

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Conversion and Multiple Religious Belonging  
Convener: Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University  
Moderator: Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University  
Presenters: Catherine Cornille, Boston College  
Reid B. Locklin, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto  
Trent Pomplun, Loyola University Maryland

The purpose of this session was to explore the notion of conversion in light of the recent scholarship on multiple religious belonging, thereby foregrounding the semantic and conceptual polyvalence of *conversion* beyond the traditional juridical understanding of the term. The papers and the discussion that followed offered new and stimulating perspectives on the theological—no less than the anthropological and sociological—implications of conversion as a phenomenon whose contours are actually evolving in the context of our increasingly multireligious and multicultural societies.

In her paper “Multiple Religious Belonging as Incomplete Conversion,” Catherine Cornille explored the interface between multiple religious belonging and conversion, offering a conceptual springboard for our exploration of this phenomenon in its different manifestations. Cornille began by noting that, historically, multiple religious belonging has always characterized cultures such as that of China, where one's religious identity often comprised elements drawn from the Buddhist, the Taoist and the Confucian tradition, or that of Japan, where Buddhist practice was always colored by Shinto elements. In these contexts, individuals belonging to a particular culture would avail themselves of services offered by different religions at different times in their lives. If we then turn to the contemporary West, we find different forms of multiple religious belonging; one such form is what characterizes the New Age phenomenon of “religious seeking” while another is the consequence of one's involvement in interreligious dialogue. In this second case, an individual's original tradition may retain its primary or normative status, but he or she may also come to appropriate numerous elements of a different religious tradition. If the traditional understanding of conversion indicates a radical acceptance of a different point of view, multiple religious belonging can then be regarded as an incomplete, or unfinished conversion. Cornille referenced Joelle Rostkowsky's expression “conversion inachevée” to indicate this form of dynamic indwelling within distinct religious traditions.

Reid Locklin's paper, “Up and Through: Models of Conversion in Contemporary Advaita Vedanta,” explored the question of conversion in the sensitive context of Hindu-Christian relations. In the first part of the paper, Locklin outlined the debate that opposed Sita Ram Goel (an outspoken opponent of Christian expansionism in India) and Kuruvachira (for whom Hindu fundamentalism represented the most dangerous threat to the cultural and religious development of the Indian subcontinent). Both Goel and Kuruvachira, however, envisaged conversion as deliberately “leaving behind” a religious position that was now perceived as flawed.

Locklin contrasted this attitude with the position of modern Advaita (non-dualist) teachers, such as the religious master Swami Dayananda. The latter did not envisage conversion as a “conversion over” from one tradition to another but rather as a “conversion up,” where individuals who have experienced different religious traditions come to appreciate the higher truth of Vedanta. Locklin deploys this conceptual approach to conversion to reconsider the scriptural narrative of Paul’s acceptance of Christianity; while conversion to Advaita is “up and through” as one goes through different religious traditions until one gains an awareness of the superiority of Vedanta, conversion to Christianity could then be regarded as “over and up,” as the individual joins the community of the church as a step in her movement towards God.

Trent Pomplun’s final paper explored the legacy of Ippolito Desideri, S.J., an Italian Jesuit who in the first years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the first Westerner to master the Tibetan language and come to a real understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. His *Notizie storiche* as well as his writings on Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rin chen mo* (one of the most important texts of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism) show how Desideri’s apologetic intent and his critical attitude towards particular teachings, such as reincarnation, coexisted with a profound appreciation of Buddhist practices such as meditation. For Desideri, meditation actually allowed God to bestow graces on Tibetan practitioners that were truly mystical, placing them on the way toward final salvation. Somehow anticipating the insights of the Second Vatican Council, Desideri envisages the practice of a religion different from Christianity as already preparing one for conversion to the truth of the Gospel.

Each of the papers led to a lively discussion, challenging the audience to develop a broader understanding of conversion allowing for the partial or incremental acceptance of a number of elements of different traditions. This new perspective on conversion opens creative avenues of conversation for the fields of comparative theology and interreligious dialogue.

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