

- Topic: The Wider Communion:
Interreligious Friendship as a New Theological Virtue
- Moderator: Lizette Larson-Miller, Loyola Marymount University
- Presenter: James Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University
- Respondents: Denise Carmody, Santa Clara University
Jack Renard, St. Louis University

This paper called for the recognition of friendships between Christians and non-Christians as a new theological virtue. Behind this proposal are two recent developments in theology: (1) the revival of virtue theory in theological ethics and (2) the breakdown of any consensus regarding an adequate theology of non-Christian religions. The implications of virtue theory for theological disciplines beyond moral theology remain to be discerned. In this session, James Fredericks reflected on ways in which virtue theory contributes to the problem of a Christian response to the diversity of religions today. Specifically, he proposed interreligious friendship as a new theological virtue. Friendships between Christians and non-Christians may once have been considered a vice. In the Church's current situation, such friendships should be seen as virtuous to the extent that they assist Christians in responding creatively to the fact of religious diversity.

The presentation included a review of some basic elements in virtue theory (MacIntyre, Yearly, Foot, etc.) as well as some of the recent discussion of friendship as a virtue (Meilaender, Waddel, Hauerwas, etc.). These findings formed the basis for a sustained reflection by the presenter of his own experience of friendships with Buddhists and the implications of these friendships for him as a Christian theologian. The virtue of interreligious friendship provides a basis for a "wider communion" among Christians and non-Christians, not based on assertions of the ultimate unity of religions as variant expressions of a transcendent ultimate reality as in pluralist theologies of religions.

Interreligious friendship is a virtue which helps Christians resist what must be counted a serious vice today, namely, fear of the Other. Christian believers have evolved theological strategies for protecting themselves from what Levinas has called the "terror of the Other." Friendship with a non-Christian believer allows a Christian to take the Other seriously and perhaps to be transformed by the relationship.

The presentation by Jim Fredericks was followed by responses by Denise Carmody and Jack Renard. Denise Carmody reflected on the implications of recognizing interreligious friendship as a virtue for our increasingly diverse classrooms. Jack Renard responded to the presentation by offering the example of his own friendships with Muslim believers in St. Louis.

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