

GOD AND TRINITY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Ecology: Theological Investigations  
Convener: Manuel A. Cruz, Belmont University  
Moderator: Karl Hefty, Saint Paul University  
Presenters: John P. Slattery, University of Notre Dame  
Brendan McNerny, Fordham University

The God and Trinity session explored whether ecological theology unwittingly harbored racist attitudes in its praxis. This fruitful but unsettling conversation shifted to examining a trinitarian ecology of play, where the immanent life of God and the act of creation become gifts of playful delight.

In “Nature is Not the ‘New Poor’: Resituating Ecological Theology in a Trinitarian Framework,” John Slattery mounted a critique of eco-liberationist theology and theologies of deep incarnation. These movements unite the suffering and salvation of human and non-human life under one conceptual framework. Slattery unmasked the racist and dehumanizing implications of eliminating the theological and ethical difference that distinguishes the suffering and redemption of persons from that of non-human life.

Slattery began with the extension of liberationist categories to non-human life. Out of compassion for all suffering, eco-liberationist theology has often personified systems of non-human life with the voices and human concerns of primarily white theologians and ethicists. “There is a cry of the poor, but there is no equivalent cry of the earth. There are only words of largely-dominant-class people placed poetically into non-human creatures. We must be careful that in arguing for non-human creation we do not subvert the voice of oppressed humans around us.” Slattery explored whether the privilege given to the suffering of nature might not represent a white privilege that would prefer to care for non-human environments over persons of color.

Slattery also exposed dehumanizing aspects of evolutionary theology and deep incarnation, beginning with their seemingly benign reliance on Teilhard de Chardin. Slattery drew attention to de Chardin’s shocking call for racial eugenics as an element of evolutionary divinization. He called into question the soteriological appropriation of certain evolutionary concepts and processes. Evolutionary theologies prove susceptible to ignoring the particularity of human and animal suffering, to reducing salvation history into evolutionary development, and to depersonalizing the personhood of Christ.

In “Playing Before Him at All Times: The Immanent Trinity, the Gift of Creation, and an Ecology of Play,” Brendan McNerny offered a portrait of a playful Trinity—a God who delights in trinitarian life and in the created order. Drawing on Hindu, Platonic, biblical, and theological sources, he examined playful representations of the divine, wherein God relates to the world and Godself out of sheer joy and playful delight. This divine play of delight displays the freedom from which God is able to create the world as a joyful gift. God is not forced to create out of necessity. Neither the creation of the world nor the eternal begetting of the Son are of any use to Father. The Son and the world are “useless,” but as such, begetting and creating become gifts that are free from necessity and the inherent instrumentality of means and ends.

From this ludic representation of the Trinity, McNerny developed a trinitarian ecology of play. “An ecology of play is borne out of the human wonder at the innate

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beauty and worth of things. . . Reverence for the integrity of things is thus a key virtue in ludic ecology.” Ludic ecology refuses to reduce the truth of a thing to an analysis of facts or to knowledge of its technological potential. It recognizes that “truth is ‘the signature of love indwelling’—the miracle and mystery of God’s creation from nothing. Ludic ecology is thus profoundly apophatic.”

McInerny set this trinitarian ecology of play in direct conversation with the sustained environmental harm done to the farm fields and community of Adrian, Minnesota by the farmers of that community. This local connection brought to light the ethical implications of what initially may strike the hearer as a whimsical way to name God. A trinitarian ecology of play offers an alternative to the technocratic paradigm that seeks to engineer human dominion over the natural world. It resists the resignation expressed in the words of one city official that “contaminated water is just part of living in Adrian.” A trinitarian ecology of play thus challenges the disturbing concession that pollution is an acceptable dimension of life in the industrialized world.

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