

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

- Topic: Critical Responses to *Caritas in Veritate*
Convener: Charles Curran, Southern Methodist University
Presenters: Judith Merkle, Niagara University
Thomas O'Brien, DePaul University

Judith Merkle began the session by presenting her paper, "Church, Culture, and the Economy," in which she compared Benedict XVI's thought with that of United Methodist theologian Joerg Rieger. The first section of Merkle's paper examined the significance of culture in reflection on the economy. She highlighted the ways in which John Paul II used the concept of cultural frameworks to explain how people approach and participate in economic life, then she proceeded to describe how Benedict continued this line of thought in *Caritas in veritate* (e.g., in his discussion of how cultural representations of ultimate values undercut the willingness of people of good will to intervene in the economy for the sake of the common good). Merkle then turned to Rieger's work, focusing in particular on his 2009 book, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics and the Future*. Rieger claims that confidence in the idea that "A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats" has become so deeply embedded in American culture that it functions as a quasi-religious ideology. This feature of contemporary culture impairs the ability of many Americans to understand and interpret economic realities rightly.

In the next section of her paper, Merkle explained how culturally embedded understandings and attitudes toward the market impact the vision of human identity operative in those cultures. Merkle drew helpfully upon Rieger's work to explain how the contemporary economic system reduces the human person to a consumer. Using an interpretive framework that combines the insights of Marx and Freud, Rieger uncovers the ways in which power is used to produce, nurture, and continually revitalize the population's will to consume.

Finally, Merkle described what interventions are warranted in light of each author's analysis. Both Rieger and Benedict XVI agree that it is vital to attend to the task of restructuring institutions that have been so deeply affected by social sin. Benedict emphasizes that the church's main role is not to offer technical solutions, but rather to enter into an important dialogue with the dominant culture. In that conversation the church's primary role is to question predominant values and call attention to the needs of those without a voice. In tandem with that cultural dialogue and renewal, the institutions of social, political, civil, and cultural life must be reshaped and imbued with more humanizing values. Rieger believes that the key to institutional reform lies in the creation of "open spaces" in which the status quo can be reexamined. Merkle concluded that both Benedict and Rieger encourage Christians to create a community of contrast that provides an alternative vision to market logic.

The session continued as Thomas O'Brien presented his paper, "An Analysis of the Use of Caritas as a Theme of Catholic Social Theory." O'Brien began by

making the claim that although “love” is not a principle traditionally articulated in Catholic Social Thought, the importance of “brotherly love” is discernable in several social encyclicals. Thus, Benedict’s articulation of the importance of *caritas* is not truly a novelty in the tradition. O’Brien then turned to the question of whether it is wise and appropriate to introduce *caritas* into the discussion of political, economic, and social issues. Toward this end, O’Brien brought *Caritas in veritate* into dialogue with Christian Realism, drawing particularly upon the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray (whom O’Brien also places within the realist camp). Finally, O’Brien argued that Benedict’s efforts to link truth and love in this encyclical are undermined by the fact that the document fails to offer a definitive and unambiguous account of “truth.” O’Brien maintained that in the first seven paragraphs of *Caritas in veritate* there are no less than five different and often competing definitions of truth. This being the case, O’Brien concluded that encyclical’s discussion of *veritate* fails to clarify the meaning of *caritas*.

The session concluded after a lengthy period of vigorous discussion.

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