

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation
Convener: Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
Moderator: Peter Feldmeier, University of Toledo
Presenters: Bede Benjamin Bidlack, Saint Anselm College
Reid B. Locklin, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto
Axel M. Oaks Takács, Harvard Divinity School

In “Imagining Forth the Incarnation: A Comparative Islamic Theo-Poetics of the Flesh,” Axel M. Oaks Takács compares Johannes Scotus Eriugena (d. circa 877) and the Muslim Persian poet Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ of Shīrāz (d. circa 1390) on theo-poetics and imagination in order to articulate a subversive incarnational imaginary. A key theme for Ḥāfiẓ is that of the lover’s im/possible union with the beloved. That union is obtained through the poetic imagination, which negotiates the tensions between immanence and transcendence, union and separation. Similarly, Eriugena articulates a poetics of the impossible, arguing that the Incarnation brings together the opposites of created reality and the uncreated God and moves beyond the logical to make the impossible possible. Just as the Incarnate Word suffered in the flesh, the person must enter into spaces of suffering, attend to and act with and alongside the oppressed. The Incarnation liberates us from the confines of what we falsely presume to be real, theo-poetically disrupts the oppressive aspects of social imaginaries, and calls us deeper into the flesh, the world, and God. Similar to how Muslim poets imagine forth revelation, Christian tradition calls our bodies to imagine forth the incarnation.

In his presentation, “Of Soldiers and Saints: Spiritual Combat in St. Ignatius Loyola and Chen Weiming,” Bede Benjamin Bidlack retrieves the metaphor of spiritual combat through a comparison of Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and Neoconfucian scholar-bureaucrat Chen Weiming (1881-1958). The *taiji quan* theme of “stick and follow” means to withdraw *shen* (spirit) and join with the opponent’s movements, thereby restoring cosmic harmony. The first step of the *Exercises* also requires self-withdrawal. By moving within oneself, the retreatant rids the soul of disorder and is able to discern between the spirits one follows and the spirits one rejects. In “following the commander’s banner,” the military commander is connected with the heart-mind and the banner with the waist. That the commander of action is the heart-mind is important for clarifying the strategy of *taiji quan*: overcoming hardness with softness. Ignatius also uses the metaphor of a military banner, calling retreatants to choose which banner to follow, Christ’s or Satan’s. Christ’s martial strategy also emphasizes the “soft” virtues of contempt, humility, and poverty over the “hard” vices of fame, pride, and riches. Bidlack argues that a martial metaphor can be productive and that the martial arts can be powerful tools for embodied contemplation.

In “Striving for Other Worlds, without An-Other: Two *Advaita* Visions of Social Transformation,” Reid B. Locklin compares two non-dualist approaches to social transformation. For Transcendental Meditation (TM) and its founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1914-2008), the relative exists only in and through the Absolute. Rather than withdrawing from the relatively-existing world, the goal is to harmonize the

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relative with the Absolute. TM practice leads not only to individual liberation but also to social transformation. Such is the focus of John Hagelin's *Manual for a Perfect Government*, which argues that government functions best when it empowers people to become self-governing (through TM). Hagelin connects Advaita teaching with contemporary science and public policy. For Anantanand Rambachan, on the other hand, the Vedas constitute the unique source for liberation and suggest a radically egalitarian and participatory social ethic. Rambachan revalues the created world, calling for engagement with the world, its history, and its social sciences. Rambachan's thought has inspired Sadhana, an explicitly Advaitin progressive Hindu movement that works for social justice. Further comparative work with Christian movements can be helpful. For example, a comparison between *Laudato Si'* and social Advaitins helps clarify the motivations, theologies, and strategies of religiously-inspired environmental work.

Discussion after the presentations crossed all three papers. Some questions sought clarification (how Cheng and Ignatius conceive of banners) or requested further information (the role of poetics in Christian traditions, the selection of Eriugena in a comparative project, and the specific activities of Sadhana). Other questions reflected on the theological implications of the comparisons undertaken by each presenter (for example, whether the problem of incarnation for Islam ultimately was about a perception of the ways Christians *restrict* incarnation to Jesus). The group also addressed the possibilities of integrating diverse techniques (poetics, martial arts, interfaith activism) into comparative theological education as well as the challenges of institutional contexts and locations for comparative pedagogies.

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