

THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE

Topic: The Im/Possibility of Dialogue
Convener: Susan Abraham, St. Bonaventure University
Moderator: Linh Hoang, Siena College
Presenters: Tom Beaudoin, Santa Clara University
 Jeannine Hill-Fletcher, Fordham University
 Michele Saracino, Manhattan College

This session explored how dialogue is possible or not in current theological writings, reflections, and practices. The three presenters anticipated the possibility of dialogue well before the session started by posting longer versions of their papers online.

Tom Beaudoin presented the “The Incitement to Dialogue.” He sees dialogue as a theological practice located in a post-Vatican II progressive sensibility often associated with a hermeneutical mentality that must operate in a secular world in which theology now finds itself. Dialogue has a location and function in the space of modern theology and the history of Western Christianity. It is also important to explore the historical and conceptual conditions for the invitation of theology to dialogue with its “other.” Considering Michel Foucault’s notion of “Christianization,” as an alternative to theories of secularization, helps to make possible such a critical theological perspective on theological dialogue with nontheological sources. Beaudoin draws especially on Foucault’s understandings of the powers of Christianity to shape Western experience in order to raise the question of whether Christian dialogue with non-Christian sources can be veiled forms of Christian dialogue with Christian ancestors—dialogue becomes a subtle form of Christian monologue.

Jeannine Hill-Fletcher presented the paper “Possibilities in the Impossible: Building on George Lindbeck’s Rejection of Interfaith Dialogue.” She states that the writings of liberal theology often too easily assert a universality that erases particularity as the basis for dialogue. George Lindbeck’s postliberal theology reminds us of the real difficulties of understanding across difference. She examined Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory of religions as a way of affirming the lived challenges to dialogue. Yet, Lindbeck sees difference as a roadblock to dialogue and does not see theological possibilities in incommensurability. She argues that the embrace of the disorienting reality of difference in dialogue can renew a posture of theological wonder.

Michele Saracino presented “Dialogue as Violence?: Thinking Through the Limits of Conversation.” Michele explores what she calls the “affective aftershocks” of dialogue of all kinds. She starts by illustrating the positive and negative effects of theology’s dialogue with poststructuralist theory and psychology. For Saracino, such dialogue is helpful in that it enables the theologian “to construct new ways to explore traditional religious themes—to meet the sign of the times.” At the same time, this sort of interdisciplinary conversation is dangerous in that it could

result in intellectual dishonesty or misappropriation. Ultimately, employing the thought of Jean-François Lyotard as well as contemporary film analysis, Saracino wonders if dialogue is doomed to end in violence.

After each presenter gave a shortened version of their paper, they briefly discussed issues that were raised. This was followed by a lively exchange with the large number of attendees showing the complexity of the im/possibility of dialogue.

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