

MORAL THEOLOGY (I)—TOPIC SESSION

Title: Ecological Theology
Convenor: Christina A. Astorga, University of Portland
Moderator: Kent J. Lasnoski, Wyoming Catholic College
Presenters: Kyle Lambert, University of Notre Dame
David A. Clairmont, University of Notre Dame
Respondent: Tobias Winright, St. Louis University

Kyle Lambert refers to the essay of Bill Mckibben “A World at War” in articulating the *status questionis* of his paper, “A Just War on Climate Change?” In examining the relationship between war and climate change, Mckibben aligns with other authors, but he gives this relationship, however, a whole new perspective by shifting from calling climate change a form of war to declaring a warfare against climate change. Pursuing the martial metaphor that Mckibben proposes in fighting climate change, Lambert draws from the Catholic tradition of just war to analyze whether the warfare against climate change is just. He points out that Mckibben’s proposal rightly focuses on the victims of climate change—women, children, refugees, and the poor—but fails to grapple with the question of agency, noting that carbon and methane are not moral agents aggressively attacking the planet and its people; it is unclear against whom we are being called to fight.

In pursuing the question of his paper, Lambert shifts his focus from a just war on climate change to just war against climate changers who are either formally or directly materially cooperative with climate change. Distinguishing a combatant from the civilian in the warfare on climate change, he concludes that an oil tycoon is an unjust combatant while a subsistence farmer is a civilian. Applying Arendt’s distinction between guilt and responsibility, he asserts that the lack of guilt of ordinary consumers of fossil fuel like us does not negate our responsibility. And unless we relentlessly work against the deleterious impacts of climate change and undermine its causes, we may also be found to be combatants.

In his paper, “An Ecology of Letters: Discerning the Shape of Thomas Merton’s Moral Theology through his Social Justice Correspondence,” David A. Clairmont raises the question: Is it possible to be morally responsible and socially engaged as a theologian without being primarily a social activist? This question is prompted by what seems to be the reduction of the work of theologians to the work of activist and social critic, and how the use of religious language for political purposes is questioned in public forums where there is more suspicion rather than dialogue. Clairmont’s response to his question is affirmative—as shown by Merton’s extensive correspondence with some of the leading religious leaders regarding major social justice issues of his day such as war, racism, economic exploitation, and environmental destruction.

Clairmont argues that Merton’s letters navigated the intersection between his monastic world and the secular world, where both worlds enter into critical and creative dialogue. Reading Merton’s correspondence as “ecology of letters,” he refers to what Pope Francis describes in *Laudato Si’* as “cultural ecology” and an “ecology of daily life” where concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace are woven into one tapestry. Pursuing the main question of his paper, Clairmont argues that Merton’s “ecology of letters” offers a mode of engaging theology with social issues in multiple contexts, without reducing theology to mere social activism

Topic Session: Moral Theology (I)

and without sacrificing one's religio-ethical tradition. As monk of the Abbey of Gethesemani, his physical location was limited, but he profoundly engaged with social issues from his monastic tradition on which he wrote, as he sought to find common ground with those from different social, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

In his response to the two talks, and in his attempt to connect them, Tobias Winwright concludes that both papers are about method in moral theology, and both "offer tactile and textured proposals." He says that, on the surface, Lambert drawing on the just war tradition with reference to warfare against climate may seem like an odd choice, but on a critical level, the just war ethic, which has been called a "hybrid ethic," provides a moral resource for any issue when discussing duties, obligations, principles, consequences, and virtues. Winwright rightly sees that Clairmont was arguing for a human ecology that bridges the two, either/or options that moral theologians have been stuck with—to be or not to be a social critic and activist. He concurs that Clairmont, using Merton's "ecology of letters," offers an integral way of approaching moral issues.

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