

## COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Topic:	Liberating Interreligious/Comparative Theologies: Asian and Asian American Perspectives
Convener & Moderator:	Francis X. Clooney, Harvard Divinity School
Presenter:	Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
Respondents:	Jonathan Tan, Xavier University, Cincinnati Karen Enriquez, Boston College

This discussion was premised on the conviction that a prophetic theology, responding to “the present *kairos*,” must engage the realities of religious plurality in dialogue and conflict. According to Tiemeier, these realities present theologians with important opportunities for promoting interreligious understanding as a contribution to ending oppression. However, Tiemeier also indicated that we must ask, “Do interreligious and comparative theologies in fact respond prophetically to this *kairos*? Do they repeat past sins by focusing unduly on theological debates, ignoring the socio-political implications of their conversations?” It is important to note that interreligious and comparative theology do not necessarily arise from interreligious dialogue. While dialogue involves interaction *between* persons in life, action, theology, and experience, an interreligious theology that is largely historical or philosophical would not necessitate interpersonal dialogue. Tiemeier argued that comparative theology’s prophetic role must be tested by attention to the power and privilege operative in the comparative process, and by locating one’s work in the context of a living and open community.

Within such a community, the theologian is better positioned to be a prophetic voice in word and witness. Through it, her theology is held accountable to the concerns, interests, and goals of her dialogue partners. So too, even if a theologian may at one point or another publish or speak on a classic text of seeming little present-day relevance, she serves her friends (and not just the academy) by contributing to understanding, and by allowing the overall body of her work to emerge from and then also serve the needs of the wider community. In this sense, the comparative theologian remains embedded in the real-life concerns of religious believers, her projects reflecting issues and questions arising from everyday life. She bears witness to truth by voicing the community’s concerns and seeking understanding in the midst of its life.

Tiemeier developed this comparative orthopraxis from Asian and Asian American feminist dialogues of life, drawing on her own dialogues with Hindus in Los Angeles, particularly Hindu women, her cooperation in the project of reviewing the portrayal of Hinduism in Catholic school textbooks. To show how comparative study can also bring to a community’s attention powerful examples of women who resist established hierarchies, she introduced to us the story of Kannaki, a wife/prophetic figure/goddess in the classical Tamil drama, the *Cilappatikaram* (*The Ankle Bracelet*).

Jonathan Tan agreed with Tiemeier with her that the efficacy of any theology must be intimately linked to real human persons with their history, cultures, and

religions, as well as their struggles and aspirations in a particular place and time. Hence, comparative theology becomes prophetic when we are able to engage with the daily life experiences of people for whom specific sacred texts are life-sustaining or marginalizing, and allow their concerns to inspire or challenge our own theological perspectives. We are therefore called to move from an exclusively rational, discursive engagement with these texts, to a mutual dialogue with the people and their experiences with these texts. These experiences include not just the positive and life giving experiences, but also the suffering, pain and injustices that are generated by these texts. Tan drew parallels to the liberative representation of women in *Cilappatikaram* by introducing Nguyen Du's poem, *Truyen Kieu* ("The Tale of Kieu"), widely regarded as Vietnam's national poem and the greatest accomplishment of the Vietnamese literary heritage.

In her response, Karen Enriquez noted that what Tiemeier adds to earlier understandings of dialogue is an insistence that dialogues do not or should not be found only in formal conversations, but that this dialogue can be found in the "informal moments" valuing what maybe usually seen as the "trivial" moments during the "break" or "sharing a meal," particularly as we recognize how people in such communities form friendships and relationships that are the true foundation of a lasting dialogue that is transformative of one's theology. It is in communities of friendship that "one's theology is accountable to the concerns, interests and goals of her dialogue partners" and "allows one's work to emerge from and serve the needs of the wider community. In this sense, then, the comparative theologian remains embedded in the real-life concerns of religious believers" (Tiemeier, cited by Enriquez).

The ensuing lively discussion explored in particular the required difficult balancing of community engagement and responsibility, and the more technical demands of theological study of great texts, whether these be philosophical or, as in Tiemeier's and Tan's examples, powerful instances of poetic discourse.

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