

MORAL THEOLOGY (II) – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Social Salvation
 Convener: David Kwon, Seattle University
 Moderator: Cathy Melesky Dante, Marquette University
 Presenters: Bridget Burke Ravizza, St. Norbert College
 R. Zachary Karanovich, Mount Mary University

This session of the Moral Theology Topic Session featured two papers provocatively questioning theological understandings of salvation as social in light of exclusionary sinful social practices.

Bridget Burke Ravizza’s paper, “Salvation and the Sacrament of Same-Sex Marriage,” drew on research conducted for her recent book, *The Sacrament of Same-Sex Marriage: An Inclusive Vision for the Catholic Church* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2024.) Building on earlier research on heterosexual married couples conducted with colleague Julie Donovan Massey, Burke Ravizza conducted interviews with twenty-two same-sex couples with meaningful relationships to the Catholic tradition. Responding to the conference theme of social salvation, her paper highlighted “how couples are sacraments *to one another* as well as to their families and communities, as their love overflows in life-giving ways.” She found an image of social salvation in an interviewee’s desire for “wholeness in families,” which the interviewee believed would be a positive outcome of sacramental equality, the recognition of same-sex relationships as sacramental within the Catholic Church. Burke Ravizza joins a host of Catholic and Protestant theologians in calling for such sacramental equality.

A corollary point of Burke Ravizza’s paper was the pastoral, ecclesial and theological necessity of listening to people’s stories. Building on the work of feminist philosopher Miranda Fricker, Burke Ravizza named “epistemic injustice” and “testimonial injustice” as harms done to those whose stories and knowledge are discredited due to bias against aspects of their identity. Such refusal to hear and know also harms the communities who deny such testimony, an insight Burke Ravizza underlined by noting Pope Francis’s stress on dialogue and the synodal process. Hearing the beauty of God’s love as known and experienced in same-sex relationships also means listening to the pain that is caused by magisterial condemnation of such relationships and by the appropriation of this condemnation at the level of parishes and families.

R. Zachary Karanovich’s paper, “Universal Salvation and the Victims of History: Considering Justice, Reconciliation and Forgiveness from the Margins,” wrestled with the problem of hoping for universal salvation while honestly facing the great sinfulness of humanity: “How does one hope for the salvation of those who deny their humanity, assault their dignity, murder their loved ones, or seek the extinction of their community?” Karanovich engaged David Bentley Hart as the representative of the universalist view. For Hart, divine justice always seeks reconciliation and can never strive toward eternal punishment as a goal. The paper’s next section turned to Black theology, where the experience of suffering under unjust social structures led to a realized eschatology which focuses on envisioning God’s justice in history. Karanovich focused on the thought of James Cone, who was not a universalist because

he saw the opportunity for salvation as coming through our work for liberation—or not—in the here and now: God’s justice is “exclusionary justice.”

Karanovich found opportunities to build bridges across the apparent chasm between Hart and Cone, noting that Cone remains open to an eschatology quite different to the present. Furthermore, in not explicitly engaging social structures and the way they may limit agency and therefore complicity, “Cone left room” for a more nuanced understanding of guilt and, Karanovich suggests, damnation. Karanovich concluded with an insight from Nancy Pineda-Madrid, illuminating how the legitimacy of any hope for universal salvation in a world rife with oppression must be paired with an equal commitment to work for social salvation in the here and now. For Karanovich, “social salvation is the bridge” that connects both impulses as both oppressors and the victims of history realize their liberation, their access to God’s salvific desire, is bound up with that of others.

A robust and appreciative discussion followed both papers. Colleagues witnessed to the beauty of the sacramental love present within their own same-sex marriages. These same colleagues and others who spoke on behalf of loved ones affirmed pain related to magisterial dismissal of such relationships. Another frequent theme in engagement with Burke Ravizza’s paper was lessons to be drawn for different-sex relationships, both related to exclusionary experiences (e.g. divorce) or positive experiences of sacramental love. Engagements with Karanovich’s paper included discussion of hell envisioned as purgatory and application to Israel’s attacks on Gaza.

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