

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Bodhisattvas, Walis, and Sadhus: Saints in Other Traditions as Resources for Christian Comparative Theology?
- Convener: Pim Valkenberg, Loyola University Maryland
- Moderator: David Clairmont, University of Notre Dame
- Presenters: Christian Krokus, University of Scranton
Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
- Respondent: John Sheveland, Gonzaga University

In his presentation, “Reading al-Hallaj and John of the Cross to Understand Union with God,” Christian Krokus started with a basic description of the famous Sufi saint and martyr Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922), concentrating on his utterance of *shath*, which is an “ecstatic” or “theopathic expression” of union with God that can only be properly understood by others with similar experiences. While al-Hallaj is famously associated with the expression “*ana l-haqq*” (“I am the Truth”) that was considered a blasphemy because “Truth” is one of the 99 beautiful names of God, he was in fact executed for having spiritualized the Muslim pilgrimage by making a copy of the Ka’ba for inner devotion in his own home. While Sufis said that the problem was not so much the experience of union with God but making this experience public, his adversaries objected to the idea that God would act through Hallaj in a prophetic role. In Attar’s account of Hallaj’s execution, he is reported to have blessed those who executed him, which seems to bring him close to models of sainthood in Christianity. Krokus used Saint John of the Cross and his description of the desire to enter in complete emptiness as a heuristic lens for detecting a Christ-like and therefore Christ-inhabited life. While John would not use *shath* language like al-Hallaj, he would sometimes use the divine first person in his poetry. It is therefore possible, Krokus concluded, for Christians to find grace outside of the Church and to learn from a Muslim saint in such a way that their understanding of the life, passion, and resurrection of Christ is enhanced.

Thomas Cattoi, the second presenter, contrasted the Catholic idea of holiness with the Tibetan Buddhist notion of the bodhisattvas, and more specifically, the notion of the “pride of the deity.” A classical notion of holiness is related to the unity of the transcendentals, in which beauty makes intelligibility accessible to the senses. Saints, therefore, are persons in whose life the beauty of God is made visible. Cattoi concentrated on Theodore the Studite, a ninth century monk involved in the defense of the icons, in order to show how the Christian understanding of holiness hinges on the tension between emulation and veneration: while Christ as God incarnate is obviously to be worshiped, it seems that following the saints is enough since they are merely human. At this point, Theodore was aware of a lingering Origenism that would lead to iconoclast spiritualism and a flight from the senses. Such a disembodied spirituality might find easier access to Buddhist ideals of sainthood such as the notion of the bodhisattvas in the Kagyu

school of Vajrayana Buddhism. After a first phase in which the bodhisattva is seen as distinct from the visualization practitioner, the phase of the “pride of the deity” reflects on their fundamental unity, but after this follows the phase of completion in which the unity is dissolved into nothingness. Cattoi suggested that bodhisattvas, being saints in a world where the unity of the transcendental has been dissolved, might be a better fit to the modern idea of sainthood insofar as it is prepared to look beyond celebrities.

In his response, John Sheveland concentrated on two main areas. First, he suggested that an implicit inclusivist theology of religions is operating in both presentations, which leads to an asymmetry in the comparison since the Christian pole determines what real sainthood is. While he agreed that such a theology of religions might be necessary for an “in-house rationale,” it should be set aside once the dialogue is underway in order not to domesticate the other. Sheveland suggested that the notion of solidarity be used as the methodological point of departure in theology of religions, and he pointed to Gandhi as model. The second area that Sheveland addressed was the problematic notion of suffering in the two papers. We should be very cautious to link suffering and holiness in a way that legitimizes the victims of history. Again, the notion of solidarity demands that the notion of suffering be reinterpreted as dangerous memory to privilege the victims of history.

After Krokus and Cattoi replied to Sheveland’s concerns and suggestions, a lively discussion followed on aspects of Buddhism (the relation between conventional and ultimate reality), Islam (canons of sainthood and border figures), and the danger of romanticism in our reconstructions of historical models of sainthood.

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