

Comparative Philosophy of Religion in Our Time

Comparative Philosophy of Religious Responses to Suffering:
A Panel Discussion

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First of all, I'd like to thank Dr. Knepper for inviting me here. I also want to congratulate Dr. Knepper and his colleagues for their hard work that has made the Comparison Project a success. I believe the project has resulted in excellent collaboration, producing a rich, thought-provoking series of talks and enriching our understanding of religion.

The Comparison Project addresses issues on several layers. Broadly defined, this project consists of three elements: (1) It is an experimental approach to the field known as philosophy of religion; (2) as a "comparison" project, it explores the meaning of "comparative studies;" and (3) this year's theme is religious responses to suffering. I'd like to comment briefly on these dimensions of the project, starting with the last one.

As a Buddhist scholar, I was excited to hear that the first year's theme is suffering. In Buddhism, everything eventually comes down to the issue of "suffering." The Buddha was never ambiguous about this. From the start, he was clear that the purpose of Buddhism is to save people from suffering. When Buddhism came to the West, the Buddha's unequivocal declaration of the goal of Buddhist teaching sparked an unexpected debate among Western scholars who asked: Is Buddhism a philosophy or a religion? Among the frequently cited sources of this doubt is a story about Buddha's disciple named Māluṅkyaputta, who is well-known for posing ten questions to the Buddha. As a faithful follower, Māluṅkyaputta became curious about the Buddha's answers to questions which he considered fundamental to understanding the nature of the Buddha's teachings. Māluṅkyaputta's ten questions included: Is the world eternal? Is the body the same as the soul?¹ In sum, he wondered about what Western philosophical tradition calls metaphysical issues. When asked these questions, the Buddha flatly refused to answer, and Western tradition interprets this exchange as proof that the Buddha declined to engage in philosophical discourse; therefore, Buddhism is not a philosophy. However, the issue is not as simple as this. The Buddha answered the questions in his own way, although not in the way that the questioner might have expected. And partly because of that, traditions different than Buddhism have had difficulty understanding the Buddha's logic and, thus, his philosophy. The Buddha's logic went as follows: Regardless of the answers to the metaphysical questions his disciple posed, people's suffering continues, and the goal of Buddhism is to save people from

suffering.² I tell you about this episode, because it is precisely such moments that demonstrate why comparative studies are imperative to understand others whose cultures and modes of thinking are different than one's own.

A comparative study is, among other things, a dialogue, and a dialogue is a two-way path. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) describes the dialogic relationship between the subject and object as “chiasm.” The interlocutors meet at the junction of two lines, like the letter X.³ The Comparison Project, as I understand it, has tried to create this junction, a shared space among different religions through discussion of the theme of suffering.

The six presentations and two interfaith dialogues in this year's project have shared some themes. I would broadly categorize them as follows: (1) violence, (2) suffering, (3) mourning, (4) healing, and (5) dealing: What do we do next? What is the role of religion in these five categories?

I. Violence

Violence is the obvious beginning of suffering. Speakers in the project dealt with a number of major tragedies in human history: slavery, the massacre of Native Americans, the Holocaust, the Nanjing massacre, comfort women, and the Milwaukee shooting. The unambiguous reality of the violence of these historical moments and the magnitude of suffering they caused have led humans to search for the cause of violence so that we can understand these incidents, deal with them, share them with the victims, and prevent more violence.

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) described how violence occurs on three levels. Derrida states that violence begins with articulation, when one makes distinctions through a linguistic system. The first layer of violence, which takes the form of naming, paves the way for the second layer of violence realized as evaluation and the creation of institutional systems such as moral regulations and laws. Out of this second layer of violence emerges more empirical and physical violence, or “what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape.”⁴ The tragedies discussed in this year's talks were the third layer of violence, according to Derrida's interpretation, and they took on the most visible and familiar form of violence. At the “origin” of violence, however, according to Derrida, lies the identity principle, which is represented by the language we use and the rules and regulations of our society.

II. Suffering

Suffering is an inevitable result of violence.

Let me ask some rather brutal questions: Why do we want to know about suffering? Why are we concerned about it? The suffering addressed by the presentations in this project occurred at specific historical moments to people who are not “you” or “me.” Why does it matter to any of us? How sensitive are we to the suffering of the people around us, in our community, and in the world? For example, according to a recent survey, 1 out of 6 Americans lives in poverty.⁵ How

sensitive are we to this reality of suffering in our time? We need to identify a certain common denominator which connects us to the suffering of “others” and enables us to think about the relationship between one’s self and others and about how religion functions to create a shared space between them. I will return to this issue shortly.

III. Mourning

After suffering occurs, how do religious traditions respond? One of the most noticeable responses is “mourning.” Professor Singh emphasized how the Sikh, both immediate victims of the shooting and others, continue to remember the victims, the violence, and the suffering. Professor Kopf underlined the ethics of memory and posed the question: What do we remember and what do we forget in the process of commemoration?

What does mourning entail? Mourning is an act of remembrance, a promise to not forget, to not commit a person or an event to oblivion. Why do we want to remember something *unless* in some way we are ready to continue the ideas, the legacy, the inheritance that we received from the person or the event that we commemorate? Here, I once again reference Derrida, whose works deeply engaged with philosophical interpretations of acts of mourning.⁶ In a book written in memory of Paul de Man, Derrida states, “What is recalled to memory calls on responsibility. How to *think* the one without the other?”⁷ Mourning then is not simply an act of remembrance; it is an act confirming one’s obligations to what one remembers.

IV. Healing

To carry out one’s responsibilities and remember a person or event, one needs to recover normalcy, and healing is a path to normalcy. A “dialogue or communion with the Divine” in the Sikh tradition; dancing to the rhythm of nature in a Native American religion; the emphasis on justice, empathy, and forgiveness in Islam as represented by Abdelkader; and the Buddhist call for a reconceptualization of identity and the exercise of compassion in response to the Nanjing massacre—these religiously informed practices are all ways to regain normalcy.

V. Dealing: What do we do now?

1) Philosophy of Religion

The philosophy of religion emerged as academic field at a certain point in the intellectual history of the West. This field has been specific to a certain region and tradition: Regionally, it is based on Western philosophy, and religiously, it is based on the Abrahamic religious tradition. Indeed, in the East Asian tradition, distinct terms for “philosophy” (哲學, Jap. *testugaku*; Chi. *zhéxué*; Kor. *ch’ŏrhak*) and “religion” (宗教, Jap. *shūkyō*; Chi. *zōngjiào*; Kor. *chonggyo*) were created only in the mid-19th century. Japanese philosopher Nishi Amane (西周 1829-1897),

introduced the term “philosophy” in an 1874 publication.⁸ The word “religion” entered the region through a translation of a letter from Commodore Perry in 1853.⁹ If philosophy of religion is to claim relevance to our time, it needs to open up its boundaries and incorporate thus far excluded religious traditions. Precisely this is, to my understanding, a goal of the Comparison Project.

Comparing the content of the talks delivered at this year’s project with the perennial themes of philosophy of religion reveals some differences. First, the speakers at this project were less concerned about defining and proving the existence of God, a key theme in traditional philosophy of religion. Instead, they were more concerned with how we as humans understand and deal with tragedy. Secondly, instead of focusing on granting justice for wrongdoing and condemning perpetrators—another traditional topic in philosophy of religion, which has been attempted to explain the existence of evil—these presenters more often than not emphasized the cultivation of virtuous action, forgiveness, compassion, and empathy.

In my perspective, these two characteristics of this year’s talks indicate the direction in which philosophy of religion must go in our time, which more than ever is diverse, multicultural, and globalized as the differences among people and cultures have become more keenly visible.

2) Comparative studies: How do we open our identity?

The Comparison Project proposes comparison as an effective means to deal with the issues of our time. What does comparison as an intellectual activity involve? Among other things, it calls for opening up one’s boundaries by learning about and from others.

How then do we move from a fixed concept of identity to an open identity? How do we go beyond community-specific responses to suffering and respond to tragedies with an open identity? Religious responses to suffering, as discussed in the presentations in the Comparison Project, were mostly based on the presenter’s identity as a Jewish, German, Sikh, American Indian, or Christian scholar. Does knowledge automatically transform into virtuous action? Does education about other religions and the suffering of others necessarily facilitate sharing suffering? The Buddhist tradition deals with these issues through the relationship between wisdom and compassion. Wisdom arises from one’s understanding of the Buddha’s teaching, and compassion means the exercise of wisdom through virtuous action. How does one make wisdom alive through compassionate actions? How do we make “their” suffering our own? Is this a goal of the Comparison Project at all?

This is one question that this year’s project has left us to ponder. To pose a possible answer, I would like to return to the idea of “mourning” and Derrida’s proposal that mourning is inevitably related to obligation. Building on the idea of mourning, Derrida discusses an inheritance as a source of responsibility. As an heir receives and becomes responsible for an inheritance, existence makes one responsible simply for the very fact of being alive. Derrida states: “*To be ... means ... to inherit.* All the questions on the subject of being or of what is to be

(or not to be) are questions of inheritance. . . . the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not” (emphasis original).¹⁰

The Buddhist tradition explains this “responsibility” through the idea of dependent co-arising; existence arises only through indebtedness to others, and thus, practicing living together is a fundamental way of Buddhism, known as the *bodhisattva* path. Both to Derrida and in the Buddhist tradition, to exist means to be responsible.

To consider how different religious traditions can expand their boundaries, find a shared space, and create ways to transform wisdom into compassionate action seems a logical next step for us to investigate.

Thank you.

Notes

¹ John J. Holder, *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Hackett Publishing, 2006), pp. 95-100.

² For more detailed discussion on this issue, see Jin Y. Park, *Buddhism and Postmodernity: Zen, Huayan and the Possibility of Buddhist-Postmodern Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), Chap 1, “The Silence of the Buddha.”

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968). See Chapter 4, “The Intertwining-The Chiasm.”

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 112.

⁵ “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States 2010” issued in September 2011. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-239.pdf>.

⁶ For example, see *The Work of Mourning*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. by Cecile Lindsay, et. al. (New York: Columbia University, 1989), p. xi.

⁸ Nishi Amane (西周), *Hyakuichi shinron* (百一新論, One hundred one new ideas, 1874). Kang Yöngan, *Uri egye ch'örhak ün muöt in'ga?* 우리에게 철학은 무엇인가? (Seoul: Kungni, 2002), p. 217. Gino K. Piovesana, “The Beginnings of Western Philosophy in Japan: Nishi Amane, 1829-1897.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2/2 (1962): 295 -306, pp. 295.

⁹ The expression “religion” appeared in the diplomatic letters from American President Fillmore (1800-1874, president 1850-1853) and Commodore Matthew Perry (1794-1958), which were to be delivered to the emperor of Japan in 1853. For discussions on this, see, Gerard Clinton Godart, “‘philosophy’ or ‘Religion’? The Confrontation with Foreign Categories in Late Nineteenth Century Japan,” *Journal of History of Ideas* 69/1 (January, 2008): 71-91, pp. 74-75; Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. by Bernd Magnus & Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 54.