

CHRIST – TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Eugene R. Schlesinger, Santa Clara University
 Moderator: Robert Lasalle-Klein, Santa Clara University
 Presenters: William Orbih, Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary
 Brandon Peterson, University of Utah
 Michael Costas, Boston College

This session consisted of three papers, each approximately twenty minutes long, that explored the convention theme of “One Baptism” and evolving visions of catholicity in connection to Christology through a variety of approaches. Each paper was followed by a question-and-answer period, and the session concluded with a wider discussion of emergent themes from the papers.

William Orbih's paper, “The Risen Christ is the Resisting Christ: From Nicaea to Postcolonial Africa,” proceeded from a recognition that among the effects of coloniality is a tendency to convince Africans that any resistance is always unethical. In view of this, Orbih argued that African theology needs to develop a theology of “a Savior who offers salvation and inspires resistance to the colonial status quo.” He did so by appeal to Athanasius's account of Christ as both divine and human, constructing a Christology that is “faithful to the creed” and also “relevant to Africans.” Recognizing Jesus's resistance to the injustices of his own time, the same injustices that crucified him, Christians should recognize the resurrection as his vindication, and their own baptism as an invitation to uncompromising and courageous resistance to colonial structures. A key component of this Christology is its distinction from the notion of Christ as “liberator,” which Orbih suggests lends itself to a “cargo mentality,” which reproduces colonial structures by priming Africans to view their salvation as something to be received from outside, rather than a reality informing their own agency.

Brandon Peterson's contribution, “One Gospel, Many Nations: The Torah, the Covenant, and Christian Supersessionism,” took as its starting point the distinction proffered by Jewish theologian David Novack between “hard” and “soft” supersessionisms. The former views the Christian church as a replacement of Judaism, while the latter views it as a culmination and fulfillment without suggesting the obsolescence of Judaism. Peterson situated several relatively recent contributions, ranging from Joseph Ratzinger to Matthew Levering, from so called Christian Seders to identifying Jesus as the “living Torah” within this typology, and suggested a third category of “firm” supersessionism may also be needed to fully account for the viewpoints. Often lost in the discussion is the distinction between the Israelite religion of the Hebrew Scriptures and post-Christian Judaism. Following Amy Jill Levine, Peterson suggested that Christianity and Judaism might be better understood as children of Ancient Judaism, rather than as “mother” and “daughter” religions. In moving towards a conclusion, he suggested that the category of “covenant” may be more fruitful than such concepts as “Torah” for articulating Jesus' and Christianity's relationship to the elder siblings.

Finally, Michael Costas offered his paper, “Living Up to Our Baptism,” which explored the ways in which this unrepeatable sacrament can be continually

reappropriated by Christians, whose life remains a fundamentally baptismal reality. He developed this question principally in conversation with Thomas Aquinas, along with categories derived from Bernard Lonergan, arguing that baptism is a sign which brings about what it signifies, imparting upon its recipients a character and priming them for lives of worship lived according to the law of the cross. Baptism has a “developmental intelligibility” insofar as its effects are deepened across the span of one’s life. The classic categories of sacramental baptism, the baptism of desire, and the baptism of blood provide a framework for articulating this developmental intelligibility. Doing so requires some shifts from Thomas’s framework, proceeding principally from baptism’s effect, rather than its administration. The life of grace ordinarily begins with the heart’s desire (baptism of desire), proceeds to public commitment (sacramental baptism), and reaches its culmination by sharing in the law of the cross in one’s concrete living (baptism of blood). The baptismal reality of Christian life unfolds through a series of affective breakthroughs, culminating in charity.

The discussion following each paper and the session as a whole was stimulating, with questions ranging from the difference between resistance and liberation, to how baptismal liturgies could more effectively emphasize the political dimensions of Christian commitment.

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