

require a social ethic articulated in terms of the common good. Because the wholeness and completeness of the human pattern of the good is actually preserved in Christ's actual effective activity, eucharistic evangelization need not stand in a paradoxical relation to the common good. Rather, Christ's saving form could well bring to completion the principle of the common good and the structures of subsidiarity. Using Christ's entirely free and self-formative choice to give himself for others out of love as the model for freedom moves past an apparent opposition between eucharistic evangelization and the harmonious order of civil society.

In the course of the talks themselves or in the later discussion—although this does not frequently appear in the summaries above—the speakers emphasized that the cogent and correct use of civil society requires local knowledge, which emerges from acute, analytical, focussed attention to specific groups and that manifests itself in direct pastoral practice.

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## COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

### EVIL AND HOPE IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT: REFLECTIONS DRAWN FROM THE CONTEXT OF BENGALI GODDESS WORSHIP

This workshop followed the standard pattern for group meetings in comparative theology at the CTSA: in light of the general theme of the convention, a specific example from a non-Christian religious tradition is examined in some detail; in the course of discussion, it is opened up in a way that draws on the categories of Christian theology; the goal is not simply the study of some aspect of another religious tradition, but also Christian theological reflection on a (well-understood) example from such a tradition.

At this session, Rachel Fell McDermott (Barnard College) presented reflections on the Hindu theology and cult of the Goddess Kali, a deity often connected (in both the Indian and Western imaginations) with destruction and evil, as well as maternal love. Drawing on theological and popular texts as well as iconography, Prof. McDermott vividly described Kali as "an example of an

ambiguous goddess, one who incorporates the opposites of powerful, dangerous destructiveness, on the one hand, and maternal, compassionate care, on the other. . . . [for many] Kali is the feminine representation of Kala, or Time: as such, she eats what she has once created; she nurtures what she will again destroy; she presents the holistic cycle of life and death. Her iconographical association with the inauspicious—in particular, with blood and death—signifies that she is the bringer of, as well as conqueror over, all that we humans fear.” In both poetry and image, Kali is portrayed in ways that are nothing short of gruesome: she dwells in cremation grounds, nude, adorned only with a necklace of human heads, standing on the prone body of a male figure who is either a demon or her consort; yet for most Hindus, Kali is also *seen* primarily as a gracious mother figure.

Prof. McDermott proceeded to explore how devotees relate to Kali and shape their worldview accordingly. If one is a devotee of Kali, does this relationship shape one's attitude toward the good and evil experiences of life? Analyzing major themes from both popular and scholarly literature, McDermott observed a kind of resolution of the problem of evil: “It is the goddess who embodies, and therefore sends us, suffering, and the spiritual challenge is to embrace her and the complex life she represents, with the expectation that thereby we may also receive her boons of fearlessness and grace. In other words, there is no imperative in this Hindu system to save the deity from association with pain and suffering.” As in other Hindu theological systems, though, this attribution of evil as well as good to the goddess does not absolve the individual of responsibility for his or her actions. McDermott illustrated these points from traditional poetry in honor of Kali, and from records of the life and conversations of Ramakrishna, the well-known nineteenth century devotee of Kali.

In a final section of her presentation, Prof. McDermott drew on her own fieldwork in Bengal in order to indicate a modern shift in viewpoint. For many modern devotees, even in the face of their preservation of the same poetic and iconic representations of the goddess, Kali is nevertheless seen as an entirely gracious and loving figure, the source of good and the banisher of evil. Interestingly, though, this revised popular theology of Kali seems to have promoted the emergence of yet other goddesses who take on the characteristics of evil that had traditionally been hers.

Two responses aided the audience by putting the presentation in the broader contexts of related aspects of Indian thought, and of Christian theology. John Makransky (Boston College) offered reflections drawn primarily from a Buddhist perspective. Buddhist thinkers, from ancient times to the present, were critical of Hindu gods and goddesses, seeing them as beings still caught within the world of good and evil, neither beyond it, nor its cause, nor a remedy to it. For most Buddhists, a supreme divinity worthy of human reliance would not be an admixture of good and evil. Instead, Buddhist thinkers located the source of the worlds of living beings in karmic causality and dependent origination; the evil and suffering that seem to come at us from outside us are in reality located at the

very center of our existence, within us. Our lives are subject to the powerful delusion and karma that lay within our own minds and bodies, and these in turn construct a dissatisfying world. Those who can aid us in our confrontation with evil, then, are not those who would snatch us away from evil, but those who would guide us to pierce our own inner illusions and distortions. Nonetheless, Prof. Makransky observed, on the level of religious purification and clarification, Buddhists draw on imagery and themes strikingly similar to those associated with Kali; evil is iconographically visualized as exterior, endowed with horrific forms, and only gradually to be cut through and ultimately eradicated from within.

In her response, Lisa Cahill (Boston College) suggested that while Kali is obviously a highly unusual figure quite foreign to the Christian tradition, there is room to observe how similar related concerns have appeared in the Christian tradition. Drawing by way of example on the writings of James M. Gustafson, particularly his *Ethics in a Theocentric Perspective*, Prof. Cahill traced his effort to reconfigure ethics in relation to a more sober image of God, freed from the platitudes with which the theme of "God in relation to suffering" has often been adorned. For Gustafson, the world ought to be understood as theocentric, not anthropocentric; much of what we take to be decisive is in fact not, for God does not work according to human expectations, and our standards of good and evil are ultimately not God's standards. Prof. Cahill suggested that (with all the necessary qualifications and distinctions) this approach can be seen as consonant with the theological traditions of Kali described by Prof. McDermott. Indeed, given the debate that arose around Gustafson's works, his approach may be in some ways closer to that tradition, with its frightening aspects, than to the Christian. Prof. Cahill also raised questions regarding the significance of the portrayal of Kali as female, a goddess, and of her demonic victims as male. She asked about the sources and practices of the cult of Kali, and whether men and women relate to this cult differently. More generally: when we discuss evil and hope in a theological context, can we separate this from a consideration of gender issues?

The ensuing lively and provocative discussion concluded with the satisfying feeling that much had been learned, and many new questions raised regarding the theme of evil and hope in relation to our images of the divine.

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