

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

- Topic: Bridging Material and Non-Material Aspects of Personhood
 Convener: Erin Lothes Biviano, Columbia University Earth Institute
 Moderator: Michele Saracino, Manhattan College
 Presenters: Colleen M. Griffith, Boston College
 Heidi Russell, Loyola University Chicago
 Nadia Delicata, Regis College

Our session explored the material and non-material aspects of personhood at the intersection of theology and the sciences. The presenters each examined ways to move a theological understanding of the relationship of body and spirit beyond the traditional impasse of hierarchical dualism and the modern threat of biological reductionism or “virtual” disembodiment. A lively discussion afterwards highlighted the implications of these theories for a theology of resurrection and Christian hope, the body and identity, and relationality and ecology.

Colleen M. Griffith presented a paper entitled “Beyond the Impasse between Humanity and Earth: A More Adequate Theology of Bodiliness.” Post-modern philosophers and feminist theorists have rendered a strong service in demonstrating how bodies are socio-culturally constituted. Some have concluded that the body is entirely a social construct. Griffith argued that we cannot afford to reduce bodiliness to a socio-cultural phenomenon alone. Such reductionism, ironically, advances the same kind of anthropocentrism and separation from the created order that the historical Christian hierarchical ordering of body and soul advanced. Rather than extend the traditional hierarchical relationship of soul to body, Griffith proposed relating human bodiliness primarily to the earth, emphasizing human embeddedness in the world, and offering a more adequate foundation for an ecological ethic. Such a theology of the body begins with a fuller grasp of the dynamic “givenness” of the body as *vital organism*. This approach, while avoiding the pitfalls of identifying “givenness” with fixity or essentialism, stresses the vital changeability and interdependence of the body in its lively relationship with the created order.

Heidi Russell’s paper, “Quantum Analogy: Rethinking the Human Person as Spirit/Body,” explored ways past the impasse of reductionism and dualism in representing the relationship between spirit and matter. Neuroscience challenges the traditional view that the intellect and will are immortal and disembodied, yet a strict reductive physicalism that reduces all functions traditionally attributed to the soul to biological processes is also problematic, eliminating the possibility of dialogue between science and religion. Quantum physics offers a new paradigm of reality that can help us move beyond the impasse of reductionism versus dualism. The understanding of the relationship between wave and particle in quantum theory can offer a new analogy for how we conceive of human person as spirit/body. Specifically, quantum theory speaks of wave in terms of probability, and particle in terms of observation, using language such as wave collapsing into particle upon observation. The analogy of the wave may help us understand spirit as

the capacity for infinite, and particle as an analogy for understanding the ways in which we embody and actualize that capacity of spirit.

Nadia Delicata discussed “Electric Ecology as the Context of Postmodern Christianity,” asking, who is the human becoming in our contemporary world? What does the shift in global culture mean to the Christian? She addressed these questions through a media ecology hermeneutic that interpreted the effects of mediated electric technologies in today’s world. She postulated that three foundational effects of technology—disembodiment, the rise of the virtual, and a new tribal ethos—are challenging the traditional Christian notions of personhood. The new “electric ecology” in which personal experience is “angelized” as communication is increasingly mediated and globalized “tribal” identities elide personal distinctions enable a hyper-separation of mind from body. Delicata argued that these new challenges undermine a distinctively Christian anthropology constructed on the unity of body and spirit, an emphasis on the goodness of creation, and the necessity of human freedom and responsibility. Christian faith thus contributes a valuable model of personhood rooted in embodied experience, affirming the importance and goodness of presence and limits of concrete existence in the flesh—the person as image of God, an identity confirmed in bodiliness.

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