

## TERROR AND ESCHATOLOGY

Topic: Terror and the End of Time:  
The Search for a Responsible Eschatology  
Convener: Natalie Kertes Weaver, Ursuline College  
Presenter: Natalie Kertes Weaver, Ursuline College  
Presenter: John Shields, Calumet College of St. Joseph  
Moderator: Alison Benders, Ursuline College

This two-paper presentation explored the eschatological thinking of theologians David Tracy and Rosemary Radford Ruether. At the heart of both theologians is a commitment to making Christian theological discourse relevant to and engaged with a pluralistic audience. To so engage a pluralistic audience is to attempt to make Christian thinking simultaneously public and accountable. This agenda requires of the Christian theologian an interpretation of doctrine that is both authentically Christian as well as contextually and socially accountable. No area of Christian teaching is more challenged by this task than that of eschatology. In light of the fact of interreligious violence, terror, and competing truth claims—particularly about the end-time, it is incumbent upon the Christian theological community to dialogue about strategies for thinking eschatologically in a way that is responsible and accountable. This session was convened toward the goal of advancing this dialogue.

The first paper, presented by John Shields of Calumet College of St. Joseph, was entitled “An Eschatological Imagination: Constructing a Responsible Christian Eschatology in the Light of David Tracy’s Theological Project.” This paper attempted to suggest the fundamental features of a contemporary Christian eschatology for the postmodern world. In this process, Shields claimed that an intellectually responsible Christian eschatology can be best shaped in the form of a rhetoric of virtue wherein suspicions about certainty claims for the future can still find hope in possibilities. He named this rhetoric an “eschatological imagination” where interruptive future, hope acting on possibility stimulated by the Christian story, and truth as the outcome of that action are all essential features of that eschatological imagination. In making this constructive claim, he appropriates dimensions of the revisionist theologian David Tracy’s theological project in order to address contemporary eschatology in a critical and responsible fashion. He concludes his paper with the suggestion that a responsible Christian eschatology will be guided by three commitments: to resistance, to attentiveness, and to solidarity.

Natalie Kertes Weaver of Ursuline College presented the second paper in this session, entitled “Terror and the End-Times: The Search for a Responsible Eschatology.” In this paper, Weaver explored the apocalyptic dimension of eschatology. She argued that in the intersection between religion and terrorism, one finds eschatological hope giving way to an apocalyptic fatalism. By analyzing how this is manifest in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, she claimed that those who are, or perceive themselves to be, marginalized from

meaningful participation in public life, often seek refuge in the apocalyptic imaginations that these religions offer. Despair of the present world and presumption about the manner in which future events are supposed to unfold, when interpreted through an apocalyptic religious lens, result in an exhortation to violent action. Those who yield to the apocalyptic imagination find justification, sanctification, and even a mandate to engage in violent behaviors, as they perceive themselves to be participants in a holy war. In seeking a means to negotiate the intricate web of ideologies that underlies religious violence, Weaver further sought to understand how the apocalyptic imagination functions not only at the *margins* of religion but also in its *central* themes and doctrines. Calling upon the insights of Rosemary Radford Ruether, she explored the masked apocalypticism that underlies major Christian doctrines, which Ruether argues inevitably leads to radical ecological irresponsibility. Weaver suggested that in unmasking the apocalyptic dimension of Christianity, Ruether's eschatology becomes an exemplar of the rhetoric of virtue as called for in Shield's presentation. The paper demonstrated this claim by analyzing how Ruether's eschatology manifests the tripartite commitment to resistance, attentiveness, and solidarity—the marks of a responsible eschatology.

The presentation concluded with the suggestion that a responsible Christian eschatology, understood as a rhetoric of virtue for the present context, would be guided by five key points: (1) resistance to presumption about the way in which future events are (believed to be) scripted to unfold; (2) resistance to understanding the future as dualistically disconnected from the present; (3) resistance to any use of violence justified on religious grounds; (4) attentiveness to recovery and reappropriation of Christian sources and symbols that empower us to resist religiously motivated violence; and (5) recognition of our solidarity as a pluralistic human and biotic community responsible to one another in the collaborative effort to build conditions of mutual sustainability into the future.

Questions were moderated by Alison Benders of Ursuline College. Two primary areas of discussion emerged from the session. The first concerned the tension between the future understood as initiated by God and the future understood as constructed by human endeavor. The second concerned the question over the degree of freedom Christian theologians have for reinterpreting or revising doctrines. At what point, the question was raised, do our reinterpretations or revisions depart from "authentic" Christianity?

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