

- Topic: Neglected Themes in Common Good Theory  
Convener: Brian Stiltner, Sacred Heart University  
Presenters: Maria Malkiewicz, University of Notre Dame  
Christopher Steck, Georgetown University  
Brian Stiltner, Sacred Heart University

Public theology examines Christian symbols and traditions in order to chart a public role for the church and to nurture Christians' commitment to political action. Sharing these general tasks, Catholic common good theory can be understood as a form of public theology. Yet common good theory distinctively strives to develop an account of the good and just society that can, in principle, motivate all citizens of a pluralist society to act for its realization. With a view to the public relevance and institutional efficacy of the Christian tradition, Catholic articulations of the common good often return to a pertinent set of theological themes, such as creation, anthropology, and ecclesiology. In contrast, spirituality, eschatology, Christology, and pneumatology are underutilized in common good theory. One plausible explanation is that these elements of the church's understanding of the ultimate good are difficult to share with fellow citizens as intellectual and motivational resources for social action. The presenters in this session took up that difficulty and sought to develop connections between these underdeveloped themes and common good theory.

Maria Malkiewicz argued that common good approaches generally fail to make an adequate distinction between what hope Catholics ought to place *in* the political realm and what hope they ought to have *for* the political realm. The fear driving the collapse of these two kinds of hope is that a too "otherworldly" expectation has led Catholics to be unconcerned with or to disengage from the temporal political realm. Both extremes must be avoided. The primary corrective is to appreciate the distinction between placing our hope in what is unfailling and eternal, namely God, and having hope for the realization of temporal justice, which is clearly implied by faith in God. Maintaining God as the object of hope carries political implications in that it provides an eschatological understanding of human well-being and gives a prophetic edge to hope. Malkiewicz concluded by naming liturgy as an important resource for sustaining hope. By providing an outlet for lament and by making real the vision for which Christians strive, liturgy is a political act.

Brian Stiltner took as his starting point the near consensus of biblical scholars and systematic theologians on a proleptic interpretation of eschatology, which maintains the tension between the "already" and "not yet" dimensions of the Kingdom of God. Relying on Rahnerian hermeneutics, he presented ethical principles and motivations that can be developed from eschatology, such as a Trinitarian understanding of human dignity, a reconciling ethic of solidarity, and love for the earth. These ethical principles and their overarching eschatological motivation contribute to the common good, not only by guiding Christian service to the world but as a resource that can be shared with society. Christians in their political speech might seek to make contact with the eschatological longings in

other persons (though that will not always be appropriate); in their sociopolitical action, Christians should stress cooperation with groups that are receptive to eschatological principles. The Jubilee 2000 movement for debt forgiveness is a positive example of such cooperation.

Christopher Steck explored one aspect of the virtuous person's contribution to the common good: the capacity of her action to transform the moral outlook of those who encounter its goodness. The gift of Christ, which is salvific and morally transformative, is universalized and made available to all people through the work of the Spirit. The Spirit does this by enabling the human eye to perceive Christ in the forms of the world and by awakening in the human heart a love for his work. The life of radical Christian witness is a creaturely form that can be made by the Spirit into a particularly powerful pointer to Christ and thus can become a kind of divine liturgy where the transformative gift of Christ is made present and real for others. This aesthetic reading of the Spirit's work, influenced by von Balthasar, gives a new twist to John Courtney Murray's recognition of the virtuous person's role in public discourse. To move citizens toward the common good, public discourse must not only be rational and civil, but needs to be influenced by a Christian witness that opens up new moral horizons for others.

Lively discussion with the audience led the presenters to explore the similarities and tensions among their views. One comparison of each pairing of the presenters is described here. (1) A questioner asked whether Malkiewicz's position needs a greater use of mediation and if that could be provided by Steck's appeal to the virtuous person. Steck agreed, mentioning Cardinal Bernardin as a public personage whose courageous encounter with death mediated hope into the public forum. Malkiewicz indicated that mediation is warranted since there is no absolute distinction between the temporal and supernatural orders. (2) Another questioner brought out the apparent contrast between Malkiewicz's caution against placing hope in politics and Stiltner's embrace of historical utopias. Malkiewicz and Stiltner thought their views were not disparate, since Malkiewicz supports vibrant political engagement and Stiltner commends the occasional appropriateness of "eschatological reserve." (3) Steck and Stiltner both see Christian hope influencing public debates: for Steck, the moral life of Christians is a sort of liturgy for the world; for Stiltner, Christians should employ eschatology as an intellectual resource in public discourse. These approaches are complementary, though the former stresses the performative, the latter the discursive, aspect of Christian political engagement. The question will continue to be pressed as to how Catholic common good theory can best hold these two aspects together.

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