

## MORAL THEOLOGY II – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Freedom in Pursuit of the Common Good  
 Convener: Marc Rugani, Saint Anselm College  
 Moderator: Kate Ward, Marquette University  
 Presenters: Elizabeth Sweeny Block, Saint Louis University  
 Ramon Luzarraga, Saint Martin’s University  
 Sara Bernard-Hoverstad, Boston College

This session consisted of three papers, each approximately twenty minutes in length, followed by a question and answer period and topic session planning meeting for the next conference, which filled the balance of the allotted session time.

In her paper titled “Searching for Truth: What Religious Freedom Can Teach Us about Moral Freedom,” Elizabeth Sweeny Block argues that the pluralistic environment engendered by religious freedom can be a vehicle for greater discernment and dialogue in the arena of moral freedom. She began with the provocative statement, “Freedom is a problem that needs solving,” drawing attention to conflicts of personal freedoms and the challenge of rooting freedom in truth consonant with human beings’ social nature. Block highlighted three points to advance her argument that if we embrace the inherent right to religious freedom, proclaimed in The Second Vatican Council’s declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, we can come to a better understanding of moral freedom. By affirming (1) a communal search for truth engendered in relationality and dialogue, (2) the sanctity of freedom, and (3) the richness of human diversity and difference, we overcome insufficient articulations of freedom, such as those constrained by blind obedience to political and religious authorities, and moral agents will have the space for genuine moral discernment in our societies. This achieves an appreciation for the gifts of the Holy Spirit found in our personal and cultural diversity extolled in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Ramon Luzarraga highlights the architect of *Dignitatis Humanae* in his paper “John Courtney Murray: Prophet.” Focusing on his 1960 work *We Hold These Truths*, Luzarraga argues that the current state of affairs in the United States is the “barbarism” about which Murray warned, and that by returning to Murray’s prescient insights, we might find a way to overcome the polemic polarization and base majoritarianism that threatens our society today. To address the undermining of rational standards of judgment, the corruption of inherited wisdom, and the exclusive appeal to individual subjective feeling, we need the revival of civility in society through education in rational, deliberative debate based on common foundations in philosophy and the practice of rhetoric. For the kind of consensus needed in our times, Luzarraga concluded that that we need a robust account of natural law that includes all voices and experiences. Scholars innovating new approaches to natural law like Craig Ford, Vincent Lloyd, and Cristina Traina can help us account for the experience of especially marginalized members of our communities to interrogate the question of what it means to live a good human life. To overcome today’s challenges to public consensus grounded in truth, we also must have the will and desire to live together, engaged in conspiring within our communities to “breathe together” through debate and the development of shared philosophies.

Sara Bernard-Hoverstad addresses another threat to moral freedom in the context of the global climate crisis in her paper, “Climate Anxiety, Moral Agency, and Social Ethics.” Recognizing the effects that climate change has not only on the physical environment but also on the mental health and wellbeing of those directly and indirectly affected, Bernard-Hoverstad contended that narratives currently circulating in the global north intended to stimulate sustainable action can, in fact, overburden agents and lead to moral paralysis. To promote moral freedom, especially among young people disproportionately reporting “ecoanxiety,” she argued that social ethics must appeal to affect and emotions for effective, sustainable responses to climate change and its effects. Invoking the scholarship of Emmanuel Katongole and Bryan Massingale, Bernard-Hoverstad argued that communal practices which name the situation as tragedy, which need not result from moral evil, and incorporate the ritual practice of lament can help not only individuals fraught with climate anxiety but also the layered, overlapping communities in which they are embedded move from shame and guilt to compassion and hope. Such a deliberate externalization of emotion can help people avoid what Sarah Jacquette Ray calls the “fetishization of action” in the confines of a capitalist worldview and assume a deeper responsibility for personal and structural change in creative, socially equitable ways not yet imagined under our current subjective and intersubjective constraints.

In the discussion that followed, those present offered insights into each paper, noting intersections in the papers according to the theme. A notable highlight was the identification of the essential connection between freedom and truth, noting that, for Christians, truth is a person—Christ. An encounter with Christ can help us act in freedom together as a community and look through the cross to the resurrection for hope, especially in the face of social injustice. Participants also discussed the prospects of rational debate and rhetoric to promote freedom in our times and its effectiveness, compared to a narrative approach for touching human affect for achieving consensus, community, and personal responsibility in our times.

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