

## THEOLOGY AND THE ARTS

Topic: Theology in Dialogue with the Arts  
Moderator: Susan A. Ross, Loyola University Chicago  
Convenor: Susan A. Ross, Loyola University Chicago  
Presenters: Russell Connors, College of St. Catherine  
Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, College of St. Catherine  
Leo J. O'Donovan, Georgetown University

This session was designed to include presenters on the arts in three forms: music, literature, and the visual arts. The presenters were asked to consider the imagination as a common ground for the meeting of beauty and justice. Susan Ross began the session by discussing her ideas in proposing the session, and the way that she had used the arts in her undergraduate courses. She described one particular incident where her students considered different portrayals of female crucified women, including Edwina Sandys's famous sculpture, and the lively class dynamics that followed.

Russell Connors began by speaking of mystery and diversity in music and also noted the directions he would not be taking. Connors then played J. S. Bach's "Air on a G String" first using a chamber orchestra that conveyed a sense of mystery and the numinous. Connors suggested that this piece can help one "name towards God;" that music can help students to "get" how God is named in different ways. Connors then played seven different renditions of the piece, ranging from one using "original" instruments, to different instrumental arrangements such as flute and guitar, and concluded with a jazz/rock version. The purpose of this presentation was not only to allow for different interpretations but, in fact, to show that not just any version will do. In music, there is openness to diverse interpretations but there are also "outer limits" to them. The real classics not only allow for but cry out for different interpretations. Connors suggested that this shows that we can "get it wrong" in these variations, that God can be named in both appropriate and inappropriate ways.

Colleen Carpenter Cullinan entitled her presentation "Beauty, Terror, and Truth: Reading Others' Stories," and explored what she called a "multipolar anthropology," showing how one human nature is instantiated in multiple ways. She shared her own experience of moving to a rural town in Minnesota and becoming acquainted with regional authors, such as Ole Rolvaag. Rolvaag's novels describe the lives of immigrants in the nineteenth century, particularly the experiences of women living on the edge of the prairie. Cullinan noted how she learned that insane asylums in the Midwest in the nineteenth century were largely populated by women, who lived an entirely different life than Cullinan knew and who also raised new and unfamiliar questions. The prairie, she commented, was like the sea, yet there are no waves, no sound, and this led her to the idea that "life must have something to hide behind." Listening to other peoples' stories can be a learning experience, although the listener needs to be aware that her assumptions can be

incorrect. White theologians listening to the stories of minority writers need to be aware of the risks of appropriation, usurpation and possession; bearing witness is not possession.

Leo O'Donovan focused on visual arts and architecture in his presentation. He noted that he was particularly attracted to twentieth-century artists. Among the many examples that he described were Mark Rothko's work in Washington, D.C., and Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross. Rothko's work, *Rectangles in a Small Room*, suggests a place to go to, like a church. Newman's Stations of the Cross, inspired by Gruenewald, show (in Arthur Danto's terms) how utter abstractness can convey a religious narrative of human endurance in the face of terrible suffering. Turning to architecture, O'Donovan described how Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial enables the perceiver to become part of the monument itself, how the viewer "goes down into the earth" with the monument. He then discussed the Sagrada Familia in Spain, the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, in Washington, D.C. (a "sorry image of U.S. architecture"), the Matisse Chapel in Vence, France, Breuer's chapel at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, and the new cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles.

A lively discussion followed these three very different but equally provocative presentations. The first question dealt with the idea of familiarity and unfamiliarity: whether the most familiar music (to this questioner, the *Air on a G String*) could convey the mysterious. In the discussion that followed, the presenters and audience commented on how one could find oneself in the unfamiliar, and how peaceful music can convey a sense of grandeur. Another questioner raised the idea of the celebratory character of art, such as the "Cloud Gate" sculpture in Chicago's Millennium Park. O'Donovan suggested that the goals of the arts are diverse ones, but that a key question is whether art takes one out of oneself and in communication with something new. We need to be taught to see beauty, he observed. Other questions and comments dealt with art and liturgy and how the arts can be helpful in the classroom.

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