

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Convener: Rita George-Tvrtković, Benedictine University  
Moderator: Bede Bidlack, St. Anselm College  
Presenters: Scott Steinkerchner, Edgewood College  
Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology  
of Santa Clara University  
Respondent: Kevin Johnson, Boston College

The comparative theology topic session consisted of two papers and a response centered on the study of two sets of Christian and Buddhist texts. In his paper, “Eckhart and the Lotus,” Scott Steinkerchner reexamined the medieval Dominican Meister Eckhart’s sermons in light of the influential Mahayana Buddhist text *Lotus Sutra*, especially its concept of “skillful means.” The *Lotus Sutra* replaces the former ultimate goal of Buddhism, “achieving nirvana,” with the attainment of Buddhahood and a concomitant non-conceptual omniscience proper to buddhas.

The text also illustrates “skillful means,” the ability of the Buddha to intuitively understand the needs of his listeners (e.g., that they are not yet ready to hear certain teachings), and thus to be able to teach them in the way that will help them the most (e.g., at first the Buddha sometimes teaches doctrines that are “relatively” true, so that people will be able to move to a place where they can eventually understand more profound doctrines).

Steinkerchner suggested that if we look at the ideas of Eckhart—some of which were condemned as heretical in the fourteenth century—in light of the *Lotus Sutra*, we will see that Eckhart was actually employing something like skillful means in offering his listeners a deeper appropriation of the accepted Christian tradition. What he preached was completely compatible with that tradition, though beyond its usual portrayal; for example, Eckhart taught how to experience the “pure truth” of a relationship to God identical to that of Jesus, a non-conceptual, eternal giving and receiving of all that we are. Eckhart’s formulations, deemed heretical by some medievals and incomprehensible by some moderns, are best understood as part of a pedagogy of “skillful means.”

Thomas Cattoi’s paper, “Reading Religious Texts Interreligiously: A Joint Exploration of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and Ignatius’s *Exercises*,” was inspired by a graduate seminar at the Center for Buddhist Studies at Kathmandu University in which Buddhist and Catholic graduate students read the spiritual manuals of Ignatius and Śāntideva together. Cattoi outlined several points of contact and divergence that emerged from this joint reading, including: the practice of confession and repentance, the practice of discernment of spirits and vigilance, the practice of visualization and meditation (convergence); and assumptions about subjectivity, inner transformation, and the nature of ultimate reality (divergence). One major point of divergence is how readers of the manuals end their spiritual trajectory; while God’s intra-trinitarian love and its presence in the soul of the exercitant crowns the four weeks of *Exercises*, the Buddhist who follows Śāntideva to the end undergoes a cognitive transformation where an insight into the groundlessness of conventional reality will inform his ongoing pursuit of wisdom and compassion.

In the second part of his paper, Cattoi reflected on the broader theological implications of this joint reading. He argued that the practice of dialogue requires an underlying theology of religions that acknowledges the presence of elements of truth in the other tradition, and agrees with Fredericks's contention that the reality of dialogue cannot be constrained by an all-encompassing system which places traditions into boxes of inferiority and superiority (e.g., where Christians judge the Buddhist nirvana to be a real condition which nevertheless falls short of the plenitude of self-realization available to Christian practitioners, or where Buddhists judge Ignatius's relationship with the divine and his understanding of salvation to be symptomatic of the inability to move beyond the conventional realm). Rather, the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians who come together to read texts from both traditions can help to uncover the particularities of the different traditions, as well as some of their irreducible differences.

In his response, Kevin Johnson noted that the four texts all seem to be engaged in the problem of relating words to embodiment: how do we use words to help us embody spiritual paths? In short, these texts are about profound engagement or participation. He noted that all the texts are either discussing or explicating the highest truths of their tradition (a form of meditative wisdom in the Buddhist tradition or contemplation in the Christian tradition). They are not doing philosophy or speculative theology; rather, they are talking about what the path in their tradition looks like and how words can help us make sense of that, despite the fact that words can also be a trap. To help us out of this trap, Johnson suggested a useful way to approach these texts: by employing Maggie Ross's term "beholding," a "threshold word" which "conflates active and passive," indicates "an alert receptivity and profound engagement," and helps us to understand the type of shift we need to make away from words and toward embodiment. Johnson ended with questions for each speaker. Johnson asked Steinkerchner if we really need to use "skillful means" to understand Meister Eckhart and suggested that the idea of beholding, because it encompasses two aspects of knowing, allows us to understand him. Johnson asked Cattoi if it is problematic to read these texts in an academic setting; would a true comparative theology require practicing these texts rather than simply studying them?

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