

TRINITY & ASIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

- Topic: The Trinity from the Resources of Asian Religious Traditions
 Convener: Peter C. Phan, Georgetown University
 Moderator: Ruben Habito, Southern Methodist University
 Presenters: Francis X. Clooney, Harvard Divinity School
 James Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University
 Peter C. Phan, Georgetown University

The intent of this selected session is to explore the resources of Asian religious traditions, more specifically, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, as possible aids to deepen the Christian theology of the Trinity. It is part of a wider writing project of the three panelists and other scholars that will eventuate in a volume to be published by Cambridge University Press under the title *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*.

The first panelist, Francis Clooney discusses the Trinity in relation to Hinduism. He notes that the Hindu-Christian relationship is long, varied and on occasion provides surprising common ground, but it is far less fundamental or developed than Christian relations with Judaism and Islam. Accordingly, reflection on the Trinity and Hinduism enables us more freely to see the possibilities and drawbacks of using a Trinitarian hermeneutic in encounter with Asian theistic traditions. Clooney first explores colonial-era Christian uses of Trinitarian models to make connections with the Hindu Trimurti of Brahma, Visnu, and Siva, Hindu reactions to claims about Trinity, novel Hindu explanations of Trinity on indigenous terms, analogies such as *sat* (being), *cit* (consciousness), and *ananda* (bliss). In turn, such newer analogies influenced Christian theologians in India, ranging from Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) to Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda, 1910-1973), who influenced Jacques Dupuis (1923-2005), a leader in finding in Trinitarian thought models for understanding other religions. In the end, Clooney said, cautious optimism seems appropriate: on the one hand, the history of “finding the Trinity in India” has been filled with mishaps; well-intended parallels, though attractive, tend to neglect the complex theological histories current in each religion; on the other, the rich interrelational complexity of Trinitarian theology and a Christian hope of finding the Trinitarian God in India has fruitfully stimulated positive, constructive comparative theological conversations that have been more fruitful than narrower Christological or ecclesiological strategies of communicating Christianity. Hindu responses have likewise helped Christian thinkers see anew what it is we are talking about in saying that the one God is Three.

The second speaker, James Fredericks discusses the doctrine of the Trinity in relation to the mahāyāna and Pure Land Buddhist teaching on the “Triple Body” (*trikāya*). According to this teaching, the Buddha has three distinct modes of existence: the *dharmakāya* or Body of Dharma, the *nirmānakāya* or Body of

Transformation, and the *sambhogakāya* or Body of Bliss. Pleading necessary oversimplification due to brevity of time, Fredericks explains how of the three “bodies” of the Buddha, the *dharmakāya* is the most fundamental. It is, according to Mahāyāna and Pure Land Buddhism, absolutely unlimited in nature, free of all determinations and boundaries, and therefore “formless.” Fredericks also explores the Buddhist teaching of the “primordial vow” of the Amida Buddha to “save” all sentient beings. In developing his “comparative theology” of the Trinity with Buddhist insights, Fredericks suggests that instead of conceiving the Trinity in terms of “one substance and three persons” one could think of God, along the line of thought of his friend Noriaki Ito, a Pure Land abbot in Los Angeles, in terms of the *dharmakāya* with its utter “emptiness” and “primordial vow.” In this conceptualization, the ultimate character of all reality is understood as utterly selfless compassion, which is not contrary to the Christian (e.g., Karl Rahner’s) view of God as self-bestowing grace. Fredericks acknowledges that he is not seeking a consensus or even a parallel between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Buddhist teaching on the three “bodies” of the Buddha. Rather, he is pointing out the unresolved tension in the Cappadocians’ formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of one substance and three persons and suggests how this tension can be relieved by the Buddhist teaching on Emptiness and Compassion.

The third panelist, Peter C. Phan explores the Confucian and Daoist teachings on the Tai Chi, the One through which the Ineffable Dao manifests itself and then differentiates itself in two forces of yin and yang that interact to produce the “thousand things.” He also points out the mutual “immanence” between yin and yang and the “ontology of relation” entailed in such metaphysics. He further expounds the processive view of reality contained in Confucianism and Daoism according to which reality exists in so far as it is in constant change or process. Finally, he notes how in these two Chinese religious traditions, “heaven,” “humanity,” and “earth” are always seen as intrinsically related to each other so that one cannot exist and be understood without the other two. With regard to the Trinity, he suggests that the unity and trinity of the Christian God could be conceived in terms of the Dao realizing and manifesting itself in the Tai Chi which in turn manifests and differentiates itself in the yin and yang. The Tai Chi and its differentiations in yin and yang exist in mutual immanence or “perichoresis.” Finally, in economic terms, the Trinity could be seen as manifesting itself in heaven, humanity, and earth.

The panel presentations and the lively question-and-answer period were most ably moderated by Ruben Habito (Southern Methodist University), whose works on Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, are internationally known. He not only directed the traffic of the discussion among the (unusually large) audience and the panelists with great finesse but also contributed much-appreciated insights and bibliographical information that are the fruits of his past and current research on Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Far from being

simply the one “substance” hidden behind the “trinity” of presenters, Habito enlivened and energized them. A better moderator on the Trinity one cannot easily find.

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