

## CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT – TOPIC SESSION

Convener: William George, Dominican University  
 Moderator: Katherine Tarrant, University of Virginia  
 Presenters: Marcus Mescher, Xavier University  
 Simeiqi He, Independent Scholar  
 Thomas Massaro, S.J., Fordham University

Focusing on the convention theme of “Social Salvation,” this session featured three presentations followed by insightful questions or comments, either in the brief time allotted after each presentation or during the general discussion.

Marcus Mescher’s paper, “‘No One is Saved Alone’: Evaluating Pope Francis’s Vision of Social Holiness,” examined Francis’s claims of social salvation in light of some of his most familiar phrases (e.g., “culture of encounter,” the church as “field hospital,” and “social poets” who are “sowers of change”). Although language of “liberation” is seldom employed in the canon of CST, Mescher argued that the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez can more explicitly connect social duties, social sanctification, and social salvation. The paper drew on three examples—Francis’s attention to shame, indifference, and polarization—to assess his efforts to translate CST from principles to practice.

With reference to shame, one attendee noted Pope Francis’s shift in addressing people with disabilities from *Amoris Laetitia* to the synodal documents, more explicitly honoring in the latter the subjectivity and inherent dignity of people with disabilities. A question leading to a brief but lively discussion dealt with the presenter’s allusion to Gutiérrez’s work on friendship, wondering if the church’s presentation of solidarity as “social charity” or “social friendship” over-inflates what we can expect of these relationships (“Is friendship stretched too thin?”). Returning to the issue of shame, a third participant wondered about “social shame” or how “every social interaction risks shame,” and the implications for Pope Francis’s call to build a “culture of encounter.” Mescher’s responses confirmed the legitimacy of turning to Gutiérrez to elucidate and evaluate Francis’s vision of social holiness.

In her presentation, “Social Salvation as Universal Love: From Teilhard, Berry to Francis and Beyond,” Simeiqi He argued that from Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti* there emerges a vision in which social salvation is akin to universal love. The presentation then traced Francis’s universal horizon to Thomas Berry’s cosmological ethics and to Teilhard de Chardin’s notion of *sola caritas* (love alone), and He highlighted ways in which their thought may be traced back to Eastern traditions. With a focus on Teilhard’s work in China and Berry’s study of Chinese religions, He stressed the formative significance of the Chinese tradition for the conception of the universal horizon. Thus, the actualization of Francis’s vision requires a deeper appreciation of the Chinese tradition and its insights into the anthropocosmic reality.

Session attendees asked whether Daoism had any impact on Berry and Teilhard, whether Teilhard’s interpretation of Confucianism was accurate, and whether it is appropriate to regard Confucianism as *yang* and Daoism as *yin*. He gave fitting responses to each question, while cautioning against the tendency to essentialize

Chinese religions. She stressed that the Chinese tradition is not static, but a living tradition open to transformation through diverse encounters. Moreover, He expressed the need and her desire to advance the Chinese presence in Catholic thought.

In “Imagining Social Salvation: The Potential Contribution of Utopian Thought,” Thomas Massaro argued that the tradition of utopian thought, of which he cited numerous examples, should not be dismissed by Catholic social teaching. Indeed, utopianism makes a valuable, even irreplaceable contribution to prospects for the very types of social, political and economic reform supported by Catholic social thought. Without surrendering the eschatological reservation of Christian orthodoxy, utopian dreams are capable of shaping our vision of social salvation by challenging the oppressive status quo of neoliberalism and vast inequality. Utopian imaginings of fairness in social participation and economic distribution possess the power to generate constructive regulative norms of human behavior and social institutions.

The paper provoked further questions, to which Massaro gave helpful responses, regarding the value and usefulness of utopian visions in Catholic social teaching and social ethics in general. The relationship between utopian thought and Christian realism was a fruitful topic of discussion, as was speculation regarding the extent and duration of any system of social justice aspiring to perfection in the course of human history. The motif of eschatological reservation featured prominently in the exchanges, as did the role of the imagination in the writings of several popes (Paul VI, John Paul II, and Francis). While yet further questions remained, the likelihood that those in attendance would dismiss the importance of utopian thought for Catholic social thought was surely diminished.

In a manner deeply appreciative yet critical of the Catholic social tradition and its representatives, such as Pope Francis, and within the limits of a single convention session, presenters together with those in attendance advanced what John Courtney Murray called the “growing end” of Catholic social thought and teaching.

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