

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Social Salvation and Narrative
 Convener: Ish Ruiz, Pacific School of Religion
 Moderator: William A. Clarke, S.J., College of the Holy Cross
 Presenters: Brett Hoover, Loyola-Marymount University
 Benjamin Durham, College of St. Benedict and St. John's University
 (Minnesota)
 John Allen, Duquesne University

In response to a call for papers, the three selected proposals addressed the topic of Social Salvation by focusing on the concept of narrative.

Brett Hoover from Loyola Marymount University presented a paper titled “Stories that Don’t Save: Cultural Narratives of Migration as Operative Soteriologies.” In it, he recounted his interactions with various stories of migration during a student service trip. The stories guided his reflection on which forms of stories form a healthy and unhealthy soteriology. Hoover contrasted the soteriology’s told by the members of migrant communities with those espoused by certain anti-immigrant political rhetoric in the US. The latter “host” communities’ narratives discursively create a reality for migrants whereby their search for a better life automatically stratifies society, placing them as inferior to the host community. While immigrant communities may sometimes be aware of the racist and hegemonic environment into which they are venturing, and still embark on the journey out of need for survival, they nonetheless represent a potential toward liberatory soteriology through narratives grounded in solidarity and community. Hoover encourages theologians to analyze and promote such community-based soteriologies while critically examining and avoiding soteriologies that “don’t save.”

Benjamin Durham of the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University, in his paper titled “Country Heaven: Toward a Rural Aesthetic of Salvation,” offered a theological analysis of the “rural aesthetics” of rural communities in the US, especially in light of right-wing voting patterns presumably influenced by Christian theology. Durham offered an extensive account of his ethnographic research, conducted over two summers in rural Minnesota, to argue that the Christian liturgy has created a transformational response to a rural aesthetic that has yielded a positive sense of solidarity and community among neighbors while slowly disentangling and criticizing some of the problematic racist, heteronormative, patriarchal, and xenophobic hegemony often seen in these rural communities. In the liturgy of rural America, Durham sees the potential for a culturally transformative impact on the rural culture of the US. The result is a narrative account of social salvation that can fuel Christian hope and correct some of the social sins that hinder the flourishing of rural America.

John Allen of Duquesne University presented a paper, titled “Narrating the Sacred: ‘Thin Places’ of Recovery Spirituality and Ethics,” where he described the power of narrative in the journey of addiction recovery. Allen discussed the transformation that occurs in “thin places” (that is, locations where the “higher power” appears closer, clearer, or more accessible to us in the natural world) where the telling and re-telling of one’s recovery journey (particularly through the fifth step of making a fearless moral

inventory of one's life) constitutes a particular identity that speaks to personal salvation. He argues that theologians could pay close attention to the interplay of place and mysticism in the narrative-ridden journey of addiction recovery to learn how such narrative-based approaches can produce liberatory realities for people through an ethical and theological lens. Such an incarnational approach yields new realities and teaches us important lessons.

The ensuing discussion critically examined the role of narrative, aesthetics, and control in the process of social salvation. One participant compared the process of narrative in Hoover's account of migrant narrations to the narrative process in the quest for asylum. She noted that the forced repetition refugees go through as they request asylum reinforces the damaging soteriology whereby one needs to justify their need for "a better life" and repeatedly relive the trauma of their previous community. Another participant reflected on the articulation of aesthetic narratives by pointing out that the challenge to our construction of "beauty" is not the construction of "ugly" but rather the "glamour" that points out to what "ugly" lacks. Finally, another line of questioning discussed how the narrative process that exists in many 12 step communities is restrictive, repetitive, and constraining – and therefore potentially hurtful – to some folks in recovery and that there needs to be more nuance to how we examine and harness the wisdom of this narrative-based approach to flourishing.

ISH RUIZ
Pacific School of Religion
Berkeley, California