

## COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY – TOPIC SESSION

Conveners: Julius-Kei Kato, University of Toronto  
 Laurel Marshall Potter, University of St. Thomas (Minnesota)  
 Moderator: Domenik Ackermann, Universität Paderborn  
 Presenters: Axel Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University  
 Joyce Konigsburg, DePaul University  
 Shinjae Lee, Boston College

Resulting from a broad call for papers, this Comparative Theology session reflected on the convention theme “One Baptism” in conversation with Islam, Hinduism, and the reality of religious pluralism in general. The panel stressed that, although baptism may mark Christian belonging and commitment, it can also serve as a point of connection, dialogue, and learning with members of other traditions.

The first paper, by Axel Oaks Takacs, was titled “Tradition and Propriety of Rituals in the (Omnipresent) Face of God: Ordinary (Supernatural) and Extraordinary (Natural) Means of Experiencing the Divine Presence.” Provoked by assertions from the *nouvelle théologie* (primarily Henri DeLubac) about nature as oriented to the supernatural and as medium of grace, as well as Jacques DuPuis’s subsequent articulation of an open-inclusivist theology of religions, Takacs identified a tension in conciliar Catholic theology between God’s omnipresence (a progressive, inclusive “spirit” of religiosity) and “the soteriological centrality of the Church and its sacraments” (a conservative, exclusive “letter” of religious practice). How, Takacs asked, do Catholics affirm the importance of normative sacramental practice—for example, the celebration of baptism—as meaningful for salvation, while also affirming God’s real presence in all of creation? In thinking through this tension, Takacs turned to parallel discussions among post-classical Sufis and Muslim legal experts on the validity and propriety of the *ṣalāh*, or the canonical daily prayer. Drawing on the work of Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters, Takacs presented both the Quranic affirmation that “*whithersoever you turn, there is the face of God*” (Qur’ān 2:115) and the legal requirement of facing the *qiblah* during *ṣalāh*, especially due to *adab*, propriety and courtesy to Muhammad, his behavior, and his revelatory dispensation. Ultimately, Takacs’s descriptions of and reflections on the fruits of ordinary Islamic practice confirmed the paper’s thesis that it is *through* ordinary ritual practice that the spirit of religious teaching—the omnipresence of God—is accessed.

The second paper by Joyce Konigsburg, “One Baptism: From Unity in Diversity to Diversity in Unity,” describes how baptism can promote both unity and diversity on Catholic, ecumenical, and interreligious scales. Within Catholic tradition and ecumenically, Konigsburg described how the baptized are primarily drawn into unity with each other as the Body of Christ across denominations. In relationship to members of other religious traditions, Konigsburg described how the baptized are called to participation as one among many, with a value for diversity as a starting point. In pluralist societies, the baptized are called to engage in comparative dialogue and learning in search of shared religious values that may help members of all traditions unite for ethical ends. Ultimately, the theme of the 2025 Jubilee Year, “Pilgrims of Hope,” served as an ideal for how Konigsburg imagines a unified body of the baptized

to engage with members of the world's diverse traditions in establishing justice for all beings.

Finally, Shinjae Lee presented his paper, "Reimagining Spiritual Equality: A Comparative Analysis of Dayananda Sarasvati's Vedic Reform and the Concept of One Baptism in Dalit Theology." At the heart of Lee's presentation was the question of how baptism, a sacrament of equality, might more powerfully speak to a church "still haunted by caste." For a comparative understanding of the potential for equality among castes, Lee turned to Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, who spearheaded a return to the Vedas as a means of purifying Hinduism, rejecting caste-based discrimination, and advocating for a monotheistic worship of a formless God. Lee noted that while Sarasvati promoted ontological sameness across members of all castes, he also promoted a hierarchy of people based on merit and contained some proto-Hindu nationalist tendencies. Nevertheless, evidence of ontological equality across caste from within Hinduism should, Lee asserts, help churches, too, move towards full equality for Dalit members through the celebration of baptism. Lee notes some enduring tensions, for example, that baptized Dalits are "twice discriminated" by virtue of their Dalit and Christian status, and that Dalits believers who do not choose baptism should also be treated equitably. Ultimately, however, both Lee's Hindu sources and Christian reflection suggest that equality must be made a habitual pedagogy of both traditions in consideration of their Dalit members.

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