

ANTHROPOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Convener: Kevin McCabe, Seton Hall University
Moderator: LaReine-Marie Mosely, S.N.D., Notre Dame of Maryland University
Presenters: Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
Eric Daryl Meyer, Carrol College

The papers in this year's Anthropology session contributed to the conference theme, "Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance, and Transformation" by drawing critical attention to some of the perennial themes of Christian theological anthropology—specifically, the theological emphasis on "happiness" and the discourses surrounding "human dignity"—in order to reimagine the possibilities for human life and flourishing.

Dr. Jessica Coblentz's paper, "Depression's Transformations as Social Critique and Anthropological Alternative" took up the challenge of addressing depression from a theological perspective. Coblentz discussed three "identity shifts" experienced by many depression sufferers. The first shift stigmatizes the depression sufferer. The commonplace view which holds that persons should be happy and have control over their affect sees depression and suffering as human deficiencies. Theologies which assume as normative the "enlightenment subject" lend support to such a stigmatizing image of depression. The second "identity shift" understands depression as a primarily medical problem and seeks a medical solution. The difficulty, however, is that medicine does not always deliver on its promise of distress-free living. Theological anthropologies that conflate salvation and physical health contribute to this image. The third "identity shift" changes the goal from eradicating depression to living with depression or "incorporating" it into one's life. This view holds that depression can have a place in a good and meaningful life. Building upon this third view, Coblentz argued that theology must support depression sufferers in imagining a good life. Theology must reclaim the authority of depression sufferers as the basis for a new anthropological subject. By retrieving biblical and theological resources for recuperating depression and psychological suffering, we might reimagine salvation primarily as constituted by love, not by absence of suffering.

Dr. Eric Daryl Meyer's paper, "The Recursive Violence of Human Dignity: Rethinking Creaturely Dignity as Vulnerability and Struggle" argued that the prevalent conception of human dignity in modern theology and politics undermines its own purpose. Meyer argued that human dignity is often aligned with anthropological exceptionalism. Such an account of human dignity is oppositional and competitive; it secures the inviolability of some (powerful) human lives at the expense of certain (precarious, vulnerable) others. Human dignity here depends on a clear boundary between humanity and animality that ends up marginalizing those humans who have been associated with animality for gendered, racialized, and ableist reasons. Meyer articulated a creaturely account of dignity that does not make recourse to human exceptionalism. This is a non-competitive account of human dignity that thinks in terms of the Spirit's work that is particular to each created form. In order to elaborate this vision, Meyer focused on the qualities of "shame" and "gentleness." Shame

Topic Session: Anthropology

provides a basis for rethinking dignity by focusing finitude and limitation. This anthropological move envisions dignity as solidarity in finitude. Gentleness is the power of formation and transformation. It creates intimacy and meaning, and neither assimilates nor subordinates difference. It aims for a broadening frontier of connection. In conclusion, Meyer called for a praxis of creaturely dignity that will involve significant political and cultural change, thinking of dignity as a “kinship” concept rather than a “dominion” concept.

The papers were enthusiastically received, and a lively question-and-answer session followed. Questions for Coblenz concerned how to speak about problems surrounding the medicalization of depression in a way that does not stigmatize those who seek medical treatment for depression. Coblenz made clear that she did not seek to oppose the pursuit of medical treatments for depression. Several questions for Meyer asked whether “shame” was the most appropriate anthropological category to explore for the purposes of his paper, and he took the questions and comments as a basis for further reflection on how to re-think the discourse of human dignity.

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