

## GOD AND TRINITY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: God and Freedom  
 Convener: Susie Paulik Babka, University of San Diego  
 Moderator: Mary Ann Hinsdale, Boston College  
 Presenters: Robert Elliot, Boston College  
 Jonathan Heaps, Boston College  
 Brianne Jacobs, Emmanuel College

What does it mean to say that God is “free” or that divine freedom informs human freedom? Our session considered these questions and others in an exciting and well-attended forum. Robert Elliot delivered the first paper, “Human Freedom as Participation in Trinitarian Shared Intentionality,” beginning with psychological research on “joint attention,” a behavior in which two people focus on one object for the purpose of interacting with each other. Elliot argued that this activity is unique to human beings, making us capable of creating a “we” identity or intentionality. This shared intentionality is what reveals human mirroring of divine intentionality, that Father, Son and Spirit act as a “we,” performing with shared intentionality, rather than creating, redeeming and sanctifying separately. Elliot argued, “As human beings intend common goals known to be common through their shared intentionality, so too do the trinitarian Persons intend their own infinite common intention through their own shared intentions.” The trinitarian missions intend to elevate human shared activity into the divine life. He concluded that the “intersubjective and cooperative union of the trinitarian Persons is infinite, and thus wide enough to embrace everyone as potential partners in the act of shared intending and to embrace our own ordinary shared intentions intending ordinary common objects.”

Jonathan Heaps presented the second paper, “Divine Desire, Divine Freedom, and Contemplative Prayer.” Underscoring the lens of embodiment in contemplative practice, Heaps investigated the meaning of divine desire by way of Bernard Lonergan’s work on the trinity. For Lonergan, Heaps asserted, the human commitment to self-transcendence is authentic in “an erotic desire for truth and value that of itself contains no principle of restriction.” The eros to self-transcendence is present in every person, whether we are aware of it or not, as “a gift of divine light, a created spiritual participation in uncreated spirit,” making eros a condition of human authenticity. Heaps took seriously Sarah Coakley’s suggestion that agapic eros for truth and goodness is existential in Lonergan’s understanding. Heaps argued, “The analogy from freedom—understood as the agapic willingness to cooperate with the erotic drive to self-transcending authenticity—might be ... to God’s free and loving willingness to be the God who knows and loves being God.” Embodied desire then becomes the site of human liberation.

Our third paper was presented by Brianne Jacobs, titled “Prodigal Love: Gendered Parent Language and God.” Jacobs began by referencing Shawn Copeland’s notion that grace is the freedom to see history and one’s body through God’s eyes, loving oneself as God loves us. Loving oneself has not always been prioritized by women and persons of color, who have been subject to estimations of servitude. Women, for example, have historically been described as passive in the very act that has defined

female value, the act of reproduction. Jacobs noted that “parent language for God has in the Christian tradition been used to describe the loving way God ‘sees’ us.” But how does this work when the tradition does not see the parental role as equal between female and male, but opposite, even opposed, between passive and active, or weak and strong? Hans Urs von Balthasar has preserved this distinction between male and female as analogical to the difference between God and the world. But this description limits language for God: Jacobs argues that God’s love is “freedom-granting”: “therefore what we know about the trinity and God as ‘Abba’ is not simply that God is a father/male, but that God’s love is a freedom-granting love, and God’s generativeness is not constrained or defined by gender.” Merely inserting “Mother” language for God does not necessarily solve the problem, as Elizabeth Johnson has said.

Discussion followed the papers; some of the ideas explored included whether humans are indeed the only species to display joint attention, fashioning new non-gendered references for God, and whether prayer is an experience of attention or a reflection on the experience of attention to God.

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