

GOD/TRINITY – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Discussion of *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* by Anthony J. Godzieba
- Convener: Elizabeth T. Groppe, University of Dayton
- Moderator: Michael Attridge, University of St. Michael's College
- Presenter: Anthony J. Godzieba, Villanova University
- Respondents: John R. Sachs, S.J., Eastern Point Retreat House
Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame

The God/Trinity session was dedicated to discussion of Anthony J. Godzieba's, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* (Liturgical Press, 2018). Godzieba opened the conversation by highlighting three theological vectors driving this major new book: 1) the scriptural testimony that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4:16) and the question of the meaning of this affirmation in our commodified and aestheticized post-postmodern context; 2) Anselm of Canterbury's meditation in the first chapter of the *Proslogion* on the intense and affective desire for God that is rooted in our creation in the *imago Dei*; and 3) Blaise Pascal's *pensée* that the cure for "human hatred of religion" is the demonstration that religion is worthy of reverence, attractive in its promise of true good, and not contrary to reason.

The book's narrative, Godzieba explained, proceeds in two parts: first, an explication of how God became a problem in Western culture, and, second, an antidote to this theological malaise. His narrative foregrounds a biblical witness that he describes as a dialectical view of God's "paradoxical presence-and-absence." By "absence," he explains, he means not non-existence but the *otherness* and *excess* of a personal, loving God who surpasses our experience, language, and capacity for rational demonstration. This theology of paradox began to give way in the late medieval period to spiritualities, theologies, and philosophies that prioritized God's transcendence. In the modern period, the dominant forms of Western culture eclipsed paradoxical theologies with rationalist approaches that either portrayed divine transcendence as extrinsic to creation or simply denied the existence of God.

As the first step of a corrective, Godzieba recasts the prevalent understanding of the distinction between natural and revealed theology. Natural theology is not knowledge of God attained by unaided human reason, but the active and intentional awareness of the non-objectifiable, transcending horizon of the whole of truth and being that the human exercise of reason assumes but cannot ground—a trust in a reality greater than the self. In the words of Walter Kasper, natural theology is "the natural 'access-point' of faith," a "clearing" in human experience that opens into the possibility of the more intimate relationship with God that revelation enables. Godzieba limns this trinitarian revelation with reflection on what he terms the "four 'P's': paradox, phenomenality, performance, and the presence/absence of God. The very structure of the revelation of the infinite God within the finite particularities of created phenomena is paradoxical, a presence-and-absence encountered in the theophany of the life, preaching, practices, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the lived discipleship

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of the Christian community guided by the Holy Spirit in view of the eschatological future.

Randy Sachs praised *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* for its hermeneutic of affirmation, its dialectical theology of a radically-other immanent God, its emphasis on performance and discipleship, and its illumination of the meaning of divine presence-and-absence via reflection on art, architecture, and music. Sachs offered an exposition of the contemporary practice of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius that both corroborated Godzieba's theological insights and enriched the discussion with a concrete example of how this theology can be practiced in the life of the church.

Jennifer Newsome Martin placed Godzieba's work in the genre of interventionist Trinity books—works like Karl Rahner's *The Trinity* (1967) written in a crucial cultural moment when the doctrine is in real danger of elision from ordinary Christian experience. She expressed her sympathy with many of the dimensions of Godzieba's work, including its dynamic, aesthetic, phenomenological approach and its privileging of relational personhood over an abstracted philosophy of substance. Notably, she explained, she came to practice such a form of theology through the mediation of the theology of Joseph Ratzinger rather than that of Walter Kasper, who is one of Godzieba's primary interlocutors. She also enriched the discussion with a reading of *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God* as a phenomenology of desire, particularly disappointed desire—a reading enhanced by bringing Godzieba's work into engagement with Augustine, Plato, and Charles Péguy.

A rich conversation with those in attendance ensued on topics including the meaning of the “natural,” “transcendence,” “presence,” and “absence;” the capacity of Godzieba's approach for uniting theology and spiritual experience; the importance of a performance hermeneutic; the unique character of music and its distinction from the textual; and the relation of Godzieba's work to that of Louis Dupré, Louis-Marie Chauvet, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Schelling, and St. Augustine.

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