

MORAL THEOLOGY (I) – TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Kate Ward, Marquette University
 Moderator: Jens Mueller, Notre Dame of Maryland University
 Presenters: Kathleen Bonnette, Georgetown University
 Melicia Antonio, University of Notre Dame

This session consisted of two papers. After each paper, the author took questions about her individual paper. To conclude, those gathered discussed the papers in conversation with each other.

In her paper, “‘Saved Together?’ Questioning Social Soteriology in Light of Systemic Oppression,” Kathleen Bonnette reimagined what it means to be “saved together” the in view of systemic oppressions within the ecclesiastical Church. In instances like Pope Alexander VI’s *Inter Caetera*, the oppression of Indigenous children in Catholic schools, and the contemporary marginalization of the LGBTQ+ community Bonnette identified a common problematic social structure. Bonnette contended that a hierarchical structure rooted in a dualism facilitates these instances of oppression. In her analysis, Bonnette rooted this problematic structure in a misunderstanding of the “kingdom of God” that opposes the social soteriology Jesus describes. To purify our understanding of the kingdom of God, Bonnette proposed a “kin-dom imagination.” A kin-dom imagination rooted in the eternal love of God revealed in the incarnate Christ uniquely emphasizes relationality or interconnected wholeness and humility. The ethical standard in a kin-dom imagination rejects domination and prioritizes the health and flourishing of every body in this interrelated community of life, to foster a social order that is an embodiment of God’s love.

Melicia Antonio considered what lessons a pluralist, democratic society could learn from the end of the Franco–Catholic alliance in her paper titled “Replacing Coercion with a Renewed Moral Authority: Lessons from the Spanish Experience.” Antonio focused her analysis on the leadership and moral authority of Cardinal Tarracón. Emerging from a church–state alliance to a democracy, the Spanish bishops needed to reconsider how they exercised moral authority. Having lost their persuasion in Spanish culture, Tarracón led the bishops to prioritize unity among various groups of Catholics through dialogue that restored trust and accommodated diversity. Tarracón himself modeled this shift in his rejection of authoritarian style governing for proposals and invitations. As Antonio stated, this leadership “opened new paths”: it encouraged the ecclesial responsibility of the laity, independence from political power, and dialogue as a means of evangelization. From the Spanish experience, Antonio concluded effective and virtuous moral authority require audacious prudence. In a post-liberal world, Tarracón provides as model for this audacious prudence that resists both integralism and authoritarianism.

The question-and-answer period gave rise to a generative discussion comparing the two papers and relating both to the conference theme. To Bonnette, conference participants explored where Bonnette located the authority of God, how to advocate for systemic care for others, and the relationship of hierarchy and dualism. To Antonio, conference participants asked about the limitations of considering historical examples to glean wisdom in the present moment and if moral authority without force is possible.

Given the interplay of these papers, the discussion that ensued was generative. Those gathered discussed the relationship between the Church and society and drew conclusions based on the repudiation of the doctrine of discovery and democratization of Spain. From the discussion, the panelists vindicated the importance of kin-dom imagination and audacious prudence in exercising various forms of moral leadership and authority but especially in the context of the Church-society relationship.

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