

Interreligious Dialogue: Religious Commitment in a Globalized World

RELI 350

GONZAGA-IN-FLORENCE

Summer 2008

John N. Sheveland, Ph.D

sheveland@gonzaga.edu

“In the context of the divisive, exploitative, and conflictual roles that religions, including Christianity, have played in history, dialogue seeks to develop the unifying and liberating potential of all religions, thus showing the relevance of religion for human well being, justice, and world peace. Above all we need to relate positively to believers of other religions because they are our neighbors; the common elements of our religious heritages and our human concerns force us to establish ever closer ties based on universally accepted ethical values. To be religious today is to be interreligious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism.”

Society of Jesus, General Congregation 34 (1995)

[A] DESCRIPTION

Through texts and documentaries, this course studies extremist or fundamentalist religious commitments which tend toward violence, and then utilizes comparative theology to explore Buddhist and Christian resources to diagnose the human condition and provide avenues of conflict resolution.

To these ends, the course considers recent *historical* antecedents giving rise to tension and conflict between religions; a range of *political* grievances fueling terrorism; the *psychological* foundations of religious extremism and violence; the range of Christian *theological* reactions to religious pluralism; and Buddhist-Christian comparisons in *theology* and *ethics* with attention to the value of one’s own and other religions for conflict prevention and reconciliation.

The course is *comparative* in that students will be invited to cross over into the worldview of their Buddhist and Christian neighbors, to perceive the real similarities and differences of those worldviews with one's own, and to ask whether such exposure empowers one to think freshly about one's home tradition and about contemporary human experience. What, if anything, might Christians, persons of other faiths, and non-believers learn from Buddhist and Christian worldviews? What 'earthly', practical difference do they make?

[B] TEXTS

Books:

- A. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. New York: Harper, 2004.
- B. Patrick T. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All-Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God*. Collegeville: Liturgical, 2004.
- C. Glenn Wallis, ed., *The Dhammapada: Verses on the Way*. New York: Random House (Modern Library), 2007.
- D. John Makransky, *Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness*. Boston: Wisdom, 2007.

[C] LEARNING OUTCOMES

Skills:

1. To become skilled readers of theological texts.
2. To sharpen self-expression in conversation and writing.
3. To assess the adequacy of theological arguments and positions, and to construct and defend one's own.
4. To perceive the moral implications of theological speech about religious others, and to speak responsibly.

Theological subject matter:

5. Globalization: To appreciate the global reach and interdependence of religions.
6. Pluralism: To recognize religious pluralism in contemporary society as valid, thereby becoming more informed, sensitive, and responsible members of society.
7. Fundamentalisms: To understand the modern phenomenon of religious fundamentalism and recent historical instances of the terrorism to which fundamentalisms give rise; to observe how fundamentalism distorts the religion in question; to grasp the psychological dynamics which give rise to fundamentalism, intolerance and violence; to perceive the incoherence of the fundamentalist perspective in view of a tradition's broader teachings.
8. 'Islams': To observe the basic features of "political Islam" or "Islamism" as a strain of fundamentalism. To discern the basic differences between those forms

- of Islam and moderate / progressive / reformist voices in Islam who seek the reconciliation of Islam with Democracy, global civil society, and human rights.
9. Theological Anthropology: To comprehend and assess Christian-Buddhist diagnoses of the human condition, as well as prescriptions for human flourishing, moral responsibility, and reconciliation. To develop the talent for applying these to contemporary human experience.
 10. Comparative Theology: To become empathic readers of other religions; to develop the ability to see ‘ultimate reality’, ‘the world’ and the ‘human condition’ from the perspective of others. This includes the ability to allow the other to remain ‘other’ and not a domesticated version of the familiar.
 11. Comparative Theology: To decide whether religious believers can or should be influenced beneficially by the sacred stories and teachings of another tradition; to defend one’s decision.
 12. Comparative Theology: To explore religious traditions as ‘spiritualities’ or ‘schools of wisdom’ bearing resources for conflict resolution; to investigate and test these resources.
 13. ‘Interdisciplinarity’: To appreciate the value of approaching theological issues in a multi-disciplinary manner; to gain some understanding of how Gonzaga’s Core curriculum encourages us to think within and across disciplines.

[D] SCHEDULE

I. The Signs of Our Times: globalization, reaction, fundamentalisms

II. “Theologies of Religion” and the Rise of “Comparative Theology”

III. Experiments in Comparative Theology: an invitation to dialogue

IV. Experiments in Comparative Ethics: a second invitation to dialogue