

## PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: Generations and Tradition: Sexuality and Spirituality  
 Convener: Raymond J. Webb, University of Saint Mary of the Lake  
 Moderator: Thomas Beaudoin, Santa Clara University  
 Presenters: Thomas F. Ryan, Loyola University, New Orleans  
               Donna Freitas, Boston University  
 Respondent: Lynn Bridgers, College of Santa Fe, New Mexico

Presenters Donna Freitas and Thomas F. Ryan offered variant notions of tradition and the generations. Examining Leonard Cohen's work, which is infused with religious, often Catholic, themes and depicts eroticism visually, poetically, and lyrically, Ryan found perspectives both illuminating and transformative. Using new student survey and interview data, Freitas presented insights about Catholic young adults, discussing such matters as the "spiritual but not religious" mentality and the cultural ethos of Catholic schools. Her paper attempted to begin building bridges between the generations when it came to both sex and the soul.

In "Generation from the Margins: Tradition in the Work of Leonard Cohen," Thomas Ryan argued that, because of its interdisciplinarity, practical theology is well suited for discerning goodness in popular culture and for seeing it as an extra-ecclesial agent of tradition. With images and music, Ryan made his case in terms of poet and singer Leonard Cohen. Born Jewish but influenced by a Catholic nanny, Cohen claimed to have been brought up "part Catholic." Later he characterized his poetry as "lewd, offensive, and full of Christological implications." Indeed, his lyrics' eroticism and ambiguous use of pronouns hearken back to medieval Song of Songs commentary. His words point beyond the human to convey the intimacy of human-divine relations and open a space for God to address and be addressed with words of love. On top of this, Cohen has layered a deep sense of human brokenness. Thus, Cohen alternates between the debased and the sublime, as if the debased could convey the sublime incarnationally.

In "Bridging the (Generation) Gap between Sex and the (Young Catholic) Soul," which could also be entitled "Here Come the College Catholic Theologians," Donna Freitas noted that she traveled the U.S. in the spring of 2006 to find out from America's college students how (if at all) their religion and/or spiritual identities and practices affected their romantic relationships and sexual decision-making. The paper shared insights about why so many Catholic college students are "spiritual but not religious" and do not connect Catholic teachings about sex with their own lives, but also how, on paper, young Catholics told a different story about the state of their souls and provided some hints about how we might begin building bridges between the generations, as well as foster a vibrant young adult Catholic culture. She proposed an *aggiornamento* of sorts within Catholic theology and in light of Vatican II—one that would open the borders of Catholic theology in such a way that we could begin to encounter average Catholic college students as a significant theological public and as *theo-*

*logians in formation* in their own right. To do so, she drew from her study work among evangelical youth and within evangelical youth culture to challenge William Portier's idea of the "evangelical Catholic," proposing a new understanding of how "evangelical" might more appropriately and more broadly modify "Catholic" among young adults at Catholic colleges.

In her response, Lynn Bridgers noted that presenters Tom Ryan and Donna Freitas had offered perspectives on tradition and generational change. Using Catholic themes from poet, novelist and songwriter Leonard Cohen, Ryan had proposed a practical-theological account of tradition that allowed for the generation, or regeneration, of tradition from critical and marginal sources in popular culture. Freitas had presented new research on Catholic young adults, challenging aspects of the previous work of Christian Smith, Dean Hoge and his colleagues, and William Portier. Both papers asked the listeners to think about how Catholic tradition is passed on from one generation to the next in Catholic "indoctrination." Ryan warned of the potential for what could be called a "renewed Donatism," "a preference for purity at the expense of size." Freitas also called for a more dynamic ecclesiology in integrating the voices of college students. Both challenges could be met through an ecclesiology more like an "atomic particle . . . made up of moving elements, a field of dynamic tensions."

RAYMOND J. WEBB

*University of Saint Mary of the Lake  
Mundelein, Illinois*