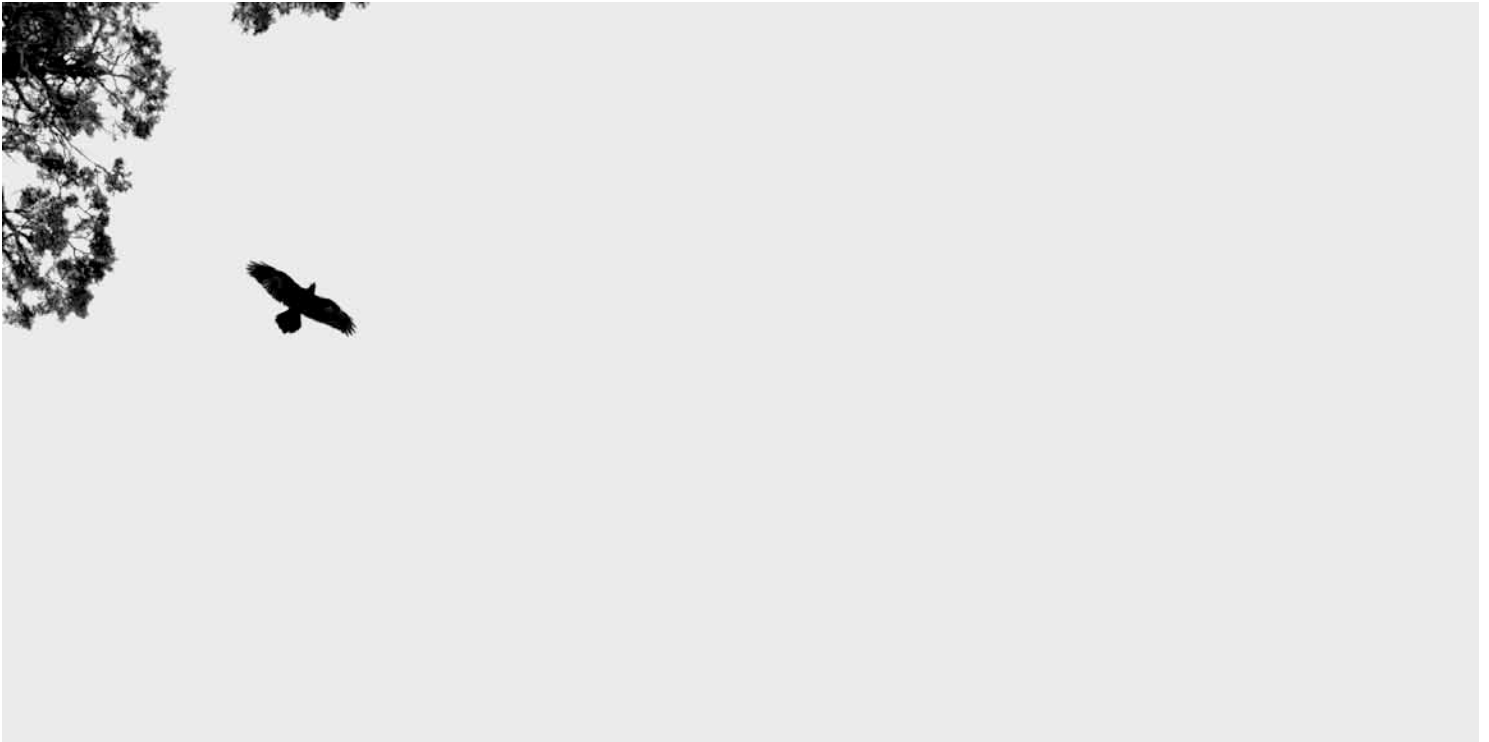




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It is with great excitement that we publish this premiere issue of the *Journal of Comparative Theology*. We hope that this publication will serve as an accessible and constructive venue for sharing research within the flourishing academic sphere of comparative theology, which to date has lacked a central organ for the collection and dissemination of comparative theological discourse. Although several prestigious journals publish articles relating to the field, the *Journal of Comparative Theology* will remain exclusively dedicated to this burgeoning discipline and its emerging scholarly community.

The subject of this issue was stated in the form of a question: "Why comparative theology today?" This growing field is blossoming for a reason, and we sought input from a variety of voices as to why and how the discipline is taking shape. We believe that the three articles published do so in unique ways.

Samuel J. Youngs argues in *The Frontier of Comparative Theology* that contemporary pluralism as an international phenomenon is definitively changing the ways in which scholars study religion and theology. Youngs begins by examining three approaches to religion by drawing upon New Religious Movements, the "New Atheist" response to 911, and Peter Berger's "counterpluralist animus"--that is, increasing pluralism has led to the strengthening of fundamentalism. How have these three approaches, in turn, affected the ways in which scholars study religion and theology today? While suggesting that academia ought to move beyond the typically Christian ways of studying theology and religion and while advocating for a sympathetic approach to the study of "other" religions, Youngs argues that the emerging discipline of Comparative Theology--where the "scholar reaches out from their own faith tradition ... in order to intentionally and sympathetically interact and exchange with other systems of theological belief in a comparative way"--is a positive response to the complex realities of the twenty-first century.

Locating himself in the academy, Benjamin B. DeVan struggles to carve out space for the contentious “bridge” of theological comparison. In so doing, he rubs up against the contours of the study of religion itself: its murky identity, its deep subjectivity, its definitional politics of exclusion and its cross-disciplinary fluidity. Acknowledging this ever-shifting terrain, DeVan nevertheless finds solid footing in the comparativist camp. On his view, the very act of comparative theology opens up the possibility for a richer appreciation of self and Other in their respective journeys of faith. Prizing this mutual sharpening as a vehicle for enhancing “our capacity to love and enjoy God,” DeVan unapologetically invests the discipline with pronounced theological commitment – a position often met with alarm, even derision, by the professed neutrality of secular academia.

In *Comparative Theology as a Devotional Practice*, AnnMarie Micikas looks at the tension between common and particular notions of truth in Buddhist and Christian traditions. Drawing upon two Buddhist thinkers, she employs this distinction as a framework for discussing culturally and linguistically informed realities against concepts of “universal” truth. Micikas then compares these ideas to several biblical passages on the relationship between human limitation and divine revelation. She posits that Comparative Theology may be particularly valuable as a devotional practice for Christians seeking to continually deepen their sense of humility and reach outside of their own particularities, such that they may expand their vocabularies and enrich their ways of thinking and meditating upon religious truth.

This premiere issue was unique in that we had asked scholars to submit articles that addressed a specific topic of inquiry. However, moving forward, the journal will be open to rolling submissions of articles that fall within the field of comparative theology. These include unique scholarship, research, book reviews, and critical responses to previously published articles. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of another issue that is focused on a certain topic. Please see the website (www.comparativetheology.org) for further information.

Finally, we would like to thank Francis X. Clooney for his valuable support and encouragement in moving forward with this journal.

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The Frontier of Comparative Theology

BY SAMUEL J. YOUNGS

Religious climates are rarely static, and the flux of religious materials, manifestations and attitudes has generated difficulty in identifying a method of religious study and dialogue which is able to speak to all areas of faith and practice. Though theology and comparative religion have been utilized with varying degrees of efficacy, modern attitudes of religious approach and issues of interreligious encounter have revealed some of their deficiencies. This study will explore some of these modern religious approaches, treat theology and comparative religion in light of them, and articulate the value of a comparative theological approach as an alternative. The end goal shall be to demonstrate that comparative theology provides a way of study and interaction which is desirable not just as an assemblage of modifications to the approaches of theology and comparative religion, but as a needed way of speaking to the concurrently engaging and volatile times in which we live.

Creativity, Tension, Contrast: Three Approaches to Religion

Religious pluralism as an international phenomenon saw a tremendous spike during the globally-active period subsequent to World War II. In the United States, unprecedented immigration allowed non-Christian religions to establish themselves and flourish.ⁱ The pluralistic *Zeitgeist* in America was further compounded by the

vibrant explosion of religious curiosity and innovation in the 60s and 70s, bearing witness to an increased focus on Far Eastern and other Asian religions, a substantial growth of Islam, and surges in missionary impetus within various Christian denominations.ⁱⁱ In short, *contra* the eventual “end-of-religion” that was prognosticated near the turn of the 20th century (e.g. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*), religious formation was booming. NRMs (New Religious Movements) proliferated, especially in America, where syncretic and/or original NRMs continue to be born apace. This atmosphere of curiosity and pluralism proffers several challenges and opportunities for religious dialogue today, raising questions of practical theology, sociology of religion, divergent and/or derivative faith systems, and philosophical questions of religious authority and actuality.

A second, far more combative, approach to religion has also gained stock in the more recent Western intellectual economy. The tragic events of 9/11 sprung a floodgate of anti-religious rhetoric on the part of several prominent naturalists and humanists, a handful of the more prolific having now been dubbed the “new atheists.” While it is true that 9/11 sharpened Western awareness of fundamentalist (or “strong”) faith systems,ⁱⁱⁱ the New Atheism has interpreted the event as an indication of the detrimental potentiality of religion as a whole (though, on balance, the Abrahamic systems have received their fullest attention). Other acts of violence, historical tensions, scientific discourse, and a vigorously humanistic ethos have also been leveraged, with varying degrees of validity, against religious and theological concerns by the New Atheist movement.^{iv} This vocal outside tension has defined another series of important concerns: the relation of religion to secular culture, religious ethics, and theological anthropology. The lambency of the New Atheism has also engendered tension with religious concerns as a whole, and sometimes with the theological project specifically.^v

The third strand of religious approach has been placed last in this overview owing to its relation to the previous two. This approach is best understood as strong religion defining itself anew amongst mounting secular and religious pressures.^{vi} The wake of modernity has caused reactionary strains in established, absolutist categories of religion, which often see modern culture as “the common denominator of outside forces.”^{vii} Further, the invigoration of pluralism has served to generate what Peter Berger terms a “counterpluralist animus,” a reactionary phase wherein stronger theologies define themselves by contrast to emergent and coercive outer trends.^{viii} This contrast vibrancy causes these particular religions to augment their theological pronouncements, more vigorously defend their absolutist beliefs, and makes them a significant factor in both theological and sociological engagement. The

New Atheism, of course, is yet another modern current against which strong religious movements have grown restive.

Theology and Comparative Religion

In light of these pivotal ripples in the religious climate of the West, the methods of studying religion—notably theology and comparative religion—must be examined with fresh insight. Theology, the study of God-concepts and resulting doctrine of a particular faith from within that particular faith (being perhaps most fully developed as a Christian discipline) has a rich tapestry of scholastic, philosophical, and devotional history. Both lay adherents and clergy stand to benefit from their own theological systems. However, attempts on the part of theologians to adequately encounter other faith systems have often been one-sided and superficial treatments at best and polemics at worst. Even Christian historians-of-religion can encounter methodological complications if an attempt is made to apply a “Christian hermeneutic” to their studies.^{ix} Donald Wiebe and theologian Paul Tillich have denounced the partisan tendencies of—usually Christian—theology’s approach to religious plurality.^x

Comparative religion involves its own procedural obstacles. Explaining religion in a scientific manner was initially viewed as a way of studying the phenomena apart from one’s own religious commitments; however, the history of the discipline has demonstrated that anti-religious sentiments have found no shortage of scholarly association nor material with which to work. This dichotomy of approach was illustrated even in the nascence of the field, in the opposition between thinkers like Max Müller and E.B. Tylor.^{xi} For those scholars who attempt to be sympathetic in their approach, the functionalist tendency of much religious studies methodology can be problematic, since such approaches tend to neglect religious experience, the believers’ own apprehension of their religious structures, and the philosophical aspects of religious interaction. The functionalism of Freud, Marx, Durkheim and others, though their excesses are avoided by some modern scholarship, has served to invigorate atheistic arguments against religion.^{xii} (A demonstrable modern example is Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*.^{xiii}) The evolutionary framework of certain theories of religion has also been used to fortify anti-religious agendas.^{xiv} Further, modern scholars of religion can exhibit disdain of the “religious study of religion,” preferring to work in purely reductionist/functionalist categories,^{xv} despite this approach’s propensity for arming anti-religion polemicists and its lack of applicability to the interreligious encounters provided by the presence of both strong faiths and religious pluralism.^{xvi}

From Phenomenology to Comparative Theology

Substantive and/or phenomenological appropriations of the study of religion deserve to be noted for their attempts to re-balance the difficulties of both the theological and scientific approaches to religion. Phenomenology has sought to interact with faith forms “as they appear” without diminishing them into purely functional categories.^{xvii} Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* stands as one of the foremost examples of this method. However, this way of engaging religion also carries a potential difficulty: the emergence of a soft methodological universalism.^{xviii} Assuming that the “the absolute” or the “the numinous” is a universal religious category which all religions attain to in all their forms is nearly as much of an assumptive impediment as over-emphasizing functionalism.^{xix} On an interactive level, this type of assumption places a natural wedge in the study of strong religions which maintain an exclusivist outlook, as the scholar’s presupposition will run counter to one of the religion’s core tenets.

Into this intersecting mix of methods has come the emerging discipline of comparative theology, wherein a religious scholar or theologian reaches out from their own faith tradition—without denying that tradition—in order to intentionally and sympathetically interact and exchange with other systems of theological belief in a comparative way. The value and insight to be gained from comparative analysis is thus not lost, as in pure theology, and underlying theological commitments are not sequestered away for the purpose of scholarly work, as in the science of religion. The work of John Carman is a key illustration of a comparative method that empathizes while remaining rooted in a strong theological framework and suffering no deficit of strong scholarship.^{xx} Carman’s methodology owes much to phenomenologists like Otto, Kristensen, and van der Leeuw, and acknowledges that it is “seeking understanding through comparison,”^{xxi} which could perhaps be considered the key trait of the comparative theological method. The fruits of other disciplines are not ignored in this framework, for, as Kristensen recognized, a balance must be struck between the findings of comparative religion, through which we gain knowledge of the practices and beliefs of other faiths, and phenomenology, by which we enter into sympathetic interaction.^{xxii} Traces of comparative theological method in recent scholarship can also be seen in works by comparative religionist Geoffrey Parrinder and Christian theologian Timothy Tennent. Though neither of these scholars are comparative theologians *per se*, the method’s temperament can be perceived in their approaches to certain material.^{xxiii}

The Utility of Comparative Theology in Light of Modern Religious Attitudes

In bringing the method of comparative theology to bear on the three modern religious currents discussed earlier, several key potentialities and applications may be addressed. Concerning NRMs (and even emergent trends in established bodies of faith), it deserves to be noted that these quickly arising and occasionally radical communities of belief have often been subjected to rather acute prejudice, not solely by traditional religions, but also by the larger secular community.^{xxiv} This reactionary strain owes its vitality, in part, to the fact that NRMs, besides exemplifying religious curiosity and invention, can also be illustrative of various societal tensions or forces; that is, NRMs are often indications of a “religious, social, and cultural dynamism.”^{xxv} This particularity entails that one of the more incisive ways to approach NRMs is through the sociological study of religion. However, a purely sociological methodology has often generated the same pronounced, reductionist tendencies as the general comparative trends which were examined above.^{xxvi} While the social sciences can certainly provide valuable insight, comparative theology can effectively mingle the benefits of this and other disciplines in light of a religious and theological temperance which both empathizes and dialogues with emergent movements.

In the examination of “emergent pluralism,” insights also stand to be gained from applying impressions from the philosophy of religion, in particular the study of religious ethics and epistemology. Where do NRMs and related groups locate their authority and truth centers and, perhaps more importantly, what is the theological basis for this structuring? How do they view differing religious and cultural climates and what are the societal impact of their views and actions? Both of these questions—besides a good many more that could be posed—are swathed with implications for philosophy of religion, sociology, and theology. However, comparative theology can allocate a door of understanding, critical assessment, and dialogue which these disciplines cannot generate in isolated application.^{xxvii} The emergent creativity of a pluralistic culture thus stands to be edified and refined through comparative theological exchange, where new ideas and instances of syncretism can be examined in a non-combative way and the strengths of multiple methods can be brought to bear.

The New Atheism has entrenched itself with somewhat startling aplomb in both the popular and, to some extent, the academic colloquy of the West. The fact that “religion,” as broadly and vaguely construed, has contributed a due series of woes to the history of humanity is probably beyond dispute, and is not a fact that a comparative theological approach should seek to shirk. However, there is no good reason to think that the “rationalist fundamentalism,”

as James K.A. Smith has aptly put it, of the New Atheism, with its blatant and sometimes philosophically jumbled attack on faith in all form and aspect,^{xxviii} is the appropriate or prudent reaction to these facts. However, though descriptions of the movement's shortfalls and defects have been leveled,^{xxix} the benefits of the New Atheism for religious interaction should not be missed. Virulent "atheology" can, admittedly, be abrasive when on the prowl, but it can also provide a valuable mirror for both the religious adherent and the scholar of religion to examine potentially deleterious theological suppositions and instances of impropriety masked by faith. Such insights, if developed critically, stand to be appropriated by a comparative theological approach that values honest intellectualism and critique. But such insights should be dealt with by, again, a dialogical and sympathetic approach to the faiths in question, and not as ammunition for a salvo of bombastic polemic.

In making use of insights from naturalistic perspectives, vigilance should also be practiced so that forces like the New Atheism, or those strongly influenced by them, are not allowed to strip all uniqueness and nuance from religion as "mythological" remnants not worthy of the modern world. The traditions, writings, and history of the world's faiths must be allowed integrity if truly academic and constructive encounter is to take place.^{xxx} Retaining a keen sense of the unique facets of world faith is necessary if the comparisons and contextual categories formed by the discipline are to have any conceptual potency or, for that matter, relevance. The assumed truths of religion should, in the emphasis of fair study, be treated with the believer's perspective foremost in concern, rather than any humanistic agenda; indeed, thoroughgoing naturalists would do well to note Slavoj Žižek's assertion, "[A] true atheist has no need to boost his own stance by provoking believers with blasphemy."^{xxxi} With such considerations in mind, comparative theology stands to ease the tensions presented by the New Atheism and related groups by offering honest, but non-capitulatory, analyses of deep theological concepts and the ways in which they are appropriated in cultural encounters.

Perhaps one of the more important aspects of comparative theology is the fact that the vibrancy of "strong" religion, even if held to on the part of the comparative theological scholar, will not be compromised as a demand of the discipline's methodology. While this is not free license for apologetics or propaganda masked as scholarship, it does free the scholar from a constant pull toward "methodological dishonesty" and take advantage of the potential insights offered as religions are studied and compared by scholars who are themselves religious. Comparative theology can also (taking a prompt from phenomenology of religion) study strong faiths "as they are": utterly convicted, soaked in a variety of ritual and tradition, and

firmly anchored by their theological outlooks. These faiths offer some of the best material with which comparative theological work can be done, for the positions held to by these religions are constructions of often grand metaphysical import that have been bolstered by, in many cases, centuries of learned thought, philosophical shouldering, and pious nuance. Many faiths of this kind are present in the United States, and it is their convictions and ardent spheres of religious expression which lend the spiritual topography of this nation such remarkable diversity.^{xxxii} The study of strong religion is of utmost importance, and comparative theology can encounter these systems on their own terms.

However, the fact also remains that strong faiths now inhabit a pluralized world where interaction and dialogue with other strong faiths, as well as the inevitable splintering and fragmentation of previously cohesive belief systems, must be dealt with. Many adherents to strong religion are not dialogical with, or even particularly curious about, other faith systems. The trends of faith-to-faith interaction have primarily oscillated between two extremes: (1) *absolutism*, which flatly condemns all other bodies of belief, to the detriment of any potential for real engagement and understanding and (2) *relativism*, where previous proponents of strong religion or religious dabblers compose a worldview which flattens or rejects all unique religious elements and teachings, rendering all faiths equally palatable to personal taste. Comparative theology stands in the rarified position of being able to thread this delicate needle, neither advocating any one religion in an absolutist manner nor reducing faith into a colorless and impotent stew of variegated functionalisms. Strong religion can be allowed to express its fullest measure of difference and tradition, and comparative theology should not wilt in the face of (a) evaluating and comparing belief-systems in the light of other religions and (b) allowing each religion to shine its singular emphases upon other faiths,^{xxxiii} whether this be in the form of the Christian *kerygma*, Buddhist *dharma*, or any other core of religious orientation. These considerations allow comparative theology, besides being an academic field in its own right, to provide avenues of discussion and reflection in and among committed faith systems. But the dialogue fostered should be “a critical dialogue, in which all religions are challenged not simply to justify everything, but to deliver their best and most profound message.”^{xxxiv}

This wide range of utility amid the many tides of the modern religious climate demonstrates how comparative theology can serve as a potent force in both interreligious encounter and academic examinations of faith. In contrast to the tendency in scholarship toward a bias against traditional religion,^{xxxv} and against the still-strong pull of secularization dismantling many aspects of shared cultural memory, communal heritage, and religious tradition,^{xxxvi}

comparative theology is gathering on the modern frontier as a discipline which allows for a “ledge of singularities” in religious expression. At a time when phenomenology of religion has entered a period of “dormancy”^{xxxvii} and the scientific study of religion is seeking to “reestablish” itself,^{xxxviii} there is a prominent need for a methodology which can both critically study and sympathetically approach religious manifestations and communities. Comparative theology fills this void by treating religious faith as a phenomenon which pulses with both traditional meaning and significance for the modern world. The comparative theological approach thus distinguishes itself by not seeing key differences in religious belief and practice as something to be forced into an evolutionary theory or functionalistic armature, nor to be subsumed beneath an all-encompassing universalism, but as unique examples of living theology, which we all stand to learn from and be challenged by.

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ⁱ Christopher Patridge, *New Religions: A Guide* (Oxford, 2004), 14-15.

ⁱⁱ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America* (Yale, 2003), 222-224; J. Gordon Melton, “The Fate of NRMs and their Detractors in Twenty-First Century America,” in *New Religious Movements in the 21st Century*, eds. Philip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 229-231.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gabriel A. Almond et al, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism Around the World* (Chicago, 2003), 5-6.

^{iv} See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Geneva: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*. (Hachette, 2007); on the parallels made by New Atheists between religion and violence/terrorism, note John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 1-2, 7.

^v E.g. Dawkins, 33-37, 54-61, et al.

^{vi} For perhaps the best recent sociological analysis and definition of strong religion, see Almond et al.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 37-38, see also 30-33.

^{viii} Hutchison, 220, 225-227.

^{ix} See Kees W. Bolle, “History of Religions with a Hermeneutic Oriented Toward Christian Theology?” in *The History of Religions: Essays on the Problem of Understanding*, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago, 1967), esp. 110-111.

^x Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago, 1955), 2-4.

^{xi} See Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (Oxford, 2006), 10.

^{xii} Julia Mitchell Corbett, *Religion in America* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), 310-311.

^{xiii} Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

^{xiv} Haught, ix-x.

^{xv} E.g. Sam Gill, "The Academic Study of Religion," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXII/4 1994, esp. 965-970.

^{xvi} On the difficulty of reductionist theories for believers, see Pals, 316.

^{xvii} On the history of religious phenomenology and some of the key considerations, see Carl Olsen, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 101-105.

^{xviii} Examples abound, but for a representative look see Friedrich Heiler, "The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Co-operation of Religions," in *History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, eds. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago, 1959).

^{xix} For a look at this critique and others of phenomenology of religion, as well as some possible responses to the critiques, see Thomas Ryba, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Blackwell, 2006), 114-117.

^{xx} See John Carman, *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

^{xxi} For further elucidation of Carman's method and influences, see *ibid.*, 19-38.

^{xxii} W. Brede Kristensen, "On the Study of Religious Phenomena (excerpt from his *The Meaning of Religion*)," in *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Gruyter, 1999), 90-97.

^{xxiii} E.g. Parrinder's book *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), which focuses primarily on Christianity and Hinduism, shows great appreciation for the spectrum of theological sentiment and data of the respective traditions. Tennent's *Theology in the Context of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), while ultimately missiological in focus, shows thorough learning and a non-reductionist look at non-Christian faiths systems.

^{xxiv} For a thorough analysis of NRMs and differing societal and religious reactions to them, see John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

^{xxv} Saliba, 109.

^{xxvi} For one of the best short treatments of elitist and reductionist strains in the field of sociology of religion, see Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 1-13.

^{xxvii} Pure theology, originating within an established faith tradition such as Christianity, has often tried an apologetic-focused approach to engaging NRMs, which can lead to various attendant difficulties, see Saliba, 182-183.

^{xxviii} For instance, Richard Dawkins' insistence that "theists" have not had their respective "consciousnesses raised" by Darwinism, as manifested by their attempts to merge the idea of God with an evolutionary framework; Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 114-119, esp. 118-119.

^{xxix} See four theological critiques/approaches to the New Atheism surveyed by D. Stephen Long, "Atheism's Resurgence and Christian Responses," in *God is Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Myself: Theological Engagements with the New Atheism*, eds. Andrew David et al. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), xv-xxi.

^{xxx} *Contra*, for instance, Thomas White, "Profane Holiness: Why the New Atheism is (Partially) Good for True Spirituality and Religion," *Crosscurrents* (Dec. 2009): esp. 551-553.

^{xxxi} Quoted in Lang, "Atheism's Resurgence," xiv.

^{xxxii} See William Scott Green, "Religion and Society in America," in *World Religions in America* (3rd edition), ed. Jacob Neusner (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 319-320.

^{xxxiii} These two points are informed by Hans Küng's stipulations for interreligious dialogue, though his focus is solely on Christianity; see Hans Küng et al. *Christianity and World Religions*, trans. Peter Heinegg (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), xvii-xviii.

^{xxxiv} Kung et al, xviii.

^{xxxv} See Stark and Finke, 19-20.

^{xxxvi} For an insightful discussion describing these elements and their impact on the practice of faith, see Ronald A. Kuipers, "Faith as the Art of the Possible: Invigorating Religious Tradition in an Amnesiac Society," in *God is Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Myself*, 145-156, esp. 147-150.

^{xxxvii} Ryba, "Phenomenology of Religion," 119.

^{xxxviii} On modern difficulties in the field, concerning both method and identity, see the short piece by Donald Wiebe, "Religious Studies: Toward reestablishing the field," *Religion* 39 (2009): 372-375.



As Iron Sharpens Iron, So Does One Religious Tradition Sharpen Another

BY BENJAMIN B. DEVAN

“Why Comparative Theology Today?” Because, to modify Proverbs 27:17, as iron sharpens iron, so does one religious tradition sharpen another. But why is such sharpening valuable? If religion and theology are themselves frivolous, then Comparative Theology is trivial as a bridge, subspecialty, or third discipline employing other religious traditions to refine one’s own; or utilizing disparate doctrines to filter gold from theological dross; or for evaluating, incorporating, synthesizing, and organizing insights from multiple religions while attempting to do “justice to the basic commitments of all.”ⁱ

As a former religion and humanities university instructor, presently a Harvard Th.M. student, I am regularly adjured by the inquisitive and incredulous as to why anyone, especially students grudgingly registered to meet a curriculum requirement, should study religion or theology at all.ⁱⁱ

First, I point out that it is impossible to do justice to any major religious tradition simply by taking a course, reading a book, declaring a major, enrolling in seminary, or earning a Ph.D. Any of these may supply fertilizer for lifelong rumination, but numerous volumes are published explicating thousands of theological themes barely mentioned, let alone surveyed, in most college, university, or seminary modules and seminars. Nevertheless, completing an undergraduate class or sifting through theological tomes yields a

sampler taste of the greater feast within the study of religion, a banquet enhanced by a useful menu, talented academic chefs, and the desire to cultivate an astute sense of taste.

Second, religion is difficult to define. Wilfred Cantwell Smith doubts "religion" is a valid category for describing non-European beliefs, rituals and values, since it is a term originating in Europe and applied, Smith avows, haphazardly to non-European cultures and contexts.ⁱⁱⁱ Feminist Rita Gross is more optimistic about quantifying religion but cautions, "Everyone has an intuitive sense of what is meant by the concept of religion, but these definitions are often limited by ethnocentrism. They often assume...all religions are...like religion in one's own culture."^{iv}

Religion has been classified as the voice of deepest human experience, behaviors concerned with supernatural beings and forces, the longing for or encounter with the transcendent numinous, a feeling of absolute dependence, a taste for the infinite, and the chief fact regarding a person's practical beliefs about, "vital relations to the mysterious universe, and...duty and destiny there."^v The Dalai Lama suggests all the major religions are "dedicated to the achievement of permanent human happiness."^{vi} Gandhi believed, "In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals."^{vii} G.K. Chesterton, later echoed more famously by Paul Tillich, wrote that religion is one's sense of "ultimate reality," of whatever meaning someone finds in his or her own existence, or the existence of anything else.^{viii}

A concurrent controversy is what counts as religion and what does not. Is Atheism the religious belief that there is no God?^{ix} What about political philosophies like Communism, where humankind or the state is deemed ultimate? Are sports with fervent rituals, rules, loyalties, and "idols," religions?^x Comparative Theology clarifies such queries by investigating religion's multivalent manifestations and inspecting the potentially theological nature of ideas and actions that less attentive onlookers or participants casually compartmentalize as secular or irrelevant to religion.

Third, because religion eludes easy definition, its boundaries are notoriously ambiguous and porous, interweaving issues from anthropology, archaeology, the arts, cosmology, ethics, history, literature, philosophy, politics, psychology, sociology, and even theoretical physics.^{xi} According to Christopher Dawson, "The great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest."^{xii} Thus, Comparative Theology equips us to appreciate richness in history and culture we might otherwise miss. From the poetry of John Donne to the majesty of the Taj Mahal, to the intricacies of Indian dance:

One cannot study themes of art or forms of architecture without some reference to the impetus provided by religion...one cannot learn about music and poetry without somehow noting the influence

of religious inspiration. History, sociology, and anthropology cannot be taught or interpreted without consideration of religious customs and practices...psychology without reference to religion as a force that motivates, regulates, influences, and even directs...behavior...is almost impossible.^{xiii}

Comparative Theology in this sense is worthwhile even for atheists, since it does not automatically entail endorsing the theologies it compares any more than researching racism makes one racist, or taking art history necessitates daubing paint to canvas ourselves. Will Deming elaborates:

For the religious, the study of religion can give one a deeper appreciation for his or her own religious tradition...It also enables a person to articulate his or her tradition better to others, either to edify one's own group or for purposes of evangelism or interfaith dialogue. For both the religious and the nonreligious—the atheist, the agnostic, or the comfortably uninterested—an appreciation of religion gives one insight into dealing with religious people of all sorts.^{xiv}

Gary Kessler recognizes religion as *"a force that influences for good or for ill, the lives of practically everyone who is alive.* So much of human history and culture remains a mystery if we cannot comprehend the role religion has played and continues to play in the development of human institutions, values, and behavior."^{xv} For example, "American culture...cannot be fully understood without knowing something about the role that Christianity played in shaping its political, judicial, and educational institutions, not to mention...individual freedom and human rights...religious ideas were used to promote the destruction of indigenous peoples and to end it, to promote slavery and to stop it."^{xvi}

Karen Farrington likewise extols, "In his darkest hour it has taken more than food and water to sustain benighted man. Religion has been his comforter, his prop, his reason for existing."^{xvii} Comparative Theology strives to ascertain why, in what way, and to what end.

Fourth, while it has been said one ought not to talk politics, sex, or religion in polite society, Comparative Theology concerns politics, sex, *and* religion! Studying themes that matter intensely is enlightening and invigorating, yet it can evoke strong emotions by touching on topics intensely personal.

Unlike some religion professors, I am repulsed by university and self-appointed faith-terminators who "shoot to kill" students' religious beliefs. Most students have few tools and limited time to winnow wheat from chaff flung by hostile, heavily armed authority figures. I hope religious and secular students alike find their preconceptions challenged by religious and theological inquiry (cf. James 1:2-5), but while spiritual depth is a worthy goal for Comparative Theology, spiritual death is not. In the words of Alex

Shand and (purportedly) Cardinal John Henry Newman, universities and Comparative Theology within and beyond ought to be where, "mind clashes with mind, and sparks of brilliant intelligence are set flying, as from the sharp contact of flint striking upon steel."^{xviii} Or, to use two complimentary metaphors, Comparative Theology ought to serve as a womb for nurturing seeds of creativity and a marketplace for confronting, analyzing, and ultimately accepting or rejecting ideas.^{xix}

Father Francis Clooney contends that when we practice Comparative Theology, "If we choose to remain in our original tradition, remaining is now a real choice made in light of real alternatives."^{xx} Even so, such variables must be balanced with vulnerability inherent to subjecting personal beliefs to scrutiny and mutually seeing ourselves as others see us.^{xxi} As W.B. Yeats poeticized:

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.^{xxii}

If the fear or awe or reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10), then comparing notes and collaborating with past and present God-fearers from every nation, tribe, and tongue (Revelation 5:9-10, 7:9, 14:6) is a productive subsequent step whereby Comparative Theology gathers the spiritual "wealth of nations" (Isaiah 66:12). If all truth is God's truth and has its source in the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:17), we must be free to explore it.^{xxiii} St. Augustine said, "Every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he finds truth, it is his Lord's."^{xxiv} Process theologian John Cobb concurs, "Hebrews were not (always) faithless to Yahweh when they adopted and adapted from Egyptians and Persians," nor are Christians necessarily faithless if they adopt or adapt wisdom from science or "Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and primal peoples."^{xxv}

Lack of faith expresses itself in fear of being affected by the wisdom of other communities. If we trust Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we have no reason to fear that truth from any source will undercut our faith. Indeed, we have every reason to believe that all truth, wisdom and reality cohere in him...faith in Jesus Christ encourages and even requires us to assimilate into our tradition what others have learned...It is incumbent upon us as Christians to transform ourselves by being open to this wisdom and goodness and learning all we can from it. It is also incumbent upon Christians to

share the saving wisdom that we have derived from our own tradition. Listening to others and witnessing to them are not in conflict; in fact, as we are transformed by what we learn from others, our witnessing may become far more convincing to them.^{xxvi}

Gerald R. McDermott, author of *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* and *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions?* demonstrates to Christian Evangelicals and others:

The religions are good for theology. God uses the religions to teach the church deeper insight into the meaning of Christ...We saw this even in the Bible...It may be that some of today's religions portray aspects of the Divine mystery that the Bible does not equally emphasize: for example, the Qur'an's sense of the divine majesty and transcendence...Hindu traditions...remind Christians of God's immanence when deistic tendencies have obscured it. Theravadin Buddhists may be able to show...dimensions of the fallen ego that will shed greater light on what Paul meant by "the old man." Philosophical Daoists may have insights into nonaction that can help Christians better understand "waiting on God." Confucius's portrayal of virtue may open new understandings of radical discipleship...I am not saying these...(are not taught) in the Bible...But many of us...see them less clearly than we could...God used Aristotle to shed light for Thomas Aquinas on certain aspects of Christ and life with him...Peter learned from Cornelius's religious experience and heard God's word through him.^{xxvii}

Paul F. Knitter goes even farther: *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian.*^{xxviii} Mega-church pastor Joel Hunter insinuates that Christians and Muslims are necessary complements for each other.^{xxix} Not all Comparative Theologians will go so far, but a vigorous Comparative Theologian contemplates Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha's teachings in order to be (or become) a better Hindu, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Parsi, Sikh, or Baha'i, and to illuminate Comparative Theology itself.

For example, in context, the Buddha's teaching in the Samyuttaka (or Samyutta) Nikaya, a Pali text, indicates reticence in sharing unhelpful truths, but the metaphor the Buddha uses can be adapted to illustrate why examining "leaves" from assorted trees in the religious forest is essential to theology. When the Buddha was staying at Kosambi in a Sinsapa-forest, he took a few leaves in hand, "What do you think, my disciples: which is more, these few leaves I hold, or the other leaves in the wood and the trees above and around us? As the leaves of the forest are more numerous than those in my hand, so are the leaves of truth I have not communicated to you in proportion with those I have communicated."^{xxx}

In the Bible, "Israel" means "God wrestler," or "wrestler with God and humanity" (Genesis 32:28). Comparative Theology correspondingly wrestles with a variety of religious convictions. Even

if a Comparative Theologian does not rejoice or agree with every concept of the Divine, she acknowledges that error illumines truth by contrast, just as “geocentrists taught heliocentrists certain things” even though geocentrists were wrong in their overall interpretation of the data.^{xxxii}

Even the Comparative Theologian who perceives particular religions as profoundly mistaken can aver with C.S. Lewis, “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”^{xxxiii} But to answer bad philosophy, one must be alert to it and simultaneously vigilant to one’s own propensity to be blinded and hobbled by it. What at first blush may appear to be a strange ritual or dastardly doctrine could contain subtle perspicacity or Divine prompts eliciting holy yearning.^{xxxiii} Gerald R. McDermott comments, “Religions may be inspired in part by other powers, but God has not abandoned whole cultures to perdition and untruth. God is still at work, using even distorted truth to teach truth. And his Spirit is still actively leading individuals within the religions to draw closer to himself.”^{xxxiv} As the Apostle Paul proclaimed in Athens, “God let all nations go their own way, yet has not left himself without witness” (Acts 14:17).

Flourishing Comparative Theology thus demands unfettered, vibrant exchange of ideas. It must embrace dialogue and celebrate passionately the advice of the *Rig Veda*, “may noble thoughts (or auspicious powers) come to us from every side” (1.89.1) along with the aphorisms attributed to Confucius, “Let three walk together and there I will find instruction. For what is good in them I will follow, and what is not good I will try to modify or reform in myself” (*The Analects* 7.21) and Voltaire, “I (may) disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”^{xxxv}

The task for Comparative Theology is not to sew etymological straitjackets to make theology more manageable, but to stretch prevailing categories and forge the Infinite frontier. Instead of perpetually marching in lockstep, Comparative Theology nourishes innovation, hopefully—though not inevitably for the better. Active dialogue with practitioners and dissenters, and harvesting the fruits of interchange is crucial to all study, including Comparative Theology. Comparative Theology will also consider the musings of those who dismiss religion as nonsense. Sparring with atheists, agnostics, and anti-theists enlivens theological acuity. Cardinal Bonomi alleged, “The best way to beat the heretics is not to deserve their criticisms,”^{xxxvi} but maybe the best way to engage “heretics” or “apostates” is to learn via reciprocal probing of merits and flaws.

Additional incentives for Comparative Theology are curiosity, enjoyment, awe, and the quest for beauty and truth. As Philip Novak indicates, “It is often upon an initial opening of the heart in wonder and delight that all further study depends.”^{xxxvii} In performing

Comparative Theology, we hone critical thinking which helps us be less easily fooled by charlatans and differentiate “sick religion” from faith that is healthy, good and true.^{xxxviii} Comparative Theology is “faith seeking understanding,” which inquires into the truth, consistency, and explanatory power of the belief systems it interacts with.^{xxxix} At the same time, it reveals resources for building empathy, tolerance, and love in our career, family and other relationships. “Instead of filling the gaps of knowledge with imaginary dragons or secretly looking down on the barbarians, let us get acquainted with our new neighbors in the global village and learn to love them.”^{xl} Surah 49:13 (Al-Hujuraat) in the *Qur'an* congruently exults, “O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another.”^{xli}

Many Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others throughout history, have believed at some level that Christianity or Hinduism or Islam is not just a religion, tradition, culture, or one of many equally valid worldviews, but that the *Torah*, *Qur'an*, the teachings of Buddha, or the person of Jesus, convey or embody more fully than anything (or anyone) else the truest insights about Ultimate Reality, what it means to be fully human, and how to best live our lives relating to each other and the Divine. If any of these faiths or none are essentially or partly true, the implications are enormous. To simply dismiss the question with a yawn, “who knows what is right?” or “we all basically say the same thing,” is paternalistic and epistemologically lazy. Comparative Theology will not allow it.

Theodore Ludwig concludes, “Religion has to do with fundamental human issues and concerns. Who am I?...How can we find the life that is real and fulfilling?...Does life actually have any meaning—any **real** meaning—or do we just live and die in the small frame of a pointless, accidental cycle of the universe?”^{xlii} Because these deliberations are not confined to one tradition, Comparative Theology provides the opportunity to ponder “the distilled wisdom of the human race.”^{xliii}

But lest we forget, “Comparative Theology Today” is first, finally, and foremost about God. C.S. Lewis in his provocative essay, “Learning in War-Time” puts it this way, “the pursuit of knowledge and beauty...for their own sake...does not exclude their being for God’s sake...We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so.”^{xliv} Francis Clooney maintains:

Theology, deep learning across religious borders...will always be a journey in faith. It will be from, for, and about God, whose grace keeps making room for all of us as we find our way faithfully in a world of religious diversity. That for me the work of comparative theology finally discloses a still deeper encounter with Jesus Christ

only intensifies the commitment to learn from...religious diversity...In Christ there need not be any fear of what we might learn, there is only the Truth that sets us free.^{xlv}

“As iron sharpens iron, so does one person (or religious tradition) sharpen another” (Proverbs 27:17) is valuable because it enhances our capacity to love and enjoy God forever by tuning the mind for the same purpose Bach crafted music, “for the glory of God and the refreshment of the human spirit.”^{xlvi} So, whether we read or think or whatever we do, may it all be for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). Martin Luther King, Jr. appends, “No matter how small one thinks his life’s work is in terms of the norms of the world... it has cosmic significance if he is serving humanity and doing the will of God.”^{xlvii}

As Comparative Theologians today, let us as be like the Biblical David who served the purpose of God in his generation (Acts 13:36, NRSV) by comparing theology as Michelangelo carved, as Ella Fitzgerald sang, as the Keralan Kathakali dance, as Pablo Neruda spoke poetry, as Shusaka Endo penned prose. When like the Biblical David, we go to our ancestors (Acts 13:37), may we then kneel as faithful workers joyfully receiving the Divine invitation, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21, ESV).

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ⁱ John B. Cobb Jr., “Being a Transformationist in a Pluralistic world,” *The Christian Century* (August 10, 1994), online at:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n23_v111/ai_15729926/, accessed February 5, 2010. Cf. Niels C. Nielson, et. al., *Religions of the World* (3rd ed., Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1993), p. 2.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Dorothy C. Bass and Miroslav Volf, (eds), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 245.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962, 1963, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

^{iv} Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion* (2nd ed., Boston, MI: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 8.

^v Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 1897), pp. 8-9. Cf. Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy: Sweetness and Light” in *Culture and Anarchy and other writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 61; Gary Ferraro, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective* (3rd ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998), p. 284; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902, reprinted SC: Bibliobazaar, 2007), p. 39; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923, 2nd

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- ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1950, 1958), p. 8; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (2nd ed., Berlin, 1830, reprint NY: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 17, 132; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (trans. John Oman, London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, 1893), p. 39; J Milton Yinger, "Pluralism, Religion, and Secularism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* XI (1967), p. 18.
- ^{vi} The Dalai Lama, *Answers: Discussion with Western Buddhists* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2001), p. 12.
- ^{vii} M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and other writings* (ed. Anthony J. Parell, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 52. Cf. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 3.
- ^{viii} G.K. Chesterton, "On Mr. Epstein" in *Come to Think of It* (NY: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1931), p. 72. Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 211-248.
- ^{ix} E.g. Derek H. Davis, "Is atheism a religion? Recent judicial perspectives on the constitutional meaning of 'religion' (Kaufman v. McCaughtry)," *Journal of Church and State* 47:4, (9/22/05), pp. 707-723.
- ^x Cf. Shirl James Hoffman, "Sports Fanatics," *Christianity Today* 54:10 (February, 2010), online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/february/3.20.html>, accessed February 5, 2010.
- ^{xi} E.g. John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Physics and Theology: An Unexpected Kinship* (Yale University Press, 2007).
- ^{xii} Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (IL: Sherwood Sugden, 1978), p. 128.
- ^{xiii} S.A. Nigosian, *World Religions: A Historical Approach* (NY: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008), p. 2.
- ^{xiv} Will Deming, *Rethinking Religion: A Concise Introduction* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5. Cf. <http://www.studyreligion.org/misconceptions/index.html>, accessed February 5, 2010.
- ^{xv} Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction through Cases* (2nd ed., NY: McGraw Hill, 2006), p. 12 (emphasis in original). Cf. Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Handbook of Today's Religions* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 11; Martin Palmer, ed., *World Religions: A History of Faith* (NY: Barnes and Noble Books, 2002), p. 9.
- ^{xvi} Kessler, p. 12.
- ^{xvii} Karen Farrington, *The History of Religion* (NY: Barnes and Noble Books, 2001), p. 9.
- ^{xviii} Alex Innes Shand, *Half a Century or Changes in Men and Manners* (2nd ed., Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1888), p. 62; cf. *The Literary World: Choice Readings from the Best New Books, with Critical Reviews Vol. 36—New Series from July to December 1887* (London, James Clark and Co), p. 167. In the context of university study, "Mind clashes with mind" is attributed to Cardinal John Henry Newman in Lawrence S. Cunningham and John Kelsey, *The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion* (3rd ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 6.

^{xix} Cunningham and Kelsey, p. 6. Cf. Sunderrao Ramrao Dongerkery, *Memories of Two Universities* (Manaktalas, 1966, digitized by the University of Michigan, 2007), p. 183.

^{xx} Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 156.

^{xxi} Robert Burns, "To a Louse," 8:2, *The Life and Works of Robert Burns Volume I* (London: W&R Chambers, 1856), p. 223.

^{xxii} William Butler Yeats, "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (1983, 1989, NY: Scribner, 1996), p. 73.

^{xxiii} Cf. William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: Gospel of John Volume 2* (1955, 1975, Revised and Updated, UK: Saint Andrews Press, 2001 and KY: Westminster John Knox), p. 228; Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (1975, Revised ed., MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 63. Cf. Arthur Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983).

^{xxiv} Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (NY: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), p. 54.

^{xxv} Cobb, online.

^{xxvi} Cobb, online.

^{xxvii} Gerald R. McDermott, *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Early Church* (IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), pp. 162-167. Cf. Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions* (IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

^{xxviii} Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (Oxford, UK: OneWorld, 2009).

^{xxix} "A Common Word: Panel One, Religious Pluralism in the 21st Century" (October 8, 2009), <http://explore.georgetown.edu/news/?ID=45512>.

^{xxx} Cf. George Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha: The Religion of Reason and Meditation* (New Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1973, 1999) p. 45; *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith, a Bill Moyers Special* (Public Affairs Television, 1996).

^{xxxi} McDermott, *God's Rivals*, p. 167. McDermott is apparently paraphrasing George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984).

^{xxxii} C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (1949, 2001, NY: HarperCollins), p. 58.

^{xxxiii} Cf. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (3rd edition, Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981, 2005); C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Book 2, Chapter 1, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952, 2001), p. 35.

^{xxxiv} McDermott, *God's Rivals*, p. 168.

^{xxxv} Stephen G. Tallentyre (Evelyn Beatrice Hall), *The Friends of Voltaire* (London: Smith, Elder, 1906), pp. 198-199.

^{xxxvi} Quoted in Stephen Tomkins, *A Short History of Christianity* (UK: Lion Hudson, 2005; MI: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 146.

^{xxxvii} Philip Novak, *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions* (NY: HarperCollins, 1995), p. xii. Cf. Roger Eastman, ed., *The Ways of Religion: An Introduction to the Major Traditions* (3rd ed., NY: Oxford, 1999), p. xiii; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

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^{xxxviii} Wayne E. Oates, *When Religion Gets Sick* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1970), p. 25.

^{xxxix} Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (1991, MI: Eerdmans, 2nd ed. 2004), e.g. p. 2; Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (4th ed., NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.

^{xl} Richard Wolff, *The Popular Encyclopedia of World Religions: A User-Friendly Guide to Their Beliefs, History, and Impact on Our World Today* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2007), p. 7.

^{xli} Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (NY: A.A. Knopf, 1930), <http://sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/>.

^{xlii} Theodore M. Ludwig, *The Sacred Paths: Understanding the Religions of the World* (2nd ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 2. Emphasis in original.

^{xliii} Huston Smith, *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith, a Bill Moyers Special* (Public Affairs Television, 1996): "If we take the world's enduring religions at their best, we discover the distilled wisdom of the human race."

^{xliv} Lewis, p. 56.

^{xlvi} Clooney, p. 165.

^{xlvi} "Recreation" in Wilibald Gurlitt, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Master and His Work* (MA: De Capo Press, 1986), p. 67. Cf. The *Bhagavad Gita* 10:10, 11:55, 18:65; The *Bible*: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, Numbers 15:37-41; Matthew 22:37, Mark 12: 30-31, Luke 10:27; The *Qur'an*: Surah 2:177; "The Westminster Shorter Catechism" (1647), A:1; John Piper, *Desiring God* (OR: Multnomah, 1986, 1996, 2003).

^{xlvi} Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Measure of a Man* (1959, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), p. 42.

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Comparative Theology as a Devotional Practice: A Christian Argument

BY ANNMARIE MICIKAS

In challenging the theologian to remain “rooted in a particular faith tradition” while yet “learning from one or more other faith traditions,” the discipline of Comparative Theology is, in some sense, premised upon a tension between the particular and the universal aspects of religious truth.ⁱ This tension is central to religion and the study of religion. In the field of Buddhist studies, for example, Donald K. Swearer writes of the “creative tension between the universal and particular dimensions of the figure of the Buddha.”ⁱⁱ Interestingly, however, Swearer goes on to compare this tension in the figure of the Buddha to the simultaneous universality and particularity of the “enfleshment of the universal Logos” in the figure of Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ Swearer’s use of the particular-universal tension to compare the Buddha to Jesus Christ suggests that understanding the particular and universal aspects of religion may be not only a productive trope for the study of a single religion, but also a crucial component of any attempt to think interreligiously. In fact, the comparative theologian--beyond recognizing this tension--must herself experience and even embody this tension: theologizing from a position committed to a given tradition while remaining actively open to the inspirational and challenging truths of other traditions requires that she maintain a strong sense of both the culturally-contingent and particular nature of her own tradition’s insights as well as the potential universality of the insights of other traditions.

As an endeavor which exploits this very tension, Comparative Theology represents a valuable tool for helping all scholars think across religious boundaries. In this article, however, I argue that Christian Scripture's emphasis on the particularity and limitedness of human understanding on the one hand, and the broadness of divine revelation on the other, suggest that the particular-universal tension on which Comparative Theology is premised may be particularly relevant for Christian thinkers. Indeed, insofar as Comparative Theology can be understood as an activity which reflects Christian principles regarding this tension, it can be seen as a devotional practice through which Christians consciously respond to and meditate on both particularity and universality as they affect human apprehension of divine revelation.

I begin with a brief discussion of the support for these principles in Christian Scripture, then move to a consideration of two figures in the field of Buddhist-Christian studies: Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama and Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikku. Although these thinkers would probably not call themselves comparative theologians (in the case of Buddhadasa's Buddhist reflections, "theology" is an especially problematic term), each of them, in developing his religious ideas through consciously-dialogic reflection on those of another tradition, has been led to emphasize both the particularity of our own culturally-specific religious formulations and the universality of the truth which informs them. Their examples suggest that the activity of Comparative Theology may not only be a productive way of meditating on these realities, but may even contribute to Christian devotional practice by bringing us face-to-face with, and helping us operationalize the implications of, these important principles.

Limited human understanding, broad divine revelation

Christian Scripture speaks to both the inherent limitedness of human spiritual understanding and the broadness of God's revelation of truth. First, it warns us that we should neither claim nor expect to fully grasp divine Truth. For example, Job 11:7-8 asks: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens—what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave—what can you know?" Or again, Job 28:20 states: "...Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air..." These verses draw a deliberate distinction between human understanding--and, by extension, human capacity to articulate truth--and the unreachable divine truth which our religious doctrines attempt to approximate. Oft-quoted 1 Corinthians 13:12 puts this discrepancy in temporal terms: "Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then

shall I know fully, even as I am fully known." In such passages, limited understanding is posited as an inescapable fact of the human condition and the humble recognition of this reality is further recommended as the proper attitude toward human formulations of religious truth.

These reminders of the limits of human wisdom--and, hence, the limited nature of the religious conceptualizations created from it--are complemented by verses which describe the universality with which God's truth can be sensed. One of the most familiar such passages emphasizes God's general self-revelation to all peoples in the form of creation:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night, they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

Romans 1:19-20 builds on this theme of the openness and obviousness of God's revelation by insisting that no one can claim not to have access to revealed truth: "What may be known about God is plain to [humanity], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that humanity is without excuse." Similarly, Scripture explains that the capacity for moral discernment is found among all peoples. Romans 2:15 points out that "... [Even pagans] show that the requirements of the law are on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing or defending them." Scripture thus supports an understanding of all peoples as blessed with the capacity to recognize both the glory of God and moral truths related to divine authority.

Although this discussion has only skimmed the surface of this topic, it is clearly possible to make a case for the principles of limited human understanding and broad divine revelation as Scripturally-based Christian tenets. Given the Scriptural importance of these notions, I argue that Christian participation in Comparative Theology--when it is grounded in and contributes to our appreciation of these principles--has great potential value as a devotional practice. Specifically, in the same way that other forms of worship such as singing and praying can help the practitioner develop an appropriate mindset vis-à-vis the divine, Comparative Theology can function as a way of meditating upon and actively affirming the principles of limited human understanding and broad divine revelation, thus encouraging an attitude of proper humility as regards our own, and appropriate openness as regards others', apprehension of religious truth.

Comparative Theology as leading to an ever-deepening spiral of humility

Like other devotional endeavors, the practice of Comparative Theology can help deepen our appreciation of the principles that call Christians to it in the first place. In helping us internalize the limitedness of human understanding and of human capacity to express religious ideas in language, engaging in Comparative Theology can inform the way we understand our own truth claims' relationship to Truth itself. Furthermore, in helping us internalize the broadness of God's revelation, Comparative Theology can affect how we think about the truth of others' traditions. Ultimately, by making us more keenly aware of the realities of limited human understanding and broad divine revelation, Comparative Theology can guide us into a kind of ever-deepening spiral of humility in which, once moved to reflect theologically across religious boundaries, we gain--through sustained engagement--even more reasons to reflect further.

In order to demonstrate how comparative theological reflection can lead to a deepened appreciation for these Christian tenets, I would like to highlight two thinkers in the field of Buddhist-Christian studies whose works are enriched by engagement with another tradition: Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama (1929-2009) and Thai monk and reformer Buddhadasa Bhikku (1906-1993). An exploration of how Koyama and Buddhadasa's consciously-dialogical approach to religious reflection has led them to understand both the particularity and the universality of religious truth claims will demonstrate the contribution which Comparative Theology can make to our thinking about these principles.

Although primarily focused around the question of how Christian missionaries and theologians should approach theology for and about Asia, Kosuke Koyama's Water Buffalo Theology is inherently dialogical in that he develops his discussion of Christianity in conscious conversation with the Buddhist perspectives he encounters in Thailand. This experiment in "dialogical inter-context[ual]" religious reflection prefigures Comparative Theology in identifying multiple cultural sources for theological inspiration.^{iv} Koyama describes the theologian's task not as creating de novo theology which can be appreciated across cultures, but rather as discovering those "potential amphibious agent[s]" which already cut across cultural boundaries, and then elaborating on them so as to optimize their ability to reflect value in each culture. As an example, Koyama describes how the truth of the Japanese notion of *tsurasa*, a principle of Japanese tragedy, interpenetrates the truth which Luther articulated when he described the crucifixion as God fighting with God.^v He explains that when we engage with another culture in a way that uncovers and highlights extant shared truths, "What takes place

is dialogue between the inner meaning of the event of Christ and the inner feeling of the Japanese people.”^{vi} Koyama calls this phenomenon “the meeting of two inners,” making a distinction between an external layer of articulated difference and an inner sense of apprehended Truth. Koyama approaches his discussion of these particularly-packaged yet universal truths by proposing an analogy which describes divine truth as an initially-raw, unflavored dish which acquires cultural ‘seasoning’ when expressed through the vocabulary of a given religion.^{vii} His consideration of the culturally-specific ‘flavor’ of Christianity as expressed in Western contexts and as transported into Eastern ones demonstrates how thinking about religious truth as it is interpreted across cultural boundaries--as we do in Comparative Theology--can help us appreciate how and to what degree our doctrines may be ‘seasoned’ to a specific cultural taste. In fact, Koyama calls us to mentally distance ourselves from our home cultures so as to truly appreciate the cultural indebtedness of our religious doctrines:

Isn’t it true that the incarnation of the Son of God means his “in-culture-ation”? Wasn’t he a Palestinian Jew?...Does this then mean that one must not simply reject the “pepper and salt” of any culture, but attempt to see what kind of pepper and salt is seasoning Christ...?^{viii}

That Koyama’s own attempt to explore how the Gospel is ‘seasoned’ takes the form of a set of musings in which Christian ideas are considered as they relate to Buddhist ideas suggests that a dialogical model of theological reflection may be useful as we respond to Koyama’s challenge. Further, his distinction between a set of culturally-specific seasonings and a presumably ‘unseasoned’ dish encourages us to look beyond the external trappings of our religious doctrines to an underlying continuity with the spiritual sensibilities of other cultures. Koyama’s example thus demonstrates how cross-cultural theological reflection, by making us aware of the ways in which our doctrines are culturally ‘seasoned,’ can encourage us to consider the limitedness and particularity of our own religious formulations, and, by helping us uncover the potential amphibious agents that swim in the inner sensitivity to Truth shared by all peoples, can call us to further appreciate and explore the broadness of divine revelation.

Another example of the power of this mode of thinking appears in Buddhadasa Bhikku’s 1967 Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture. In this work, Buddhadasa moves dialogically between interpreting Christian concepts and explicating related Buddhist ideas, probing the extent to which the doctrinal terminology of particular religions represent different attempts to access what he sees as the same truths. Buddhadasa’s analysis of the resonances between apparently-contradictory concepts--for example, God and Karma—is an effort to

move past the image-bound, metaphorical meaning of religious concepts in order to access a deeper level of meaning which can then be compared to the meaning of a concept in another religion.^{ix} This exercise of mentally moving between Christian and Buddhist concepts--for example, between Salvation and Nibbana,^x Redemption and release from suffering,^{xi} or the figures of Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha^{xii}--leads Buddhadasa to treat religious systems as languages. That is, much the way Koyama treats particular religious formulations as culturally 'seasoned' forms of a given raw truth, Buddhadasa treats religious systems as idioms which reflect the cultural rooting of different groups but which, when employed properly, can also be used to reflect truths that are universally available.

Buddhadasa's sense that terms like the Buddhist "Dhamma" and the Christian "God" are, when properly interpreted, just different ways of referring to the same truth,^{xiii} leads him to call for a clear distinction between doctrinal concepts and the underlying truth for which the doctrinal terms of different religions are simply culturally-marked signifiers. The culturally-marked signifiers of individual religions he calls "conventional language," whereas the reality to which they refer he calls the "language of Dhamma." Buddhadasa defines Dhamma language as "a special kind of religious language embodying the "inner world," the culture of mind, of the heart."^{xiv} This definition captures the sense in which Dhamma language is less a way of communicating than a way of apprehending--that is, by mind and heart. According to Buddhadasa, moving beyond literalist loyalty to conventional language and into the realm of Dhamma language--that is, to truth as it is apprehended by human religious sensibility and not as it is articulated in culturally-packaged doctrines--will allow people to recognize that, although the degree to which different religious formulations approximate divine truth may vary, the underlying truth which religious language tries to capture is nevertheless consistent across time and place.^{xv} Buddhadasa's comparison of Buddhist and Christian doctrines as a way to highlight the existence of this kind of universally-applicable and universally-accessible Truth, behind and beneath and above the language we use to point to it, helpfully demonstrates how Comparative Theology offers an opportunity to contemplate both the universality with which truth is sensed and the chasm between Truth itself and our particular religious formulations of it.

The experiences of both Koyama and Buddhadasa thus demonstrate how, by heightening our awareness of and deepening our appreciation for the very principles which support Christian participation in endeavors like Comparative Theology, this discipline can lead to what I have termed a "deepening spiral of humility." As we humbly embrace the principles of limited human understanding and broad divine revelation, we are rewarded with an ever-rich

understanding of how these principles can and must be practiced if we are to think about and seek truth in the way that Scripture calls us to do so. The devotional practice of Comparative Theology thus offers us both further--and, ultimately, never-ending--reason to engage in interreligious theological reflection and, as a result of that reflection, a deepened and ever-deepening sense of humility as regards religious truth.

Responding to the richness of divine revelation

As illustrated by the experiences of Koyama and Buddhadasa, the practice of Comparative Theology fulfills the devotional function of helping participants meditate on and internalize the disjunction between God's unconstrained and universal revelation and our culturally and linguistically-constrained, particular apprehension of it. Moreover, allowing the insights of another tradition to inform and inspire those of our own can help us not only recognize, but perhaps even begin to escape, the boundaries of our own particularity, enriching our thinking by enlarging the pool of vocabulary and imagery at our disposal for speaking about and meditating on religious truth. By allowing us to creatively substitute different metaphorical and visual descriptions for concepts in our own tradition, we can perhaps glimpse new aspects of the ultimate Truth to which our familiar language makes reference. In this way, we can begin to 'cheat the system' of cultural seasoning and reach out to savor multiple tastes at once!

Seen in this light, the practice of Comparative Theology can be understood not only as a devotional practice that deepens our understanding of our own limitations and of God's broad self-revelation, but also as a grateful acknowledgement of and a faithful response to the variety and depth of that revelation. Acts 17:24 – 27 suggests a way of conceiving this endeavor:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth, and does not live in temples built by hands...From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

Interpreting this passage in light of the preceding discussion suggests that just as God does not live in temples built by hands, so God's Truth does not reside in doctrines formed by human minds. Further, in attributing human diversity to God and, specifically, to His desire for humans to seek Him, this passage suggests that the diversity of human religious perspectives could serve as a resource for our attempts to seek God. Thus, in addition to affirming the principles of limited

human understanding and broad divine revelation, Christian participation in Comparative Theology can also represent a grateful response to the richness of God's self-revelation. Ultimately, engaging in Comparative Theology offers a fresh way of approaching a God whose Truth is too great to be grasped by any one group, and whose revelation is so broad as to touch all peoples--and, in so doing, to bring them together in a shared experience of dialogic learning.

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ⁱ F.X. Clooney

ⁱⁱ Donald Swearer, "Buddha Loves Me, This I Know," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19.1, pp.113-120, p. 113.

ⁱⁱⁱ Swearer, p. 116.

^{iv} Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (Orbis Books: 1999), p. viii.

^v Koyama, p. 86.

^{vi} Koyama, p. 87.

^{vii} Koyama, p. 63.

^{viii} Koyama, p. 63.

^{ix} Buddhadasa Bhikku, "Christianity and Buddhism." Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture, 5th series, 1967, p. 32.

^x Bhikku, p. 18.

^{xi} Bhikku, p. 111-115.

^{xii} Bhikku, p. 106-107.

^{xiii} Bhikku, p. 67-71.

^{xiv} Bhikku, p. 4.

^{xv} Bhikku, p. 10.