

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE—TOPIC SESSION

Convener: J. Matthew Ashley, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Celia Deane-Drummond, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Steven Battin, University of Notre Dame
Sr. Chau Nguyen, O.P., Catholic University of America

The papers presented at this session considered two ways in which to draw on resources from the dialogue between science and theology to enrich ecumenical conversations. One presentation drew on recent work in the social and cognitive sciences, while the other drew on a little-studied theme in the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Steven Battin began with a presentation entitled “The Problem of Intergroup Disunity: A Non-Theological Model for Addressing the Problem Theologically.” In an introductory section Battin argued that considering theories of inter-group conflict from the perspective of social psychology correlates with a soteriology that focuses not just on individual salvation but on group salvation (important to the extent that in Scripture God’s salvific response to violence and lack of meaning centers on the latter). He then considered evolutionarily developed mechanisms of in-group/out-group distinction, the need for belonging, parochial altruism and infra-humanization. These mechanisms are not in themselves the direct causes of conflict between groups; that is, their innateness to human beings should not be taken to warrant a Manichaeic rejection of human nature as intrinsically evil. Rather, they constitute four bio-psycho-sociocultural preconditions for such conflict and violence, which is triggered by historically contingent events and processes, such as a trauma visited on a group or the expansion of a group into new territory. Cultural discourses and practices (including religious ones) are crucial determinants of whether or not the combination of these preconditions and historical contingencies lead in fact to invidious forms of moral exclusion, dehumanization of out-groups, and intra-group conflict, such as racism. In a final section he applied this model to the conference theme by arguing two principal theses. First, he argued that disunity among Christians is a specific form of in-group/out-group conflict. Second, he warned that inner-Christian unity is not necessarily an adequate response to the broader problem of inter-group conflict, to the extent that attempting to achieve the former can create and deploy discourses and practices that negatively form the four mechanisms described earlier toward moral exclusion and dehumanization of other out-groups.

Sr. Chau Nguyen followed with a paper entitled “The Eternal Feminine According to Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.: A Marian Principle of Cosmic Unity.” Her thesis is that Teilhard’s writing on Mary not only provides a corrective toward the tendency toward pantheism in his theology, but is also a resource for ecumenical dialogue. She described the origins of Teilhard’s Marian theology and spirituality while he was a stretcher-bearer during World War I. It first found expression in his poem, “The Eternal Feminine,” written on the occasion of his profession of final vows in the Society of Jesus in 1918. Chau analyzed this poem (with the assistance of images), along with another text of Teilhard’s, “The Evolution of Chastity.” In developing Teilhard’s Mariology, Chau connected its themes with central patristic themes (alluding to Henri de Lubac’s analysis and defense of “The Eternal Feminine”

as well), including the fundamental goodness and spiritual potential of matter, the interconnectedness of all creation, and the essential role given to Mary (especially in theological reflection on the Assumption). She concluded by arguing that, with Teilhard's insights, a scientifically informed view of the cosmos coheres with an understanding of Mary's perfect faith and absolute fidelity as the dynamism that presses the cosmos toward a unity-in-diversity that is inherent to Christogenesis, thus emphasizing the non-pantheistic structure of this process and culmination. This process and (eschatological) culmination of cosmic unity in Mary can also serve to model ecumenical dialogue.

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