

THE COMPLEXITY OF DIALOGUE

- Topic: Panel Discussion of Terrence W. Tilley's *History, Theology, and Faith: Dissolving the Modern Problematic*
- Convener: Thomas Ryan, St. Thomas University
- Moderator: Thomas Ryan, St. Thomas University
- Panelists: Mary C. Boys, Union Theological Seminary
Lynn Bridgers, St. Thomas University
Bradford Hinze, Fordham University
- Respondent: Terrence Tilley, University of Dayton

In his presentation (and book), Tilley distinguished between tradition's constitutive principles—whose abandonment would lead to tradition's rejection—and their formulation. The responsibility of historians is to articulate evidence-based claims. Their work may challenge religious formulations and practices; however, the role of historians as such is not to undermine or support beliefs' fundamental principles. The theologian's task is to respond to history's challenges and perhaps to reformulate or, as Tilley writes, "to creatively adapt, strongly misread, or reinvent the traditions so the old creeds can continue to live in new worlds" (66). Tilley argues for a complex account of the history-theology relationship. Theologians "should not try to solve the 'problem of history'" but should, instead, "dissolve" it by recognizing the multiplicity of relationships among "the practices of history, theology, and faith" (3).

Lynn Bridgers praised the rich interdisciplinary conversations that Tilley promotes and, in that light, called particular attention to private, emotionalized religious experience. Our gendered assumptions tend to privilege the social over the individual in religious experience. She made the related case that exoteric practices tend to be emphasized at the expense of the esoteric. Relating esotericism to divine immanence, she stated that it is only through the adoption of an immanent God that "the bodies of those relegated to the scrapheap of history can declare their own bodies the houses of the holy."

Likewise, Mary Boys suggested that the work of Sandra Schneiders—particularly the categories of actual, historical, proclaimed, and textual Jesus—might add texture to Tilley's reflections on history and biblical interpretation. She then linked his book to her work by pointing out the pastoral benefits of more historically sophisticated approaches to Scripture in preaching; Catholics would thereby be less likely to maintain antisemitic and supercessionist positions. She concluded in terms of Tilley's principle/formulation language by arguing that such stances towards Jews and Judaism are not, hopefully, constitutive of Catholic faith. Therefore, theologians need to refashion formulations of Catholic principles to reject Christianity's sad history in this regard.

Brad Hinze wondered whether richer, more diverse conversation is always necessary. Sometimes all that's needed is "good old-fashioned historical critical work," for example, in response to the problems contained in *The Passion of the*

Christ and The Da Vinci Code. Hinze also cautioned against too sharply specifying roles in the Church. Based on his own work on dialogical practices before and after Vatican II, he is convinced of the importance of “collective discernment and decision making through dialogue. . . . It is not simply a matter of figuring out the differentiation of roles and their respective ethics and requirements—as important as that is; it is equally important to talk about the collaboration and interdependent work of bishops, theologians, and all the faithful—calling forth everyone’s participation as historical agents and holding everyone accountable in the process.”

The session concluded with lively discussion. Comments included a response to the phrase “History will tell.” No, history does not speak. It is historians who select texts and construct historical narratives; it is they, not history, who “will tell.” The point, in slightly more polite language, was, “Don’t anger historians.” A similar distinction was drawn between historical and historic. The former refers to things that have occurred in history. Besides being historical, something historic has also been deemed worth saving. Conversation drew to a close with Tilley’s reflections on his experience of the Alamo, which stood a short distance from the session. At the intersection of the U.S.A. and Mexico, of mission and fort, of faith and patriotism, the Alamo provides valuable resources for historical-theological reflection.

Tilley himself concluded by thanking the panelists for their careful readings. He also responded to some of the questions raised, but he allotted most of his time to a challenge: “So dear friends . . . , what should we do?” What are we to do in light of Catholicism’s centuries of misogyny, anti-Judaism, and recurrent plagues of corruption? Surely, these are not constitutive; they do not represent faith’s principles. If they do, that is, if the distortions and the practices they underwrite are constitutive of Catholicism, then “we must abandon it as irredeemable.” If, or better, since they do not, then we need to articulate formulations more closely aligned with faith’s basic principles. We must “work to change the tradition, to reinvent it.”

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