

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic:** Conscience and Authority: A Conversation with Anne Patrick's
Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Moral Theology
- Coconveners:** Susan M. St. Ville, University of Notre Dame
Susan M. Simonaitis, Fordham University
- Presenters:** Lisa Cahill, Boston College
Patricia Beattie Jung, Loyola University of Chicago
Jamie Phelps, Catholic Theological Union
- Respondent:** Anne E. Patrick, Carleton College

Each of the presenters used Anne Patrick's book, *Liberating Conscience*, as a springboard for reflecting on the broader topic of "conscience and authority." Lisa Cahill highlighted the context of the book, noting that it spoke particularly to the concerns of the generation of Catholics born before Vatican II. Thus she cited as an important contribution Patrick's construction of a view which frees the conscience from the hold of authoritarian Church structures. In light of the book's institutional and generational context, Cahill raised two challenges. She asked first whether Patrick had adequately addressed the concerns of the post-Vatican II generation. In Cahill's view, the central question facing this group is moral relativism. Rather than a liberation from authoritarian structures, this generation needs a challenging vision of Roman Catholicism that can provide norms for thought and action. Second, Cahill noted that Patrick's book is identifiably Catholic in its continued faith in an objective morality rooted in "the fullness of divine truth." While sympathetic to this vision, Cahill called for a fuller explication of the nature of this truth in light of postmodern challenges to foundational claims.

Patricia Beattie Jung focussed on the topic of authority, outlining three issues relevant to determining the roles of the magisterium and individual believers in ethical decision making. First, Jung argued against granting preemptive authority to the Church, for to do so is ultimately to undermine the Church's hold on the faithful. As Patrick suggests, magisterial teaching stands always in need of interpretation and thus it is important to develop other sources of moral wisdom, such as the conscience, to aid in this task. Second, Jung suggested that, nonetheless, the Church should be granted "presumptive authority." Church teaching should be considered *prima facie* binding even as we anticipate testing it against other resources. Finally, Jung reflected on the deliberative strategies required in moral decision making. While tensions are inevitable, Jung urged us

to work toward establishing a deliberation inclusive of all voices and open ended in its conclusions. Like those postmodern thinkers who value the plurality of perspectives, we should neither expect nor hope to find closure in our moral reflections.

Jamie Phelps considered the ecclesiology and theology implicit in Patrick's text and the implications of these for oppressed groups. She seconded Cahill's observation that the book primarily addressed debates within the Catholic Church. Because of this intraecclesial focus, Phelps claimed, Patrick's ethical analysis could not readily be extended to the global community nor could it be fully engaged in ecumenical dialogue. This limitation is troubling when viewed from the horizon of racial oppression. The sources of racial discrimination extend far beyond the borders of the Catholic Church. Consequently, the ethical dilemmas of this oppression will not be solved until theories attend to these larger contexts.

In response, Patrick acknowledged the Catholic and generationally specific focus of her book but cautioned against too quickly moving past the debates within the Church. She reminded us of the power the institutional Church continues to yield, urging us to take toward the institution a stance of critical and informed consent so that we might direct this power toward a justice encompassing multiple and varied groups.

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