

ANTHROPOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Relationality, Anthropology, and Baptism
 Convener: Tiffany Hartnell-Howden, Boston College
 Moderator: Adam Beyt, Loyola Chicago University
 Presenters: Brianne Jacobs, Emmanuel College
 Arun Joseph Chakkalakkal, KU-Leuven
 Bede Ukwuije, C.S.Sp., Duquesne University

In response to a call for papers the three selected proposals addressed the topic of baptism and relational anthropologies highlighting examples and counterexamples of authentic relationality and the possibilities inherent in baptismal grace.

Brianne Jacobs of Emmanuel College presented a paper entitled “Infinite Generation: Relationships and Baptism in the AI Age,” in which she argued that while artificial intelligence (AI) is advertised as a generative technology it is in fact a form of autoeroticism and consumes and reduces rather than produces authentic relationships. Drawing on Karl Rahner, Jacobs argued that by virtue of our baptism human beings are called to open ourselves to others and to transcend self, an authentically generative process which bears the fruits of faith, hope and love. The applications of AI as a replacement for authentic relationship in a therapeutic or romantic context cut off the possibility of self-transcendence and, citing Augustine, trains the user to be “curved in on oneself.” The grace of baptism can counter this tendency.

Arun Joseph Chakkalakkal of KU-Leuven presented a paper entitled “Relationality and Anthropology: Weaving Towards a Participatory Relational Ontology,” in which he argued that there is a way to avoid the inherent dualism of modern relational and participatory ontologies, exemplified in the theologies of John Zizioulas and Hans Boersma respectively. In his paper, Chakkalakkal traced the lineage of classical versions of relational and participatory ontologies from Aristotle to Anselm and Aquinas, highlighting the significance of each along the way. The modern shift to the individual and the separation of creation from the Creator introduced the problem of an autonomous self in relation to a distant God which classical ontologies cannot account for. While Zizioulas addresses the problem of modern dualism by arguing that creation relates to the Creator like the persons of the Trinity relate to one another and Boersma argues that all of creation participates in Christ, each tend toward the extremes of absolute autonomy or absolute dependence. As a solution, Chakkalakkal resourced Irenaeus’ *analogia entis* as a middle way—creation participates in the life of God analogous to the participation of the persons of the Trinity. This ontology is not simply relational nor participatory but incorporates the strengths of each and seeks to avoid absolute distinction and absolute absorption.

Bede Ukwuije, C.S.Sp. of Duquesne University presented a paper entitled “*Memoria Christi* in the Amistad Story: Transforming the Memory of Race through the Memory of Grace,” in which he argued that re-membering history through the lens of grace has the potential to heal wounded memory and resolve contemporary problems of polarization. Drawing on the example of the Amistad story, Ukwuije pointed to the role of “*Memoria Christi*” as a common source of grace and solidarity for the liberated

enslaved Africans and American abolitionist missionaries alike. The upshot of recognizing the common woundedness of humanity enabled the communities to see one another clearly as made in the image of God and facilitated collaboration rather than opposition. Thus, the Amistad story can serve as a model for healing the wounds of race-based animosity today.

The subsequent discussion explored the limits of AI relationships, the role of myth and story in actualizing liberation, and the fundamental conditions and form of fruitful relationships. Jacobs was asked whether human–AI relationships might be beneficial for individuals who suffer from debilitating illness or isolation. She responded that there is still little research evidence for the benefits of AI therapy but argued that given the self-transcendent needs of humanity, it is more likely to cause further isolation. In response to a question on the difference between “fruitful” pleasure and instant pleasure, Jacobs commented that relationships are not primarily ordered toward pleasure but rather producing something more of which human–AI relationships are not capable. On a related question regarding the productive role of failure in relationships, Jacobs affirmed that AI does not provide the necessary “push-back” or friction for authentic human growth and Ukwuije added that as an example, the common ground of vulnerability and finitude between the American abolitionists and the freed Africans was conducive to growth as well. A participant challenged Ukwuije on the mythological and thus not actually realized quality of the Amistad story, arguing that the collaboration described in the story did not ultimately lead to abolition. Ukwuije contended that the story mobilized people toward abolition and drew in those who were otherwise on the margins or uncertain about the movement. A final question for all participants inquired to what degree relationship with God, others, or AI might be understood in terms of asymmetrical reciprocity. Chakkalakkal responded that a relational participatory ontology fits this mode of relationality and added that AI might be a form of “intensive imagination” to which Jacobs responded that interaction with AI is more passive than active.

The session was concluded with a fifteen-minute business meeting during which the new member Brienne Jacobs was included in a brainstorming session on the 2026 convention theme of synodality.

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