

## MORAL THEOLOGY I – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: New Methods for Urgent Moments  
 Convener: Rachel Bundang, Santa Clara University  
 Moderator: Marcus Mescher, Xavier University  
 Presenters: Cristina Traina, Fordham University  
 Anna Floerke Scheid, Duquesne University  
 Ish Ruiz, Emory University

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

In her paper, “Freedom or License? The Path through Vulnerability,” Cristina Traina observed that political claims for personal freedom—rooted in a “rational, individual liberalism”—often slide into the language of selective license, or *carte blanche* permission to do as one wishes in some spheres of life. She further argued that returning to the language of the common good, to a Catholic theology of existential and moral freedom, or to conscience to resolve the distinction is often fruitless, as conflicts over these concepts are at the root of the problem. Traina put her thought in dialogue with the work of Hille Haker, Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz and used ethics of care, (inter)dependency, and vulnerability in an effort to develop a critical distinction between license and freedom. Real freedom, Traina argued, is bounded in our relationships and vulnerabilities with one another. Recognizing that our sense of freedom is often grounded in fear of one another, she sees that the honoring the *imago Dei* in one another is not enough, so she called instead for “freedom rooted in interdependence and vulnerability.”

In the second paper, “Agency, Technology, and Freedom from Radicalization,” Anna Floerke Scheid started from events such as racist, antisemitic mass shootings and the January 6 insurrection to argue that political violence is a clear, demonstrable reality. As she sees it, such violence disproportionately affects minoritized communities in the United States, negatively impacts the freedom of vulnerable people, and degrades democratic values and institutions. Through her analysis, she claimed that among the factors contributing to radicalization are social media algorithms that operate absent specific human agency. Such algorithms challenge Catholic ideas about agency and compel Catholic ethicists to reshape our conceptions about that accordingly. With special attention to how collective agency is fostered in community, Catholic ethics has a role to play in efforts to prevent online radicalization toward religious extremism and political violence.

In the third paper, “Rescuing Probabilism: A Tool to Guide Catholic Schools Forward on Matters of LGBTQ+ Inclusion,” Ish Ruiz argued that probabilism can help Catholic school leaders navigate controversies pertaining to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools. Rather than solving theological or moral questions, probabilism allows Catholics to evaluate the validity of conflicting moral arguments and ultimately allows the conscience to act freely, thus justifying a necessary pluralism that will allow Catholic institutions to teach magisterial doctrine while welcoming conscientious dissenters. In his presentation, he offered an overview of the controversy in Catholic

schools, explained the tool of probabilism and its relationship to freedom of conscience, and applied probabilism to matters of LGBTQ+ inclusion in Catholic schools.

Given our fraught political moment, with its threats of political violence and very real assaults against fundamental human dignity—particularly against vulnerable groups and persons such as women, children, and others pushed to the sociocultural margins, especially where actual bodies and lives are concerned—the audience and presenters engaged each other thoughtfully and eagerly. The discussion covered wide terrain, delving into the particulars of each presenter’s frameworks and theo-ethical methods in their analysis of the present. For example, Traina focused on ongoing questions about the sexual abuse crisis and LGBTQ+ issues in terms of whose power and freedom are actually valued when we privilege individual actors over the contexts and communities in which they live. Floerke Schied zoomed in on the rise of white Christian nationalism and consequent radicalization among some Catholics. Ruiz explored how probabilism offers an opportunity to navigate culture wars and Catholic tensions particularly around questions of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Participants also sought to make connections across the individual situations each paper addressed and drive toward new directions and possible practical resolutions for each. What was interesting was each one’s commitment to bridge theory to application, rhetoric to action. How might we best live out these renewed Catholic understandings of freedom in the public square and make a “space for grace” in our dealings with one another?

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