

DISSENT AS A MEANS OF SALVATION? SOTERIOLOGICAL
DIMENSIONS OF DISSENT – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Dissent as a Means of Salvation? Soteriological Dimensions of Dissent
 Convener: Travis LaCouter, KU Leuven
 Moderator: Elizabeth Pyne, Mercyhurst University
 Presenters: Ryszard Bobrowicz, KU Leuven
 Travis LaCouter, KU Leuven
 Ryan McAleer, KU Leuven

This selected session sought to respond to the conference theme of “Social Salvation” by drawing on work being done at KU Leuven as part of the “Dissenting Church” research project. The panelists considered dissent’s relationship to salvation from historical, empirical, and philosophical perspectives. The panel featured three papers and a robust question and answer portion.

Ryszard Bobrowicz’s paper, “Truth or Obedience? Dissent as a Conflict Between Individual and Communal Soteriology,” examined three cases of medieval dissent (St. Francis of Assisi, Jan Hus, and Martin Luther) and the institutional responses to them. Bobrowicz argued that these episodes were not just conflicts over power, but over competing conceptions of salvation, with the dissenters understanding salvation from an “individual perspective” and the hierarchy viewing salvation as a “collective responsibility” (albeit one held in trust by the magisterium). Dissent threatens those in power by calling into question their role as the authors of “legible” categories of salvation. The three cases also highlight different possible outcomes to dissent: St. Francis’s dissent, while radical, still sought to remain loyal to magisterial authority and so was eventually domesticated by the church; Hus rejected both magisterial and secular authority, appealing directly to Christ and divine law, and was ultimately destroyed (he was burned at the stake in 1415); but in the case of Luther, dissent created permanent disruption in the form of Protestant schism, in large part because he enjoyed the ongoing support and protection of secular authorities while publicly and powerfully rejecting magisterial authority. This latter case is “extremely important in the contemporary context,” Bobrowicz claimed, because many contemporary Catholic dissenters “align themselves with the broader society” and “its legal/moral framework(s).” Avoiding future schism will require balancing the magisterium’s “collective responsibility” with the voices of individual dissenters.

Travis LaCouter’s paper, “When Doctrine Wounds: Dissent as Response to Feelings of Ontological Disjunction,” developed the Foucauldian concept of “ontological harmony” in light of church teaching on sexuality and gender. For Michel Foucault, “ontological harmony” consists of a reasonably coherent alignment between *bios* and *logos*, that is, between one’s life and the account one is able to give of one’s life. The church, however, presents an account of the human person that many experience as alienating and disjunctive with their lived experience, thus giving rise to ontological disjunction. LaCouter demonstrated this through three case studies drawn from original interviews (namely, an out gay priest, a Roman Catholic Woman Priest, and a young trans Catholic). In each of these cases, the individual felt a serious misalignment of *bios* and *logos* such that their lives were rendered more or less

unintelligible to themselves by nature of their participation in the community's shared (theological) discourse. In each case, this disjunction produced some form of dissent. LaCouter suggested that dissent in each of these cases can be best understood as a "mechanism of ontological harmonization," rather than as epistemic resistance to doctrinal pronouncements, or as evidence of "moral relativism."

Ryan McAleer presented a paper, "Unity as Violence: Prioritising Dissent as an Ethical-Dialogical Approach to Truth," that drew on the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas in order to critique a "totalizing discourse" in philosophy and theology. The quest for "truth" can suppress otherness when it is understood to be process of assimilation, correlation, and absolute comprehension. Philosophy in this sense becomes "egology." McAleer suggested that the church's discourse often bears these marks: "Truth" and "unity" are deployed as neutral terms that facilitate a synthesis of all propositions and counterpropositions within a single "all-embracing narrative." The axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* betrays an ecclesial egology that cannot reckon with difference—indeed, one in which difference is seen as a threat to "truth" itself. McAleer pointed out "recent developments in magisterial teaching" that mitigate against this danger, including Pope Francis's emphasis on synodality and his frequent invocation of the image of the "polyhedron." But a "much more radical" form of dialogue is required on Levinasian grounds, one that accepts the "absolute distance" between parties as the basis for an infinite "surplus" of meaning between them. That scripture often locates God in and through this surplus of meaning should be soteriologically probative for the church. With regards to the phenomenon of dissent, McAleer suggested that it can help to reveal the impossibility of the church's "relentless effort to master everything," and can in this way create opportunities for genuine ecclesial "listening."

Following the papers, Elizabeth Pyne facilitated a wide-ranging question-and-answer portion. Among the issues raised were the following: how best to motivate dialogue in a church marked by deep polarization; the need for "ecclesial discernment" in order to distinguish productive and unproductive forms of dissent; the purpose of doctrine; whether or not shifting cultural conditions affect our understanding of dissent; and the distinction between metaphysics and epistemology.

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