

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Sacramentality and Inculturation
Convener: David Clairmont, University of Notre Dame
Moderator: Francis Clooney, Harvard University
Presenters: Matthias Frenz, Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes
SimonMary Aihiokhai, Duquesne University
Hans Gustafson, University of St. Thomas

This year the Comparative Theology Topic Area was focused on the conference theme of sacrament through the lens of culture in three different contexts (modern day southern India, Nigeria, and in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century) and from three different disciplinary perspectives (anthropology of religion, Catholic theology, and ecumenical Christian theology). The theme of inculturation was an organizing umbrella for these papers rather than a topic treated at length by each presenter.

Examining the first of these contexts, Matthias Frenz introduced his audience to his recent fieldwork on interreligious Marian devotion in a presentation titled “Intuitive Access to Sacraments in a Multi-Religious Context: Hindus at Christian Pilgrimage Sites in Southern India.” His examples were drawn from the shrine of Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni, the precursor of which was developed by Portuguese Franciscans in the early seventeenth century. Frenz noted how the devotional practices associated with this site were “sacramental” in suggesting the ultimate unity of God, even as these same practices closely mirrored external forms associated with the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation despite the lack of clerical presence at and the inter-religious nature of the practices. Frenz moved toward outlining a definition of these “sacramental rites,” based on observations of their symbolic value, performative and reciprocal nature, perceived efficacy, and social value as “tangible signs of reliable reciprocal relations between human and divine beings.” He concluded with some suggestions about how comparative theology might reflect at greater length and detail on the performative dimensions of its subject matter.

Examining a pluralistic African context, SimonMary Aihiokhai offered a paper titled “Shaping the Content for Interreligious Engagement: A Case for Interreligious Hospitality in Nigeria’s Religiously Pluralistic Societies.” Drawing on insights from Martin Buber and especially Emmanuel Levinas about relationality and alterity in interreligious interactions, Aihiokhai emphasized the “religious dimension of hospitality” as trust in the presence of God in other religious traditions. Speaking in general terms of the Church in Nigeria, Aihiokhai also cautioned that true hospitality implies humility in emphasizing the “contradiction of how one’s religion has been practiced in history.” Among the contemporary practices the community might employ to illustrate such hospitality, Aihiokhai offered more specific contemporary examples such as collaborative worship, especially between Christians and Muslims, as well as prayer for religious others precisely as expressions of God’s grace.

Hans Gustafson’s paper, “What a Christian Might Learn about Sacramentality from the Spirituality of Nicholas Black Elk,” examined the relationship between early twentieth-century Lakota Catholicism and the phenomenon of “multiple religious belonging.” Gustafson positioned his paper as an exercise in comparative theology that emerged from his wider research into contested interpretations of Black Elk’s “Lakota Catholicism.” Turning to the relationship between sacramentality and spirituality in this particular inculturated form of Catholic faith,

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Gustafson argued for the importance of sacramentality in helping the wider Christian community understand and accept the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging. By exploring several Lakota rites as sacramental expressions of spiritual affinity between Lakota and Catholic views, Gustafson suggested the possibility of sacramental rituals in traditional religious communities as complementary with existing Catholic sacramental practices.

Francis Clooney moderated the ensuing discussion which focused on the relationship between the seven sacraments, especially Eucharist, and the broad use of the term sacramentality. Several participants wondered about the extent to which Catholic comparative theology risked losing its distinctive theological orientation if it focused on sacramentality rather than on the sacraments. In the short time available for questions, the presenters offered brief responses that comparative theology ought to strive for a balance appropriate to the subject matter being explored between a focus on the sacraments (and thereby on its Christological orientation) and sacramental aspects of comparative programs (which are not always explicitly christological).

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