

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Convener: James F. Keating, Providence College
Moderator: Christopher Hadley, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University
Presenters: James L. Martin, University of Notre Dame
Anselm Min, Claremont Graduate University
Chris Baglow, University of Notre Dame

The Fundamental/Method Theology session was blessed to have three exciting papers given by scholars at various stages of their careers.

Jay Martin, a doctoral student at Notre Dame, gave a paper with the provocative title, “Another Violence is Possible: Reconceiving the Nearness of the Peaceable Kingdom.” His starting point is Georges Bataille’s attempt to upend Christianity by claiming that the crucifixion of Jesus, precisely as a communicative act of sinful violence, should be seen as the supremely redemptive moment in human history. For Bataille, it is the mutual wounding involved that opens a bridge of communication between God and the human. Martin places Bataille’s attempt to upend the Christianity he so hated by entering into its essence and reversing it into unlikely dialogue with Bernard Lonergan, who also views redemption in terms of communication. Martin shows how Lonergan’s argument that the cross expresses the self-offering of the innocent Jesus outperforms Bataille’s argument that evil rather than love yields communication.

Anselm Min, a veteran theological scholar, presented, “Structural Sin, Structural Grace? Contemporary Reflections on the Subject and Agent of Grace.” Building upon earlier work on structural evil, Min seeks here to investigate the notion of structural grace. Conceiving such a notion entails not only borrowing the insights of neo-scholasticistic, personalistic and liberationist treatments of the working of divine grace but also broadening our ideas regarding the proper recipient of grace beyond the subject or even intersubjectivity to include nature itself. Min takes for granted that God’s work of redemption is inclusive of all of creation and thus must be the purpose of grace. Accordingly, grace would be conceived as a “dynamic field” of God’s transforming activity healing the wounds of all creation and elevating that creation to a salvific participation in God’s own life. Reflection on this topic must begin with a robust and variegated conception of the grace of being and move from there to discern the ways in which God is at work healing and elevating for glory that which is wounded by structural sin.

Finally, Chris Baglow’s “Endless Forms Most Credible: Biological Evolution as an Analogy for the Development of Christian Doctrine” explored the analogical relationship between the evolution of biological life and the development of Christian doctrine. Stressing that analogies come with differences as well as similarities, Baglow argues not only that theologians must utilize the full panoply of human knowledge inclusive of scientific advances, but also that an analogy between the history of life and the history of faith finds initial plausibility in the inseparability of creation and redemption. After laying out Newman’s theory of the development of doctrine as the

Topic Session: Fundamental Theology/Method

continuity of principles with legitimate development of expression and understanding, Baglow turns to biology. Here he relies upon the theoretical work of Simon Conway Morris that shows that the paths of evolution are not random or haphazard but rather “follow definite genetic and environmental pathways” traceable back to the Big Bang. In a sense, therefore, just as doctrinal development is the working out of stable principles from revelation, the paths of life are the working out of established patterns from nature itself. Another concept from evolutionary biology useful for understanding the development of doctrine is that of “exaptation.” That basic idea is that certain features of an organism have their evolutionary origins in a different adaptive function than its present use. For example, feathers on dinosaur served as added insulation or enhanced sexual attractiveness but only later on down the evolutionary line proved useful for flying in birds. Baglow argues that this notion could be helpful in relating certain aspects of Israelite religion and their adaptation by the Christian Church.

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