

OF GODS AND MINDS



# Of Gods and Minds

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In Search of a Theological Commons

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JAMES W. HEISIG



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# Series Foreword

## Duffy Lectures in Global Christianity

Catherine Cornille

Never, in the history of Christianity, has Christian faith been expressed in so many forms. While long a global religion, it is only in the course of the twentieth century that the Church has come to valorize and celebrate the particularity of the different cultures, and that local Churches have been encouraged to creatively engage and appropriate indigenous symbols, categories and modes of celebration. A milestone in the Catholic Church was the 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which states that:

The individual Churches, intimately built up not only of people but also of aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering, have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language (§63).

The term “language” is here understood in the broad anthropological and cultural sense and to touch upon not only translation of the gospel message, but also “liturgical expression... catechesis, theological formulation, secondary ecclesial structures, and ministries.” It thus involves a thorough rethinking of the gospel in terms and structures resonant with particular cultures, and a focus on the social, political, and spiritual questions and challenges alive in those cultures.

The notions of inculturation and contextualization have since become firmly engrained in Christian theological thinking. One has come to speak of Latino/a theology, African theology, Indian theology, and so forth, each giving way to even more local or focused theologies, such as Igbo theology, Mestizo theology, and Dalit theology. This raises questions about the relationship between all of these forms of theologizing and about the relationship between the individual and the universal church.

The goal of inculturation and indigenous theologies in the first place is, of course, to better serve the local churches and to respond to their particular needs and questions. But many of the cultural riches mined in the process of inculturation may also become a source of inspiration for other churches or for what is called the “universal” Church. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* clearly warns “not to conceive of the universal Church as the sum, or, if one can say so, the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different churches” (§62). It implores individual Churches to remain in communion with the universal Church. But it does not yet fully appreciate the opportunity for the universal Church to learn from local Churches.

There is still an often unspoken assumption that theological models and currents that have developed in Europe remain normative and that local theologies are but various forms of expression of the same theological insights. However, all theology (including Western theology) entails both universal and culturally particular dimensions, and each attempt to express the gospel within a particular culture may bring out new dimensions of its message relevant for all believers. As the center of gravity of the church is shifting, and as the distinction between local and universal or global is becoming more blurred, it is becoming more than ever important and possible for different theological traditions to engage and enrich one another.

This is why the department of theology at Boston College established the Duffy Chair in Global Christianity. Each year, a theologian from a different continent is invited to deliver a series of lectures



dealing with the theological challenges and insights arising from their particular context. They may focus on ethical questions, theological developments, Biblical hermeneutics, spiritual and ritual practices, and so on. The goal is not only to inform faculty and students of the ways in which theology is done in particular parts of the world, but also to raise new questions and offer new insights that might enrich local theological reflection in North America and beyond.

The Duffy Chair in Global Christianity was named after Father Stephen J. Duffy (1931–2007), who taught systematic theology at Loyola University in New Orleans from 1971 to 2007, and who was himself deeply engaged with questions of religious and cultural diversity and eager to address these questions in a creative and constructive way. What he wrote about the relationship of Christianity to other religions applies all the more to its relationship to different cultures:

To the extent that Christianity opens itself to other traditions, it will become different. Not that it will be less Christian or cease to be Christian altogether. It will simply be taking one more step toward catholicity, the fullness it claims to anticipate in the coming reign of God.<sup>1</sup>

1. Stephen Duffy, “The Stranger Within Our Gates,” in T. Merrigan and J. Haers, eds., *The Myriad Christ* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2000), 30.



## Preface

The five lectures that make up this book were delivered at Boston College in the late winter of 2019. In the discussions that followed I came to realize how much my peculiar squint on things had overlooked, but rather than undertake the revision needed to address the valuable suggestions and criticisms that pierced my conclusions here and there, I have chosen to publish them more or less in their original form. In composing and recomposing my thoughts, I was aware that nearly everything in these lectures overlaps with one or the other debate being carried on in contemporary philosophy and theology. Here again, I chose not to be distract myself with defending my position at each point in their regard. The handful of ideas I selected to rehearse—in the etymological sense of harrowing the ground to prepare for planting seeds to tend until harvest—were ones I have been carrying around with me for some time and I am grateful to Catherine Cornille and her colleagues for the opportunity to open them to discussion.

In the course of writing my undergraduate thesis on Cornelio Fabro's interpretation of Aquinas, my professor alerted me to the massive study of modern atheism the eminent Italian philosopher had just published. I remember being struck by the special attention Fabro gave to the positive and constructive aspects of the assault on the God of the Christian West. I determined that some day I would look into this myself. Again and again in my later education and over the course of my academic life in Japan, I did just that in seminars and writings, only to feel my initial enthusiasm slowly sag under the mass of accumulated scholarship. Although I now find many of Fabro's arguments alien, the book was an enormous stimulus and I have

dipped into it regularly in the course of preparing the modest response you now hold in your hands.

No doubt some readers will be surprised to see so much attention to classical critiques of God and so little confrontation with the new atheisms that emerged in latter decades of the twentieth century. My reason is a simple one: I wanted to pursue the question of gods in minds without feeling trailed at every step by the varieties of scientific humanism that have set themselves up as reasonable alternatives to traditional beliefs and practice around the world and across religious systems. It is not that I am without sympathy for the motivations behind their rejection of organized religion, and indeed there were many points of coincidence along the way that tempted me to quote approvingly from the literature. But given the very different direction my thoughts had taken me and the attention I was expected to pay “global Christianity,” I felt it best to redress the balance at another time.

The question of gods and minds has shadowed me in one or the other form during the more than forty years I have lived in Japan, marinating in an intellectual tradition very different from that of my youth. It did not take me long to realize that the images and ideas of the God of Western Christianity would have a hard time taking root in the native soil of Japan. By the time of my arrival, the voices lamenting the situation had already become fewer, partly out of exhaustion, partly out of a dwindling audience. For my part, I saw no reason to join the debate so long as it was framed as a chronic disappointment at the failure of a universal Christianity to be inculturated into the particular religious cultures of East Asia. On the contrary, I was more preoccupied with how to exculturate received images of God.

It would have been naive to suppose that any God could find its way into minds as a transcendental notion stripped of the conditions of its birth. The problem was not how to extract a pure God from the impurities of culture, but to lay bare the attachments that excluded radically different conditions from giving rise to images and ideas of God that would seem as alien to the Christian West as their God seems

to Japan. Two paths lay before me and I took both at the same time, point and counterpoint, in the quest of a simple, harmonious melody that might sustain a Christian tenor over the *basso ostinato* of the new world of Japanese thought that I was laboring to make sense of.

On one hand, I turned to the esoteric and countertraditions of Christian Europe preserved in hermetic, gnostic, alchemical, and mystical texts. From my earliest years in Japan I was surprised at the special affinity many Japanese philosophers, and not only those of a Buddhist bent, felt towards the way mystical writers expressed their ideas of God. The discomfort they felt with mainstream theological argument and the short shrift they gave to classical Christian dogmatics seemed to find relief in the apophatic logic, the trust in experience, and the affection for the *nihilum* they met in the likes of Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso, not to mention Plotinus and the Neoplatonists. Attention to the broad pluralism of approaches within the Western tradition persuaded me that there is much in Christianity that had been undervalued in Japan's appropriation of Christian thinking. On the other hand, as wave after wave of scholars from within the country and without washed through the Nanzan Institute with projects related to the religious and philosophical history of Japan, I came to learn of the variety of ways in which the questions to which the Christian God was proposed as an answer have been shaped and explained with resources absent in the West.

None of this would have been possible without the guidance of colleagues and students who had wrestled with these questions much longer, and to much greater effect, than I. Nevertheless, throughout it all, I knew that the question of gods and minds could not be abbreviated to the question of Christianity's fate in East Asia; or put the other way around, that if the Christian God is to have global significance, it would not merely be a matter of accepting cultural and religious diversity and retreating from the mission to convert the entire world to its own way of thinking about God. The conversion to tolerance and hospitality towards other modes of belief and practice marks a watershed

for Christianity, but only as a transition to straighten out its past in the face of a graver, commoner concern: the care of an earth abused by human civilization and devalued by organized religion. It is the quest of this third path that drives the logic of these lectures

Start to finish, I knew that there was something cross-grained about trying to construct that argument around a discussion of the origins and functions of gods in minds. Empirical complexities interfered, again and again and from all sides, with the pursuit of a clear argument. No sooner did I install a generalization than its contrary would rise up from another quarter to strike it down. From the moment I left port, the project began taking on water, slowly sinking under the weight of the cargo I had taken on board. Too much ambiguity of expression and too loose a connection at the joints of one idea to another muddled any hope I had of circumnavigating the vast history of theories about the gods. I say this to forestall any impression that the simpler course I chose has dispensed justice to the question that has guided these lectures. I remain as dazed and overawed as when I began.

In a word, my aim was to seek out a ground in reality for the presence of metaphorical language about God inside the mind and out. It seemed to me that a skepsis which relies merely on apophasis or symbolic cataphasis to replace literal, metaphysical language about God is unsatisfying—both to religious faith and to philosophical reason—if it is not based on factual reality, dimly perceived or vaguely conceived though it be. To that end, I have tried to tether my arguments to a limited range of resources and stayed the urge to overwhelm them at each step of the way with qualifications and counterarguments. I am well aware that the rationale of these lectures is not as subtle or accurate as some readers may wish. It is also rather more free-range than the theological sciences of Christianity may wish to sanction. As such, I do not mean to represent any particular Christian or philosophical position against any other, but only to speak as one educated in a range of both traditions. So, too, my selections and interpretations are done not with a focus on clarifying any part of those traditions but in answering a

question I have tried to frame in a way that does not bind it to my personal experience and history: How can I keep the idea of God in mind and speak reasonably about it?

The loose-stitched fabric of ideas in which I have wrapped up these lectures was pieced together from a diverse stock of sources across the theological commons, a sampling of which are included in the closing Annotations. As I look them over, I am reminded of Don Quixote's complaint to a typesetter in Barcelona about the poverty of translations. They are, he says, like the back side of a tapestry: "though the figures are distinguishable, there are so many ends and threads that the beauty and exactness of the work is obscured." The threads and the loom of these talks text are not my own and I can only hope that the uneven patterns of my weave will not deter anyone from tracking down the originals from which they were pulled.

My thanks to Maximus Ferguson for taking the time carefully to proofread the enter text prior to publication. Above all, were it not for the incitement of the Theology Department at Boston College and the indulgence of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, I would not have retailed the time from other projects to set down the ideas expressed in these pages.

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