

CONVERSATION AND CONVERSION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE—
SELECTED SESSION

Topic: “Conversation and Conversion in the Public Sphere”

Convener: Amanda C. Osheim, Loras College
Moderator: John Edwards, Villanova University
Presenters: Stephen Okey, Boston College
Nichole M. Flores, Boston College

In “Conversation Ain’t Beanbag: The Promise and Peril of Conversion in David Tracy’s Public Theology,” Stephen Okey notes the transformative potential of public discourse and argues for a more complex approach to both conversation and conversion. Employing David Tracy’s thought on the public nature of theology, Okey finds that dialogue within the academy, church, and society may entail conversion, as entering into conversation involves letting one’s self go in search of the truths that may be discovered via discourse with the genuine “other.”

Okey notes Tracy’s identification of two conversation interruptions: the plurality of languages and histories that shape conversation partners in ways that resist uniform interpretation, and the ambiguity that imbues all conversations due to manifold inadequate and/or morally flawed interpretations. While these interruptions are significant, Okey finds that assuming the good faith of conversation partners may ignore problems: conversation is not truly desired where openness to transformation via dialogue is not manifest; one party may wish to engage in dialogue that has the potential for mutual transformation while the other manipulates the conversation in order engineer a unilateral transformation; and dominant groups either intentionally or ignorantly deny the other’s contributions to the conversation.

Okey is also concerned with negative aspects of conversion via conversation. First, he draws insights from Rebecca Chopp’s criticism of self-abandonment within conversation. Chopp believes letting go of identity allows an abstract, idealized other to become normative in such a way that the embodied and particular identities of the conversation partners are denied. Second, though the theological lens generally perceives conversion as movement towards the good, the potential also exists for conversion to lead to conversion toward the false, such as indoctrination into a supremacist group.

Okey proposes that suspicion sheds light both on the ways conversation is circumvented and the potential for conversions away from embodied identity and truth. Through suspicion, conversation partners recognize both their own ambiguity and that of the other; this critical appraisal leads to a more authentic engagement with the complexity of both self and other. Okey concludes that openness to conversation and suspicion are not mutually exclusive but may rather allow for greater engagement in public discourse as well as deeper, mutual conversion.

Nichole M. Flores, in “Guadalupe in the Public Square: Religious Affections and Aesthetics in Public Conversation,” describes Latino/a participation in public discourse for justice as necessary, though limited and threatened. In Martha Nussbaum’s analysis of aesthetics and justice, Flores finds insight for describing La Virgen de Guadalupe’s function as a symbol for public, ethical discourse as well as

theoretical limitations that preclude Guadalupe's participation in public dialogue due to the symbol's mysticism and transcendence. Nussbaum designates genres such as novels, films, and poetry as aesthetic media that are potential catalysts for conversation. In particular, their narrative quality communicates the context of daily life in which the need for ethical reflection arises, which Flores links to Latino/a theologians' concerns for *lo cotidiano*.

While approving many of Nussbaum's contributions, Flores finds her identification of morally serious genres too narrow. By focusing on literary aesthetics, Nussbaum excludes the value of symbols from the general citizenry in promoting public discourse —particularly those symbols belonging to citizens who are marginalized by unjust power structures. While Nussbaum separates personal emotion from public moral discourse in order to remove the danger of self-interest, for Flores justice requires that the self-interests of the marginalized be included in public discourse. Further, failure to consider religious symbols and their accompanying narratives as potentially morally serious media creates an untenable disconnect between the rich tradition of Latino/a religious symbols and the activism those symbols inspire in the public square.

Flores proposes that devotion to La Virgen de Guadalupe depicts the need for a more expansive view of the media that allow for public, ethical discourse. By examining the role Guadalupe played as a symbol for the United Farm Workers and Guadalupe's continued use in community organizing, Flores demonstrates that popular religious aesthetics encourages and inspires marginalized groups to advocate for common ethical reflection leading to justice in the public sphere.

The strong, interactive discussion following the presentations included the public versus private nature of critical self-reflection by marginalized groups seeking justice; the potential transformation and even loss of "classics" such as Guadalupe as their narratives are interpreted in conversations that are disconnected from an originating context; and the positive role suspicion may play in public discourse as a preventative for either demonization of the other or valorization of the self.

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