of its key identity markers

and in terms of the solvent effects of secularization.” Thus the theological virtues as these identity markers should be seen “not as an ideal type of a Christian virtue ethic that stands above the corrosive effects of secularization, but as itself implicated in and complicated by—and even deepened through—these inescapable experiences of disjunction.”

Susan Abraham (“Postcolonial Hermeneutics and a Catholic [Post] Modernity”) examined the decolonial hermeneutics proposed by Walter D. Mignolo (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* [2011]) in comparison with postcolonial theory. After providing an introduction to postcolonial theory, she emphasized that Mignolo, in attempting to do “better theory,” essentializes cultural borders. In postcolonial theory, especially in the work of Gayatri Spivak, cultural borders are more fluid and porous. The strategies of the latter emphasize Derridean *différance* rather than cultural or identity difference. This subtle point of difference between Mignolo’s and Spivak’s work is the occasion for a feminist, sacramental and Catholic theology. Specifically, in response to Mignolo’s “border knowledge” and attempts at “decolonizing religion to liberate spirituality,” Abraham defended a more deconstructive approach and sketched a “postcolonial theological hermeneutics” that would “seek to dismantle theological claims that rest on cultural or political imperialism.” Liberation, she concluded, “has to be *political*—that is, it has to result in the liberation of gendered bodies and their sacramental potential.”

The ensuing discussion of the three papers dealt both with clarifications of each speaker’s arguments and overall connections among the three papers. Some examples: Would Thiel’s aesthetics solve all the divisions between liberals and conservatives? (Thiel replied that he was not offering a theological panacea but a path to mutual understanding by a more explicit naming of what each theological style finds beautiful in the tradition they believe to be authoritative.) How are disjunctions and cross-pressures experienced within the secular culture, and not just within the Church? (Doyle provided some examples and made further connections.) Is “postcolonial” more of a metaphor than a standpoint theory in politics? (Abraham replied that it is both, but in her own work, the South Asian standpoint functions more concretely.) How does a theologian’s social location obscure the reality of violence and exploitation, especially when a theologian offers idealized accounts of theological topics in a way that is detached from concrete social and economic practices?

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