

Theological Engagement with California's Culture Project: Summary of the November 2011 Session

In November 2011, the TECC Project held its inaugural session at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society at the San Francisco Marriott Marquis. The speakers, Robert Covolo, Richard Mouw, Monica Ganas, and Fred Sanders, considered theological, sociological, and historical dimensions related to their research on various topics linked to California's culture. The papers by Mouw and Sanders provided methodological possibilities for accessing California's cultures and theologies. Mouw considered a number of models for approaching cultural-theologies while Sanders sketched an approach to California theologies through literary regionalism. As test-cases, Covolo and Ganas provided explorations into particular topics in their distinctive Californian manifestations. Covolo examined the motifs and realities existent in California surf culture and Ganas explored parallels between Hollywood's elevation of human demi-gods and the California church's uneasy reflection of this characteristic. Each test-case modeled the valuable features of careful theological analysis and sound critical engagement.

Each paper was followed by a brief question and answer session, and the final presentation was followed by a panel discussion and further audience participation. This discussion enabled us to begin to focus our attention on the intense difficulty of assessing California's culture, primarily due to not only its massive size and countless cultural manifestations, but also because of the elusive nature of California itself. Additional questions were raised about what is "California," including what it might be that gives rise to California's unique religious and moral climates, both to the treachery, tragedy, and redeeming qualities of the State's dynamic. These features demonstrated further both the complexity and utter necessity for *theological* engagement with California's culture. This, of course, strengthens the case for the importance of our project, which is categorically enabled to ask questions like what would the face of America or even global Christianity look like had there not been a California? And what are the deeper thoughts and values that have made California what it is? And why was the discipline of academic theology neglected as a resource able to pursue these questions? This initial session, therefore, provided a platform both in its methodological sketches and test-cases for how we will seek to answer some of these larger questions during this project's future gatherings.