

INDOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: DISCIPLINES IN DIALOGUE

- Topic: How Theologians Learn from Indology
(and Other Tradition-Specific Scholarship)
- Convener: Francis X. Clooney
- Presenter: J. Patrick Olivelle, University of Texas at Austin
- Respondents: Francis X. Clooney, Harvard Divinity School
Tracy Tiemeier (Loyola-Marymount University)
Edward Ulrich (University of St. Thomas)

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was Christian missionary scholars who taught the West about religions. More recently, however, nontheological “Area Studies” have provided the key resources for that understanding of religions that must precede credible Christian theological reflection on them. Thus, Indological and South Asian Studies now clarify what “India,” “Hinduism,” and “Buddhism” mean, generally and then with respect to particular theological questions. How this and other area specializations become accessible to theologians, however, requires further exploration, and so this session offered the valuable opportunity for a conversation with a renowned Indologist who, though not a theologian, has for decades made available Indological resources rich in theological implications. J. Patrick Olivelle is well known for his research and wide publication on: 1. classical Hindu scriptures (e.g., *The Upanisads* 1996), 2. the religious legal traditions of India (e.g., *Dharmasutras* 1999; *The Law Code of Manu* 2004), and 3. asceticism and renunciation (e.g., *Renunciation in Hinduism* 1987; *The Asrama System* 1993; *Rules and Regulations of Brahmanical Asceticism* 1995). (For an estimate of Olivelle’s work, see also *Religious Studies Review* 26 (2000), “Recent Contributions of Patrick Olivelle to Indology,” by Carl Olsen, and the recent collection of Olivelle’s essays, *Language, Texts, and Society: Explorations in Ancient Indian Culture and Religion* (Firenze University Press/Munshiram Manoharlal, 2006.) After initial reflections on theology, philology, and “textual archaeology” (with respect to texts, their redaction and earlier and later history), Olivelle surveyed his recent scholarship and scholarly methodology, highlighting how careful Indology dispels misconceptions about India (and ourselves), enabling us to trace genealogically the ancient and living ideas and practices formative of the discourses we often identify as “Hindu.”

Three responses opened a lively conversation. Tracy Tiemeier explored Olivelle’s Upanisadic scholarship and its uses: “The multiple strategies Olivelle employs in his studies of the Upanisads allow Christians to have an important bridge for learning from other sacred texts, even as they may or may not have resolved issues of how one thinks of other religions. The Upanisads, like the Bible, are sacred texts revealing important theologies and concerns. . . . We can—and should—learn from them and be transformed by them, even if we cannot completely resolve difficult questions of truth. Only if we allow this to take place, can we begin to address how we might differently and more adequately theorize about other religions.” Using the famous tale of Svetaketu’s learning in its multiple

retellings, as traced by Olivelle in multiple Upanisads, Tiemeier illustrated the rich potential of close theological attention to Indian texts: “Olivelle shows us how a close reading of the text in its larger context exposes its theological purposes. While Olivelle’s annotated notes and linguistic work on the Upanisads illustrate the historical, social and cultural complexities of reading India’s scriptures, his study of Svetaketu shows how literary analysis also unveils important theological meanings in the texts. Such hermeneutical strategies are quite similar to those we use in reading Biblical texts; Olivelle demonstrates the potentially enriching dialogue between theology and Indology.”

Ted Ulrich explored Olivelle’s work on renunciation: “Olivelle’s focus on history gives great insight into the transcendent character of *sannyasa*. . . . According to Olivelle, the *Yatidharmaprakasa* offers a brief but complex explanation for the rituals in which renunciants engage. These rituals are not actually constitutive of *sannyasa*, and their significance lies in the fact that they displace prior activities, associated with home and village; they negate one’s former ways. In Olivelle’s words, ‘In its positive content, [begging] may be viewed as an ascetic practice. . . . However, the significance of begging as an act of renunciation lies in the fact that it is the immediate consequence of the rejection of fire, the central element of life-in-the-world.’ Strikingly, Olivelle’s focus on the concrete illumines deeply even the transcendent and acosmic character of this institution. What can the Christian theologian learn here? As Olivelle says, ‘an accurate description of the historical reality of a religious institution is basic to the theological task if it is to have intellectual validity.’ ” World renunciation—Indian, Christian—can be reconsidered more richly. Ulrich concluded, “Olivelle’s work challenges the Christian theologian to boldly plunge into the social sciences, relying on them for theological reflection.”

Using Olivelle’s study of eating and food in ancient India, Francis Clooney focused on the legal classification system found in *The Laws of Manu* and related treatises. Olivelle’s inquiry into this seemingly arcane material illumines basic human attitudes toward food, power, and sexuality and, by extension, allows us to rethink our conceptions of religious law, customs and rules about marriage and celibacy, ecclesial hierarchy, and even Eucharist. Attention to law and ritual law may seem marginal to the theology of religions, but the study of religious law enables us to observe how Hindu and Christian traditions identify their insiders and outsiders.

Olivelle’s scholarship clarifies “Hinduism” in its complexity, shaping a more authentic referent for theological reflection, and offering a model for theological dialogue with nontheological disciplines. It become evident that theology, though distinctive and guided by its own inner resources, should turn to Indology and similar disciplines for the sake of credible reflection on religions as they exist in their particularity.

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