

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Liberation in Christian, Hindu and Buddhist Traditions of South Asia
 Convenor: Reid B. Locklin, University of Toronto
 Moderator: Stephanie Wong, Villanova University
 Presenters: Akhil Thomas, Harvard University
 Matthew Vale, Boston College
 Respondent: Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University

In his paper entitled “Christian-Hindu poems for South Indian Christians: A Comparative Reading of the Christian Poetry of Ernst Hanxleden,” Akhil Thomas used selected sections of the long form poem, *The New Measure (Puthenpāna)*, of Ernst Hanxleden, S.J., (1680-1731) to argue for the emergence of a new genre of Malayalam Catholic poetry and literature in eighteenth-century South India. He paid special attention to the role of karma in the poem. Here, it is hard to demarcate Jesuits missionaries from Indian Catholics, Indian Catholics from other South Indian religionists, Malayalam Vaishnavism from Catholicism, and, finally, Krishna from Christ. Looking at the epithets for Christ in the *Puthenpāna*, notably the ones that cast their long Vaishnava theological shadows, Thomas focused on the epithet “Inception of all karma and its dissolution.” Thomas compared this with the sixteenth-century mystic poet Poonthanam Namboothiri’s poem, *The Measure of Wisdom (Jānapāna)*, which beautifully etches the precarity of the human condition and the pivotal role of karma and devotion to the Lord of Guruvayoor as the path of liberation. As a conclusion, Thomas offered some general remarks on taking the voice of Indian Christian recitation and performance as an alternate starting point for comparative theology. This starting point, he argued, also complicates received notions of doing comparative theology for Christian ends.

Next, Matthew Vale presented his paper, “Natural Liberation: A Christian Reception of Mahāmudrā.” The Tibetan Buddhist practice traditions of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen are a significant presence in the West. However, unlike the Christian reception of Zen and Theravāda-style *vipassanā*, we have very little historically engaged work thinking through the Christian theological reception of these Tibetan traditions. In his paper, Vale articulated a theological rationale for receiving what Tibetans call “*sūtra Mahāmudrā*” practice as a contemplative style that follows from creation *ex nihilo*. Creation *ex nihilo* means that every created reality is grounded in nothing at all besides God’s wholly uncoerced—and so wholly unqualified—“Yes” to its being. For a created reality to be at all, then, is for it to be intrinsically and inalienably good, grounded nowhere at all but in this joyful “Yes.” Vale compared this fundamental conviction to Mahāmudrā practices of coming to rest in awareness. In this tradition, all appearances are themselves the radiance of Buddhahood, the manifesting (*rstal*) or self-resonance (*rang gdangs*) of a limitless empty-luminosity (*stong gsal*). From a Christian perspective, this means that coming to rest in awareness as grounded in nothing but the “Yes,” the Joying, originating all things out of nothing, as unconditionally, radiantly OK. Even distressing thoughts and experiences are, in themselves, a “self-releasing” (*rang grol*) into their basic nature. In the same way, a

Christian rests in all experiences as always already self-released into the unrestricted “Yes,” joying in them as good.

In her response, Tracy Tiemeier thanked Thomas and Vale for offering thought-provoking and rich presentations with many new avenues of theological reflection. Although each examined different traditions and topics, there were a number of striking themes that crossed their presentations, including the meaning and practice of liberation; the translation of traditions, theologies, and practices across contexts; the nature of the divine; and the ambiguities in a Christian comparative theology where the divine is the inception and dissolution of karma, or all of creation is seen in its “basic OK-ness.” What is sin and evil if God truly is the Alpha and Omega? Tiemeier wondered further how Buddhist and Hindu notions of liberation open up Christian views of salvation, or, for that matter, how Buddhist and Hindu notions of liberation push Christian language about liberation.

These presentations were followed by a rich discussion of the implications of focusing on devotional or meditative practice in comparative theology, the ways these traditions reinforce and/or disrupt social hierarchies, and the potential and limits of creation *ex nihilo* as a locus of interreligious exchange. The session concluded with a brief business meeting.

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