

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Unity and Fragmentation
Convener: Stephen Okey, Saint Leo University
Moderator: Stephen Okey, Saint Leo University
Presenters: Brad Rothrock, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Cathal Doherty, S.J., Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

In his paper, “Christian Postures Toward the World: Authenticity and Credibility in a Secular Age,” Brad Rothrock situates the question of authenticity and the credibility of Christian faith within the context of theological education. He draws on Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* to ground an understanding of authenticity that focuses more on the content of what one chooses rather than the procedure by which one chooses. Human freedom is shaped within what Taylor calls frameworks, which shape and orient the judgments of the true and the good that humans make. Rothrock then argues that some contemporary forms of authenticity, rooted in a mechanistic sense of freedom and a rejection of traditions, encourage and enable a “God-without-frameworks” approach to religion and spirituality. A key problem here is the lack of awareness about the larger frameworks in which one operates; the quality of one’s judgments is undermined by one’s obliviousness to what is shaping those judgments. This provides a challenge to the Catholic tradition precisely because the individualist sense of authenticity overlooks one’s embeddedness within a tradition and the possibilities of making intelligible and shareable articulations of truth claims. For Rothrock, this leads to a call for a new apologetics rooted in listening, dialogue, and persuasion. Ultimately, though Rothrock does not outline a set of solutions to this problem of degraded authenticity, he does argue that an apologetics that is rooted in spirituality, liturgy, and community can contribute to making strong claims for the grounds of Christian belief.

In his presentation “Superstition and ‘The Scandal of Particularity’: Maurice Blondel and the Enlightenment Critique of the Christian Religion,” Cathal Doherty investigates the relationship between the particular and the universal as it relates to the distinction between superstition and sacraments. Doherty retrieves Maurice Blondel’s critique of the Kantian interpretation of sacraments as superstition, arguing instead that superstition is rooted in a human desire for self-sufficiency. The superstitious individual seeks to contain and control the infinite in concrete and finite objects by an act of will. Sacraments do rely on the concrete activity of human persons, but, in contrast to superstition, they are rooted in the gift of revelation and thus received by humans, not produced by them. Despite the apparent external similarities between the superstition and sacrament, the contrast between human and divine initiative is therefore the central internal distinction between them. Blondel, in fact, claims that the Enlightenment effort for religion grounded solely on reason becomes itself a form of superstition by fetishizing the powers of human reason. According to Doherty, the distinction between self-sufficiency and divine initiative ultimately resolves the scandal of particularity at the heart of the Christian sacramental imagination precisely because the divine gift is always offered within the concrete particular of human activity.

The conversation that followed focused on how Rothrock's concern for criteria of authenticity engaged Doherty's discussion of the scandal of particularity. Of particular interest here was the question of how one understands the relationship between theology and philosophy. Following from this, the point was raised that philosophy is sometimes insufficient for critiquing inadequate understandings of authenticity, and thus the encounter of revelation might be necessary. This led to a question about how these projects fit within the larger frame of fundamental theology. Doherty claimed there is a danger in fundamental theology of attempting to capture the divine within human concepts, which God always exceeds while Rothrock pushed for a retrieval of an apologetic focus of fundamental theology that seeks to clear a path for the consideration of faith at all. Lastly, it was noted that the issue of self-sufficiency seems to be at the heart of both projects, as both Rothrock's "God without frameworks" and Doherty's discussion of superstition reveal human efforts to reject any reliance on the other.

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