THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: One Baptism: Evolving Visions of Catholicity from Nicaea to Vatican II and Beyond
Convenor: Megan Loumagne Ulishney, Boston College
Moderator: Benjamin J. Hohman, Salve Regina University
Presenters: Taylor Nutter, Mount St. Mary's University
Monica Marcelli-Chu, Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University
Alexander Klee, Boston College

This session solicited papers addressing the conference theme of "One Baptism: Evolving Visions of Catholicity from Nicaea to Vatican II and Beyond" and, at the same time, engaging topics at the intersection of Theology and Science. The session included three twenty-minute presentations, followed by a period of questions and answers following each individual paper.

Taylor Nutter, in his paper entitled "AI, Death-Time, and Baptismal Hope," critiqued the view of artificial intelligence (AI) as an "inevitable" feature of modern life. To develop his argument, he drew from a creative array of sources including Cyril O'Regan's genealogy of modernity, Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, Karl Marx, medical ethicist Harriet Washington, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and others, to illuminate the entanglements of AI development with Gnosticism, surveillance capitalism, antiblackness, and labor exploitation. Far from being a neutral technological innovation to be navigated with resigned prudence, Nutter argued that AI poses fundamental threats to creaturely life and flourishing that must be resisted wholesale. He juxtaposed the "death-time" of AI with the temporality of "baptismal hope." Drawing from Elizabeth Freeman's notion of "queer temporality," Nutter presented baptismal hope as contained within the "temporality of the resurrected Christ," which is a "queer temporality," insofar as "Christ orders past, present, and future, and is, therefore, not ordered by them." Baptismal hope is a promise of real presence that renounces the "cruel optimism" of AI.

In her presentation entitled "Grace-in-Flux and a Changeable Self: Conceiving an Ecological Theology of Grace," Monica Marcelli-Chu brought Thomas Aquinas' understanding of grace into conversation with an ecological understanding of "flux." Introducing the concept of flux from the context of ecology enabled Marcelli-Chu to develop an "ecosystem-centric rather than organism-centric" approach which provided a pathway to consider the concept of grace from the perspective of integral ecology. Marcelli-Chu proposed a view of grace as "both singular and diverse," and as "infused and flowing." Considering grace in these terms allowed for a reconceptualizing of human agency as not focused on singular acts or habits, but rather, on the reality of "flow." From this consideration of grace, Marcelli-Chu turned to a particular problem raised by neurobiology concerning the notion of a "self." Marcelli-Chu noted that neurobiology emphasizes the various processes that coalesce into self-awareness, in contrast to more colloquial understandings of the self as a distinct and static entity. She noted that the suggestion of the "non-existence" of the self raises problems especially for ethics, since some form of a self is required for that self to have ethical obligations to one's neighbor, the earth, etc. Marcelli-Chu then connected the problem of the self

with her earlier arguments about grace-in-flux. She suggested that one could consider the self as "in-flux," and both "continuous and changeable, in relation and singular." Finally, she argued that the creation-in-flux presented in the paper reflects a divine likeness, even as the simplicity of the divine draws everything into the unity of itself.

In the third presentation, "Original Trauma: Epigenetics as a Solution to the Issue of Evolution and Propagated Sin," Alexander Klee took up anew the perpetual puzzle of the doctrine of original sin in a post-Darwinian milieu. Klee focused, in particular, on the problem of the transmission of sin. He interpreted the premodern Western church as forming a consensus that sin is inherited (in a bodily way) rather than being spread through imitation. He then examined a modern interpretation of the transmission of sin as found in the works of Piet Schoonenberg to demonstrate that a common tendency in post-Darwinian approaches—namely, to locate the transmission of sin in culture rather than nature—strays too far from the "classical consensus." From his critique of Schoonenberg, Klee turned to developments in the emerging field of epigenetics for a solution that allows for both bodily and cultural transmission of sin, thus retaining the core of the classical consensus without losing important insights about the influence of culture on the human person. Epigenetics provides, for Klee, a powerful analogy for considering the ways in which sin can be transmitted both through bodily inheritance and cultural learning. Indeed, epigenetics troubles a simplistic dichotomy between culture and nature. Using epigenetics as an analogy, Klee emphasized that humans are born into sinful and traumatizing situations that hinder human flourishing in all aspects of life, including biology, which may make sin more likely in many circumstances. A key emphasis, though, of epigenetics is not only a negative one—that we traumatize one another. Epigenetics also illuminates the positive impacts of our relationships with each other, and reasons for cultivating baptismal hope.

MEGAN LOUMAGNE ULISHNEY
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts