

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: *Thinking Interreligiously*
 Convener: Patrick Flanagan, C.M., St. John's University
 Moderator: Marcus Mescher, Xavier University
 Presenters: David Cloutier, Catholic University of America
 Michael VanZandt Collins, Boston College
 Nicholas Hayes-Mota, Boston College

Historically, scholars and practitioners have employed Catholic social thought (CST) to critique the global village's political, economic, religious, and social systems and propose innovative action steps to rectify injustices. While CST enjoys respect among Catholics for its compelling insights and clear challenges, this session sought to answer whether CST had the same credibility among other religious traditions and cultures. Moreover, do those who value the import of CST in critical assessment and important decision-making adequately value and dialogue with members of other faiths? There is recent evidence of alliances in both these areas and, admittedly, the tensions of interreligious efforts vis-à-vis CST. These include areas such as environmental sustainability and peacebuilding in the world, as well as engagement with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In this CST topic session, Jens Mueller (University of Dayton, OH), William George (Dominican University, IL), and Patrick Flanagan, C.M. (St. John's University, NY) welcomed proposals on a range of topics that actively engaged CST "interreligiously." These included: the reception of CST among people of other faiths; the value of thinking interreligiously in formulating and applying CST; the areas of interreligious intersectionality and those of divergence in CST vis-à-vis other religious traditions and cultures; the reality of conflict in the application of CST among different religions and efforts to resolve differences; the import of CST in assisting other religions to build a similar, formidable system of social justice analysis; and, the important reflections and critical insights that non-Catholic religious traditions and non-religious persons have brought to bear on social analysis that CST has not incorporated.

The first to present their academic scholarship was David Cloutier (Catholic University of America). His paper was entitled "And Then There Were Nones? CST, Interreligious Dialogue, Fratelli *Tutti*, and the Secular Surge." David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John Green's 2020 publication extensively discussed the phrase "secular surge." Cloutier explained their thesis that the recent "secular surge" in American politics has reconfigured the landscape due largely to rapid disaffiliation, especially among younger generations, towards historically valued structures, including organized religion. Commentary on the latter, "the rise of the nones," has been building for some time (often regarding church attendance or contested issues in sexual morality). Yet, Cloutier noted, little attention has been paid to the challenge nones pose to the commitments of Catholic *social* thought. Because of this, important questions arose for Cloutier: Are the "nones" simply another "religious group" in a pluralistic society? Or, are the challenges more complex than that?

Cloutier then examined magisterial documents from *Gaudium et Spes* onward, focusing his attention on Francis' writings, making two suggestions. First, Cloutier observed that the robust and positive interreligious language deployed by all the post-Vatican II popes, especially Francis, is in some significant tension with finding political common ground with the "nones." Secondly, Cloutier deemed CST as having done insufficient work to understand the distinctive make-up of American "nones." For Cloutier, they are neither systemic atheists (John Paul II's context) nor citizens of a post-war Europe deeply formed by Christian democracy (Benedict's context) nor the citizens of Latin American countries with thickly Catholic cultures (Francis' context). Both of these points contributed to Cloutier's modest conclusions about the place of God in CST discourse that is consciously interreligious in a "none"-saturated culture.

Michael VanZandt Collins (Boston College) then presented a paper entitled "Toward Rectifying Terrestrial Habits: 'Respect for Nature,' Muslim-Christian Dialogue and the Ethics of Recognition." In his research, VanZandt Collins examined "respect for nature" as both common good and potential virtue key in response to environmental degradation. VanZandt Collins considered a proposal by Indonesian Muslim scholar Zainal Abidin Bagir, a comparative theological perspective that evaluates the need to accommodate indigenous voices in order to protect creation. For VanZandt Collins, Bagir's reflections served as a case study that addresses the reception of CST, interreligious cooperation, and potentially reconciliation.

VanZandt Collins observed that Bagir believed Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* offered the most explicit expression of the growing awareness that faith communities must mobilize in response to environmental degradation. In particular, Bagir welcomed the "special care" and consideration of indigenous peoples as "principal dialogue partners" (LS 146) that the encyclical promotes. By way of example, VanZandt Collins referenced Bagir's work on deforestation. For Bagir, deforestation has become a primary concern in Indonesia, and indigenous rights are linked directly. Historically, as in Indonesia, paternalistic and colonial policies have marginalized indigenous voices. Moreover, as Bagir observed, so-called "world religions" such as Christianity and Islam have also historically dismissed and failed to recognize indigenous traditions.

Reconfiguring dialogue including indigenous peoples and their traditional ecological wisdom may facilitate "ecological conversion." First, it can resolve or, at best, balance the unequal power. Their inclusion can rectify past and current injustices. Although, as VanZandt Collins highlighted, in Bagir's study of *Laudato Si'*, the encyclical still speaks of indigenous "cultures," not "religions." However, beyond acceptance and inclusion, accommodating indigenous wisdom theologically may transform "world religions." For VanZandt Collins, Bagir's suggestion that indigenous wisdom can help Muslims and Christians, environmental colonialists who have marginalized indigenous peoples, reappraise harmful "anthropocentric" tendencies.

While many might immediately turn toward solidarity, in conclusion, VanZandt Collins drew attention to similarities and differences in learning "respect for nature." What lessons might traditional indigenous wisdom provide for a CST and this Muslim reform perspective? From such a wellspring, VanZandt Collins believes, like Bagir, problematic "terrestrial habits" can be resolved interreligiously.

Nicholas Hayes-Mota (Boston College) presented the final paper entitled "Catholic in Principle, Interfaith in Practice? The Case of Faith-Based Organizing."

Hayes-Mota's precis was that faith-based community organizing (FBCO) in the United States today presents a paradox. On the one hand, Hayes-Mota noted that faith-based organizing is not only ecumenical but decidedly interfaith in orientation, drawing together institutions from across many religious traditions to collaborate for the common good of their local communities. Yet, on the other hand, Hayes-Mota admitted that, as some practitioners have observed, the core principles of faith-based organizing also appear to align most closely with one tradition, particularly Catholic social thought (CST). Hayes-Mota then asked how should the "interfaith" and the specifically "Catholic" aspects of faith-based organizing be understood in relation to each other? Secondly, what does this particular example reveal about how Catholic social thought can be effectively applied in a pluralistic, interfaith context?

Hayes-Mota explored these latter questions through a historical and ethical analysis of one prominent faith-based organizing network, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Hayes-Mota began by assessing the historical influence Catholics have actually exercised on the IAF since its founding by Saul Alinsky in 1940. Hayes-Mota then demonstrated that the IAF simultaneously draws its core principles of "practical philosophy" from CST while leaving these open for substantive theological elaboration by other religious traditions. In effect, Hayes-Mota argued, IAF organizing embodies a kind of overlapping "natural law" consensus, but one cultivated primarily through shared political *practice*, rather than explicit agreement on matters of theological or moral belief. Hayes-Mota concluded by suggesting that this practice-first approach represents a fruitful way forward for Catholic social thought.

Attendees found each of these scholars' presentations engaging, leading to a dynamic discussion about individual paper presentations and their intersectionality. Supportive colleagues encouraged Cloutier, VanZandt Collins, and Hayes-Mota to continue to use the promise of "thinking interreligiously," the 2022 CTSA conference theme, to examine the critical issues each of them presented. Such strident efforts can lead humanity into a deeper experience of solidarity among people of faith and perhaps even the "nones." For, as Pope Francis noted early on in his pontificate: "Interreligious dialogue is a sign of the times... (it is) a providential sign, in the sense that God Himself, in His wise plan, has inspired, in religious leaders and in many others, the desire to encounter and come to know one another in a way respectful of religious differences. Only in this way can we build together a habitable world for all, in peace." Moreover, dialogue rooted in respect can unite a fractured global village, unfortunately, presently rich with conflict and division.

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