CONTINUING SEMINAR IN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

In San Francisco we continued our practice of using our two sessions for two kinds of discussion: one devoted to a consideration of the principles of a theology and/or philosophy of religion(s); the other devoted to the practice of comparison, through a consideration of concrete detail (e.g., some particular text or religious practice) drawn from a specific religious tradition.

Our session on 7 June was devoted to a discussion of John Hick's magisterial *An Interpretation of Religion* and its implications for Catholic theology. In this book (a revision of the author's Gifford Lectures) Hick articulates and defends his theory that our contemporary situation of religious pluralism is marked by (at least) two important characteristics. First, the reductive critiques of religion which have flourished since the Enlightenment and which seek to explain away religious phenomena are not ultimately convincing; it is justifiable, and indeed reasonable, to take religion, and religions, seriously. Second, in the face of today's rich, vibrant religious pluralism, it is not tenable for any religion to present itself as *the* true religion. Hence, we must respect religion(s) and religious diversity, and adjust our conceptions of our own religion accordingly.

An initial presentation by Chester Gillis (Georgetown University) focused our discussion. He began by emphasizing the important contributions Hick has made over the past twenty-five years to our thinking about religious pluralism; throughout he urged a serious theological reception of this important book. He highlighted potentially controversial aspects of Hick's work, most prominently the following: (1) Hick's application of Kant's noumena/phenomena distinction to religions may in practice undercut serious consideration of the various religions, and do so according to a philosophical distinction many today find unconvincing; (2) the traditional Christian evaluation of the centrality of Christ is threatened by a theory that views all religions and all their key elements as inadequate expressions of the real; (3) the cognitive status of (religious) language as a vehicle for the communication of the "real" and for cross-religious conversation is diminished; (4) the role of grace is unclear, and Hick's theory may bear Pelagian implications; (5) in a pluralism such as Hick proposes the construction of a cross-religious ethics becomes even more difficult than it normally is; and (6) although we should be grateful that Hick's theory is splendidly clear, we may be left with the feeling that it is clearer and more conclusive than the data warrant.

The ensuing discussion was invigorated by the presence of John Hick himself, who graciously engaged in a congenial argument about the potential and limits of his theory; although he found few avid supporters in the group, all were appreciative of his labors over the years and were unwilling to dismiss his ideas. A few of the points made: efforts to explain religion philosophically (in Kantian or other terms) must be pursued cautiously, since particularity can be endangered by the

tendency to abstraction that often accompanies philosophy; our enormous, ever-increasing body of information about religions creates a practical situation of pluralism, in which the enunciation of a single comprehensive explanation of pluralism seems an unviable enterprise or at least a premature one; yet, the pursuit of detail without a simultaneous effort to articulate its significance and to retrieve a view of the whole would be an abandonment of our larger intellectual duty as scholars and teachers; "pluralism" may turn out to be just one more imposition of a dominant Western culture on the rest of the world, just as "exclusivism" and "inclusivism" may have been in the past—i.e., the insistence on diversity may in practice allow us to postpone or completely avoid taking each other seriously, and so to muffle those non-Western voices which are just now being heard; though constructed by a person from the Christian tradition, Hick's pluralist position is not a "Christian theology of religions," but an alternative to such theological positions.

Our session on 8 June focused on the *Shōshinge* ("Song of Faith in Amida"), a brief but important section of the *Kyōgōshinshō* of Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū ("True Pure Land") school of Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the *Kyōgōshinshō* Shinran analyzes from four perspectives the journey of the believer to the "pure land" of the savior Amida Buddha: teaching, practice, faith and enlightenment. The *Shōshinge*, located in the section on practice, praises and explains the salvific religious practice of reciting the *Nembutsu* (the "name" of Amida). In the course of his elaboration, he presents succinct and profound positions on the nature of evil, grace, faith, right thinking and practice. Composed in praise of recitation of the *Nembutsu*, the *Shōshinge* itself became a text to be appropriated through regular recitation.

It is very difficult to study in translation a religious text from a very different time and place, and as theologians we may feel justified in avoiding religions, texts and contexts which are unfamiliar to us. The goal of our session was precisely to put aside the garb of "expertise," to attempt to read and appreciate the *Shōshinge* theologically, and so to be begin to learn together how to be "conscientious comparative amateurs" in this age of inevitable pluralism. Two factors made our experiment easier. First, the text had been made available in advance of the convention, and many of us had a chance to read it beforehand; several of those present were in fact quite familiar with it. Second, Ruben Habito (Perkins School of Theology) began our session with a very helpful and theologically sensitive elucidation of its main points. His presentation included some initial reflections on the theology of religions in general, and certain aspects of the *Shōshinge*: salvation as a transcendent reality to which the believer is gradually conformed; the nature of the act of faith; the process of the transformation of the believer, in which she or he gradually realizes the already achieved salvation that accrues from a single recitation of the *Nembutsu*.

David Burrell (University of Notre Dame) responded with a theological reflection that focused on the nature of faith as a practice which transforms the believer's relationship to the world, the "things of life," and the self. He also reflected on the imaginative spiritual possibilities of the encounter with a religious tradition other than one's own, and on how one's faith can remain intact in such an encounter, in continuity with its tradition, while yet being profoundly transformed.

The ensuing discussion was wide-ranging and lively, tending more toward the exploration of the possibilities of the text than to conclusions about it. A few of the points made: the tension in the text between the already realized nature of salvation and the need for a personal appropriation of it may be fruitfully compared with St. Paul's theology of salvation; the revelatory status of the texts of religions is determined less by a formal, doctrinal evaluation of them than by attention to the transformative power released by practical engagement in them; the idea of an underlying realm of experience which enables people of different traditions to take each other seriously is rich in potential—but is also liable to the danger of evacuating texts and practices of their particular, "local" meanings, as we rush to affirm our prior experiences through them; texts like the *Shōshinge* may challenge us by illuminating our own tradition in new ways, but they may also call us to conversion, to a specific new practice, such as the recitation of the *Nembutsu,* and hence to the abandonment of our former religious practices; we must be aware of the limits of our appropriation of the *Shōshinge* in English—it is a Japanese text with strong Chinese connections, and is meant to be recited, heard; hence, we need to reflect on the implications of our decision to discuss the theology of the *Shōshinge,* instead of reciting it as its tradition recommends; we must decide if we are engaged in a real conversation with the text and its tradition, ancient and contemporary, or are simply incorporating it into our own, already established soliloquy.

Our brief business meeting was devoted to details of organization, and to some fruitful brainstorming about the possibilities for next year's sessions, as an individual seminar which welcomes cooperation with other continuing seminars.

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.
Boston College