

Editorial – Biennial Conference in Philosophy, Religion and Culture

Andrew Murray

Published *Sophia* 49 (December 2010): 461 – 462. DOI 10.1007/s11841-010-0219-z

The Biennial Conference in Philosophy, Religion and Culture was held at Catholic Institute of Sydney on 1 – 3 October 2010. Although this was the eighth Biennial Conference, the first being in 1996, its roots go back to 1977 and to long collaboration between the University of Newcastle and Catholic Institute of Sydney, then at Manly. It has from the beginning sought to draw academics from both universities and theological colleges into vigorous dialogue.

In its present form, the Biennial Conference is hosted and given institutional support by Catholic Institute of Sydney, but is convened by a broader group of scholars. The convenors of the 2010 conference were Stephen Buckle (ACU), William Emilsen (UTC/CSU), Peter Forrest (UNE), John McDowell (Newcastle), Andrew Murray (CIS/SCD), Shane Mackinlay (CTC/MCD).

Although largely led by philosophers, the conference has from the beginning attempted to be broad both in its scope and in its participation. Each conference has had a theme designed to focus discussion on a recognisable area of interest, but also broad enough for scholars from diverse fields to participate. It has enabled philosophers, theologians and a diverse range of scholars from the arts and occasionally the sciences to contribute to the one conference. This has led to very interesting discussions, enabling connections of thought that may not otherwise have been achieved. It has been valuable for philosophers interested in religion to talk with theologians and for theologians to speak with philosophers and those in the arts. Attendance has presumed only a serious interest in religion, good scholarship in a particular area and interest in some aspect of the theme of the current conference.

The 2010 Conference took the theme ‘Creation, Nature and the Built Environment’. The theme obviously invited people in architecture, town planning and the plastic arts to join the conversation, and they did so with contributions about the nature and design of cities and even of prisons, and about the depiction of human artefacts. Philosophers and those in the arts took up the question of beauty, and the juxtaposition of nature and built environment gave room for discussions about human activity and the environment. Theologians were able to wrestle with the notion of

creation and, together with philosophers, to respond to the problem of how traditional religious concepts might be conveyed in a contemporary context. Philosophers saw room in this for a discussion of pantheism. In all, 42 papers were presented in three streams. The following articles are based on papers that were presented at the conference.

Peter Forrest in ‘Spinozistic Pantheism, the Environment and Christianity’ begins his speculations with Spinozistic pantheism as a way of conceiving the relation of God to a law governed universe in which life has evolved. The possibility of sin and opposition between human and divine wills forces a qualified pantheism from which rational beings are excluded. This in turn opens up the possibility of Deep Ecology (the total environment is in some sense greater than humanity) and a way of understanding the Christian mysteries of creation, fall and redemption.

Jeremy Shearmur in ‘Why the ‘Hopeless War’?: Approaching Intelligent Design’ presents a serious challenge to theologians and philosophers of religious disposition to take Darwinian evolution seriously or to provide a seriously researched and argued alternative. He rejects theological modernism as insipid but indicates respect for the endeavours of those proposing Intelligent Design. In the end, however, he suggests that bringing full rigour to their project would be a daunting task.

John Owens in ‘Creation and End-Directedness’ turns to teleology to ground a richer notion of creation than is available to the Western scientific imagination. He rejects Paley’s notion of intelligent design for the richer ontology of Aristotle that sees end-directedness as intrinsic to living things. Critical to his argument is the claim of a qualitative difference between human artefacts and whole living entities. Thought about creation need not be limited to the production of materials prior to the Big Bang but can begin from the claim that with every life something new comes into existence.

Shane Mackinlay in ‘Heidegger’s Temple: How Truth Happens when Nothing is Portrayed’ focuses on one of three examples that Heidegger uses in his *The Origin of the Work of Art* to bring out Heidegger’s notion of art. A Greek temple portrays

nothing, and so is not representational. Analysis of Heidegger's concept of Nothing shows that being is more than what appears in presence and suggests that art is only fully appreciated in terms of what is absent. Art is not a matter of beauty but a happening of truth.

Matthew Del Nevo in 'Baudelaire's Aesthetic' works philosophically into poetry and art to reclaim Baudelaire's understanding of beauty, which Del Nevo claims is both authentically modern and now needed to restore the soul in art. Baudelaire's central notion is correspondence between an eternal unchanging element, for which Del Nevo develops criteria, and a sensual or voluptuous element. In the correspondence is found the space (height) for sensibility and sensitivity.