

THEOLOGY, SEXUALITY, AND JUSTICE—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	Grace at Work in the World
Convener:	Elizabeth Antus, Boston College
Moderator:	Christine Firer Hinze, Fordham University
Presenters:	Rosemary P. Carbine, Whittier College Craig A. Ford, Boston College
Respondent:	Susan Abraham, Pacific School of Religion

In her paper, “Whose Justice? Which Experiences? Decentering Cisgender Feminist Theology through the Ekklesia of Wo/men,” Rosemary Carbine deploys Catherine Keller’s neologism “transfeminism” as a starting point for garnering critical, self-reflective notions of embodiment, relationality, and the sheer plenitude of women’s experiences. Specifically, thinking more intentionally about such multiplicity encourages a feminist theological method and praxis to entertain the question, “Whose justice and which experiences are supported and sourced by feminist theologians?” In response to this question, Carbine argues that feminist theology must center the experiences of many variously sexed and gendered subjects, not only for the purpose of solidarity and a more capacious inclusivity of perspectives, but also for the purpose of recognizing and contending with the fluidity and social construction of everybody’s gender/sex identity. In making this point, she adverts to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s notion of the ekklesia of wo/men to develop further the idea of transfeminist theology, one that takes seriously the lived experience of all self-identified women and therefore destabilizes a “heterokyrarchal” gender binary.

In his paper, “Interrogating ‘Born This Way’ Theology: The Problem of Identity for the Future of Catholic Sexual Ethics,” Craig Ford critiques the commonplace defense of both gay people and same-sex marriage that relies on the idea that being gay is not a choice because people are “born this way,” which supposedly points to a certain God-given creaturely givenness that is manifested in these sexual orientations. For Ford, this type of defense will impede the ultimate liberation of all queer persons because it encourages a reifying identity politics that forces people who inhabit multiple marginal identities to have to focus on one identity over the others (e.g., being gay more than being black or female) for the sake of more immediate political expediency when mobilizing in groups with others. Most importantly for Ford, this defense also unwittingly excludes consideration of the lived experience of trans and genderqueer persons who very much have to “choose” and actively negotiate their gender identities throughout their lives. Turning away from this heteronormative construal of sexual desire strictly as an expression of an unchosen sexual orientation, Ford turns instead to what he calls a queer natural law perspective, a framework which suggests that all gender identities can be welcomed because they are part of the human journey toward flourishing and the virtuous life. Reconceiving of gender identity as part of one’s pathway toward flourishing through the virtuous life recasts gender identity as something that necessarily involves dynamic and intentional decision-making and self-work. Furthermore, these pathways will look different for everybody.

In her appreciative response to both papers, Susan Abraham highlighted the way that both papers are using—without critiquing—a distinctively contemporary Western politics of authenticity and discourse of self-making. To balance this type of language, she asked both presenters to think more about the ways that the world is always already

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graced by God apart from human awareness, such that identity—the self—should be discussed primarily as creaturely, as made by God. For Abraham, this framework requires an ethic of creaturely gratitude more than one of individual, intentional choice. This discourse would help open up a more liberative framework for queer persons that extends beyond the restrictive frameworks of the modern and postmodern West.

This response then led to the major themes of the open discussion that followed: the role of appeals to science and “the natural,” and the extent to which the category of choice matters in discussions of gender identity. On this second point, a major rivet in the conversation was Bryan Massingale’s intervention that many trans persons often experience their gender identities as fixed and irrevocable, which means that it is important not to reify them simply as symbols of self-making gender fluidity and individual choice.

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