

TEXTUAL JOURNEYS: COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY
 READING GROUP – PRE-CONVENTION MEETING

Topic: Text: *The Light of Truth (Satyārth Prakāś)* by Dayananda Saraswati
 Conveners: Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University
 Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
 Moderator: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
 Presenters: Shinjae Lee, Boston College

The purpose of this meeting is to bring theologians together who wish to explore the practice of comparative theology through guided readings of texts from a non-Christian tradition. This meeting invites someone to select short texts from the other tradition and prepare some introductory commentary. The texts along with the commentary is circulated ahead of time. At the breakfast, following introductory explanations of key terms by the presenter, the group engages in an interreligious, close reading together as a community so that fresh theological insights may be encountered.

This year, Shinjae Lee, a Ph.D. student from Boston College, presented on portions of *The Light of Truth (Satyārth Prakāś)* by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883). Dayananda was a Hindu reformer who, like those who founded the Brahmo and Prarthana Samājes, articulated an ethical monotheism in Western terms that could push back against challenges posed by Christian missionaries and colonial schools. Unlike others, though, he contended that Hindus should return to the classic Vedic texts and to the deepest elements of their tradition. In 1875, Dayananda gathered his supporters into the organization of the Ārya Samāj, whose charter verse, “*Kṛṇvanto viśvam āryam—Make the whole world noble*” (Ṛig Veda 9.63.5), situated their attempts at social change as a form of returning to and aligning with the cosmic truth-order, *ṛta*. Like other reformers, Dayananda proposed a set of cultural changes to Hindu life, such as renouncing caste privilege and promoting women’s education, but all from the perspective of championing the Vedas as the sole revelation. The Veda, he argued, precedes the division between the various Hindu spiritual lineages, and so it can generate a modern ethic that is freed both from oppressive ritualism and idol worship as well as from dependence on colonial ways of thinking. Dayananda was able to synthesize a conservative approach to textual traditions with a more egalitarian social reform which also manifested through concrete institutions, such as schools and vernacular journals, through which the movement took hold.

There were two primary selections from *The Light of Truth*, which showcased Dayananda’s textual arguments and his focus on Hindu reform. The first ten chapters of the book articulate positive doctrines concerning God, education, marriage, and cosmic cycles. The final four chapters are polemical and seek to dismantle what Dayananda labels anti-Vedic systems, from Paurāṇic Hinduism to Christianity and Islam.

In the first text selection, Dayananda focuses on truth (*satya*), cosmic order (*ṛta*), and moral righteousness (*dharma*), and because this is the core of the Vedas, anything contrary is *adharmā*, against righteousness. For example, Dayananda argues that true sacrifice is not about fire-oblation but instead is about the ethical disciplines of study, charity, and self-governance. Thus, while he might agree with fellow Hindu critiques

of idol worship, the solution is not a rejection of Vedic culture (following European critics) but instead a Vedic renaissance that returns to the text and its alignment with cosmic order. In the second passage, Dayananda makes an epistemological argument about the sources of truth, linking the Veda to the observable order of nature, the testimony of respected sages, the statement of conscience, and the traditions of logical reasoning. Together, these two passages illustrate Dayananda's movement from the cosmic principle of reality to daily duties, and from scriptural revelation to social reform, offering us a clear example of *ṛta*-centered Hindu renewal.

The discussion covered a range of topics, including comparisons of Dayananda's focus on *ṛta* to Catholic natural law approaches that root cultural critiques and reforms in a form of return to eternal law. We also discussed the Indigenous resistance to colonialism, and how Hindu critiques of other religions might adopt some categories and terms from these non-Hindu traditions in order to reject other suppositions and positions. We also debated the possibility that one way of resisting an oppressive universalism is to fashion an alternative universalism. In addition, we examined the example of Dayananda and his contention that ethical renewal need not require abandoning ancient scripture; indeed, retrieval can be a critical, forward-looking act.

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