

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: “Detachment, Duty, and the Greater Good: Reading Chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita Comparatively”  
Convener: Christian Krokus, Scranton University  
Moderator: Christian Krokus, Scranton University  
Presenters: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard University  
Daniel P. Sheridan, St. Joseph's College of Maine

The Comparative Theology Reading Group is a new initiative that arose out of last year's celebratory event, at the San Diego convention, marking 25 years of the Comparative Theology Group at the CTSA. There, an hour was devoted to a reading of a section of Farid ud-Din Attar's 12<sup>th</sup> century *The Conference of the Birds*. That was a rewarding experience, since comparative theology is of necessity a discipline that proceeds slowly by careful study (usually of texts, though images and rites, practices and moral norms can also be appropriate sites), even as an interreligious mode of *lectio divina*. We saw that those dedicated to this field with respect to any instance of interreligious study would do well to come together and, as Catholic theologians, read together texts from the various traditions which we study. Hence this year's session in Milwaukee, we continued the practice by focusing on Chapter 2 of the famous Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. A fine recent translation of Gita 2 was distributed in advance (Georg and Brenda Feuerstein, Shambala Books, 2011). Since no background knowledge of Hinduism was necessary, those in attendance included experts in Hinduism, other comparativists, and some learning of the event simply from the program.

Frank Clooney and Dan Sheridan presented Gita 2 as a Hindu text, read on its own terms, then too from and for a Christian perspective. In the opening 20 minutes, Frank gave an overview of the chapter, identifying major themes, the structure of the chapter, and the progression of the teaching from Arjuna's existential crisis regarding his duty to the portrait at chapter's end of the “person steady in wisdom.” He noted the chapter's status as “the entirety” of the Gita's teaching (as suggested by commentators from the 8th century until today), and also the traditional view that studying the Gita is itself a spiritual journey, an ascent into knowledge of self, society, and God. He highlighted some of the challenges the chapter raises for the Christian/Catholic comparativist, regarding the eternity of the self, the necessity of action and the primacy of duty, and the ideal of detached wisdom even in the midst of the active life. In the next 20 minutes, Dan focused on Gita 2.11–16, under an intriguing title, “Nothing Comes From Nothing?” He stressed possibilities and difficulties in the return of the reading practice to the realm of Catholic theology, and the challenges arising therein, even regarding the adequacy of translation; when we discuss Christian theological ideas and Hindu theological ideas together, in English, can we monitor how faithful we are to the technical language-specific (e.g., Hebrew, Greek, Latin; Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil) terminology of our traditions? Dan grouped his comments under four headings: “Straining for a properly interreligious vocabulary;” “First Contrast: *Creatio Ex Nihilo*;” “Second Contrast: Why Is There Anything?” “Concluding Contrast: Seeing with a New Eye.” Near the end of the paper, Dan nicely catches the dynamics and instabilities of comparative theology: “Contrasting Christian *creatio ex nihilo* and the *Gita*'s “of the non-existent there is no coming-

into-being” leaves us in a second “suspended middle” of differing rationalities and revelations. The question why there is anything at all and the peculiar logics of a peculiarly unanswerable question compound the task. We are suspended in a suspension. The tasks of comparative theology are not just theological. Therefore we need to develop a properly interreligious vocabulary.”

We spent some time discussing the points put forward by Frank and Dan and then, in the second hour of our session, participants shared other insights based on their own reading of Gita 2, any part of it, in light of their own theological and comparative perspectives. Issues were raised about the translatability of technical terms from one language to another, and the extent of knowledge of context required if even a small section of a classic religious text, such as Chapter 2 of the Gita, could be rightly appreciated. Taking seriously the framing story of the Gita, wherein Krishna is consoling, challenging, and teaching the warrior Arjuna about his duties, some raised issues of pedagogy, and asked whether the manner of teaching exemplified in the Gita — short questions from the “student” and long answers from the “teacher” — needs to be modified in today’s learning environment. It was also noted that the Gita’s solution — do your duty (svadharma), regardless of the positive and negative results that may accrue to you — is problematic first of all on a simple level: how do young people today discover their duty in life, when one’s work in life is no longer inherited from parents? Scholars of Islam in the room noticed parallels and differences with respect to Sufi tradition regarding indifference and detachment, and the kind of knowledge (or “gnosis,” as Feuerstein translates the Sanskrit *prajñā*) desired in spiritual fulfillment. In turn, we also dealt with evident parallels and contrasts between the Gita’s teachings on indifference and detachment (and the karma yoga of Chapter 3) with those of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola.

In future such sessions we will continue seeking a fine balance between honoring the quite varied expertise of CTSA members who do comparative work, and cultivating an inclusive theological conversation over a period of years, the insights of one year affecting the choice of text for the next. We are mindful that the subtler points of how we read across religious boundaries must remain ever before us if the Reading Group is to achieve its goal of consolidating and deepening the conversation among CTSA members interested in the practice of learning interreligiously.

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.  
*Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts*