

SPIRITUALITY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance, and Transformation  
Convener: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame  
Moderator: Andrew Prevot, Boston College  
Presenters: Heather DuBois, Florida State University  
Christopher Pramuk, Regis University

The session began with a presentation by Heather DuBois, entitled, “Correlating Spirituality and Psychotherapy for Trauma Healing.” In it, Dr. DuBois put the mystical theology of John of the Cross into conversation with the work of feminist trauma therapist, Judith Herman. After a brief discussion of some features of trauma, she focused on the importance of empowering intersubjective relationships for healing from trauma, but also, as seen in John of the Cross’s spirituality, to growth in the contemplative life. She also pointed out that John of the Cross himself experienced trauma, both in his early life and, in particular, in his imprisonment by members of his own religious order. Judith Herman, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has developed a model of recovery that pays particular attention to the dangers arising from the power differential between the patient and therapist, particularly when it comes to empowering the patient (which, DuBois noted, is not unlike the kinds of critiques that John of the Cross made of poor spiritual directors). In a way similar to John’s understanding of the “nights” of the spiritual life, and the necessity of finding a way when there is no way, Herman points out how the trauma survivor is also often walking in the dark. Neither the survivor nor the therapist may be able to see where the process is going. DuBois also pointed out the consonances between the three-fold process of transformation that Herman defines for the process of healing from trauma and the traditional triad of the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways. While they cannot be fully mapped onto one another, they can be correlated. Trauma healing entails purgation of distorted understandings and embodied lies, illumination by knowledge through a reframing of narratives and a sense of bodily wellbeing, and unitive movement understood as greater ability to be in positive relationships. Exploring these correlations offers the possibility of not only improved mutual learning between theologians and psychologists, despite historical animosity between the disciplines, but also more holistic, more effective pastoral and ecclesial approaches to trauma that occurs within and without the church. It might also support psychotherapists who wish to include some attention to spirituality in their practice.

Dr. Pramuk followed with a paper entitled “What You Gaze Upon You Become: The Subversive Iconography of William Hart McNichols.” He gave some biographical details on the gay priest and iconographer, William Hart McNichols, with particular attention to his experience of ministering to AIDS victims in New York during the first outbreak of this epidemic. He pointed out that while in many ways his artwork is profoundly traditional, both in its form as icon and in its use of theological themes and images, there is also a powerfully subversive quality to it, in its choice of subject (“The Passion of Matthew Shepherd,” a gay man murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, or “San José en el Rio Grande”), its correlation of Christ with those who suffer “on the margins” (as Pope Francis puts it), and the evocation of Sophia as the feminine in God.

*Topic Session: Spirituality*

Pramuk unpacked his work with the help of the theologies of Pope Francis and Johann Baptist Metz, and showed its depth structure in Ignatian spirituality. He showed how, far from binding us to some dead thing of the past called tradition, gazing upon “images that return our love” can be a transformational spiritual exercise, helping the receptive heart get into its best (i.e., most human) shape. In an era crippled by mass migration, virulent xenophobia, and an accelerating environmental crisis—and for a church reeling from the sexual abuse crisis—Pramuk proposed McNichols’ art as a powerful mediator of the Gospel summons to freedom through eyes of love, compassion, and nonviolence.

During the discussion a number of important issues were raised, allowing Dr. DuBois to speak a bit more to the *differences* between her two conversation partners (the difference of setting and the absence of the named divine), and speak to the relationship of the social imagination and trauma. Among other things, Dr. Pramuk was asked, and spoke to, McNichols’s alienation from the Society of Jesus, to which he belonged for some two decades. The final fifteen minutes of the session were devoted to brainstorming topics for next year’s meeting in Cleveland.

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