

## SPIRITUALITY

- Topic: Considering Impasses in Christian Spirituality  
Convener: James Wiseman, The Catholic University of America  
Moderator: Thomas McElligott, Saint Mary's College of California  
Presenters: Anita Houck, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana  
Dorian Llywelyn, Loyola Marymount University

The first of this year's two presenters, Anita Houck, used the thought of the twentieth-century Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to shed light on some of the difficulties or impasses that arise in spirituality studies today. She began her presentation, titled "Speaking through the Impasse: A Bakhtinian Way into Spirituality," by noting two principal concerns in the field of spirituality: first, how to shape and define the field as possessing both disciplinary integrity and genuine inter-disciplinarity, and second, how to illumine the popular distinction between the spiritual and the religious. She pointed out that both of these concerns have something of Constance Fitzgerald's notion of *impasse* to them. Accordingly, Houck sought to move through the impasse by examining the ways in which spirituality, religion, spirituality studies, and theology use language and by showing how Bakhtin's notion of polyvocality can "re-describe" any oppositions that arise (for example, the opposition that appears when a person claims to be "spiritual but not religious").

According to Bakhtin, polyvocal language incorporates "a living mix of varied and opposing voices" that both critique and illuminate each other in a genuine dialogue. Since spirituality studies and lived spirituality are, at their best, both polyvocal, the difference between lived spirituality and religion and the difference between spirituality studies and theology can best be understood as lying along a continuum rather than as stark opposites. On this understanding, lived spirituality and spirituality studies tend to emphasize diversity over coherence (but without ignoring the need for coherence), while religions and theology tend to emphasize orthodox ways of speaking to and about the divine (while yet acknowledging the need of some diversity).

The other presenter, Dorian Llywelyn, spoke about a different kind of impasse and the way in which spirituality could help the Churches of both East and West move toward reunification. His paper, "Beyond Filioque: Spirituality and Theology in Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue," began with the observation that despite the considerable rapprochement between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches over the past forty years, doctrinal differences (especially ones concerning the nature of Church authority) preclude any realistic prospects of prompt reunification. Joint statements on doctrinal issues have not necessarily resulted in warmer relations, particularly in the Orthodox homelands of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Ecumenical discussions are subtly affected by differences in ecclesial cultures: Eastern and Western traditions differ in their understandings of the nature of theology and its practice in the life of the Church. Cultural dissonance was the underlying cause of the Great Schism of 1054, and contemporary

ecumenical discussions are more likely to be pastorally successful when they deploy a comprehensive, contextual approach. The academic discipline of spirituality—with its focus on experience, its consideration of context, and its inherent inter-disciplinarity—provides tools that can usefully complement the usual, more systematic approaches of Catholic-Orthodox dialogue.

Both presentations generated a number of questions and comments from those in attendance. In a brief business session at the end of the period, various possible topics were suggested for the session in 2010, all of them related in some way to next year's overall convention theme of "Theology's Prophetic Commitments."

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