

ANTHROPOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work, and Economy
 Convener: Heather M. DuBois, Stonehill College
 Moderator: Elizabeth Pyne, Fordham University
 Presenters: Craig Sanders, St. Louis University
 Janice Thompson, King’s College

In “The Liberating Power of Sabbath Slowness in a Relentless Economy,” Craig Sanders claims that theologies of work need to be rewritten with rest as the teleological focus. While humans are called to share in the labor of creation, they are also called to share in God’s rest. Indeed, sabbath slowness should function as an interpretive key to human identity. The historical context for this argument is hustle culture and the gig economy, among other causes of overwork and exhaustion, driven by economic necessity or cultural pressure.

The theological starting point is Genesis 2:1-3. The six days of creation are interpreted as preparation of the cosmic temple, and the seventh day is the climactic moment in which humans are invited to dwell with God in that temple. Sanders goes on to highlight the importance of the sabbath in John Paul II’s writing, especially the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* and the apostolic letter *Dies Domini*. These texts emphasize the subjective development of personhood through action, including labor, and conclude that work should provide opportunities for people to express their personhood. Moreover, says Sanders, the moral value of work should be measured by its impact on personhood.

This paper argues that humans do not fully participate in creation unless they participate in divine rest as well as labor. Sanders’ theology of work includes the cosmic call to contemplate the good and grandeur of all that God has lovingly created, and this call is an invitation to communion. Heeding this call is presented as an antidote to the contemporary materialist horizon and dysfunctional culture of “relentless work” in the United States. Finally, the paper connects the subjective dimension of work to objective practices such as a living wage, paid leave, and a focus on product quality rather than profitability.

In the second paper, “Likely to Become a Public Charge: Immigration Policy and Theological Anthropology,” Janice Thompson traces the history of disability rhetoric in U.S. policy and gestures toward a constructive Catholic response. The contextual moment that initiates the paper is a 2019 speech by the then-acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Contradicting the spirit of the Statue of Liberty to fit the administration’s view of citizenship, Ken Cuccinelli said, “Give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge.” While the Biden administration reversed efforts to increase the restrictions of the public charge clause, the clause itself has been law for 140 years, and it remains.

Thompson explains how the ostensibly economic concept of a public charge has been historically intertwined with disability rhetoric, racism, and sexism to deny citizenship and facilitate deportation. People are labeled and rejected as “defective workers” and “burdens” to society. There is a discursive feedback loop in which disability is defined as lack of participation in narrowly defined economic roles, and

the perception of disability justifies rejection. Positive changes have occurred, such as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. However, the language of self-sufficiency and dependency has continued to be deployed, often with moralizing language about who deserves support and who is lazy.

Catholic Charities and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to the Trump administration with statements about human dignity. Yet, Thompson indicates that their responses reduce persons with disabilities to other people's moral imperative; the emphasis is on how "we" can care for "them." Instead, Catholic theologies need to question their use of virtue language and confront their inadequate anthropologies. Thompson points to the work of Johann Baptist Metz as inspiration for the church to challenge political myths around immigration, to reject economic models of human worth, and to stop using disability as a theological analogy for improvement. This paper claims that mystical hope demands and makes possible the understanding that all humans are dependent.

The question-and-answer portion of this session covered a variety of topics from artificial intelligence in industry to *Fratelli Tutti* to intersectionality. An extended part of the conversation focused on cultural use of the language of dependence. How do we talk more about mutual dependence? How is autonomy distinct from independence? How does a focus on caregiving belie rhetoric of self-sufficiency? What do the working poor have to teach society about graced dependence on God, especially in terms of agricultural labor and the gift of creation?

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