

COMPARATIVE SPIRITUALITY—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Comparative Spirituality  
Conveners: Paul Knitter, Union Theological Seminary  
Roger Haight, Union Theological Seminary  
Moderator: Kyeongil Jung, Union Theological Seminary  
Presenters: Roger Haight, Union Theological Seminary  
Paul Knitter, Union Theological Seminary

This selected session consisted of a conversation between Roger Haight and Paul Knitter that gradually expanded to include all in the audience of about thirty five people. Haight spoke for twenty minutes and Knitter developed the theme further for another 20 minutes. Each then asked the other a seminal question drawing out an equally fundamentally important response. The conversation then was open to the floor. Kyeongil, a recent doctoral graduate who wrote a thesis developing an interreligious liberation theology, chaired the meeting and facilitated the discussion.

Haight's opening statement was an analytical narrative of what he had to do as a Christian theologian to enter into a conversation with Buddhist spirituality. He described the concept of a "functional analogy" developed from Perry Schmidt-Leukel and John Makransky, and proposed a framework for the conversation as Christians and Buddhists both standing before questions of ultimacy. He then proposed a broad view of *spirituality* as the way persons or groups lead their lives before ultimacy. With that definition in place, he hypothesized that, just as Christian spirituality can be conceived as "following Jesus," so too Buddhist spirituality might be conceived as "following Buddha." This framework allows Christians and Buddhists to speak with each other in terms of the practices that unify their lives and give them a religious identity.

As for learning from Buddhism, the conversation with Buddhist spirituality helps confirm for Haight how the doctrine of creation is non-dualist: no finite being is separable from the power of absolute being. The human self does not exist absolutely but always by God's presence within the power of creating. In Thomistic terms we are created actuation by uncreated act.

Finally, the attempt to appropriate the realistic descriptions of emptiness, no-self, and samsara into Christian sensibility highlights an impersonal aspect of the experience of God that intensifies God's mysterious transcendent character and the need for hope in the Christian disposition toward reality.

Knitter took off where Haight left off. He essentially underscored five points. He first noted that the ultimate question of the Buddhist is less a question of meaning than of suffering. This helps to situate Buddhist spirituality as a set of practices in which transcendence is also utterly immanent and responsive to suffering.

Second, following Buddha is less an imitation of an external exemplar, and more a realization of the Buddha nature within the self, prompting functional analogies with a Christian mysticism of being "in Christ" in a way that Christ is "in me" (St. Paul). This led, third, to a discussion of the meaning of the doctrine of no-self and how it may be interpreted as meaning an "Inter-Being" that could fruitfully be appropriated by Christian spirituality. Inter-being does not destroy the conventional

*Selected Session: Comparative Spirituality*

self but accurately describes it as an open clearing house of change within a process of multiple vectors of constant influence.

Fourth, Knitter brought out how the language about transcendence in Buddhism is thoroughly apophatic: all spiritual practice and language about the ultimate has to be chastened by an awareness that language points to but cannot “represent” the absolute. He closed with a fifth reflection on the tension between universal compassion and practical response to especially grave social suffering. Socially engaged Buddhists are living within this tension between the open disposition and the practical needs to which it must respond.

After these brief presentations, Haight and Knitter primed the pump for a general conversation by asking each other pointed questions about basic points in their presentations. This led to a general conversation that was animated and fruitful.

ROGER HAIGHT, S.J.  
*Union Theological Seminary*  
*New York*

PAUL KNITTER  
*Union Theological Seminary*  
*New York*