

THEORIES OF FREEDOM AND CONTEMPLATIVE  
PRACTICE – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Theories of Freedom and Contemplative Practice  
 Convener: Jacob W. Torbeck, Valparaiso University  
 Moderator: Derrick Witherington, Loyola University Chicago  
 Presenters: Min-Ah Cho, Georgetown University  
 Jacob W. Torbeck, Valparaiso University  
 Kathleen McNutt, Marquette University

This session consisted of three papers, each approximately twenty to twenty-five minutes in length, followed by a question and answer session that filled the remainder of the allotted time.

In her paper, “Reclaiming Silence as a Spiritual and Political Practice of Freedom,” drawn from her forthcoming monograph, Min-Ah Cho seeks to reclaim silence as a liberative spiritual practice through attending to the multivalent character of silence as something that can be wielded as a tool both for political oppression (censure) and political resistance (protest), and as something that is gendered and raced. In laying out her reclamation of silence as contemplative praxis, Cho highlights the role of silence in the apophatic and ecstatic, where it marks that which cannot be said, or that which must be unsaid in testimony to the Truth. Here, the character of Jesus in the passion narrative is lifted up as the model for our own practices of silence, which are to be aimed both at resisting political oppression and misguided cultural notions that foreground urgency and productivity, and promoting contemplative attention to the still small voices of the meek and humble, as well as God’s subtle self-revelation “heard in a whisper.”

Jacob W. Torbeck’s paper, “One is Undone: Kenotic Freedom in Christian Mystical Theologies,” began by briefly addressing the fraught history of “self-emptying” notions of freedom as having been abused either as a demand for others or as a kind of autarchy or self-mastery. As an alternative to these destructive forms, Torbeck draws from sources across the mystical traditions of Christian spirituality to articulate a vision of kenotic attention, contemplation that weds liberation for the soul to liberation from material oppression. This kenosis carries with it an understanding of freedom as “letting go of the self” that relies upon an imitation of God’s self-emptying attention, which continually creates and sustains all creatures. In this imitation, the spiritual beholder hopes that they will both be filled with the Spirit and inspire and nourish others through attention to the spiritual and material needs of others, a disposition that leads the mystic to engage in both “working and waiting” for the new day that God will bring.

Finally, Kathleen McNutt examined the nature of human willing as it could relate to ecological action in her paper, “On Care for Our Common *Gnōmē*: Eco-spirituality and Freedom in Maximus the Confessor.” Situating her paper in the context of our environmental crisis, McNutt details the two kinds of wills Maximus discusses, the natural and the gnostic will, to talk about how the proliferation of choices within a culture of consumption may malform our gnostic wills and lead toward environmental calamity. According to McNutt, Maximus offers us a way of understanding how our

gnomic wills might be better formed: first, through training our desiring will to “see better” through contemplation; second, through reintegration of our own responsibility through the virtues; and finally, through coming to desire the good of the planetary community—an expansion of the scope of our desire for the good.

The discussion that followed was fruitful and wide-ranging, and pushed the speakers to expand upon their papers. Aristotle Papanikolaou asked all speakers about the role of affectivity as it relates to spiritual and political freedom. Each panelist responded by speaking of unrepresented aspects of their work that dealt with emotion and desire as an impetus and effect of contemplative praxis. Ruben Habito asked Jacob Torbeck about the difficult example of Simone Weil’s life as it related to the notion of kenosis that Torbeck had proposed, and Torbeck responded by noting that among those for whom she advocated, what was appreciated was not Weil’s *maladroit* labor, but her rare efforts at solidarity which few others attempted—Weil’s sometimes scrupulous and ultimately self-injurious practice can indeed be critiqued. Andrew Prevot raised the problem of political freedom as a concept, wondering if there was enough agreement about what political freedom entailed. Other questions engaged Min-Ah Cho’s paper directly, and asked about the essential nature of the cross to silence, and to what extent this might be part of a process of liberation. Additionally, another question asked how one knows when silence must give way to action. In answering these, Cho agreed that knowing when silence must be broken is difficult. She then directed our attention again to the ways in which silence is contextual, how silence can be “loud”—a silence of unspeaking, of anguished or exuberant vocalization that carries no particular phonemes—or melancholic, or defiant. In the spirit of the conversation, all the attending agreed to end the session with a brief period of contemplative silence.

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