

PRE-LIBERAL THEOLOGIES OF FREEDOM IN A
POST-LIBERAL AGE – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Pre-Liberal Theologies of Freedom in a Post-Liberal Age
 Convener: Michael C. Magree, S.J., Boston College
 Moderator: Stephen Pope, Boston College
 Presenters: Michael C. Magree, S.J., Boston College
 Elisabeth R. Kincaid, Loyola University New Orleans
 Grant Kaplan, Saint Louis University

This selected session was comprised of three papers of twenty-five minutes each. There was a shared question and answer time in the remaining half hour.

Michael Magree began by presenting his paper, “Origen on Freedom: Christian Exaltation of the Human in the Face of Gnosticism.” Everything regarding true religion, in Origen’s view, has to do with rational persuasion and not with blunt force. For Origen, it would make God unjust to have God forcing people to be condemned or to be at a lower level spiritually. The different levels of spiritual life must be traced back to rational freedom and not to God. Origen preserved at the heart of his concept of the state the notion that the state has an obligation to foster religious observance and to suppress bad religious observance. The defect of the state in his own time, Origen claimed, was that it suppressed the true religion, Christianity. Christians who “have their citizenship in heaven” (Phil 3:20) fight for the earthly state by their prayers and charitable works. Origen likened Christians in the Roman Empire to priests, to military generals, to “a special army of piety.” Christians were radically free because of their conscious pursuit of an apocalyptic destiny, and yet this freedom did not withdraw Christians from the state but made them even better citizens of it.

Elisabeth Kincaid spoke on “Calvin and Suárez: Freedom of Conscience for a Post-Liberal Age.” For John Calvin, each person possessed the ability to make radically free decisions that are not subject to the authority of civil law, which can never bind the conscience. Kincaid described Calvin’s view of the state as “legal Gnosticism” in which “the body politic has no intrinsic value itself.” Francisco Suárez, by contrast, saw conscience as practical judgment, subject not only to God and the natural law but also to civil and even customary law. When taking up the views of “the heretics” in *De legibus* III, Suárez seems to be responding directly to Calvin’s view of conscience and to be developing by contrast a theory of conscience’s moral obligation to obey the laws of the state. Suárez did allow one to reject a human law that is morally reprehensible, but only according to strict criteria. If observance of a civil or customary law causes the subject to sin, then it should be disobeyed. There are other cases, however, where a law may be imprudent and yet obedience to it does not cause sin in the subject. The civil law binds the conscience in this case, since order in the society is itself a moral good. Kincaid pointed to a case in which Suárez held that laws prohibiting bearing arms ought to be obeyed, despite the fact that those arms might be helpful in self-defense.

Grant Kaplan was the third to present, with a paper entitled, “On the Freedom of a Catholic? Möhler and Baur on Freedom.” Johann Adam Möhler’s contemporary, Ferdinand Christian Baur, proposed the essence of Protestantism as autonomy and

mature independence. Catholicism, for Baur, was deeply unfree, insofar as it was bound to creedal formulations and ecclesial authority. By contrast, Möhler's theology of freedom was intent on the freedom of the church in relation to secular authority and the freedom of the Christian from sin. Mandatory celibacy for priests and the authority of the pope were both under attack in German Catholic circles, but Möhler argued in favor of both, since he saw these teachings as essential signs of Catholicism's freedom from control by the state. In different ways, priestly celibacy and papal authority served as signs of the church's "eschatological hope for the kingdom of God." This Catholic freedom did not demand armed rebellion, but it helped "inoculate Catholics against osmosis into the state." There remains some tension between the individual and the group. For Möhler this tension must be lived ecclesially. The human being needs bonds of obedience to have true communion and community. Kaplan summarized by saying that, for Möhler, "There is not only no spirituality without religion, there is no belief without community."

The concluding discussion was a lively one, moderated by Stephen Pope. Kincaid presented an application of Suarezian principles to COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Kaplan responded to further probing on Möhler's position on celibacy. Magree clarified for one questioner that Origen does not have a sense of analogous levels of freedom extending, for example, to dolphins.

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