

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Rome, Issues of Orthodoxy,
and the Future of Comparative Theology
- Convener: Bradley J. Malkovsky, University of Notre Dame
- Moderator: Francis X. Clooney, Boston College
- Presenters: Thomas Forsthoefel, Mercyhurst College
Paul J. Griffiths, University of Chicago

This session discussed recent Roman documents such as Pope Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (FR, 1998), Cardinal Ratzinger's address "Current Situation of Faith and Theology" (CSFT, 1996), the International Theological Commission's document "Christianity and the World Religions" (CWR, 1997), and the case of Jacques Dupuis, a Belgian Jesuit under investigation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith since 1998. The main issue was the relation of comparative theology to orthodoxy.

Thomas Forsthoefel argued that comparativists must continually refine their vision in the light of internal and external stimuli with the goals of a deepened and incarnated knowledge of the divine. Internal stimuli include our unfolding lives of faith in the light of new knowledge, experience, and relationships. The seedbed for new awareness is often a "fertile darkness," a period characterized by a lack of clarity. External stimuli include recent Vatican teachings and exhortations, including *Fides et Ratio*. Positive elements of FR are the role of reason, an emphasis on metaphysics, and the goals of synthesis. Troubling is FR's *a priori* dismissal of non-Christian metaphysical reflection, a telescoped focus on Greco-Latin thought, and structures of power and control in the teaching and transmission of doctrine, all of which vitiate the program of comparative theology and the teaching authority itself. By modeling patient, humble, trusting encounter with the relevant data of faith across cultures, comparative theology can achieve its goals of adding to our knowledge of the divine and also help to render the Church more humane, thus facilitating the Church's own deepened incarnation as the Body of Christ.

Paul Griffiths acknowledged Rome's concern about the possible danger of relativism in the practice of comparative theology, but took issue with the implicit assumption that all comparative theology necessarily rejects traditional constitutive Christology and ecclesiology and tends toward pluralism. While concurring with Ratzinger that the reading required by comparative theology is often done in captivity to philosophical and theological views extrinsic to and incompatible with orthodoxy (example: John Hick), Griffiths judged Ratzinger to be incorrect that the nature of the works read has any necessary connection with such mistakes. For example, relativism and indifferentism are made less attractive—not more—by serious attention to Indian Buddhist works.

The ITC's "Christianity and the World Religions" (CWR), while not addressing the question of reading alien texts, reiterates Ratzinger's concern about

indifference to Church teaching. CWR advocates interreligious dialogue, but such dialogue is neither the serious reading of the texts of other traditions nor constructive work undertaken in response to such reading.

Jacques Dupuis's *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997) raised questions in Rome probably having to do with the author's views on the salvific significance of Jesus and the concomitant significance of the Church. The Dupuis case confirms that the Vatican worries principally about the tendency of work in comparative theology requiring radical reinterpretation of central doctrinal claims.

Griffiths argued nonetheless in favor of the possibility of practicing comparative theology under the doctrine and discipline of the Church. Might it not be the case that the Church can learn some of the implications of its own faith from a thoughtful and deep reading of alien religious works? Ought not the Church then actively recommend and sponsor just such work of deep reading in the hope of understanding itself better? She should do this in complete confidence that she is the principal and universal sacrament of salvation and that she alone is an explicit witness to the full significance of Jesus Christ.

In response James Fredericks addressed the issue of the viability of any theology of religion. While agreeing that the pluralist model was a threat to Christian orthodoxy, he added that the more orthodox inclusivist model, too, was problematic when one attempted to understand Buddhism on its own terms. He felt it necessary to suspend temporarily his inclusivist theology so as to understand Buddhism in a more Buddhist way. After understanding Buddhism properly on its own terms, Fredericks stated that he thereupon returns to his own Christian tradition and tries to reformulate it based on his knowledge of Buddhism.

In regard to what he perceived to be Forsthoefel's hopes for a return to metaphysics and supposedly universal principles, Fredericks pointed out that his Buddhist friends would offer a reasoned argument against every supposedly universal principle named in section four of FR.

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