

ANTHROPOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Ecology  
Convener: Elizabeth Antus, Boston College  
Moderator: Julia Feder, Creighton University  
Presenters: Eric Daryl Meyer, Carroll College  
Elizabeth Pyne, Fordham University  
Gregory Zuschlag, Oblate School of Theology

In his presentation, “A Political Ecology of Kinship: Theological Anthropology Centered in Human Animality,” Eric Meyer argues against a conception of human dignity or human distinctiveness that hinges upon what supposedly makes humans different from other animals (such as rationality and free will). This traditional move encourages a destructive anthropocentrism that provides an inadequate view of humanity while also enabling a habit of toleration for violence against non-human animals. Meyer thus suggests that Christian theologians need to recover a robust conception of human animality in order to do justice both to humans and to non-human animals. As Meyer’s engagement with Giorgio Agamben, Sylvia Wynter, and Eduardo Kohn shows, this recovery of human animality entails celebrating human instinct, desire, and corporeal dependence, and doing so specifically by listening to how various marginalized groups have historically celebrated these values. Ultimately, Meyer argues that framing human animality as the key to Christian theological anthropology can help overcome the sinful pretension to absolute self-sufficiency and intolerance of difference while doing justice to Francis’ call for an “integral ecology” by encouraging political kinship with non-human animals.

In her presentation, “Nature, Nonidentity, and Creaturely Difference: Two Perspectives on Human Ecology,” Beth Pyne places Pope Francis and the Frankfurt School in conversation with each other on the topic of nature. In *Laudato Si’*, Francis correctly critiques the market-driven human alienation from nature, and, in this way, he resembles the Frankfurt School’s critique of modern subjectivity as centered in the domination of the natural world. The Frankfurt School helpfully highlights (and reinforces Francis’ point) that what is needed is a non-objectifying view of nature, one which appreciates nature’s nonidentity, or ongoing capacity to defy reification and simplistic categorization. However, Francis’ appreciation for the nonidentity of nature in an ecological key unfortunately does not extend to his conception of human nature vis-à-vis gender and sexual difference; much like his papal predecessors, Francis assumes that the heteronormative male-female binary is a fixed reality with clear moral meaning. This assumption is alienating for those whose sexual lives do not fit within this conception of human nature. The insights of the Frankfurt School, however, serve as an important reminder to respect the nonidentity of nature in relation to the realm of human sexuality. With this reminder in place, theology may still make a normative place for nature, albeit one that embraces negativity and dynamism in this concept.

In his presentation, “Environmental Stewardship: The Last Acceptable Anthropocentrism,” Greg Zuschlag briefly affirms the genuine attractiveness and popularity of environmental stewardship. However, Zuschlag’s main argument is that the anthropology undergirding environmental stewardship is unsound ecologically, philosophically, and theologically. He then offers an alternative anthropology based upon a “transcentric” and “poly-relational” understanding of the human person which

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allows for an alternative set of identities to stewardship within the various realms of life: “kinship” in the bio- and metaphysical realms, “fellowship” (citizen-partner) in the socio-political-economic realm, and “companionship” (i.e. “to break bread together”) in the religious-theological realm.

In the following open conversation, some audience members elaborated in different ways upon the critiques of the idea of human distinctiveness offered by all three panelists. For example, one person spoke about the rationality of non-human animals (demonstrated vividly in the caprice and independence of house cats) as an under-appreciated phenomenon in Christian theological anthropology. However, later conversation included more pushback from other audience members who still wanted an account of human distinctiveness based on, for example, an appreciation for the ways that humans can distinctively plan for the future. Meyer argued in response that, even if human distinctiveness could be grounded in the human capacity for futurity, humans are doing a terrible job at using this orientation toward the future to live ethically in the present. His recommendation was that humans actually attempt to live responsibly and *show* a possible distinctiveness, rather than merely asserting it as grounds to continue treating non-human life poorly. The discussion had to end as this point of disagreement was becoming clear.

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