

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: A Thematic Examination of the Significance of James L. Fredericks' Work
- Convener: Bede Bidlack, St. Anselm College
- Moderator: Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
- Panelists: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard University  
Ruben Habito, Southern Methodist University  
Mara Brecht, St. Norbert College  
SimonMary Ahiokhai, Valparaiso University
- Respondent: James L. Fredericks, Loyola Marymount University

The Comparative Theology Topic Session convened a panel to celebrate the theology of one of its founding fathers, James L. Fredericks (JF) and to begin to develop several lines of inquiry on his lasting impact on Catholic theology and comparative/interreligious studies.

Francis X. Clooney opened the panel by briefly noting how and why theological grounding matters. JF's grounding springs from his life as a Catholic and more particularly as a Catholic priest. Clooney noted his appreciation for JF's responsible mining of the history of the tradition's approach to non-Christian religions and the complexity of those relationships. From an aware theological starting point, Clooney pointed out, JF was able to move from the intellectual rigor of practicing theology interreligiously to the practice of friendship and the craft of teaching.

In his remarks, Ruben Habito highlighted JF's doctoral work comparatively examining the thought of Karl Rahner and of Buddhist philosopher, Tanabe Hajime, which gave Fredericks a unique angle to view the question of reason and faith in the quest for salvific truth and ultimate reality. This work led him to look more closely at the differences between Tanabe and Tanabe's senior colleague and mentor, Nishida Kitaro, who had formulated a Buddhist-based philosophy of Absolute Nothingness. Tanabe instead proposed a Philosophy of Repentance, or *Conversio*. These differences in the two prominent Kyoto school philosophers sensitized JF to issues that also marked the difference between Rahner's theological anthropology, and the latter's mentor Martin Heidegger's philosophical anthropology of Dasein. The philosophical and theological questions addressed in his dissertation, wherein Buddhist and Christian themes intersected and overlapped, drew JF into a close friendship with Masao Abe, a successor of Nishida and Tanabe, and put JF in a special and unique place to also help shape Abe's thought regarding the latter's own Buddhist tradition.

Mara Brecht, for her part, noted that comparative theology and the theology of religions offer Christians two options for responsibly addressing diversity. (NB: Brecht was not present. Her paper was read by Tiemeier.) She saw JF committing himself to comparative theology as a "better way" while *demoting* the theology of religions. Brecht provided three main criticisms informing his call for the moratorium on the theology of religions: it is impractical, un-neighborly, and solipsistic. After reviewing these criticisms, Brecht revisited theology of religions to which she is committed. She proposed that JF might be open to theology of religions if it embraced risk. For JF, only theologies that "place Christian self-understanding at risk" are capable of enriching Christian faith. Comparative theology achieves this by

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growing out of dialogue; theology of religions is not. JF embraces risk not because it is a value of post-modernism or pluralism but instead because it stands at the heart of the Christian tradition, especially conversion. When complemented by insights from comparative theology, the theology of religions has the possibility of destabilizing old assumptions, throwing wide-open theological structures, and inviting Christians to pass over to another reality.

In a summary of a longer paper, SimonMary Aihokhai asserted that JF's theology of friendship becomes a necessary tool to navigate the unfolding surprises facing contemporary societies. Aihokhai articulated the parameters for a theological hermeneutic of friendship as the basis for a viable comparative theology in a global context. However, he corrected JF's idea that friendship is a "new virtue" by arguing that it is rather the "forgotten virtue," that is too often sacrificed for self-preservation. He insisted that cultivating a stance of solidarity is the highpoint for both interreligious friendship and comparative theology.

JF responded to each of the presenters. For example, he answered Clooney's concluding question regarding how his thought has changed due to the practice of comparative theology. Another example was his response to Brecht. Although he still insisted on a moratorium on theologies of religions—a position he is known for—he did acknowledge at least an implicit theology of religion in himself.

A rich discussion followed, much of which was a response to JF's plea to keep theology personal. Accordingly, conversation shifted from scholarship to such things as religious pluralism on our campuses, liturgical space as interreligious encounter, and interreligious rituals. Many of JF's comments were illustrated by his personal interfaith encounters. He urged us to keep the conversation going so that important moments in interreligious dialogue can happen.

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