

POST-POST-CONCILIAR AND MILLENNIAL THEOLOGIANS – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Social Media as Sacred Space: Public Millennial Theology and the Digital Age
Convener: Mary Beth Yount, Neumann University
Moderator: Katherine Schmidt, Molloy College
Presenters: Daniel A. Rober, Sacred Heart University
Stephen Okey, Saint Leo University
Karen Ross, Marquette University

This session explored millennial, post-post-conciliar theology as developed, and expressed, in a digital age. In his opening paper, “Faith and Hope in the Ruins: Millennial Theology in a Shattered Church,” Daniel A. Rober highlighted the social, cultural, political, and religious fragmentation—and increasing religious disaffiliation—in which the millennial generation of US Catholic theologians have come of age. In keeping with the CTSA convention theme that “another world is possible,” he argued that a key task for millennial Catholic theology is to articulate and live out the possibility of a new vision of the church that goes beyond the institutional, bringing the teaching of Vatican II to unpack what it means to truly *believe* in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” as a mystery of faith rather than as a strong, visible institutional church with clearly delineated lines of authority.

Current trends and events are arguably reaping the fruits of this vision, in which a crisis of the institution becomes almost automatically a crisis of belief and affiliation. Rober reflected on the experience of the different millennial cohorts, particularly the lack of a “first naïveté” among young millennials and their different relationship to the church in light of having been raised in the church following 2002. The paper concluded by proposing a more robust Catholic engagement of the Lutheran concept of the invisible church as an antidote to over-identification of the church with its institutional aspects.

Stephen Okey followed with “Reconsidering Public Theology in a Digital Age,” in which he argued that the changing media landscape requires a reconsideration of David Tracy’s three publics and the theological claims that underpin them. Tracy’s publics to which the theologian is responsible are the academy, the church, and the society. Theologically, per Tracy, the church is the sacrament of the world, and thus it mediates between God and the world (the world being a theological construct that includes both academy and society). In his challenge to this vision, Okey engages the work of Stig Hjarvard, who argued that the media have become an independent and largely consolidated social institution on which other social institutions such as religions, governments, and corporations are increasingly dependent. As such, these institutions, especially religions, conform themselves to the fundamental logic of the media in order to communicate their message. This conformity has had significant impact on the formation, dissemination, and reception of religious meaning and value within society.

Okey investigated four possible approaches to engaging the question of the digital within Tracy’s public theology. First, it is possible that the digital age simply extends

pre-existing communications media. Second, the digital may simply be a part of society, especially its techno-economic realm, making digital theology a part of practical theology. Third, the digital may be its own unique public, apart from Tracy's three, thus raising the question of what a separate "digital theology" subdiscipline might look like. Fourth, digital theology might be comparable to liberation or feminist theologies, which engage all three publics and can be found in all three theological subdisciplines. Okey tentatively suggested that some combination of these last two is the most persuasive, although his work is still in process.

In the final paper of this session, "Social Media as Sacred Space for Feminist Theological Activism and Resistance," Karen Ross demonstrated how social media has been a widely-used platform for feminist activism and resistance in light of the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. Although millennial membership in religious institutions has significantly declined, Ross argued that social media has created an alternate form of sacred space for *lament, communal gathering, and resistance*. Liturgies of lament in traditional religious spaces are communal gatherings—often led by lay people—that foster solidarity by allowing for people to cry out in sorrow and share in the pain with those who have been wronged. Similarly, millennial feminists have utilized social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in order to speak up against societal injustices, hold others accountable for violence, and experience solidarity and healing. Ross identified and discussed three particular components of liturgies of lament present on social media that contribute to the creation of a digital sacred space: cries of lament, solidarity in suffering, and ritual action and organizing. By highlighting these three components of liturgies of lament found online, Ross demonstrates that as religious landscapes are changing, particularly for millennials, the longing for connection and a space to grieve, gather, and organize remains, particularly in the midst of injustice.

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