

GRACE, CULTURE, PLURALISM—SELECTED SESSION

Topic:	Grace, Culture, Pluralism
Convener:	Jonathan Heaps, Marquette University
Moderator:	Neil Ormerod, Australian Catholic University
Presenters:	Jonathan Heaps, Marquette University Anne Carpenter, St. Mary's College of California Ryan Hemmer, Marquette University

In his presentation, “Cooperation and Culture: Human Action as a Theonomic Principle,” Jonathan Heaps elucidated how Bernard Lonergan approached nature and grace from a theory of action. Lonergan argues Thomas saw grace as a special case of the general cooperation between God and creatures, cutting through the tendency to make nature and grace into separable spheres or to suppose the distinction meaningless because all creation is gift. Heaps argued that, because God causes human agency as free, God also wills its products. We recognize the human world is largely such a product. We call it “culture.” How, Heaps asked, do we read the “theonomic” character of creation in cultures and the redemptive work of God in the same? Despite efforts by both sides of the contemporary controversy over the supernatural, Heaps argued that this irreducibly modern problem of the supernatural cannot be directly addressed by solutions to the medieval, metaphysical problems of divine *concursum*.

In her presentation, “Theological Aesthetics and Pluralism,” Anne Carpenter deployed examples from the tradition of Benedictine monasticism to consider how cultural artifacts provoke controversy and strain in questions about or situations of pluralism. Pluralism at once highlights and threatens the possibility of a coherent, concrete expression of faith. If beauty is unitive, then faith’s aesthetic dimension ought to be recognizable across cultures and times; if it is plural, then it ought to reflect the diversity of the Church’s catholicity. She argued that both extremes represent dead ends, but their reconciliation is neither obvious nor simple. If a rapprochement with beauty is to be achieved, it needs to rely on careful attention to nature and grace such that the artifacts mediate grace without at any point being identified with grace.

In his presentation, “After Retrieval: Grace, Intellectual Pluralism, and the Renewal of Theological Understanding,” Ryan Hemmer argued for a retrieval of speculative theology on par with the ressourcement retrieval of positive theology. The thirteenth century speculative reconciliation of grace and freedom brought resolution to the doctrinal pluralism of the twelfth century. This Thomistic achievement, however, depended upon a unified social, intellectual, and cultural matrix. Such unity was founded upon the Aristotelian notion of science, philosophy as subordinated to theology, and the classicist conception of culture as singular, universal, and unchanging. In the modern period, these foundations, which once supported speculative theology, have crumbled. Science, philosophy, and culture have turned to the empirical, the concrete, and the historical. And so, absent the cultural unity of the high middle ages, Hemmer asked, is speculative theology still possible? He answered in the affirmative but indicates the ways in which the modern notions of science, philosophy, and culture transform the practices and horizons of speculative theology. He argued for a methodically-grounded speculative pluralism, and describes the material, formal, and dialectical elements of that plurality.

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The conversation began with clarifications of certain conceptual claims and implications of Heaps's paper. Of particular interest was the "bracketing" or "cancelling" involved in specifying the "general" from the "specific" instances of cooperation with divine agency. Two other questions were raised about the possibility that God could withhold grace or humans could refuse it. Heaps insisted that the founding metaphysical principle behind his analysis was the priority of actuality to possibility, rendering some of these questions moot or uninteresting. Carpenter was asked about how her analysis might bear on the recent Met Gala's engagement with the Catholic imagination. She responded that Catholic analysis of such non-Catholic appropriation of Catholic symbols would be itself inevitably plural. Hemmer fielded a number of questions about the relationship between the abstractness of theory and the concreteness of doctrines and how it affects specifically theological speculation.

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