

BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Comparative Perspective on the Notion of Forgiveness
Convenor: Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara Univ.
Moderator: Karen Enriquez, Xavier University
Presenters: Ruben Habito, Southern Methodist University
Glenn Willis, Misericordia University

In line with the broader theme of the CTSA convention and also with the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue interest group chose to explore how the two different traditions explore the theme of mercy and forgiveness. The group was approved for the 2015–2017 period, and this past convention marked the second year of its history.

The first scheduled presenter, Susie Paulik Babka from the University of San Diego, was unfortunately unable to attend the convention because of a family emergency, and was thus unable to read her paper “An Aesthetic of Vulnerability: Toward a Buddhist-Christian Ethic of Forgiveness.” As a result, the group had ample time for the two remaining presentations: Glenn Willis, from Misericordia University, read a paper on “Forgiveness and Self-Interest: Buddhist and Christian Challenges to the Contemporary Psychology of Forgiveness” while Ruben Habito from Southern Methodist University presented a reflection on “Victim and Oppressor: Buddhist and Christian Reflections on Atonement and Forgiveness.”

Dr. Willis’ paper wove together different strands from early Christian theology and spirituality, Buddhist reflection on cognitive and behavioral transformation, and contemporary psychology. Dr. Willis noted that therapeutic approaches to forgiveness seek to accomplish an inner epistemic shift that would free the individual from the tyranny of resentment, whereas traditional Christian models of forgiveness understand the latter within a broader theological framework, grounding human forgiveness within God’s forgiveness of our sins, and viewing inner transformation as a form of *metanoia* that gradually assimilates human beings to God.

As a result, the very notion of conversion is utterly alien to contemporary psychology; the focus is rather on shame and the pursuit of “authenticity,” in a context where the self is no longer experienced within a framework where sin and guilt are held together in a conversant identity. Dr. Willis presents an alternative Christian notion of forgiveness where grace accomplishes an ontological transformation of the individual, who then in turn “performs” forgiveness towards his neighbors. During the discussion, Dr. Willis compared this approach to Buddhist approaches such as *metta* meditation or *lojong* practices such as those taught by the contemporary Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron. Such practices are closer to the Christian tradition to the extent that they also envisage a process of transformation accompanied by practice, but they also function within a different conceptual frame characterized by the absence of a transcendent deity.

Dr. Habito’s discussion of atonement and forgiveness presented the author’s personal engagement with the question of moral injury and its broader impact on society after his visit to the Dachau concentration camp. Dr. Habito problematized the classic atonement soteriology that is found in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury, and contrasted it with alternative understandings of divine forgiveness as

well as number of Buddhist approaches, such as those by contemporary Tibetan and Vietnamese masters who suffered political and religious persecution.

The presentations were followed by a lively discussion where the speakers and the audience explored the implications of the two papers. The conversation focused on the distinct “ground” of forgiveness between a religious tradition that affirms the enduring character of individual subjectivity, and one that denies the ultimate existence of a permanent self. Members of the audience also discussed the impact on the practice of forgiveness of different beliefs such as the claim that every individual is created in the image and likeness of God, and the assertion that the Buddha nature inheres within every sentient being. The discussion highlighted both the points of contact between the Buddhist and Christian practice of forgiveness, as well as a number of irreducible differences due to the traditions’ distinct frameworks.

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