

READING OTHER RELIGIOUS TEXTS: INTRATEXTUALITY AND THE LOGIC OF SCRIPTURE

Michael Barnes

PRECIS

The reading and interpretation of texts from another tradition is becoming a more familiar practice in both ecumenical and interreligious circles, yet the use of intuition and imagination to cross religious boundaries raises ethical and theological as much as hermeneutical questions about the interpretation of unfamiliar worlds of discourse. This essay looks at two important dialogical practices—Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning—to explore the implications of the “logic of scripture” for interreligious relations. By distinguishing between scripture as an exemplary text and the pedagogy intrinsic to religious or “reverential” reading, the essay argues for more careful theological attention to the *process* rather than to the *content* of such textual reading.

In recent years, two important interreligious practices, Comparative Theology (CT) and Scriptural Reasoning (SR), have generated a great deal of interest. They have different roots and, in some ways, different aims, but as forms of a careful and discerning reading of religious texts they may usefully be compared as examples of how an empathetic use of the imagination can bridge the gap between religious worlds of discourse. Putting them together in this way is not unproblematic; nevertheless, there are sufficient commonalities for a comparative account to be fruitful. I will not try to summarize an ever-growing literature, still less give an exhaustive critique. My intention is to bring them into dialogue with a thesis about “the place of reading in the practice of religion,” which comes

Michael Barnes, S J (Catholic) is a senior lecturer in theology and religious studies at the Heythrop College of the University of London, where he has taught since 1981. He served as academic director of the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue at Heythrop College, 2000–06, has been convenor of the M A program in Christianity and Interreligious Relations since 2000, and has lectured in Christianity at Muslim College, Ealing, since 2002. He was a lecturer in Buddhist Studies for the Gregorian University in Rome, 1978–81, and taught previously at Stonyhurst College, 1977–81. He has been a member of the Committee for Other Faiths of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales since 1984, and a theological consultant to the Churches Committee for Inter-faith Relations since 1990. He was a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, 1981–84, directed Westminster Interfaith (Catholic diocesan agency for interfaith relations), 1990–95, and directed Faiths Together, 2007–09. Since 1999, he has directed the De Nobili Inter-faith Dialogue Centre in Southall. Ordained a Jesuit priest in 1976, he studied philosophy at Heythrop College, receiving a B D, has a M Litt in Oriental Languages and Religion from the University of Oxford, and received his Ph D (1998) from the University of Cambridge, with a thesis on “A Eucharistic Ethic for Inter-faith Relations.” The most recent of his five books is *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge, 2002), forthcoming in early 2012 is *Interreligious Learning Dialogue, Spirituality, and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge). He has contributed chapters to several edited volumes and articles to encyclopedias and such journals as *Studia Missionaria*, *Religion*, the *Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute*, *The Tablet*, and the *Heythrop Journal*. He was assistant editor of *The Month*, 1991–95, and general editor of *The Way* journals of Christian spirituality, 1996–2000.

from the Chicago-based philosopher of religion, Paul Griffiths.¹

Let me briefly anticipate the discussion. In a brilliantly sustained polemic—he admits that it is something of a “jeremiad”²—Griffiths distinguishes between religious or “reverential” reading, on the one hand, and “consumerist” reading, on the other. By the former he means the sort of premodern prayerful study of canonical and commentarial texts that has sustained communities of faith for centuries, which is marked by metaphors of “fishing,” “digging,” and “savoring.”³ The latter is more typical of modernity and a culture that sees reading in utilitarian terms; metaphors tend to the technological or even industrial: “consumption,” “production,” “control.” Griffiths regrets the shift to a type of reading that values books only for their usefulness for immediate purposes and pleads for more attention to be paid, especially in the university setting, to the terms of a properly religious reading. This may sound like nostalgia for the more humane religious practice of a bygone age, but the issue that concerns Griffiths has a peculiarly contemporary significance—and important implications for the dialogue of religions. In a globalized pluralist world, religious texts are instantly available, whether in bookshops or at the touch of a computer mouse. As “world religions” become more identified by literary canons and commentarial traditions, so interreligious dialogue becomes more bound up with practices of reading, thus raising not just hermeneutical questions about how such reading relates to other forms of interreligious dialogue but also more practical and pedagogical questions about the skills and virtues that the reading of texts demands.

Although Griffiths is not concerned specifically in his book with *interreligious* reading, his account of religion makes it clear that, if reading is to be discerning, then it raises ethical as much as theological concerns. This is not just because there is always a danger that one community of faith manipulates the precious traditions of another to meet its own needs. There is also a further point that is easily overlooked in the rush to assimilate a wealth of meanings: Reading is an intrinsically relational act. To engage with any text, more especially when the text encapsulates the canonical scripture or spiritual wisdom of a different community of faith, is to enter into a relationship with what is “other.”

Although the ethics of interreligious relations runs through this essay, it is this latter point that I want to highlight, what Peter Ochs calls the “logic of scripture.”⁴ What I hope to show is that, while both CT and SR in their different ways are responsible for the production of a new theological literature, their major contribution is an approach to the theology of religions that puts the *practice* of reading the text itself at the center of the dialogue, rather than some more or less abstract or universal “content” to which the text supposedly points. That religious texts do cover common themes is obvious; without them there could be no point of access in the first place. However, the point I take from Griffiths’ “reverential”/“consumerist” distinction is that CT and SR at their best are concerned

¹Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford, U.K., and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²*Ibid.*, p. 188.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 41 ff.

⁴See Peter Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 246 ff.

in the first place with establishing the terms of a pedagogy—and with the *results* of that pedagogy only insofar as the topics of conversation are a necessary part of a practice of faith. Such topics or themes are, to oversimplify, starting points rather than endings. To that extent they are arbitrary, just as the “conclusions” of interreligious dialogue are more accurately to be described as hypotheses or possible ways forward.

At stake here, I argue, is the formative power of the sheer *givenness* of an ancient wisdom on the religious imagination. In what follows I will first give an account of the two practices before bringing them into a correlation. I will then return to Griffiths’ distinction and argue that its value lies less with his powerfully argued strictures against the tendency to commodify learning than with an important question that is implicit in his argument: about how individuals and communities are formed in response to the world of the text. While it may seem paradoxical to find an academic philosopher of religion writing a book that takes to task the process of its own production, Griffiths insists that the academy is always at its best when questioning its own presuppositions. Something similar, I would add, needs to be said for practices such as CT and SR, which of their very nature straddle ecclesial and academic communities. If they are not to fall foul of the consumerist temptation and become further examples of a sort of intertextual colonizing, they have to become more, not less, conscious of how foundational texts and practices of reading are formative of faith.

Comparative Theology—A New Practice

The major inspiration behind CT is the American Jesuit, Francis Clooney, who now teaches at Harvard. In a series of books over the last twenty-five years, Clooney has brought Christian and Hindu texts into a correlation.⁵ In a recent apologia for this theological hospitality he writes about entering into a dialogue with the symbols and thought-forms of another tradition in order to seek a learn-

⁵For an introduction to CT and a brief overview, see Francis X Clooney, *Comparative Theology Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester, U K, and Malden, MA Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). See also the entry by Clooney in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford, U K, and New York Oxford University Press, 2007), pp 653–668. For an earlier review article, see Francis X Clooney, “Comparative Theology A Review of Recent Books, 1989–1995,” *Theological Studies* 56 (September, 1995) 521–550. For lucid theological discussion, see James L. Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22 (Spring, 1995) 67–87, and some critical commentary in Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Chichester, U K, and Malden, MA Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp 37–45. Among Clooney’s most important exercises in comparative theology are *Theology after Vedānta An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY State University of New York Press, 1993), *Seeing through Texts Doing Theology among the Śrīvaisnavas of South India* (Albany, NY State University of New York Press, 1996), *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford, U K, and New York Oxford University Press, 2005), and *Beyond Compare St Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Desika on Loving Surrender* (Washington, DC Georgetown University Press, 2008). For a recent collection of critical material on the CT project by various writers, see Francis X Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London T and T Clark, 2010).

ing "for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition."⁶ One's own tradition is read with proper attention to the defining doctrines of the tradition *but also* with an awareness of how analogous themes and ideas are conceived and ordered by the other. "Comparative theology," for Clooney, "is a practical response to religious diversity read with our eyes open, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with a willingness to see newly the truths of our own religion in light of another."⁷

Put like that, there is nothing essentially Christian about the practice as such. In principle, for Clooney, it is open to all people of faith and, in the sense that many religious traditions are built upon rich and complex commentarial traditions, what he is commending is an expansion of the ancient principle that theology is "faith seeking understanding." Such language may seem odd when applied to some religious traditions, notably Buddhism, but then so does another recent development called Buddhist theology: odd maybe, but entirely plausible. The term "theology" is being used to describe what John Makransky calls a "critical reflection upon Buddhist experience in light of contemporary understanding and critical reflection upon contemporary understanding in light of Buddhist experience."⁸ Makransky, a colleague of Clooney's in Boston, is one of the group of self-described "baby-boom buddhologists," many working through faculties of Religious Studies, who are seeking to shift the emphasis from a purely descriptive to a normative account of Buddhism. In some ways this phenomenon represents the recovery of the ancient commentarial tradition of monastic training, but, by taking such intellectual engagement out of the monasteries and into the academy, it also returns to an important dimension of the Buddhist tradition, namely, its strict avoidance of "unskillful" forms of purely metaphysical speculation. Buddhist living, like Christian, involves the acquisition of particular skills and virtues that enable one to read traditional texts. It also demands a critical engagement with the wider context of the world to which the texts point. Theology is not a matter of codifying the structure of belief but of reading and re-reading foundational texts in their relationship to ever-differing contexts.

In this sense CT is not that novel a departure. Clooney's exploration of the genealogy of the term traces it back to the early eighteenth century with "comparative" contrasted with "absolute" theology. If the aim of the latter, "natural" or "theoretic" theology, is what David Tracy describes as the "analysis of the philosophical conditions of possibility for any religion,"⁹ the former is concerned with identifying the more important shared beliefs and values. Originally the focus of CT was on differences between Christian denominations; by the later nineteenth century it had shifted to differences between religions. F. Max

⁶Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, p. 10

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 69

⁸Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky, eds., *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism (Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2000), p. 19

⁹David Tracy, "Theology: Comparative Theology," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, London: Collier Macmillan, 1986), vol. 14, p. 446

Müller, for instance, philologist and historian of religion, was interested in the particularities of faith, in what is shared and what is unique to specific traditions. He argued that the task of gathering and comparing the data of religion necessitates a second-order reflective discipline—an exercise which he occasionally spoke of not as comparative religions but as comparative theology. Tracy uses the term in this sense as a sort of catch-all to refer to any intellectual, if not systematic, exercise “that affords a central place to the fact of religious pluralism in the tradition’s self-interpretation.”¹⁰ Within that particular framework, various possible options emerge, from traditional accounts of the “religious other” (often given the shorthand “exclusivism” or “inclusivism”) to versions of what is sometimes called world or “global theology”—most obviously the late work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith or the idiosyncratic and selective “mutual inhabitation” of Raimon Panikkar. The term is made to cover a wide spectrum of dialogical engagements, depending on where the emphasis is placed. As “comparative” we are talking about a subset within the History of Religions; as a more strictly *theological* enterprise it “ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds.”¹¹

CT, as currently practiced, is the work of theologians skilled in the thought and practice of another religious tradition. Trained in classical Indology, Clooney’s first concern has been to bring the scholarly study of Hinduism into dialogue with his own Christian theology. In doing this he is clearly anxious to avoid the twin pitfalls of imposing particular faith-based categories on other traditions and presuming a neutrality that fails to acknowledge its own presuppositions. The same tension runs through the work of other comparative theologians to whom Clooney refers in his study. For another Bostonian, Robert Neville, theology comprises a number of activities, from scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics to history and philosophy, the aim of which is “to understand, to express, and critically to examine the truth of the gospel in the experience and language of all the world’s peoples, and in reference to all natural and social contexts.”¹² Although hardly “evangelical” in the ordinary sense, an important dimension of Neville’s work is its rhetorical quality; his version of comparative theology seeks not just to examine truth but also to communicate it in particular situations.

In the United Kingdom, Keith Ward has written a series of studies of major theological themes—revelation, creation, human nature, and community—each of which has to be articulated in light of different religious traditions and their claims to divine truth and revelation.¹³ Ward would not consider himself a spe-

¹⁰Ibid., p. 447

¹¹Ibid., p. 446

¹²Robert Cummings Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 30

¹³Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World’s Religions* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), idem, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), idem, *Religion and Human Nature* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and idem, *Religion and Community* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

cialist in the study of any particular religious tradition. His particular skill lies in weaving together a number of different perspectives, all of which, he argues, are to be assessed in light of Christian revelation. With a nod in the direction of Aquinas, he reminds us that theologians have "always taken their interpretative clues from philosophical or cultural factors not confined to Christianity."¹⁴ Both Neville and Ward recognize a distinction between confessional and comparative theology, but both aim to be constructive and systematic, taking their rise from Christian faith but seeking to broaden the base for comparative reflection.

Comparative Theology—Missionary Antecedents

Clooney's approach is rather different, both in terms of material and method. Neville's primary dialogue is with Chinese traditions, and Clooney makes the point that this gives his work an air of "elegant detachment," which is rather different from his own much messier engagement with the unruly forces of Hinduism.¹⁵ The word "intuition" runs through his work; he begins not with any theory about religions but with particular instances of finding himself drawn into the world defined by his Hindu texts. In this regard his own antecedent comes not from philosophy or phenomenology of religion but from another genealogical strand, the tradition he has inherited from Christian mission and specifically from the dialogue that fellow Jesuits such as Roberto de Nobili and Matteo Ricci held with Indian and Chinese culture, respectively. Like Clooney they were, of course, confessional theologians—only more so. They had no doubts about the object of their work—to make converts to Christianity. But, to do so successfully, they had to learn about and from the religious traditions they encountered; that learning profoundly changed the way they viewed their own tradition and the wider world. Scholarship was put at the service of a faith that seeks understanding.

Thus, for example, de Nobili learned Sanskrit and Tamil and wrote a variety of works, some intended to justify his methods of adaptation to Roman authority, some more exactly aimed at a dialogue with the Brahmin religious elite. De Nobili noted parallels between the life of the early church's coming to terms with the Roman world and the equally complex challenge faced by a minority community in south India. An early Tamil treatise, for instance, that is set out in the upanisadic form of question and answer between teacher and disciple is titled "The Dialogue on Eternal Life." In it de Nobili applied theological principles to the new engagement with Indian culture, arguing that, while reason has its role in achieving logical clarity and coherence in argument, and while the mind can acquire real but inadequate knowledge, including knowledge of God, there are truths beyond the power of the mind to grasp; hence, reason must be complemented by revelation. He became familiar with Indian philosophical terminology and found there the common language on which could be built a reasoned account of the Christian worldview.

¹⁴Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, p. 37

¹⁵Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, p. 47

De Nobili's theological training was, of course, Thomistic—albeit an Aquinas taught through the systematized Thomism of the likes of Francisco Suarez. At the beginning of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas states that he seeks to demonstrate “that truth which faith professes and reason investigates. This we shall do by bringing forth both demonstrative and probable arguments, some of which were drawn from the books of the philosophers and of the saints, through which truth is strengthened and its adversary overcome.”¹⁶ “The philosophers” include, of course, Aristotle and Muslim and Jewish thinkers. As David Burrell comments: “Aquinas’ intellectual inquiry bridged the divide initially posed by alien faiths, allowing him to discover and exploit cognate strategies for explicating shared perspectives on creation, providence, and often parallel trajectories towards the goal of human fulfilment.”¹⁷

The basic structures of the world, of the human person and capacity for knowing, all are to be found in the Thomistic framework; they provided de Nobili with a structure through which to engage with analogous ways of thinking in the Indian traditions. At the time the approach was considered controversial; de Nobili had to defend himself against the more polemical missionaries who insisted on a clear break between “pagan” religion and Christian faith. He quotes another St. Thomas, the Apostle of India, who did not have recourse to “severe reprimands” but insisted on “gentle persuasion.” In de Nobili's *Dialogue* it is the person of the wise teacher who makes the student receptive not just to knowledge but also, through recognizing and following the moral force of true understanding, to divine illumination. Writing in a culture pervaded by themes of enlightenment and liberation, de Nobili has the teacher saying that knowledge is not about “knowing various things”; rather, “One has to know the Veda of the Lord—but also act accordingly. It is as if someone knows the way to reach a city but, because he does not take that way, he never reaches that city. So too, if one knows that Lord's Veda but does not act accordingly, he will not reach liberation.”¹⁸

De Nobili may have avoided the violence of earlier generations of missionaries, but this is no fount of liberal pluralism. He is measured but forceful in his condemnation of what he perceives as elements of idolatry in Indian culture. While he has confidence in the capacity of reasonable human beings to reach reasoned conclusions, he does not shirk the neuralgic points in the dialogue. Thus, his version of the cosmological argument moves from the beauty and grandeur of the world to the nature of the creator: “I shall show this to you more clearly by proving to you that there is only one supreme creator and not several; they are either self-existent or dependent on another for their existence, and then we come to our Self-existent.”¹⁹ It is important to note, however, that de Nobili is not commending Christian faith as a system of thought that builds on and ultimately replaces Indian thought. He proposes a *way of life* that has its own in-

¹⁶Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.9.3.

¹⁷David Burrell, “Thomas Aquinas and Islam,” *Modern Theology* 20 (January, 2004): 73.

¹⁸Roberto de Nobili, *Dialogue 1.1*, reproduced in Francis X. Clooney and Anand Amaladass, tr. and intro., *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

trinsic logic, leading people to make certain moves as they grow in true understanding of the ways of God. That is why he made a point of adopting Brahmin dress and living according to the customs and culture of the local people. He had to make *himself* acceptable—not just his message.

Extending Theological Rationality

That distinction, between religious practices and purely social ones, seems less easy in today's world of cultural and political complexity—and especially in an Indian church much more sensitive to the structural evil of the caste system.²⁰ What has changed for today's comparativists is not the principle as much as the context for dialogue. Where de Nobili worked out of a typically Catholic instinct that expected to find “seeds of the Word” in the Sanskrit and Tamil texts he explored, his modern-day counterparts are only too well aware that Hinduism, which is itself so much given to assimilation of other traditions, presents a more profound challenge to Christian faith. Today's Hindus are ready to respond to the dialogue with their own vigorously argued philosophical convictions.

Here I draw attention to what is perhaps the most systematic of Clooney's studies: *Hindu God, Christian God*, the subtitle of which—“*How Reason Helps to Break Down the Boundaries between Religions*”—is nothing if not a reminder that, in the ambiguous and dangerous world of religions in the twenty-first century, the aim of interfaith dialogue is not just to enable intelligent cross-religious communication but also to test and extend the limits of theological rationality itself. Clooney's point is that, while increasing knowledge of religions may open up wide areas of difference, the aims of theology as a second-order discipline of inquiry contain many commonalities. Topics such as the nature of the world as a dependent reality, the existence and qualities and activity of God, the possibility that God can be revealed or even become embodied, in the world, that God can speak to human beings—all cross the Christian-Hindu religious boundary and, at the very least, speak of similar theological issues. Each chapter opens with an exposition by a representative Christian theologian—Swinburne, von Balthasar, Rahner, and Barth—and addresses one of the themes in dialogue with a number of Hindu counterparts.

In many ways these are thought-experiments, exercises in the creative imagination. The protocols and principles that systematic attention to the coherence of a faith tradition opens up keep them from straying off into fantasy and self-indulgence. This is not just a matter of achieving a consistency and coherence of argument. If theology is “interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional,”²¹ then it must be accountable not just to the “home tradition” but to the other as well. The use of tradition-specific language in writing up or pass-

²⁰For a recent study gathering much of the recent material produced in India, see Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities* (Farnham, U K, and Burlington, VT Ashgate, 2010)

²¹Francis X Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God How Reason Helps to Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford, U K, and New York Oxford University Press, 2001), pp 7–12

ing on the insights of any comparative exercise is necessary if one is to be honest and responsible to one's own community of faith. At the same time the other tradition must itself be presented in a manner that is recognizable by its adherents. In this regard the dialogue with Hinduism turns out to be an enriching experience. Despite the fact that there are few historically formative links between the two traditions (or maybe because of it), the sheer diversity of Hindu devotional practice and the sophistication of the classical philosophical schools open up all sorts of possibilities for a rich theological conversation.

In his latest book, Clooney summarizes some of the general points of convergence with regard to the nature of God. They include God's omniscience and omnipotence, God as creator and loving redeemer, God as embodied or incarnate, and God's unity yet relationality, whether expressed in trinitarian terms or through the myriad forms taken by the divine couple in Hindu thought.²² The fact that such points of agreement are set within broader contexts of considerable complexity and disagreement does not take away from the possibilities of a well-reasoned interreligious learning; indeed, it may positively encourage a more nuanced understanding of the finer points of particular ideas and concepts. Such learning, however, is very much not a matter of constructing a Christian-Hindu hybrid, still less a grand narrative for appreciating some putative inner consistency of Hinduism. The only assumption at work comes from a generous Catholic vision of God at work in the world. The question that this raises—how the act of reading the religious texts of *another* religious tradition can be practiced with integrity—will occupy us once we have looked at the second of my practices of interreligious reading.

The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning

At its simplest, SR is a meeting of people from the three Abrahamic traditions, Jews, Christians and Muslims, in which key texts are read, expounded, and discussed in order to let the "deep wisdom" that has sustained a community of faith emerge and challenge the various participants.²³ CT, as it has developed, is an exercise in prayerful and personal religious reading. While SR builds on similar principles, it has a communal dimension that CT lacks—at any rate, at

²²Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, pp 111–117

²³A vast amount of commentary on SR is appearing. See especially "Scriptural Difference and Scriptural Reasoning," a chapter in Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge, U K, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a theological overview, see a special issue of *Modern Theology*, vol 22, no 3 (July, 2006), also published as David F Ford and C C Pecknold, eds., *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford, U K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). On theological background, see C C Pecknold, *Transforming Postliberal Theology: George Lindbeck, Pragmatism, and Scripture* (London and New York: T and T Clark, 2005). There is a comment on practice in Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, eds., *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (London: SCM Press, Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002). A Muslim commentary appears in Basit Bilal Koshul, "Affirming the Self through Accepting the Other," in Michael Ipgrave, ed., *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and Qur'an Together* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp 111–118. See also the website of the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* at <http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/>

the moment. Nevertheless, like CT, SR begins in the middle, with an act of faith—that theological meaning is to be found in other religious texts, that somehow God is at work in these texts and in the communities to which they speak. Again the implications of that act of faith, like Clooney's "intuition," must occupy us later. It is enough to stress at the moment that it is the good faith of the participants and their trust in each other as precisely *people of faith* that provides the initial platform on which the practice is built. That is very much not to say that the authoritative status of the texts within the three traditions—Tanakh, Bible, and Qur'ān—is presumed to be equivalent; indeed, coming to terms with the different ways in which the texts are used is itself an important part of the learning exercise.

For David Ford, one of the founders of SR, "nothing has been theologically more fundamental than the threefold sense that study and interpretation are happening in the presence of God and for the sake of God, in the midst of the contingencies and complexities of a purposeful history, and in openness to God's future and for the sake of God's purposes."²⁴ This is, therefore, every bit as theological an exercise as CT. The three "peoples of the book" are, of course, divided by some fundamental differences about the very nature of God, and no amount of dialogue is going to forge some sort of theological settlement or even negotiate a *modus vivendi*. The aim, however, is not to achieve consensus or even to define some area of well-intentioned tolerance that sweeps major doctrinal disagreements away as of secondary importance. It is, rather, to build a more ill-defined network of friendship that reaches beyond the bounds of individual loyalties and commitments. As Ben Quash nicely remarks, the task is about improving "the quality of disagreement."²⁵

Rather than let doctrinal difference become the dominating feature of the conversation (whether through its presence or absence), what has been found fruitful is to set the specificity of faith and practice in the broad context of the scriptures and traditional writings that continue to nourish the inner life and outer relations of the different communities of faith. The topics for conversation and study are the more human, as well as more religious, questions that occupy all people of faith, questions about leadership and prophecy, hospitality and friendship, tragedy and loss. But, these are all theological questions; insofar as they provoke people to think through the most significant of issues, they raise the question of God. All three traditions, in analogous ways, reveal sources of a "superabundant wisdom" that, precisely because it is grounded in the otherness of scripture, keeps the "question of God" open. Hard questions and difficult sayings are not avoided but are approached through a "wisdom-seeking" collegiality founded in the desire to learn what the Word of God may be unfolding in this meeting and between the members of this particular group.

²⁴David F. Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians, and Muslims," *Modern Theology* 22 (July, 2006): 362.

²⁵Ben Quash, "Heavenly Semantics: Some Literary-Critical Approaches to Scriptural Reasoning," *Modern Theology* 22 (July, 2006): 412. Quash highlights four marks of SR: particularity, provisionality, sociality, "and its readiness for *surprise*" (p. 403, emphasis in original). All four, and most especially the last, argue "against finality" (p. 413) by opening up the unexpected and surprising.

All practitioners of SR insist that it is first and foremost a practice and only then a set of ideas or theory—not that this has stopped the theorizing and secondary reflection from appearing. Over a relatively short time a great deal of practical wisdom has been learned that has been sifted into sets of rules for good practice. Steven Kepnes names some of the most important principles in a “Handbook,” stating that SR is “about serious conversation between three religious traditions that preserves difference as it establishes relations.”²⁶ Ford is more allusive in summarizing his “maxims,” which range from acknowledging “*the sacredness of the others’ scriptures*” and remembering that the aim is not consensus, to giving time to the process and reading “with a view to the fulfilment of *God’s purpose of peace between all*.”²⁷ He concludes: “Be open to *mutual hospitality turning into friendship*—each tradition values friendship, and for it to happen now might be seen as the most tangible anticipation of future peace.”²⁸ Hospitality is the dominant theme, both as topic for conversation and as a mutually assured practice.

SR takes place at a number of different levels, from the university seminar to much more informal settings in places of worship. The biblical terminology of “tents of meeting” is sometimes used to express something of the provisionality of the exercise. These are never, of course, neutral spaces, but every effort is made to ensure that in speaking and listening participants act by turns as host and guest, giving explanation, inviting comment, and drawing conclusions not just from the canonical texts being formally studied but from a whole range of other materials and experiences. Ford quotes the evocative phrase of Aref Nayed, that in the SR practiced by academic Jews, Christians, and Muslims in addition to the canonical texts are brought to the table “internal libraries”—from tradition-specific commentary of all kinds to the specific contributions that come from particular interests and specialisms.²⁹ What is held in common, in other words, is not some sort of “shared theology” of the “Abrahamic religions” (which would, of course, subvert the whole process before it begins) but the shared experience of scripturally rooted traditions and the different ways in which people of faith find therein a prophetic or *public* wisdom. What sets SR apart from a sort of shared textual exegesis class is the interactive process in which particular voices are heard to speak in a shared space, reflecting on life-giving words that echo down the centuries and across religious and cultural divides.

As “emergent rules” or guidelines, perhaps the most important is what Kepnes calls “the reason of scriptural reasoning”:

SR is the thinking that occurs when scripture is taken up and discussed by a group of interpreters. It therefore works through both the reasoning that is implicit in scripture and the reason that practitioners, as interpreters, bring to scripture. But, most importantly, scriptural reasoning is the reasoning that

²⁶Steven Kepnes, “A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning,” *Modern Theology* 22 (July, 2006): 367–383.

²⁷Ford, “Interfaith Wisdom,” p. 349; emphasis in original.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 350; emphasis in original.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 348–349.

*is "disclosed" as members engage in dialogue about scripture.*³⁰

This is not a straightforward linear process of correlation but a matter of "making deep reasonings public," as Nicholas Adams puts it.³¹ That may be accounted the final objective of the process: when a certain collegiality has been established, trust and mutual understanding have been formed, and the inner wisdom of the tradition has been allowed to speak. In a safe place, the implications of traditional learning and teaching for wider society can be explored and tested. The aim, however, is not to defend particular meanings but to uncover the most significant assumptions and inner logic that give a shape to the tradition as a whole. In practice, of course, because of the very nature of the text, the human pursuit of meaning and the movement of the Spirit that is set deep in the text work together in sometimes unnoticed and surprising ways. Rather like CT's intuitive following of a personal thread into another religious world, SR practitioners rely on picking up chance connections, on a degree of interpersonal chemistry—and on luck.

SR as Reparative Reasoning

As with CT, there is nothing particularly novel about SR. Persons of faith, as Griffiths is at pains to remind us, have been living out of commentarial traditions of reading and study for centuries. Jewish Talmudic commentary, for instance, the original model for SR, can be understood as an application of the wisdom of Torah to questions raised by culture and the life of wider society. Again, what is new is the contemporary interreligious context. The immediate inspiration lies with the "textual reasoning" practiced by such Jewish thinkers as Peter Ochs and Robert Gibbs, themselves influenced by the dialogue between Jewish tradition and Western philosophy opened up by Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas. In the 1990's Christian theologians, such as Ford and Daniel Hardy, became part of a regular dialogue. By the end of the decade the group had been more formally extended to include Muslim participants as well. There can be little doubt that it is the inclusion of the third of the "peoples of the book" that has given the movement (for that is now what it is) an extraordinary energy. In an obvious sense there is something straightforwardly pragmatic here. SR was formed not out of a theory of universal reason but from the experience of people of faith who found that it worked. It may have become something of an interfaith cliché, but dialogue does happen when people meet. Despite the disagreements and differences, or maybe because of them, it is still possible for learning to take place—for participants to appreciate something of another's position and to understand what is most significant about one's own. Indeed, as a practice, there is something agreeably postmodern about the desire to avoid the rush to universalizing concepts and premature judgments, but it is a principled postmodernism: "a practice," notes Adams, "which can be theorised, not a theory

³⁰Kepnes, "Handbook," p. 373; emphasis in original.

³¹Nicholas Adams, "Making Deep Reasonings Public," *Modern Theology* 22 (July, 2006): 385–401.

which can be put into practice."³²

That distinction is important. It leads to consideration of a second influence on SR, namely, the philosophical pragmatism associated with Charles Sanders Peirce. Ochs's formidably dense and detailed study, *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*, is addressed to a variety of readers with different philosophical interests and concerns, not least to religious Jews and Christians. Early in the book, Ochs writes about pragmatic definition as a "corrective activity"—not a discrete act of precise judgment but "a *performance of correcting other, inadequate definitions of imprecise things*."³³ Such philosophical clarification always begins with a degree of what Peirce called "vagueness," a dimension of generality and lack of clarity in things, which brings with it the experience of irritation and doubt. Yet, unlike the Cartesian movement to establish firm foundations, Peircean pragmatism sees the task as a continual process of correction that leads not to a set of "clear and distinct ideas" so much as to a learned habit of identifying and thinking about problems that require repair. Oppositions or dualities—what Peirce would call "dyads"—are an inevitable and necessary aspect of life in a contingent universe, but they never make for a finally satisfactory way of clarifying meaning, let alone speaking of truth. To say that they need to be subjected to a continual process of "correction" is not to invoke some pragmatic version of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. A and B are related not by some shared characteristic that can then be hypostatized as a "third" C but in terms of this particular practice of clarifying meaning here and now.

It is the focus on corrective practices of reasoning that makes Ochs's book much more than an attempt to reclaim Peirce for modern philosophy. The last section takes up an issue that he feels is implicit in Peirce, namely, how one can draw imaginatively on the resources of scripture to create a sort of "scriptural pragmatics" that can apply the ancient inherited wisdom embodied in texts to the breakdown and crises in human communities. For Ochs the "logic of scripture" is the pattern that careful discernment finds inscribed in texts and that offers promise of repair. Such a "reparative reasoning," however, is precisely not a final Hegelian synthesis that takes reasoning to a higher level of harmonious integration. Attending to the logic of scripture is not a solution for all manner of human suffering, as if some esoteric formula or "answer" is to be excised from the text. Rather, the act of habitual reading of an ancient wisdom and the virtues that practice inculcates identify the question and open up patterns of healing. Right at the end of the book, and this time speaking from within his own Jewish tradition, Ochs writes about the rabbinic act of translating a traditional wisdom across time so that it speaks afresh to new communities with new questions: "As prophet, the philosopher is more translator than seer. The 'good news' has already come down from heaven in the vague writings of an antecedent community; the philosopher has only to clarify its message."³⁴

The process of constant reading and re-reading of the text opens up the hope of a better future for a particular community. What SR seeks to achieve is to ex-

³²Ibid., p. 387

³³Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism*, p. 5, emphasis in original

³⁴Ibid., p. 321

tend the scope of that translation, so that one particular fount of sacred wisdom is allowed to address the contemporary concerns of a variety of religious reasoners—or, to recall Adams's phrase, makes "deep reasonings public." Thus Kepnes writes that the final stage of SR is its application to "the problems and issues which inspired SR practice in the first place."³⁵ While the idea of a single "Judaean-Christian"—let alone "Judaean-Christian-Islamic"—tradition is problematic (While Jews, Christians, and Muslims do share a religious history that has formed relations in particular ways, similarities and continuities can be exaggerated.), what they do hold together is a prophetic commitment to the moral order of God's world. Christians are not, to use the Islamic term, "people of the Book," but "people of the Incarnate Word"; to that extent, the "logic of scripture" as discerned in the three "Abrahamic traditions" differs in important respects. Nevertheless, both as individuals and as communities of interpretation, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are called to take responsibility for the work of healing brought about through mutual understanding. Resources for achieving this are not the same and may well occasion considerable disagreement, but the manner of engagement—doing justice to difference as well as forming strong relationships—is intended as a sign of reconciliation that itself can act as a powerful witness to the wider world of secular society.³⁶ In other words, however much the form of *reasoning* may differ in the three traditions, they are all driven by a shared concern to overcome age-old divisions.

Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning—Similarity and Difference

We will return to that point, and the nature of scriptural reasoning, in due course. Meanwhile, in attempting even the briefest of comparisons, it is important to remind ourselves that SR and CT begin as practices that can be theorized. For all that SR has a strong rooting in the academy, the majority of SR participants are unlikely to be bothered with the niceties of Peircean semeiotic theory that so excites the philosophers.³⁷ At its best SR gathers like-minded people in an atmosphere of generous hospitality, to focus on issues of communal and public concern. That is clearly one justification for careful reflection on the philosophical and theological implications of the process itself: to keep the process honest, as it were. Academics do have their place—even if the charge that SR is covertly elitist, requiring linguistic and theological skills that few possess, has some justification. CT is often viewed in the same light. Clooney's books are never anything less than erudite and elegant, the work of a conscientious and skilled Sanskritist who is also an experienced Christian theologian. Even if other comparativists bring more intuitive than exegetical skills to bear, the whole pro-

³⁵Kepnes, "Handbook," p. 376

³⁶Ford, "Interfaith Wisdom," p. 363

³⁷For Ochs's own account of some of the major strands that went to make SR, see Peter Ochs, ed., *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Post-Critical Interpretation* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), especially his introductory essay, pp. 3–51. For an excellent series of critical essays on Ochs's work and his response, see *Modern Theology* 24 (July, 2008): 439–503.

ject seems at times to be more at home in the seminar rooms of prestigious universities than in temples, mosques, and church halls. It would, however, be easy to miss the originating context of the practice—which lies in processes of teaching and learning. CT is a way of introducing students of all types and levels to a way of thinking about the “logic of scripture” inscribed in familiar and unfamiliar writing. In CT, as noted earlier, texts are read prayerfully and their ideas pondered interiorly; in SR the exercise is very much a group effort in which study builds up friendship and trust. Nevertheless, like SR, but often using a more formal set of processes, CT teaches skills rather than content, an ability to think cross-culturally and to learn how to reflect theologically on the very experience of learning.³⁸

The difference between the two has less to do with method and actual practice (which seem to cohere quite closely) than about the implicit theology or background presuppositions that are at work. If SR seeks to develop a form of “reparative reason” that builds a new sociality, CT is characterized by a more “exploratory reason” that is committed to searching out the full extent of God’s providential purposes. CT can be traced through Vatican II to the recovery of the Catholic missiology of de Nobili and Ricci. The roots of SR are more complex; in addition to the influence of Ochs and the Jewish Talmudic tradition, SR owes much of its specifically Christian credentials to the “postliberal” theology associated with Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. The first witnesses to the best of a generous Catholic attention to the “seeds of the Word” in other faith traditions; the second comes from a Protestant world that has become increasingly aware of the power of God’s Word to be sounded in other traditions. Neither, however, is locked within its originating tradition. Both are part of a broader dialogue with anthropological, historical, and philosophical accounts of religion³⁹ that have made theologians more sensitive to other religious traditions as, to use Lindbeck’s words, “comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.”⁴⁰

That dialogue needs to be linked to another, one that is more purely theological. Both CT and SR share a debt to the recovery of the Jewish matrix of Christian faith. For Catholics that took place at Vatican II and sprang directly from Pope John’s desire that the Council should take up the question of the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. The resulting declaration *Nostra aetate* has had an enormously important ecumenical, as much as interreligious, impact. Without the healing of relations between Jews and Christians, it is doubtful whether either CT or SR would have taken the form they have. It is, of course, a big jump from what I have elsewhere referred to as Christianity’s

³⁸Often, but not necessarily, formal. One of Clooney’s most accessible and revealing works is *Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998). The aim of Clooney’s *Comparative Theology* is to lay out the parameters of a new approach to theology of religions—but also to encourage its practice at whatever level his readers feel comfortable with.

³⁹Summed up, most evocatively, in such terms as Wittgenstein’s “language games” and Clifford Geertz’s “webs of significance.”

⁴⁰George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 32.

"primary relationship" to a "secondary" engagement with other traditions, even one as culturally and historically close as that with Islam.⁴¹ Nevertheless, what holds different interreligious relationships together is not some intrinsically theological hierarchy of traditions but the very experience of dialogue that has marked both Catholic and Protestant engagements with the religious other, the "wider ecumenism."

The Catholic and Protestant dimensions of CT and SR, respectively, are less significant than what they hold together as interreligious practices of faith. If CT has about it a typically Catholic sensibility in which practitioners are called to seek out the fullest extent of God's grace, SR quite overtly asks its practitioners to recognize a world of broken relationships and to participate in God's work of healing—what Barth would have called the *Missio Dei*. As theologies for dialogue, that is to say preparing the ground for engagement, Catholics and Protestants tend to emphasize different principles and theological values. As theologies of dialogue, reflecting on the actual experience of relationship with the other, both share a common experience, that of working and learning alongside each other—and other persons of faith as well.⁴²

It is the nature of that shared process of learning as intrinsically scriptural that most needs critical attention. At times, CT and SR seem like a cross-religious *lectio divina* or an extended version of the classic Catholic "Gospel enquiry" in which the imperatives "see, judge, act," are applied to "their" wisdom as much as "ours." That sounds like an admirable advertisement for the potential of interreligious reading to extend the scope of theological rationality (in CT mode) or to repair the brokenness of interreligious relations (in SR mode). The danger has been noted in the introduction—that the practice leads to a colonizing of religious resources in which the other is instrumentalized as a means to an end.

Whatever the form of dialogue, there is never such a thing as a strictly "neutral space"; relationships are always asymmetrical and, without careful discernment the danger is that the powerful interests of one group may prevail over others. This, of course, has deeply theological implications. The "cultural-linguistic" paradigm of religion that commends itself here demands a strong concept of intratextuality; that is to say, individual texts are part of a wider textually constituted framework within which they are to be understood.⁴³ Different worlds of religious discourse are taken to be true in an absolute sense for par-

⁴¹See Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge, U K, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially chap. 2, "Remembering the Covenant," pp. 29–64.

⁴²See Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, which engages with the thought of Levinas to offer an alternative approach to theology of religions based on the experience of dialogue with the Other, and idem, *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality, and the Christian Imagination* (Cambridge, U K, and New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), which reflects on particular examples of interreligious learning to develop further the terms of a spirituality of dialogue.

⁴³Taking the term "intratextuality" in the sense associated with Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" account of religion. The scriptural narrative creates its own universe of meaning. Thus, "canonical texts are a condition, not only for the survival of a religion but for the very possibility of normative theological description" (Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 116).

ticular participants, those whose "worlds" they can be said to form, but they are not true for all. As discrete "language games" they are all particular and manifest different claims to truth. What then of "extratextuality"? How can one speak of the relationship between what may be considered analogous (at least insofar as they perform the same function within different communities of faith) but also very different "cultural-linguistic" paradigms?

In his judicious response to the symposium on SR, Hardy asks how participants are to ensure that it is indeed the "logic of scripture," the "grammar" inscribed within texts, that speaks—and is not placed within "another determinative context," theological, philosophical, sociological, or whatever.⁴⁴ Something similar needs to be asked about CT. Whether we are talking about the accommodative instinct of the Catholic or the more critical scripturally based instinct of the Protestant, the question is how the distinctiveness of another religious voice can be heard without either reducing it to a lesser version of the same or interposing some "third" mediating framework. This is where the experience of dialogue, from both CT and SR, has developed its own integrity of practice by extending the limits of the religious imagination so that in some way another's beliefs can be "taken as" true and its inner logic followed through in a process of dialogue.

Interreligious readers are challenged, both by each other and by the text, to bring what they do know as members of this religious world into some sort of a correlation with what they do not know about that religious world by searching out the traces of the "superabundant wisdom" that exceeds both. That, however, is simply to raise the question with which we started in a different way: how the "intratextuality" that has formed my religious world can be extended into the extratextual world defined by the other without simply reducing it to or subsuming it within what is already known. In the final part of the essay, I want to address that question by taking up Griffiths' thesis about "religious reading." Griffiths may be too ready to lump all other forms of reading under the "consumerist" label, but the emphasis that he places on the formative power of religious practice takes us to the heart of a reasoning, which is properly scriptural.

Becoming Interreligious Readers

At the beginning of *Religious Reading* Griffiths notes that his approach to religion does have certain affinities with Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" paradigm.⁴⁵ To be religious, for Griffiths, is to give a religious account, to present the essential features that characterize a religious view of things, and to acquire those skills and dispositions that enable one to live from that view and so govern relations with others.⁴⁶ In speaking of his own Christian faith he names three practices that together inculcate those skills—prayer, worship, and the reading

⁴⁴Daniel W Hardy, "The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning," *Modern Theology* 22 (July, 2006) 532

⁴⁵Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, pp 3 and 189, n 1

⁴⁶Ibid, chap 1, "Religion," pp 3–21

of significant religious texts. As an exercise in the philosophy of religion, not the least impressive aspect of the book is the way history and religious phenomenology are brought into correlation with spirituality. Insofar as Griffiths is commending a religious account that is rooted in the prayerful rhythms of reading and rereading, he touches very clearly on the same areas that concern the practitioners of CT and SR. As intratextual religious readers they do not make the text another dimension of the world that they seek to control; it is "intrinsically other than the human, ordered independently of it,"⁴⁷ and forever drawing them into its ambit and forming them according to the moral values that are central to its religious account. Religious reading is intended to establish relations between readers and texts "that are at once attitudinal, cognitive, and moral."⁴⁸ Griffiths wants to retrieve the specificity of a type of reading that, paradoxically, does not require writing. It can be (and in its origins was) an oral practice in which the recitation of texts opens up a world of discourse and provokes responses of aesthetic delight and religious wonder:

For religious readers the world is a textualized field of endlessly uncoverable ordered riches. For consumerist readers/writers the world is also textualized; but it is an endlessly constructable field of play, and not just any play, but most especially the free play of signifiers that can be ordered at whim into lightly orgasmic objects of *jouissance*, of sexual or sensual pleasure.⁴⁹

Griffiths' aim is the eradication of religious reading as a significant cultural force in what has become a market-dominated culture. When books are regarded not as entry points into a conceptual and symbolic world of discourse but as part of life's capital, to be consumed and discarded at will, reading is subordinated to the apparently more creative and fulfilling act of *writing*. Books are mined for their content and used to provide information and messages that are to be reinscribed and repackaged. Indeed, in serving the purposes of the controlling market, Griffiths goes so far as to argue that writing acts as a "dominant metaphor" to cover the intellectual practices of late modernity and postmodernity.⁵⁰ The first casualty of this consumerist culture, he suggests, is memory. It is not that writing has made the particular skills involved in memorization unnecessary; rather, a culture that regards texts as repositories of wisdom and meaning has replaced one in which the rhythms of reading give birth to the rhythms of life itself.

Griffiths further considers the role of memory and traditional mnemonic techniques in "ingesting" or "ruminating" on the words of scripture, so that, like Ezekiel's tasting of the prophetic scroll, the reader becomes "incorporated" or "textualized" into their world. He also goes into the complex question of the composition or, more exactly, dictation of commentaries, usually on some canonical text, and the formation of anthologies. Much of the book is given to analyzing the commentarial traditions that have typified Patristic Christianity and

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 45.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 46.

the reading and writing practices of Buddhist India. The object here is to show how religious reading as a prayerful practice of faith is not just a rote recitation but implies a whole set of social and catechetical arrangements that are themselves based in liturgy and worship. Central to Griffiths' argument is a theory of religion as an account of things that is comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central. The stories people tell, the beliefs they hold, the actions they perform—all construct a religious world that is intratextual, interpreted through a single framework in which everything can be made to fit. Thus, religious readers believe that "everything is in the text" but not with the postmoderns that "everything is text." The distinction, says Griffiths, is crucial. The textualized world that religious or reverential reading forms and supports is always other than the community of faith, always acting upon it, and therefore always generative of meaning.

Griffiths' rhetorical point, pitting religious against consumerist reading, needs to be seen in light of the sort of textually based rationality that guides both CT and SR but that, in some circumstances, can easily be subverted by the anxiety to make meanings plain—or "public." He has not ruled out other forms of reading or ignored the need for imaginative reworkings or "translations" of foundational texts. The point is, rather, that, without proper attention to the practice of reading that allows certain foundational texts to go on supporting the life of faith, a community will lack that stimulus to the imagination that makes connections and constructs possible hypotheses. Neither the "exploratory reason" of CT nor the "reparative reason" of SR would be possible without prior attention to the pedagogy that generates the project of translation in the first place. This is not to say that religious reading rules out anything but a strictly intratextual reading of the world; on the contrary, it is precisely attention to the inner "logic of scripture" that makes an extratextual engagement possible. The key point is that for the religious reader the text has a power that is independent of the subject; indeed, it is formative of the subject. In a celebrated lecture on the hermeneutics of revelation, Ricoeur put it like this:

To understand oneself before the text is not to impose one's own finite capacity of understanding on it, but to expose oneself to receive from it a larger self which would be the proposed way of existing that most appropriately responds to the proposed world of the text. Understanding then is the complete opposite of a constitution for which the subject would have the key. It would be better in this regard to say that the self is constituted by the issue of the text.⁵¹

Ricoeur did not, of course, venture into other worlds of religious discourse; the lecture was concerned with the terms of a philosophy of Christian revelation. But, his relentless opposition to the concept of a self-constituting consciousness and his account of the "textuality of faith" raises in particularly sharp fashion the hermeneutical question of the "given" that is somehow inscribed in the text.⁵²

⁵¹Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (January–April, 1977): 30.

⁵²See Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis,

Scripture is not self-interpreting—as if the task were to excise some “hidden” meaning that the writer has set in the text—but *self-questioning*. That is to say, its very existence as an exemplary set of words that communicates the intimacy of a relationship with whatever is taken to have transcendent value provokes communities and individuals to explore “the quality of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text.”⁵³

At the end of his book Griffiths spells out the implications of his thesis for the future of religious reading—questions about spirituality, liturgy, catechetics, the various pedagogical resources that any community needs to give a “religious account.” These are essential for understanding the rich textuality of human living, for obediently traversing the narrative of faith, *and* for stimulating the imagination to see things otherwise. As the proponents of Buddhist theology have discovered, it is possible to retrieve ancient forms of learning *not apart from but precisely through* a very postmodern dialogue with other persons of faith. If, to put it in Christian terms, the issue is about *learning* how to be a reader, the “intra-Christian” question—how to discern the “Word in the words”—cannot be artificially separated from the “extra-Christian”—how to discern the “Word outside the words.” People of faith may begin within a tradition and base their view of things on the reading of particular texts, but, in a world where other peoples’ texts are a familiar feature of a shared sacred landscape, questions that test the theological imagination are not an “added extra” to the religious life but its very heart.

Thus, inquisitive CT specialists, seeking to read Christian texts in dialogue with Buddhist texts, will ask how the *Buddhadharma*, teaching about the life of Enlightenment, speaks also of that process of turning back to God that builds the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Or, thoughtful SR participants, listening to their Muslim colleagues, will want to know how the “recitation” of the Holy Qur’ān by the Muslim community is itself an instance of, as much as a response to, God’s revealing action in the world. Such questions are more than pragmatic questions in the Peircean sense, arising from the desire to repair problems in human relations. However, they are also significantly *less* than the speculative questions that arise from the universalizing instinct of de Nobili and the early Jesuit missionaries. In the first place they are hypotheses about the meaning of religious pluralism—attempts to grasp what God may be saying through the conversations that bring people of faith together. They are thus the fruits of the instinct formed in Griffiths’ religious readers, a learned habit of faith that values the sources of a superabundant wisdom. This is what makes those who practice CT and SR reverential and not consumerist readers. The texts they read, from the strictly canonical to the more allusively poetic and devotional, are treated not as versions of some shared or common truth but as the trace of a community’s relationship with transcendence. Interreligious readers are thus guided by the expectation that meaning is always to be found in the text—even if at this particular moment speculative judgments must remain provisional and the desire to heal broken relations is itself always in need of further

MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 218.

⁵³Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic,” p. 29.

"repair."

Imaginative Reading

My intention in this essay has been to survey two developments within the theology of religions and to assess their significance as specifically interreligious practices of faith. CT and SR share much in common, not least a commitment to reflection on the process of prayerful reading and interpersonal engagement, which has led to the production of an ever-growing academic commentary. In bringing them into dialogue with Griffiths' "jeremiad" I am not suggesting that, as practices rooted in the academy, they are inevitably tarnished with the consumerist label. Indeed, both address more than one of what David Tracy calls "publics"; in the case of SR all three—academy, church, and society. Dissemination of the "results" of the practice to the initiated is only one objective—and arguably the least important. Nevertheless, as anyone involved in interreligious relations at whatever level knows, it is all too easy to collude in an instrumental type of reading in which intratextual categories are projected on to what is strictly external to that thought-world.

The carefully constructed rules and protocols that surround both CT and SR are intended to guard against the danger, always present in any practice of interreligious dialogue, of returning "the other" to the all-dominating interests of "the same." In this regard Hardy's remark about the covert introduction of "third" overarching concepts questions the ease with which supposedly neutral spaces are used to domesticate anything too tradition-specific. While Clooney rarely ventures into such theoretical observations about the distorting effects of interreligious reading, his tendency to write in personal terms, frankly acknowledging his commitments and interests, safeguards his own integrity as well as that of the text he is reading.⁵⁴ Both in different ways make a virtue of their writing out of a version of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic paradigm. That is to say that they demand careful attention to the context of the life-giving practices of worship, pilgrimage, and prayer, which is both expressed in and grows from the text. CT and SR may take their rise from religious reading, but they cannot be reduced to it since the object of the exercise is to draw meaning from the process of interrogating the text. How in that case can one ensure that what is produced, the results of reading, is not just another manifestation of the consumer culture? That question can be put more positively in terms of the relationship between the text that sustains the community of faith and the creative imagination that seeks to understand other texts and other communities. How can one build up a process of imaginative reading in which theological hypotheses about the other are entertained in a spirit of generous yet critical hospitality?

It was Cantwell Smith who talked about bringing into being a "worldwide community" through the influence of persons who are neither external observers nor uncritical participants but mediators capable of moving across boundaries and enacting the patterns of hospitality that make religious communities not

⁵⁴See especially Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, pp. 295 ff.

closed enclaves but welcoming schools of faith.⁵⁵ Truth for Cantwell Smith was as much a "function of persons" as a function of propositions; or, to put it another way, personal integrity builds a capacity to discern and clarify the sources of wisdom, what Peirce might have called the "habit of reading."⁵⁶ Both CT and SR demand such mediators, but that is only to say that a dialogue between religions understood in "cultural-linguistic" rather than propositional or experiential terms means that attention needs to be paid to pedagogy, the forms of teaching and learning that are implied in the practice.

It may seem paradoxical that, by grounding the work of reasoning in strictly confessional "cultural-linguistic" paradigms, CT and SR open up rather than close down the potential for a genuinely interreligious reading. However, there is nothing intrinsically "exclusivist" or "inclusivist" in theological traditions that seek to be faithful to the interpretative categories of a tradition. Indeed, CT and SR hold in common both a suspicion of simplistic accounts of modern liberal pluralism and a refusal of rigidly tradition-centered judgments of the other. The "logic of scripture," as expounded by Ochs and practiced in SR (and in an analogous fashion in the close textual reading commended by CT), opens up a different possibility, one based on a distinction—mirroring that between reverential and consumerist forms of readings—between the common or neutral ground that modernity seeks to construct and the space of meeting within which persons of faith find themselves before the text. If there is a "third," it is the imaginative reading that grows from the reverential and subverts the pretensions of the consumerist.

The wisdom inscribed in texts is not a "message" in any binary sense—such and such a passage generating such and such a sign. This leaves out of account the lifelong practices of learning that have formed the interpreting community—and the hermeneutical pondering to which life-before-the-text gives rise. Soaking oneself in a religious wisdom is not an act of cultural isolation; it provokes a tentative but imaginative leap from what is known to what is strictly unknown but vaguely sensed. What the comparative theologian Clooney refers to as an act of "intuition," trusting an instinct to follow, the scriptural reasoner Ochs talks about as "abduction," a Peircean term that refers to the experience of being drawn into a process of repair. Neither is an example of Hardy's "mediating paradigm," which is interposed between the intratextual and the extratextual. Different traditions of faith remain in their proper integrity. The point, of course, is that the very desire to understand effects a new correlation, one that in refusing shortcuts and accommodations opens up a space for a properly interpersonal engagement. It is the text—and all that the text stands for in terms of the practices that sustain faith—that catalyses the religious imagination.

⁵⁵Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London: Macmillan; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 59 ff.

⁵⁶Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "A Human View of Truth," in John Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), pp. 20–44.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.