

## PRACTICAL THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Religious Freedom and Human Liberation: Mapping Dissonances  
 Conveners: Milton Javier Bravo, Edgewood College  
 Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Emory University  
 Ish Ruiz, Emory University  
 Moderator: Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Emory University  
 Presenters: James Bretzke, S.J., John Carroll University  
 Cynthia Cameron, University of St. Michael's College  
 Richard Hanson, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

In light of this year's convention theme on freedom, the Practical Theology topic session curated a panel that probed theological, philosophical, ethical, political, and legal tensions between religious freedom, Catholic identity, and human development. The three presenters anchored their papers in concrete case studies drawn from Catholic education, developmental psychology, and the Supreme Court.

James Bretzke began the session with a dynamic presentation entitled "'Pride' and Prudence in Catholic School Identity: Flagging Freedom and Liberation." In June 2022, Worcester Bishop Robert McManus declared that Worcester's Nativity Middle School was no longer "Catholic," and forbade Mass, the sacraments, or any other privilege afforded other Catholic institutions in his diocese. This was necessary, in the bishop's words, because the school had flown Pride and Black Lives Matter flags, which in bishop's view "embody specific agendas or ideologies [that] contradict Catholic social and moral teaching [and] sends a mixed, confusing and scandalous message to the public about the Church's stance on these important moral and social issues." The Bishop referenced canon law and the Holy See Dicastery for Catholic Education 2022 instruction, "The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue." However, Bretzke argued, neither canon law nor the recent instruction required such an episcopal response. A strong case can be made that these actions run counter to the Vatican instruction which counsels a more measured, less confrontational, and prudent response to such conflicts. The Vatican approach reflects traditional understandings of authority, derived from ancient Roman law, of a "listening" claim of authority of the *mater familias'* *auctoritas* that was meant to complement the ultimate exercise of *potestas* of the *pater familias*. Foregrounding these concepts in relation to the Worcester case enables us to envisage a less conflictual and more collaborative *modus vivendi* for similar future controversies.

Next, Cynthia Cameron presented a paper entitled "Living into Freedom: A Developmental Framework." Cameron began by noting that the Catholic theological tradition has largely neglected the theological reality of childhood and adolescence, deferring instead to a theological anthropology that assumes white male adulthood as its default. Bringing age and cognitive development to the fore in theological reflection offers a wider view of human freedom. How do the developmental capabilities of children and adolescents impact their ability to understand and articulate what freedom is? To answer this question, Cameron employed the work of theologian Karl Rahner and cognitive psychologist Robert Kegan. Rahner argues that childhood has its own intrinsic goodness that is not dependent on the goodness of adulthood; thus, what we

say about human freedom must have meaning for children and adolescents, and knowledge about children and adolescents should inform theological reflections on the human person. Kegan provides a framework for understanding freedom as a relational and, therefore, developmental task. His articulation of subject/object theory explains the process by which young people develop the ability to reflect on a reality like freedom, which requires a sophisticated ability to stand outside of a relationship in order to analyze it. Development occurs when ideas that a young person is not yet able to reflect on become available as an object of reflection; they develop the ability to see their freedom as a response to being in relationship with God and others. This, in turn, provides a developmentally nuanced context for thinking about the ways that children and adolescents comprehend and exercise freedom as human beings created in the image of God. It calls on theologians to articulate a more capacious approach to freedom that accounts for these developmental “ways of knowing.” Such an approach takes seriously the intrinsic goodness of children and adolescents, consciously including them in understandings of the *imago Dei*, and provides a more adequate explanation of agency in children and adolescents.

Finally, Richard Hanson delivered an engaging lecture entitled “Secularity and Religious Freedom: Charles M. Taylor’s Narrative of Secularity and Secularization as a Resource for Understanding the Dynamics of Religious Freedom in Modern Societies.” Religious freedom is a potent area of controversy, as evidenced in the discussion around recent US Supreme Court decisions. Foregrounding the Declaration of Independence’s assertion of equality and inalienable rights, the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, and philosopher Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, Hanson examined the underlying assumptions about religion and secularity in the context of three contentious cases: *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru* (2020), *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022), and *Groff v. DeJoy* (2023). Hanson surfaced seven conceptual touchstones from the analysis of freedom and secularity developed by Taylor as a practical lens for understanding the issues at stake in the cases. Hanson argued that Taylor’s theologically relevant insights help to reveal, refine, and expand the context of religious freedom in secular societies; offer plausible strategies for engaging in controversies associated with religious freedom; and give Christians and their religious and secular interlocutors pathways for understanding ourselves and living out our traditions in richer and increasingly meaningful ways.

The three presentations were pedagogically astute and conceptually complementary. As such, they sparked enthusiastic conversation among attendees. The first question, for Cameron, wondered how Kegan would respond to the suggestion that youth who identify as queer are too developmentally immature to articulate a durable sense of identity. Cameron responded that Kegan’s developmental phases illuminate how young people gradually grow in self-understanding in ways that do not imply a dismissal of such understanding as “just a phase.” Questions that followed probed dimensions of Taylor’s thought and inquired into the implications of presenters’ arguments for various Catholic institutions.

SUSAN BIGELOW REYNOLDS  
*Emory University*  
*Atlanta, Georgia*