

ANTHROPOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Thinking Desire Interreligiously
 Convener: Elizabeth Pyne, Mercyhurst University
 Moderator: Heather DuBois, Boston College
 Presenters: Tiffany Lee, Boston College
 Greg Mileski, Boston College
 Respondent: Won-Jae Hur, Xavier University

The Anthropology Topic Session hosted a panel featuring two papers and a response oriented to the overall convention theme.

Tiffany Lee's paper, "'The cure for addiction is suffering': Lessons in Deep Learning from Heruka's *Life of Milarepa*," took as its point of departure a recent comment by actor Ben Affleck regarding his journey of addiction and recovery. She first examined the claim that "[t]he cure for addiction is suffering" in the context of Alcoholics Anonymous, a widely known support group and therapeutic program in which Affleck has participated. AA is strongly informed by the regnant medical model of addiction, which treats it as a treatable but fundamentally irreversible disease. Yet the arc of Affleck's self-narration points, Lee argued, to an alternative configuration of suffering, desire, and transformation, one better understood in terms of the deep learning model of addiction. After a brief introduction to the contemporary neuroscientific research behind this alternative model, Lee explored the rich vision of deep learning that emerges—as a complement to a more conventional movement from suffering to liberation—in the life of Milarepa, a twelfth century Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist yogi. Lee then sketched how dialogue with this Buddhist account might contribute to a constructive Christian theological response to addiction. Whereas the standard disease model aligns closely with a dualistic Christian narrative of sin and suffering on the one hand and grace on the other, an interdisciplinary and interreligious approach to deep learning encourages us to see the working of grace and the transformation of desire in and amidst experiences of suffering.

Greg Mileski's paper, "Seeking A New Desire: Śāntideva's *Bodhicitta* and René Girard's Pacific Mimesis of Christ," adopted a Girardian lens on the nature of Christian life, centering the task of imitating Christ and Christ's desire as an antidote to the conflict, greed, and envy of rivalistic patterns of imitative desire that shape us in the world. Given the profound difficulty of converting one's desire—of learning to love like Christ loves—wisdom regarding the dynamics of imitation is welcome. Mileski proposed that, in charting a course toward the imitation of the enlightened Buddha, the eighth-century Indian author Śāntideva offers a trove of such wisdom from within one Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. He focused on the notion of *bodhicitta*, a mental orientation in which the desire for enlightenment and compassion for others converge, and drew out lessons from Śāntideva regarding the cultivation of such desire. Two insights are key: first, that the love we seek to imitate is primarily a love we have experienced, and, second, that it is essential not to instrumentalize others in our project of imitation. Thus, turning from this Buddhist path back to Christianity, Mileski concluded that "Śāntideva helps to illuminate the

ways in which the experience of being loved and accepted by God, and returning to that experience is foundational for developing the kind of love and compassion for others that Christ exemplified and that Christians are called to emulate.”

Won-Jae Hur appreciatively engaged the presenters’ work in a response (read in his absence by Katie Mahowski Mylorie of Boston College). Highlighting the fruitfulness of Lee’s reading of Milarepa, Hur invited her to reflect on potential analogues within the Christian tradition and to probe further what might be entailed in a Vajrayana Buddhist perspective on what Christians understand as grace. Hur identified Mileski’s emphasis on the experiential quality of transformed desire as an asset of his paper, and specifically drew out the “bodily, sensorial dimension of experience” as a theme. He also raised questions regarding how distinct conceptions of self and other in Buddhist and Christian traditions bear on Mileski’s account of desire and the imitation of Christ.

To begin the discussion, Lee and Mileski elaborated on elements of their papers prompted by Hur’s perceptive response. An open-ended initial question from the floor then proved especially generative as panelists shared first-person accounts of “what drew you to this kind of work [comparative theology]?” and did so with an eye toward broader conversation on the contributions of interreligious scholarship within Catholic theology.

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