

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Ecology: Theological Investigations  
Convener: Catherine Wright, Wingate University  
Moderator: Paul Schutz, Moderator, Fordham University  
Presenters: Gloria Schaab, S.S.J., Barry University  
Justin D. Klassen, Bellarmine University

In her paper, “Renewing the Vision: The Environment through the lens of Relationality,” Gloria Schaab investigated how a keener sense of the relational ontology that constitutes all creations can foster and impact ecological commitments. She drew our attention to historical perceptions of how humanity understood our position and worth in the created world and how dominion, Image of God, and hierarchical value systems were implanted (and grew voraciously) in Christian imaginations, obscuring meanings of biblical and theological traditions and distorting moral precepts. Gloria then took her listeners through a corrective—a relationality paradigm based on an ontology grounded in communion/relation. She thanked Denis Edwards for stealing her trinitarian thunder at the plenary, but she dove deeply into Aquinas’ work and empirical data from science to substantiate her claims of a relational ontology: “the distinction between creatures themselves, as well as between the Creator and created, is a distinction of subjects in constitutive and active relation, rather than of primary and secondary substances.” She states that relationality is woven into our common origin, the emergence of complex forms of life, an effect which “suggests that each form of life is a unique outcome or effect of the relationships among the elements that constitute it.” This, she stated, is the foundation for *Laudato Si*’s relational ontology and its call to prioritize “being” over “being useful.” This, claims Gloria, will refresh Christian imaginations and awaken us to the kinship inherent to life; we are enmeshed in the webs of life and must act accordingly.

The second presentation fit beautifully with the groundwork laid by Gloria; Justin Klassen’s paper, “Another Dream of Separateness: Thomas Merton’s Critique of Technocratic Knowing,” both taught (and embodied) his thesis: Merton’s vision of waking from a dream of separateness is achieved through authentic encounters with the wet and wild world and this can be best articulated via poetic language. Justin indicated that we have become literalists who desire to know nature completely; we desire no “loose ends.” This is an expression of technocratic knowing and is one expression of our dominion over, and control of, nature. Embracing this way of knowing banishes the elements of mystery, contingency, and gratuity from our encounter with the created world. Merton laments this exile and refuses to know the world only through the lens of utility and price. He claims that when we are liberated from this alienating dream new behaviors abound. Justin’s adept use of the work of Charles Taylor and Carolyn Merchant gave even more nuance to Merton’s claims, offering listeners a portrait of how Christian imaginations have been entranced by such a dream and ways to awaken from it. We must, Justin claims, become poets who appreciate “the gratuity of poetic language” and the rhythms of created life. These modern poets participating in the rhythms of creation need not wield a pen; they can be the gardeners, bread bakers, cooks, musicians, or politicians as long as they are attuned to the inexplicability inherent to our *oikos* and remain open to new sources of revelation in our interconnected reality. Justin espouses that for Merton, “the

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homemade is the poetic, is the immediate, is our possible communion with the Spirit of Life.”

The attendees expressed their gratitude for the presentations and inquiries included the following. Was the Bible used to justify exploitation of the natural world or did the biblical visions of dominion cause the exploitation? Gloria reflected that certainly there was exploitation woven into agricultural practices that needed no biblical justification but one cannot obscure the fact that Scripture was often used to sanctify human exploitation of creation. Another question asked if there is a broadening of intrinsic worth beyond the sphere of the human (thanks to a relational ontology), how will Catholic Social Teaching (CST) be effected? Speakers offered that a widened horizon of meaning for the dignity of humanity (central to CST) does not diminish the relevance or importance of the CST. Following, Justin was asked to comment on whether Merton’s understanding of contingency as gift was problematic, especially concerning the limits (based on uncertainty principles) of technology in ethical debates? Justin probed the limits of Merton’s understanding of gift and grappled with potential limits of Merton’s ideas. Next the inquiry—can a relational ontology rehabilitate anthropocentrism and the biblical vision of dominion—surfaced. Justin indicated that Merton would be theocentric and pointed to the need to learn from creation prior to engaging with these theological concepts while Gloria suggested that relationality does not necessarily redeem or restore anthropocentrism. A final inquiry asked where is the poetry in Manhattan, NY, and both Justin and Gloria graciously offered both professional and personal perspectives on awakening to and engaging with the poetic in our world manifest in its inherent relationality.

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