

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	Textual Journeys: Religious Learning across Borders
Conveners:	Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Harvard University Marianne Farina, C.S.C., Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology, Graduate Theological Union
Moderator:	Francis X. Clooney, S.J.
Presenter:	John Pawlikowski, Catholic Theological Union
Text:	Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Bava Metzia 59b: “The Excommunication of Eliezer, Son of Hyrcanus”

The Comparative Theology Reading Group is a new initiative that arose out of our 2014 celebratory event (in San Diego) 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 12th century *Conference of the Birds*. In 2015 (Milwaukee), we read together Bhagavad Gita 2:54–72. These rewarding experiences show how comparative theology is a discipline that, of necessity, proceeds slowly by careful study, even as an interreligious mode of *lectio divina*. This year’s session broadened our reading practice by turning to Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Bava Metzia 59b (with some attention to Tractate Sanhedrin 68a). No background knowledge of Rabbinic Judaism was prerequisite, and those in attendance included experts in a variety of religions studied from a Catholic perspective. This diversity brought a wide variety of nuances to bear on the reading of the Tractate.

John Pawlikowski, who had selected the text for reading in consultation with experts in Rabbinic Judaism, was our guide to reading. In his prefatory remarks, John commended the group for focusing on a text of Judaism, since too often, he remarked, the study of Judaism is cordoned off from the study of other traditions, as if paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate* (Judaism) is a separate topic entirely from paragraphs 3 (Islam) and 2 (Hinduism and Buddhism). He also indicated that too often the Catholic rapprochement with Jewish tradition and declaration of respect for Judaism’s revelatory status is in effect restricted to the Hebrew Bible. While not all contemporary Jews study or see as central the Rabbinic tradition, the Talmud is clearly a highly significant part of Judaism as rich historical and living tradition. John then introduced Tractate Bava Metzia 59b, a text which focuses on Rabbi Eliezer, his teaching methods and his strategic appeals to reason, miraculous signs, and divine authority, in favor of his positions. Arguing for the purity of an oven for baking, when Eliezer fails to persuade his fellow rabbis by argument, he elicits signs from nature—a carob tree uprooted, a stream reversing its flow, the walls tilting inward. When his colleagues reject signs too, he calls upon Heaven—the Lord—and a heavenly voice of approval is heard. But this too they dismiss, reminding Eliezer that at Sinai the Lord had sent the Torah down to earth, to be interpreted here, by humans. The Lord is pleased by their audacity; Eliezer is excommunicated for his reliance on signs and appeals to Heaven; for a time the wellbeing of the world is endangered. In Tractate Sanhedrin 68a) as Eliezer nears death, the situation is resolved. His appeal to natural signs is recognized as a teaching technique and not magic, and at death he is restored to the community. John noted that, in some strands of Rabbinic tradition, the Eliezer story is a kind of “stand-in” for the story of Jesus, that interpreter of the Law

Interest Group: Comparative Theology

who also offered miraculous signs and who appealed to the Lord to vindicate his message.

We discussed the Tractate in small groups for about 50 minutes, enjoying its details, the puzzles of its meaning, its representations of authority and community, and the role of the divine in a human community. As comparativists we naturally drew parallels and contrasts with other traditions, thereby shedding light on Catholic reading practices and communal decision-making.

In future sessions—drawing other traditions and their texts (and perhaps images or practices) into our reading—we will continue to refine the work of reading together, inclusive of as many voices as possible, and with attention to the manifold benefits and challenges for Catholic theology.

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