

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE – TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Amanda R. Alexander, Diocese of San Bernardino
 Moderator: Chelsea King, Sacred Heart University
 Presenters: Joyce Ann Konigsburg, DePaul University
 Kevin Frederick Vaughan, The College of St. Scholastica
 Respondent: Megan Loumagne Ulishney, University of Nottingham

As Megan Loumagne Ulishney, of the University of Nottingham, astutely noted in her response, this panel provided an opportunity to reflect “on the role that interdisciplinary thinking between Theology and Science, in addition to interreligious thinking and practice, can play in helping us to address some of the serious challenges and crises that we face in our time.”

Joyce Ann Konigsburg, from DePaul University, opened the panel by highlighting the many opportunities for interreligious and interdisciplinary encounters by which we can engage religious and indigenous traditions, as well as the scientific community, to develop an ethic of climate change. In her paper, “Thinking Catholic Interreligiously about the Ethics of Climate Change,” Konigsburg noted that, whereas government evaluations of climate data are often done with a view toward anticipating the economic impact of forecasted changes, religious traditions consider how these changes will impact vulnerable and marginalized populations. Religious traditions also supply diverse and mutually enriching ways of imagining what it means to care for the global commons: Christian stewardship emphasizes the preservation of the environment for future generations; Judaism commands practices that protect vital ecosystems; Islam emphasizes an approach that treats “all things with care, awe, and compassion;” indigenous traditions emphasize responsibility, reciprocity, and interdependence. Within specific local contexts, these approaches are united in “interreligious ecological activities” that bring concrete and specific changes to the community. At the national and international level, interreligious cooperation sustains the work of initiatives that aim to mitigate climate issues globally. Thus, thinking Catholic interreligiously provides a path forward to global solidarity and climate justice.

In his paper, “She Blinded Me with Classics: Science in Dialogue with Religious Classics according to Pope Francis,” Kevin Frederick Vaughan, of The College of St. Scholastica, explored Pope Francis’ concept of a “religious classic” in order to understand why Francis, in *Laudato Si’*, suggests this as a “key means of dialogue with science on the topic of the environment.” By tracing Francis’ references to “religious classics” from addresses given in the 1970s up to the publication of *Laudato Si’*, Vaughan is able to conclude that, for Francis, “a classic... is a cultural artifact that represents the symbolic language that expresses the hard-one historical processes by which a people appropriate the ethical and spiritual values around which their identity takes shape.” The classic thus has the power both “to return a people to its fundamental principles” and to prepare them “to face the challenge of the future.” With respect to dialogue on the environment, classics express “universal ethical principles within the language of a particular people.” These principles are expressed in “an experiential way” rather than in the language of doctrine. The religious classic, therefore, brings

“the historical experience of the identity of one’s community” into dialogue not only with the present reality but also with other communities and their historical reality, enriching and helping to preserve the total cultural ecology of which the natural world is a necessary part.

In the response, Ulishney drew out the implicit argument in the papers presented by Konigsburg and Vaughan that religious traditions and communities have developed substantial resources and praxes that can be used to “develop pedagogies of desire that can be formative for shaping human action.” Ulishney then connected desire and encounter to the role of aesthetics in the conversation about climate change. She noted that novelist Amitov Ghosh “argues that the climate crisis is not only a scientific crisis, but that it is also a crisis of desire and of the imagination.” The “realms of the imaginative and the scientific” were “ripped apart” in the Enlightenment and must be brought back together if artistic gestures will ever have a chance at shaping our imagination and thus our ability to conceive of the world other than it is. The religious classic, Ulishney suggested, may have a profound role to play in shaping not only our desire but also our imagination so that we might dream of new ways of living and being in this time of crisis.

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