

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—Topic session (Preconvention)

Topic:	Comparative Theology—25th Anniversary Event
Convener:	Rita George-Tvrtković, Benedictine University
Presenters:	Francis X. Clooney, Harvard University James L. Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University Daniel A. Madigan, Georgetown University
Respondent:	Marianne Farina, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology

The purpose of this pre-convention session was to celebrate twenty-five years of Comparative Theology at CTSA. Our session was divided into three parts: reflections on the past; a group comparative reading; and a discussion of possibilities for the future.

In the first part, “The Past: Reflections on the Origins and Growth of Comparative Theology at CTSA,” two founding members of comparative theology, James Fredericks and Francis Clooney, discussed the origins of the movement. Fredericks shared memories of people who shaped his development as a comparative theologian, including Clooney, Joseph M. Kitagawa (one of his mentors at the University of Chicago), and Masao Abe (his professor, sensei, dialogue partner, friend). Fredericks noted that he and Clooney present fundamentally similar views of comparative theology vis-à-vis the theology of religions and the academic study of religion, but offer different “styles” of carrying out this project, one focused primarily on texts (Clooney), the other focused primarily on the praxis of dialogue and interreligious friendship (Fredericks).

Francis Clooney took us back to the 1980s, and described his efforts to make space for Comparative Theology at CTSA. The goal was (and is) not to turn the CTSA into AAR, or to work separately from it, but to work with it by connecting the wisdom of other religious traditions with recognizable Catholic theological topics, teaming up with other groups, and drawing on local experts. Clooney shared a handout which listed every comparative theology session at CTSA from 1988 to 2014; topics have ranged from “World Religions as a Source for Catholic Theology, A Case Study: Hindu and Buddhist Interpretations of Worship” to “Resurrection and Reincarnation” and “Classical Impasses in Muslim-Christian Encounters.”

In the second part of the session, “The Present: Doing the Work of Comparative Theology,” Daniel Madigan introduced the text, *The Conference of the Birds* by the medieval Muslim poet Attar, and we broke into small groups for reading and discussion. This was followed by a response from Marianne Farina, who reflected on the notion of discernment in both Attar and Catherine of Siena. We ended with an all-too-brief group discussion of the text.

In the third part of the session, “The Future: Comparative Theology at CTSA in the Next 25 Years,” attendees commented on recent developments (e.g., the gradual emergence of related CTSA groups such as “Theologies Responsive to Islam” and “Buddhist-Christian Dialogue”) and brainstormed for the future. Some key observations included: we have to be prepared for the “next big shift,” just as we dealt with the major theological changes following *Nostra Aetate* fifty years ago; we need to avoid further “balkanization” into sub-interest groups such as Christian-Muslim, Christian-Buddhist, Christian-Hindu; we cannot be a group only for

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specialists who can read Arabic or Sanskrit; and we need to avoid “soft comparisons” and engage in deeper analysis. Questions included: how do we better integrate comparative theology topics into a wider range of theological concerns, lest we become a special interest group? How might we more effectively collaborate with other CTSA groups? Can we do more to help Catholic universities deal with the reality of religious diversity? How can we best educate the next generation of doctoral students in this area? Comparative Theology plans to continue finding new ways to connect with and permeate all sectors of the CTSA, for the good of theology as a whole.

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