

The Seminar on God and the Human Future *Continued from page 14*

have become theologians, theologians have become philosophers. They delightfully bleed into one another.

Robbins noted that there is a lack of trust in big stories. We now have little stories.

Postmodernists are non-theists, or post-theists. They are not atheists.

Caputo's God is a weak force that insists on justice to come. To use Caputo's own terms, his philosophical theology is relatively unstable: God is beyond being, God is *venir*, becoming, an event in the horizon. Perhaps frozen there forever but the call is out for the weak force of justice in, under, and with the name of God.

In Caputo's speaking and writing there are plenty of commas, as if he were struggling to find the right conceptual descriptions. His philosophical theology is refreshing, thought provoking. The collaborative work and dialogue has just begun. We are fortunate and privileged at Westar to have John Caputo as our conversation partner.

Afternoon Session with Joseph Bessler

The afternoon session featured Joe Bessler who spoke about "Moving Words: Theology and the Performance of Proposing".

Joe Bessler's presentation helped us understand Caputo's thinking and postmodern reflections on the divine, even though Bessler's talk was more about his book project that shares the same tentative title, *Moving Words*. According to Bessler, theological speech more closely resembles political speech than scientific speech.

We entered into lengthy discussion of "pure water" that is flavored all the way down. This metaphor used by Bessler ties to the work of the Christianity Seminar: there never was "pure Christianity."

Following this thought provoking and inspiring discussion another lengthy conversation ensued about the best formulation of our God Seminar voting question. The original formulation was:

To the concept of God as a supreme being, as the highest entity, and to the attempt to prove the existence of this God, "atheism is the right religious and theological reply," as Paul Tillich says.

Although that formulation accurately reflected the topic and conclusion of the Seminar's discussion, several Fellows

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Christianity Seminar

Report on the 2015 Spring Meeting

Chris Shea

For the Christianity Seminar's fifth meeting, we returned to our home turf, the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa. The general meeting theme "Tales of Sorrow, Tales of Power: Critical Questions about Religious Rhetoric" elicited six major papers on the intersection of rhetoric and history in Christian martyr tales. On March 20, the Seminar attracted some 165 participants, full of enthusiasm for our "martyr-fest" (as Judith Perkins dubbed it).

The Seminar sessions were opened by presiders L. Michael White (University of Texas) and Emily Schmidt (University of California Santa Barbara). White's work on the evolution of Christianity has spoken to a wide audience—he's the on- and off-camera guru behind the four-hour PBS/Frontline program *From Jesus to Christ: The First*

Christians (1998). Schmidt is a child (so to speak) of the Jesus Seminar, since she attended her first meeting as an undergraduate. She has gone on to an MTS at Harvard Divinity School and is hard at work on a PhD in Religious Studies at UCSB.

Seminar organizer Hal Taussig (Union Theological Seminary) launched the meeting with the intriguingly-titled "What Do Fiction, Mass Crucifixions, and Killer Seals Add Up To?" Here, Seminar participants and Westar Associates were introduced to the idea that the martyrologies (ancient stories about martyrs) had a higher religious and cultural significance than Hollywood hacks—and many modern critics—are willing to accord them. "Indeed," as Taussig puts it, "current scholarly conversation has shifted so complexly that current scholarship has more than several scholars suspecting that martyrological discourse in the first centuries may well have been a defining dimension of the emergence of Christianity itself." In ironic contrast to previous schools of thought, however, Taussig argues that the martyr tales, as rhetorical constructs, have little to say about the history of the early Christ people. His paper is an invaluable and lucid guide to currents of scholarship on the early Christian stories about martyrs.

Continuing the day's theme and integrating into the discussion ideas from his Wednesday workshop on Paul,

Seminar organizer Brandon Scott (Phillips Theological Seminary, emeritus) tackled “Jesus the Martyr (Rom 3:21–26).” In a close analysis of a perplexing text, Scott convinced us that (1) Paul understands the death of Jesus within the context of the ancient literary convention of the “noble death”—a dramatic portrayal of how someone’s heroic way of facing death summed up the ideals for which that person had lived—not in the context of substitutionary atonement; and (2) there may be a kind of DNA (his term) that comes out of 4 Maccabees (a first-century CE text glorifying Jewish martyrs), stays in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and feeds into Islam—and this DNA may lead to war. As topics for future study, he suggested the Seminar unpack the meaning of “noble death” and consider what motivated the Acts of Paul to discuss the death of Paul.

Maia Kotrosits (Denison University) returned to the Seminar after her “Second-Century Imaginations of Social Unity” last spring, presenting “Sovereignty in Ruins: The Death of Ignatius and Ecologies of Destruction.” In a densely packed argument she dealt with: the ecology of life and death in the Roman Empire, the politics of martyrdom, the myth of the exceptionality of Christian martyrdom, the Ignatius of scholarly romanticism, Ignatius as a Judean diasporic figure, the invention of the terms “Christian” and “*Christianismos*” (the Greek term at the root of our word “Christianity”) and their specific meaning within the martyr cult, the longing for the sovereignty of a Jewish state as an underpinning of martyr narratives, ancient concepts of the social body, and Maccabean echoes in Christian martyr tales. The response to Kotrosits’ paper came from distinguished classicist Judith Perkins (University of Saint Joseph, emerita), whose 1995 *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (Routledge) is a noteworthy contribution to martyrological research. Perkins developed Kotrosits’ analysis of the imperial “ecology of life and death” by pointing to the Empire’s “overarching values”: no uprising, no unrest, nothing is to interfere with the pumping of resources to the Empire’s center. This is Perkins’ first encounter with Westar; we’re pleased she promptly signed on as a Fellow.

Carly Daniel-Hughes (Concordia University in Montreal) led off the afternoon sessions with “Producing and Contesting Martyrdom in Pre-Decian Roman North Africa,” which critically examined the rhetoric of the third-century theologian Tertullian and the early Christian tales about the martyrs. A complex and closely reasoned work, her paper raised issues which cast doubt on popular perceptions of the Christian worldview, as well as on the historicity of the North African martyrologies. She touched on the techniques the martyrologists use to create a sense of Christian identity; she reminded us of the diversity of early views of martyrdom; she unpacked the group-formation

rhetoric behind the “I am a Christian” assertions; and she revealed the gendered imagery in the theology of martyrdom. Perkins again responded, this time as author of *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (Routledge 2009). This was Daniel-Hughes’ debut performance at the Seminar, but she’ll team with Taussig for a Jesus Seminar on the Road in Naperville, Illinois, September 18–19.

“Gladiators and Martyrs: Icons in the Arena” by Susan (Elli) Elliott followed. Her lively and moving analysis puts us in the arena seats, but as rooters for the victims of the gladiatorial games, as indeed the ancient viewers likely were. She argues that we regularly misunderstand the iconography of the gladiatorial combats—the gladiators come to represent the manly qualities that define Roman identity. Elliott is an independent scholar living in Red Lodge, Montana. As the convening collaborator of the Shining Mountain Institute, a grassroots think tank in the Big Sky region, and as a candidate for the Montana State Senate representing the Beartooth Front, she lends a unique flavor to the study of Christian origins. Her book *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul’s Letter to the Galatians in Its Anatolian Cultic Context* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series #248, 2003) is regularly invoked in research on Paul’s impact on the Christian movement.

Boston University scholar Jennifer Wright Knust led off the late afternoon session with “Christian Sacred Scriptures and the Martyrs,” which proved a splendid introduction to a new Fellow. Philip Harland (York University Toronto), author of *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians* (Bloomsbury 2009), whose podcast on Mediterranean religions has excited much attention from Fellows and Associates, was the respondent. Wright Knust’s close readings of early Christian texts elicited lively commentary, which threatened to extend the session into the dinner hour. In an engrossing exchange with the Fellows, she scored some points which will likely serve as programmatic for the Seminar: (1) we must “push back against the canonically driven lens of Christian works”; (2) we should be wary of “always tracing the canon as if it already existed”; (3) we must keep in mind that the centrality of texts is “local and opportunistic”; (4) on the vexing question of literacy among the earliest Christians we should recall that copies of Irenaeus turn up in Egypt about thirty years after the work was written in Gaul; and (5) we must avoid the printing press conception of canon.

The evening’s plenary session featured a genial conversation with longtime Fellow Joanna Dewey (Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr. Professor Emerita of Biblical Studies, Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge), hosted by Art Dewey (Xavier University). J. Dewey’s struggle as a woman in a man’s profession set heads nodding all through the Ballroom. On a day with many notable contributions by female scholars, her story commanded enraptured attention.

Christianity Seminar Ballot Items

Jews, Christians, and Christ people were executed by Roman imperial agents and government. (Taussig)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

First- and second-century Christ people and Christians were systematically targeted for execution by Roman imperial agents and government. (Taussig)

Fellows: **Black** / Associates: **Black**

Jews were systematically targeted for execution at times by Roman imperial agents and government for the first half of the second century. (Taussig)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

In portions of the last half of the third century and very early fourth century Christians were systematically targeted for execution by Roman imperial agents and government. (Taussig)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

Discursive martyrdom played a significant role for Jews, Christians, and Christ people in negotiating and strategizing their relationship to imperial violence. (Taussig)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Discursive martyrdom played a significant role in the emergence of early Christian culture. (Taussig)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

Paul understands Jesus in the noble death tradition, not sacrificial atonement. (Scott)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Ignatius does not belong to an already existent phenomenon called Christianity. (Kotrosits)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Rather than pathologically obsessed with his own death, Ignatius is captivated by imperial politics of visibility, in which the promise of being seen goes hand in hand with heightened odds of being destroyed. (Kotrosits)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Red**

Ignatius needs to be seen as a Judean diasporic figure. (Kotrosits)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Red**

Readings of martyrological materials should be recalibrated as questions of sovereignty, belonging, diaspora, and social integrity/vulnerability. (Kotrosits)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Red**

The dominant place of martyrdom in early Christian literature is not evidence of the extent of Roman persecution of Christians, but reflects the rhetorical agendas of early Christian authors. (Daniel-Hughes)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Ancient Christians did not develop a singular ideology of martyrdom, but multiple and contested ones, with varying implications for how they understood Christian life and practice. (Daniel-Hughes)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

While some early Christians invested heavily in martyrdom, other Christians (perhaps the majority of them) complied and compromised with Roman authorities to avoid death and physical harm. (Daniel-Hughes)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Some ancient Christians advocated compromise with Roman officials to avoid death and torture, and they had theological and scriptural rationales for doing so. (Daniel-Hughes)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

As the Christianity Seminar pursues a more accurate historical reconstruction of the development of early forms of Christianity than traditional interpretations, we must examine and question assumptions of Christian exceptionalism present in many previous interpretations of early Christian history. (Elliott)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

As the Christianity Seminar pursues a more accurate historical reconstruction of the development of early forms of Christianity than traditional interpretations, we must examine and question assumptions about the Roman Empire's success in exercising absolute power. This means looking for the strategies that various groups in Roman society, including Christians, used to exercise power over their own lives and challenge imperial power. (Elliott)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Although presented as projecting absolute power, the Roman amphitheaters and the programs of spectacles that took place within them provided a location for negotiating power dynamics around the centralization of power in the Emperor. (Elliott)

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Gladiators and the Christian martyrs as presented in the narratives of their deaths are both examples of images of a similar strategy for claiming the self as a subject in a situation intended for objectification and degradation. Both use strategies based on images of the ideal of Roman *virtus*. (Elliott)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Red**

Early forms of Christianity developed in a context where the Roman arena was a prominent location for social definition and struggle for social identity. The centrality of the image of the martyrs for sectors of Christianity that rose to dominance in late antiquity is a product of the need of audiences in those sectors for an image of Christian identity that presented an image of Roman *virtus* for imitation in the context of a new vision of a Christian empire. (Elliott)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

As presented in the narratives of their deaths, the Christian martyrs became icons for Christian identity in a Christian vision of the Empire much as the gladiators functioned as icons for Roman identity in the Roman Empire. (Elliott)

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**