

CREATION/ESCHATOLOGY—Topic Session

- Convener: John R. Sachs, S.J., Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Moderator: Ernesto Valiente, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Presenters: Joseph Drexler-Dreis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Todd Walatka, University of Notre Dame

In his paper, “Nat Turner’s Rebellion: Conversion Outside Normative Christian Frameworks,” Joseph Drexler-Dreis took up the complex case of Nat Turner, seeing in it an instance of conversion away from the white evangelical Protestantism of 19th century Virginia to the religion of the slaves, with its deep apocalyptic sensibility for the connection between divine salvation and earthly liberation. Turning away from the “normative” Christianity of the slave owners toward the Christianity of the slave community, Turner found God in a profoundly, even disturbing, new way. He professed he was inspired by the Spirit to lead a violent rebellion in which he and some sixty to eighty slaves killed almost sixty slave masters and their families. When asked whether other rebellions were likely to follow, he expressed confidence that the same kind of heavenly promptings would move others to similar actions. Drexler-Dreis noted that Turner saw his own conversion, and the rebellion it entailed, as a turning to the biblical God who then, as long ago, brings salvation and liberation. It was part of a universal eschatological vision being actualized in the resistance of the slaves to their oppression. Turner met the living God on the borders, at the margins, not in the mainstream.

In dialogue with the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, Drexler-Dreis then sketched out an approach to a deeper understanding of the search for God and the conversion it entails. He highlighted three aspects of her thought. First, the living God of the Bible is the Queer God who is revealed in the stranger, in indecent spaces and relationships; therefore, conversion entails a turn from ideology and mainstream norms to excluded peoples. Second, conversion therefore demands a recognition and privileging of new theological loci, holy ground where “Queer holiness” may be found—at the gate, where people have been denied a ground to stand on. Third, conversion demands on-going vigilance to prevent its “straightening” or “colonizing” reabsorption into the mainstream. To be faithful to God’s self-revelation, Turner could not turn toward the God presented in the institutional church, for that would have been a betrayal to the God who had encountered him historically in his own slave community.

Drexler-Dreis closed with a reflection on the significance of Nat Turner for liberationist theologies, which also draw on biblical, eschatological perspectives that announce and demand a profound reversal of valuation while privileging marginalized people as a place of divine revelation.

In “Eschatology Reframed: Kathryn Tanner’s Turn to History and away from the Future,” Todd Walatka brought Tanner (*Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*) into dialogue with Karl Rahner, presenting eschatological hope more clearly as a hope for the past, especially for the victims, those who have been lost and forgotten. He began by noting four central principles in Tanner’s work broadly shared by other theologians: (1) eschatology involves belief and imagination; (2) theology as a whole

is eschatological; (3) eschatology is political theology; and (4) eschatology is universal in scope. He then noted two other features of Tanner's approach: (1) it reckons with the likelihood of the final death and supposed failure of our solar system and the universe; and (2) it highlights the essential unity of the personal, social, and cosmic dimensions of eschatological consummation.

In the first part of his presentation, Walatka showed how Tanner reframes eschatology, focusing not on the future improvement of this world or on how we might imagine the next, but on our new life in Christ and the new relationship of creation to God as consummation. Christian hope is not centered on the world of the future but on the world as a whole, which in Christ includes past, present, and future. The eschatological vision of faith is more spatial than temporal, in the sense that what we see as the space of our lives is the new and eternal life we have even now in Christ.

In the second section, he drew on some insights of Rahner that fit well with Tanner and can deepen and correct Tanner's approach in significant ways. Central is Rahner's insistence that the heaven we hope for is neither a mere state nor another place. Our hope is for this cosmos, God's creation, radically transformed. This entails a true consummation of history, not an endless prolongation of empirical time. Like the individual person, the creation as a whole must pass through death into this final consummation.

In the final section, Walatka showed how Tanner's relativization of the future (betterment) of the world does not undercut a demand to improve it. For Tanner, the motivation for active response to suffering and injustice does not come from hope in progress but from the obligation to be merciful that God's gift of new life calls forth in the believer. New life in Christ is participation in Christ's mission, as both gift and unconditional demand.

The discussion following the presentations concerned Althaus-Reid's critical engagement with other liberation theologies, Turner's turn to violence as part of his personal conversion and social transformation, and the role of the Spirit in an eschatology inspired by Tanner and Rahner.

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