

SACRAMENTAL-PROPHETIC VISION: EXPLOITING INSIGHTS FROM  
BERNARD COOKE'S *ESSENTIAL WRITINGS*—SELECTED SESSION

Convener: Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., Vanderbilt University  
Moderator: Amanda Osheim, Loras College  
Presenters: Daniel Horan, O.F.M., Boston College  
Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., Fordham University  
Kimberly Hope Belcher, University of Notre Dame  
Richard Lennan, Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

Bernard Cooke (1922–2013) based his original theological project on a biblical theology of revelation grounded in history and experience, formulating a theology at once sacramental and prophetic. This panel session discussed the newly published *Essential Writings of Bernard Cooke: A Narrative Theology of Church, Sacrament, and Ministry*. Bruce Morrill, coauthor and editor, opened by describing his methodology for composing the book, narratively integrating portions of Cooke's unpublished memoir with selections from the breadth of the late theologian's work thematically arranged in four parts: fundamental theology, Christology and pneumatology, sacramental theology, and ecclesiology and ministry. The panelists then discussed the book's four chapters in order.

Daniel Horan addressed the methodological commitment to experience at the heart of Cooke's theology, whereby he enlisted developments in psychology, anthropology, and philosophy to argue for the inherently symbolic character of reality as the medium of human personhood and divine encounter. Cooke's critical hermeneutic method offers at least three distinctive contributions for current theology: 1) his pastoral, praxis-oriented commitment to theological education and ministerial formation as indicative of the importance of *how* theology is practiced and communicated; 2) his prioritization of both individual and communal experience over rigid doctrinal, propositional faith claims; and 3) the promise and challenges in his (underdeveloped) concept of "vicarious experience" for contemporary theological pluralism.

Elizabeth Johnson opened her assessment of Cooke's "densely layered" theology by highlighting aspects of Cooke's life that contributed to the generative insights found in his Christology. Fundamental is his insistence on the risen Christ as united in friendship with all humanity through the power of the Spirit. For Cooke, Spirit and Word are not divine attributes but activities, communications of God's self-giving love. This divine activity does not begin or end with Jesus but, rather, comes to realization in his person and life in a functional, sacramental way that continues now in his resurrected existence. Inquiry into the historical Jesus is theologically sterile if not allied with two thousand years of Christians' faith relationships with the risen Christ. With Jesus of Nazareth the norm for discipleship and thus the church, this raises the challenge of what categories and lines of argument can bring experiences of the living Jesus into Christology done in postmodern, pluralistic, and at times even skeptical contexts.

Kimberly Hope Belcher explained how Cooke not only did sacramental theology, that is, reflection on the church's sacramental rites, but did theology sacramentally. Belcher began by reflecting, in light of her own and Cooke's experiences, on his original argument for baptism's dependent relationship on

marriage as the “fundamental” Christian sacrament. In response to people’s experiential criticisms, Cooke revised his premise to assert “deep friendship” as basic human sacrament, for which Christian marriage is paradigmatic. Belcher concludes that Cooke did not intend a simplistic interpretation of “fundamental sacrament” as a universal experiential foundation applicable to every individual. Rather, the change to deep friendship suggests that he was interested in the multiplicity of ways human experience cries out for sacramental narrativity in order to ground itself in the Christian message. Foundational sacramental theology looks for symptoms of contact with God’s reign in history, transforming human lives by the Spirit’s communication of the gospel. In this perspective, the Eucharist elevates human friendship into charity, implicating its participants with responsibility for one another and the wider community. Drawing on Cooke’s pneumatology, Belcher pursued implications for the eucharistic experience of Christian charity as sacramental of God’s love not only for humanity but all creation.

Richard Lennan noted how not only experience but the experience of *change*—personal, professional, and ecclesial—was primary for Cooke. The question of normativity is central to Cooke’s theology of church and ministry because Christian faith is experienced in common and has to do with revelation in Christ. Hence Cooke’s ongoing inquiry into authority in the church, for which unity is the goal, and grace the key. Associating authority only with created grace fosters juridicism, uniformity, and clericalism, whereas grounding authority in the movement of the Spirit (uncreated grace) places office in functional service to the observable social process of *koinonia*. Tradition thus is inextricable from history, texts from social locations, giving rise to questions of who does the interpreting, whose experiences count. Accompanying his wife, Cooke, in his later writing turned to the particular practices of women and Latino/a cultures, demonstrating ways for discerning the sacramentality of lives shared and organized in ever-changing circumstances, a pilgrim church, Lennan concluded, ever dependent on the Spirit.

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