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DEVELOPING GROUPS

CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY THEORY

Topic: Theology, Postmodernity and Contemporary Theory
Conveners: Vincent J. Miller, Georgetown University
Michele Saracino, Manhattan College
Presenters: Anthony J. Godzieba, Villanova University
Laurence Paul Hemming, Heythrop College, University of London
Respondent: Lieven Boeve, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

The level and breadth of discussion of this group at the 2003 meeting in Cincinnati exceeded all expectations. What began with Anthony Godzieba's call for Catholic theologians to think through the body, then moved to Laurence Hemming's scathing argument that Catholic theology has lost its sense of faith to its preoccupation with certain philosophical queries, culminated in Lieven Boeve's constructive theological insights on the importance of contexualization for theology.

To begin, in his paper, "Incarnation, Theory, and Catholic Bodies: What Should Post-Postmodern Catholic Theology Look Like?" Godzieba argued that "mainstream" *aggiornamento* Catholic theology is in trouble—on the verge of being overshadowed by certain contemporary rivals (the von Balthasar school, Radical Orthodoxy, and Derridean-influenced continental philosophy of religion)—and indicated reasons for this (e.g., the charge that theology has supposedly sold out to modernity; its puzzling failure to enter into the post-modern debates over "religion" and "the experience of God"). He then pointed to certain shared presuppositions which presently render the three rival methods attractive to many Christians: a negative evaluation of modernity; a fundamental antihumanism; and (especially in continental philosophy of religion) the emphasis on negative theology as the only valid approach to the experience of God. This latter presupposition, which privileges the undecidable character of "transcendence," reduces the particularity of divine revelation and of a religious tradition to instances of illegitimate closure. This poses a serious challenge to Catholic theology and its essential commitments to incarnation (the particularity of God's revelation in Christ) and sacramentality.

In response to this challenge, Godzieba argued for a renewed and refocused emphasis on the fundamental logic of Catholic belief, namely its commitment to the "outrage" of the historical particularity of God's revelation in Christ, to Catholicism's "sacramental imagination." He suggested that theology should

"think by means of the body," employing sociologist Bryan Turner's theory to underscore the physical vulnerability and ontological frailty of humanity. A positive starting point for articulating the meaningful particularity of bodily experience, including a sense of social solidarity and a universal theory of human rights, Turner's way of "thinking otherwise" about the body parallels the Catholic sacramental imagination's recognition of corporeality as the mediating condition for the human experience of the infinite and salvific love of God. The incarnation of God in Christ confirms the revelatory significance of this vulnerable mediation. In regard to future theology, Godzieba concluded with what he called a "modest manifesto," inciting Catholic theologians to exercise Catholicism's properly sacramental imagination and faith in the "outrageousness" of the incarnation in order to make the postmodern conversation about religion more *theologically* responsible.

Struggling against similar currents as Godzieba, most obviously those tied to Radical Orthodoxy, Hemming, in a paper entitled, "What Catholic Theologians Have to Learn from Radical Orthodoxy: What Radical Orthodoxy Has to Learn from Catholic Theology," moved the group in a different direction, questioning the role of philosophy in what he calls "the business of believing." By capitulating to the growing tide that rationalizes what is most sacred, the faith relationship, Hemming claimed: "We have got ourselves into a mess in Catholic theology." Rationalization takes a number of forms, ranging from the liberal agenda of assimilating the revelatory affect of scripture through an excessive use of scientific method to the move of those in the camp of what Hemming labels the "so-called *Radically Orthodox*" to promote the system of theo-ontology through analogy.

Muddling through the mess of current state of Catholic theology, Hemming posed a controversial and leading question: "[I]n the use of the word 'tradition' we have to ask has this been handed over to me, or am I to be delivered to it?" In response, Hemming spent the majority of his paper grappling with various medieval and contemporary thinkers, including Aquinas, Cajetan, Lotz, and Ward, regarding the notions of analogy and proportionality in order to prove that an intelligible, ontological proportion between Godly being and creaturely being is impossible. This poses implications for how one conceives of relating to God, as well as to other Christians and other others. Arguably, distinguishing theology from philosophy, Hemming fostered a performative and prophetic sense of living faith—ideas wedded to postmodernity.

Before responding to Godzieba and Hemming, Boeve made a general statement related to the need for theologians to become more rigorous in contextualizing theory with everyday practice. He intuited that Godzieba has already broached this challenge in emphasizing thinking through the body as a particular means to one's context, thereby negotiating a connection between the believer and the world. He wondered, however, how Godzieba's incarnational approach is open to particular faith narratives. On the other hand, Hemming's

argument that only the believer can know the relation between God and being is indicative of his respect for a certain sense of contexualization. Nevertheless, even as Boeve acknowledged Hemming's intricate analysis of the difference between theology and philosophy, he pushed Hemming on "the precise relationship between the two." Boeve answered his own question through an analysis of Hent de Vries' and John Caputo's interpretations of deconstruction as method (reason) and prayer (faith), respectively. It is as if in the fecund space between method (reason and philosophy) and prayer (faith and theology) that the particular, contexualized space that Boeve desires emerges. His response was followed by a public discussion, a "buzz" that remained for the entire convention.

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THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

Topic: The Vocation of Theologians in Response to Ecological Degradation
Convener: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University
Presenters: William French, Loyola University of Chicago
Elizabeth Johnson, Fordham University
Kevin Irwin, The Catholic University of America

Moral theologian William French launched the panel of theologians representing different specializations who had been asked to focus on (1) the circumstances that prompted their theological research, writing and teaching on ecological degradation, (2) the most effective responses they have generated thus far, and (3) future compelling research on their horizons. The intrusion of a nuclear weapons facility near his grandfather's otherwise serene farm initiated French's early childhood awareness of threats to the environment. Later observations of conservation practices in Italy that contrasted with the wastefulness of Americans and the escalating growth in the rate of a consumptive population stimulated his concern for other species and ecological systems. Among his most effective theological responses have been deconstructing the postmodern anthropocentric claims over ecological systems and reconstructing theology to consider humans within ecological systems, placing environmental concerns within strategic national concerns so the health and well being of future generations are factored into national strategic policy, and advancing the debate about natural law to a more physically inclusive understanding of natural law. In the future, French plans to expand natural law thinking to consider "laws" about human reproduction and biospheric sustainability. If we broaden our vision to consider the