



Journal of Comparative Theology

at Harvard Divinity School

Issue 1 Volume 3
APRIL 2012



The third volume of the *Journal of Comparative Theology* presents articles concerning both the theory and the practice of comparative theology. This expanding inquiry into the field, represented by both the number and various subject matter of the submissions we received, demonstrates that the field continues to grow, especially among undergraduate and graduate students. Here, at Harvard Divinity School in particular, and in Boston-area universities in general, the interest in comparative theology has been highlighted by a yearlong series of well-attended lectures hosted by the Center for the Study of World Religions. Furthermore, Boston College held their 10th annual Engaging Particularities conference, which hosted graduate students from many different universities, from the West to East coast.

As the field grows, so must the *Journal*; we are always looking toward long-term visions and goals. These include expanding the *Journal* by adding issues that are reviewed by other professors and recently graduated doctoral students. In addition to being a graduate student journal, then, we would also be an academic journal for professors, providing peer-reviewed articles to the broader academic community. We hope to add also a column in which experienced and veteran professors of the field can opine about interreligious and comparative theology.

The growing interest in comparative theology indicates that theologians are beginning to take seriously the growing religious diversity of world; it is being recognized that at some level, all theology must be interreligious. Furthermore, it also indicates that the religious studies field is beginning to take theology seriously once again.

This re-connection between the academic study of religion and comparative theology is the subject of Oludamini Ogunnaike's article, entitled "Myth and the Secret of Destiny: Mircea Eliade's Creative Hermeneutics and the Yorùbá Concept of Orí." Ogunnaike looks to the great Romanian historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, in order to address the methodological problems found within the field of religious studies today. Eliade's methodology and hermeneutics, as Ogunnaike demonstrates, are similar to the methodology and hermeneutics of comparative theology, and together are a much needed remedy

for the agnosia of the academic study of religion, which is “prey to the ‘sudden, strange fixations’ of academic fads, with a marked weakness, inability, or refusal to recognize the irreducible, holistic nature of religious phenomena and explain what they mean.”

Our second article also takes on method in comparative theology. Bennett Comerford, in his article entitled, “The Present Situation and the Comparative Imperative: Parallels in the Theological Responses to Religious Pluralism of David Tracy and Francis X. Clooney,” clearly illustrates the similarities that David Tracy’s interreligious theology has to Clooney’s comparative theology. Comerford elucidates why Tracy’s broad understanding of “interreligious dialogue” is much akin to Clooney’s comparative theology, thus showing that dialogue can occur beyond the roundtable, manifesting itself in the form of works of comparative theology.

The third and fourth articles are actual works of comparative theology in practice. Hans Harmakaputra’s article, “Comparing Ḥusayn’s Martyrdom and Jesus’ Crucifixion: An Excursion on Finding Common Concern,” is an exercise in interreligious theology that “compares Ḥusayn’s martyrdom within Shi’i Islam with the crucifixion of Jesus in Christianity to see if there are parallel themes that can be used for dialogue between the two religious traditions.” It is works such as these that demonstrate how comparative theology can be a textual method for interreligious dialogue that does indeed occur beyond the roundtable, but is certainly intended to be used, later, at the roundtable of interreligious dialogue.

Our final article, by Carlo Perez, entitled “Understanding Happiness as Vision of God: A Comparative Reading of Aquinas and Al-Ghazzālī,” is an excellent example of classical comparative theology. That is, Perez takes two thinkers from two different traditions, closely and interreligiously reads their texts, and thus obtains refreshing, new insights for the home tradition. As Perez writes, “The aim of this paper is to look at al-Ghazali’s understanding of the Vision of God in such a way that it will serve as a catalyst for Catholics to better understand what St. Thomas Aquinas is teaching us about the Beatific Vision.”

The editors at the *Journal* would like to express their thanks and gratitude for the help of Brad Bannon (ThD candidate, HDS), Chen Zhang (second-year MTS student, HDS), and Mike VanZandt Collins (MA student, Harvard) in getting this issue published. Furthermore, we are continuously grateful for and honored by the advisement of Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard Divinity School and director of the Center for the Study of World Religions.



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Destiny is the secret of God.

-*Hadīth* (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad

Orí lo dá mi
Eniyan kò ó
Olórun ni
Orí lo dá mi

Ori (head/destiny) created me
It is not man
It is God
Ori created me

Orí níí dá ní
Enikan ò í d'Órí

Ori created us
Nobody created Ori

-Yorùbá sayings

**Myth and the
Secret of Destiny:
Mircea Eliade's
Creative
Hermeneutics and
the Yorùbá Concept
of Orí**

BY OLUDAMINI
OGUNNAIKE

There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.

-William Shakespeare's *Hamlet V. ii*

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

-William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar I. ii*

And we should consider that God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity (daimon) of each one, being that part which, as we say,

dwells at the top of the body, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven. And in this we say truly; for the divine power suspended the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus made the whole body upright.

-Plato, *Timaeus* 90a

...There is always a kernel that remains refractory to explanation, and this indefinable, irreducible element perhaps reveals the real situation of man in the cosmos...

-Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*

We hold that...the cardinal problems of metaphysics could be renewed through a knowledge of archaic ontology.

-Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*

Introduction

Nearly every time I put down the religious myths, poems, and books which have captivated me since early childhood to read a work from the academic study of religion, I am struck with a subtle *dis-ease*, an elusive and uncanny feeling whose articulation I finally discovered in Oliver Sacks' description of his encounter with Dr. P., the eponymous patient in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*:

Yet there *was* something a bit odd. He faced me as he spoke, was oriented towards me, and yet there was something the matter—it was difficult to formulate. He faced me with his *ears*, I came to think, but not with his eyes. These instead of looking, gazing, at me, 'taking me in,' in the normal way, made sudden strange fixations—on my nose, on my right ear, down to my chin, up to my right eye, as if noting (even studying) these individual features, but not seeing my whole face, its changing expressions, 'me' as a whole. I am not sure that I fully realized this at the time—there was just a teasing strangeness, some failure in the normal interplay of gaze and expression. He saw me, he scanned me, and yet.... I had stopped at a florist on my way to his apartment and bought myself an extravagant red rose for my buttonhole. Now I removed it and handed it to him. He looked at it like a botanist or morphologist given a specimen, not like a person given a flower. "About six inches in length," he commented. "A convoluted red form with a linear green attachment."¹

¹ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 12-14.

Poor Dr. P was finally diagnosed with visual agnosia, the inability of the brain to make sense of otherwise normal visual stimuli, typified by the inability to recognize familiar objects or faces. From a religious perspective, like Sacks' patient, much of the academic study of religion seems afflicted with its own form of visual agnosia, prey to the "sudden, strange fixations" of academic fads, with a marked weakness, inability, or refusal to recognize the irreducible, holistic nature of religious phenomena and explain what they mean. In and of itself, this scientific or academic gaze, which turns a rose into "a convoluted red form with a linear green attachment," is harmless enough, and can even be quite useful, but it gets into trouble when it ignores its own limits, makes pronouncements about religious phenomena on the basis of its agnostic vision, and tries to subsume other perspectives under itself.

Dr. P was able to recognize abstract shapes such as cubes, pyramids, and even icosahedrons, and could sometimes identify simple images by picking out a key feature (such as Einstein's hair and mustache, Churchill's cigar, or his brother's buck teeth), but when confronted with unrecognizable images, Dr. P, like any good academic, would make informed hypothesis based on the available data. Sometimes he would be right, but more often than not he would mistake a picture of the desert for a picnic scene, his foot for his shoe, and most famously, and his wife for a hat.

Given that the fully-enlightened sages working in the study of religion are few in number, it is safe to say that most of us, in one way or another, share the plight of Dr. P: when confronted with religious rites, myths, and other phenomena, we just don't "get it." And so we must interpret the phenomena according to our own conceptual frameworks and severely limited perceptual insights, more often than not producing descriptions and interpretations that sound as strange to an initiate as a "a convoluted red form with a linear green attachment" does to us. Some scholars accept that this is simply the best we can do, others assert that the "convoluted red form" is just as good as or better than the "rose," but still others do not. It is probably abundantly clear by now that I belong to this third group, which holds that religious phenomena express and transform reality and its human perceptions in a unique and irreplaceable way.

In my research on traditional Yorùbá religion and West African Sufism, I have seen far too many roses reduced to color and shape, distorted by methodologies whose philosophical presuppositions run counter to those of their subject material, and witnessed the problems and even dangers these academic confusions pose for communities of practitioners. These experiences have led me to contemplate how (short of quitting the academy to take up a career as a traditional scholar in Timbuktu or Ife) I could convey the power, beauty, and above all, the life-affirming and transforming truths of the religious traditions and phenomena I study in an academic setting. That

is, how could I analyze and describe, rigorously and academically, religious rites, doctrines, texts, and myths on their own terms?

One methodological precedent for addressing such concerns is found in the work of Mircea Eliade, the great Romanian historian of religion, litterateur, and keeper of extensive journals. Eliade writes, “a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied *as* something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred.”² However, he holds that there is “no purely religious phenomena;” religion always takes place in a particular historical, linguistic, sociocultural, economic, etc. context. “But the fact that a myth or ritual is always historically conditioned does not tell us what a religious experience ultimately *is*. We know we can grasp the sacred only through manifestations which are always historically conditioned. But the study of these historically conditioned expressions does not give us the answer to the questions: What is the sacred? What does a religious experience actually mean?”³ In the same chapter, Eliade concludes,

He [the historian of religions] knows that he is condemned to work exclusively with historical documents, but at the same time he feels that these documents tell him something more than the simple fact that they reveal to him important truths about man and man’s relations to the sacred. But how to grasp these truths?... But more important than any single answer is the fact that historians of religions asked *this* question. As so often in the past, a correct question may infuse new life into a wornout science⁴

This article is intended as a methodological exercise and experiment inspired by the above concerns. In the first part of this article, I will outline my interpretation of Eliade’s hermeneutical method, and apply this methodology in the second half of the article to the mythico-ritual complex of the Yorùbá concept of *orí* (head/destiny). Finally, I will conclude by evaluating the costs and benefits of this method, and compare it to similar methods used in Comparative Theology, with a view towards further methodological developments.

Part I: Eliade’s “Creative Hermeneutics”

One of the most important and prolific figures in the history of the study of religion, Mircea Eliade left behind a legacy whose profound and wide-reaching influence is perhaps matched only by its controversy. One of the

² Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1968), xiii

³ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest, History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1969), 52.

⁴ *ibid.*

most significant aspects of this legacy was Eliade's effort to create and write a study of religious phenomena as *religious phenomena* (not as historical, ethnological, sociological, or philosophical data), in order to refocus academic inquiry on discovering what a given religious phenomena really *is*, what it *means*. This turn away from and against reductionism towards a new, "creative hermeneutics" of religious phenomena characterizes nearly all of Eliade's academic work, and occupies a significant place in his extensive journals and literary works.⁵ Nevertheless, Eliade's methodology is notoriously difficult to uncover and even trickier to pin down. He rarely, if ever, gave a full account of his unique hermeneutic methodology, noting in a journal entry, "in my work, I have tried to elaborate this hermeneutics; but I have illustrated it in a practical way on the basis of documents. It now remains for me or for another to systematize this hermeneutics."⁶ Douglas Allen writes, "But during the last year of his life, after noting that 'methodological' criticisms brought against his conception of history of religions had increased, Eliade wrote the following: 'The fault is, in part, mine; I've never replied to such criticisms, although I ought to have done so. I told myself that someday, 'when I'm free from works in progress,' I'll write a short theoretical monograph and explain the 'confusions and errors' for which I am reproached. I'm afraid I'll never have time to write it.'"⁷ Although Eliade never did write this monograph, he left behind thousands of pages of scholarship illustrating his methods, and several scholars have taken up the task of explaining his elusive methodology.

My own understanding of Eliade's method of "creative hermeneutics" is largely drawn from his own works, particularly from *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (and J.Z. Smith's pair of articles on this work⁸), *Myth and Reality*, the foreword to *Shamanism*, and selections from his journals. The works of Douglas Allen and Brian Rennie have also been influential in this regard.⁹

Eliade defined his discipline as the "history of religions" and often referred to himself as "the historian of religions" in his works. This terminology

⁵ Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade (Theorists of Myth)*, first edition (New York: Routledge, 2002) Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), *No Souvenirs : journal, 1957-1969 / Mircea Eliade* ; translated from the French by Fred H. Johnson, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976)

⁶ Eliade, *No Souvenirs*, 313.

⁷ Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade (Theorists of Myth)*, xii.

⁸ See Smith, J.Z. "Acknowledgments: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade's "Patterns in Comparative Religion" (1949-1999), Part 1: The Work and Its Contexts & Part 2: The Texture of the Work." *History of Religions*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (May, 2000), pp. 315-331 (Part 1) and pp. 332-351 (Part 2)

⁹ see Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade (Theorists of Myth)* (2002); Douglas Allen, *Structure & Creativity in Religion (Religion Reason Ser. : No 14)*. First Edition (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1978); Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade* (Albany, New York: State University Of New York Press, 1996).

indicates that there are two concepts at work: "History" and "Religion." "Religion" or "religious" for Eliade is simply a designation for "the Sacred" which is simply the opposite of "the profane." In his "archaic ontology," which is the ontology Eliade attributes to the traditional, pre-modern, religious man (*homo religiosus*), the sacred is transcendent, irreducible, and the source of "Being"—what makes things *real*. It stands above and in opposition to the mundane world of the profane:

This "other world" represents a superhuman, "transcendent" plane, the plane of *absolute realities*. It is the experience of the sacred—that is and encounter with a transhuman reality—which give birth to the idea that something *really exists*, that hence there are absolute values capable of guiding man and giving a meaning to human existence. It is then, through the experience of the sacred that the ideas of *reality, truth, and significance* first dawn, to be later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculation.¹⁰

Thus "the sacred" is not hermetically sealed from the profane, but irrupts or manifests itself in the profane. Every instance of such a manifestation is termed a hierophany, and it is here that "History" enters, as every hierophany is a "paradoxical coming-together of being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming."¹¹ Thus, "Every hierophany we look at is also an historical fact. Every manifestation of the sacred takes place in some historical situation."¹² Anything in the world could potentially become a hierophany, in fact, Eliade writes, "in all probability there is nothing that has not, somewhere, some time, been invested with a sacred value."¹³ Just as Eliade's "archaic ontology"/methodology begins with a dialectic of the sacred (sacred vs. profane), there is a related dialectic on the plane of hierophanies: not everything is a hierophany all at once, so "in every religious framework there have always been profane beings and things beside the sacred...The dialectic of hierophany implies a more or less clear choice, a singling-out. A thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself."¹⁴

These hierophanies are the raw material for Eliade's method, "For the moment we shall consider each separate thing—rite, symbol, myth, cosmogony or god—as a hierophany; in other words, we shall see each as a manifestation of the sacred *in the mental world of those who believed in it*."¹⁵ Furthermore, "each is valuable for two things it tells us: because it is a

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (World Perspective Series), 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 139.

¹¹ Eliade, *Patterns*, 29.

¹² *ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 10 (*italics mine*).

hierophany, it reveals some modality of the sacred; because it is a historical incident, it reveals some attitude man has had towards the sacred.”¹⁶ Eliade privileges the former, and in doing so places the emphasis on *religion* in “the history of religion:”¹⁷ “the religious historian must trace not only the given history of a hierophany, but must *first of all* understand and explain the modality of the sacred the hierophany discloses.”¹⁸ Elsewhere, Eliade explains this priority of purpose as hermeneutics over history:¹⁹ “In other words, the historian of religions makes use of all the *historical* manifestations of a religious phenomenon in order to discover what such a phenomenon ‘has to say;’ on the one hand, he holds to the historically concrete, but on the other, he attempts to decipher whatever transhistorical content a religious datum reveals through history.”²⁰

So far, Eliade’s method is simply to identify hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred, and to attempt first, to understand the modalities of the transhistorical sacred they express in history, and then to trace the course of a given hierophany through history.²¹ Elsewhere these two parts are termed “a morphology” and “a history.”²² The reason for this privileging of morphology over history is simple: you cannot follow a thing through history if you do not already know what it is; and moreover, this method is supposed to ultimately help answer the questions, “What is the sacred?” and “What does a religious experience actually mean?”—questions more directly addressed by Eliade’s morphology.

But how is this morphology constructed? How do we interpret the meaning of a hierophany? And what kind of hierophanies do we look at: buildings, texts, rituals, myths? Eliade concludes that “the safest method, clearly, is to make use of all these kinds of evidence, omitting no important type, and always asking ourselves what *meaning* is revealed by each of these hierophanies. In this way we shall get a coherent collection of common traits which, as we shall see later, will make it possible to formulate a coherent system out of the various modalities....”²³ As J.Z. Smith has illustrated in his

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ cf. Mircea Eliade, *Images & Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (San Francisco: Search Book, 1969), 29: “in the title of ‘the history of religions,’ the accent ought not to be placed on the word *history*, but on the word *religions*. For although there are numerous ways of approaching *history*...there is only one way of approaching *religion*.”

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ cf. Mircea Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations With Claude-Henri Rocquet* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984), 142: “A historian of religions, whatever his opinions...thinks that his first duty, in practice, is to grasp the original meaning of a sacred phenomenon and then interpret its history.”

²⁰ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xv

²¹ see Eliade, *Patterns*, xiv: “The aim I intend—that of seeing just what thing are religious in nature and what those things reveal.”

²² Eliade, *Shamanism*, xiii

²³ Eliade, *Patterns*, 8

pair of articles "Acknowledgments: Morphology and History in Mircea Eliade's 'Patterns in Comparative Religion Parts 1 & 2,'" the term "morphology" (which Eliade borrows from Goethe) is key to understanding this process.²⁴ Smith quotes Eliade as praising "this [morphological] method of delineating structures by reducing phenomena to archetypes."²⁵ This morphology stands in opposition to evolutionary or developmental models, which are often teleological and privilege the historical connections between and amongst data; in morphology, however, the formal relationship is the organizing principle.

Such historical inquiries are not off the table, but must come after the morphological work, as Eliade notes, "We shall therefore, only be able to consider the problem of the *history* of religious forms after having examined a certain number of them."²⁶ Smith notes that Eliade promised a "companion volume" to *Patterns*, which would complement the latter's morphological project with a historical one, and argues that the foreword to *Shamanism* serves as an outline to this never-completed work.²⁷ Eliade envisioned his total work as "a vast synthesis of morphology and history of religion."²⁸ On the morphological side, he distinguished his work from the evolutionary and developmental model en vogue at the time,²⁹ and on the historical side, Eliade distinguished his method from phenomenology, "criticiz[ing] the ahistorical approach of phenomenology, deploying technical morphological vocabulary to charge that a phenomenological account ignores the 'modifications' and 'degradations' of the sacred brought about by cultural and historical 'conditions.'"³⁰ In the foreword to *Shamanism*, Eliade explains this distinction further, "[The phenomenologist] in principle rejects any work of comparison, confronted with one religious phenomenon or another, he confines himself to 'approaching' it and divining its meaning. Whereas the

²⁴ (ibid.): Part 1 and portions of Part 2 illustrate the origins of Eliade's morphology in Goethe's morphological studies, especially the 1790 work, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, in which Goethe sought to show how all the parts of a plant which developed in succession were intrinsically identical (all being leaf) despite their differences in outward form, and to describe the archetype of the plant (from which all plants are logically generated), which he had "intellected" through contemplating the variety of plants in a garden in Palermo.

²⁵ ibid., Part 1, p.322.

²⁶ Eliade, *Patterns*, xvii.

²⁷ The multi-volume work, *History of Religious Ideas*, could be seen as such a work, but Smith argues that it is not. On p. 339, Smith also perspicaciously notes that "that the three works by Eliade that I associated with his historical 'companion volume' in Part 1-*Shamanism*, *Yoga*, and *The Forge and the Crucible*-have in common that they reverse, by a variety of human activities, the downward path. Each technique has a directionality toward transcendence. Shamanism and Yoga annihilate the human condition, alchemy alters natural conditions. If this be correct, then the morphological volume portrays a movement of the transcendental toward the human; the possible partial contents of the historical volume would seem to illustrate a movement of the human toward the transcendental."

²⁸ Quoted in Smith, Part 2, 332.

²⁹ see the foreword to Eliade, *Patterns*.

³⁰ ibid., 333.

historian of religions does not reach a comprehension of the phenomenon until after he has compared it with thousands of similar or dissimilar phenomena, until he has situated it among them; and these thousands of phenomena are separated not only in time but in space.”³¹

The variety of phenomena is key to both the morphological and historical projects, and gives us great insight into Eliade’s method. “Whatever practical difficulties it causes, this very variety is what makes it possible for us to discover all the different modalities of the sacred.”³² Of the historian of religion, Eliade writes, “Familiar with a considerable number of hierophanies, his eye will have learned to decipher the properly religious meaning of one or another fact.”³³ Simply put, Eliade read everything, forgot nothing, and brought it all to bear on every thing. His morphology and interpretive method consists of discovering the meaning of new religious data (hierophanies) by situating them amongst the systems of relationships between previously studied hierophanies. These systems are archetypes³⁴ revealing the same modality of the sacred. Eliade explains the union of this morphology with history thusly:

The very dialectic of the sacred tends indefinitely to repeat a series of archetypes, so that a hierophany realized at a certain “historical moment” is structurally equivalent to a hierophany a thousand years earlier or later. This tendency on the part of the hierophanic process to repeat the same paradoxical sacralization of reality as in infinitum is what, after all, enables us to understand something of a religious phenomenon and to write its ‘history.’ In other words, it is precisely because hierophanies repeat themselves that we can distinguish religious facts and succeed in understanding them.³⁵

As this passage indicates, “history” has unique and multiple meanings for Eliade, and although a detailed discussion of this concept is outside the scope of this paper (and would probably require a multi-volume work), I will try to mention a few aspects of Eliade’s concept of history that are germane to his “creative hermeneutics.” In the foreword to *Shamanism*, he distinguishes history from historiography in that the former is the “specific plane of manifestation” of religious facts, whereas the latter is a chronological perspective. Moreover, given the irreducible nature of the religious, the history of religions is different from any other kind of history. “Though a *history* of religions exists, it is not, like all other kinds of history, irreversible.”³⁶ This reversibility of history can only be understood if we

³¹ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xv.

³² Eliade, *Patterns*, 9.

³³ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xvii.

³⁴ Although Eliade corresponded with Jung, he used the term archetype in a very different way, and eventually dropped the term in order to avoid Jungian misinterpretations of his work. See *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, 163

³⁵ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xxiii

³⁶ *ibid.*, xvii-xvii

recognize that for Eliade and/or *homo religious*,³⁷ “all history is in some measure a fall from the sacred, a limitation and diminution.”³⁸ However, this fall is reversed by the process of the sacralization of the profane: the hierophany, the “eternal return” to the eternal sacred. “Yet in the humblest hierophany there is an ‘eternal new beginning,’ an eternal return to an atemporal moment, a desire to abolish history, to blot out the past, to recreate the world. All this is ‘shown’ in religious facts; it is not the invention of the historian of religion.”³⁹

In this respect, we can see how one aspect of Eliade’s concept of “history” functions similarly to sacred history or myth. In his “archaic ontology,” to know a thing means to know its myth of origin, the exemplary history of how it came to be *in illo tempore*, because “facts show us that, for archaic man, reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype.”⁴⁰ In *Patterns*, Eliade writes, “Thus though it may seem paradoxical, what we may call the ‘history’ of primitive societies consists solely of the mythical events which took place in *illo tempore* and have been unceasingly repeated from that day to this.”⁴¹ However, the historian of religions must also deal with these repetitions in profane time. While myth explains what things are by explaining how they came to be *in illo tempore*, the historian of religion explains what a thing is by discovering its archetype through its manifestations, its “becoming” in profane time.

Herein lies the magic of Eliade’s method. As he writes, “To know the myths is to learn the origin of things...For knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant, and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will.”⁴² Similarly, by knowing the myth, the sacred origin or archetype, the historian of religion makes a given religious phenomenon tractable, workable, systematic, and above all, *meaningful*. This process of uncovering the archetype, the modality of the sacred, expressed through a hierophany, is likened to Platonic anamnesis (supra-rational recollection),⁴³ albeit in a historiographic mode:

³⁷ This slippage between Eliade’s own scholarly perspective and that of the traditional, archaic, or religious man he is attempting to uncover and explain has been the source of much criticism, and is a point we will return to later in this paper.

³⁸ *ibid.*, xix.

³⁹ *ibid.*, xvii.

⁴⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos & History the Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1959), 5

⁴¹ Eliade, *Patterns*, 397.

⁴² Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality (World Perspective Series)*, first edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 13, 15.

⁴³ “Philosophical anamnesis does not recover the memory of the events belonging to former lives, but of truths, that is, of the structures of the real. This philosophical position can be compared with that of the traditional societies: the myths represent paradigmatic models established by supernatural beings, not the series of personal experiences of one individual or another.” (Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 124) And, “The past thus revealed is much more than

Through this historiographic anamnesis man enters deep into himself. If we succeed in understanding a contemporary Australian or his homologue, a Paleolithic hunter, we have succeeded in "awakening" in the depths of our being the existential situation and the resultant behaviour of a prehistoric humanity...A true historiographic anamnesis finds expression in the discovery of our solidarity with these vanished or peripheral peoples. We have a genuine recovery of the past, even of the 'primordial' past revealed by uncovering prehistoric sites or by ethnological investigations.⁴⁴

This, modern, academic, historiographic anamnesis is distinct from traditional mythical anamnesis,

But there is this common element: the importance of precise and total recollection of the past. In the traditional societies it is recollection of mythical events; in the modern West it is recollection of all that took place in historical Time. The difference is too obvious to require definition. But both types of anamnesis project man out of his "historical moment." And true historiographic anamnesis opens, too, on a primordial Time, the Time in which men established their cultural behavior patterns, even though believing that they were revealed to them by Supernatural Beings.⁴⁵

This reveals what I argue is the Platonic structure underlying Eliade's ontology, and ultimately his methodology. Eliade writes, "it could be said that this 'primitive' ontology has a Platonic structure; and in that case Plato could be regarded as the outstanding philosopher of 'primitive mentality,' that is, the thinker who succeeded in giving philosophic currency and validity to the modes and life and behaviour of archaic humanity...[His] great title to our admiration remains his effort to justify this vision of archaic humanity theoretically, through the dialectic means which the spirituality of his age made available to him."⁴⁶ Is not Eliade engaged in a similar, if not identical task?⁴⁷ In his *Journal* he writes, "Our duty—as writers, scholars, and philosophers—consists of reinterpreting, for the modern Western consciousness, the *other* mythological traditions, and first of all the archaic

the antecedent of the present; it is its source. In going back to it, recollection does not seek to situate events in a temporal frame but to reach the depths of being, to discover the original, the primordial reality from which the cosmos issued and which makes it possible to understand becoming as a whole." (J.P. Vernant, "Aspects mythiques de la mémoire en Grèce," *Journal de Psychologie*, (1959): 1-29—page 7 quoted in Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 120).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁶ Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 34-35.

⁴⁷ However, Eliade writes on the same page, "Recognizing the Platonic structure of that [archaic] ontology would not take us very far." I disagree, and in the last section of this paper will argue that this recognition is very significant for understanding Eliade's methodology and conclusions. However, the purpose of this section is merely to summarize Eliade's methodology as he presents it.

traditions...It's not a matter of letting oneself be inspired by these exotic myths and legends, but of creating poetically in a perspective in which the significance and beauty of the Polynesian myths, for example, are revealed to the reader with a force equal to Rilke revealing to him the meaning of the myth of Orpheus."⁴⁸

But how does all of this practically work? I will present a few examples before turning to "logic of symbols" which is Eliade's expression for the structure of the sacred revealed by hierophanies. On page 25 of *Patterns*, Eliade explains how the basic hierophany of a stone reveals a modality of the sacred, "A sacred stone will manifest one modality of the sacred at one moment of history: this stone shows that the sacred is something other than the cosmic surroundings, and like stone, the sacred is absolutely invulnerable, steadfast, and beyond change." Due to its particular circumstances, a hierophany may become a symbol; for example, the black stone of the Ka'ba which "in falling from the sky, made a hole in it, and it was through this hole that a communication...could be effected between heaven and earth. Though it passed the *Axis Mundi*."⁴⁹ In this way, a hierophany becomes a part of a system, and

every hierophany in fact supposes such a system...For instance, what I should describe as a cryptic, or insufficiently clear, *local* hierophany is the custom of carrying a green branch in solemn procession at the beginning of the spring; whereas what I would call a 'clear' hierophany is the symbol of the Cosmic Tree. Yet both reveal the same modality of the sacred embodied in plant life: the rhythm of rebirth, the never-ending life that vegetation contains, reality manifested in recurring creation, and so on. What must be emphasized at once is that *all* these hierophanies point to a system of coherent statements, to a theory of the sacred significance of vegetation[.]⁵⁰

Here we see how a hierophany, without letting go of its historical grounding, is related back to its archetpye and integrated into a system of hierophanies that reveal the same modality of the sacred. This is the morphological process underlying *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, and the means by which Eliade determines what a given hierophany signifies. The historical process consists of examining history for the same hierophany or hierophanies that reveal the same modality of the sacred, and are thus part of the same symbolic system. "Thus firstly symbolism carries further the dialectic of hierophanies by transforming things into something other than what they appear to profane experience to be: a stone becomes a symbol for the center of the world, and so on; and then by becoming symbols, signs of transcendent

⁴⁸ Eliade, *No Souvenirs*, 230.

⁴⁹ Eliade, *Patterns*, 227.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 8-9.

reality, those things abolish their material limits and instead of being isolated fragments become part of a whole system.”⁵¹

This symbolic system or “logic of symbolism” has a special place in Eliade’s methodology and ontology, roughly analogous to Plato’s World of Forms. These symbolic systems are not constructed by the historian of religion, but rather uncovered or revealed by him. They exist “trans-consciously” and autonomously, consciously in the mind of *homo religious*,⁵² and subconsciously in his (and possibly modern man’s) dreams and instincts. “What we may call symbolic thought allows man to move freely from one level of reality to another...[Symbols], as we have seen, identify, assimilate, and unify diverse levels and realities that are to all appearances incompatible.”⁵³ Symbols, like hierophanies in general, paradoxically become more than what they are while remaining exactly the same. They unite or bridge levels of reality in objects without negating any of them.⁵⁴ The historian of religions has only to integrate the hierophanies in question into this logic of symbolism to discover their relationship to the sacred and everything else, and therefore their various levels of meaning. “In such a perspective this is not a closed Universe, no object exists for itself in isolation; everything is held together by a compact system of correspondences and likenesses.”⁵⁵

This, in summary, is Eliade’s ontology, methodology, and hermeneutics. The transcendent sacred manifests itself in different modalities into the plane of profane history creating hierophanies, historical events which reveal or manifest a given modality of the sacred or transhistorical archetype. These modalities, and their manifestation in history, are organized according to the “logic of symbolism” which governs the structure of the Universe (from the sacred on down to the profane), connecting everything to everything else on every level of reality. The *homo religiosus* participates in the sacred through religious rites, symbols, and myths, and in his world, all order, meaning, and

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 452; A “symbol” for Eliade is technically that which makes a hierophany more than what it is in itself, or constitutes a “revelation” which could not be expressed by any other hierophany. But in reality, it could be anything, provided that it embodies or symbolizes the whole system in question. See Eliade, *Patterns*, 448-453.

⁵² see Eliade, *No Souvenirs*, 313: “First Argument: ‘The sacred’ is an element in the structure of consciousness, and not a moment in the history of consciousness. Next: the experience of the sacred is indissolubly linked to the effort made by man to construct a meaningful world. I emphasized this: hierophanies and religious symbols constitute a language, *sui generis*, it necessitates proper hermeneutics. In my work, I have tried to elaborate this hermeneutics; but I have illustrated it in a practical way on the basis of documents. It now remains for me or for another to systematize this hermeneutics.”

⁵³ *ibid.*, 455.

⁵⁴ Eliade argues that religious experience enables man himself to become such a symbol, a bridge connecting all levels of reality, and a microcosm in which all cosmic realities are also realities of his own being. See Eliade, *Patterns*, 455-6.

⁵⁵ Eliade, *Images & Symbols*, 178.

reality is derived through participation in the structure of the sacred. The historian of religion attempts to distinguish hierophanies from profane things (the dialectic of the sacred), discover their meaning by looking at what modality of the sacred they manifest and/thus situating them within a symbolic system of related hierophanies. The logic of this system will allow him to identify the same and similar hierophanies at various other points in history and understand how they have been historically conditioned. This entire process will allow the scholar to answer the question: what does a given religious phenomenon actually mean?

Before moving on to the second section of the paper, I want to present three journal entries of Eliade's that help clarify his self-identified purpose, precedent, and process, as well as reveal the magic of his method of creative hermeneutics. He describes an aspect of the motivation for his scholarship thus, "I want to show the cathartic function of a correct understanding of myth. It liberates (modern) man from certain inhibitions which made him incapable of *loving* his own prehistory (and history...)." ⁵⁶ He later presents a discovery of a precedent or pretext for his work and method as follows:

In a text by [Henry] Corbin, I have found these quotations: "Recite the Koran as if it had been revealed only for your case" (Sohrawardi). "If the meaning of the Koran were limited to the circumstances and personalities to whom it was revealed, the Koran would have died long ago (Bāgit Iman, eighth century). These two texts alone could justify the historico-religious hermeneutic which certain of us are trying to do (Corbin, myself, Ricoeur—and who else *for the moment?*). Point of departure: a revelation, although brought about in a well-defined historical moment, is always transhistorical, "universal," and open to personal interpretations. In fact the term "interpretations" is not precise enough: it is a matter of a transmutation by the person who receives, interprets, and assimilates the revelation. For my part, I am going even further: the creative hermeneutic of which I have been speaking in so many of my recent studies provokes equivalent transmutations even when we are confronted not with a "revelation" of the type of that of the Koran, but also with exotic (India, etc.) or archaic ("primitive") religious forms."⁵⁷

And perhaps most illuminatingly, Eliade elaborates on this process of transmutation:

The meaning of my 'learning': I grasp the true meaning only after having gone through all the material (enormous, inert, somber documentation); I would compare my immersion in the documents to a fusion with the material—to the limit of my physical resistance: when I feel I'm suffocating, that I am being asphyxiated, I come back up to the surface. A descent to the center of dead matter, comparable to a *descensus ad infernos*. Indirectly, the experience of death. Drowned in the

⁵⁶ Eliade, *No Souvenirs*, 288.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 305-6.

documents, what is personal, original, living, in me disappears, dies. When I find myself again, when I return to life—I see things differently—I understand them.⁵⁸

This is precisely what I have tried to accomplish in the previous section, burying and fusing my own voice (and you, gentle reader) in Eliade's documents and words before coming up for air. I hope it has resulted in understanding. In the spirit of following the methodology outlined above, I attempted to do the same in conducting my research on the Yorùbá concept of *orí*. However, in sitting down to write this next section, I was still confronted by the “magical” or “noetic” aspect of Eliade's hermeneutics: the leap from historical hierophany to transhistorical archetype. The question of how exactly this process occurs, how Eliade identified the archetype of a given hierophany, is not clear from his scholarly work. Despite the self-proclaimed empiricism of Eliade's method, this initial leap, if empirical, seems based on the experience of something other than mere historical data.⁵⁹ Once, however, we accept a number of these “leaps,” we can begin to see the consistency of Eliade's logic of symbols and use these symbols as guideposts or exemplars that allow for and direct the interpolation and integration of new hierophanies amongst them. This is what I attempted to do in the following Eliadian analysis of *orí*.

Nevertheless, Eliade's assertion that this system of symbols (and the sacred which it reveals) is autonomous, that it is not constructed by the scholar or *homo religiosus*, seems impossible to accept without embracing Eliade's/the archaic ontology.⁶⁰ We will return to this issue later in the final section of

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 92; This process is strikingly similar (although described in slightly more dramatic terms) to the process of Comparative Religious Reading Described by Prof. Francis Clooney at the beginning of the fourth chapter of his *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Boundaries* (Oxford: Wiley and Sons, 2010).

⁵⁹ Eliade himself was inconsistent on this point: in some places he seemed to argue that the historian of religion need not believe in the archaic ontology of *homo religiosus*, but only need accept that it was real for, and let it guide his study of traditional man. In other places, particularly in his journals, Eliade seems to argue that only scholars who are true believers are capable and qualified to interpret religious phenomena. Allen quotes some of his early Romanian works in which Eliade writes, “One must believe in the existence of the religious and metaphysical planes...You cannot judge a spiritual reality without knowing it, and you do not know it without contemplating it on its own plane of existence.” Only by “loving supra-sensible realities (i.e., believing in their existence and autonomy) can you judge and accept or reject a metaphysics, a dogma, or a mystical experience.” (Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, 11). My hypothesis is that Eliade did in fact embrace the reality of these religious and metaphysical planes and conducted his research accordingly, and that he believed that while the ideal historian of religion would be like him in this regard, experience taught him that it was possible for people who were “wrong” in their ontology to provide “correct” descriptions of religious phenomena.

⁶⁰ As previously mentioned, Eliade is inconsistent on this point, in some places he presents this ontology as belonging only to archaic man, in other places it seems this ontology applies to both himself and archaic man, and in yet other instances it seems as if this ontology is presented as the truth, not just for the historian of religion, Eliade, or archaic man, but for all

this paper, but for the purposes of this exercise, I simply assume that this ontological assertion was true for the traditional Yorùbá person (which, by all accounts seems accurate) and try to bracket my own ontology. Although I think I was no more successful than Eliade was in his own scholarship, I leave it to the reader to determine if the following application of his method is fruitful or not.

Part II: The Secret of Destiny: The Yorùbá Concept of Orí

The destiny of man is in his own soul.

-Herodotus

Due to the limitations of space and my erudition,⁶¹ I will not be able to provide anything but a poor preview of what a full application of Eliade's methodology to this topic would look like. Furthermore, the structure of this section will be uncharacteristic of his method, because while most of his essays focus on a single set of symbolic structures or archetypal realities (such as "The Sky and Sky Gods," or "Mythologies of Memory and Forgetting") in its various manifestations, this essay will start with a single, but multi-faceted hierophany, the Yorùbá mythico-ritual complex of orí, and relate it back to these symbolic structures.

The Head

The head appears to have near universal symbolic significance across geography and history. From Moai statues of Easter Island, to head-hunting rites of Melanesia, the widespread ritual of coronation, the classical bust tradition of sculpture, and the decoration of many forms of official currency (coins and now bills), the image of the head has been used to represent personal essence, authority, and dominion. And this is no wonder: we recognize one another by our faces, not our hands, so the head is the most obvious sign of individuality; and in most anthropologies, ancient and modern, the head plays a significant role in governing the rest of the body. The head is the part of the body closest to heaven, and is also a source of knowledge, because other than the sense of touch, and the subtle senses attested to by archaic traditions, the head is the source of all sensory data. The head is not only the source of knowledge, but also reveals the idea of source or origin in the abstract. In language families as diverse as the Indo-

humanity. See the first chapter of *Patterns*, the conclusions of "Symbolism of the Centre" and "Symbolism and History" in *Images and Symbols*, and *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

⁶¹ Most of my reading in the field of the study of religion could and probably did fit in just one or two of Eliade's bookshelves

European, Semitic, and Niger-Congo, the words for head also signify source, essence, origin, and leader.⁶²

But it is among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria that the hierophany of the head has perhaps realized its fullest expression in sculpture, song, poetry, prayer, ritual, and myth. The head, or *orí* in Yoruba, is at once the physical head (*orí-odè*, literally, “outer head”), the inner reality of a personality (*orí-inú*, literally, inner-head), the seat of consciousness, a guardian spirit or personal divinity, destiny/fate, the creator, and the all-powerful immanent aspect of the transcendent deity (Olodumare). Although one may belong to the cult of one or a few of the 401⁶³ orishas (deities) of the Yorùbá pantheon, *orí* seems to be the only divinity worshipped by each and every traditional Yorùbá person.⁶⁴ In the face of such a dizzying array of attributes, one is reminded of Eliade’s statement: “Hierophanies have the peculiarity of seeking to reveal the sacred in its totality, even if the human beings in whose consciousness the sacred shows itself fasten upon only one aspect or one small part of it. In the most elementary hierophany, *everything is declared*.”⁶⁵ Similarly, the Yorùbá conception of *orí* seems like a dazzling gem of uncountable facets, any one of which could serve as the subject for an entire article or book, but in this short space we will try to examine a few of these aspects with a view to the whole.

The Myth of Orí

According to Yorùbá mythology, each person is created in heaven before being born into the human world. The body is crafted by the god Orishanla (Obatala) from primordial clay by the command of the Supreme God, Olodumare, who gives life to the new person by breathing a part of himself, called *èmi*, into the body. This *èmi* is the soul or vital force of the person, which remains with the body until death, when it returns to Olodumare (who may then put it into another earth-bound body). But before this newly

⁶² *r’as* /*rosh* in Arabic/Hebrew, *Sar/sira* in Persian/Hindi, *kichwa* in Swahili, *olu/ori* in Yorùbá. The Yorùbá word for source/origin (*orísun*) is directly derived from the word for head (*orí*).

⁶³ A symbolic number indicating completion or totality (400) and its transcendence (+1) cf. W. Abimbola, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977)

⁶⁴ Ademuleya quotes the following tradition:

<i>Ori laba bo</i>	It is Orí that needs to be worshipped
<i>Ti a ba fi orisha sile</i>	And not the deities
<i>Nitori oogun lo ni ojo iponju</i>	For charms are for the troubled days
<i>Ori eni l’oni ojo gbogbo</i>	Only one’s <i>orí</i> stands by man everyday.

in “The Concept of Ori in the Traditional Yorùbá Visual Representation of Human Figures.” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16(2) (2007): 212–220, p. 216, cf. R. Abiodun, “Verbal and Visual Metaphors—Mythical Allusions in Yorùbá Ritualistic Art of Ori.” *Word & Image* 3 (3): 252–270 JUL-SEP 1987.

⁶⁵ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xvii.

animated person leaves heaven, he goes to the house of Ajala, “the potter,” who is charged with making *orí-inú* (inner heads or destinies). Ajala is often described as an irresponsible rascal who, due to his carelessness, makes all kinds of *orí*: good, bad, and otherwise. Each person must choose an *orí* from the potter’s storehouse, and this head determines (or is) a person’s fate in life. This choice of destiny is witnessed only by Orunmila, the god of Ifá divination, and this witnessing is of the utmost importance, because in the descent to earth, a person forgets everything about his “pre-existence” in heaven. On earth, the only way he or she can learn anything about this choice of *orí*, his destiny, is by consulting Orunmila, known as *elérí ipín* (the witness of fate/one’s lot), through Ifá divination.⁶⁶

Ifá is a divination system somewhat similar to the Chinese *I-Ching*, through which *babalawos* (priests of Orunmila) select and recite a set of verses from one of the 256 *Odus* (divinatory signatures roughly corresponding to “chapters”) that comprise its oral corpus. These verses usually consist of a mythological narrative in which a deity or mythological character consults the Ifá oracle about a particular problem, the oracle prescribes a specific sacrifice, and the deity or character performs the sacrifice, resolving the issue which led him to consult Ifá in the first place.⁶⁷ For example, *Odu Irete Ofun* says:

“Atefun-tefun”
 Performed Ifá divination for the 401 divinities
 When they were going to Apere (a state of perfection)
 “Atefun-tefun”
 The *babalawo* of Ori who performed Ifá divination for Ori
 When Ori was going to Apere
 They were all advised to offer sacrifice
 Only Ori responded by offering the sacrifice
 The sacrifice of Ori was abundantly rewarded
 Ori is higher than all Orisha (deities)
 It is only Ori which reaches Apere
 No other Orisha can help
 Apart from one's Ori⁶⁸

Numerous other verses of Ifá attest to the supremacy of *orí*, prescribe rituals and sacrifices to honor and propitiate it, assert its role in determining the

⁶⁶ cf. Abimbola (1977); W. Abimbola, “The Yorùbá Concept of Human Personality,” in *La Notion de Personne en Afrique Noire* (Paris: Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, no. 544. 1971); Abiodun (1987).

⁶⁷ Eliade would have found in Ifá an ideal example of his theory of myth and ritual, “Myth assured man that what he is about to do has already been done, in other words, it helps him to overcome doubts as to the result of his undertaking.” Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 141.

⁶⁸ Ifalola, personal communication-see also http://ifalola.blogspot.com/2008_02_01_archive.html

fate of gods and men alike, and even seem to identify it with the Supreme Deity (Olodumare).⁶⁹

Interestingly, we find a structurally similar myth amongst the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, the Akan of Ghana, and further afield, in the Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions of early to late antiquity. Chinua Achebe writes, "The Igbo believe that a man receives his gifts or talents, his character—indeed his portion in life generally—before he comes into the world. It seems there is an element of choice available to him at that point, and that his *chi* presides over the bargaining. Hence the saying *Obu etu nya na chie si kwu*,"⁷⁰ meaning, "that's the agreement he reached with his *chi*." The *chi* functions as a kind of guardian angel or spirit double, which determines the fate of the person in its care, and serves as one of, if not *the* central object of worship in the traditional Igbo world. Indeed one's *chi* may be more powerful than all of the other divinities. Thus it is said, "No matter how many divinities sit together to plot a man's ruin, it will come to nothing unless his *chi* is there among them."⁷¹

However, a person ignores or opposes his *chi* with disastrous consequences, as Achebe relates in the myth of the great wrestler who threw all opponents on earth and in the spirit world, but was defeated when his *chi* appeared and smashed him to death with its little finger. When an Igbo man fails repeatedly at an endeavor for no apparent reason, his fellows say "*Chi ekwero*,"—His *chi* does not agree. The Yorùbá have virtually identical expressions about *orí* (when a stroke of luck, good or bad, befalls us, we say "it's my head," and Ifá attests that "No orisha blesses a man without the consent of his *orí*"⁷²). Furthermore, one of its praise-names, *orí-oorò* "head at dawn,"⁷³ mirrors the etymology of *chi*, which literally means "daylight." Thus the Igbo Supreme Deity, who is associated with the sun, is known as Chukwu (Chi ukwu, literally "great *chi*") or Chineke (Chi na eke, "Chi who creates"). Amongst certain Igbo groups, an individual consecrates his shrine to his *chi* at daybreak, when a priest brings the *chi* "down from the face of the sun."⁷⁴

Amongst the Akan, the vital force, or *kra*, is also said to be a ray cast from the sun into the soul during its heavenly pre-existence. The *kra* is also regarded as a guardian spirit or divine double, and the source of a person's destiny.

⁶⁹ See Abimbola (1971), Abiodun (1987), B. Lawal, "Ori: The Significance of the Head in Yorùbá Sculpture" *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 41:1 (Spring, 1985): 91-103; B. Lawal, "Orilonise: The Hermeneutics of the Head and Hairstyles among the Yorùbá." *Tribal Arts* II:2 (Winter 2001/Spring 2002)

⁷⁰ Chinua Achebe, "Chi in Igbo Cosmology." *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann Educ., 1975), 165.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Abimbola (1971), 81.

⁷³ Abiodun (1987), 257.

⁷⁴ See Achebe (1975).

Just before a child leaves heaven, it declares the manner in which it wants to live and the plans it will achieve in life. This declaration is known as the *nkrabea* or “destiny” (literally, that which you stipulate when leaving). Fate is determined by one’s *kra*, given by Nyame or chosen by one’s self.⁷⁵ Thus, a close brush with danger elicits the saying, “but for his *kra* that followed him, he would have died.”⁷⁶ Like *orí* and *chi*, the *kra* is worshipped as a separate deity, even as an immanent, personal aspect of the Supreme, Lunar God Nyame. During life, “the *honhom* [divine breath or soul] is always coupled with the *kra*; but whereas after death the *kra* labours up a steep hill in order to reach heaven, there to submit to the judgement of Nyankopon [the Solar demiurge], the *honhom* flies back to Nyame in the shape of a bird.”⁷⁷ After judgment by the solar deity Nyankopon, the *kra* is condemned to be reincarnated in its familial line “until one of [its] descendants achieve[s] a pure *kra*, that is, has become a *saman-pa*, a good spiritual being, which can then become one again with Nyame’s eternal *kra*.”⁷⁸

In his essay, “The One and Only Transmigrant,” Ananda Coomaraswamy identifies the eponymous being with the “the solar self,” the Hindu deity Prajapati, who according to the Vedas “‘moves in the womb and is multifariously born;’ ‘The Person expires and suspends in the womb, and then he is born again, when thou, O Breath, givest life; ‘Thou alone, O Sun, art born about the whole world,’ who as the sacrificial Person ‘was poured out upon the earth from East to West.’”⁷⁹ Coomaraswamy comments “by this Prajapati, this body of ours is set up in possession of consciousness, he as its driver passing on from body to body, overcome by the bright or dark fruit of his acts, or rather those acts of which he, as our Inner Man, is the actuator and spectator rather than the doer.”⁸⁰ Here we see a very different cultural coloring, but the near-supreme divinity and description of Prajapati as the actuator and spectator of all individual action is also applied to the *kra*, *chi*, and *orí*.⁸¹ In fact, a possible etymology for *orí* is *o rí*, literally “it sees / finds.”

Nevertheless, the structure of the West African cluster of myths is recapitulated even more closely in the Myth of Er from Plato’s Republic. At the end of Book X, Socrates relates the tale of a Greek warrior who died in battle and was taken home to be prepared for burial, but was revived twelve days later on his funeral pile and related his vision of the other world. In his

⁷⁵ Meyerowitz, 27: *Onyane nkrabea nni kwatibea*—“What God has destined cannot be avoided.”

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁷ *ibis.*

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Coomaraswamy, *Major Essays*, 72-73.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ See Abimbola’s (1971) discussion of the concept of *ese* “leg” (meaning human effort and activity). “Even if one is predestined to success by the choice of a good *orí*, one cannot actually achieve success without these use of one’s *ese*” (85-6).

“death,” Er witnessed souls traveling between Heaven and Earth, the three Fates, Lachesis (the past), Clotho (the present), and Atropos (the future), working the spindle of Necessity and weaving the destinies of men:

Hear the word of Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity. Mortal souls, behold a new cycle of life and mortality. Your daimon will not be allotted to you, but you choose your daimon; and let him who draws the first lot have the first choice, and the life which he chooses shall be his destiny. Virtue is free, and as a man honors or dishonors her he will have more or less of her; the responsibility is with the chooser—God is justified.’[...]

All the souls had now chosen their lives, and they went in the order of their choice to Lachesis, who sent with them the daimon whom they had severally chosen, to be the guardian of their lives and the fulfiller of the choice: this daimon led the souls first to Clotho, and drew them within the revolution of the spindle impelled by her hand, thus ratifying the destiny of each; and then, when they were fastened to this, carried them to Atropos, who spun the threads and made them irreversible, whence without turning round they passed beneath the throne of Necessity; and when they had all passed, they marched on in a scorching heat to the plain of Forgetfulness, which was a barren waste destitute of trees and verdure; and then towards evening they encamped by the river of Unmindfulness, whose water no vessel can hold; of this they were all obliged to drink a certain quantity, and those who were not saved by wisdom drank more than was necessary; and each one as he drank forgot all things.⁸²

Here we clearly see, thousands of years and miles apart, the very same mythical structure, the paradoxical choice of destiny, the divine nature and guardian function of this chosen destiny, and the mankind’s forgetfulness of all this during his entry into the world. Further likenesses are revealed when we consider that another one of orí’s praise names is *àyànmó*, which in ordinary Yorùbá means fate or destiny, but which literally means “that which is affixed to one.”⁸³ The orí, like the daimon, is chosen and irrevocably attached to one. One of the myths of Ifá testifies to this aspect of orí, and links it to the concept of reincarnation seen in the Akan and Vedic accounts: “One day Orunmila gathered all of the gods together and asked them, ‘Who can accompany his devotee on a distant journey over the seas without turning back?’ Each deity, including Orunmila, boasts of being able to do so, but upon further examination, all of their claims prove empty. The gods are all dumbfounded so they consult Ifá, which tells them that it is only orí that can ‘accompany his devotee on a distant journey over the seas without

⁸² From Plato’s *The Republic*,

<<http://www.davidson.edu/academic/classics/neumann/CLA350/ErMyth.html>>

⁸³ Abiodun (1987), 263. Even the shape of the spindle and throne of Necessity closely resemble that of the *ìborí*, the altar for the *orí* and its container the *ilé-orí* which in turn serve as models for the Yorùbá royal crowns. Cf. B. Lawal, “Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yorùbá Art.” *The Art Bulletin*, 83:3 (Sep., 2001): 498-526; H. Drewal, J. Pemberton, and R. Abiodun, “Yorùbá: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought.” *African Arts* 23:1 (Nov., 1989):68-77,104.

turning back,' because whenever a person dies, his personal shrines of the other gods are cast away, but his *head* accompanies him even into the grave."⁸⁴

Similarly, in the fourth chapter of the third *Ennead*, Plotinus describes the *daimon paredos*, the guardian spirit that is the guide of the soul throughout life and in death.⁸⁵ Porphyry, one of Plotinus' disciples, recorded that,

From birth Plotinus had something more than did others. An Egyptian priest who had come to Rome and made his acquaintance through a friend wanted to give an exhibition of his wisdom and asked Plotinus to come see his own attending daimon evoked. Plotinus having readily consented, the evocation took place in the temple of Isis, for the Egyptian said that this was the only pure place in Rome. When the daimon was summoned before their very eyes, a god came who was not of the order of daimons and the Egyptian said: 'Blessed are you who have a god for a daimon and not a companion of a lower order!' Plotinus thus had as a companion one of the more divine daimons, and he kept his divine eye continuously raised towards this companion.⁸⁶

Socrates spoke of his own daimon in the *Apology*, "For previously the familiar divinatory voice of the daimon always spoke to me quite frequently and opposed me even in very small things if I was about to do something I should not rightly do."⁸⁷ Similarly, Galen wrote that, "The cause of the passions, that is, of inconsistency and the unhappy life, is not to follow in everything the divinity (*daimon*) within oneself who is of the same stock and has a similar nature to the one who governs the whole cosmos."⁸⁸ In the same vein, Abimbola writes:

Broadly speaking, therefore, one can say that when a person goes to consult Ifá all he is doing is finding out the wishes of his orí. Ifá is merely the mouthpiece, an intermediary between the inquirer and his orí. Ifá carries the message of Orí and the gods to the supplicant and carries the sacrifices made by the latter to Orí and the gods...The gods themselves have their own orí directing their daily life. Like human beings, the gods know the wishes of their orí by consulting Ifá.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Abimbola (1977), 133-42.

⁸⁵ see Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Green Oaks, IL: Omega Publications, 1994); pp. 13-37 for a more thorough exposition of this symbol of the "Heavenly Twin."

⁸⁶ Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 10. 14-30. Translation 2005 by Robert K. Clark. From <http://www.prometheustrust.co.uk/Meadow_2/Greek_Philosophical_Terms/greek_philosophical_terms.html>. In the Fourth *Ennead*, Plotinus described a part of the soul, its *head*, that remains in the heavenly realms and never falls into the suffering and dispersion of the material and temporal world.

⁸⁷ Plato, *Apology* 31-32 Translation 2005 by Robert K. Clark

⁸⁸ quoted in Christopher Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280.

⁸⁹ Abimbola (1977), 115.

Lawal identifies this divine *orí* (belonging to both gods and men) with Olodumare, the Supreme Deity and “head” of the Yorùbá pantheon on the basis of a number of sayings, prayers, and verses of Ifá that describe them in the same terms, arguing that *orí* is “an aspect of the Supreme Being.”⁹⁰ In the first of two parallel narratives from different Odu of the Ifá corpus, *Orí*, in the humble form of the little cone of his altar, rolls in and splits the sacred kola nut of *àshe* (spiritual power/energy) with ease after all the other *orisha* (deities) had tried and failed to accomplish this. He is enthroned in Heaven, which infuriates the other *orisha* who attack and try to dethrone him in their jealousy, but *Orí* subdues each one of them and sets them to their particular cosmic tasks.⁹¹ Lawal points out that the verb for “subdue” used in this verse *dá*, can also mean “to create.” So *orí* can be seen as creating all of the *orisha* and assigning them their roles, something normally attributed to Olodumare. In the second narrative, the *orisha* plot against Olodumare and ask him to abdicate the throne. He agrees on the condition that they rule the world on their own for sixteen days. Olodumare, who is the source of *ashé*, the force that animates the entire cosmos, cuts off its flow, and the world stops working. The *orisha*, ashamed, return to Olodumare (referred to as *Olórí*, the Lord, literally “the owner of the head”) and pay homage to him.⁹²

During the Roman Empire, as in the Yorùbá and Akan civilizations, subjects paid homage not only to their own personal divinity (*genius* in Latin) but also to that of the Emperor or King.⁹³ The Roman *genius* was also a tutelary and guardian deity who controlled man’s fortune, and like *orí*, had a “generative/creative” aspect (from which the modern English term is derived) as it was etymologically derived from the Indo-European root *gen-*, meaning “to create.”⁹⁴

In *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, Henry Corbin conducts an extensive analysis of closely-related symbols and guardian spirits, demonstrating how they had been identified with the angels of the Abrahamic religions and Zoroastrianism, the Active Intellect of Peripatetic Philosophy, and the “Perfect Nature” of Hermeticism described as “‘the philosopher’s Angel’—the philosopher’s initiator and tutor, and finally as the object and secret of all philosophy, the dominant figure in the Sage’s personal religion. Again and again, these descriptions strike the fundamental note: the Perfect Nature can only reveal itself ‘in person’ to one whose nature is perfect...each of the two simultaneously assumes the position of the I and the self—image and mirror: my image looks at me with my look; I look at it with its own look.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Lawal (1985), 92-4.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, cf. Abiodun (1987), 261-3

⁹² Lawal (1985), *op cit.*

⁹³ See Abiodun (1987), Meyerowitz *op cit.*, and J.C. Nitzsche, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1975).

⁹⁴ cf. Nitzsche *op cit.*

⁹⁵ H. Corbin, *Man of Light*, 17.

The 17th Century Shī'ite philosopher Qāzī Sa'īd Qommī, similarly asserted that "the face that God shows to man is the face that man shows to God,"⁹⁶ and his contemporary and fellow philosopher Mulla Sadra held that each soul comes from a specified point of origin amongst the spirits' points of origin, and the location of this point is specified by its connection to or being governed by one of the Names or Attributes of God. This point of origin is also the soul's point of return of to God. This Divine locus or origin and return is unique to every individual soul and thus the path traversed from the soul out into the world and back to God is also unique (there are as many paths to God as there are souls), and is determined, obviously, by the location of this point. In fact, one could say that this path is what the soul "becomes" as it goes through life headed back towards God. Therefore, the unique nature of each soul, and what it becomes, i.e., the path it takes, is determined by this unique locus, what it is, was, and will be *in divinis*:

When humans ask God to guide them along the straight path in verse six of the Qur'an's first chapter, they therefore ask for nothing but guidance upon their own path, which will lead to their felicity. This is why Sadra goes on to make a subtle distinction between the different paths available to a person and the path appropriate to him or her: 'It is just as God says, *And do not follow the paths, for they will divert you from God's path* [6:153], that is, the path which is *for you* contains felicity and salvation,'...What Sadra seems to have in mind here is that since each individual has a path to God specific to him or her, the other paths which are available to him or her are not actual options in terms of his or her return to God. A person has the option to tread upon them, but the truth is, in accordance with his or her innate disposition, there is only one path that is open to his or her soul, and it is that path that must be followed. Sadra then says that not everyone who returns to God will attain felicity. This is because, in accordance with the divine decree, there are some who must end up in misery and wretchedness, and some who must end up in felicity. Thus, while all souls return to God, some meet what classical Islamic theology refers to as God's attributes of beauty, which are manifested through such divine names as "the gentle," "the kind," and "the loving;" whereas others meet God's attributes of majesty, which are manifested through such divine names as "the overpowering," "the vengeful", and "the wrathful."⁹⁷

Here again, the divine origin of destiny and its simultaneous unity with the soul are emphasized, along with the resulting paradox of the unity of freedom and fate. In all of these diverse manifestations of myth and doctrine we can see the same modality of the sacred, the same archetypal reality that shines through the myth of orí.

⁹⁶ See H. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques, Tome III: Les fideles d'amour et Shi'isme et sufisme. Livre III: Ruzbehan Baqli Shirazi and the Sufism of the Fideles d'Amour*. (Paris: Gallimard, Bib. des Idees, 1972).

⁹⁷ Dr. Mohammed Rustom, personal communication and "From Philosophic Language to Mythic Discourse: Mulla Sadra's Anthropology of the Afterlife," paper delivered at American Academy of Religion Conference in Montreal, 2009.

The Meaning of the Myth: Character, Destiny, Divinity

Character is destiny.

-*Heraclitus*

Bí Orí ba fe' ìwà If Ori marries Iwa (character)

Bí Ìwà ba fe orí And Iwa marries Ori

Aiye a gún régé The world will be well

-Yorùbá song

Olodumare, Olori, Olorun, Eleda, Olu Ìwà

Supreme Being, Lord of Heaven, Creator, Lord of Existence

-Praise names for Olodumare

Orí eni, l'Elédá eni

One's head/destiny is one's creator

-Yorùbá saying

He who knows himself, knows his Lord

--*Hadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad

Now we must emerge from this process of immersion in the various hierophanies and systems of symbols described above to answer the question: what does it all mean? Eliade himself gives us a key to understanding this particular modality of the sacred:

For Plato, philosophy helps you remember the Ideas; more precisely to remember the situation of the soul in post-existence and pre-existence when the soul contemplated the Ideas. For the Australians, initiation reveals to you that *you were already here*, in these places, in the dawn of time, *in illo tempore*, you were such-and-such civilizing hero. This mythical personage serves as a model: the initiates must repeat what he did in the beginning. But through the initiation, you discover that this mythical personage is *you yourself*—as you appeared for the first time. Ultimately, you are a repetition of yourself—as you were in the beginning, *exemplary*.⁹⁸

This mythical theme can be analyzed according to the following elements: 1) for *homo religiosus*, character, reality, and happiness are attained by aligning oneself with, or participating in, one's own unique archetype, 2) this archetype is at once one's destiny, ideal self, and guardian spirit, what one was *in illo tempore*, 3) *homo religiosus* "wants" to be what he (his archetype)

⁹⁸ Eliade, *No Souvenirs*, 182; Eliade, *Myths, Rites and Symbols*, 55.

“is”, and “is” what he “wants to be” (his destiny); that is, man is his archetype, and his archetypal self chooses/manifests/creates his destiny in accordance with its own nature, 4) This archetypal self is divine and opens up onto the transcendent sacred. Eliade’s creative hermeneutic reveals this same symbolic logic, or modality of the sacred, manifesting itself in the mythologies of orí, kra, chi, daimon, guardian angel, “solar self,” “Perfect Nature,” and “divine locus of origin/return,” in spite of their vastly different cultural and historical contexts.

In the Yorùbá case, a person learns and develops good character (*ìwà*, which also means existence; things exist only insofar as they have character) by consulting the Ifá oracle about a significant event or decision in his life. Through a mythical narrative from the Ifá corpus, a person’s orí communicates its wishes and what it would do (or has done *in illo tempore*) in this event, revealing the way (the necessary rituals, taboos, and sacrifices) for the person to re-integrate himself with his archetype, realizing his destiny and becoming immortal (as the prayer contained in Ifá says, *orí mí da mi da Iye, N ò kú mó, Ire gbogbo ni t’emi, Ìmólè ni ti Àmàkìsì*—My orí give me life, empower me to overcome mortality/I shall not die, Let all good things belong to me, As light belongs to the god of sunrise⁹⁹).

But what about the person with a bad orí (*olórí búrukú*)? If his archetype or destiny is to not have character/existence, is he still fulfilling his destiny and manifesting his archetype? The answer depends on perspective. From the human side, looking “up,” we have forgotten the nature of our orí, and so it would seem that either one’s bad actions spoiled one’s good destiny, or that one’s bad destiny thwarted one’s good efforts (hence the saying *eni l’orí rere ti kò ní ìwà, ìwà l’o ma b’orí reje*—the person with good destiny but without character, it is character that will ruin his good destiny). But from the divine side, looking “down,” all of a person’s decisions are really just repetitions of his primordial choice of orí, in fact, the person is just a manifestation of his orí, an unfolding in time of all of its potentiality, hence the saying *ori eni l’Eleda eni*—“one’s orí is one’s Creator.”¹⁰⁰

So from the human side, destiny is character (character seems to determine one’s destiny), but from the divine side, character is destiny (destiny manifests itself as character). Both perspectives are right, but the divine or archetypal perspective is more so because it is ontologically prior or superior to the human one. So the unfortunate soul with a “bad” orí is still fulfilling his destiny and manifesting his archetype, but his orí or archetypal self, although more real than him in and of itself, is less real than a good orí. As Ifá says,

⁹⁹ quoted in Abiodun (1987), 263.

¹⁰⁰ We can imagine the cone of orí with its point at a particular location on the “face of the sun,” the face of divinity. This point is manifested, expanded outward and downward, to form the circle of a person’s life.

“*Ori kan o buru n’ile Ife; t’iwa nikan lo soro*”¹⁰¹—“There is not one bad orí in Ile-Ife (the sacred city, here symbolizing heaven), it is cultivating character that is difficult.” Because orí occupy a higher ontological place than their human counterparts, relative to people, they are not bad, but some are better than others, that is, some lead to lives of better character than others. But what of human will and responsibility?

This question has been taken up by many anthropologists and scholars of African Philosophy who have argued that the Yorùbá concept of orí is fatalist,¹⁰² soft-determinist,¹⁰³ or voluntarist,¹⁰⁴ or that the orí is like Freud’s unconscious.¹⁰⁵ Their extensive debates have formed the basis of dozens of articles and fascinating studies, but from the Eliadean perspective, they all commit the classic error of approaching a religious phenomenon as philosophy. From his mentor Nae Ionescu, Eliade inherited the notion that there are three planes of knowledge and reality: the religious, the philosophical, and the scientific, each with an appropriate method of inquiry. The worst sin a scholar can commit is to confuse these levels in trying to use a “lower” method to understand a “higher” level (i.e., trying to study the philosophical as empirical science, or the religious as philosophy).¹⁰⁶ By seeking to reduce it to philosophy or psychology, these scholars fundamentally misunderstand what the orí myth actually is, and therefore misinterpret what it says.¹⁰⁷ However, this does not mean that philosophical or systematic exegesis of a myth is impossible, as Eliade writes, “myth expresses in action and drama what metaphysics and theology define

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Fayemi, “Human Personality and the Yorùbá Worldview: An Ethico-Sociological Interpretation” *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2:9 (March 2009), 170

¹⁰² See Barry Hallen, *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse About Values in Yorùbá Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare, God in Yorùbá Belief* (London: Longmans, 1970); E.O. Oduwole, “The Yorùbá Concepts of ‘Ori’ and Human Destiny: A Fatalistic Interpretation.” *Journal of Philosophy and Development* 2(1&2): 40–52; S. Oladipo, “Predestination in Yorùbá Thought: Philosopher’s Interpretation.” *Orita: Journal of Religion*. XXIV(1&2): 34–51.

¹⁰³ See O.A. Balogun, “The Concepts of Ori and Human Destiny in Traditional Yorùbá Thought: A Soft-Deterministic Interpretation.” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16:1 (2007): 116–130; S. Gbadegesin, “Èniyàn, The Yorùbá Concept of a Person,” in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds) *The African Philosophy Reader (2nd ed.)*: 175–191; M.A. Makinde, “A Philosophical analysis of the Yorùbá Concept of Ori and Human Destiny.” *International Studies in Philosophy*, 17:1: 54–69; S.A. Ali, “The Yorùbá Conception of Destiny: A Critical Analysis.” *Journal of Philosophy and Development* 1&2(1): 100–106.

¹⁰⁴ Kola Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account (Yorùbá Culture in Context)* (Turnhout: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Robin Horton, “Social Psychologies: African and Western.” An essay accompanying Meyer Fortes’ *Oedipus and Job in West African Religion* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 41–82.

¹⁰⁶ Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ See Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 148, “every attempt to interpret Greek myth, at least within a culture of the Western type, is in some sort conditioned by the response of the Greek rationalists.” Eliade’s discussion of the misinterpretation of Greek myths could apply equally well to the case of Yorùbá mythology in Western academic institutions.

dialectically.¹⁰⁸ In fact, the experience of the sacred is the origin of all such discourse, as the mythology engendered by such experience is “later elaborated and systematized by metaphysical speculation.”¹⁰⁹ However, any such attempt at systemization must maintain the “opening to the Transcendent” inherent in the myth and not confuse the levels of existence unified in the symbol.

From this methodological standpoint, I argue that the academic accounts of orí as fatalism, soft-determinism, or voluntarism are all correct, but also all wrong because they are all premised on the absolute difference between a person and her orí. The fatalists assert that a person does not have any free will or choice because it is one’s orí and not one’s self that determines one’s fate. The soft-determinists hold that one’s orí can be altered or influenced by one’s hard-work, sacrifices, and character, while the voluntarists argue that one’s orí is simply what one makes of oneself given the uncontrollable circumstances of life. All of these accounts find both support and opposition in the religious rites, myths, and orature of the Yorùbá. This union of opposing attributes and perspectives (*coincidentia oppositorum* in Eliade’s language) characterizes not only orí, but myths in general. Eliade writes, “myth reveals more profoundly than any rational experience ever could, the actual structure of the divinity, which transcends all attributes and reconciles all contraries...[this] *coincidentia oppositorum* is one of the most primitive ways of expressing the paradox of divine reality.”¹¹⁰

In the case of orí, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of fate and free will can be understood by considering that orí is also the nexus of the human and the divine. In orí, human will (choice) is not separate from divine will (fate), hence the paradox of the heavenly “choice of fate.” A person always has choice, but she has already made this choice *in divinis, in illo tempore*. But this *illud tempus* is not the historical past, but rather the eternal present of myth and ritual; so, conversely, a person’s fate is sealed, but he himself seals it every time he makes a decision. In the words of one Yorùbá priest, “it (emi) chooses what it will come to do...So also it is the act of the self when it is with the supreme deity (Olorun).”¹¹¹ The choice of orí in heaven is the archetype and source of all the choices a person will ever make in life, and this human choice is not other than the divine choice. We are ultimately not other than our orí, and through our orí, we are not other than Olodumare, and so our choices, all of our exercise of free will, is not other than our destiny. It is only when we leave the unity of eternity and the sacred and are plunged in profane time and multiplicity that these aspects seem contradictory and paradoxical, as in the Yorùbá saying “*a kúnlè, a yan èdà, A*

¹⁰⁸ Eliade, *Patterns*, 418.

¹⁰⁹ Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 139.

¹¹⁰ Eliade, *Patterns*, 419.

¹¹¹ Hallen, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*, 52.

dáyá tán, ojú nkán ni—We knelt (in heaven) and chose our destinies, but when we arrived on earth, we became impatient/troubled.”¹¹²

In conclusion, *orí* is our divine self, more powerful than any *orisha*, and being identified with *Olodumare*, is the individual, personal aspect of the Supreme Being, “the face God turns towards us.”¹¹³ Just as the outer or physical head (*orí-odè*) is the vessel of the inner head (*orí-inú*) and determines the fate of the rest of the body, humans are the chosen vessel of *Olodumare* and determine the fate of the world, as *Ifá* says:

... a wa <i>gegebi eniyan</i> ,	We as human beings,
a wa <i>ni Olodumare yan</i>	We are the God’s elect,
<i>lati lo tun ile aye se</i> ,	designated to renew the world,
<i>Eni -a yan ni wa...</i>	We are the chosen ones. ¹¹⁴

But our destinies do not absolve us from effort and struggle, in fact they decree it for us/we have chosen it for ourselves. As *Ifá* says:

Ifá divination was performed for Struggle
Who was coming from heaven to earth
We are only struggling
All of us
Those who chose good destinies are not many
We are only struggling
All of us
We are only struggling¹¹⁵

In this particular struggle to describe an aspect of *Yorùbá* mythology, as in any exegesis of myth, we find that no explanation could ever be complete. In *Eliade’s* words, “...There is always a kernel that remains refractory to explanation, and this indefinable, irreducible element perhaps reveals the real situation of man in the cosmos...”¹¹⁶ And yet in the *Yorùbá* case, *orí* is both the impossible kernel that encapsulates “the real situation of man in the cosmos” and the solution which breaks it open. No one but the little cone of *orí* could crack the sacred *kola* nut of *Olodumare* and set the cosmos in order.

¹¹² Abimbola (1977), 113; cf. Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* in which “the angel of Philosophy” (his genius) comes to him and resolves the paradox of God’s foreknowledge and God’s judgment by showing him that God is outside of time, and that free-will and foreknowledge are united in the atemporal.

¹¹³ *Olodumare* has no shrines, cult, or images in traditional *Yorùbá* religion.

¹¹⁴ B.A. Ademuleya, “The Concept of *Ori* in the Traditional *Yorùbá* Visual Representation of Human Figures” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16:2 (2007): 214. The *Yorùbá* word for person, *èniyàn*, is here etymologically and mythically derived from the phrase *eni a yan* “one who is chosen.”

¹¹⁵ Abimbola (1977), 147; cf. Ibn al-*Arabī’s* discussion of “the strugglers” in his exegesis of the *Qr’anic* verse, “you did not throw, when you threw, but God threw.” In W.C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, New York: State University Of New York Press, 1989), 211.

¹¹⁶ *Eliade, Shamanism*, xiv.

Part III: Conclusion and Criticism

Having attempted to outline and demonstrate Eliade's creative hermeneutic, I will now try to evaluate the benefits and limitations of this approach, and compare it to Comparative Theological approaches. J.Z. Smith wrote, "I have often observed to students that a methodological or theoretical position is not some magic wand that makes problems disappear. Each position assumed entails costs and consequences. The question is not one of deciding on solutions, but of choosing what set of costs one is willing to bear."¹¹⁷ I agree wholeheartedly with Smith's assessment. Every methodology is a limitation of inquiry and exposition (one asks some questions and not others, and writes down some things, passing over others in silence), so scholars must assess their own goals, the nature of material, and the nature of the different methodological approaches available to them when deciding how to approach a topic.

Eliade's creative hermeneutic has many strengths: it attempts to approach religion as religion, without reducing a religious phenomenon to its given psychological, historical, or political dimensions, while at the same time not ignoring these other dimensions. This methodology requires the scholar to take the worldview presented in the subject of inquiry seriously and allow it to "transform" him or her. However, this personal dimension, the need to virtually adopt the perspective of the object of inquiry, is both the greatest strength and weakness of this method. Such a task is incredibly demanding (perhaps even impossible) for the serious scholar, and while this Herculean labor may allow the scholar to produce creative and coherent interpretations of myths and symbols that are congruous with the traditions in which they reside, it raises many more issues about the validity of such efforts. Without delving into the messy politics of representation, suffice it to say that the possibility, desirability, and accuracy of such a project depends upon one's epistemology and ontology. The emerging field of Comparative Theology offers some important ways of responsibly and rigorously addressing this "personal and transformative" aspect of this kind of work, but I will return to this shortly.

I believe this is the main reason that Eliade's work has fallen out of vogue; leaving aside the largely *ad hominem* political critiques, most criticism of Eliade has focused on the slippage between his own personal ontology and views and those of the "archaic man" he sought to represent.¹¹⁸ In almost all of his works, it is difficult to distinguish Eliade the man from Eliade the

¹¹⁷ Smith (2000) "Part 2", 351.

¹¹⁸ T. Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion (Religion and Postmodernism Series)* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1993).

scholar from Eliade's "archaic man," indeed passages from his journals frequently find their way into his books without significant alteration. Moreover, Eliade was clearly profoundly and personally shaped by the material he studied, to the extent that the line between "this is how the primitive sees the world" and "this is how the world is" vanishes and reappears like a ghost in Eliade's writings.

This is not necessarily a problem, but it is a position that merits exposition and defense. One cannot describe how a religious person views the world, without (even if only implicitly) adopting some kind of rudimentary understanding of how the world is; i.e., whether or not things exist, or the laws of nature are regular, or time and space exist in a certain way, etc. All kinds of coherent, mutually exclusive positions are possible, and each has its own methodological consequences. If we take Eliade's ontology to be identical or at least very similar to the "archaic ontology" outlined in his works (and I believe we have good reason to do so), then I think we would find that it has a strong resonance with our understanding of the perspectives of so-called "archaic peoples." In fact, Eliade looks to "archaic man" in much the same way as his "archaic man" looked to mythical figures: as distant exemplars that can be used to create order, meaning, and reality in the world. This "creative" or even "performative" aspect of Eliade's hermeneutic has, unfortunately, been lost on most of his critics.

Nevertheless, the ontological foundations of Eliade's methodology are particular, and being particular, are not universally held. It would be difficult, and perhaps very interesting, to try to apply Eliade's method to traditions which reject this ontology, such as post-modern or psychoanalytic circles, or even early Madhyamika Buddhist philosophy.¹¹⁹ However, Eliade claims that his "archaic ontology" is not *a priori*, but is rather empirically derived from his sources, indicating that perhaps his methodological ontology could be transformed by new sources of data. This potential for reflexivity is a great strength of the method.

In the exercise of this paper, I found that Eliade's method allowed me to see connections that I had never previously imagined between the Yorùbá myths with which I was raised and other myths and concepts, but the way in which I made these connections was certainly intuitive and not systematic. After following up a given intuition about the relationship between, say, *orí* and genius, I would systematically look for similarities and differences, but while Eliade's method was very helpful in deriving metaphysical meaning about "a given modality of the sacred" from these similarities, and historical meaning from their differences, it limited my examination of the aspects of the transcendent sacred (assuming Eliade's ontology) revealed by their differences.

¹¹⁹ See Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, for such efforts.

Moreover, as previously discussed, Eliade does not provide a justification for the leap from a religious phenomenon to its archetype that makes the whole comparative project possible. I hold to the Hermetic principle that “everything is in every thing,” and thus anything can be read into any thing. Given a particular myth, I may see a symbol of the union of the divine with the human, while another scholar may see a symbol of patriarchy, and yet another may see it as an expression of repressed libido or class conflict. Which one of us is right, and in what way, and how do we tell? If Eliade had been more consistent and transparent in his presentation of his own philosophical positions, I think he could have answered these questions and made his methodology that much stronger. However, it is also probable that Eliade was engaging in a kind of *upaya*, or intentional ruse. By concealing his philosophical presuppositions, he may have made his work and the conclusions he derived from it more palatable to his colleagues.

In the end, I deemed my exegesis of the myth of *orí* according to Eliade’s creative hermeneutics to be a limited success, in that it provided an answer to the question of what the myth means without reducing the myth to this interpretation, closing the door on other interpretations, or cutting the myth off from the sacred. However, I found that this method limited the exploration of difference amongst the source material, and did not allow for a discussion of why I held my interpretation to be “more correct” than other valid interpretations, i.e., my own philosophical presuppositions. In one sense, Eliade’s methodology allowed me to be honest in that it permitted me to take the myth seriously and as applicable to my life, here and now; and it further allowed me to demonstrate the kind of intuitive, associative processes that are at work whenever I try to understand or explain something. However, I think it made me dishonest in that I was not able to present a sufficiently clear boundary between my interpretation of the myth and the myth itself.

I think it would have been better to take an approach more similar to a traditional commentary; that is, to present the reader with a fuller account of the Yorùbá sources before beginning the comparative process, as this would allow him or her to develop a more complete response to the particular myth before moving on to examine others. But this was not Eliade’s style or method. Moreover, his method makes it all too easy to read whatever one wants into any given religious phenomenon, and this is dangerous not only for the scholar seeking to accurately portray a religious phenomenon, but also for the scholar who, like Eliade, is looking for new ways of understanding the world. There is not much new about one’s old presuppositions wrapped in different mythological clothing.

This is perhaps Comparative Theology’s greatest advantage when compared to Eliade’s method of doing a comparative study or history of religion. By

emphasizing and even foregrounding his commitments, the comparative theologian is paradoxically more open to revising them and distinguishing them from those inherent in the object of study. Where Eliade strives for a kind of transcendent scholarly objectivity, Comparative Theology thrives on the transformation of a particular scholarly subject. This, I believe, is the fundamental difference that separates these otherwise strikingly similar methods.

Comparative Theology and the comparative study of religion (what Eliade called the History of Religions) have a great deal in common. As mentioned earlier, Eliade's method of research through transformative reading bears striking similarities to Clooney's description of the analogous process in Comparative Theology in the fourth chapter of *Deep Learning*; both seek to take texts, rites, and authors from different traditions seriously, on their own terms, and discover what they can say to us today; both view this task as having been necessitated by the explosion of diverse religious perspectives into public and academic spheres (compare the first pages of Eliade's *The Quest* to those of Clooney's *Deep Learning*); and both try to achieve these goals while holding themselves to the highest standards of academic rigor. This simultaneous commitment to deep religious or metaphysical insights and a critical evaluation of academic facts is perhaps the most important element shared by the Eliadean tradition of the Comparative Study of Religion and that of Comparative Theology. In fact, Eliade's two dimensions of "History" and "Religion," as defined above, are closely mirrored by Clooney's dimensions of "Comparative" and "Theology."¹²⁰

However, as noted above, Comparative Theology differs from the Comparative Study of Religion in that, in the former, the particular religious commitments of the scholar are the explicit starting point of investigation, whereas the bracketing of these commitments is one of the first things one must do in the latter. As Clooney writes,

Comparative theology must not be confused with comparative religion, since faith is a necessary and explicit factor in the former and not in the latter, where its influence might even be ruled out. But the fields need not be separated entirely, since comparative theology still has to measure up to expected disciplinary standards regarding the religions being compared.¹²¹

Transparency and vulnerability are key to this method, to the transformative encounter with ideas and texts from a different religious tradition. The explicit acknowledgement of one's convictions not only makes them transparent to the reader, but also to oneself; and in coming to terms with one's convictions as convictions, as "deeply held truths," the comparative

¹²⁰ Clooney, *Deep Learning*, 10-11.

¹²¹ Clooney, *Deep Learning*, 12.

theologian can become more aware of the fact that these convictions are not universally apparent or held, making him or her more open to different perspectives. Ironically, comparative theology's emphasis on the particular and the personal opens it up to a broader universe of traditions and perspectives. The vulnerability engendered by this openness is the key to allowing the study of different religious traditions to transform the comparative theologian's own understanding not only of the subject material, but of his or her own convictions.

While Eliade seems to have taken a similar approach to his material, this aspect of "vulnerability" and "transformation" was not explicit in his academic works, and seems markedly absent from the works of other scholars of Comparative Religion, such as Eliade's student J.Z. Smith. Eliade's evocation of the dictum "read the Koran as if it had been revealed only for your case" reveals the important, although often invisible, role that this kind of reading plays in his methodology. Comparative theology takes up this existential concern in particularly productive ways, and by explicitly focusing on this method of engaging with religious objects of study, provides a flexible framework in which both methodology and epistemology underlying the process of comparison can be explicitly justified and simultaneously transformed by the work itself.

One of the greatest weaknesses of Eliade's method lies in the fact that he does not explicitly define his underlying epistemology and ontology, leaving him open to critiques of his seemingly "magical" method of intuiting meaning from hierophanies, and accusations of trying to pass off his own beliefs as those of archaic man. The methodology of Comparative Theology allows scholars of multiple religious traditions, to first of all name and claim their own positions, however complicated they may be, vis-à-vis the material on question and lift the curtain separating the reader from the scholar's epistemology and personal perspective. This second transparency allows the scholar to explain, defend, and perhaps even revise the intuitive processes that are so often an integral part of this kind of work. I believe Eliade's Platonic ontology and epistemology is what allowed him to make the intuitive leaps from particular hierophanies to universal "modalities of the sacred," but I believe part of the reason he never got around to writing an explicit exposition of his method was that the academic climate of his time was becoming hostile to seemingly "mystical" ideas such as the Platonic recollection he espoused.

This fact is even truer today, and although Clooney does not explicitly outline a particular epistemology or metaphysics underlying the process of doing comparative theology, his method allows individual scholars to do so, and for the experience of encountering different epistemologies and ontologies to change one's own. This double transparency, of commitments and of their relation to one's methodology, can be an effective antidote to the problems of

“puppeteering,” wherein scholars use their objects of study as a thin disguises for their own views, and of the reduction of a religious tradition or phenomenon to a scholar’s limited grasp of it.

Clooney’s account strikes me as simply a more honest description of what goes on when I read and write papers. In employing Eliade’s method, I hid my own commitments from the reader, and my relationships with the various texts I read, both of which I believe were key in allowing me to gain the insights and intuitions which connected Greek, Akan, and Yoruba myths to one another and to more contemporary philosophical concerns.

If I were to have conducted this methodological exercise according to the methods outlined by Clooney, I could have described how delving into the source material from the Greek and Islamic traditions (which have shaped me as much, if not more than the Yoruba traditions of my forefathers), particularly certain passages which didn’t make it into the article, radically changed the way I understood the myths of orí, and conversely, how studying the myths of orí profoundly changed the way I understood aspects of the Greek and Islamic traditions. Perhaps most telling, however, was the way in which this project created a new crystallization of my understanding of fate and free will, an issue that has troubled me since childhood.

But comparative theology, in its current forms, has a particularly Christian coloring, and the expositions of its approach seem disproportionately influenced by Christian and Hindu traditions. The language of vulnerability and emphasis on personal experience strikes me as particularly Christian and Catholic, however, this need not be a problem. To Clooney’s credit, he has left accounts of the methodology of Comparative Theology open enough to be taken up and modified by scholars from different religious traditions. It will be interesting to see if field is flexible enough to accommodate different (i.e. Islamic, African, and other “indigenous”) traditions of studying multiple religions which may result in markedly different approaches. The main point is, in Clooney’s words, “No one needs to put aside faith and its hope when working as a scholar, although we do need to be able to learn vulnerably without letting even deeply held truths become an obstacle to learning.”¹²²

Oliver Sacks once compared Dr. P, his patient with visual agnosia, to a similar case, “But the saddest difference between them was that Zazetsky as Luria said, ‘fought to regain his lost faculties with the indomitable tenacity of the damned,’ whereas Dr. P. was not fighting, did not know what was lost, did not indeed know that anything was lost. But who was more tragic, or more damned—the man who knew it, or the man who did not?”¹²³ Despite the flaws of Eliade’s method, one similarly wonders whether he, in his quest for

¹²² Clooney, *Deep Learning*, 13.

¹²³ Sacks, *The Man*, 16.

transcendent religious meaning, or his post-modern critics, in their rejection of the very idea, are more lost.

On a final, personal note, although I found Eliade's creative hermeneutics to be powerful tools for comparative analysis of the kind I hope to conduct in the future, I worry that it can too easily turn the hierophanies, the windows onto the transcendent that it studies, into mirrors, reflecting the prior-held beliefs of the scholar. Thus, if I were to be completely honest, my main methodological inspiration comes not from the 20th century study of religion, nor from the predominantly Christian tradition of Comparative Theology, but rather from the 12th-13th century Andalusian Muslim mystic Ibn al-^cArabī, who wrote,

In general most men have, perforce, an individual concept of their Lord, which they ascribe to Him and in which they seek Him. So long as the Reality is presented to them according to it they recognize Him and affirm Him, whereas if presented in any other form, they deny Him, flee from Him, and treat Him improperly, while at the same time imagining that they are acting toward Him fittingly. One who believes, believes only in a deity he has created in himself, since a deity in "beliefs" is a construction. They see only themselves and their own constructions within themselves.... So beware lest you restrict yourself to a particular tenet, for you would forfeit the true knowledge of what is [the Reality]. Therefore, be completely and utterly receptive to all doctrinal forms, for God, Most High, is too All-embracing and Great to be confined within one creed or another.¹²⁴

Or as he said more poetically,

My heart can take on any form:
A meadow for gazelles,
A monastery for monks,
A temple for idols
The Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,
The tables of the Torah,
The scrolls of the Quran.
My Religion is Love;
Whichever way its caravan turns,
That is my religion and my faith

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¹²⁴ Ibn Al-^cArabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (trans. R.W.J Austin Classics of Western Spirituality Series), New edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 137.

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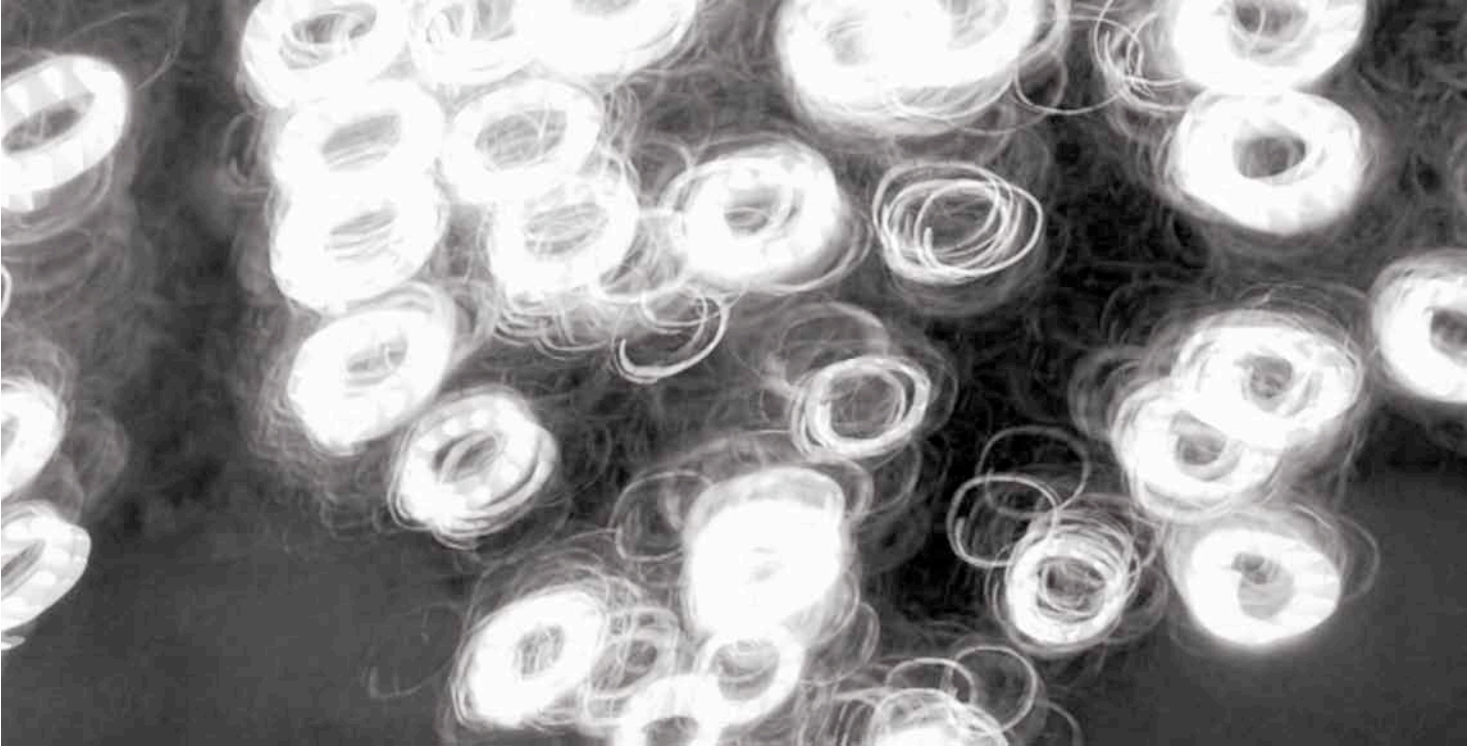
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Introduction

David Tracy's *Analogical Imagination* provides a theoretical basis for interreligious dialogue as an imperative for theological work. Tracy, however, has written relatively little on the burgeoning field of comparative theology outside of his 1987 essay "Comparative Theology" which appeared in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Stated plainly, Tracy is not a comparative theologian. Instead, his interest in pluralism, coupled with an emphasis on hermeneutics characterized by the interplay between the analogical and dialectical imaginations, has led to substantial contributions to the field of interreligious dialogue. Although his voice within the field of comparative theology has largely remained at the level of a whisper, comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney has recognized his influence on the field. This paper seeks to highlight the aspects of Tracy's thought that may shed further light on the importance and practice of comparative theology, particularly as Clooney defines it.

This paper explores the relevance, for the comparative theological enterprise, of three central themes found within Tracy's thought. After introducing Tracy and Clooney's respective approaches to comparative theology, I will proceed to outline these three themes from Tracy's *Analogical Imagination*. I will first consider Tracy's insistence on "naming the present" (namely, the reality of religious pluralism in contemporary society), and will argue that such a "naming" makes the undertaking of comparative theology

The Present Situation and the Comparative Imperative: Parallels in the Theological Responses to Religious Pluralism of David Tracy and Francis X. Clooney

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an imperative. I will then look at Tracy's understanding of the *classic*, and consider how such an understanding might inform comparative theology, a discipline which is grounded in textual reading, interpretation, and comparison. Finally, I will consider Tracy's discussion of the three publics, and the church in particular as the primary public to which comparative theology, a systematic, constructive theology, is addressed. Considering these three themes in Tracy's work may shed further light on the comparative theological enterprise. Furthermore, such an undertaking may elucidate similarities between Tracy's notion of interreligious dialogue and Clooney's understanding of comparative theology.

Tracy, Clooney, and Comparative Theology

In an article included in the 1987 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*,¹ Tracy offers a comprehensive definition and analysis of comparative theology as he understands it. He begins by mentioning that the term "has been used in a variety of ways" as included within the field of comparative religion, the "science of religion" and also within the history of religions. Tracy suggests that typically comparative theology, in contrast to comparative religion or the secular study of history of religions, "refers to a more strictly theological enterprise...which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more compared on theological grounds."²

Tracy draws on his understanding of the pluralism of the present as an explanation for the imperative of comparative theological work. He suggests that all contemporary theology is comparative theology in how "on strictly theological grounds, the fact of religious pluralism should enter all theological assessment and self-analysis in any tradition at the very beginning of its task."³ Furthermore, Tracy avers that any theology that gives either positive or negative significance to the fact of religious diversity in some sense functions as a comparative theology.⁴

Tracy generally understands comparative theology to be "any explicitly intellectual interpretation of a religious tradition that affords a central place to the fact of religious pluralism in the tradition's self-interpretation."⁵ In this sense, we might correctly understand it more broadly as simply a theological response to religious pluralism. In addition, and complementary to it being a theological discipline, Tracy further suggests that it is a hermeneutical one

¹ The article was also republished in the 2005 edition.

² David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition, ed. Lindsay Jones, (Detroit: McMillan Reference USA, 2005), Vol. 13, 9126.

³ David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," 9126.

⁴ *ibid.*, 9126.

⁵ *ibid.*, 9126.

which critically engages the religious questions of contemporary pluralism and a particular religious tradition or traditions within the pluralistic milieu. He emphasizes the necessity that all contemporary theology engage in two particular types of interpretation, among others: a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of retrieval, two models he also presents in the *Analogical Imagination*.⁶

Tracy's understanding of comparative theology is grounded in his understanding of theology in general as a hermeneutical discipline that continuously interprets a given tradition within a particular situation.⁷ Tracy suggests that comparative theology is a distinct discipline precisely in its theologically grounded insistence that religious pluralism must seriously be reckoned with. Tracy concludes and summarizes comparative theology as "an academic discipline that establishes mutually critical correlations between the claims to meaningfulness and truth in the interpretations of a religiously pluralistic situation and the claims to meaningfulness and truth in new interpretations of a religious tradition."⁸ Such an understanding, we will see, is complementary to, though perhaps not fully expressive of, comparative theology as Francis X. Clooney envisions it.

Tracy's Encyclopedia entry was an early contemporary effort to describe the relatively new (or at least recently renovated) field of comparative theology. Francis X. Clooney, in *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, cites Tracy as an influential contributor to the field. Noting Tracy's emphasis on either the "comparative" or the "theological" aspect of the discipline, Clooney suggests a third aspect. He asserts that comparative theology can be understood as a constructive theology by itself. Constructive theology, then, must not always arise apart from comparison, but rather it can actually arise *from* comparison, insofar as such comparison is firmly rooted in a particular tradition and entails the deep study of one or more other tradition(s).⁹

Clooney emphasizes the commitment to deep and serious study across religious borders, not merely theological insights gleaned from the fact of religious pluralism in contemporary society. Clooney states:

This comparative learning does not simply nuance already familiar themes or repeat methods already settled prior to the comparative practice, and it does not remain simply a matter of observing another religious tradition from a distance. It is rather a theology deeply changed by its serious engagement in the particularities of more

⁶ *ibid.*, 9131.

⁷ David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," 9132.

⁸ *ibid.*, 9133.

⁹ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 43.

than one religious and theological tradition; it occurs only after comparison, in a complex learning that cannot be left behind once the comparative work is done.¹⁰

Clooney concludes that Tracy is correct in his assessment of comparative theology. However, Clooney emphasizes that comparative theology is also more than Tracy indicates it to be. Clooney refers to the discipline as “Tracy-plus” given its emphasis on a deeper learning of the particularities of another tradition to the point that both the theology and the theologian may potentially be transformed.¹¹

To clarify Clooney’s approach, he explicitly defines comparative theology as a discipline that is both

Comparative and theological beginning to end [and] marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.¹²

Furthermore, it is important to note certain distinctions Clooney makes in his description of comparative theology that are slightly more nuanced than Tracy’s description of the field. Clooney is careful to distinguish comparative theology from the similar but related fields of comparative religion (which he groups with history of religions and sociology of religion), theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, and other related sub-disciplines. Tracy, on the other hand, while taking pains to distinguish comparative theology from comparative religion (although he does not draw quite as sharp of a contrast as does Clooney), maintains a fairly broad definition that might arguably encompass theology of religions.¹³ Clooney, however, suggests that in addition to comparative theology, theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, and dialogical/interreligious theology are all fields that take seriously religious pluralism from a theological standpoint. Clooney emphasizes his approach to comparative theology as a distinct and concentrated way of engaging in the comparative theology that Tracy presents.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 43.

¹² *ibid.*, 10.

¹³ Clooney defines theology of religions as “a theological discipline that discerns and evaluates the religious significance of other religious traditions in accord with the truths and goals defining one’s own religion. It may be greatly detailed with respect to the nuances of the home tradition, but most often remains broadly general regarding the traditions that are being talked about” (*Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 10). He distinguishes theology of religions from comparative theological emphasis on deep learning of other traditions in their own particularities.

Although Tracy's definition is broad enough to include other comparative fields that Clooney prefers to keep distinct from his comparative theology, the building blocks of Tracy's comparative theology, which are articulated in detail in *The Analogical Imagination*, are particularly well-suited to inform and complement Clooney's understanding of the field.¹⁴ Clooney's comparative theology embraces three of the major themes Tracy describes in the *Analogical Imagination*: it is a response to the contemporary situation of religious pluralism; it is a practice particularly concerned with classic religious texts; and it is a constructive, systematic theology that addresses the three publics, but primarily the public of the church.

Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, and Foundations of Comparative Theology

David Tracy, as an American Roman Catholic priest and theologian, has written widely on the reality of religious pluralism in our increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Of his ten published books, half contain variations of the terms "pluralism" or "inter-religious dialogue" in their titles. Central to his scholarship is a transcendental Thomism that attempts to make sense of Thomas Aquinas in the wake of Kant. His major influences include Paul Ricœur, Jacques Derrida, Hans Georg Gadamer, and process theologian Schubert Ogden. The focus of his work has been on theological method, pluralism, and an attempt at building bridges between postmodern human experiences and human experiences relayed in classic texts, especially those of theology and philosophy.

Tracy's *Analogical Imagination* takes a step forward from his evaluation of the Christian theological pluralism on which he focuses in *Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology*, to include (though touched on briefly in *Blessed Rage for Order*) critical insights on the contemporary "situation" of religious pluralism, namely, the reality of the existence of other religions in addition to Christianity. While still not completely immersing himself in the questions of religious pluralism, which he addresses at length in his subsequent works on inter-religious dialogue, Tracy develops a solid theoretical foundation from which arises his inchoate arguments for the imperative of taking religious diversity, and the close study of "the other," seriously. It is from this foundation, grounded in his understanding of the role of theology in the three public spheres, the importance of classic texts, and the hermeneutical interplay of the analogical and dialectical imagination, that we may trace his later contributions to the fields of comparative theology and inter-religious dialogue.

¹⁴ I would argue, even more so and distinct from the ways it might inform the other related comparative fields.

In *The Analogical Imagination* Tracy first addresses the role of the three publics, then discusses the *classic* (a particular term Tracy uses that will hereafter not be italicized), and finally, toward the end of the book, considers the contemporary situation of religious pluralism. Here I will deal with these topics in reverse order. I maintain that it is easiest to understand the imperative of comparative theology using Tracy's model(s) first by acknowledging the contemporary situation of religious pluralism, next by considering the practical and scholarly way of engaging that situation (namely, by reading classic texts inter-religiously) as advocated by Clooney's approach to comparative theology, and finally by considering to whom the work of comparative theology is primarily addressed (the question of the three publics). Such an approach, I believe, presents the contributions of Tracy in a similar progression to how comparative theological work itself develops.¹⁵

Tracy's Pluralism

In the opening sentence of the eighth chapter of the *Analogical Imagination* entitled "The Situation: The Emergence of the Uncanny," Tracy reminds us that "[e]very theology lives in its own situation."¹⁶ Tracy draws on Paul Tillich as a further reminder that "the interpretation of the situation is...one of two major tasks for the theologian."¹⁷ Tracy continues, "an interpretation of the Christ event in dialectical correlation to an interpretation of the situation remains, as we have seen, the primary task of every theologian."¹⁸ Here, we might note the hermeneutical emphasis of Tracy's description of the task of the theologian. Such a task is one of interpretation of both the Christ event and the theologian's contemporary situation.

¹⁵ However, it would be incorrect to assume that comparative theology (as well as Tracy's presentation of these concepts in *The Analogical Imagination*) is conducted in such a linear fashion without any overlap or crosspollination among these three categories. Certainly the comparative theologian may consider the audience to whom her work is addressed at the same time that she engages a classic text or ponders the reality of religious pluralism. However, the basic outline of this ordering is in some ways unavoidable, even in practice. Before engaging in the practice of interreligious reading, an individual must first be aware of the reality of religious pluralism and the importance of conducting scholarship across religious borders. Furthermore, an actual work of comparative theology must be produced before one can be sure of the public (or publics) to which it is addressed and before that public may receive and respond to it.

¹⁶ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 339.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 340.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 340.

Tracy goes on to introduce his own general understanding of the contemporary situation as follows:

A distinguishing mark of the contemporary situation is the conflictual pluralism existing on what worthwhile fundamental questions are now to be asked. A distinct dilemma of our time seems to be a sensed inability to ask those questions at all, to be able to watch and listen amidst a Babel of voices for any saving word, any gift of hope, any worthwhile question. Theologians, as intellectuals, live culturally in a post-Christian and postmodern intellectual situation.¹⁹

Tracy points to the reality of religious pluralism as a positive challenge to previous conceptions of the theological enterprise. He does not view such pluralism negatively, despite his admission that it is indeed “conflictual.” Rather, the reality of religious pluralism forces theologians to identify and formulate new fundamental questions that contribute to new and evolving understandings of what theology is and means.

Tracy expands upon “the contemporary situation” in a later collection of essays entitled *On Naming the Present*. In his opening essay, which shares the title of the collection, he sums up the postmodern predicament in his examination of the current age “that cannot name itself.”²⁰ He points to three distinct “namings” of the present situation that are in conflict with one another:

For some, we are still in the age of modernity and the triumph of the bourgeois subject. For others we are in a time of the leveling of all traditions and await the return of the repressed tradition and communal subject. For yet others, we are in a postmodern moment where the death of the subject is now upon us as the last receding wave of the death of God.²¹

Much of the contemporary theological enterprise is concerned with balancing or refuting these particular “namings.” Tracy, however, calls us to take a step back from even these. Later, Tracy points to the reality of religious pluralism as “a new ecumenism” in which engaging other religious traditions is vital for genuine Christian self-understanding.²² It is through consideration of the particularities of these “other” religious traditions that we might best proceed, for according to Tracy, “the new ecumenism agrees with the heart of all the classic religious journeys: the universe is to be found by embracing the particular.”²³ It is through this embrace of the particular

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 342.

²⁰ David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 3.

²¹ *ibid.*, 3.

²² David Tracy, *On Naming the Present*, 136.

²³ *ibid.*, 137.

that Tracy's understanding of the present situation is closely allied with comparative theology.

Tracy's "Classic"

As I will introduce shortly, Tracy understands theology to be primarily a public practice, one that interprets a theological tradition for the wider society, the academy, and the church. Tracy points to the classics as texts, events, or persons that express an excess of meaning. These classics, for Tracy, resist definitive and exhaustive interpretation and are constantly held in balance between historicity and normativity. Tracy suggests "when the text is a classic, I am also recognizing that its 'excess of meaning' both demands constant interpretation and bears a certain kind of timelessness—namely the timelessness of a classic expression radically rooted in its own historical time and calling to my own historicity."²⁴

Tracy regards careful consideration of classics as a means through which the pluralism of the contemporary situation may be translated and elucidated for the three publics. Tracy insists that classics, taking the form of texts, images, persons, and symbols, exist in every culture and that they stand as a normative element in cultural experience.²⁵ Furthermore, it is in relation to the classic texts of our respective cultures that we recognize the disclosure of a reality akin to "truth."²⁶ These classics, however, are constantly being appropriated anew and reinterpreted in light of the present situation. And they can and should have a multiplicity of interpretations. Tracy goes so far as to say "if, even once, a person has experienced a text, a gesture, an image, an event, a person with a force of recognition: 'This is important! This does make and will demand a difference.'"²⁷ Our continuous interactions with classics spark ever new and ongoing interpretations, the slightest of which still contains significant value, both for the interpreter and for the classic itself.

In addition to the reality of religious pluralism, Tracy points to the "pluralism within each tradition" to indicate the existence of a plurality among and even within texts as well as a plurality of readers. Tracy's emphasis on the importance of the interpretation of classic texts places hermeneutics as the linchpin for theological understanding. It is via the hermeneutical enterprise that we may best navigate the plurality of pluralisms to which Tracy points. Indeed, it may be the only way.

²⁴ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 102.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 108.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 108.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 115-116.

Tracy's Three Publics

Tracy understands theology to be primarily an engagement of public discourse. In an attempt to demonstrate the social reality of the theologian and the public status of theology, Tracy draws on his understanding of the fact of religious pluralism in contemporary society to propose the importance of recognizing a plurality of publics, three in particular, to which theology is addressed. These three publics are the wider society, the academy, and the church. Tracy asserts that in every theological work, one of these three publics will be the primary addressee.

Tracy prefers the term "society" to the term "culture" for the designation of his first public because "'society' is a word coined by social scientists as the broadest term available to encompass three realms: the technoeconomic realm, the realm of the polity and the realm of culture."²⁸ In light of these three realms and the inherent complexity of society, Tracy insists "any member of the society (including the theologian) needs to reflect explicitly on that complexity."²⁹ All theology, but theology addressed to this public in particular, should incite such reflection.

Tracy affirms that theology should be recognized as an academic discipline by both secular and non-secular institutions alike, and thereby continue to explicitly address the public of the academy. Given the nature of theology as a discipline engaged in claims of both "meaning" and "truth" (as distinct from religious studies which confines its interests to "meaning"), Tracy still believes that the secular university is an appropriate venue for theology so long as theologians are able to "render those claims explicit by rendering disciplinary criteria as explicit as possible."³⁰ Hence Tracy's second public, the academy.

According to Tracy, the theologian is also responsible to a third public, the church. He sees all Christian theology as implicitly church theology. Tracy understands the public of the church to be a "community of moral and religious discourse which the theologian addresses."³¹ As a community in which one participates voluntarily and to which one is explicitly committed, the church, both a greater Christian community and likely also a particular denomination, is the ostensible public of every theology:

the theologian, like all others in a pluralist and denominational society, is involved, consciously or unconsciously, in an ongoing process of reflection upon one's

²⁸ *ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁰ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 19.

³¹ *ibid.*, 21.

voluntary commitment and loyalty to the Christian church and, ordinarily, to some particular church tradition.³²

The process of such reflection through which theology is mediated is always addressed, at least in part, to the church.

Clooney's Comparative Theology vis-à-vis Tracy

Clooney's Pluralism

Audible reverberations of Tracy's musings on religious pluralism in *The Analogical Imagination* (regardless of whether or not the influence can be traced to Tracy or merely to the situation itself) may be heard in the opening lines of Clooney's *Comparative Theology*:

We live in a world where religious diversity is increasingly affecting and changing everything around us, and ourselves as well. No religious community is exempt from the pressures of diversity, or incapable of profiting from drawing on this new religious template. No community, wherever it is and however it is configured, will casually abandon its traditional commitments and practices in the face of religious diversity. If we are trying to make sense of our situation amidst diversity and likewise keep our faith, some version of comparative theological reflection is required.³³

We find that Tracy and Clooney take the "present situation" (a phrase that shows up in the works of both) of religious pluralism with great seriousness. Clooney, like Tracy, acknowledges the potential challenges inherent in navigating a pluralistic society, particularly while maintaining one's own religious commitments. Clooney recognizes the possibility and potential for the celebration of religious diversity, however he is also aware of the challenges such diversity presents for those with particular religious commitments. In highlighting these challenges he mentions how

[i]ndividual religious traditions are under internal and external stress as they are challenged to engage an array of religious others. Some find themselves under siege, threatened by a bewildering range of religious possibilities; some withdraw and demonize their others; some, perhaps too accommodating, begin to forget their identities. Some of us are relatively untouched by the phenomenon, but none of us avoids changing inside and out.³⁴

In light of the variety of these responses, and the unavoidability of our being affected by the phenomenon of religious diversity, Clooney highlights the

³² *ibid.*, 22.

³³ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 3

³⁴ *ibid.*, 3.

imperative of learning to learn from our religious others in intentional and constructive ways.

In undertaking the navigation of a pluralistic society, both Tracy and Clooney call for a theological response. Clooney emphasizes comparative theology, as he envisions it, as an adequate response to religious diversity. He believes that comparative theology is a particularly helpful tool for taking the present situation of religious diversity and religious commitment seriously.³⁵ He emphasizes both the increasing diversity around us as well as the impact of such diversity within us, and the fact that we are all personally affected by the religious choices we must make in response to the present situation. Clooney suggests keeping two distinct but complementary points in mind when pondering the contemporary predicament of religious diversity:

Because diversity is an objective feature of the world around us, we need to keep looking outward, learning to be as intellectually engaged as possible in studying it in the small and manageable ways that are possible for us. Because diversity also touches upon our faith experience and affects our identities as religious people in our own traditions, it is changing us from the inside out. We need therefore to attend with special care and a fresh eye to the well-being of our faith in our community, and to the quest to understand it. This spiritual and intellectual response to diversity, with its outward and inward dimensions, is the comparative theological venture.³⁶

As Clooney proceeds to detail the particularities of such a venture he points to close and careful reading as a probable vehicle for crossing religious borders.

Clooney's Emphasis on Classic Texts

Tracy's emphasis on continual interpretation of classic texts in light of the contemporary situation is not unlike Francis Clooney's emphasis on textual analysis and comparison as the primary practice of comparative theology. Taking a similar stance as Tracy, Clooney concedes that, of texts and of religious traditions in general, "we cannot ever say all that needs to be said."³⁷ Furthermore, noting the ever increasing and widespread access to classic theological texts of many traditions, Clooney points to how easy it is for us to read. Furthermore, he insists it is increasingly difficult to justify not reading outside of one's own tradition.³⁸

³⁵ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 3.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁷ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 6.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 5.

Though open to the use of other media for comparative theological exploration, Clooney suggests the reading of texts is the best approach. Clooney states:

In my view, the foremost prospect for a fruitful comparative theology is the reading of texts, preferably scriptural and theological texts that have endured over centuries and millennia [these would be classics in Tracy's estimation], and that have guided communities in their understandings of God, self, and other.³⁹

Clooney's emphasis on texts demands that reading be "patient and persistent, careful and committed, privileging insights strictly indebted to the reading."⁴⁰ Such reading requires in-depth attention to primary sources, but also includes careful consideration of commentaries that allow us to read with others. Clooney sees reading as a spiritual practice that has the potential to change us deeply. Religious reading "complexifies and deepens how we imagine and see God."⁴¹ Furthermore, "we are what we read, and if we read in complex ways we become persons with complex religious identities."⁴² Surely it is only by developing such complex identities that we may be able to fully and most effectively face the reality of a complex, pluralistic world.

The Public(s) of Clooney's Comparative Theology

According to Clooney "comparative theology needs to remain in living connection with the tradition and faith experience of particular communities, which must be convinced that a comparativist's work is actually theological."⁴³ He emphasizes the importance of using "tradition-specific theological language" in comparative work in order to theologize in a way that our respective religious communities can understand.⁴⁴

Clooney's emphasis on the importance that comparative theology be grounded in a particular faith tradition speaks to his understanding of the Church as the primary public, at least for the Catholic Christian comparativist. He sees comparative theology as ideally combining the exploration of another tradition with firm rootedness in one's own tradition. Furthermore, while the comparative theologian is responsible for choosing which traditions and texts to study and compare, it is ultimately one's religious community that judges the value of such work. In Clooney's words:

I would like to think, for example, that I write a Catholic comparative theology and do the work of a Catholic theologian, regardless of how deeply I am engaged in the

³⁹ *ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 60.

⁴¹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 147.

⁴² *ibid.*, 147.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 114.

study of Hinduism. But I cannot decide on my own, or just with my friends, that I am actually a successful Catholic theologian. It is something the Church has to think about and decide, in the complex ways the Church does such things. Other communities will have other ways of deciding if the comparative theologian is to be welcomed home or not[.]”⁴⁵

If the comparative theologian is to understand her work as principally theological, but also as demonstrative to her home community of the necessity of learning from religious others, it is to her own religious community that her work must primarily be addressed. Thus we may understand the church as institution and as greater Christian community, or its equivalent for comparative theologians from other traditions, as the primary public for comparative theology.

Tracy, Clooney, and the Negotiation of a Contemporary Comparative Theology

This study of how the work of David Tracy informs and speaks to the field of comparative theology as Francis X. Clooney envisions it might be regarded as a comparative project in itself. Considering Tracy’s conceptions of pluralism, classic texts, and the three publics in relation to Clooney’s thoughts on comparative theology allows us to appreciate more fully a powerful theological approach to the complexity of religious pluralism. In focusing on such similarities and complementarities between Tracy and Clooney, we might also wonder about some of the differences and about what is to be gained from looking at these two thinkers together.

Both Tracy and Clooney implore us to take the reality of religious pluralism seriously. As Catholic theologians deeply concerned with the fact of religious pluralism, both understand the imperative of learning about religious others. Tracy even states that all contemporary theology, in some sense, is comparative theology. Both understand “pluralism” to be a complex term that describes multiple realities. Tracy emphasizes an intra-Christian pluralism that is implicit, in addition to the multiplicity of ways of practicing one’s faith, in the three primary subfields within theology: practical, fundamental, and systematic. He further uses the term pluralism to describe the infinite possibilities of interpreting religious classics. Furthermore, classic texts employ a plurality of interpreters as well as a plurality of interpretations.

Clooney, like Tracy, discusses the imperative of engaging the pluralism of the contemporary situation, or the “diversity around us.” He further points to the powerful way that engaging the diversity around us through comparative

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 157-158.

reading has the potential to change us internally, creating a “diversity within us.” Finally, Clooney also understands that with textual reading, we can never say all that needs to be said. This too is suggestive, like Tracy, of the infinite plurality of interpretations of texts that, though never conclusive, if studied closely and with care, may guide comparative endeavors.

In response to the reality of religious pluralism, both Tracy and Clooney emphasize encountering classics, and the reading of classic texts in particular, as the avenue down which the comparative theological enterprise, and all theology for that matter, is primarily bound. Yet both offer nuanced perspectives with regard to how we might read, and that reading, though central, may not be the only approach. Tracy’s hermeneutics may serve as a complementary enterprise for the deep reading across religious borders that Clooney advocates. Tracy suggests that hermeneutics might best be understood as akin to authentic conversation. Drawing upon Gadamer’s reflections on the experienced reality of conversation, Tracy points to authentic conversation as the primary mode by which we may gain understanding of ourselves, others, and the present situation we all share. According to Tracy:

[r]eal conversation occurs only when the participants allow the question, the subject matter, to assume primacy. It occurs only when our usual fears about our own self-image die: whether that fear is expressed in either arrogance or scrupulosity matters little. That fear dies only because we are carried away, by the subject matter itself into the rare event or happening named “thinking” and “understanding.” For understanding *happens*; it *occurs* not as the pure result of personal achievement but in the back-and-forth movement of conversation itself.⁴⁶

Tracy concludes that genuine understanding occurs only in response to such authentic conversation.

Noting Tracy’s emphasis on “conversation” as implicit within his hermeneutical understanding, it is not surprising that much of his later work moves in the direction of the hermeneutics and theory of interreligious *dialogue*. Interestingly, however, Tracy’s discussion of “conversation” and “understanding” cited above seem particularly relevant to the practice of comparative theology (allowing subject matter to assume primacy, letting the subject matter speak for itself without the interference of our fears or self-image, and emphasizing conversation as subjective yet inter-subjective, shareable, and public). Although Clooney draws a sharp distinction between comparative theology and interreligious dialogue, Tracy’s conception of interreligious dialogue appears to be much broader than Clooney’s definition. Tracy’s understanding of “conversation” as central to his hermeneutics is foundational to his understanding of interreligious dialogue. In a similar way,

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 101.

we might understand “conversation” in this sense to be deeply complementary, and perhaps in a certain sense synonymous to Clooney’s comparative theology.

Although interreligious dialogue as Tracy understands it may be more closely related to comparative theology than Clooney suggests,⁴⁷ we might still understand Clooney’s comparative theology as “Tracy-plus” in certain ways. Clooney envisions comparative theology as a deep learning process in which the theologian seeks to understand another tradition or other traditions from within and become personally transformed through such study. This might ideally be facilitated through learning the languages and closely studying the religious texts of the other tradition(s) over an extended period of time. We might understand comparative theology as distinct from interreligious dialogue primarily in its emphasis on the deep study of religious others and a willingness to enter into the perspective of those others. In this sense, one might argue that comparative theology falls within the broader category of interreligious dialogue. It is a more particular and focused form of the interreligious dialogue that Tracy posits.

However, Tracy’s hermeneutics emphasizes the potential for transformation of both the reader and the text in much the same way that Clooney sees close and careful reading over a prolonged period of time as resulting in the transformation of both the theologian and the theology. To say that Tracy does not advocate close and careful study of other religions in their particularity may, in fact, be an unfair reading of Tracy. Indeed, Tracy’s emphasis on the concentration of the “subject matter” through conversation may not be dissimilar from the close, careful and prolonged reading Clooney advocates. In this sense, it may be argued that Tracy’s hermeneutical approach does not lack the emphasis on depth of study of the particularities of another tradition that Clooney emphasizes. Clooney’s comparative theology, rather, may in fact embody the fullest expression of Tracy’s interreligious dialogue that is grounded in a hermeneutics of conversation.

In the Epilogue of the *Analogical Imagination*, Tracy points to the imperative of conversations with religious others that are transformative and entail in-depth study of the particularities of other religions. He concedes, however, “where that conversation will lead no one yet knows.” A key difference between Tracy and Clooney is that Clooney seems to have a clearer sense of how that conversation can proceed and where it might lead. As exemplified in his own comparative theological work and his contributions to the

⁴⁷ Clooney discusses interreligious dialogue as actual live conversations and interactions between adherents to different traditions. We find in Tracy, however, an understanding of “conversation” that is much broader and includes interreligious reading, grounded in hermeneutics, with the goal of attaining “understanding” of particular texts and thereby other religious traditions in their particularities.

reformulation of the field of comparative theology, Clooney proposes a particular strategy for conversation. That strategy is comparative theology itself as he himself practices and defines it.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that both Tracy and Clooney seem to agree that the church is the primary public to which Catholic comparative theological work is addressed. I was somewhat hesitant to argue this parallel, for it is clear to me that comparative theology is very much also concerned with the academy, (and certainly also, though somewhat less explicitly, with the public of society). However, both Tracy and Clooney emphasize the importance of remaining grounded in one's faith commitments while seeking to venture across religious borders in response to the reality of religious pluralism. Furthermore, Clooney, in his concession that the final judgment of the value of comparative theology rests ultimately with the church, confirms the church, or its equivalent in other religions, as comparative theology's primary public.

Conclusions

Reading David Tracy in light of Francis X. Clooney's approach to comparative theology better enables us to understand the imperative of engaging the reality of religious pluralism, namely of learning deeply across religious borders from religious others. Both Tracy and Clooney cause us to rethink the goals and potential of theological work, particularly with regard to how we read classic religious texts. And both thinkers challenge us to reflect seriously on our primary religious commitments, the religious communities to which we belong and to which we must present our theological work.

In looking at Tracy and Clooney together, we find that their respective understandings of the imperative of confronting the questions of religious pluralism share complementary and interrelated foundations. Indeed, we find that through close consideration of these two theologians the fields of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology may not be as disparate as they often appear. Tracy's emphasis on interreligious dialogue calls for serious and prolonged "conversation" with the religious other. Clooney's comparative theology answers that call in his articulation of strategies, and his actual implementation of those strategies, by which we might proceed in our encounters with religiously other interlocutors. The reflections that Tracy and Clooney provoke, and the engagement with others that these reflections demand, speak to the increasing centrality of interreligious and comparative work for theology. Such reflections challenge both new and seasoned Catholic theologians, and non-Catholic theologians alike, to be "catholic" in a deeper, fuller sense of the term.

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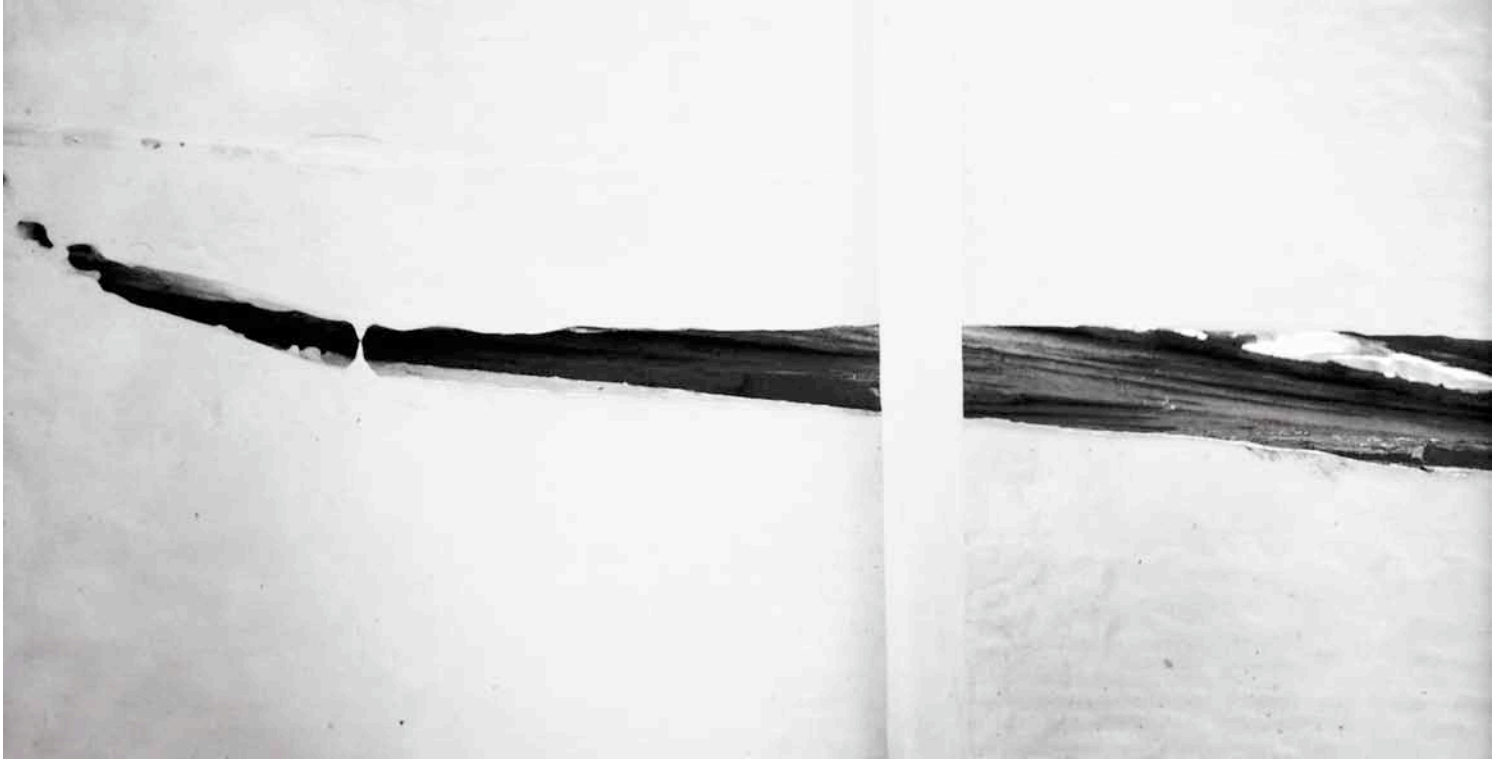
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Comparing Ḥusayn's Martyrdom and Jesus' Crucifixion: An Excursion on Finding Common Concern

BY HANS HARMAKAPUTRA

Introduction

Ḥusayn's martyrdom at Karbala is one of the main events in Shi'i history. This article describes the Shi'i view of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, and explores its theological meaning. Furthermore, it compares Ḥusayn's martyrdom within Shi'i Islam with the crucifixion of Jesus in Christianity to see if there are parallel themes that can be used for dialogue between the two religious traditions.

Such a comparison – setting up the event of Ḥusayn's martyrdom and Jesus' crucifixion together – is an uneasy task. The cross of Jesus has been a clash point between Christians and Muslims for centuries. Smail Balić says that many Muslims reject any Christian theology about the Christ and label it un-Islamic.¹ The reason for this rejection is that the Qur'an never mentioned Jesus as crucified.² Particularly, Shi'i theologians like al-Tusi (d. 1067) and al-Tabataba'i (d. 1982) affirm this view.³ However, many Christian theologians have tried to find a way to bridge this difference.⁴ One of the recent studies

¹ Smail Balić, "The Image of Jesus in Contemporary Islamic Theology," in *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam*, ed. Annemarie Schimmel and Abdoldjavad Falaturi (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 2-3.

² For this denial of Jesus' crucifixion, see A.H. Mathias Zahniser, *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 32-44.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-31.

on this topic is by Todd Lawson, who concluded that “the Qur’an itself is neutral on the subject of the historicity of the crucifixion and may indeed be read to affirm it.”⁵ Still, Jesus’ crucifixion is one of the most disputable themes in Christian-Muslim discourses and presents one of the widest gaps to be bridged. This is the first of difficulties for this topic.

The second difficulty is the fact that there is a plurality of groups with Christianity and Shi’ism that represent their own divergent views. To reach a deeper level of comparison, this study thus will use only one particular perspective from each. The Shi’i perspective provided is an elaboration of the meaning of Ḥusayn’s martyrdom from the Twelver Shi’i (*Ithnā’asharī*). Then, for the Christian view of the cross, the black theology perspective is the focus, especially from the work of James H. Cone.

The comparison between Ḥusayn and Jesus has been covered widely and, indeed, has become a valuable starting point of dialogue between the two traditions. Mahmoud Ayoub, a well-respected Shi’i scholar, compares these two central figures in one of his works.⁶ He stresses that the Twelver Shi’i’s account of Ḥusayn has many similarities with the Christian view of Jesus Christ. For example, both figures have a miraculous birth story and share similarities in their passion narratives.⁷ But Ayoub notes key differences between the two; he demonstrates how in Shi’i tradition Jesus is seen as part of Ḥusayn’s event, not as the center of his own, like in Christianity. In more recent studies, Khalid Sindawi also compares the Twelver Shi’i view on Ḥusayn and Jesus Christ in Christianity. He details how Jesus’ depiction in the New Testament has many similarities to the portrayal of Ḥusayn in the Twelver Shi’i tradition, such as “miraculous birth, superior moral qualities, supernatural abilities, ability to work miracles and to see the future, and self sacrifice and martyrdom.”⁸ In this work, Sindawi did better than Ayoub in arranging the similarities and differences, and has arranged them into a more systematic pattern. Whereas, Ayoub’s focus is more on the Twelver tradition of Ḥusayn.

The following analysis will compare the approaches of those two writers in two ways. Firstly, the scope with respect to the theology of Jesus Christ is narrowed to James Cone’s account. In contrast, Ayoub and Sindawi looked more at the New Testament where common Christian belief on Christ is rooted in redemptive power. By using a specific Christian theology, the perspective offered here arrives at different conclusions. Secondly, while

⁵ Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 143.

⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shiism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

⁷ Ibid., 71-72, 121, 195.

⁸ Khalid Sindawi, “Jesus and Husayn Ibn Ali Ibn Abu Talib: A Comparative Study,” *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 44 (2007): 50-65.

Ayoub's and Sindawi's works were concerned only with showing similarities and differences, this study goes a step further to find a common concern between Twelver Shi'ism and Christianity, one which can become common ground for mutual praxis. Finally, through this process of respectful comparison and commonality, on a personal level of belief, I am looking for what James L. Fredericks called "transformation" and "enrichment" of Christian faith, an integral part of my identity.⁹

The use of comparative theology to frame this article can solve the two problems mentioned above. The first difficulty is answered by comparing theologies, instead of historical accounts. Engaging the historical perspectives on these two events would only perpetuate the first difficulty. Putting the focus on the particularity of each faith affords an opportunity to engage each other in dialogue and praxis, and opens to finding common concerns as a starting point. Addressing the second difficulty, the particular theological lens used here permits expansive engagement between the two different traditions. It also open more encourages Christians to use a different lens in their own theology so they can see Twelver Shi'i – or other traditional Islamic – theology better rather than be stuck in one conclusion. From this author's perspective, very little effort was needed to compare Ḥusayn and Jesus within a comparative theology paradigm, using Jesus' account from the black theology point of view. This article is offered as an example to invite others to enrich comparisons between Ḥusayn and Jesus. Thus, we know that interfaith engagement can bear many positive possibilities for the transformation of all participants.

The Twelver Shi'i View of Ḥusayn's Martyrdom

Ḥusayn's martyrdom at Karbala is one of the most significant events to shape Shi'i identity, world-view, and piety. As part of commemorating the martyrdom, the followers of Shi'i celebrate the day of 'Ashura' on the tenth Muharram every year Hijra. This section explores Shi'i thoughts on that event. Firstly, the narratives of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, including the political and religious background behind it, are described. Next comes an explanation of the theology of Imam and Mahdi, which relates to the place of Ḥusayn in Shi'i thinking. Finally, this part details the theological meaning of Ḥusayn's martyrdom.

The Events at Karbala

Mahmoud Ayoub states that people cannot fully understand the meaning of Ḥusayn's martyrdom without first knowing the Shi'a perspective on the

⁹ James L. Fredericks, *Buddhist and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 97.

events directly after the death of the Prophet.¹⁰ For the Shi'a, the right leader and successor to the Prophet Muhammad was Ali Ibn Abi Talib, not Abu Bakr, nor 'Umar, nor 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan, all of whom were caliphs before Ali. Thus, to the Shia the day of Saqifah is a symbol of the beginning of the oppression, because it was then that Ali's right to the caliphate was usurped.¹¹ But at that time, Ali did not protest or rebel, for the sake of the unity of the Muslim community (*ummā*). Instead he waited in patience until the community appointed him the fourth caliph. The Shi'i always regarded him as the true leader and successor to Muhammad, who had chosen him at Ghadir Khumm.¹² Unfortunately, Ali's caliphate did not last long because of opposition, especially from Mu'awiyah, the governor of Syria and member of the Umayyad clan. Ali was a caliph for four years before he was assassinated and so became a martyr.

After the death of the first Imam, Ali' Ibn Abi Talib, Malawian had no challenger and was able to establish his reign freely. Hasan Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib, who was the second Imam, and his younger brother, Husayn Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the third Imam, were unable to challenge Malawian openly, so they chose to retreat from political life. Mu'awiyah's reign, from a Shi'i perspective, was certainly not ideal since he lacked authority from God, who had chosen the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). To strengthen his position and his dynasty, Malawian consistently tried to get rid of the Prophet's family. He oppressed them, along with their supporters (the Shia). Malawian killed Imam Hasan by poisoning him, and Husayn "had to endure these days [of Maria's reign] and to tolerate every kind of mental and spiritual agony and affliction from Maria and his aides – until in the middle of the year 60 A.H. Malawian died and his son Yazid took his place."¹³

Soon after Yazid became caliph, he had also perceived Imam Husayn as a threat. Yazid tried to obtain Husayn's allegiance, since Husayn was one of the main obstacles to his future reign.¹⁴ Knowing that Imam Husayn was living in Medina, Yazid wrote a letter to al-Walid Ibn 'Utbah, governor of Medina at the time, to ask the allegiance of the people of Medina, including Husayn Ibn

¹⁰ Ayoub, 93.

¹¹ The day of Saqifah was when the first caliph Abū Bakr was elected, and is also the same day of the Prophet's death. So from the Shi'i perspective, the right of Alī was taken over from him. To read more about this event, see chapter two of Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 7-25.

¹² Ghadīr Khumm is the place where the Prophet Muḥammad announced to the people that Alī had been chosen as his successor. He said, "For whomever I am the authority and guide Ali is also his guide and authority. Oh God! Be friendly with the friends of Ali and the enemy of his enemies. Whoever helps him, help him, and whoever leaves him, leave him." Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabatābāi, *Shiite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 179-180.

¹³ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴ Allegiance is a traditional practice in Arab society; it involves pledging loyalty to a respected leader. This allegiance binds them like an oath.

Ali, by force if necessary. Upon receiving the letter, Walid consulted with Marwan Ibn al-Ḥakam, who had suggested to Walid that he should kill Ḥusayn if Ḥusayn refused to give his allegiance. Then Walid called on Ḥusayn to ask for allegiance to Yazid.¹⁵ However, Ḥusayn declined Walid's suggestion, telling him that allegiance should be declared before people's eyes, not in a secret meeting. So the next morning, Ḥusayn took the opportunity to flee from Medina to Mecca. He happened to meet Marwan on the way, and the latter persuaded Ḥusayn to give his allegiance to Yazid so there would be no disunity within the Muslim community. Again, Ḥusayn rejected Yazid for his wickedness, which Ḥusayn thought would cause Islam to collapse.¹⁶

Thereafter, Ḥusayn and his family arrived in Mecca, which was a sanctuary at that time, as it is even until today. He stayed in Mecca for four months. During his stay there, many people from all over the Islamic world sent letters of their support to him. Many were tired of Maria's rule, and became more disappointed when Yazid became his successor. Those letters, mostly from Iraq, asked Ḥusayn to lead the inhabitants in a campaign against Yazid.¹⁷ At the same time, Yazid tried to kill Ḥusayn, sending assassins who blended in with the pilgrims, because it was the time for the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*). Realizing this, Ḥusayn shorten his pilgrimage ritual in order to prevent spilling blood in the holy city of Mecca. Before he left, he gave a short speech to the people at Mecca, stating that he would directly resist Yazid and be killed as a martyr. He also asked the Muslims to join him in the struggle to defend justice.¹⁸ After that, accompanied by his family and some companions, Ḥusayn journeyed to Kufa, where he had many supporters. It was said that his group consisted of only about fifty men who could bear weapons, and the rest were women and children.¹⁹

While Ḥusayn was still on his way to Kufa, he received news that the new governor of Kufa, 'Ubaydallah Ibn Ziyad, had killed Ḥusayn's representative there.²⁰ Ibn Ziyad also had surrounded the city of Kufa with an army of thousands to prevent Ḥusayn's party from reaching Kufa. When Ḥusayn learned of this situation, he insisted on continuing; he prepared to face his death, because there was no possibility of defeating such a large enemy force. Apparently, Imam Ḥusayn and his party arrived on the second day of Muharram in 680 C.E. at Karbala where they were surrounded by Yazid's army. According to Shi'i tradition, they were kept in that position for eight

¹⁵ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 95.

¹⁶ Ibid., 96-97.

¹⁷ Tābatābai, 197.

¹⁸ Ibid., 197-198.

¹⁹ L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Husayn b. Ali b. Abi Talib," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam volume III*, eds. B. Lewis, et. al. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 608.

²⁰ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 99-100.

days by a large army numbering thirty thousand soldiers.²¹ The army also prevented Ḥusayn's party from using the river, in order to force them to submit to Yazid.

At this time, Ḥusayn offered his companions the chance to leave his party and save their own lives, because it was clear that only death awaited them. After he reviewed his army two times by tests, Ḥusayn was accompanied only by fewer than ninety people: his companions, a few of the enemy soldiers who had switched allegiance to him during the war, and his family of children, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, and cousins.²² On the ninth day, the enemy gave Ḥusayn a chance to choose between "allegiance and war." He deferred the decision for one night in order to pray overnight. The next morning was the tenth day of Muharram and is celebrated as the day of 'Ashura': that day Imam Ḥusayn, accompanied by a very small group of people, fought the thousands of Yazid's army. On that day, Imam Ḥusayn was martyred, along with his companions, including all his family members.²³

The enemy took off the heads of the martyrs and did not bury their bodies. They also ransacked Husayn's tent, from which they kidnapped women and also seized all of the property as their bounty. In addition, they also stripped all the clothes from the corpses of the martyrs and left their naked bodies in the desert.²⁴ Only three male members of Ḥusayn's party even survived. First of these was Ḥusayn's twenty-two-year-old son, who had not joined the war because of serious illness; he was to be Ali Ibn Husayn, the fourth Imam. The second was Ali Ibn Husayn's own son, only four years old, who would be the fifth Imam later. The third was the son of Hasan Ibn Ali, Ḥusayn's brother, named Hasan Muthanna, who was wounded and fainted among the dead; he was almost killed but was helped by one of the generals.²⁵ After being taken as captives, Husayn's family passed through many towns before reaching Damascus. Thus, many people saw how the family of the Prophet were tortured by the Umayyad. Finally, Yazid's army took all the prisoners, the bounty, and the head of Imam Husayn to Ibn Ziyad, governor of Kufa, who desecrated the head of Ḥusayn and sent all these prisoners, along with Ḥusayn's head, to Yazid.²⁶ Yazid, according to some traditions, acted differently from Ibn Ziyad. He released all the prisoners and sent them back to Medina.²⁷ The tradition of this bitter event has been passed down by Zeynab, Husayn's sister and one of those among the captives.²⁸

²¹ Tābatābai, 198.

²² Ibid., 198-199.

²³ Ibid., 199.

²⁴ Ibid.; Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 118-120; Vaglieri, 611.

²⁵ Tābatābai, 199-200.

²⁶ Ibid., 200; Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 120.

²⁷ Vaglieri, 611-612.

²⁸ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 120.

Finally, the head of Ḥusayn was sent back to his family to be buried, even though the exact burial location remains in dispute. In present day Cairo there is a shrine to commemorate Ḥusayn, which is also said to be his tomb. But there are other traditions that hold Imam Husayn was buried in Medina, Kufa, or Karbala.²⁹ All these shrines have become important places of pilgrimage and ritual for the Shia ever since.

The Shi'i Doctrine of Imam and Mahdi

To understand fully the importance of Ḥusayn's martyrdom, we cannot separate this particular event from the Shi'i theology of Imam and Mahdi, in the Twelver Shi'i perspective. Ayoub states that what makes Husayn's martyrdom a special event is not only his status as a pious man, but, most importantly, his position as Imam. The Imamate status came to him as a divine determination through his lineage to the Prophet Muhammad.³⁰

The Imamate is a central concept in Shi'ism and also imparts to Shi'ism its uniqueness in comparison to Sunni Islam.³¹ Tabatābā'i says in this regard:

Imam or leader is the title given to a person who takes the lead in a community in a particular social movement or political ideology or scientific or religious form of thought....Shiism believes that since Islamic society is in dire need of guidance in each these three aspects, [i.e., Islamic government, Islamic sciences and injunctions, and guidance in the spiritual life] the person who occupies the function of giving that guidance and is the leader of the community....*must be appointed by God and the Prophet* [italics mine]. Naturally, the Prophet himself was also appointed by Divine Command.³²

According to Shi'i traditions, the Imam possesses pre-existence as light, which God created before the world. God then used the light as God's instrument for creation.³³ The Imam also is known for three necessary attributes: as the designated (*manṣūṣ*); as sinless or infallible (*ma'sūm*); and the best among people (*afḍal an-nās*).³⁴ The Imam holds authority from divine designation, via the choice of the previous Imam and not from election by the Muslims. The function of the Imam is to be a rightful guide for Muslims and to strengthen adherence to the Divine Law. Shi'i belief holds that God always put an Imam on earth, even before Muhammad's time, because the earth cannot exist without an Imam. That is the reason why the Imam also is

²⁹ Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 14-15; Vaglieri, 612.

³⁰ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 54.

³¹ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 177.

³² Tābatābā'i, 173.

³³ Momen, 148.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

called the Guide (*Hādī*) and Proof (*Ḥujja*) of God.³⁵ The first attribute of Divine designation requires, as a logical necessity, that God will always guide him and prevent him from committing error. Thus, it follows that his second attribute consists of infallibility and sinlessness. Furthermore, because he cannot err, the Imam is necessarily the best among people in the earth.³⁶

In addition to these three attributes, the Imam also has other important qualities, including knowledge and spiritual guidance (*Walāya*). Knowledge means both general and religious knowledge. Religious knowledge is further separated into external knowledge, like the Quran, hadith, and jurisprudence, as well as esoteric knowledge, which includes the capability to discern the allegorical meanings of the Quran and mystical knowledge. Moreover, the Imam acts as the spiritual guide who mediates between God and humankind.³⁷

In the Twelver Shi'ism perspective, there are twelve Imams. First of all is Ali Ibn Abi Talib, to whom the Prophet Muhammad granted his Divine authority upon God's commandment. Then Ali transferred the Imamate to Hasan, and from Hasan it passed to Ḥusayn. So the Imamate is seen as Divine authority, which can be transferred only from a previous Imam to the next Imam by God's providence. From the Twelver perspective, except Hasan and Ḥusayn, the rest of the Imams were chosen from the line of father to son. The twelfth Imam, whose name is al-Mahdi, plays a significant role. The Twelver Shia community believes that the Mahdi is still alive to this day, but exists in a state of occultation (*ghayba*). This process has occurred by God's providence; God appointed him as the Lord of the Age (*Ṣāhib az-Zamān*) who controls human affairs.³⁸ The Mahdi will return before the Final Day of Judgment, and lead the righteous people against the enemy whom he is destined to defeat.³⁹

Theological Meanings of Ḥusayn's Martyrdom

This section elaborates on the meaning of Ḥusayn's martyrdom from the Twelver Shi'i perspective. These meanings are intertwined but they are treated separately here.

Prevailing Justice

Some condemn Ḥusayn's martyrdom as foolish and illegitimate, since he revolted against the leader and destroyed the unity of the Muslim

³⁵ Ibid., 147.

³⁶ Ibid., 153-155.

³⁷ Momen, 155-157.

³⁸ Ibid., 165.

³⁹ Ibid., 166.

community.⁴⁰ But the Shi'i perspective is different. This view starts with Mu'awiya's decision to give the caliphate position to Yazid. That decision in turn ignited Husayn's uprising because the decision violated the Islamic tradition of collecting allegiance from the people, and hence reduced the Islamic government to the monarch's control through dynastic succession.⁴¹ In addition, Yazid was generally known for his lack of leadership qualities and for his wickedness. These are the main reasons that Husayn refused to pay allegiance to Yazid. Mu'awiya's reign had not been an ideal government, either, but Husayn did nothing because he was bound by a prior agreement with Mu'awiya.⁴² This restraint demonstrates Husayn's integrity. But, if he had supported Yazid, then Islam would have fallen prey to injustice. Many Muslims at that time felt as Husayn did, and he received many letters of support.

Unfortunately, Yazid was already in a position of power and wealth, and tried to secure his position by using money and violence. Husayn was left with two options: either he could pay allegiance to Yazid, or die. The first option would save his life, but would desecrate both his integrity and Islam as a community. Therefore, Husayn chose the second option: to fight until death. Choosing open revolt so that all Muslims could hear and see his concern for justice, he knew he would die in suffering and sorrow.⁴³ Shi'i theologians, and even some non-Shi'i, give credit to Husayn's struggle, because it was successful in opening the eyes of Muslims to the wickedness of Yazid and the Umayyad regime. Tabataba'i says Husayn's revolt did not fail: its success was only postponed, since ultimately the Umayyad regime fell anyway.⁴⁴ Moreover, Husayn's martyrdom is a strong symbol for Muslim to imitate, to fight injustice bravely.

The event also inspired within the Shi'i tradition the rise of lamentation poetry, which usually praises Imam Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala and thereby condemns the oppressors for their wickedness. The sorrow and suffering endured by the Holy Family of the Prophet because of the regime's wickedness is another important theme.⁴⁵ In many periods, this kind of poetry is seen as a political threat toward the government, because it reminds the Shi'i to prevail in justice and to fight an immoral government. Shams al-Din notes that the Umayyad and Abbasid governments have persecuted such poets, and as a result much poetry circulated in secret. He

⁴⁰ For example, Wellhausen judges that Husayn was motivated by political power. Vaglieri, 614.

⁴¹ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 94.

⁴² For example, Muawiyah seized the *fay* and gave it into the hands of the powerful and rich, and killed the best people and allowed the worst to live. Vaglieri, 608.

⁴³ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 103.

⁴⁴ Tabataba'i, 200.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, *The Rising of Al-Husayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1985), 84-85.

also stresses that these poets had a large impact on many political revolutions, such as the ones during the early Abbasid period.⁴⁶

Shi'i theology placed the struggle against injustice in the eschatological and messianic hope of the Mahdi. Realizing that justice cannot be fully gained in the worldly sense, they believe that true justice will come in the future, when the Mahdi returns before the Day of Judgment. The Mahdi will bring God's power to defeat all enemies who desecrated the world with their wickedness. In Shi'i thought, this concept cannot be separated from the event of Karbala, because the Mahdi will avenge Imam Husayn and all the other wronged martyrs. On that day, people must choose either to stand alongside the Mahdi or to oppose him.⁴⁷

Participation in the Redemptive Suffering of Husayn

Ayoub has called Husayn's martyrdom event one of redemptive suffering, because it transformed the evil of suffering experienced by the Shia through history into redemption.⁴⁸ In Shi'i piety, people are invited to participate with weeping, fasting, and the beating of chests in order to commemorate the suffering of Husayn and to gain redemption. Recitation of the aforementioned lamentation poetry above is also part of the commemoration of Husayn's martyrdom.⁴⁹ Husayn is the central subject, but also included are other stories of the sufferings of the House of the Prophet, with the assassinations of all Imams and Fatima's suffering; it is an accumulation that symbolizes the suffering of all the Shia oppressed across history. The event of Karbala is treated as the zenith of all suffering. That is the reason Husayn bears the title of "Prince of Martyrs" (*Sayyid al-Shuhadā*). Hence, the remembrance means nothing without *participation* in the suffering.⁵⁰

The commemoration and participation in redemptive suffering that exist in the Shi'i consciousness are then embodied in the Shi'i ritual of 'Ashura' and also in the pilgrimage to the tomb of martyrs (*ziyara*). Both rituals consist of acts of weeping and lamenting, which express their participation in the suffering of Husayn. The Shi'i celebrate 'Ashura' on 10 Muharram, which is the same day on which Husayn was martyred at Karbala. Shi'i people weep and beat their own bodies on that day, fast, and incorporate other ritual symbols. These all repeat the Karbala event. Those acts also assume a promise of reward, i.e., Paradise and forgiveness of sin.⁵¹ Moreover, the pilgrimage to the tomb of the martyrs, including the Imams and the House of

⁴⁶ Ibid., 86-88.

⁴⁷ For a deep exploration of the traditions of the Mahdi, see Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 216-229. See also, Shams al-Din, 107-113.

⁴⁸ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 15-16.

⁴⁹ Shams al-Din, 79-81.

⁵⁰ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 27.

⁵¹ Ibid., 142-143, 151, 159; Shams al-Din, 150-151.

the Prophet, is another important ritual for the Shia. It is better if they can perform the pilgrimage on the day of 'Ashura', but if they cannot make it, they can gather to weep together in their houses.⁵²

Those rituals have their roots in the events after Husayn's death, when his captive family was humiliated in procession through cities until they arrived at Damascus. Many people involved in the rituals envision the wickedness of Umayyad toward the House of the Prophet and consequently cry spontaneously.⁵³ This enactment celebrates the redemptive suffering of Husayn's martyrdom and the promise of God's action against injustice. Thus, these rituals have a great impact also on every political ruler who displays hostility towards the Shi'i. From the ruler's perspective, the rituals are embedded with dangerous political threats against their regime. Thus, some political authorities have prohibited the Shi'i from conducting the rituals. Shams al-Din states that, throughout Islamic history, there are two strategies a ruler has used to prevent the Shi'i from partaking in those rituals. First, they stop them by threatening them with punishment. Second, the rulers remove the object of pilgrimage (e.g., by destroying the tomb), as the Abbasid caliph, al-Mutawwakil, had done.⁵⁴

Cosmic Unity

According to Shi'i traditions, Husayn's martyrdom symbolizes cosmic unity with the past, present, and future, along with transformation of their suffering. Thus it brings together all history, as Ayoub concludes:

In a very direct and special way, Husayn is connected with the history of creation and of mankind. He is also linked to the divine plan of the universe and through his martyrdom the destiny of men is determined. Human history revolves around him: first as the *Imam* and father of the *imāms*, and secondly through the mission of the *Mahdi* who will avenge Husayn's blood and fulfill his mission.⁵⁵

Thus, Shi'i tradition relates the event of Karbala to the prophets. Not only had the Prophet Muhammad and his family known of the event, so did other prophets before him. It is said that Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Jesus all knew what would happen at Karbala and had visited the place.⁵⁶ For example, one tradition says that Jesus traveled to Karbala with his disciples and met a lion that had blocked their way. The lion then spoke clearly about the death of the descendant of Muhammad and asked Jesus to curse the murderer. After Jesus cursed Yazid (the latter name was revealed by the lion), he and his disciples

⁵² Shams al-Din, 150.

⁵³ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 152; Shams al-Din elaborates on this issue from a historical perspective. Ibid., 140-148.

⁵⁴ Shams al-Din, 41-43.

⁵⁵ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 27-36.

could pass through Karbala.⁵⁷ The lion here symbolizes a complete cosmic unity, since not only humans but also other creatures are participating in the cosmic drama of Husayn's martyrdom.

There are further traditions that connect Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala with other creatures. It is reported that soon after the event, birds stopped singing happy music and fasted for several days.⁵⁸ Some traditions recount that fishes and wild beasts wept for Husayn's death. Moreover, in addition to the suffering of humans and animals, *djinn* and angels were also affected by this event.⁵⁹ Another tradition mentions that even non-Muslims joined in weeping for Husayn. For example, there is the story of a Jewish man's daughter, who was blind and crippled. She met with a bird smeared with Husayn's blood, and after touching the blood, she was healed.⁶⁰ In this tradition, Husayn's suffering is a medium for healing.

Beyond the concurrent participation of creatures in Husayn's event, which symbolizes cosmic unity that is centered around Husayn's martyrdom, the future Mahdi is evoked as the one who will fulfill God's scheme for the world. The Mahdi will not only bring divine justice, but also complete God's salvation plan for all creatures and create cosmic unity. Ayoub concludes:

Thus the cycle [of God's plan] will be completed. We began with a pure and holy creation, a creation which has been confronted with a choice between judgment or salvation. History is the stage on which this choice is painfully and dramatically worked out. When the process is completed, creation will return to its original purity....All dominion will belong to God.⁶¹

To complete this part, these three meanings of Husayn's martyrdom have to be treated integrally, linking together God's divine plan for human history from the creation until the last day. Justice is a core element of Islam; by commemorating and participating in Husayn's martyrdom, which occurred in his battle against injustice, the Shi'i community becomes an integral part of God's plan.

The Black Theology Account of Jesus' Crucifixion

This section describes Jesus' crucifixion from the perspective of black theology with a focus on the work of one theologian, James H. Cone. He is an acknowledged prominent black theologian who discusses the black Christ and the importance of the cross. Cone is noted as the leading figure in black

⁵⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁹ Vaglieri, 613.

⁶⁰ Ayoub, *Redemptive*, 132.

⁶¹ Ibid., 229.

theology, both because of his influential and numerous publications, and also through his profound impact on the second generation of black theologians, including those who studied under him at Union Theological Seminary.⁶² He wrote the first book on black theology discourse, *Black Theology and Black Power*, in 1969 at the end of civil rights movement, which had influenced him very much.⁶³ Alistair Kee argued that before Cone there were people who brought black perspective to Christian faith, but none had received the recognition Cone garnered.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Cone's work was groundbreaking for the evolution of black theology, giving impetus to that particular theological movement. Julian Kunnie stressed that Cone's importance arose from the fact that he wrote over a very wide range of topics in addition to his use of social analysis.⁶⁵ Another significant contribution from Cone's earlier works was the realignment of African-American Christians back to the church, as previously many black Americans thought that the church was incompatible with black consciousness and black power. Cone's writing asserted that Jesus Christ is in absolute harmony with the black struggle for freedom.⁶⁶

The following is a brief description of Cone's view of Jesus and the cross. This summary of Cone's theological view of Jesus' crucifixion comes from his later book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, in which he formulated his account of the black Jesus.

Kelly Brown Douglas stresses that Cone's foundational understanding of black Christ encompasses the central symbol for black Christians, since Christ gives them strength for the struggle in their experience of oppression. In addition, black theology refuses to see Jesus only within a "high Christology," which focuses predominantly on his divinity. Rather, Jesus must be seen primarily as a historical figure, who was willing to fight against the oppression of his time, to the point that he was crucified for his resistance.⁶⁷ With these unique emphases in his theological framework of the black Christ, as his main concern Cone asks: "What does Jesus Christ mean for the oppressed blacks of the land?"⁶⁸ If Jesus is not on the side of oppressed people, then black people accordingly would not need Jesus. This vision

⁶² Edward Antonio, "Black Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 80.

⁶³ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 14; M. Shawn Copeland, "Race" in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 507.

⁶⁴ Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 45-46.

⁶⁵ Julian Kunnie, *Models of Black Theology: Issues in Class, Culture, and Gender* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 3.

⁶⁶ Hopkins, *Heart and Head*, 15.

⁶⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas, "Christologies: African American" in *The SCM Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, eds. Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: SCM Press, 2003), 43.

⁶⁸ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 111.

stands in contrast to Jesus has long been portrayed as a white Jesus who teaches meekness and love. Cone also observes that this white Jesus was at the same time used in order to legitimize the oppression of black people by whites – a theology to maintain the status quo. The black Christ is the real Jesus who takes sides with oppressed black people.⁶⁹

Cone shows through his historical critical point of view that Jesus was always on the side of the oppressed and the poor.⁷⁰ The kingdom of God that he taught is an embodiment of God's solidarity with the poor, and Jesus truly lives his life to make it real. In this account, Cone criticizes white theologians who often have interpreted the kingdom of God to be only a spiritual dimension, or restricted to the afterlife. This mainstream interpretation blurred the real message of Jesus and his compassion for the oppressed. So, in Cone's view, the Kingdom of God really means salvation not only in the hereafter, but in this life also: it is salvation for oppressed people to live as free men and women.⁷¹ The narratives of the Gospel demonstrate this goal, from his birth, baptism, ministry, through his death and into his resurrection.⁷² In this theme, Jesus' crucifixion cannot be separated from his resurrection, because "[in] his death [Jesus] is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility of freedom."⁷³ The crucifixion of Jesus symbolizes his stand with the oppressed and the poor, and his resurrection is proof that God has justified Jesus' struggle for justice and freedom. This whole theology shows how God in Christ must support black people who have been oppressed by whites, and so Christ stands beside them and not with the oppressor. Thus, Cone establishes a black Christ is black and that justifies that black people do not need the white Jesus but the real, black one.

Cone admits that his exclusive black Christ results in insensitivity to the problem of other oppressed groups, specifically women and ignores the problem of sexism. Thus, the exclusive concern for oppression of black people is too narrow. Additionally, this view does not confront the problems of the Third World, since it lacks a clear analysis of those economic and social issues. Moreover, it relies too much on the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth.⁷⁴ In sum, Cone gives too much emphasis to racism and neglects several important aspects.

However, Cone takes his thought further in an article published more recently, in which he discusses the relation of the cross and the lynching

⁶⁹ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 111-113.

⁷¹ Ibid., 124-128.

⁷² Ibid., 114-117.

⁷³ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁴ Ibid., xvii-xx.

tree.⁷⁵ In this article he still focuses on the black experience but also adds a wider perspective on the idea of oppression. Thus, he reinforces the cross as the central symbol for Christianity. Cone argues that the full meaning of the cross of Christ cannot be fully understood without the lynching tree.⁷⁶ The lynching tree is a historical reality and symbol of the suffering of black people that comes from their lived past, when many of them were lynched on trees just because of their skin color. The comparison provides a powerful symbol of the crucifixion of black people.⁷⁷ In the present day United States, where this form of violence and discrimination has disappeared, the lynching tree has been gradually forgotten, especially because it bears a horrible memory. But, as Cone argues, it should not be forgotten because in reality even the crucifixion of Jesus often was interpreted as superficial pietism. By that model, God had forgiven the sins of Christians without realizing the core of the Gospel message.⁷⁸ "The Gospel," says Cone, "is God's message of liberation in an unredeemed and tortured world." It contains both the mystery of salvation in the hereafter and the liberation of any people suffering from any kind of oppression right now.⁷⁹ It is the lynching tree that discerns the true meaning of Jesus' crucifixion: Christ who was crucified is a sign that God is on the side of oppressed people, whoever and wherever they are, both black and not black.

Identifying himself with the oppressed, the black Christ asks all Christians to fight against oppression so that the cross becomes a source of power for every liberation movement. This interpretative approach to the cross cannot be achieved without remembering the lynching tree, the bitter experience of black people. As Cone concludes:

[T]he civil rights movement did not end lynching. It struck a mighty blow to the most obvious brutalities.... But whenever society treats a people as if they have no rights or dignity or worth, as the government did to blacks during the Katrina storm, they are being lynched covertly. Whenever people are denied jobs, health care, housing, and the basic necessities of life, they are being lynched. There are a lot of ways to lynch a people. Whenever a people cry out to be recognized as human beings and society ignores them, they are being lynched....When I heard and read about the physical and mental abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, I thought about lynching. The Roman Empire that killed Jesus at Calvary was similar to the American empire that lynched blacks in the United States and also created the atrocities in Iraq.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ James H. Cone, "Strange Fruits: The Cross and the Lynching Tree," in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35.1 (2007).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

It is clear from this passage that Cone has widened his focus point to account for all the victims of oppression and for all struggles for liberation as a part of the black theology of the cross. Wherever oppression still occurs in the world, in any form, it is imperative for Christians who understand the meaning of the cross to intervene in order to end it. All suffering, in the end, should remind us both of the black bodies hanging on the lynching tree and of the cross of Jesus.

Comparing Husayn's Martyrdom and Jesus' Crucifixion

With an account of Husayn's martyrdom and of Jesus' crucifixion from their respective traditions, it is time to compare their particular theological meanings. An entrance point for further dialogues between Shia and Christians on shared concerns may appear through reference to the dominant themes. Also, it is important to note that a better understanding of another faith could more fully enrich and transform Christian self-understanding.

To begin, Husayn and Jesus are similar in their pursuit of justice and liberation from all kinds of oppression. Husayn's mission was to reveal the Umayyad wickedness to the Muslim community, while Jesus stood with the poor and on the margins of society. Sharing this common concern for justice and liberation, each used a different method. Husayn utilized an open uprising that was certain to end in his own death, whereas Jesus used passive resistance or non-violence, which also led to his own death. Ayoub stresses that if Husayn had not resisted the Umayyad regime, he would not have been able to spread his message of justice. When Husayn refused to give his allegiance, the only option left was death. He preferred to die in an open war rather than being killed in secret: the latter option would not have empowered the Muslim community. On the other side, if Jesus had used revolt as the medium for his struggle, his death would have meant nothing, because he would have been not any different from earlier messianic leaders who had led an uprising against the Roman government at that time. However, since Jesus took the passive resistance method as God's plan, then God revived him on the third day. Thus, afterward his purpose of installing justice and liberation was strongly heard.

Of equal importance, remembrance and participation are the second parallel themes shared by these two events. Shi'i thought, including its piety, puts great emphasis on the commemoration of and participation in Husayn's suffering. These are embodied in many ways, such as the 'Ashura' ritual, the pilgrimage to the tomb, the recitation of lamentation poetry, weeping, fasting, and the beating of one's own body. In a deeper sense, the event of Karbala has strongly influenced the Shi'i consciousness in their life and history in order to continue the fight against any form of wickedness, including the kind

that affects them in bitter times of persecution and discrimination. For instance, from a personal anecdote, when a Shia mosque in Indonesia was burnt down on 29 December 2011, one of my Shia friends on Facebook related the event to Husayn's suffering and, accordingly, the perpetrator of this fire was referred to as one of Yazid's minion.⁸¹

Jesus' crucifixion also plays an important role in black theology's imagination with its connection to the black experience of oppression and discrimination. In his more recent articles, Cone emphasizes even further the importance of commemorating Jesus' cross by placing it alongside the lynching tree that represents black people's suffering. He clearly tries to convince some womanist theologians who have rejected the cross of Jesus because it has been used as a tool to justify women's oppression.⁸² Indeed, the cross's identification with suffering has been extended as the means to justify all kinds of oppression. From this viewpoint, it functions as a symbol for the oppressor, rather than one of liberation. On the other hand, the lynching tree has become a symbol of black suffering, even until today, and tends to be forgotten because it contains a horrible experience for black people. Here, Cone insists that if the cross or the lynching tree are seen apart from each other, then their true joint meaning will be reduced, and even corrupted. The cross then is a symbol of oppression, and the lynching tree as a result carries no impact for Christians, except as a bad omen and traumatic memory. Cone concluded that the true meaning of the cross is revealed only when it is placed in juxtaposition with the lynching tree, and thereby it transforms the lynching tree: Jesus' crucifixion means opposition to every kind of injustice and oppression. Furthermore, Cone interprets the cross as an imperative for Christians to fight every form of oppression and not only what has been happening to black people. By participating in opposition toward any kind of injustice in the world, the Christians subsequently are also commemorating and participating in God's plan of liberation, through the core example of Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. This idea is a departure that differs from Cone's earlier stance of the cross alone. Now he puts the cross and lynching tree together. If Cone required some years to combine those two, Twelver Shi'i already were combining the event of Husayn martyrdom with their experience of suffering and oppression, so that it became not a mere symbol, but a strong motivation to fight the reality of suffering and injustice.

There is an element in the Twelver Shi'i account of Husayn's martyrdom not found in James Cone's portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion. As elaborated in the previous section, the third theological meaning of Husayn's martyrdom is cosmic unity. In this state, all creatures, including animals and people of other faiths, participated variously in the event, and continue together until

⁸¹ "Indonesia: Mosque and Houses burnt down by Muslims," The Muslim News, accessed January 1, 2012, <http://muslimnews.co.uk/news/news.php?article=21402>

⁸² Cone, "Strange Fruit," 51 fn. 4.

its culmination with the coming of the Mahdi. In my opinion, Cone's theology of Jesus' crucifixion has not explored this element. Therefore, the black Jesus is more of an anthropocentric model. He is Jesus Christ as liberator, and the liberated subjects are also human, a category which Cone has expanded in scope to include not only black but all oppressed people in any form imaginable. Despite his developing ideas about Jesus' crucifixion and the lynching tree that enabled a broader vision of liberation, nowadays our world faces wider-than-human injustice. Now, when all of creation is in ecological danger, such a crisis demands theological answers. In this sense, Cone's view on Jesus' crucifixion as liberation could also be elaborated in a way that addresses our ecological challenge. This Christian perspective can learn from the cosmic reach of Husayn's martyrdom in a way that does include ecological justice.

Conclusion

We have seen how each respective religious tradition treats the events of Husayn's martyrdom and Jesus' crucifixion. Further, a comparison of the theology of the two events reveals both similarities and dissimilarities. This brief study has focused on only similarities between the two, as its purpose is to find common concern as an entrance point for further dialogue and praxis. From my Christian vantage-point, Husayn's martyrdom and his struggle to fight the injustice are strongly reminiscent of Jesus, who ended his life at the cross because of his decision to embrace poor people marginalized in society. Both events show that symbols are an important part of religious belief: they can move people deeply to face their reality and problems. Otherwise, symbols would be empty and without correlation to human life. If that were the case, these events would add up to empty symbols if the people did only the ritual part without combining it with the actual practice of fighting unjust circumstances and standing alongside the oppressed. Remembering these events and using their similarities to share the effort of spreading justice in the world could be the meeting point between Muslims, particularly the Shia, and Christians. Moreover, both traditions could explore the issue of ecology, which already is a shared problem all over the world. While the theology of Husayn's martyrdom has already been mentioned more emphasis is need here. As a result, Cone's theology of Jesus' crucifixion would benefit from this challenge. Dialogue can build from a discussion of similarities and dissimilarities between the two religions, but working together requires common concerns. Without any doubt, Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala and the cross of Jesus can play a substantial part in building a mutual consciousness of justice and liberation between Muslims and Christians, that includes the urgent ecological challenge and other crises of justice that confront our shared world.

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Understanding Happiness as Vision of God: A Comparative Reading of Aquinas and Al-Ghazzālī

BY CARLO PEREZ

Introduction

Throughout the centuries, philosophers and theologians have been exploring the ultimate end of the human person – happiness. What does happiness consist in? Aristotle discussed his notion of *eudaimonia* in his *Nicomachean Ethics* as “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue [or excellence]”¹ and identified contemplation as the activity in which it consists. St. Thomas Aquinas likewise identified man’s ultimate end as happiness, and explains that this happiness consists in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence. In one of his articles in the *Summa Theologica*,² he discussed that there can only be one final end, not only for one person, but for all human beings. This brings into mind the question of whether thinkers of other traditions agree. Thus, this comparative study plunges into the Islamic tradition and focuses on the writings of one of the most revered Muslim theologians, Abu Hāmed Mohammad ibn Mohammad al-Ghazzālī. In his work, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, al-Ghazzālī explained that “the Vision of Allah is the summit of human felicity.” The aim of this paper is to look at al-Ghazzālī’s understanding of the Vision of God in such a way that it will serve

¹ Cf. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by H. Rackham, (New York: Putnam, 1926), 1097b22–1098a20.

² Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, online ed. (2008), I- II, q.1, a.7, accessed November 26, 2011, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>. Cited henceforth as *ST*.

as a catalyst for Catholics to better understand what St. Thomas Aquinas is teaching us about the Beatific Vision.

The Life of al-Ghazzālī

Imam al-Ghazzālī is probably the most influential scholar, philosopher, theologian, legal expert, religious reformer and mystic in the history of Islam. He was born in Tus in Khurasan, near the modern Iranian city of Meshhed, in 1058 CE.³ In writing about the life of al-Ghazzālī, Hamid Reza Alavi, a professor at the Shahid Bahonar University in Kerman, Iran, categorizes al-Ghazzālī's life into four stages.⁴ The first stage in Alavi's article is al-Ghazzālī's life as a student, from his birth up to the age of 28. His native language was Persian, and he studied Arabic from an early age. His father had died when he was young, but before his father died al-Ghazzālī was taught an enduring interest in Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. After his father's death he studied in *madrassa* schools in Tus, Jurjan and Nishapur under a number of famous scholars, among them the famous Imam al-Juwayni. Al-Ghazzālī developed his expertise in *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *kalām* (scholastic theology). Also during this period he had already begun his career in teaching and writing. His great teacher, Imam al-Juwayni, died in 1085 CE.

At this second stage of his life, al-Ghazzālī became more involved in the political and intellectual disputes of the age. Alavi narrated that al-Ghazzālī became engaged in debates between religion and philosophy (or between Islamic and Greek thought, respectively), in which he sided with religion, and between the Sunnites and the Shi'ites, in which he sided with the orthodox 'Abbasid caliphate against the Isma'ilis and those who believed in the infallibility of the Imam (the spiritual leader of the Shi'ites). He went to the camp (al-mu'askar) of the Seljuk minister Nizam al-Mulk (the founder of the Nizamiyya schools) and stayed there for six years as a court jurist. Then al-Ghazzālī was appointed as a professor in the Nizamiyya *madrassa* in Baghdad, which was probably the most prestigious institution of higher education in the eastern Islamic world. There he wrote some of his most famous works, including *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, or *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which permanently undermined the influence of Greek philosophical thinking in the Muslim world.

Alavi identified the third stage of the life of Imam al-Ghazzālī at the moment when he had a dramatic experience as if having a spiritual crisis and a nervous breakdown. Al-Ghazzālī was unable to speak, and so he could not

³ Hamid Reza Alavi, "Al-Ghazali on moral education," *Journal of Moral Education* 36, no. 3 (September 2007): 310.

⁴ *ibid.*, 310-311.

teach. He also became convinced that the pursuit of fame and material success was meaningless. He left his teaching post in Baghdad, renounced wealth, fame and influence and committed himself much more fully to the path of Sufism. Al-Ghazzālī travelled between Damascus, Jerusalem, Hebron, Medina and Mecca for two years before returning to Baghdad and later to his hometown of Tus where he lived in solitude as a poor Sufi. He spent much time in meditation and other spiritual exercises, and came to believe that anything he did that was not done for the sake of God was a hindrance to his spiritual progress. It was during this period that he completed his magnum opus, *Ihyā' ʿulūm al-dīn*, or *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, which is arguably the most important Islamic text after the *Qur'ān* and the *hadīth*, the traditions and sayings of the life of the Prophet and his companions.

Alavi concludes with the final stage of al-Ghazzālī's life, from 1104 CE when he went back to teach again at the Nizamiyya madrasa in Nishapur, at the request of the Seljuk rulers and on to his death. As he went back to his teaching career, he continued to live as a Sufi and to promote the need for spiritual development and the cultivation of the inner self. Shortly before his death he wrote *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, or *The Deliverance from Error*, a spiritual autobiography that is arranged thematically rather than chronologically. He died in his hometown in 1111 CE.

The Alchemy of Happiness

Another one of his notable works is the *Kīmīya' al-Sa'āda*, or *The Alchemy of Happiness*. The book was originally written by al-Ghazzālī in Persian, around the year 1105 CE, towards the end of his life. It is a compendium of some chapters of his main work *Ihyā' ʿulūm al-dīn*. If one consults the corresponding chapters in *The Revival*, one would find that many points and arguments presented in *The Alchemy* are also discussed in *The Revival* in detail. In the Introduction of *The Alchemy*, al-Ghazzālī presents a structure by which we can understand his epistemology:

Now the treasures of Allah, in which this alchemy is to be sought, are the hearts of the prophets, and he who seeks it elsewhere will be disappointed and bankrupt on the day of judgment when he hears the word, "We have lifted the veil from off thee, and thy sight today is keen." Allah has sent on earth a hundred and twenty-four thousand prophets to teach men the prescription of this alchemy, and how to purify their hearts from baser qualities in the crucible of abstinence. This alchemy may be briefly described as turning away from the world to Allah, and its constituents are four: the knowledge of self, the knowledge of Allah, the knowledge of this world as it really is, the knowledge of the next world as it really is.⁵

⁵ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claud Field. (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1954), accessed November 27, 2011, <http://www.sunnah.org/tasawwuf/alchemy.htm>.

Kīmīya', or alchemy, is an applied and mystical science that has been studied for centuries, and it is an important religious discipline for many religious philosophers. Due to its spiritual dimensions, *kīmīya'* is considered the noblest of all occult sciences. Al-Ghazzālī was himself a believer that everything on Earth is a manifestation of God's spirit, thus everything belongs to *kīmīya'*. In its essence, *kīmīya'* represents a complete conception of the universe and relations between earthly beings and the cosmos.

Al-Ghazzālī distinguishes between "the world" and "the hereafter." Death is the element that stands in between these two states; "the world" comprising that which is before one's death and "the hereafter" referring to that which comes after one's death.⁶ The purpose of the world is "provisioning for the hereafter." Knowledge of the world is the key to knowledge of the hereafter. Al-Ghazzālī writes:

Know that no one recognizes the real nature of the Hereafter until he first recognizes the true nature of death. He does not know the true nature of death until he knows the true nature of life. He does not recognize the true nature of life until he recognizes the true nature of the spirit; and the gnosis of the true nature of the spirit is the gnosis of the true nature of his own self....⁷

One needs to utilize one's senses and come to a knowledge of creation, God's handiwork. God's work is the manifestation of God and his goodness, and understanding knowledge of the world builds up understanding of knowledge of the hereafter.

While in the world, we learn to see the good things that God has provided, but we also watch out against the evils that tend to turn us away from Him. We can come to knowledge of the next world by understanding this world as it really is. Al-Ghazzālī explains:

As long as a person possesses these senses and they spy out things for him, he is said to be 'in the world.' When he says farewell to these senses, while he endures as do these things which are the essence of his attributes, then it is said that 'he has gone to the Hereafter.' As a consequence, this is the reason for his being in the world.⁸

⁶ Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam, trans. *Al-Ghazzali On Knowing This World and the Hereafter* (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, Inc., 2002), 13.

⁷ *ibid.*, 26.

⁸ "As long as a person possesses these senses and they spy out things for him, he is said to be 'in the world.' When he says farewell to these senses, while he endures as do these things which are the essence of his attributes, then it is said that 'he has gone to the Hereafter.' As a consequence, this is the reason for his being in the world." *Ibid.*, 14.

God created the world with a certain order and manifested this in his law and revelation, especially in the Qur'ān. The human being needs to be sensitive to this manifestation of God, and use his or her senses to perceive this manifestation while on this world, in order that he or she may come to recognize it in the hereafter.

Sa'āda, or happiness is a central concept in Islamic philosophy used to describe the highest aim of human striving. *Sa'āda* is considered to be part of the "ultimate happiness," namely, that of the hereafter. According to al-Ghazzālī, it is only when a human being has liberated his or her soul completely from its corporal existence that he or she arrives at an active intellect. Al-Ghazzālī believed that by exercising his God-given capacity for reason, the human person must be drawn to the spiritual alchemy that transforms the soul from worldliness to complete devotion to God. This alone, he believed could produce ultimate happiness. Al-Ghazzālī's teachings were to help man to live a life in accordance with the sacred law, and by doing so gain a deeper understanding of its meaning on the day of Judgment.

In the eighth chapter of the *Alchemy*, he wrote that human perfection comes when the love of God conquers the heart of the person. "Human perfection resides in this: that the love of Allah should conquer a man's heart and possess it wholly, and even if it does not possess it wholly it should predominate in the heart over the love of all other things."⁹ It is in this that the human person will achieve the happiness he seeks. The human being has been created by God with an inclination to seek him, ultimately finding fulfillment in him. This world will prepare him to encounter God without "the veil."¹⁰ Al-Ghazzālī understands this in that the level of happiness in God in the next life is proportional to the love one has for God in this life. "If he had no delight in Allah before, he will not delight in Him then, and if his joy in Allah was but slight before it will be but slight then. In brief, our future happiness will be in strict proportion to the degree in which we have loved Allah here."¹¹ Thus, it is important to grow in the love of God while we are living, so that when the day comes that we pass to the next life, the knowledge and love that we have for God will be transformed into the best vision of God that brings us delight and true happiness.

⁹ Human perfection resides in this: that the love of Allah should conquer a man's heart and possess it wholly, and even if it does not possess it wholly it should predominate in the heart over the love of all other things." Claud Field, trans. *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1954), chapter 8. Cited henceforth as *Alchemy*.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid*.

¹¹ "If he had no delight in Allah before, he will not delight in Him then, and if his joy in Allah was but slight before it will be but slight then. In brief, our future happiness will be in strict proportion to the degree in which we have loved Allah here." (*ibid*).

Knowledge of God

Anyone who will look into the matter will see that happiness is necessarily linked with the knowledge of Allah. Each faculty of ours delights in that for which it was created: lust delights in accomplishing desire, anger in taking vengeance, the eye in seeing beautiful objects, and the ear in hearing harmonious sounds. The highest function of the soul of man is the perception of truth; in this accordingly it finds its special delight. Even in trifling matters, such as learning chess, this holds good, and the higher the subject matter of the knowledge obtained the greater the delight. A man would be pleased at being admitted into the confidence of a prime minister, but how much more if the king makes an intimate of him and discloses state secrets to him! An astronomer who, by his knowledge, can map the stars and describe their courses, derives more pleasure from his knowledge than the chess player from his. Seeing, then, that nothing is higher than Allah, how great must be the delight which springs from the true knowledge of Him!¹²

First and foremost, we must understand that al-Ghazzālī recognizes the unknowability of God. David Burrell sees this unknowing as that which distinguishes an authentic search for God from a mere lusting after idols.¹³ The question then comes up: How do we come to knowledge of God, if He is unknowable? Burrell suggests that one characteristic way of responding to this divinity is to propose a scheme which will allow it to be accessible.¹⁴ Such a scheme will be instrumental in giving us access to achieve even a minimal level of understanding. Al-Ghazzālī leads us to the starting point: knowledge of self. This self-awareness consists of two parts: knowledge of the body and knowledge of the soul. He wrote:

An important part of our knowledge of Allah arises from the study and contemplation of our own bodies, which reveal to us the power, wisdom, and love of the Creator.... But, when all is said, the knowledge of the soul plays a more important part in leading to the knowledge of Allah than the knowledge of our body and the functions. The body may be compared to a steed and the soul to its rider; the body was created for the soul, the soul for the body. If a man knows not his own soul, which is the nearest thing to him, what is the use of his claiming to know others?¹⁵

We can come to the knowledge of God by attaining knowledge of self, from understanding one's body and more so through understanding one's soul. God created the human person in his likeness and so we can get an idea of God's attributes by knowing about the human person He has created:

¹² *Alchemy*, Chapter 1

¹³ David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 20.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid*, 21.

¹⁵ *Alchemy*, Chapter 1

Not only are man's attributes a reflection of Allah's attributes, but the mode of existence of man's soul affords some insight into Allah's mode of existence. That is to say, both Allah and the soul are invisible, indivisible, unconfined by space and time, and outside the categories of quantity and quality; nor can the ideas of shape, color, or size attach to them. People find it hard to form a conception of such realities as are devoid of quality and quantity, etc., but a similar difficulty attaches to the conception of our everyday feelings, such as anger, pain, pleasure, or love. They are thought-concepts, and cannot be cognized by the senses; whereas quality, quantity, etc., are sense-concepts. Just as the ear cannot take cognizance of color, nor the eye of sound, so, in conceiving of the ultimate realities, Allah and the soul, we find ourselves in a region in which sense-concepts can bear no part. So much, however, we can see, that, as Allah is Ruler of the universe, and, being Himself beyond space and time, quantity and quality, governs things that are so conditioned, so that soul rules the body and its members, being itself invisible, indivisible, and unlocated in any special part. For how can the indivisible be located in that which is divisible? From all this we see how true is the saying of the Prophet, "Allah created man in His own likeness."¹⁶

God created human beings to be like himself to allow us to have an idea of who He is. "No one can understand a king but a king; therefore Allah has made each of us a king in miniature, so to speak, over a kingdom which is an infinitely reduced copy of His own."¹⁷ Through this, we come to a certain level of understanding, as if a hint of God's attribute. We have to keep in mind, however, that this idea that we pick up is a very limited idea.

To present an example, let us try to understand the greatness of God. Proclaiming that "God is great" means that His greatness far exceeds all powers of human understanding and comprehension.¹⁸ God's greatness immeasurably transcends our cognitive faculties, and that we can only form a very dim and imperfect idea of it. Al-Ghazzālī uses the illustration of a child asking someone to explain to him the pleasure that exists in having sovereignty. One may address the question by saying that it is like the pleasure one feels when one is playing bat and ball. This would make sense to the child; although in reality having sovereignty and playing have nothing in common except that they both come under the category of pleasure.¹⁹

According to al-Ghazzālī, the delight of knowledge still falls short of the delight of vision. This world is a stage or market-place passed by pilgrims on their way to the next. Man acquires here on earth, by the use of his bodily senses, some knowledge of the works of God, and, through them, of God Himself, the sight of whom will constitute his future beatitude.²⁰

¹⁶ *Alchemy*, Chapter 2

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. *Alchemy*, Chapter 2

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, Chapter 3

The Vision of God

In Chapter 8 of *The Alchemy of Happiness*, al-Ghazzālī wrote specifically about what constitutes happiness. According to him, the Vision of God is the summit of human felicity and all Muslims profess to believe that. Al-Ghazzālī explained that first and foremost, every single one of a human person's faculties has its appropriate function that it delights to fulfill. This holds good of them all, from the lowest bodily appetite to the highest form of intellectual apprehension. But even a comparatively low form of mental exertion affords greater pleasure than the satisfaction of bodily appetites. To illustrate this, al-Ghazzālī gave the example of a man who is absorbed in a game of chess. Because he is engaged in his game, he will not come to his meal, though repeatedly called. Secondly, al-Ghazzālī pointed out that the higher the subject-matter of our knowledge, the greater is our delight in it; for example, it is more delightful to know the secrets of a king than the secrets of a vizier.

Seeing, then, that Allah is the highest possible object of knowledge, the knowledge of Him must afford more delight than any other. He who knows Allah, even in this world, dwells, as it were, in a paradise, "the breadth of which is as the breadth of the Heavens and the Earth," a paradise the fruits of which no envy can prevent him plucking, and the extent of which is not narrowed by the multitude of those who occupy it.²¹

As we have mentioned earlier, for Imam al-Ghazzālī, the delight of knowledge still falls short of the delight of vision. He explained that just as our pleasure in thinking of those we love is much less than the pleasure we have by actually seeing them.

Our imprisonment in bodies of clay and water, and entanglement in the things of sense constitute a veil which hides the Vision of Allah from us, although it does not prevent our attaining to some knowledge of Him. For this reason Allah said to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Thou shalt not see Me."²²

Al-Ghazzālī used that image of a veil as an analogy of how our physical body acts as something that prevents us from actually seeing what is there to see. Another image that he used is that of a mirror. Through this image he explained why the Vision of God will be different for each and every person.

The truth of the matter is this that, just as the seed of man becomes a man, and a buried date-stone becomes a palm-tree, so the knowledge of Allah acquired on Earth will in the Next World change into the Vision of Allah, and he who has never learnt the knowledge will never have the Vision. This Vision will not be shared alike by all who know, but their discernment of it will vary exactly as their knowledge. Allah is

²¹ *Alchemy*, Chapter 8

²² *ibid.*

one, but He will be seen in many different ways, just as one object is reflected in different ways by different mirrors, some showing it straight, and some distorted, some clearly and some dimly. A mirror may be so crooked as to make even a beautiful form appear misshapen, and a man may carry into the next world a heart so dark and distorted that the sight which will be a source of peace and joy to others will be to him a source of misery. He, in whose heart the love of Allah has prevailed over all else, will derive more joy from this vision than he in whose heart it has not so prevailed; just as in the case of two men with equally powerful eye sight, gazing on a beautiful face, he who already loves the possessor of that face will rejoice in beholding it more than he who does not.²³

At this point it is important to note one very important aspect of the Vision of God: love. Al-Ghazzālī wrote that one's happiness, and Vision of God, in the hereafter is commensurate to one's love for God while here on earth. He wrote:

For perfect happiness mere knowledge is not enough, unaccompanied by love, and the love of Allah cannot take possession of a man's heart till it be purified from love of the world, which purification can only be effected by abstinence and austerity. While he is in this world a man's condition with regard to the Vision of Allah is like that of a lover who should see his beloved's face in the twilight, while his clothes are infested with hornets and scorpions, which continually, torment him. But should the sun arise and reveal his beloved's face in all its beauty, and the noxious vermin leave off molesting him, then the lover's joy will be like that of Allah's servant, who, released from the twilight and the tormenting trials of this world, beholds Him without a veil.²⁴

And in the later part of the same chapter, al-Ghazzālī concludes with:

He who supposes that it is possible to enjoy the love of Allah is far gone in error, for the very essence of the future life is to arrive at Allah as at an object of desire long aimed at and attained through countless obstacles. This enjoyment of Allah is happiness. But if he had no delight in Allah before, he will not delight in Him then, and if his joy in Allah was but slight before it will be but slight then. In brief, our future happiness will be in strict proportion to the degree in which we have loved Allah here.

To sum up, there are two factors that affect one's attainment of the Vision of God: knowledge and love. For al-Ghazzālī, every person should strive to learn about God through his manifestation in creation, and each one should prepare one's heart to love God by forming and shaping oneself and acquiring virtue. "For the next world is a world of Spirit and of the manifestation of the Beauty of Allah; happy is that man who has aimed at and acquired affinity with it."²⁵

²³ *Alchemy*, Chapter 8

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

St. Thomas Aquinas and Beatific Vision

Now we go back to Catholic Theology, and see how we can understand what the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote about the ultimate end of human beings. Aquinas wrote in his *Summa* that “Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence.”²⁶ He emphasizes two points that he wants to focus on: “First, that man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object.”²⁷ Walter Farrell, OP, explains that,

The object of his pursuit of happiness is not outside man and in the universe; it is not within man, body or soul... It is still real, still decidedly objective, this beatifying object – but it is above man and the universe. It is the answer to the human capacity to desire all goods and be satisfied with none; it is the final good that can leave nothing to be desired; it is the absolutely universal good, outside and above man, outside and above the world, outside and above any good that bears the brand of limitation, of particularity.²⁸

Aquinas further states that, “For perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause.”²⁹ This affirms what he wrote in the first part of his *Summa*, where Aquinas discussed how we can possibly know God. To begin with, he acknowledges the greatness of God, and the limitation of human comprehension:

Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light.³⁰

Aquinas continues to affirm the possibility of knowing God and God’s essence:

Therefore some who considered this, held that no created intellect can see the essence of God. This opinion, however, is not tenable. For as the ultimate beatitude of man consists in the use of his highest function, which is the operation of his intellect; if we suppose that the created intellect could never see God, it would either

²⁶ *ST* I-II, q.3, a. 8

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Walter Farrell, *A Companion to the Summa: The Pursuit of Happiness* Vol. 2, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 13.

²⁹ *ST* I-II, q.3, a. 8

³⁰ *ibid.*

never attain to beatitude, or its beatitude would consist in something else beside God; which is opposed to faith. For the ultimate perfection of the rational creature is to be found in that which is the principle of its being; since a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its principle. Further the same opinion is also against reason. For there resides in every man a natural desire to know the cause of any effect which he sees; and thence arises wonder in men. But if the intellect of the rational creature could not reach so far as to the first cause of things, the natural desire would remain void. Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God.³¹

How is this possible for the limited human person to have a grasp of a “vision” of the invisible “Divine Essence?” Paul A. Macdonald, Jr., associate professor of Christianity at Bucknell University, in Lewisburg, PA, explains that for Aquinas, the power to “see” the divine essence is a *supernatural* cognitive capacity given to the intellect by God, thereby making the intellect like God in order that its possessors may participate or share in God’s own self-knowledge (without, of course, possessing that knowledge themselves).³² Anna Williams, a lecturer in Patristic and Medieval Theology at the University of Cambridge, points out that while beatific knowledge of God and God’s self-knowledge share the same object, that is, the divine essence, there is still a very big difference in how the human person and God will perceive the common object of knowledge. She writes:

The creature possesses knowledge according to its own nature; it may be lifted beyond its own capacities, but such grace perfects nature rather than destroying it. God also knows himself according to his own nature, and since divine and human nature are essentially distinct, the mode of this knowledge differs from the creature’s knowledge, even though the object of knowing, God, is the same in each case.³³

And yet, this capacity to “see” the Divine Essence does not operate independently of our already developed natural intellectual capacities, and neither does it supersede or replace those capacities.³⁴ This capacity is a gift

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Cf. Paul Macdonald, Jr., “The Eschatological Character of our Knowledge of God.” *Modern Theology* 22:2 (April 2006), 259. Anna Williams, whom Macdonald cited from, argues that while beatific knowledge of God and God’s self-knowledge share the same object—namely, the divine essence—they still differ radically in the mode in which they are appropriated. She writes: “The creature possesses knowledge according to its own nature; it may be lifted beyond its own capacities, but such grace perfects nature rather than destroying it. God also knows himself according to his own nature, and since divine and human nature are essentially distinct, the mode of this knowledge differs from the creature’s knowledge, even though the object of knowing, God, is the same in each case.” Cf. Anna Williams, *The Ground of Union* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 97.

³³ Anna Williams, *The Ground of Union* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 97.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.* Grace in Aquinas’s theology never replaces or does violence to nature; rather, it always elevates nature: “Grace . . . does not add to the human person by creating new faculties and thus changing essentially the structure of the human being but by extending the range of possibility of those faculties the person already possesses. Grace is both foreign to

from God himself. It is a special grace that he bestows upon the blessed. Grace never replaces nature; rather, it elevates nature. Williams explains this:

Grace... does not add to the human person by creating new faculties and thus changing essentially the structure of the human being but by extending the range of possibility of those faculties the person already possesses. Grace is both foreign to us, in the sense that its effects lie beyond the attainment of our nature itself, and yet natural to us in that it does not violate or alter the composition of our nature, working instead through that nature.³⁵

Macdonald points out that according to Aquinas, the blessed “see” God by means of a “supernatural disposition,” or a “supernatural *increase* or *extension* of their natural intellectual powers of cognition afforded by the light of glory that specifically strengthens and perfects the mind.”³⁶ As Aquinas explains, “This light is necessary to see the essence of God, not as a likeness in which God is seen, but as a perfection of the intellect, strengthening it to see God. Therefore it may be said that this light is not a medium *in which* God is seen, but one *by which* He is seen; and such a medium does not take away the immediate vision of God.”³⁷

Another interesting point about Aquinas’ notion of the beatific vision is that he believes that the Divine Essence is one and the same, but people will not have the same perception of the Divine Essence. This difference in participation in the beatific vision is explained in his treatise *On Love and Charity*, a part of his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. Aquinas wrote:

Now, the object of the activity in which beatitude consists is altogether one and the same, namely, the Divine Essence, from the vision of which all will be blessed; hence on its side there will not be any level in beatitude. But on the side of the acting subject, the activity of beatitude will not be perfect in the same way, since insofar as the habit that brings to perfection the aforesaid activity, namely the light of glory, will be more perfect in one than in another, to that extent this activity will be more perfect and the delight greater; and from this vantage, all the blessed will not be in the same level of beatitude.³⁸

us, in the sense that its effects lie beyond the attainment of our nature itself, and yet natural to us in that it does not violate or alter the composition of our nature, working instead through that nature.” Williams, 37.

³⁵ Williams, 37.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ST I.12.5 ad 2.*

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *On Love and Charity: Readings from the “Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard.”* Translated by Peter A Kwasniewski, Thomas Bolin and Joseph Bolin. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 382. In IV Sententiarum, d.49, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 2

Why is there a difference? Aquinas answers this question in another section of the same work, explaining that one's perception of the beatific vision is proportional to one's love for God:

The more joined someone will be to God, the more he will be blessed. But the mode of union with God follows the mode of charity. There will therefore be differences in beatitude according to differences in charity. Further, as one thing taken simply follows upon another taken simply, so a greater degree of the one follows upon a greater degree of the other. But having beatitude follows upon having charity. Therefore having more beatitude follows after having more charity.³⁹

An Attempt at a Comparative Moment

How do we approach St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching about the Vision of the Divine Essence, in the light of our reading of the writings of Imam al-Ghazzālī on his notion of the Vision of God?

Imam al-Ghazzālī helps us to understand how it is possible to know the unknowable God. In his writings, al-Ghazzālī reflected on the question: "What is the pleasure of seeing something that has no dimension, shape or color?"⁴⁰ He explains, in his confident teaching style,

Know that this is based upon four principles: First, that you know that seeing God Most High is more pleasant. Second, that you know that the *gnosis* [or knowledge] of God Most High is more pleasant than all things other than He. Third, that you know that the ease and pleasure which is reserved to the heart is more powerful and stronger than any pleasure of the eye, ear, or the other senses. If you know all these, it will necessarily become clear that it is not possible for anything to be more pleasurable than seeing God Most High.⁴¹

Aquinas' explanation of the degrees of beatitude can also be better understood through al-Ghazzālī's explanation that one's Vision of God is commensurate to one's love for God. How does it work? Al-Ghazzālī teaches that one can grow in virtue also by developing a desire to experience the love of God and turning away from the evils of the world. It is important to grow in the love of God while we are living, so that when the day comes that we pass to the next life, the knowledge and love that we have for God will be transformed into the best vision of God that brings us delight and true happiness. Al-Ghazzālī describes love for God in his writings on *Love, Longing, and Contentment* as "the most exalted of the stations" and that it is the "objective of all the stations," when he writes, "The ultimate rule of

³⁹ *ibid.*, 386. In IV Sententiarum, d.49, q. 1, a. 4, qa. 4.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam, trans. *Al-Ghazali on Love, Longing and Contentment* (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2002), 30.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

perfection of the servant of God is that the love of God Most High triumph in his heart, so that his totality is engulfed (by that)."⁴² All Muslims agree that the love of God is a religious obligation. "A person does not have complete faith until he loves God Most High and the Messenger more than all else."⁴³ Al-Ghazzālī further writes: "They asked: 'What is faith?' He replied: 'That one love God and the Messenger more than his kin, family, wealth, all mankind.' And he said: 'A servant (of God) is not a believer until he loves God and the Messenger more than his kin, family, wealth, all mankind.'"⁴⁴ Love for God is closely identified with faith, and the object of faith and the object of the Vision of God are one and the same.

The writings of al-Ghazzālī clearly show his project of formation of the heart of the human person. Burrell notes that the heart is the center of al-Ghazzālī's anthropology, together with its desires.⁴⁵ "The heart recognizes the voice of its creator in the recitation of the Qur'an, and the heart responds to that voice, albeit erratically."⁴⁶ Al-Ghazzālī holds that a human being's "peculiar glory" is the aptitude which he has for that highest of all kinds of knowledge, the knowledge of God.⁴⁷ It is the heart that is the core of the human person, and through it that one can come to the knowledge of God which one seeks. In the book *Marvels of the Heart*, al-Ghazzālī clarifies his concept of "heart" and starts developing his project of virtue formation. For al-Ghazzālī, the heart is the seat of knowledge and he uses a very powerful image, that of the mirror. He explains

Know that the seat of knowledge is the heart, by which I mean the subtle tenuous substance that rules all the parts of the body and is obeyed and served by all its members. In its relationship to the real nature of intelligible, it is like a mirror in its relationship to the forms of changing appearances. For even as that which changes has a form, and the image of that form is reflected in the mirror and represented therein, so also every intelligible has its specific nature, and this specific nature has a form that is reflected and made manifest in the mirror of the heart.⁴⁸

⁴² "The ultimate rule of perfection of the servant of God is that the love of God Most High triumph in his heart, so that his totality is engulfed (by that)." *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴³ "A person does not have complete faith until he loves God Most High and the Messenger more than all else." *ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ "They asked: 'What is faith?' He replied: 'That one love God and the Messenger more than his kin, family, wealth, all mankind.' And he said: 'A servant (of God) is not a believer until he loves God and the Messenger more than his kin, family, wealth, all mankind.'" *On Love, Longing and Contentment*, 16

⁴⁵ David Burrell, *Friendship and Ways of Truth*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2000), 78.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Muhammad I Hozien and Valerie J. Turner, eds., *Al-Ghazali The Marvels of the Heart Book 21 of the Revival of Religious Sciences* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), xx.

⁴⁸ "Know that the seat of knowledge is the heart, by which I mean the subtle tenuous substance that rules all the parts of the body and is obeyed and served by all its members. In its relationship to the real nature of intelligible, it is like a mirror in its relationship to the forms of changing appearances. For even as that which changes has a form, and the image of

He illustrates how the mirror can be oriented towards receiving the images, and applies it to how the heart can be prepared to eventually receive knowledge of God.

The mirror may not reflect the forms for five reasons: first, defect in its formation, as, for example, a piece of crude iron before it is turned and shaped and polished; second, because of its dirt and rust and dullness, even though it is perfect in formation; third because it is turned away from the direction of the object toward something else, as, for example, if the object were behind the mirror; fourth, because of a veil placed between the mirror and the object; and fifth, because of ignorance of the direction of the object desired, so that it is impossible to place it in front of the position and direction of the object.⁴⁹

Through the writings of Imam al-Ghazzālī, I personally come to an understanding and appreciation of St. Thomas Aquinas' explanation of his notion of happiness as beatific vision. All the more I appreciate that the human person's capacity to "see" God as God truly is, in His Divine Essence, is a divine initiative and a gift of grace. As Burrell puts it,

The point of encounter is the human heart, and the divine action is invariably described as 'removing the veil from one's heart, in order that one can see with one's heart, to be elevated to God's own self along with those who are already near to God.⁵⁰

Conclusion

I follow David Burrell's humble acknowledgement that it is "notoriously difficult" to speak for traditions so varied as Christianity and Islam.⁵¹ This attempt at doing comparative theology in reading the work of two thinkers who were both "given a central place"⁵² in their respective tradition, complimented by the commentaries of scholars who have done research on them, is a challenge for the researcher who is serious in his or her quest for

that form is reflected in the mirror and represented therein, so also every intelligible has its specific nature, and this specific nature has a form that is reflected and made manifest in the mirror of the heart." (ibid., 34).

⁴⁹ "The mirror may not reflect the forms for five reasons: first, defect in its formation, as, for example, a piece of crude iron before it is turned and shaped and polished; second, because of its dirt and rust and dullness, even though it is perfect in formation; third because it is turned away from the direction of the object toward something else, as, for example, if the object were behind the mirror; fourth, because of a veil placed between the mirror and the object; and fifth, because of ignorance of the direction of the object desired, so that it is impossible to place it in front of the position and direction of the object." *Marvels of the Heart*, 36.

⁵⁰ Burrell, *Friendship and Ways of Truth*, 79.

⁵¹ ibid., 68.

⁵² ibid.

knowledge of God, which ultimately leads to the human person's longing to be united with God. The human person has a desire to reconnect with the very source of his or her existence. One's ultimate happiness can be achieved when one goes back to God. As one awaits that moment, one is called to prepare one's heart, conforming it to the goodness of God, that it may be ready to receive the grace of "unveiling" and "seeing God" in God's Divine Essence. "The beatific vision remains a gift and a grace."⁵³

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⁵³ Georg Wieland, "Happiness (Ia IIae, qq. 1-5)" in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. by Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 67.

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