

SOOTHSAYING, SAINTS, AND THE “SIGNS OF THE TIMES”

- Topic: Soothsaying, Saints, and the “Signs of the Times”: A Debate About History As A Source For Theological Ethics
- Convener: Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College
- Presenters: Thomas Harmon, Ave Maria University
Laurie Johnston, Emmanuel College
- Respondent: Robert Daly, Boston College

Harmon offered a critique of the contemporary usage of the phrase “the signs of the times” in Catholic Social Teaching. Analyzing several recent encyclicals (including *Caritas in Veritate*) as well as scholarly works, he found that there is confusion about whether “reading the signs of the times” means “reading history in light of the truth” or “reading the truth in history.” This unwitting mixture of two very different approaches is due to the unfortunate influence of Rousseau’s thesis that man transforms his nature through history and so no two historical epochs are similar. This in turn leads to the judgment that it is pointless to refer to some transhistorical truth; one must become adept at reading the truth in history itself. But this is the error which Eusebius made and for which Augustine would have called “soothsaying.” Harmon argues that if they are not to fall victim to ideological imprisonment or temporal messianism, theologians today must take their cue from Augustine, who was pessimistic about humans’ ability to discover any intelligibility to history. The intelligibility of history is in the mind of God, not in history itself, and so we must focus instead on reading history in light of the truth.

Johnston agreed with Harmon that it is vital to approach history with a hermetic that is well grounded theologically. However, she argued for the importance of historical consciousness and attention to history as a source for theological ethics, but distinguished this from radical historicism. God’s continuing revelation in history and Christians’ vocation to respond to their contemporary history, in fact, require historical consciousness, and such awareness of history is key to counteracting what Harmon called Eusebianism or ideological imprisonment. Citing Congar’s *True and False Reform in the Church*, she noted that events “in the world” might actually represent the voice of God calling the Church to reform. She also noted the importance of the experience of the *victims* of history as a locus of revelation, and cited Rahner’s idea that martyrdom can represent “objective holiness” within history. Martyrs can aid our historical discernment by disclosing the contours of evil in the present day. On the other hand, saints also serve as heralds of Christian vocation by revealing the scope of what is possible for human life within history. Finally, drawing on Congar, Johnston argued that the emergence of new types of saints (such as Sr. Dorothy Stang, the first “ecomartyr”) is an indication that the Church as a whole is being called to understand its mission in the world in new ways.

Both speakers touched on the need to acknowledge the ways in which sin clouds humans’ attempts at historical discernment. Daly, as respondent, also called

for humility, noting that discussions of this issue tend to be clouded when theologians fail to compare normative-ideal positions with normative-ideal positions, and instead compare the normative-ideal of one position with the weak points of the "opposing" position. He also pointed out that, especially in questions as broad as the one under discussion, no one person, theologian, or position is in a position to say all that is needed to be said. He concluded that authentic striving toward the truth is an interdisciplinary, community venture, requiring the input of all the saints, as well as the input of some whom we probably would not consider to be saints.

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