

CREATION AND ESCHATOLOGY

Topic: Impasse in Creation and Eschatology
 Convener: Natalie Weaver, Ursuline College
 Presenter: Christopher D. Denny, St. John's University, New York

Christopher Denny's presentation, entitled "All Will Be Well: Julian of Norwich's Counter-Apocalyptic Revelations," offered a provocative and fruitful comparison of the eschatologies of Julian of Norwich and Catherine Keller. Denny began his talk by announcing his intention to act as an "ungracious guest" as a presenter by refusing to adhere to the expected categories of discourse within the field, and instead to question the very legitimacy of the theological subfields of "creation" and "eschatology." However, he did point out that this move was prompted at least in part by the theme of the conference and the call for papers written by the Creation and Eschatology team: both of these led him to his investigation of Keller and Julian as thinkers whose own struggles with the impasses of eschatology in their respective historical situations might indeed help us find our way around or through the impasse facing theologians today wrestling with the categories of creation and eschatology. Given that we have discovered all too well the "limitations and the debilitating socio-religious consequences of our cherished assumptions regarding the alpha and the omega points of history," we are truly in the type of impasse described so eloquently by Constance FitzGerald.

To address this impasse, Denny turned first to the work of Catherine Keller, a process theologian whose books, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (1996) and *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2002), both set out a feminist and process argument that the traditional Christian categories of creation and eschatology have had enormously destructive consequences for our social, political, sexual and ecological lives through the centuries. Today, Keller argues, our culture is so saturated with apocalyptic worldviews that we cannot escape them. Denny describes the four types of apocalyptic rhetoric examined by Keller: retroapocalypses, cryptoapocalypses, antiapocalypses, and neoapocalypses. Keller argues that the "apocalyptic script" is so engrained in our ways of thinking that it is not enough to counter one (destructive, dualistic) apocalyptic narrative with another (more hopeful, progressive) one: instead, we need to engage in "counter-apocalyptic," a postmodern interruption of apocalypse. Here she turns from eschatology to pneumatology, and advocates for an embrace not just of the Spirit who hovered over the primordial watery chaos, but of that chaos itself. Dominating the chaos is not the answer; embracing its possibilities for relationality is.

After detailing Keller's argument with eloquence and generosity, Denny pointed out that it is, in the end, difficult to refute her on her own grounds. "Simply to appeal to the authority of the biblical text or to that of tradition is to speak past her, and to provide another example of what Keller condemns as logocentrism, preferring *logos* to *pneuma*, certainty to creativity, and power to freedom," he said. Keller is arguing for "freedom, spontaneity, worldly creativity, and mutual-

ity,” and Denny points out that critics of Keller’s position need to either concede that ground to her, or find ways that traditional eschatologies, too, can embrace these values. Here is where he turned to Julian of Norwich, arguing that in Julian’s own struggles with orthodox eschatology, we can find a way through this apocalyptic impasse.

Julian, Denny reminded us, “faced an impasse as she struggled to reconcile two conflicting sources of revelation: the traditional apocalyptic claim of the church that some human beings were damned, and her own revelatory experience that ‘all would be well.’” In order to understand why she never abandoned orthodoxy despite this impasse, Denny demonstrated that for Julian, the love and vulnerability of God trumped all. Julian’s eschatology was not (as for Keller) a foundational narrative; rather, for her, eschatology was grounded in a trinitarian and christological understanding of “com-Passion centered grace.”

Denny conceded that a Passion-centered spirituality like Julian’s could be said to “foster masochism and passivity,” but argued that Keller’s position, too, carried risks of its own—specifically, the risk that an embrace of chaos and uncertainty could serve to block liberating social changes. Thus, we need to seek a balance between the two: “Such a balance between our power and powerlessness will not remove the impasses we will face in the future, but it does allow us to offer it up in a loving trust that mirrors the balance of power and vulnerability revealed to Julian in her vision of Christ’s kenotic love.”

A lively discussion followed Denny’s presentation. We began with a consideration of three questions that Denny himself provided us in a handout: Is there a theological impasse between divine providence and creaturely freedom and spontaneity? Does traditional Christian eschatology induce apathy and fatalistic resignation towards this world’s shortcomings? Can the apocalyptic narratives be retrieved for constructive theology in a post-Enlightenment age?

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