

## TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: CONJOINT SEMINAR

### "PERSON" IN BUDDHIST AND HINDU THOUGHT

A. History was quietly made in Atlanta during this first conjoint seminar. Its purpose was to begin in actuality what is so often urged in theory: the dialogue of systematic theology with a religious tradition other than Christian. This attempt was made in consonance with the conference theme, "Theology as Intellectually Vital Inquiry."

Moderator Sixto Garcia of St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida, set the tone in his opening remarks, and noted this first attempt at a dialogue at the CTSA.

First presenter Paul Griffiths of the University of Chicago opened the session with a brief explanation of the Buddhist perspective on person. Entitled "Persons without Selves: An Indian-Buddhist View and Its Theological Implications," Griffiths's presentation focused on the standard Buddhist rejection of "enduring selves." In contrast to mainline Hinduism in which the *atman* or person is an enduring reality, Griffiths emphasized that the Buddhist position denies any enduring subject substance. The person is instead an "ontology of events." This view is evident in accounts of the life of the Buddha given by Buddhists. The Buddha is not a "person" in the Western understanding of the term, yet possesses such human qualities of name, history, and attributes.

Griffiths then challenged all present with the Buddhist notion of the "three-fold Buddha body." From a Buddhist perspective there is the "essence" body, single and unchanging, and the "enjoyment" and "magical transformation" bodies, multiple and in constant transformation.

Methodically, Buddhism has good reason to make use of any conceptual system available, including those outside its system. The attentiveness is valued over the doctrinaire.

Frank Clooney of Boston College followed with a presentation entitled "Saving Persons: A Hindu View of Divine Unity and Distinction." Clooney's purpose was to shed some comparative light on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He began by stating the creative nature of the comparative work we are attempting, and noted the indirectness of the light shed by comparative work. More significant is careful attendance to the transformation of the comparatist in and by the process itself.

Clooney stressed the dynamics of proceeding by single examples. This approach is necessary, he is convinced, and has both its advantages and limitations.

The theologian entering comparative work does well to be aware of the very painstaking nature of the work.

To put flesh on his approach, Clooney explored the specific relation of Visnu and Sri (Laksmi) in Hinduism as shedding light on the discussion of "person" in Christian trinitarian theology. In giving the participants some background for his explanation, Clooney noted the Srivaisnava tendency toward monotheism in contrast to the preferred polytheism of the Vedic schools. He then focused on the northern (Vatakalai) school which preserves Sri as the eternal consort of Visnu while preserving a monotheistic singleness in the economy of salvation itself.

In this context it becomes necessary to identify self-consciousness as the "core" of what one means by person. Knowledge (*jnana*) as fundamental (*asraya*), however, is distinct from knowledge as object-oriented (*dharmabhuta*). Self-consciousness consists of knowledge (*jnana*) plus being turned toward oneself (*pratyaktva*).

The Lord Visnu in this school is distinguished from other "persons" by the situational context of his knowledge. This can be identified as the Visnu's very definition as Lord or source of being. This, plus the fact that his domain is all pervasive (atomicity) is then added to the final situational distinction: he is depended-upon (*sesitva*) rather than being dependent (*sesatva*).

When examining the special case of the relationship of two persons, namely Visnu and his consort Sri, some very interesting insights emerge which can be of interest to Christians doing trinitarian theology.

There is a continuing distinct worship of Visnu and Sri. Sri is "positioned" at times on Visnu's chest (*laya*), at his side (*bhoga*), or as independent (*arca*). She shares in his distinct situational context. Pervasiveness is attributed to her. Visnu and Sri are distinct in their knowledge as fundamental, but identical in object-oriented knowledge. Dependence-upon (*sesitva*) is attributed to Sri, although by choice she is dependent (*sesa*). In their intentional union, freely chosen, there is one mind, one affection, with Sri again choosing to be dependent on Visnu.

In handling distinctions and explaining unity in this particular context, the theologian must take grammatical analysis very seriously. Sri is considered both as means (*upaya*) and goal (*upeya*). Wherever Visnu is mentioned, Sri is understood. Male and female salvific functions are allocated to Visnu and Sri respectively.

In ritual, the two deities are the object of worship (*Agni/Visnu*). There is joint ritual action on the part of the couple (*yajamana/patni*). There is regulated derivation of more complex rituals from simpler ones, and purposeful integration of ritual elements into a ritual whole (*sesa/sesi*).

This holds several implications not only for Christian trinitarian work but for the entire theological enterprise. It suggests that we need to change the way we enter the discipline, aware that we do it in a pluralist world of religious experience and religious categories different, but in ways similar, to our own. This context differs from the solely Christian context where we are accustomed to do our work.

Our task, Clooney reminds us, is to find specific points and texts for comparison. Will this affect the truth of our trinitarian faith? Frank suggests that it will sharpen our recognition of the specificity of our work on the Trinity. It will also contribute to the challenge of the theme offered by this year's conference, for our

intelligent inquiry cannot continue to ignore the religious search of the traditions that surround us. We are to avoid the extremes of "no difference" or "complete difference." It will focus our attention on the hermeneutical dynamics of interpretation, thus recomposing the significance of our faith. Most challenging of all, it may bring out of our treasure house both old things and new.

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B. Buddhism exhibits the difficulty of direct translation of theological terms and concepts from one culture to another. There are no enduring persons in Buddhist thought; indeed it is incoherent to maintain that God exists much less to speak of a Trinity. A similar problem is faced by Whiteheadian philosophy. The emphasis in both systems of thought is a phenomenal experience of personhood in which an ontology of events is coupled with a complex causal theory. A "person" is a causally connected series of events in Buddhism; in process thought, a society of actual occasions. Both reject a substance metaphysics. The person for the Buddhist is composed of five levels from the physical and sensitive to the mental. A particular level is not always continuous; there are gaps in some of the levels, for instance, when a person is asleep or at rebirth.

The Buddhist discussion of the salvific action of Buddha, particularly in the understanding of the "bodies" of Buddha is perhaps a more fruitful place to look for appropriate parallels. Consistently, the Buddha too is not a person, a possessor of material things, but rather, while not a substance, possesses all qualities maximally. In principle there can be many Buddhas and Buddha-realms with different histories or focal points. The oneness of the Buddha is articulated in terms of three Buddha bodies. The first, the *dharmakaya* or essence body, properly possesses all qualities. It is eternal—changelessly compassionate. It only appears to do different things at different times because of the changing needs of living beings. The second, the *sambhogakaya* or body of enjoyment, is differentiated by name and is active in different Buddha-realms, teaching the "dharma" to those assembled. It is accessible by visualizations. The third, the *nirmanakaya* or body of magical transformation, is the Buddha that appears in history as needed. All these Buddhas have essentially the same career and differ only in name, appearance, and the time and place they appear. The parallels to the Trinity of Christianity are fairly obvious and are "economic" in character. Another way to compare Buddhism in this matter with Christianity is to look to Augustine's triad *adversio-conversio-maneo*. The religious experience behind this is similar to Buddhist experience: the inaccessibility of the highest or ultimate, a conversion or transformation in some sense mediated by the ultimate, an experience of the ultimate as accessible, as enjoyed.

Within Hinduism the Northern, Vatakalai, School of Srivaisnavism offers material useful for comparison with Christianity. There is a similar interaction between two cultures—the older Sanskrit and the southern Tamil language group. The Indian context is polytheistic, even given various exceptions, as was the Christian context in Greece and Rome. Srivaisnavism has a tendency to monotheism against this background. A single higher deity, Visnu, rules over all oth-

ers. Visnu is compassionate and in contrast with Brahman has personality. This allows for distinction from and relation to Visnu. Visnu's higher status ensures that there is only one true way of salvation.

Conscious being revolves around knowledge, bliss, and purity. Such being is either atomic, in the case of creatures, or pervasive in extension, as in the case of Visnu. Knowledge is distinguished either as fundamental or as oriented to objects. Self-consciousness as the core of a "person" thus comprises fundamental knowledge and being-turned-toward-oneself. In addition to pervasiveness, Visnu is distinguished from all others in being the source of being and in being depended upon.

Given this monotheistic tendency, the goddess Sri, the consort of Visnu, provides interesting material for comparison with the doctrine of the Trinity. The differing interpretations of the mantra "I take refuge at the feet of Narayana-with-Sri; Homage to Narayana-with-Sri" will divide North and South. The north will see a true specification of Sri here as both means and goal. Whenever Visnu is mentioned Sri is understood. Only sex-linked functions will be differently allotted to Sri and Visnu. There will be joint ritual action involving the two and single sacrifices paying homage to both. Thus the unity and distinction of the deity (and the problem of the one and the many) has a higher profile in the North. Unlike the southern Srivaisnavists the northern branch refuses to reduce Sri to the level of an inferior being. She is Visnu's equal. This does not involve, however, a double salvation.

The starting point for the Srivaisnavists is the continuing distinct worship of Sri even as worship focused on Visnu. In this regard Sri is seen in three perspectives vis-a-vis Visnu: on his chest, side-by-side as a consort, independent. As Visnu, Sri is seen as pervasive. Their distinction in knowledge is fundamental but there is identity in their object-oriented knowledge. The world depends on Sri even as on Visnu. She alone depends on Visnu not by necessity but by choice. Even though they are independent their sole thought and intention is for each other.

It was noted that there is a persistent reluctance cross-culturally to ascribe complete inaccessibility to the Ultimate as witnessed by the Deuteronomic development of an angelology to replace the consort of Yahweh. There is a consistent dialogical character to the deity which was often expressed sexually. This relational characteristic of "person" is easy to see in Srivaisnavism; in Buddhism it can be postulated only if there is not substance. Buddhism did not originally use feminine images (though they were worshipped in Hinduism), however, and gender is not relevant to Buddhist metaphysics. Within Hinduism the *atman*, and thus the human person, is also genderless—a necessary corollary of reincarnation which allows one to come back a different sex. Transcendental bodies replace the earthly.

That every detail of the grammar of scripture is important for interpretation finds its echo in Christianity. Augustine in a similar vein argues that "the Spirit does nothing in vain." This implies a specific understanding of God's action in inspiring scripture. Likewise, the inseparability of divine persons in the Trinity similarly leads to the rule whereby one affirms of one person what is affirmed of the other except where the relations are concerned.