

CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Contemporary Theory and Constructive Theology
Convener: Bradford Hinze, Marquette University
Presenters: Vincent Miller, Georgetown University
Michele Saracino, Regis College

This session launches an effort to create an ongoing group for theologians working with contemporary theories in philosophy, cultural studies, critical race theory, postcolonialism, and feminism, as they pertain to issues in constructive theology.

Vincent Miller presented "Consuming the Signs of the Times: The Politics and Theology of Consumption." This essay complements his previous work on the deleterious effects of consumer culture as a colonizing force on all aspects of culture including religious symbols, beliefs, and practices. His current work concentrates on the effects of consumer culture on the agency of consumers. One must constructively engage and not just critically dismiss consumer culture so as to explore how consumption is politically and theologically significant. The political significance of consumption is analyzed from various perspectives. Drawing on Thorsten Veblen's work, he posits that consumption serves as a social act to mark class groups, even as it fosters solidarity and social discipline for those seeking to transgress class boundaries, while inverse and multidirectional exchange undermines these distinctions and boundaries. Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates the political significance of the cultural arena of consumption as groups and subgroups contend for social status through the defense and subversion of distinctions. The commodification of dissent by those with power and affluence need not yield a totalizing pessimism about production and consumption. Even though larger corporations control production and representation, they do not have absolute control. Michel de Certeau brings to light the political agency of consumers in the constructive work of *bricolage* and the practices of everyday life. The acts of consumers provide tactical practices, "phrasings," clever devices which offer "the willful, creative twisting of language to suit the needs of the situation." Such hopeful fragments of resistance and subversion are matched by Certeau's pessimistic assessment of the increasing loss of space for marginalized groups to act. There is no place of exile from the corporate control of mass culture, which means that the practices of *bricolage* are "fragmented and dispersed."

To address the issue of the theological significance of consumption, Miller associates popular religious production with the creative dimensions of consumption. Popular religious cultures convey the religious traditions of marginalized subcultures and the *sensus fidelium*. In the popular religion of Latino culture, there is operative a coherent sense of culture, clear spatial boundaries, and a subaltern class struggling against the hegemic alternative of

mass culture. The problems are different in consumer cultures where there are no coherent cultural traditions and no clear group boundaries, media and culture industries corrupt socialization processes, and any organized struggle against mass culture is undermined by niche marketing of differences.

Michele Saracino's presentation "Conflict, Suffering, and Peace: Issues in Being-*For-The Other*," challenges common sense understandings of these basic terms in light of contemporary reflections on the other. Success and happiness are commonly based on everyone being the same and having the same. Sameness is identified with equality and justice; difference is associated with injustice and considered the cause of conflict and a hindrance to peace. Saracino's major claim is that theologians when reading the signs of the times should shift their basic assumptions "from thinking about justice as rooted in a peaceful sameness to justice embedded in conflictive difference." In this she wants the theologians to emulate Jean-François Lyotard's understanding of the philosopher who "bears witness to conflict, rather than uphold an empty, hegemonic call for peace." Moving beyond the Dalai Lama's view of peace as working through conflict, Saracino claims that "peace is rooted in a witnessing to conflict, in a nourishing of conflict, . . . a peace that admits the *differend*, and embraces conflict as a form of expressing a particular concern, voice, and individuality." Saracino advances her argument first drawing on the works of Lyotard on the *differend* and using the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, race relations, and Jewish-Christian relations as her examples. Are these situations more of a *differend* than a dialogue, where one must move beyond consensus? She invokes Emmanuel Levinas's claim that we have moved "beyond dialogue," that "in being *for-the-Other*, sometimes the only human and just thing to do is witness to difference by standing at the borders, and declaring the separation between self and Other. Only in the separation can we realize our relationship with one another." Both Lyotard and Levinas assert that witnessing to this difference is emancipatory.

By commending the significance of "the opera of our ordinary lives," like Bernard Lonergan on the dramatic pattern of our lives, Saracino calls for attending to one's interpretation of conflict in interpersonal relations in an everyday context. Italian-American Catholic culture provides a helpful example, where "conflict and contestation are defining moments in being in relationship with others." Conflict in the opera of the everyday may provide "an idiom for the unspeakable, the *differend*" in and through which the narrative of life lived in relation is carried along. But we do not know how the narrative will end, and so are left with fostering a charitable approach to conflict that entails trust and risk in a justice and peace based on difference.

BRADFORD HINZE
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin