

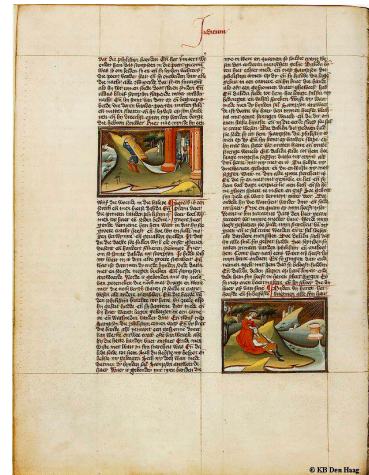
NEW COURSE (Fall 2009)

Dei Verbum & Buddhavacana: Scripture, Exegesis, and Hermeneutics in Christianity and Buddhism

THEO 83822

Prof. Robert M. Gimello

In the fields of enquiry known variously as “comparative theology” or “theology of religions” attention is usually paid first and foremost, if not exclusively, to what might be called “ultimate questions” — i.e., questions about differences or similarities between fundamental beliefs, about the possibility or impossibility of salvific efficacy in more than one religion, about competing definitions of salvation, about the nature of “religious experience” as a category untethered to any single tradition, etc. Such questions, of course, demand attention and should not, in some excess of delicacy or caution, be circumvented or postponed indefinitely. However, if they are raised prematurely, before the various religions under study have been thoroughly enough explored, they can be obstacles both to understanding and to sound theological judgment. Insofar as the ultimacies of particular religions can be expected to have their roots in the



practicalities and particularities of those same religions — under, for example, the rule of *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (Prosper of Aquitaine) — it behooves us to prepare to address the great and final issues at stake in the encounter among religions by first examining how those religions actually, in their routine practices, pursue their respective ultimate goals.

Now it happens that both Buddhism and Christianity are “religions of the book.” That is to say, they both assign decisive value to texts of the kind we nowadays call “scriptures.” These are texts that purport to transmit the words and deeds of the founders of the two religions and, because those founders are held — each in his own way — to embody absolute perfection, these texts are



presumed to convey an inexhaustible superabundance of meaning and to provide uniquely privileged access to truth. Their presumed plenitude of meaning and their multivocality are understood in both traditions to impose special demands upon those who hear and read them, requiring special methods of “reading” and special strategies of interpretation if their depths are to be truly plumbed. For this reason, in both



Buddhism and Christianity, reverential and yet also critical exegesis and hermeneutics are deemed to be cardinal religious practices, fundamental forms of the religious life no less important than other forms of religious praxis like prayer, meditation, liturgy, and theological reflection. Moreover, both traditions have invested great care and effort in formulating reasoned, systematic procedures and criteria of interpretation.

In recognition of the importance in both traditions of the categories of scripture, exegesis, and hermeneutics, this course will explore how each of these categories is defined in the two traditions — this on the assumption that such an enquiry into actual scriptural practice will yield surer insight into the genuine differences and the genuine similarities between the two religions than would emerge from the hasty and bald posing of such large questions as whether or not *nirvāṇa* and beatitude are ultimately the same, whether Christ can be said to be enlightened in anything like the sense in which the Buddha is said to be enlightened, whether the Buddhist notion of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and the Christian notion of Christ’s “emptying” (*kénōsis*) are really the same, etc.

In our enquiry into the Christian pole of the comparison particular attention will be given to the classical “four senses” of scripture — the literal or historical, the analogical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical — and to selected examples of the actual practice of scriptural commentary in pre-modern times. Our special guide in this will be Henri de Lubac (particularly his *Scripture in the Tradition*, which is in turn a kind of *précis* of his magisterial four-volume *Exégèse Médiévale*). On the Buddhist side, we will attend particularly to the four “great authorities” (*mahāpadeśa*) that Buddhists recognize as governing the use of scripture — viz., the authority of doctrine (*dharma*) over person (*puruṣa*), of “spirit” or sense (*artha*) over “the letter” or discourse (*vyañjana*), of definitive sense (*nītārtha*) over provisional sense (*neyārtha*), and of intuitive understanding (*jñāna*) over discursive understanding (*vijñāna*). Our chief example of a Buddhist scripture and its commentarial tradition will be the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra*) — arguably the most influential of all Mahāyāna scriptures, especially in East Asia — together with selections from its many commentaries. Special attention will be paid to the role of parable in both scriptural traditions

This course meets on Tuesday mornings from 9:30 until 12:15 (not on Tuesday afternoons as had originally been announced) and, although it is a doctoral level course, it is open also to Masters students, subject to the approval of their advisers. The sole formal requirement of the course will be a seminar paper (approximately 20-25 pages in length) dealing comparatively with some aspect of nature and/or the use of scripture in Buddhism and Christianity.

Students who might wish to learn more about the course are invited to contact Prof. Gimello (Gimello.1@nd.edu). Note, however that he will be out of the country, and in only intermittent email contact, from August 3 through August 16.