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New light on Christian sources **Tapping into World Classics**

By Catherine Cornille

In the course of the twentieth century, nearly all of the major classical texts of the world religions have been translated and become readily available. From the Bhagavadgita to the Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way of Nagarjuna, and from the Mozi to the Meccan Illuminations of Ibn Arabi, these classics are studied and tapped for intellectual and spiritual inspiration reaching far beyond the boundaries of their original historical and religious contexts. This raises questions for Christian theology and philosophy and for the teaching of these disciplines at Catholic and Jesuit universities.

Should these texts become part of the standard curriculum in philosophy and/or theology, and be integrated in the syllabi of (at least some) core courses? Or should they be regarded as essentially alien to the Christian intellectual tradition, or perhaps even the entire “western” tradition, and therefore left to expert historical and philological study?

Although it is, of course, true that the world classics of non-Western religious traditions have played little role in the shaping of the Christian philosophical and theological traditions, the current awareness of these texts challenges Christianity to come to terms with their status and role for Christian reflection. In a significant reversal of prior attitudes toward other religions, the Second Vatican Council came to recognize “rays of goodness and truth” in the great religions of the world, and thus also in their sacred texts.

This affirmation has opened the way, in Christian theology, for a creative engagement of the classics of non-Christian religions. The reading of sacred texts of other religions indeed sheds new light on Christian sources, at times by way of recognition or resonance and at times by way of contrast. It is in the engagement with the sources of other

religions that one becomes distinctly aware, often for the first time, of the specificity of one’s own classical tradition, as many students of religion have come to realize.

But the effect of studying classics of other religions sometimes goes beyond simply providing a sharper understanding of one’s own identity and commitments, all the way to offering new inspiration and sometimes occasioning real growth. The call to recognize rays of truth in other religions is immediately a challenge to theologians that they might explore these classics in an open and constructive way, making themselves and their work receptive to new elements of wisdom they may find there.

How to engage

The classics of other religions may be engaged in different ways. One may focus mainly on similarities in order to reinforce the truth of one’s own texts, and of the texts of the other. Or one may focus on both similarities and differences in order to consider, both critically and constructively, what may be learned from the classic of the other tradition.

Some Christian theologians have gone so far as to see the classics of other religions, in particular the more philosophical classics, as an opportunity to radically rethink traditional theological categories. Just as Aquinas used the classics of Greek philosophy to develop his theological system,

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Lighting candles at a multi-faith celebration, Fairfield University.

these contemporary theologians have come to use the classics of other religions, mainly Buddhist and Hindu, to reinterpret some of the basic Christian teachings. This raises challenging questions about the relationship between faith and philosophy and about the possibilities and limits of using non-Christian philosophical classics to reformulate Christian faith.

All of this engagement with the classics of other religions, of course, requires some degree of expertise in the other tradition. While the texts are readily available, a proper grasp of their meaning presupposes familiarity with their context and use. This may be acquired through historical study of the particular tradition but also through a sustained dialogical engagement with the other tradition.

Several Jesuit universities are in the process of replacing or supplementing the introduction to world religions course with a more in-depth study of Christianity in dialogue with one other religion. This allows for a serious engagement with the texts and the teachings of the other religion and reflection on their meaning and relevance for Christian faith. Such an approach often leads not only to an understanding of the classics of the other tradition, but also to a renewed appreciation for Christian texts and traditions.

What to read

A more systematic theological approach to the classics of other religions may be found in the series *Christian Commentaries on non-Christian Sacred Texts*. Here, Christian

theologians reflect on the meaning and relevance of a particular non-Christian classic for Christian faith and practice. So far, Christian commentaries have appeared on the *Bhagavadgita* (C. Cornille, ed.) the *Narada Sutras* (D. Sheridan), the *Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaishnavas* (F. Clooney), the *Dhammapada* (L. Lefebure and P. Feldmeier), and the *Heart Sutra* (J. Keenan).

Each text poses its own set of challenges, some requiring more extensive historical explanation, and others at times lacking evident points of intersection with texts and teachings. But any classic can in principle become the focus of Christian commentary. The commentarial genre involves not only the recognition of similarities, analogies, or resonance with experiences and ideas which may come to enrich the Christian tradition, but also at times more critical and apologetic reflection. The classics of other religions thus provide a new and virtually inexhaustible source of theological reflection.

This creative and constructive engagement of the classics of other religions is taking place largely and perhaps by definition in the burgeoning field of comparative theology. Here, Christian theologians are trained in the history and languages of the other tradition so as to be able to render its classics and traditions intelligible and meaningful for other Christians. This represents a genuinely new and promising avenue for theological reflection. One may expect that it will continue to enrich the Christian tradition, but one also hopes that it may likewise inspire other traditions. ■