

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Classic “Impasses” in Muslim-Christian Encounters
 Convener: Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, Loyola Marymount University
 Presenter: David Burrell, University of Notre Dame
 Respondents: Pim Valkenberg, Loyola College in Maryland
 Scott Steinkerchner, Aquinas Institute of Theology

David Burrell began his presentation to the comparative theology group with a personal narrative of his journey in comparative theology. He then examined three neuralgic issues in Muslim-Christian theological dialogue. First, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is in tension with Muslim understanding of tawhid (divine unity). However, shifting the focus to the development of thought on Jesus as Word of God and Muslim thought on God’s Word (the Qur’an) shows a way out of the impasse. Such a shift does not erase differences between the traditions, but it does lead each tradition to better self-understanding. Second, the Christian understanding of Jesus as mediator is problematic for Muslim thought, because while the Prophet Muhammad delivers the Qur’an, there is no mediator between human and divine. Discussion between Muslims and Christians around this impasse, however, reveals that Christian theology does not properly see Jesus as “go-between,” situated between human and divine, creator and created. Similar to the way in which it is human response to God’s Word that brings about an immediate relation with God for Muslims, Jesus’ mediating role as Word of God for Christians leads to immediate relation to God as Father. Finally, both Jews and Muslims deny the Christian teaching on “original sin.” Dialogue on this neuralgic point illustrates that Christian discourse has yet to describe “atonement” fully. Even more, Jewish and Muslim thought recognizes that humans need divine revelation, “since human beings left to themselves would never make it.” Thus, shifting perspective again shows a way out of the impasse. Impasses between traditions, then, are mutually clarifying for dialogue partners. They reveal the limits of language and help the participants to formulate their teachings more adequately. As Burrell noted, “if theological expression will ever be inadequate, theological inquiry will ever be comparative, always seeking the least misleading modes of expression.”

Pim Valkenberg focused on the pneumatological dimension implicit in Burrell’s presentation. Fundamental to comparative theology and interreligious dialogue is the belief in the guiding function of the Holy Spirit, “that it makes sense for me as a theologian to read *this* particular text, to encounter *this* particular group because this may be the text or group that God sends on my way.” As a result, impasses should not be seen as problems but as possibilities: “in situations where there is historically speaking an impasse, faith in the working of the Holy Spirit tells us that new possibilities may be possible even or maybe preferably in these situations.” When all dialogue partners agree and the conversation is easy, insight is rare; but when the dialogue becomes difficult, partners may be forced to think in a different or unexpected way. These difficult moments, then, become moments of “grace.”

Scott Steinkerchner suggested a shift from neuralgic issues between religious traditions to neuralgic issues within Catholic theology. He asked what interreligious dialogue could contribute to current impasses in Catholic thought. For example, Gary Macy and Constance FitzGerald raised issues of history and memory in their plenary addresses. Conversation with Islam on Muhammad and women can break open the Catholic impasse of history, memory, and women's participation. James Keenan's plenary address discussed solidarity and the responsibility of theologians to speak beyond the academy. His Holiness the Dalai Lama can offer a way for doing both of these things through the Mahayana Buddhist understanding of compassion for all beings and the doctrine of "skillful means." In his final remarks, Steinkerchner proposed that historical Catholic perspectives such as Thomas Aquinas, Riccoldo da Montecroce, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz offer models from the tradition for rethinking interreligious dialogue.

Forty-minutes of conversation followed the presentations. A wide range of questions, comments, and topics were raised by the session participants, including: the relationship between philosophy and theology; how to know what constitutes success in an interreligious dialogue; how the category of *imago dei* can serve as a bridge for Muslim-Christian dialogue; how to root comparative theology in the context of a lived community, and not just a community of scholars; and how impasses that cannot be resolved can nevertheless be productive. The comparative theology session concluded with five minutes of brainstorming for next year's session.

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