

## SPIRITUALITY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work, and Economy  
 Convener: Andrew Prevot, Boston College  
 Moderator: Mary Frohlich, Catholic Theological Union  
 Presenters: Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University  
 Kevin Ahern, Manhattan College

This year’s Spirituality Topic Session featured two papers closely connected to the convention theme, “All You Who Labor . . .’: Theology, Work, and Economy.” Both presenters explored ways that spirituality counteracts the worst aspects of the current economic world order, including especially the systemic mistreatment of the poor and working class. Whereas Takacs offered an interreligious, spiritual response to neoliberalism’s distorted views of humanity and the earth, Ahern highlighted the spiritualities of Catholic grassroots organizations that empower and support workers. Both speakers raised timely questions about the grave spiritual damage that is done by a culture whose values are primarily based on the market and the private interests of individual capital owners. However, both also found hope in the idea that spirituality enables us to fight back and to seek a better possible world that is more reflective of the merciful love of God.

The paper by Takacs, “I am with those who are broken-hearted’: Spirituality, Imagination, and the Disruption of Neoliberalism,” drew on a rich set of Catholic and Muslim spiritual sources to resist the corrosive effects of neoliberalism. Takacs cited a diverse group of black, indigenous, and critical theorists who analyze neoliberalism in relation to racism and colonialism (e.g., Cedric Robinson, Charisse Burden-Stelly, Gerald Horne, Cornelius Castoriadis, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Vine Deloria, Qwo-Li Driskill, Leanne Betas-samo-sake Simpson, and Michel Foucault). Building on their work, he explained that neoliberalism takes the values of the market and extends them to all spheres of culture and society. It forms the human being, not in the image of God, but in the image of the economy. Persons are reduced to capital. Sacred lands are reduced to property for extraction. The capacity to imagine and practice solidarity with human and nonhuman creatures is threatened.

Takacs argued that spirituality can help restore such a vital capacity. To this end, he connected the Franciscan spirituality of universal fraternity that inspires Pope Francis’s encyclicals *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti* with spiritual teachings on friendship, solidarity, and prayer from Muslim sources such as Maybudi and Ibn Arabi. In particular, the line from the title of his talk, “I am with those who are broken-hearted,” comes from an early Sufi story, in which God speaks these words to Moses. In order to be a friend of God (a *walī*), one must remain close to the poor and broken-hearted with whom God dwells. Moreover, the prayer that Muslims perform five times a day (the *salat*) requires one to kneel and prostrate oneself on the earth. This embodied ritual connects one with the land and the people that are trampled upon. The friendship with the poor and all of creation that Pope Francis offers as a healing alternative to the neoliberal “technocratic paradigm” resonates with such Muslim spiritual practices. Although neither the Catholic nor the Muslim form of such a spirituality immediately overcomes neoliberalism, both of these spiritualities (whether approached individually

or, better, in dialogical connection) present a relational way of being human that refuses a totalizing market logic.

Ahern's presentation, "Uncovering the Bushels: Rediscovering the Spiritualities of Work in the Young Catholic Worker Movement and Catholic Worker Movement" compared and contrasted the spiritualities of work that emerged in two grassroots Catholic movements of the twentieth century, namely the Young Christian Workers (YCW) started in Europe by Joseph Cardijn and the Catholic Worker (CW) started in the United States by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. Distinctive features of the YCW include its development of the "see-judge-act" method and its emphasis on the God-given dignity and collective agency of laborers. Ahern stressed that the YCW is "a movement *of, for, and by* young workers themselves." It has close ties to labor organizing and is designed to empower young workers to advocate for themselves and to find their own best ways to participate meaningfully in God's creative and redemptive work.

By contrast, the CW is a movement oriented by the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy. Its model is one of Christlike solidarity, friendship, service, and hospitality. It is dedicated to the holistic wellbeing of the poor but is not primarily initiated or orchestrated by them. Despite having a more distanced relationship with labor organizing, CW has often supported and engaged in labor strikes, including ones by the National Maritime Union, a New York gravediggers' union, and the United Farmworkers Movement. Moreover, it rejects the values of "the whole industrial capitalistic system" and seeks to establish "a more agrarian model that prioritize[s] bottom-up approaches, such as cooperatives, guilds, and distributive economies." In these ways, the CW shows its commitment to doing work that prioritizes greater justice and mercy for workers and resists the forces that oppress them.

All in all, Takacs and Ahern argued that spirituality is a way of life that challenges a culture built on economic exploitation and strives for one transformed by divine love.

ANDREW PREVOT  
*Boston College*  
*Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*