

CREATION/ESCHATOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work, and Economy
 Convener: Rhodora Beaton, Oblate School of Theology
 Moderator: Daniel Minch, Karl-Franzens University Graz
 Presenters: Gunda Werner, Karl-Franzens University Graz
 Elizabeth Groppe, University of Dayton
 Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University

This year’s Creation/Eschatology Topic Session included highly relevant, fundamental reflections on creation theology, salvation, theological anthropology, and the relation of each of these to “labor” as a human vocation. Gunda Werner presented a paper entitled “*Laudato Si’*: Radical, but Anti-Modern Environmentalism? Comments on the Ambivalent Argumentation in *Laudato Si’* Regarding Creation and Ethical Stewardship.” Werner argued that despite the characterizations—positive and negative—of Pope Francis as a “modern pope,” many of his teachings remain in continuity with the previous tradition. This is particularly evident at the level of creation theology in *Laudato Si’*. Like all encyclicals, it cites scripture, magisterial statements, episcopal teaching documents, and the fathers of the church, but not the works of “modern” theologians—with the notable exception of Romano Guardini. Werner shows how Guardini’s “theology of decline,” as an expression of a general hostility to modernity, is integrated into *Laudato Si’* and is consistent with other modern social encyclicals. This view of humanity as “deformed” by modernity explains why people destroy creation, instead of protecting it. Werner argues that this “theology of decline” must be critically reexamined through the lens of human autonomy.

Elizabeth Groppe delivered a paper entitled “To Keep Is Not to Till (Gen 2:15): Labor and the Land.” Groppe began with her personal experience of working in the corn fields of Indiana as a teenager with the presupposition that large-scale, till-agriculture was the normative form of food production. This was challenged years later in her encounter with the work of Wes Jackson and the Land Institute which cultivates a “remnant” of the Kansas prairie. The practice of “listening” to the prairie and its complex systems of life presents a radical approach to the cultivation of land. Groppe transposes these lessons to the Genesis creation narratives, exploring alternative interpretations for the Hebrew verb *abad* other than “to till.” Two possibilities are presented: Theodore Hiebert’s assertion that the land, as sovereign, must be served, and Ellen Davis’s conception of working *for* the land by respecting its needs in light of God’s ordinances. Groppe presents a powerful critique of normative till-agriculture and how it damages fertile topsoil, while challenging us to examine the phrase “All You Who Labor,” and reevaluate who “you” is. An inclusive view of labor includes the whole network of life, thereby recontextualizing the vocation of labor.

Paul J. Schutz presented the paper “*Sentire Cum Terra*: Human Work, Co-Creation, and Ecological Responsibility,” which examined the category of creatureliness and how it is lived out from evolutionary, socio-ecological, and theological perspectives. The first two perspectives reveal that we are all already formed by others and we exist in a specific history and relationship to those others. The

theological perspective sees the gift of life in all its particularity and as it is manifested in each individual creature. Human identity appears within this gift of individual and interrelated life. Norman Wirzba's "garden aesthetic," provides an ecological imaginary that reframes all creatures as collaborators within a vast garden. God works in and among all creatures, tending to the Earth. The "garden aesthetic" heightens our awareness of creatureliness. The theme of *sentire cum terra* means thinking and feeling *with* the created world and raising this "thinking with" to a primary theological imaginary. Schutz frames this as a critical stance towards modern industrial capitalism and encourages the cultivation of both the "garden aesthetic" and real gardens that can feed our hungry neighbors.

The session was well attended and inspired a lively exchange of questions and comments involving each of the presenters. Points of discussion included the acknowledgement of St. Francis' Cantic of the Creatures as a call to repentance, the inherently social nature of ecological realities, and how the "theology of decline" appears to neglect the Incarnation.

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