

ANTHROPOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Grace at Work in the World  
Convener: Julia Feder, Creighton University  
Moderator: Kevin McCabe, Seton Hall University  
Presenters: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University  
Adam Beyt, Fordham University

In her paper, “Grace in the Face of White Supremacy,” Jeannine Hill Fletcher argues that a White theology of grace has constructed the non-White, non-Christian other as outside the purview of God’s grace by linking grace and the good life within a White racial frame. This kind of theological production has created structural disparities within which White Christians continue to count themselves as graced because they live lives of abundance. This understanding of grace hides the reality that White accumulation of wealth has relied upon violence toward people of color. With womanist and feminist theologians, Hill Fletcher rejects connections of grace and the “good life” and embraces grace as God’s presence amidst the traumas inflicted by White supremacy. Instead of locating grace in the lives of the economically successful, the Christian religious tradition demands that we view grace through the lens of the Crucified One and identify the vehicle of God’s grace not with the “winners” of the world, but with those who are crushed by its tyrannies. Grace is the power to recognize the *imago Dei* in all humanity, and with the Crucified One to commit to the transformation of our world.

In his paper, “Reading the *Summa* Backwards: Against Natural Law Positivism,” Adam Beyt argues that the human body is both the site and agent of grace in the world and that theological anthropologies should consider the concrete realities of human bodies in order to describe the salvific power of grace in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. This approach stands against a version of Thomistic natural law that posits normative and universalizing principles regardless of context. Beyt refers to this type of mobilization of the natural law tradition as “natural law positivism” and argues that it holds grace hostage for individuals whose sexuality or gendered embodiment does not conform to its own normative framework. With Mark Jordan, Beyt argues that the *Summa* is best understood as an embodied pedagogy for Christian discipleship, pointing the reader toward understanding the nature of reality and right human action through materiality. The Incarnation itself is a form of divine embodied pedagogy meant to disclose the nature of God for embodied persons and the sacraments are the transformation of human bodies into agents of grace in the world. Thus, grace is always mediated to and for bodies. By turning to the work of Ignacio Ellacuría, Beyt argues that our bodies become agents of grace in the world precisely as we become oriented toward the suffering and marginalization of bodies. Thus, Christian discipleship entails bearing the Reign of God within embodied and concrete realities and, in so doing, becoming sacraments.

In the rich discussion that followed both papers, we discussed the relationship between the soul and the body in traditional Catholic theologies. Participants and presenters agreed that the soul and the body need to be closely related in Christian anthropology since the existence of a soul has historically been used to dehumanize human bodies (e.g., I can do whatever I want to your body since your soul will live forever in heaven). Similarly, Christian eschatological language has historically been

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used to fuel political quietism. Hill Fletcher argued that, in addition to keeping the soul and the body together in conversation, we also need to be reflective on the ways in which the body, as a locus of knowing, is also a locus of unjust enrichment. Some in the audience raised the idea that, as people of color, their bodies do not benefit from unjust enrichment. We do need to name grace in those places that we see the dignity of human persons despite the realities of violence, but before we can do this we need to name the pain of structural and social violence. Grace is the power to endure in the midst of structural and social pain and the power of God's interruption of epistemic blindness. The proper response to structural and social violence is to create structures of love. Catholic parishes can create these spaces but often have failed to do so.

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