

DOING THEOLOGY IN FRAGMENTS—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Doing Theology in Fragments: “The Fragment” in Theological Method and Epistemology
- Convener: Judith Gruber, Loyola University New Orleans
- Moderator: Mara Brecht, St. Norbert College
- Presenters: Brent Little, Loyola University Chicago
Jenny Newsome Martin, University of Notre Dame
Judith Gruber, Loyola University New Orleans

This session investigated whether “the fragment” offers a viable hermeneutical frame for mapping the methodological and epistemological parameters of a theology which is sensitive to the intricate interplay of unity and diversity, of identity and difference in the Catholic tradition. The papers of the session proposed that the principles of the fragment (provisionality, ambiguity, multiplicity, epistemic humility) allow us to outline a theology which adequately reflects the always finite mediation of the transcendent in human experience and knowledge. They developed these themes in a cross-reading of several seminal thinkers of the Catholic tradition—and beyond.

In his presentation, “Fragments and the Development of Doctrine,” Brent Little took up David Tracy’s argument that fragments are the spiritual situation of postmodernity, a reminder that theology must attend to the plurality of contemporary experiences of God. However, Brent asked, how does the theologian gather these fragments without this becoming little more than a collection based on personal taste? To address this criteriological issue, he drew on John Henry Cardinal Newman’s seven notes in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* as lenses through which one can consider whether or not a fragment finds some form of coherence with the Catholic tradition.

Jennifer Martin’s paper, “The Wound & the Fragment: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Ecumenical Retrieval of Russian Orthodox Theology,” traced fragments of the writings of Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work. She argued that both von Balthasar’s performative appropriation of non-Catholic sources and the methodological principles he shares with Bulgakov offer trajectories for a theology of the fragment which resists the pretensions of a fully comprehensive closed system and privileges equally a posture of openness and the sanction of determinative, unique claims.

Judith Gruber’s paper, “Remapping Cano’s *De Locis Theologicis* after the Spatial Turn: Towards a Fragmented Theological Epistemology,” offered a reinterpretation of Melchior Cano’s *De Locis Theologicis* in light of Michel de Certeau’s spatial epistemology. While for most interpreters, Cano instigates a monolithic theory of theological knowledge, she argued that the loci can be considered to do so only if the contingent practices of their formation are concealed. In exposing these practices, she sketched parameters of a theological epistemology which highlights the fragmentary character of our knowledge of God.

Each paper was followed by a ten-minute question-and-answer session, and the final twenty minutes of the panel were devoted to an interactive debate to develop its overarching theme. The lively discussion among the 15–20 attendees focused on

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possible relations of the fragment to tradition, on the fragment to the “whole” (of existence, and of the divine) and the fragment as the condition of all theology.

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