

CHRIST – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Thinking Catholic Interreligiously
 Convener: Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Wake Forest University
 Moderator: John Thiede, S.J., Marquette University
 Presenters: James Robinson, Iona College
 Mary Frohlich, Catholic Theological Union

The Christ Topic Session consisted of two paper presentations followed by a discussion among the presenters and attendees.

The first presenter, James Robinson, is a Clinical Lecturer in the Religious Studies Department and Associate Director of the Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit at Iona College. His paper, entitled “‘Jesus Christ destroys all our dualisms:’ Raimon Panikkar’s Cosmotheandric Christology,” began with a brief biographical sketch of Panikkar’s multireligious journey. Robinson then laid out the contours of Panikkar’s cosmotheandric principle as a vision in which reality is experienced to be an “adualistic” and “interdependent” interplay “of the cosmos, God, and humanity.” Although the fabric of reality is seamless, the relationship between God, humanity, and the cosmos has been ruptured and needs healing. In Panikkar’s view, Jesus Christ “remembers” this broken body by destabilizing our dualisms and incarnating the cosmotheandric principle as the “Christian symbol for the whole of reality.” Every being is a christophany, while the Eucharist “tangibly manifests Christ” and therefore “contains the entire reality” as a signification of Christ’s “*incarnatio continua* [continuous incarnation].” In the next two sections of his presentation, Robinson drew out the implications of Panikkar’s Christology for interreligious dialogue and ecological conversion. With regards to interreligious dialogue, the need for dialogue is embedded in the cosmotheandric principle, since relationality and radical interdependence are constitutive of our very nature. With regards to ecological conversion, Panikkar calls for a “radical metanoia” that will dissolve the dualistic and hierarchical relationship between humanity and the natural world. Christ functions here not only as redeemer of humanity, but as a cosmic embrace of “the restoration of the world; the cosmic *mandala*.” An ecologically oriented cosmotheandric vision is thus grounded in mystical experience and embodied in the practice of what Panikkar calls “ecosophy,” in which “human beings attune ourselves to the wisdom inherent in the earth.” Robinson draws on Panikkar’s own words to conclude that, once we recognize our interdependence with the earth, all that remains is to “spell it out in our own lives.”

The second presenter, Mary Frohlich, is a Religious of the Sacred Heart and Professor Emerita of Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union. Her paper, entitled “Christ of the Forest: The ‘New Animism’ and Christology,” began with a brief introduction to the “old animism” as a problematic term that Western anthropologists coined to describe “primitive” religions centered around “beliefs in non-empirical ‘souls’ or ‘spirits’ existing in animals, plants, landscape features, heavenly bodies, etc.” Anthropologists have since rejected this term due to its condescension towards Indigenous peoples, its definition of Indigenous religious experience in terms of Western dualism between spirit and matter, and its assumption of cognitive belief as the defining feature of religion. The new animism has two main expressions: one in

which researchers seek to learn from Indigenous spiritualities of interdependence and harmony with other creatures and the other in which “denizens of the postmodern Western world” dialogue with Indigenous peoples but do not seek to root their movement in Indigenous spirituality *per se*. The new animism envisions and embodies intimate relationships with other-than-human creatures based on three underlying assumptions: first, there is no hierarchy of creatures; second, all beings are embedded in complex relationships with the world around them; and third, the human imagination is “a tool for guiding and enhancing engagement with the world.” The new animism, therefore, rejects modern Western objectification of the world and embraces a vision of human beings as “participants in a living earth” that requires collaboration with, respect for, listening to and communication with other creatures. After laying out the methodology and evidence for the new animism, Frohlich went on to lay out several ways in which this movement might help us rethink Christology in light of the ecological crisis. First, the new animism’s relational epistemology and ontology can ground Christology in an understanding of knowledge and being as participatory rather than dualistic. Second, the new animism can help to reimagine Christ’s personhood as the foundational principle of personhood and “personing” for not only human beings, but all of creation. Third, the new animism helps to illuminate the cross and Eucharist as indicative of Jesus’ full participation in the predator-prey relationships of an animate world in which creatures depend on killing and eating other creatures for survival. Ultimately, Frohlich concluded that the new animism has the potential to “awaken fresh thinking in an era of crisis.”

The discussion that followed the two presentations touched on themes of soteriology; intersections between Christology, religious pluralism, and ecotheology; ontologies of personhood; and the reality of interdependence between humanity and creation. Participants noted the potential for fruitful dialogue between Panikkar’s cosmotheandric principle and the new animism.

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