

SEMINAR ON COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

In his introduction to the first session Charles Hallisey (Loyola University, Chicago) recalled that this new seminar looks in two directions which, it is hoped, will be mutually enriching and corrective: toward a *comparative theology*, reflection generated out of particular "encounters" with particular non-Christian religious traditions; and toward a *theology of religions*, reflection rooted primarily in the Christian tradition's own possibilities as a source for attitudes toward the non-Christian. In an exemplary fashion, this year's two sessions reflected the two directions.

In the first, David Carpenter (St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia) and John Renard (St. Louis University) spoke on *revelation* in the Hindu and Muslim traditions. Arguing that comparative study is an urgent but unsettling enterprise, Carpenter began by comparing the theology of revelation of St. Bonaventure with that of Bhartrhari, a Hindu grammarian and theologian (5th century C.E.). Comparison shows important differences regarding the source, act, content and recipient of revelation. For example: there are very different historical, cultural and theoretical contexts for revelation—in particular, an original, set world order of *dharma* (Bhartrhari), and a historical panorama framed by prophetic and apocalyptic writings (Bonaventure); though Jews and Christians lived in a "larger" world than the early Indian seers, their place in it was always endangered, and revelation served a primarily guiding, saving purpose, and revelation constituted God's freely spoken word which invites humans into dialogue; in Bhartrhari's system, revelation was the "verbalization" of *brahman*, the absolute principle and ground of the world, and revelation grounded and inspired a human ritual reenactment of the cosmos. The most important similarities pertained to the language of revelation: both develop a theory of inspiration; for both, revelation is enacted in speech that is inseparable from action; both take into account the community's formulation of a canon of scripture and the community's elevation of revelation's original recipients to a special status; in both traditions, the community in the present reenacts and is guided by the original revelation. At the beginning and end of this rich presentation (only very partially summarized here), Carpenter reflected on the implications of his comparison for our effort today to rethink this central Christian theological concept.

Renard began with a general schema of major Islamic views of revelation as it occurs in the world, in scripture, in the self; of the corresponding responses to it according to various modes of expression; and of the various goals for response (right relation to the world, the building of a faith community, authentic knowledge of self and God.) He noted how this complex set of structures allows for different human roles and different literary expressions ranging from ritual and myth, to the identification of a single authoritative scripture (the *Qur'an*) to the poetry

of mystics. Renard next outlined five forms of "Islamic prophetology" (historical, philosophical, theological, theosophical, mystical) and corresponding views of prophets, the status of prophetic utterance and miracles, the nature of exegesis, and attitudes toward Muhammed and Jesus. There followed, more briefly, a description of five Islamic theological positions regarding prophecy, and a final schematic description of Islamic influence on Aquinas' discussion of prophecy (*ST* 2.2.171-74.) Throughout, Renard's goal was to show the theological complexity, nuance and diversity of the Islamic treatment of revelation, and thereby to enable a deeper theological reflection on it and more apt comparisons with Christian views.

The ensuing discussion covered many points, but gained its sharpest focus when the question was asked, "How does this information affect our view of Christian revelation?" Responses ranged from comments based on specific points made by Carpenter and Renard, to the view that there needn't be much effect at all, to the posing of another question: "Can a uniquely Christian doctrine of revelation be maintained when this sort of new information so broadly widens the context for reflection on revelation as a theological category?"

In his Friday presentation Paul Knitter (Xavier University, Cincinnati) surveyed the current debate between "inclusivism" (which "affirms the value and dignity of all religious paths, and the need to dialogue with them, but [which] attributes to Christ and Christianity . . . an ultimacy and normativity meant to embrace and fulfil all other religions") and "pluralism" (which affirms that while religions are not all the same, nevertheless "many religions may have equally meaningful and valid messages for humankind, and that it may be the case that no one religion has the final or normative word for all the others.") He posed four key questions to structure his remarks: "Is pluralism a *bonum ultimum aut secundarium*?" "Is dialogue a *bonum ultimum aut secundarium*?" "How is Jesus unique?" "How can one maintain a fruitful and faithful balance between particularity and universality?" Knitter's careful, balanced presentation noted cogent arguments from both perspectives, offered helpful distinctions, while on the whole arguing that the pluralist viewpoint is the proper starting point for dialogue and, when rooted in today's urgent justice issues, the most appropriate Christian attitude in today's world.

In his response, William Thompson (Duquesne University) identified areas of agreement but also important differences. E.g., he suggested that "exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism" is not a necessary sequence, as if each inevitably gives way to the next; that the coherence of thought based in the discovery of unity is not ultimately supportable from a pluralist viewpoint; that it seems there will have to be a point at which various religious claims are sorted out and a "reality test" applied in judgment on them; that the dialectical nature of inclusivism may actually be a better starting point for dialogue. Knitter responded, and others joined in with great vigor; connections were made to the specific issue of revelation discussed the day before.

The second session concluded with a brief discussion of next year's plans. The still forming seminar (currently coordinated by Knitter and Frank Clooney [Boston College]) wants to retain the comparative theology/theology of religions format, but is open to ideas regarding content and framework. Particularly welcome

was the proposal that in some years at least the seminar cooperate with other interested seminars for joint sessions on a common theme.

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