

TEXTUAL JOURNEYS: COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY
 READING GROUP – PRE-CONVENTION MEETING

- Topic: Salvation and Perfection in Selections from Wang Yangming,
Instructions for Practice
- Conveners: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
 Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University
- Moderator: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
- Presenters: Stephanie M. Wong, Villanova University

The purpose of the Textual Journeys reading group is to bring theologians together who wish to explore the practice of comparative theology through guided readings of texts from a non-Christian tradition. This meeting invites someone to select short texts from a tradition (other than Christianity) and prepare some introductory commentary. The texts along with the commentary is circulated ahead of time. At the breakfast, following a brief explanation of key terms by the presenter, the group engages in an interreligious, close reading together as a community so that fresh theological insights may be encountered.

This year's presenter was Stephanie M. Wong, Assistant Professor in the Department of Theology/Religious Studies at Villanova University, and the selected texts were from Wang Yangming, *Instructions for Practice*. In her introductory text distributed prior to the convention, Wong explained that Wang Yangming (1472-1529) was a Neo-Confucian philosopher who contributed to the revival of Confucian thought during the Song through Ming dynasties. Neo-Confucians were a community of scholars who sought to revive Confucian thought after the arrival of Buddhism during the Tang dynasty. Neo-Confucianism was a response to Chan Buddhism, incorporating some elements of Buddhist thought such as Buddha-nature while also rebutting other elements.

Wong focused her texts around certain key ideas. Neo-Confucians generally "affirmed both that the universe is a dynamic and organically arising reality, and that humans possess the ability to discern accurately what is good and in keeping with the Dao." The underlying principle of Li gives identity to all beings, though their particular identities differ according to the condensation of the material force of Qi. Wang Yangming is known for reclaiming the heart-mind as a privileged place to investigate and know the universal principle, and in particular he is known for two ideas: 1) the idea of *liangzhi*, which is an endowment of moral consciousness, or a good conscience, that can be cultivated by the sage into a powerful demonstration of moral action; and 2) the idea of a unity of knowing and acting, so that something cannot be truly known until it is put into action. In this way Wang contests a seeming dualism within Neo-Confucianism that privileges knowing the world prior to and above acting in it.

The discussion in the small groups was wide ranging, including a focus on conscience and the source of moral clarity; the balance between personal freedom or salvation and social order (which was a focus for Neo-Confucians as well as embodied in the career of Wang Yangming); and examples of someone might demonstrate the unity of knowing and acting through a seemingly impossible dilemma of competing moral responsibilities.

In addition to providing a primary text from a non-Christian tradition and an introductory overview of the thinker and text, presenters also often include a selection from a Christian theologian. Wong provided some passages from Teresa of Avila's (1515-1582) *The Interior Castle* because both texts were intended as practical guidance for people who were seriously committed to a life of spiritual perfection. *The Interior Castle* offers a map of the soul's journey to God in a series of seven mansions, and Wong focused on Teresa's discussion of self-knowledge and recollection. Wong suggested many possible points of intersection, including the question, "What personal or experiential resources make it worthwhile for a person to attempt sagehood or holiness?" We did not have much time to discuss the second text, and the group generally agreed it was helpful to have a specific Christian text to put in dialogue with the first text.

Thanks to Stephanie Wong for the use of her introductory text and remarks in composing these proceedings.

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