

SPIRITUALITY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Contemplation and Freedom in Late Modernity
 Convener: Mary Frohlich, Catholic Theological Union
 Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union
 Presenters: Benedict Shoup, University of Notre Dame
 Kristen Drahos, Baylor University
 Christian Krokus, University of Scranton

Benedict Shoup led off the session with his paper, “The Freedom of Being Before God: Edith Stein, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and the Sanjuanist Paradigm.” He developed the thesis that St. John of the Cross’s articulation of the human movement through the dark night of purgation to mystical marriage and union with God was more influential than most realize in twentieth century thought on authentic Christian freedom. The Carmelite Edith Stein developed a phenomenology of the movement from sense knowledge to rational knowledge to faith knowledge. In her view, the latter, a deep touch of God at the very center of the person, comprises the most radical freedom. Jean-Yves Lacoste focused on the move from Heidegger’s “empirical I,” who cannot have any direct experience of God, to a “liturgical I,” who freely embodies gestures (such as pilgrimage, the cloistered life, or vigils) that pattern life according to the logic of a relationship with the Absolute. For both Stein and Lacoste, the disturbance and confusion John describes as a “dark night” are unavoidable if the person is to be freed from the confines of familiar, natural ways of perceiving and relating. Shoup concluded his paper by suggesting that this Sanjuanist paradigm can be discerned in other twentieth-century theologians as well, among them Gustavo Gutiérrez and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

The presentation by Kristen Drahos, “Re-Calling Contemplation: Byung-Chul Han and the Promise of Mysticism,” focused on the Korean-born German philosopher’s critique of neoliberalism and his recommendation of the contemplative path as an antidote. Han asserts that neoliberal humans are trapped by infinite, shapeless horizons that promise they can “become everything.” Even the “authentic self” becomes a commodity subject to endless cycles of production and consumption. Like Gregory of Nyssa and Bonaventure, Han calls for an ecstatic contemplative *itineraria*. The first moment of his contemplative path is “profound boredom,” which opens the way to liberation from compulsive activity. He draws on Augustine’s notions of receptive leisure, as well as Aquinas’s development of contemplation as imbuing the active life. Han’s primary source, however, is Heidegger’s “dwelling” and “lingering” that allow things to emerge and exist as they are. Drahos concluded her presentation with both an appreciation and a critique of Han’s invitation to contemplation. Her primary critique is that his “lingering” stance includes no real path forward toward transcendence and narrative coherence; thus, it risks dissolving into infinite insomniac wandering.

The third contribution, Christian Krokus’s “Christian de Chergé and the Martyrdom of Love,” highlighted the discernment process undergone by de Chergé and the other Cistercian monks of Tibhirine, Algeria, as they faced life-threatening danger during the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s. While their Muslim neighbors and

their local bishop expressed their need for the monks not to leave, the Cistercian Abbot General stated that “The Order has more need of monks than of martyrs.” Krokus traces de Chergé’s gradually growing awareness of his own inner freedom not to be coerced by these or any other pressures. De Chergé’s talks to his brothers during this period reveal his developing spirituality of martyrdom as freely giving one’s life in complete nonviolence, avoiding any hint of painting oneself as righteous victim and the killer as wicked enemy. A chief source for this spirituality was St. Jane de Chantal’s “martyrdom of love,” which consists of simple, unostentatious, everyday acts of love for all those whom one encounters. De Chergé saw the essence of Jesus’ vocation to martyrdom expressed more incisively in the incarnation and the washing of the feet than in the cross. The Tibhirine community discerned together their call to remain in place, and in the end seven out of nine were killed. Krokus concluded that these men witness to the inner freedom to disarm completely in the act of giving oneself in solidarity with one’s most vulnerable neighbors.

The question period engaged further exploration of contemplative freedom in relation to interiority, narrative, and apophasis. The question was raised of whether a “return to the senses” leading to a liminal communion with the natural world is the opposite of apophasis, or its culmination. A final comment invited consideration of Howard Thurman’s insights into interiority and community life.

MARY FROHLICH
Catholic Theological Union
Chicago, Illinois