

## ANTHROPOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Freedom  
 Convener: Elizabeth Pyne, Mercyhurst University  
 Moderator: Eric Meyer, Carroll College  
 Presenters: Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Wake Forest University School of  
 Divinity  
 Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College  
 Daniel Minch, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The Anthropology Topic Session hosted a panel featuring three papers on the convention theme of “Freedom;” each twenty-minute presentation was followed by ten minutes of discussion.

In her paper, “‘No one takes my life, I give it freely’: Reimagining Human Freedom in Light of Ecomartyrdom,” Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo pursued a multifaceted examination of freedom and its constraints that was guided by the witness of Indigenous land and environmental defenders—especially of Berta Cáceres, a Lenca leader in Honduras, who was assassinated in 2016 for her resistance to a dam on the sacred Gualcarque River. Gandolfo described how, in the first instance, the life and death of Cáceres unveil “the mechanisms of unfreedom” associated with profit-driven extractivist projects. She noted the insidious way these projects’ neoliberal ideology cloaks itself in the language of freedom and liberty, when it is fundamentally an assertion of the power to exploit both non-dominant peoples and vulnerable ecosystems. While ecomartyrs around the globe suffer the fatal consequences of this distorted view of freedom, their protest against it also limns an alternative yearning. Gandolfo acknowledged the danger of claiming that victims of violence “give” their lives, yet argued that a profound truth regarding human freedom is nevertheless present in their steadfast commitment to eco-social justice. Crucially, the freedom ecomartyrs “enflesh” is one that experiences human life as essentially bound up with the wellbeing of other creatures and the earth. Such a grounded cosmivision anticipates more recent theological interest in integral ecology and challenges the hierarchically dualist “extractivist paradigm [that] seeks human freedom from the constraints of the natural world.”

Jessica Coblentz's paper, “Freedom from Sexual Attraction? Thinking with Asexual Reappraisals of the Human Person,” illuminated the need to take seriously asexual experience in Catholic theological anthropologies and their broader cultural contexts. As it stands, views of the human person are largely governed by “compulsory sexuality”—the notion that to be human is to be sexual. This framing of what constitutes being a “normal” human, Coblentz noted, “distributes social validation unevenly according to race, ability, and size, among other social factors;” it also results in asexual erasure. Such erasure has a specific valence in Catholic magisterial teaching—for instance, in the assumption that all are called to the self-mastery required by chastity—but also appears in many progressive theologies of sexuality. Instead of arguing for the natural givenness of asexuality, or indeed any sexual orientation, Coblentz advocated for a more thorough reevaluation of the place of sexual desire in human life. Drawing from recent scholarship and varied first-person narratives of

“aces,” she showed how “experiences of asexuality can enrich our conceptions of human personhood” by introducing an expansive definition of erotic attachment and nuanced distinctions around categories such as romance, sex, and love. These contributions have implications for Catholic perspectives on marriage and family as well as relational language describing humans’ connection to God.

In his paper, “The Promise of the Future Is Also the Threat of the Future: Money as *Theos* and the Constraints of *Homo Oeconomicus*,” Daniel Minch reflected on the anthropological consequences of a major shift in Western societies: the economization of life and personhood. Contemporary capitalism, he argued, retains an “essentially religious structure” in which values, imagination, and behavior are reshaped around a new “God-concept”: “Money has become the supreme theological principle of power for Western societies, even those that firmly believe themselves to be largely secularized. It ‘mimics’ God by supplanting God as the highest object of desire, diverting our attention to itself.” While money signals the promise and possibilities of the future—in a word, money brings freedom—the priority of competitive self-interest and the unstable dynamics of market activity (e.g., circular demand and deferred realization of desire) mean that this promise is simultaneously a threat. Patterns of structural exclusion radicalize this threat for certain marginalized groups. Moreover, Minch noted that, since the 2008 financial crash, such exclusion has taken on a punitive and moralizing cast, making these groups supposedly responsible for their precarity. He argued that this dominant economic anthropology must be contended with as *theological* in order to understand its role in current political and ecological crises.

Questions from audience members sparked fruitful discussion on points including: the meaning of freedom when attributed to other-than-human creatures; comparisons between contemporary asexual experience and the disallowing of sexuality for Black women under slavery; and connections among systems of economic and sexual regulation.

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