

PROTESTANT AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGIES OF GRACE IN
CONVERSATION: PARADOX AND GIFT—INVITED SESSION

Topic:	Protestant and Catholic Theologies of Grace in Conversation: Paradox and Gift
Convener:	Paul D. Murray, Durham University
Moderator:	John Thiel, Fairfield University
Presenters:	Karen Kilby, Durham University Paul D. Murray, Durham University
Respondent:	Nicholas M. Healy, St John's University, New York

In her paper, “Catholicism, Protestantism and the Theological Location of Paradox: Nature, Grace, Sin,” Karen Kilby explored a difference between certain typically Protestant and Catholic theological instincts around grace. She suggested that Catholic thought on grace tends to be shaped by pairing it with *nature*, much Protestant thought by pairing it with *sin*. For a typical Catholic thinker, we have some understanding of grace when we understand how it takes us *beyond* the gift of nature; for prominent strands in Protestant thought we understand grace to the extent that we understand it is a response to sin. The paper argued that in each of these patterns there is a pull towards paradox. One way to understand the Protestant/Catholic distinction is to attend precisely to where one most inclines towards paradox. The paper then looked in more detail at the interaction of these patterns in recent work of Kathryn Tanner. In *Christ the Key* (2010), Tanner borrows typically Catholic language of nature and grace to work out what is nevertheless a powerfully Protestant vision. In recent Gifford lectures on theology and capitalism it becomes clear just what a far-reaching effect the commitment to a Protestant pattern of thinking on grace has, since it seems to shape even how one frames resistance to global financial capitalism.

In his presentation, “Actualizing Grace in Catholic Theology and Practice: Lutheran Actualism as Gift for Catholic Learning,” Murray deployed the approach of Receptive Ecumenism to argue that Catholic theology and practice has much to learn from the actualist strain in Lutheran theology as a corrective to Catholic default emphases on stable structures of grace in the individual and the church. Whilst acknowledging the achievements of the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Murray argued that the cost of the *Joint Declaration's* method of grammatical correlation is that it can mute the challenge and promise of difference. Specifically, the Catholic instinct for “stable structures of grace” (e.g. habits, virtues, character, sacraments, ministry, authority) can tend towards idolatrous self-sufficiency unless integrated with a Lutheran actualist emphasis on the need for a continually renewed dependence on the active gracious initiative of God in the Spirit. Some indication was given of the implications of this fact for Catholic ecclesial habits of mind, process, and structure, culminating in a proposal concerning what it means for the church to understand itself as the creature of the Word in the power of the Spirit, and as *simul iustus et peccator*.

In his response, Healy noted that although the two papers shared the theme of nature and grace, they come at it in significantly different ways. With regard to Murray's treatment of Lutheranism as a test-case of the value of Receptive Ecumenism, whilst very sympathetic, he wondered how far this approach could be generalized: e.g.

Invited Session: Protestant and Catholic Theologies of Grace

studies in “lived religion” indicate wide discrepancies between official doctrine and the beliefs and practices of ordinary believers. Is there room for church authorities and theologians to learn from those ordinary others in their midst? Also, could this be a way to undermine acrimony between rival theological camps, such as *Continuum* and *Communio*? With regard to Kilby’s paper, he welcomed the focus on denominational sensibility and asked whether this challenges Receptive Ecumenism. Referencing Kilby’s use of the General Confession of the Anglican *BCP*, Healy then wondered whether her theologically reasonable emphasis on paradox might not be more profoundly and usefully addressed in terms of prayer, which seems able to hold paradoxes and sensibilities together, at times.

The discussion ranged widely and appreciatively across many aspects of the respective papers. Kilby’s reading of Tanner was a particular focus, as too was the approach of Receptive Ecumenism, in both formal-theological and practical focus. In addition, a number of people took up Healy’s point about prayer, exploring it in relation to each of the papers.

PAUL D. MURRAY
Durham University,
United Kingdom