

CHURCH/ECUMENISM – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Does Ecumenism Work?
 Convener: Colleen Mary Mallon, O.P., Independent Scholar, Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose
 Moderator: Jakob Rinderknecht, University of the Incarnate Word
 Presenter: Kathryn L. Reinhard, Gwynedd Mercy University
 Respondents: Catherine Clifford, St. Paul University
 Kathryn Johnson, Former Director for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

“Does ecumenism *work*?” With this opening question, Kathryn L. Reinhard creatively engaged the 2021 CTSA Convention theme to explore the current “crisis of confidence” within the ecumenical movement as articulated by those who wonder about the fruitfulness of ecumenical labor today. In her paper, “The Work of Ecumenism: Rethinking Ecumenical Labor through Recognition,” Reinhard introduces “intersubjective recognition” as a potential philosophical tool to assist those who share Michael Root’s assessment that an era of “revolutionary ecumenism” has shifted into an extended period of “normal ecumenism.” Those who follow Root’s diagnosis of the current ecumenical situation contend that the metaphor of an “ecumenical winter” does not accurately describe our present moment. Root, borrowing from philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, suggests that, historically, ecumenical advances emerge from moments of crisis; and these “revolutionary” moments are made possible because of longer previous periods of relative stasis, or what he calls “normal ecumenism.” From Root’s perspective, the heyday of mid-twentieth century ecumenism marked a “revolutionary” moment, and that period has been waning in the last twenty years ushering the next period of “normal ecumenism.” Accepting, Root’s basic diagnosis that contemporary ecumenism is in a “holding pattern,” Reinhard turns to Gerard Kelly’s study of “recognition” as it has evolved within ecumenical reflection. When the apostolic faith is “recognized” between different Christian traditions, the processes that afford such an affirmation have a dual impact, postulates Kelly. Ecclesial “others” both forge a relationship between themselves *and* they come to a deeper understanding of their own communion’s embrace of the apostolic faith. Reinhard contends that Kelly’s insight of the dual character of “recognition” could be deepened by considering the work of Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor and Judith Butler and the philosophy of intersubjective recognition. Each of these thinkers offers philosophical nuances demonstrating the interplay between self-recognition and the dialogical processes of recognition by others. Here, Reinhard makes the case that processes of intersubjective recognition can become a significant part of the work of “normal ecumenism”: interdependent ecclesial identities can neither “abandon ecumenical inquiry” nor can they “force progress” in a time of ongoing discernment of a recognitive relation with an ecumenical “other.”

In their responses Catherine Clifford and Kathryn Johnson each enriched the session; both scholars commending, challenging, and adding to the conversation initiated in the presentation. Johnson noted that the contributions of intersubjective recognition offer a vision that is both humane and humanizing to ecumenical processes

and practices. Clifford challenged and reframed the metaphor of winter, noting that it is more correctly characterized as a time of gestation, not stasis or death. She also pointed out that twenty-first century ecumenism differs from mid to late twentieth century ecumenism in two significant ways. First, the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism and Evangelical Christianity calls for ecumenists to develop capacities to master the art of multi-tasking, expanding the dialogue with these communities who, for the most part, reject classical ecumenism's focus on the unity of faith and order. Second, Clifford offered a profound reflection on an intentional practice of recognition that actively resists ecclesial egotism in service of the forever work of ecclesial conversion. This becomes the space from which those who, having received the one faith in differing historical and cultural circumstances, can enter humbly into a common search for a shared understanding of apostolic faith. She notes that a better way of understanding ecumenical dialogue is to conceive of it as "triadic": where the two partners are not turned toward each other but are turned towards the one self-revealing God disclosed in the mystery of Jesus the Christ, received differently in time and space.

Approximately twenty participants joined this session and enjoyed a brief period of discussion following the responses.

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