MORAL THEOLOGY (II)—TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Daniel J. Daly, Saint Anselm College
Moderator: Elizabeth Antus, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Kevin McCabe, University of Notre Dame
              Mary M. Doyle Roche, Holy Cross College
              Jennifer Beste, College of St. Benedict

Kevin McCabe's paper, "Disability and the Challenge of Difference," critically examined the way in which religious ethicists and theologians treat human commonalities and differences in theological accounts of intellectual disability. Most theologians tend to emphasize an essential "sameness" between persons with and without disabilities by pointing to common human passivity and dependence on God. Human agency, subjectivity, and differences are thereby interpreted as theologically insignificant. McCabe noted that the danger with this line of argument is that it conflates ultimate dependence on God with intra-human forms of dependence. This leads to a theological anthropology wherein God's action is opposed to human agency and freedom. When human dependence is taken exhaustively to describe persons with disabilities, this inadequate anthropology occludes the challenging and grace-filled differences that characterize the lives of these persons. McCabe advocated a classical understanding of nature and grace in which God's grace is not opposed to human freedom and agency. The classical model of nature and grace addresses the complex relation between dependence/freedom and passivity/agency in all persons, regardless of ability. McCabe concluded that one should not reject human freedom and subjective agency as "able-ist" capacities that separate persons with and without disabilities. Instead, one should talk about an agency that embraces dependence, difference, and a sense of freedom that does not come at the expense of vulnerable others.

In "Honoring Difference in the Moral Formation of Children and Young People," Jennifer Beste drew upon her own ethnographic research to argue that the Church should respect the agency of children by offering the sacrament of penance to those who demonstrate a desire for the sacrament. The first part of the paper showed that, when the subjectivity and agency of a child was honored, such treatment fostered the child's positive moral development. Conversely, when a child was uninterested in receiving first penance, the sacrament did not seem to benefit their moral development. In addition to presenting her statistical findings, Beste included direct quotations from her research subjects, second grade students. These quotes showed the diversity of attitudes of children to the sacrament and its effects. In the second half of the paper Beste argued that, in an attempt to forge sacramental unity, the Church does not adequately respect the diversity and agency of each child. She suggested that the Church should reevaluate its policies regarding children's participation in the sacraments. In particular, the Church should explore offering sacraments to mixed age groups, as opposed to the current single age group model. Such institutional changes would better affirm each child in her own concrete reality.

Mary M. Doyle Roche's paper, "Children and Young People Living Online: Forming and Fragmenting Moral Selves and Communities," began with the claim that many young people spend a considerable amount of time with online social

media. She argued that these technologies are transforming the landscape of relationships and communities. Platforms that seem ripe with possibility for "globalizing solidarity" also appear fraught with ambiguity and danger. Tensions emerge, Roche noted, as young people attempt to carve out a private space for themselves and negotiate increasing participation in a world shaped by adult concerns. Though young people may be "natives" to these technologies, their savvy does not necessarily translate into the maturity needed maximize the benefits and minimize, let alone notice, the risks and the important moral questions they present. Drawing on the work of sociologists D. Boyd and M. Ito, the paper explored the ways in which the young participate in online culture and their motivations for doing so. Ito and colleagues have outlined three genres of participation: "hanging out," "messing around," and "geeking out." Roche argued that these genres may provide a lens through which religious communities might approach the inclusion of young people in ways that move beyond protection, to fuller participation in the common good.

Due to the fact that the papers addressed issues of agency and autonomy, much of the discussion engaged all three papers around these topics. This enabled the presenters the opportunity to further elaborate on the role of agency and autonomy in their subject groups. Specifically, audience members posed questions regarding the level of agency that should be respected in seven year olds and persons with intellectual disabilities. A discussion ensued regarding the use of parental coercion in the religious practice of children. The session concluded with questions regarding McCabe's theological anthropology as it relates to current debates on the moral ascription of personhood, and the moral status of non-human animals.

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