

FREEDOM ACROSS THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY: ENGAGING THE
PAST AS INVITATION AND LIMITATION – INVITED SESSION

Topic: Freedom Across Theological Diversity: Engaging the Past as Invitation and Limitation
 Convener: Linh Hoang, O.F.M., Siena College
 Moderator: Conor Kelly, Marquette University
 Panelists: Shawn Colberg, St. John’s University (Collegeville, Minnesota)
 Lisa Fullam, Jesuit School of Theology
 Linh Hoang, O.F.M., Siena College

This invited session experimented with a different approach than having paper presentations. The moderator and panelists decided to have a guided conversation on the convention topic. The four participants prepared months in advance through many zoom calls. Since they did not know each other, this provided a means to connect but also to become better acquainted. After several discussion on the topic of freedom in theology, they agreed on five broad questions for conversation and engagement with others in attendance at the convention session.

The first part of the session was a brief introduction by Conor Kelly to explain the invited session. The panelists, then, briefly introduced themselves and provided a brief background: Shawn Colberg is a historical theologian. Lisa Fullam is a moral theologian who currently works full-time as a veterinarian and Linh Hoang is a historical theologian and Franciscan priest. Kelly, the moderator, is a moral theologian.

After the formal introduction, the following five questions were addresses by one or more of the panelists:

Question 1: The Second Vatican Council summarized the pastoral work of the church in the modern world as “a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit,” and famously insisted that “to carry out such a task, the church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 3, 4). This description of the church’s mission gives theologians ample freedom to engage contemporary questions.

Question 2: What are the “productive constraints” in the way you approach theology? How do you define the “out of bounds” markers that help orient theological freedom so that the most productive work can occur?

Question 3: When we initially met to discuss this panel, we discovered (perhaps unsurprisingly) that a common thread across our various approaches to theology was a commitment to taking the past seriously even when we think about issues for the present. And yet, we each conceive of “the past” differently, and understand its influence in different ways. I want to explore this commonality further, hopefully to draw out some of the distinctions.

Question 4: In various ways, you all have noted a dynamic relationship in which we have a responsibility to the past alongside a duty to present. Yet it strikes me that there is not such a neat and easy dividing line between these two categories, so I would like to hear your thoughts on how the past and present interact as resources for our theology.

Question 5: Turning more immediately to the present, I would like us to think about unproductive constraints that limit our freedom in unhelpful ways, potentially even to the point of frustrating our flourishing.

- Recalling the constructive task(s) you each identified as the core of your understanding of your work as a theologian at the start of our discussion, what are the negative constraints that you have run into (or that you know others have run into) and that limit a theologian's ability to carry out their work?
- Where do you see the most significant of these unproductive constraints? Are they scholarly? Ecclesial? Social? Or, best captured in another category?
- How might a theologian's social location affect the constraints they face? Are there, for instance, certain constraints that exert more power for pre-tenure colleagues or those in contingent faculty positions?

After these questions were discussed by the panel, those in attendance were asked if they had any comments or questions to add to the conversation. There was a lively engagement between the panelists and attendees. An area that drew a lot of attention was the impact of theology in the future and how theologians can draw not only the laity but also those in the hierarchy into a conversation about the importance of theological reflection in the world today.

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