

DISCOURSE, DIALOGUE, AND SPIRITUALITY

Topic: Discourse, Dialogue, and Discovery
 in the Academic Study of Christian Spirituality
 Convener: Francis X. McAloon, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
 Presenters: Mary Rose Bumpus, Seattle University
 Francis X. McAloon, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
 Thomas McElligott, St. Mary's College of California
 Ray Maria McNamara, University of Portland

Mary Rose Bumpus began the presentations by locating the four member panel within the academic discipline of Christian spirituality and by defining the term "interdisciplinary." Acknowledging the ground breaking work of significant scholars within the discipline, the panel affirmed that the object of study of the academic discipline of spirituality is "the lived experience of the faith." They then suggested that an anthropological perspective and a hermeneutical approach provide particularly efficacious ways of investigating the lived experience of the faith.

Panelists agreed that contemporary studies in Christian spirituality often require interdisciplinary research, i.e., research that makes use of two or more academic disciplines that are ordinarily considered *distinct* for the purpose of investigating an object of study that is multifaceted. They acknowledged that the use of distinct disciplines allows for the integration of knowledge from different fields of study, for one discipline to shed light on the questions of another discipline, and for the critique of assumed knowledge by one discipline on the part of another.

Bumpus then described a specific interdisciplinary research project of her own that focused on Luke 10:38-42, "Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary." She raised two questions: What is the faith experience manifested in and advocated by this text? Does this text have the potential to be transformative of its readers in the direction of resurrection life and freedom? Utilizing Mieke Bal's theory of narratology, Umberto Eco's Model Reader, and Austin's Speech Act Theory, Bumpus described and analyzed the faith experience depicted in the text. She then demonstrated how this text might function in a transformative and liberating way in the community of faith. She concluded that a narrative analysis of the text highlights the lived experience of the faith in ways that solely historical-critical readings do not do.

The second presenter, Francis X. McAloon, focused upon the interdisciplinary nexus between Christian spirituality and postmodern literary critical strategies for the interpretation of poetic texts. When interpreting Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry, for example, McAloon argued that the literary theory tagged "new historicism" richly contributes to the critical existential interpretation of nonbiblical poetry. Among other emphases, new historicist approaches acknowledge and celebrate the historical-cultural embeddedness of all texts. There is an ever-present, dynamic, unpredictable, and sometimes disturbing negotiation and exchange of social energy within literary texts. More than simply windows into the past, poems also (potentially) serve as resonate sites for the expression and experience of

transcendence. To illustrate a new historicist contribution to the Christian spiritual interpretation of poetry, McAloon argued that Hopkins's sonnet "To seem the stranger" enacts the human experience of self, social, and sacral displacement—the narrative of the wrong man, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Hopkins's poem enacts a process of (1) remembering personal loss, (2) reexamining spiritual desolation, and (3) reconstructing social alienation. When it comes to Hopkins's sonnets of despair, McAloon concluded, new historicist literary criticism both welcomes and challenges Christian spirituality, first, inviting us to play with various postmodern strategies for the interpretation of texts, and second, challenging us to occasionally transgress boundaries of theological and Christian spiritual theories of (redemptive) displacement.

A third presentation offered by Ray Maria McNamara illustrated the importance of a dialogue between Christian ecological spirituality and environmental philosophy. Concerned with a tendency in ecospirituality literature to romanticize the natural world, McNamara explored questions of beauty, wilderness, value, and interdependence as a means of illustrating how environmental philosophy offers the kinds of questions and methods that ground an understanding of the natural world in a way that supports scientific observations as well as the lived experiences of human persons. As an interdisciplinary field of study, environmental philosophy contributes numerous dialogue partners to the study of religious experience, for example, sociology and the natural sciences. In addition, the works of environmental philosophers such as Carolyn Merchant stress that a necessary element in dealing with ecological concerns is the need to listen to nature through direct hands-on experience, as well as through the expertise of scholars. McNamara suggested that this attentive stance toward nature is essential to a Christian ecological spirituality. She further noted that scholars in the academic discipline of Christian Spirituality would likely appreciate environmental philosophy's call to listen attentively to the natural world, herein encountering an essential component of the Christian life, that is, a contemplative stance towards all of life, enabling human persons to glimpse the God who is transcendent to, yet immanently present in, creation.

The final presenter, Thomas McElligott, addressed the question of the relationship between the arts and architecture spirituality, with a focus upon defining places and spaces that are sacred. Using the architectural theory of Christopher Alexander, McElligott offered a way of understanding how any space or place is or can become "sacred" according to the wholeness that one finds there. Christian spirituality has long identified certain places and spaces as sacred, and Christopher Alexander gives to the discipline of spirituality one specific approach to space that does not rely on earlier, more "psychological," ways of identifying these spaces.

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