

SPIRITUALITY AND COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

A. Joint Session: Spirituality/Comparative Theology

On Friday, June 11, the members of the Spirituality Seminar held a joint session with the Seminar on Comparative Theology. The theme for the joint session, "*Kenosis* or Emptiness in Christian and Buddhist Spirituality," was selected in view of the general CTSA convention theme. Preparatory reading for the session was Donald Mitchell's *Spirituality and Emptiness: Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1991). There were three presentations and group discussion in the joint session.

Douglas Burton-Christie (Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley) drew attention to a particular example of *kenosis* in the life and writings of Thomas Merton. He described Merton's experience of *kenosis* in terms of being "overtaken," entering into the darkness caused by the social disorientation and cultural fragmentation of the 1960s. The more Merton identified with the agenda of social transformation of his day, the more pronounced was his experience of darkness or emptiness. Burton-Christie emphasized Merton's enormous appeal to many contemporary readers, as well as his capacity for intimacy with a very wide range of people. He suggested that, in part, such an appeal lies in Merton's deep sympathy and compassion for human frailty and weakness, born of the recognition of his own experience of darkness, disorientation and emptiness.

Joann Wolski Conn (Neumann College) addressed the issue of how different social locations influence the experience of emptiness. She seriously questioned whether Mitchell considers social location in treating spirituality and the experience of emptiness. Conn considered the lives of two women, Jane Frances de Chantal and Cornelia Connelly, both of whom were wives, mothers, and foundresses of religious congregations. In view of the profound experience of loss, deprivation and detachment suffered by these two women, she drew attention to the painful character of women's experience of darkness and emptiness. This she contrasted to Mitchell's rather exalted and lofty explanation of it. Further, on the basis of her exposition of these two figures in the Christian tradition, she contested Mitchell's thesis that the contemporary figure Chiara Lubich represents a radically new approach to the spirituality of emptiness. Conn's judgment is rather that the characteristics highlighted in the spirituality of Chiara Lubich are found within the longstanding traditions of women's spiritual experience as exemplified in the lives of de Chantal and Connelly.

Daniel Sheridan (Loyola University, New Orleans) issued a strong critique of Mitchell's work. He questioned the legitimacy of analyzing the topic of emptiness from the vantage of the Kyoto School of Buddhism, as Mitchell does. Sheridan suggested that since the Kyoto school has been strongly influenced by categories of Western philosophy, and because it represents a very small group within the much larger phenomenon of Buddhism, its view of this and other topics is necessarily limited, and its understanding partial. Further, he argued that the notion of emptiness is so rich and nuanced in meaning within the Buddhist tradition that it is no small task to arrive at any degree of unanimity of interpretation among Buddhists, let alone attempt to draw parallels between Buddhist and Christian experiences of emptiness or *kenosis*. Discussion followed each of the presentations.

B. Seminar on Spirituality

On Saturday, June 12, the members of the Spirituality Seminar gathered to take up the topic: "Spiritual Transformation in Interfaith Perspective." The preparatory reading for the seminar was Elizabeth Liebert's, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist, 1992). The session was comprised of three presentations and group discussion.

Elizabeth Liebert (San Francisco Theological Seminary) examined the writings of Etty Hillesum as a case study for some of the insights she has developed in *Changing Life Patterns*. She attempted to illustrate the methodology of her project by using Hillesum's diaries and letters as internal and external data. That is to say, Liebert demonstrated how one might determine a person's developmental stage by examining other data in lieu of personal interaction or interview. She presented Etty Hillesum as a figure who achieved a high level of spiritual and personal development at a relatively young age, and attributed this to her relationship with Julius Spier and to the demands of her "social location," i.e., Nazi-occupied Holland.

Valerie Lesniak (University of Saint Thomas School of Divinity) presented Raissa Maritain as an adult model of integration. Drawing attention to Maritain's conversion and charting her development in the diaries and other personal writing, Lesniak focused on the dynamics of recollection and lamentation as the overarching means of Maritain's personal development. Lesniak noted that Maritain's proclivity for solitude, introversion and introspection gradually gave way to an ever-increasing concern for the pressing problems of the wider social order. This then became the matrix for the dynamics of conversion and personal development as Maritain matured through recollection, lamentation and hope.

Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt (Santa Clara University) examined various paradigms for understanding the conversion of Saint Paul. She suggested that most are inadequate and that Paul's conversion must not be understood as an abandonment of Judaism. His conversion is more properly understood in terms of conversion to mission, a mission altogether compatible with Paul's Judaism.

Rosenblatt noted that in Paul's outreach to the Gentiles, there is a clearly discernible move from more narrow and restrictive understandings of faith and law within the tradition to much wider possibilities. She suggested that such an approach to Paul's continuing relationship to Judaism has several important consequences for interfaith relations, especially by serving as a corrective to fundamentalism and as an example of greater tolerance of religious diversity.

Discussion followed each presentation. Suggestions were made for topics that might be addressed in light of the theme for the 1994 CTSA Convention: "Jesus: the Concrete Foundation of Christianity."

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