

FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY/METHOD—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Justice, Mercy, and Compassion as Fundamental-Theological Concerns
Convener: John E. Thiel, Fairfield University
Moderator: Jennifer Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
Presenters: Caesar A. Montevecchio, Mercyhurst University
Colby Dickinson, Loyola University Chicago
Hille Haker, Loyola University Chicago

Dr. Montevecchio's paper was entitled "Justice as a Criterion for Doctrine." He argued for the normativity of doctrine for the theological task, since it is doctrine that guides faith toward its proper ends. The effectiveness with which theology accepts that guidance in turn measures its faithfulness. In the New Testament, he noted, the social responsibility of *koinonia* and the personal reorientation of *metanoia* are ends of faith, meaning that both should be standards by which to judge even the truth of doctrine. Theological creativity is a resource for extending doctrinal meaning in new directions, and Montevecchio evinced such an exercise in creativity by showing how the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur could be enlisted to configure a model of doctrinal development that makes concerns for social justice essential to a proper understanding of doctrine rooted in biblical belief. He provided examples of such in the theologies of Aloysius Pieris, Felix Wilfrid, and Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator.

Dr. Dickinson's paper was entitled "The Permanent Tension of Justice and Mercy: Putting Theological Aesthetics at the Center of Theological Discourse." Following the lead of Terry Eagleton, Dickinson criticized Kantian aesthetics which, in his judgment, wrongly posits a gulf between reason and the imagination, the beautiful and the sublime. This gulf is symptomatic of deficiencies in modern philosophical and political traditions, which are guilty of a reductionist anthropology. After noting critiques of this reductionism by Charles Taylor and Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Dickinson proposed a Pauline anthropology as a way of healing the modern anthropological divide, especially through Paul's insistence on the theological tension between law (justice) and grace (mercy). This Christian anthropology is one in which the believer is keenly aware of his or her own natural impoverishment before the mercy of grace. In opposition to modern anthropologies of human autonomy, Dickinson concluded that only a tradition willing to face the poverty and vulnerability of the human condition would be positioned to represent the fullness of the human being as, paradoxically, its strength.

Dr. Haker's paper was entitled "Compassion as a Political-Theological Concept: A Re-Interpretation of Mercy and Compassion." After comparing three recent approaches to mercy and compassion, namely Walter Kasper's "mercy," Johann-Baptist Metz's "compassion," and Martha Nussbaum's "political emotion," Haker argued that all three approaches point to the value of "political-theological compassion" as a central foundational concept of Christian theology and social ethics. Haker defended this judgment in an argument that unfolded in three central points: first, divine mercy or compassion is a central attribute of God's love and the necessary human response to suffering; second, compassion must be situated within a political ethics; and third, in its prioritization of the concern for those who suffer and

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its critique of and struggle against injustice, political-theological compassion offers the tradition a needed reminder of its core values.

The session generated questions and discussion. One questioner asked Dickinson about the value of his Christian appeal to the poverty of human fallenness as a correction of the Kantian sublime. Is this a perspective that compounds the problem of the victim? Dickinson replied that we cannot move toward social justice until we all realize and accept our brokenness. One questioner asked Montevecchio if the theologians to whom he appealed to support his argument would recognize justice as a criterion for doctrine? He replied that theological explorations of the normativity of doctrine should be interpretively capacious. One helpful perspective is that we see doctrine as simplifying, as much as it preserves, faith and its practice. Haker's paper generated a lively exchange on the nature and possibility of forgiveness as a human virtue, and as a specifically Christian virtue.

At the session's end, the audience expressed its appreciation to the presenters for their excellent papers.

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