

## CHRIST – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Christology and Freedom  
 Convener: John Thiede, S.J., Marquette University  
 Moderator: Mary Kate Holman, Benedictine University  
 Presenters: Flora Tang, University of Notre Dame  
 Giadio De Biasio, Boston College  
 Taylor Ott, KU Leuven

This session consisted of three papers, each approximately twenty minutes long, that tackled very different Christological issues in conversation with the convention theme of “freedom.” A wide-ranging question and answer session ensued.

Flora Tang began our session with her paper, “The Ungendered Flesh of Jesus and the Queer Body of Christ: Hortense Spillers and M. Shawn Copeland in Conversation.” Tang framed her presentation around two opening questions: “for whom has [the] theological and social ideal of femininity, masculinity, and family not been possible? How can those who seek to invoke the image of Jesus ... in writing queer theology today be responsible to these impossibilities?” She then turned to her paper’s titular conversation partners, theologian M. Shawn Copeland (who was in attendance at the session) and the Black and decolonial literary theorist Hortense Spillers. Tang explicated Spillers’ notion of “ungendered flesh,” which describes the historically violent processes of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery which subjugated Black bodies, specifically rendering womanhood impossible by denying kinship and domestic families to Black women. She then turned to Copeland’s argument that Jesus Christ’s queer flesh is redemptive for Black women, reading it through the lens of Spillers. To call Christ’s flesh queer, Copeland contends, is not a claim about his sexuality, but rather a statement of his opposition to empire. When queer flesh is understood through the notion of ungendered flesh, we can understand Christ’s flesh as redemptive for all those whose gender and sexual experiences are deemed non-normative by the violence of empire. Tang concluded with further questions these insights might raise for contemporary theology, suggesting that “questions of the essence of gender may be... less pressing” than “how to heal from racialized-gendered violence and the structural dismantling of existing gender relations and familial kinship structures.”

Giadio De Biasio then presented his paper, “Freeing the Pathway to Salvation: Christ’s Death and Salvation of Infants Who Die Without Baptism.” He reviewed four historical phases of Catholic theology’s reckoning with this question: the apophatic approach of the Greek patristic phase, the anti-Pelagian insistence during the Latin patristic phase that baptism was necessary for salvation, the medieval phase whose notion of “natural beatitude” à la Aquinas served as the basis for the idea of Limbo, and the post-Vatican II era which emphasized a “hope for salvation,” articulated in the 2007 International Theological Commission document. Wishing to develop an intellectually sound pastoral theology, De Biasio argued that there are several “theological knots” in the 2007 ITC document that his paper would untangle. Drawing on insights from Anselm, Aquinas, and Lonergan, he proposed an “inclusive Christic salvation” that might overcome these theological knots and affirm that infants who die

without baptism indeed can be saved. He contended that infants would find the way of salvation in their death, by which they are configured to Christ's death, receiving the effect of *quodammodo*-baptismal grace.

Finally, Taylor Ott shared her paper, "Following Jesus the Dissident: Developing a Theory of Dissent for a Liberative Church." Beginning with the insight from liberation theology that Jesus stands for the liberation of the marginalized, she expanded this argument to contend that dissent is "a necessary and normal part of liberative action." Drawing on the work of Richard Horsley to analyze the power structures of first-century Palestine, Ott contended that the historical Jesus stood with those harmed by the interlocking political, economic, and religious oppressions of the Roman Empire, and was threatening enough to existing power structures to be put to death. Connecting Christology to ecclesiology, Ott highlighted the irony that a church called to imitate Christ would itself be intolerant towards dissent, as has been historically true of the Roman Catholic Church. Connecting her paper to the convention theme of "freedom," she concluded with a call for a greater openness to the possibility that "dissent has an important role to play in building ecclesial community," not only because of its inevitability, but because "it is a potential site of grace."

The discussion that followed was collegial and covered many topics. Several questions addressed the possibilities and drawbacks of constructing contemporary theologies with the very complicated historical context of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as later historical theologies that might be asking different questions than our contemporary contexts are asking. Several audience members invited us to consider what voices might mitigate these drawbacks and further enrich these pastoral and theological discussions. One participant suggested that we attend to the perspectives of pregnant people and the parents of unbaptized infants when discussing the notion of salvation, while another invoked scholars of Judaism in antiquity and the present day as important conversation partners in discussions of Jesus' historical context.

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