

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Nature and Grace in a Secular Modernity
Convener: Christopher Hadley, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
Moderator: Christopher Hadley, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
Presenters: Charles Gillespie, University of Virginia
Peter Nguyen, S.J., Creighton University
Anthony Godzieba, Villanova University
Philip Rossi, S.J., Marquette University

Charlie Gillespie turns to theodramatics as a method of cultural renaissance in “‘Pure Nature’ and its Double: The Drama of Nature and Grace in Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar.” His thesis is that Antonin Artaud’s dramatic theory provides a structure for a reasoned, “publicly available” inquiry into the relationship between nature and grace in a secular milieu. He takes up de Lubac’s and Balthasar’s presupposition that there is no real dimension of existence that lies outside the sphere of grace but shows how Balthasar takes the imaginary notion of “pure nature” as a symbol that “doubles” for the pagan cosmos to be suffused by God’s grace. Drama communicates the dynamics of this God-world relation more effectively in modernity than does technical religious language because the affective responses of the “audience” to the notion of “pure nature” become part of the theatrical logic of the argument.

In “Grace as an Awakening of Authentic Desire in a Nihilistic, Technological Age,” Peter Nguyen contrasts the neo-pagan and christological visions of Ernst Jünger and Pope Francis. The nationalist technocratic logic of Jünger in the Germany of the 1920s and 30s relativizes the lives of persons in order to crush all difference by means of weaponization and propaganda, while Pope Francis’ theology of grace contemplates the strength of a gentleness that takes the form of beauty. The pope decries the disembodied idolatry of contemporary technological representation which, if not as violent as the weaponized, politicized wartime photography that Jünger was calling for, tends to take the place of the true beauty of embodied personal encounter.

Tony Godzieba and Phil Rossi offer a two-part, joint presentation entitled “Worldly Persistence in Grace: Imagination, Embodiment, and Vulnerability,” in which they ask where grace is to be sought and named from within a secular context that renders the traditional language of grace meaningless. They maintain that human existence, and indeed all existence, is fundamentally vulnerable to the presence of divine grace. In the first part, “Grace: A Book of Hours,” Godzieba offers the first “hour” of “Lauds” or “Morning Prayer” as an imaginative consideration of the sheer givenness of being arising to human sense. God “holds back” God’s own theonomy in a personal act of “discretion” that allows the autonomy of natural existence to arise. In “Midday Prayer,” human embodiedness is experienced as the particular open “space” in which phenomenality arises. Action in the world is the performative requirement and consequence of this embodied experience of grace. Reflecting on the events of this whole “day” at “Vespers” or “Evening Prayer,” Godzieba turns to Heidegger for the terms of the “formal indications” of grace in the world. Phil Rossi expands on the personal and aesthetic dimensions of these formal indications in the second major part

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of this presentation, entitled “Four Theses on the Worldly Persistence of Grace.” These four theses on grace have attending sets of consequences. As a result of the first thesis, “Creation as Original Grace,” creation itself can be seen as the horizon and locus of the persistent and always *free* working of an ever-present grace. According to the second thesis, “Grace as (Un)Manifest,” human recognition of grace *as* grace is itself not always fully given. In the third thesis, “The Syntax of Grace: Verb and Adverb,” Rossi suggests that grace is more properly considered as God’s (hidden) activity, or “gracing,” in its various modes of “freely,” “always,” and “abidingly.” In the final thesis, “Grace as Otherness, Otherness as Grace,” the plurality of existence emerges as the horizon of transcendent grace.

The ensuing discussion ranged across topics in theater, art, and the possible effects of Nazism in Germany and the occupation of France on the *nouvelle théologie* movement beyond static rationalism in theology. In response to the question of what Balthasar adds to de Lubac’s cultural *ressourcement* of drama, Gillespie pointed to Balthasar’s emphasis on the performative—as opposed to merely textual—dimension of the theodrama. When asked about the privileging of aesthetics in fundamental theology, Godzieba reflected on Augustine’s simultaneous personalization and “objectification” of grace located strictly in God against the Donatists, who insisted too heavily on the purity of the ministers of sacraments. Rossi responded to the question of the current privileging theological aesthetics by pointing to Charles Taylor’s history of art as a trajectory from understanding art as imitation of nature to an understanding of the artist-qua-creator that yields insight into the concrete and personal dimension of God’s grace. When asked about the significance of sin and the cross, Godzieba warned against theologies of grace that confined grace too much to the cross. The cross points to the still-emerging contrast between the purely secularized cosmos and the kingdom of God, a perspective that is absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, a focus on the musical “movement” of the cross should not make one deaf to the constant, eschatological “base line” of grace at work in the world.

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