

CONSULTATIONS

ASIAN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Asian Saints: Their Contemporary Message
Convener: Joseph Cheah, Saint Joseph College, West Hartford, Connecticut
Moderator: Julius-Kei Kato, King's University College at the University of Western Ontario
Presenters: Christina Astorga, Former Founding Director, Center for the Study of Catholic Social Thought at Duquesne University
Ruben Habito, Southern Methodist University Perkins School of Theology
Sophia Park, Holy Names University

Reflecting on the CTSA convention theme "All the Saints," members of the Asian Theology Consultation has brought to the fore not only the "official saints" of the Church but also those heroes and heroines of all faith traditions who stand head and shoulder over us, as well as those ordinary people, whom we come in contact with everyday, and who have provided a model of sanctity for us. One of the qualities that all of these "saints" have in common is that they exhibited a kind of loving that went against the grain of this world. They seem to say and do things that people did not want them to say or do. As a consequence, they were often misunderstood, as well as experienced abandonment and other forms of suffering. What made them "saints," however, is that they were able to turn their adverse situations into spiritual attitudes of trust and hope. The saints discussed by all three presenters have these qualities in common.

Christina Astorga, Founding Director for the Study of Catholic Social Thought of Duquesne University, explores Lorenzo Ruiz (1600?-1636), the first Filipino saint, a layperson who lived a simple life but died an extraordinary death as a martyr in radical fidelity to his faith when others recanted theirs, suffering the most extreme of human torture. Astorga is interested in discovering what made martyrs and saints in general, and St. Ruiz in particular, to choose even the most brutal forms of torture and death over freedom and life. Astorga proposes that it was "holy eros" that enabled St. Ruiz to die a martyr's death. Astorga defines holy eros as a love that emotionally unites the lover with the beloved. It is "an embodied and passionate love, completely unafraid to take risks, and finally the ultimate risk of death, for the beloved. It is holy eros because it is directed to the sublimity of God's absolute and infinite love." Furthermore, this holy eros is founded on Karl Rahner's notion of supernatural existential, the very orientation of our being

to God of absolute closeness and immediacy. Astorga explains that Rahner's notion of God's self-communication is antecedent to our freedom, that "even before we could say yes or no, God has already loved us first, and it is this divine initiative of love that draws us to God. Our very existential, the very condition of our concrete existence, is oriented to God." This orientation is "supernatural" because it is initiated and sustained by God's self-communication.

Unlike Rahner's metaphysics of being, Emmanuel Levinas relates the God question to the metaphysics of ethics. When Rahner's supernatural existential is reconsidered in Levinas ethics of desire, "the mystery of God is made present not in conceptual terms but rather in our being touched and stirred into life where acting lovingly is the only way to knowing." This notion of God as ultimate Desirable is what drew St. Ruiz and other martyrs to die for their faith because they wanted to be united with the God whom they infinitely desire.

Using post-colonial feminism as her methodology, Sophia Park, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy, at Holy Names University examines the life and holiness of two women, Mother Teresa and Saint Alphonsa Muttathupadathu, both of whom are regarded by many in India as the embodiment of sanctity. Park questions whether Mother Teresa's missionary works truly empowered poor Indians who were seen not as companions of her missionary efforts in India but as the *others*. Park notes that while Mother Teresa's missionary activities include working with the destitute and dying on the streets of Calcutta, she did not attempt to change the structures of oppression that have kept the *dalits* in the margins of Indian society. As a religious woman, however, the missionary founder was faithful to her calling to work with the poorest of the poor despite the fact, through her own admission, that her spiritual struggle, "the dark night of the soul," would remain with her over the period of sixty years until her death. Mother Teresa was an agent of her own life in that she never gave up on her faith. Even on those occasions when her faith seemed weak, she continued to persevere.

Saint Alphonsa Muttathupadathu, native of Kerala, can be attributed to represent the "postcolonial" mind in that her sanctity and healing power have echoed the religiosity of India, which emphasizes healing power and exorcism as part and parcel of popular Christianity of Kerala. This kind of Christianity, rooted in the traditional Indian spirituality, has enabled Kerala Christians to become active agents in their spiritual practices. Because St. Alphonsa's spirituality is often described in the context of suffering, many feminists have pointed out the dangers of glorifying or internalizing suffering and oppression caused by socio-economic structure which can lead to the impression that experiencing oppression could be justified as holy life.

Ruben Habito, professor of World Religions and Spirituality at Perkins School of Theology, takes a historical approach in the development of the notion of bodhisattva in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and asserts that the notion for a being-for-others, an essential feature of the Bodhisattva, is embodied in the lives of heroes and heroines of all cultures and religions. Habito began his presentation by distinguishing the Theravada notion of the "arhat" or "arahant" ("worthy one)

with the Mahayana ideal of Bodhisattva (literally, “being on the path of enlightenment”). Historically, the ideal of Bodhisattva came to the fore with the advent of Mahayana Buddhism around the early centuries of the Common Era. Bodhisattva is an ideal in Mahayana Buddhism for one who defers his/her entry into nirvana in order to help all sentient beings in their quest for deliverance from samsara or cycles of rebirth. The central feature of the Bodhisattva is that “it seeks awakening and liberation from suffering and dissatisfaction not just for one’s own self, but precisely and primarily on behalf of all sentient beings.” Because Bodhisattvas postpone their own final entry to nirvana in order to assist all sentient beings toward their spiritual goal, they can be described as beings-for-others. Habito notes that two features are incorporated in the historical development of the notion of the Bodhisattva: “the aspect of emulation, that is, in living a life in selfless dedication to the service of others and their liberation from suffering, and the aspect of veneration, that is, the devotional practices toward these accomplished figures as a way of partaking of their merit.”

Today, the notion of a being-for-others is embodied in the lives of many individuals across cultural and religious boundaries. Well-known figures as Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Simone Weil, Miyazawa Kenji, and others are venerated (though not necessarily in a “cultic” way) by the populace for their magnanimity of heart and their selfless dedication to the wellbeing of their fellow beings. Habito added that there are countless individuals who, irrespective of religious background, can be regarded for similar dedication, the unnamed Bodhisattvas around us, who inspire us to live in the same way.

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