

TEXTUAL JOURNEYS IN COMPARATIVE  
THEOLOGY – PRE-CONVENTION MEETING

- Topic: Perceiving Divinity in Jesus and Beyond: A Christian-Islamic Exercise in Interreligious Reading
- Conveners: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University  
Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University
- Moderator: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
- Presenter: Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University

The purpose of this meeting is to bring theologians together who wish to explore the practice of comparative theology, otherwise known as interreligious theology or intercultural theology. This meeting invites someone to select short texts from a non-Christian tradition. Following introductory explanations of key terms by the presenter, the group engages in interreligious close reading together as a community so that fresh theological insights may be encountered.

This year, Axel M. Oaks Takacs, an assistant professor at Seton Hall University, selected the texts. From the Christian tradition, the following was read: Mark 10:17-29 (Jesus and the Rich Man) and a selection from Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium* that treated this passage. Optional readings included a selection from *Oration 30* ("On the Son") by Gregory of Nazianzus and selections from *De Trinitate* and *Confessions* by Augustine of Hippo, all passages that dealt with this Markan passage. From the Islamic tradition, the following was read: Qur'ān 5 (*al-mā'idah*, the table), vss. 17, 72, 110, and a passage from Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* in which he discusses some of those Qur'anic passages and the nature of Jesus. The optional reading was a commentary by Dawūd al-Qayṣarī on this passage from the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam (Sharḥ-i Fuṣūṣ Al-ḥikam)*.

In the Cappadocian texts, they argue against a version of Arianism, the heresy contending that the Son of God is not co-eternal with God the Father and is distinct from the Father (therefore subordinate to God the Father). They each dealt with the Markan passage on the rich man encountering and questioning Jesus. Augustine brings up that same Markan passage in his *De Trinitate* and *Confessions*. Each author interprets the Markan passage in the context of Christological controversies: Jesus responds to the vocative "Good Teacher" from the rich man with "no one is good but God alone". How and why did Jesus say this? Does this not prove the Arian point? Jesus is not God. Intriguingly, all three deal with this prooftext by addressing the perception or belief of the rich man, who somehow was not viewing or gazing at Jesus with the proper disposition.

In the passage on Jesus in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, the author writes that when Jesus was reviving the dead—that is, performing miracles or actions that only God should be able to do—those gazing at Jesus were bewildered, because he was performing a divine action but as a human, and so this led some to profess divine indwelling—often translated as incarnationism. Later, Ibn 'Arabī remarks, *This is why disputes take place among the various [Christian] communities concerning Jesus, [for they ask], 'What is He?'* And, it should be noted that the Arabic is "what is he," not "who is he".

These Christian and Islamic passages read together offer an opportunity for constructive theological insights in comparison. Indeed, the Muslim author is correct: disputes did and continue to take place among Christians: what is Jesus? Who is Jesus? Yes, pre-modern disputes were heavily inflected with Greek philosophical concepts—but today, those disputes remain, both within and among Catholic, Orthodox, mainstream Protestant, and Evangelical Christian traditions: is Jesus atoning savior, liberator of the oppressed, satisfying a debt, or a servant? And so on. Furthermore, today, Christologies are often inflected not with Greek metaphysical concepts, but with contemporary political and even partisan positions: WWJVF? Whom Would Jesus Vote For?

Approximately 25 participants attended. Questions and insights revolved around Islamic Christologies, the spiritual stations and states that might prevent proper perception of divinity, how wealth may occlude perception of Jesus, nondual theologies, cosmic Christologies, and more. Participants offered insights into the ways in which Christologies may in fact “restrict” divinity to Jesus alone. Certainly, divine revelation extends beyond Jesus’ incarnate nature. Others were curious about just what ideas, narratives, and Christologies were circulating the seventh-century Arabian peninsula at the time Muhammad received revelation and how this might shape Islamic understandings of Christology (on this Takacs recommended *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur’an*, by Khorchide and von Stosch). Other scholars of Islam noted that the Islamic text in question, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, is a more popular text intended to awaken certain spiritual states and stations in the reader. In this way, there was a connection between the moral and spiritual disposition of the rich man in the Markan passage and the moral and spiritual stations and states the Sufi (Islamic mystical) traditions. Internal dispositions shape perceptions and experiences of the divine.

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