

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Grace at Work in the World
Convener: Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University
Moderator: Heidi Russell, Loyola University Chicago
Presenters: Krista Stevens, University of Scranton
Christina McRorie, Creighton University
Amanda Alexander, Fordham University

In “Evolving Toward Solidarity: Nature, Grace, and Liberative Praxis,” Krista Stevens explores the relationship between the evolutionary process and the principle of solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching. To begin, she asks whether humanity’s historical failure to achieve the vision of solidarity outlined in CST expresses an evolutionary orientation toward selfishness or whether human evolution is marked by a tendency toward solidarity that goes unrealized in contemporary society. After recounting the origins, meaning, and significance of solidarity in CST—with a particular emphasis on structural sin—Stevens defines solidarity as the responsible, lived awareness of one’s interconnectedness toward the realization of the common good. Placing solidarity into conversation with evolutionary theory and theological discussions of nature and grace, Stevens challenges the common division of evolutionary nature and graced Christian life. Drawing on the work of Gerald Beyer and biologists Frans de Waal and David Sloan Wilson, Stevens argues that solidarity expresses tendencies toward empathy, altruism, and “targeted helping” revealed in the evolutionary process and other-than-human species and so challenges perspectives that would see grace as an extrinsic “add on” to evolutionary nature. This, she concludes, reveals that realized solidarity actualizes the cooperation of nature and grace that pervades the evolutionary process and, indeed, all creation.

In “Can Markets Mediate Grace? An Argument Based on Behavioral Economics,” Christina McRorie explores the relationship between “grace at work in the world” and market-based behavioral economics. Noting that most discussions of economic ethics take a negative stance toward markets, McRorie asks whether markets can instead mediate grace. By analyzing “choice architecture”—the structures that encourage consumers to buy certain products and discourage them from buying others—McRorie proposes that, while large corporations like Tostitos invest huge amounts capital to influence consumer choices by maximizing product exposure, subtly shaping who consumers understand themselves to be, conscientious consumers may act to participate in alternative markets that shape humans to be better consumers. These markets, which may include small, sustainably-oriented stores or B-Corp certified producers, offer consumers an alternative architecture within which consumer choices may be made and so prime capitalist systems to mediate more fully God’s grace.

In “Actualizing Grace: Prayer, Neuroplasticity, and Transformation,” Amanda Alexander asks how theology might understand grace “at work” in prayer given contemporary scientific descriptions of reality. She argues that we must not understand grace as energy moving through a closed system. In light of these concerns, she draws on neurological studies of prayer to illustrate how long-term meditation and prayer disrupt one’s sense of the limits of the self and physically alter neural pathways, reshaping how a person understands herself in relation to the world and to God. This insight raises the question of what prayer, as a manifestation of grace, *means*.

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Navigating between the extremes of materialist reductionism and interventionist divine action, Alexander employs Aquinas's discussions of the unity of formal and material causes—as illustrated in the relationship between soul (the form) and body (the matter)—to advance a metaphysics of prayer that envisions the act of prayer as “sufficient” and grace as “necessary,” such that both concur in the act of prayer. As such, prayer—a secondary causal action—actualizes the potentialities present in the brain to encounter the formal Primary Cause, God, in whose “livingness” the act of prayer originates, participates, and comes to fruition.

Session participants discussed the relationship between grace, markets, and current investment and divestment strategies within the CTSA. How might the idea that markets can mediate grace influence the investment strategies of the organization and the church? Other participants affirmed Alexander's reading of Aquinas and engaged in deeper discussion of divine agency and prayer. One participant noted the dangers manipulating brain activity by wireless signal—a proven possibility in laboratory tests. The session concluded with a discussion of problem of evolutionary violence and suffering in relationship to solidarity.

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