

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Topic: Is the Theology of Religions Obsolete? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to the Theology of Religions

Convener/Moderator: James L. Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University

Presenters: Paul Knitter, Xavier University

Monica Hellwig, Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities

Frank Clooney, Boston College

Comparative theology, increasingly, is being proposed as a way beyond the current impasse in the debate regarding an adequate theology of religions. For this reason, theologians involved in both subdisciplines have been discussing the relationship between the theology of religions and comparative approaches to religious diversity. With this discussion in mind, the comparative theology seminar invited three theologians equipped to comment on the issue from different perspectives. Paul Knitter is widely known as an exponent of a pluralistic theology of religions. Francis Clooney, who has worked extensively with Indian traditions, has done much to promote comparative theology. Monika Hellwig's contribution was solicited based on her practical experience of interreligious dialogue.

Paul Knitter's presentation emphasized the need for Christians to prepare themselves theologically to enter openly into interreligious dialogue. More specifically, Knitter argued that in abandoning exclusivist and inclusivist theologies of religion, Christians will have to revise their views of Jesus Christ. Knitter has a strong commitment to revising our understanding of the uniqueness of Christ based on the findings of the theology of liberation. The key issue for interreligious dialogue must become the universal religious quest for social justice. Increasingly, the lines separating religious believers will not run along the frontiers separating religions, but rather across religions between those who are committed to social justice and those whose religious beliefs function ideologically to support the status quo.

Frank Clooney's presentation exemplified comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions. Clooney chose a Hindu text as an example, the "Purification of Logic," by Vedanta Desika, a fourteenth century theologian in India. With this one text, Clooney raised a variety of questions for Christian theologians. To recount but a few, the Hindu text raises questions regarding (1) the authority of scripture and the role of tradition in interpreting sacred texts; (2) the

relationship between an understanding of human nature and our understanding of God; and (3) how religions come to make authoritative and absolute claims.

Clooney argued for comparative theology as an alternative to the theology of religions. Comparative theology does not presume that Christians need to revise their theological self-understanding as a prerequisite for entering authentically into interreligious dialogue. Neither does comparative theology simply make the case that Christianity has much to learn from non-Christian religions. Instead, comparative theology looks seriously at non-Christian religious beliefs and reflects on the significance of these beliefs for Christian self-understanding. In addition, Clooney underscored the fact that, unlike the theology of religions, comparative theology is not a particular branch of theology, but rather the entire Christian theological enterprise itself. In taking non-Christian religions seriously, Christians will be led to ask in new ways all the basic theological questions.

Clooney ended by concluding that comparative theology is not another candidate for an adequate theology of religions. Comparative theology can be seen as an alternative to the theology of religions. The theology of religions is not without value. Today, however, there is decidedly a need for more comparative work and less debate regarding the theology of religions as a prelude to this comparative work.

Monika Hellwig responded to both presentations by acknowledging the differences between the theology of religions and comparative theology and then going on to ask how the two might live together more creatively. Christian theologians cannot simply abandon the theology of religions. Christianity's belief in Jesus Christ requires it to come to some sort of theological assessment of non-Christian religions. But Christian theologians may have to recognize that a complete and satisfactory theology of religions may have to wait until more comparative work is completed.

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