

MORAL THEOLOGY (I) – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Convener: Christine E. McCarthy, Marywood University
Moderator: Taylor Ott, Fordham University
Presenters: Dawn Nothwehr, O.S.F., Catholic Theological Union
Janna Hunter-Bowman, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary
Katie Grimes, Villanova University

Dawn Nothwehr’s paper, “The 2016 US Election and White Supremacy: From Christianity’s ‘Dark Night’ Toward Renewal,” discussed how the 2016 US presidential election occasioned the moral complicity of white Catholic and white Evangelical Christians in supporting a recognized “racist, misogynist, Islamophobe, and bully,” and a rise in public assertions of white supremacy. Officially, mainline Evangelicals and Catholics hold a “preferential option for the poor,” and the *imago Dei*, tenets Trump voters disregarded. Without that indifference, the Republican would have lost. This presentation demonstrated that white fundamentalist Evangelicals and white neo-integralist Catholics became a *functional religious movement* that supported a reactive political stance, allowing both groups to become vulnerable to white supremacy. First, Nothwehr defined white Catholic and white Evangelical Christians within their historical contexts. Next, using cultural anthropologist Gerald Arbuckle, Nothwehr exposed the cultural trauma involving white Evangelicals and white Catholics, which made that population vulnerable to fundamentalism. The paper also discussed socio-political factors explaining the white supremacist bent of those groups. Finally, Nothwehr offered Gerald Arbuckle’s process of “refounding,” a dialogical process, whereby the founding mythology of the nation (religious and socio-political), is rearticulated in current and contextualized language. Arbuckle’s sixteen practical responses to fundamentalism provide a starting point for such work. Spiritual insight for refounding is offered by Bryan Massingale, using St. John of the Cross and “the dark night”—namely that: “When national politics takes a dark turn, the road to renewal is also at hand.”

In her paper, “The Making of Duress: Tracing the Borders of Constraint Suffered and Confronted by Agents Under Duress in Northwest Colombia,” Janna Hunter-Bowman offered a contribution to theological peacebuilding. This paper analogically extended the Catholic moral tradition of duress by reflecting on war-affected Colombian communities that are marginalized and vulnerable as well as transformative and generative. Just miles from Medellín, their constructive interventions catalyzed resistance movements and grassroots processes that intersect with the state but are not reliant on it. This paper provided deep historical context for these claims. Rooted in sixteen years of participant observation, Hunter-Bowman provided a description of the multiple forms of constraint that converge to shape the context of these Colombian theological agents. Church and political institutions tracing back to colonialism contribute to extant borders of socio-political, economic, and racialized power. This landscape is deeply contested today, in ways that perform and transgress theological traditions (complexifying “faithful resistance”). Hunter-Bowman contended that a careful accounting of the limiting systems that structure a given environment helps us

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recognize that seemingly impenetrable and hegemonic systems of oppression are actually constructed and malleable and, thus, objects of transformation. Such was the discovery of the featured communities through tumultuous decades marked by peak deadly violence and an historic peace deal, which their interventions precipitated. It sparked a dangerous hope: another world is possible.

Finally, in her paper, “Catholic Freedom,” Katie Grimes argued that Catholic disagreements about the character of freedom and liberation are actually misunderstandings about the character of enslavement. This paper intervened in these debates, arguing that to perceive freedom rightly, we first must define slavery accurately. Unfortunately, at least in the West, slavery has been turned into a nearly infinitely fungible metaphor. Political movements position their subjects as slaves whether implicitly or explicitly almost without exception. As a result, accounts of freedom and liberation have mutated, expanded, and grown vague—almost to the point of meaninglessness. In response, this paper proposes that Catholics in the Americas ground debates about freedom in actual historical experiences of enslavement, that is, those of African-descended people. They, are after all, the only group of people in this context who have actually endured systemic slavery and its ongoing afterlife. Only when Catholic activists and scholars rightly identify what makes slavery evil can they hope to ascertain what makes freedom good.

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