

Theological Engagement with California's Culture Project: Summary of the March 2013 Workshop

On March 10-12 the TECC Project held a workshop at the beautiful historic Berkeley City Club. After an extended meeting of core group members on the 10th to discuss the goals and aims of the project, the workshop commenced Monday morning. It hosted eighteen participants (theologians, historians, and social-scientists), including three Bay Area clergy. Papers were presented on the theme, **“Is There a Theology of California?”** and on other California cultural issues.

Jason Sexton (Cambridge) gave the first paper, sketching possibilities for *how* theology as a discipline and as the exposition of the church's faith can engage California's dynamic culture. Russell Jeung (SFSU) then unveiled his work inspired by University of Virginia's Lived Theology Project, funded by the Lilly Endowment. Jeung presented his approach to writing his memoirs as a fifth-generation Chinese Californian, self-identifying with the marginalized “Hakka” people of his ancestry. Via Skype, Paul L. Metzger (Multnomah University; Institute for the Theology of Culture) presented, “Drive-By Evangelism, Church Growth and the Growth in Gang Violence,” drawing from work he's done with Bay Area pastors on gang violence and fatherlessness.

After the sudden fire at Alice Waters's *Chez Panisse*, we enjoyed lunch at Hotel Durant before returning to hear three excellent papers on the workshop theme. Fred Sanders (Biola) addressed the issue of “Is There a Theology of California?” recasting Royce's higher provincialism in light of the traditional theological loci. Richard Flory (USC) then responded as a sociologist, urging that theological conclusions be grounded in empirical research, yet accepting that theology may indeed help identify what about California gives people a second chance to be successful, and may function in a prophetic role for California. Richard Pointer (Westmont) turned a historian's lens to the question, querying whether theology could adequately capture the State, and urging caution for any triumphalist claims about theology's role to help interpret the past meaningfully. Pointer helpfully sought clarity on the nature of the “of” in a “theology *of* California.” These three papers were followed by an hour-long robust discussion among participants on the workshop theme.

After a superb dinner, we heard from our distinguished guest, the former California State Librarian and USC's University Professor, Kevin Starr, accompanied with his wife, Sheila. Professor Starr delivered an inspiring address, encouraging the work of the TECC Project in seeking to

reconnect theology back to the university. He spoke autobiographically on the issue of “California Identity and Theology,” unpacking his own approach to telling California’s story in his magisterial (presently eight-volume) California Dream series published by Oxford University Press. Therein Starr retells the California story in light of its overarching drama, which simply cannot be told without the religious and the theological features of the story.

Following Starr’s address, we hosted Bay-Area based musicians Terry Scott Taylor and Michael Roe for an acoustic California-themed music set. This included beautifully-written and imaginative renderings of California cultural phenomena, including songs about the sparrows flying over San Juan Capistrano, the significant moment when the Brooklyn Dodgers came West and its impact on New Yorkers, as well as music reflecting on dancing on Olvera Street in Los Angeles. In various ways, this song set provided its own manner of creatively and theologically reflecting on California’s culture, and should probably be a key feature of future gatherings of the TECC Project.

The next morning, we heard two papers. The first was by Bruce Baker (Seattle Pacific) on the Silicon Valley and its extant impulses relating to theological anthropology, which yielded brilliant insight from Baker’s incredible experience of working in the Silicon Valley and now teaching theological ethics, reflecting on the features there. Finally, Matthew Farlow (Wm. Jessup) gave a paper offering a critical and constructive account of the California mega-church.

Overall, the core group and advisors concluded that more work was needed on the primary question. Whether there is a particular “theology of” California is in need further exploration and will loom as the project’s research moves forward. It was concluded that focused attention in 2014 would be given over to issues of California Moral Theology. Specifically, this will address issues related to various ways California has imaged the body. Opportune venues for this research in symposia and conference sessions at Evangelical Theological Society and American Academy of Religion mtgs. in San Diego, Nov 2014, will be explored, as well as any other opportunities with other groups, including the California American Studies Association, meeting 24-25 April, 2014. Select proceeds from this workshop and our first meeting will be published in *Theology and California: Theological Refractions on California’s Culture*, ed. Jason Sexton and Fred Sanders (Ashgate, 2014), 200 copies of which will be distributed strategically to ecclesial, academic, and other leaders throughout the State. We especially wish to thank Howard and Roberta Ahmanson, and Doug Swardstrom and Steve Fergusson of Fieldstead and Co. for their generous support in funding this workshop.