

SEMINAR IN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Now in its fifth year, the Seminar in Comparative Theology continued its practice of devoting one of its sessions to a text or question from a specific non-Christian religious tradition, and the other to the methods or purposes of comparative theology in general. Each session also addressed the convention theme, "experience and theology."

On Friday, Daniel Sheridan (Loyola, New Orleans) shared with the seminar his book-length commentary on a Hindu theological treatise on love, the *Sutras on Loving God* (11th century) attributed to the sage Narada. This Sanskrit-language text is comprised of 84 very concise statements known as sutras—each of which is usually no more than three or four words in length. Narada's sutras in as brief a fashion as possible build arguments, make or extend definitions and distinctions, and thus contribute to a gradually broader and deeper understanding of love for God (the Hindu God Visnu) and the implications of that love. The first section of the manuscript had been made available in advance to those requesting it.

In his presentation Sheridan reviewed the four parts of his comment on each sutra: a translation of the sutra; an explanation of the sutra in the context of the whole text and a broader understanding of Hindu culture and religion; the citation of some statement from the Christian spiritual tradition fruitfully parallel to the sutra through similarity or contrast; a Christian reflection on the sutra and its Christian counterpart. Acknowledging that he was writing primarily for a Christian audience, Sheridan explained that his motivation was the desire to stimulate contemporary readers to reconnect with the Christian spiritual tradition, and in particular with the fundamental Christian vocation to love God completely. In light of this goal, the Hindu text is primarily a catalyst—recognized as different, respectfully used, allowed to retain its own integrity and difference—but nevertheless useful in reawakening readers to the Christian tradition of loving God. Sheridan also speculated on differences one might discover between Hindu and Christian love, and how these differences would relate to other theological differences regarding notions of creation, grace, etc.

In his response, Robert Schreiter (Catholic Theological Union, Chicago) reflected upon the rich implications of Sheridan's project, particularly its manner of bringing together so many diverse Christian sources in response to a single Hindu text. He also noted the methods by which Sheridan managed to maintain the integrity of the Hindu and Christian texts involved while bringing them into juxtaposition. Recognizing the difficulty of so large and ambitious a project, he suggested the possibility of a more narrowly focused comparison—e.g., one might use as parallels texts from a single tradition of Christian spirituality.

Finally, Schreier identified some possible differences between Hindu love and Christian love, pushing toward the question of what an audience—such as this seminar, or the readers of the eventual book—might learn about God or love from Sheridan's book. The ensuing discussion examined from a number of angles the areas of similarity and difference regarding love of God in the Hindu and Christian traditions—e.g., apophatic and kataphatic, passive and active, trinitarian and unitary—and Sheridan's comparative commentarial method was further analyzed. We were left with the larger question, "Can Christians learn anything new about God or love of God from Hindu texts—anything that would not otherwise be learned—or do such comparative studies simply highlight or accentuate aspects of what is already known?"

Saturday's presentation by James Fredericks (St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park) offered an analysis of the category of "experience" in comparative study and interreligious dialogue. He began with a critique of the thesis that there is a single universal religious experience underlying all religions. Tracing the concept back to Schleiermacher, and while recognizing the importance and influence of this reduction of religion to matters of "intuition," "sense" and "feeling," Fredericks expressed doubt as to the value of the concept in a comparative context; use of it encourages one to decide in advance all important matters of inquiry, to assume fundamental sameness, and to undercut the importance of specific religious phenomena. The problem may be extended, he observes, to modern liberal variants on "experience" used in comparative theology and in dialogue. He then considered Lindbeck's critique of the "experiential-expressivist" model and his proposal of the cultural-linguistic model as an alternative. This, too, Fredericks found lacking, despite its merits, insofar as Lindbeck may be understood as presenting religions as closed linguistic universes, unable to communicate with worlds or languages outside themselves. In the concluding section of his presentation, Fredericks offered reflections on Gadamer's contribution to contemporary hermeneutics, particularly the notions of the "classic" and "the fusion of horizons," and offered several proposals for discussion: the meaning of texts can be ambiguous without being private; a pluralistic theology of religions is preferable to an inclusivist theology because it more ably respects the otherness of other religions; a pluralistic theology can be developed even without the assumption of a common core to all religions; comparative theology is a revisionist enterprise, which places Christian self-understanding at risk in the context of dialogue.

In his response, Joseph Bracken (Xavier University, Cincinnati) likewise critiqued the appeal to a universal underlying experience, but suggested Josiah Royce's exposition of the dynamics of community as a model for interreligious activity which may be preferable to Gadamer's. For Royce, a religious community subsists in its ongoing acts of interpretation, which in turn shape the community's identity in its ongoing commitment to truth; likewise, one might conjecture, through interreligious dialogue communities reinterpret and extend

themselves. Bracken also urged closer attention to Whitehead's notion of the "common elemental form," by which the world process is the direct result of interpretation carried on by all its members, from moment to moment; by extension, one can say that as religions dialogue with one another, out of the background of their self-interpretations, they enter upon the interpretive construction of a new world culture, in which both their distinctness and a new objective state of affairs continue to emerge. In this context, Lindbeck's linguistic framing of our experience could be interpreted as conditioning but not determinative. The ensuing discussion focused on possible differentiations of the notion of experience, the differentiation among private and public experiences, the exploration of a wider variety of ways in which appeals to experience might help or hinder interreligious dialogue, and other estimations of the positions of Schleiermacher and Lindbeck.

While the seminar is still relatively new, it is making great progress in the discussion of the detailed positions of particular religious traditions, and in the articulation of the categories and methods of comparative theology in general.

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