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Abstract and Keywords

As a form of theological exchange, comparative theology is particularly interested in highlighting the nature, dynamics, and use of doctrines and their referents, within traditions but also across boundaries. Thus, for example, candidates for analysis include faith, truth, sin, grace, salvation, community, and worship, both in general and in more specific doctrinal forms, plus an even wider range of vaguer yet still fruitful terms such as union or communion, delusion, liberation, humility, devotion, spiritual knowledge, compassion, and healing. Like other forms of theology, comparative theology is to some extent interested in how religious traditions explain their own views of common human realities. This article seeks to highlight some key features and problems of a vital yet still-developing theological discipline.

Keywords: comparative theology, theological discipline, theological exchange, worship, religious traditions

REFLECTION on other religious traditions, though articulated in myriad ways, has of course occurred in religious traditions from their very beginning. So too theologies, obligated to some norms of reason and to the quest to understand and (to some extent) explain what is believed, have of necessity had to engage the thought and practice of the other traditions which helped shape the context for intelligibility in any given era. The Christian tradition (which remains the primary though not exclusive focus of this essay) is no exception, and even before Christianity, the Jewish people already shaped their language about God with an awareness of how their neighbours were speaking; they likewise articulated their own identities in comparison and contrast with those of their diverse neighbours. Other religious traditions too have had to keep reshaping their self-understanding in light of their religious 'others'. Moreover, despite numerous misunderstandings and tragic, shameful moments of hostility and violence, throughout history religious cultures have nonetheless often related to one another with subtlety,

sophistication, and boldness. Intentionally or not, interreligious exchange seems on the whole to have been a positive rather than negative phenomenon.

As but one dimension of this larger, ongoing exchange, comparative theology is not an entirely new beginning. Today, however, the proximity of religions to one another is greater than ever and the resources for understanding religions other than one's own are unprecedented; accordingly, the opportunities are greater and responsibility more acute, and so it has become nearly impossible to justify not studying other traditions and taking their theologies into account in light of (p. 654) contemporary canons of learning. While theology can never be reduced to a single task, theological reflection in its mature form always stands in a dialogical relationship to the theologies of other religions, both in general and with respect to (nearly) every topic. This commits the theological community to the practice of what will here be termed 'comparative theology', the practice of rethinking aspects of one's own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition. Other dimensions and the implications of this very brief definition will become clearer as we proceed.

As a form of theological exchange, comparative theology is particularly interested in highlighting the nature, dynamics, and use of doctrines and their referents within traditions but also across boundaries. Thus, for example, candidates for analysis will include faith, truth, sin, grace, salvation, community, and worship, both in general and in more specific doctrinal forms, plus an even wider range of vaguer but still fruitful terms such as union or communion, delusion, liberation, humility, devotion, spiritual knowledge, compassion, and healing. And there are still other terms and areas of study to be identified through learning from traditions whose concepts have until now been either ignored or poorly translated into English or borrowed without much theological sophistication; for the theologians of other traditions were not merely saying 'in their own words and concepts' what 'we' have already been meaning and saying. So too, like other forms of theology, comparative theology is to some extent interested in how religious traditions explain their own views of common human realities, ranging from birth and death to sex and love, eating and marriage, money and power. Since comparative theology is liable to the same range of meanings and perspectives as theology in general, it cannot be definitively identified in a single or univocal way; since in its current formulation it is new, it is not ready for sure and settled definitions. The following description therefore seeks only to highlight some key features and problems of a vital yet still developing discipline.

I. DETECTING THE ORIGINS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

The term 'comparative theology' has a long history that requires further research, even if we are unlikely to discover any definitive and single meaning for it. The term has been in use at least since 1700 when James Garden published his *Comparative Theology; or The True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology: A Subject very Necessary, tho hitherto almost wholly neglected*. Garden, possibly inspired by the controversial Dutch mystic Antoinette Bourignon, contrasts 'absolute theology', 'that (p. 655) knowledge of religion [which] considers its Object only as revealed and enjoined, or instituted, by God, and its business is to find out those things which are proposed to us in the Scriptures to be believ'd or practis'd, and to discern and distinguish them from all others', with a 'comparative theology' wherein 'the respective Knowledge of Religion ponders the weight or importance, and observes the Order, Respect and Relation of things belonging to Religion; whether they be points of Doctrine, or Precepts, or sacred Rites, and teaches to distinguish and put a difference between the Accessories of Religion, and the Principles; the Circumstantials and Substantials; the Means and their Ends' (Garden 1700: 3–4). Garden is speaking of intra-Christian and not interreligious differences, but his principles—a focus on common rather than dividing elements, and a determination to minimize the realm of exclusive, absolute features of Christianity—are in spirit akin to some of the best comparative work in following centuries. Where else and how else the term was used during the eighteenth century, however, remains an object of research.

In the nineteenth century, as comparison gained respect as a scientific method, comparative theology was used more often, even if not frequently. In works such as *Natural Religion* (1898) and *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1899), F. Max Müller speaks occasionally of 'comparative theology'. Religions can be compared, but not in a 'comparative religion' discipline; 'religion' cannot of itself generate that kind of second-order reflection. Rather, comparative theology is the reflective discipline in which religions are compared (Müller 1898: 47). In a comparative theology the comparativist does not privilege his own religion as exceptional, but treats all religions as natural and historical (Müller 1898: 52). Unlike general or natural theology, comparative theology is a study of religions in their particularity, aimed at noticing both what is unique and what is shared with other religions (Müller 1898: 53). Just as comparative philology transformed the philosophy of language, so too comparative theology will transform 'theoretic' theology (Müller 1899: 146). We can also note that Müller links theoretic theology with the philosophy of religion and explanations of natural religion; with respect to religions other than the Christian, today's theology of religions is a descendant of theoretic theology.

William Warren, president of Boston University for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, promoted the study of religions at the university. In an 1887 commencement address, 'The Quest of the Perfect Religion', he 'dreams' a universal deliberation on religions, which concludes in determining that the Christian religion is

indeed perfect (Warren 1887). He also taught a course entitled 'Comparative Theology and Philosophy of Religion', and perhaps all his reflections may be grouped under that rubric. James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1892) offers a wide study of the doctrines of different traditions, aiming to show their truths' inclusion in the larger truth of Christianity, the full and perfect religion (cf. Clarke 1896). At the turn of the century, J. A. MacCulloch wrote a *Comparative Theology* (1902), dedicated to (p. 656) facilitating comparisons on particular themes between Christianity, the absolute religion, and other religions, all for the purpose of an informed proof that Christianity alone is the perfect religion, but also the religion that includes all that is best in other religions, thus fulfilling them. Despite what today might be considered evident flaws of their approach—research at the service of already settled conclusions—comparative theology as practised by Warren, MacCulloch, and Clarke seems nonetheless to have advanced understanding of and appreciation for religions.

As for its more substantive history as a primarily Christian enterprise rooted in particular interreligious encounters, comparative theology lies in closest continuity with the theological reflection on other religions in the patristic era and, more fully, in the missionary period of the sixteenth century and thereafter. Spanish and Portuguese missionary scholars, as well as Italian, French, and later British, all reflected on their religious 'others'. Even if the conversations between missionaries and 'natives' were neither neutral nor entirely open-minded, such reflections were often worked out in great detail and in close conversation with intellectual representatives of various religions, strengthened in some cases by careful attention to particular texts which were often first studied and translated by missionary scholars. Comparative theology shares this attentiveness to the particularities of other religious traditions and their concern for specific ways in which the Christian faith interacts with different faiths.

One may therefore profitably seek in missionary writings a glimpse of the pre-history of comparative theology. To take some examples from India, the writings of Roberto de Nobili and Jean V. Bouchet, both Jesuit missionaries in south India at the beginning of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries respectively, show how Christian theological suppositions, guided by a care for the particularities of the Hindu traditions, support and prompt strikingly engaged works of scholarship. De Nobili seems to have read carefully the famous *Laws of Manu* in attempting to decipher the religious meaning and structure of Indian society, while, in his letters (collected among the famous *Lettres Édifiantes et Curieuses*), Bouchet rather elaborately compares the mythologies of the Indian and Greek gods, the Indian and Greek understandings of reincarnation, and even the legal systems of India and the West. Both missionaries drew the study of India into their consideration of Christian theological themes in a serious way, even if we can today wish that they had been more explicit regarding how they actually benefited from their study. In the Protestant context, we may point to Bartholomeo Ziegenbalg's *Genealogy of the Malabar Gods* as a remarkable eighteenth-century work of scholarship wherein theological interests are fruitfully merged with detailed knowledge of another tradition. Even in the twentieth century, we still find works such as Pierre Johanns's *To Christ through the Vedanta* (published serially during 1922–34), a learned and detailed analysis

of Vedanta religious and philosophical ideas with an eye toward identifying their enduring meaning and value. (p. 657) Although Johanns's Thomistic frame would today not be taken as the unexceptionable standard by which to judge other intellectual systems, but would rather be submitted to same critique as the Indian materials, within the bounds of his framework Johanns proceeds as an exemplary comparativist, well versed in both sides of his scholarly comparison, and persisting throughout in his determination to uncover theological meanings and to leave as much space as he thought possible for a generous reading of India.

Comparative theology as the theologically conscious study of religions other than one's own may today be exemplified by a wide range of works, including many which do not use the term 'comparative theology'. Thus, in *Knowing the Unknowable God* (1986) and *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (1993), David Burrell has explored how Aquinas interacted with thinkers such as Maimonides and Ibn Sina in crafting respectively his understanding of God and of creation. In *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading* (1995), John Keenan reads the Gospel of Mark in light of Buddhist theology, while in *The Wisdom of James: Parallels with Mahayana Buddhism* (2005), he extends this project to another New Testament book. James Fredericks brings Buddhist and Christian insights into conversation in his *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (2004). In a more extended project, Keith Ward wrote a series of four volumes in comparative theology: *Religion and Revelation* (1994), *Religion and Creation* (1996), *Religion and Human Nature* (1998), and *Religion and Community* (2000). During the same decade Robert Neville directed an ambitious project bringing together philosophical theologians and area experts for an extended conversation that resulted in three edited volumes, *The Human Condition*, *Ultimate Realities*, and *Religious Truth* (2000). Michael Myers's *Brahman: A Comparative Theology* (2001) attempts 'a critique of systematic theology from the comparative perspective', making use of insights gleaned in India to rethink issues in Christian theology. (My own works, such as *Theology after Vedanta* (1993), *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001), and *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* (2004), may be included in the category of 'comparative theology'.)

In light of the preceding history and examples, it is useful to distinguish two underlying motives that nourish comparative theology. Beginning with James Garden (or before), there is the determination to discern and stress what religious people have in common, for the sake of mutual understanding and peace. With Müller and thereafter, we find the goal of an objective study of religions furthered by the use of the methods of scientific comparison. The former is allied with what today we might term ecumenical or interreligious dialogue, while the latter most naturally merges with the scientific and historical study of religion and more analytic disciplines. In both, the particular details of religions are privileged over against merely theoretical and *a priori* conceptions. In *The Invention of Religion* (2005), Tomoko Masuzawa examines the influence of comparative theology in the nineteenth century in relation to the emerging discipline of the study of

religion, (p. 658) concluding that comparative theology may well have had a greater legacy than its more ambitiously scientific and ostensibly more neutral counterparts.

For a more formal contemporary understanding of comparative theology, we turn first to David Tracy's essay in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987). Tracy argues that the fact that 'theology itself is now widely considered one discipline within the multidisciplinary field of religious studies impels contemporary theology, in whatever tradition, to become a comparative theology....On strictly theological grounds, the fact of religious pluralism should enter all theological assessment and self-analysis in any tradition at the very beginning of its task' (Tracy 1987: 446). He notes two pertinent understandings of comparative theology: first, as a discipline within the history of religions, in which theologies from different traditions are compared; second, as 'a more strictly theological enterprise...which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds' (Tracy 1987: 446). He goes on to highlight four major moments in a comparative theology: reinterpreting central religious symbols in a religiously pluralistic world; providing theological interpretation with new foundations comprised of both tradition and contemporary pluralism; addressing questions of religious pluralism on explicitly theological grounds; and finally, in light of these, reviewing tradition by a hermeneutics of suspicion and critique and by a hermeneutics of retrieval.

Keith Ward too has stressed the necessarily interreligious nature of theologizing as it is being reconceived today, indicating 'that theology is the discipline of reflection upon ideas of the ultimate reality and goal of human life, of God, and of revelation. People of many diverse beliefs can undertake it. It is better undertaken in knowledge of and in conversation with those of beliefs other than one's own' (Ward 1994: 46). Consequently, theologians properly explore given theological topics such as creation or revelation in several traditions and then articulate positions in light of common features that have been discovered. Such scholars deserve to be recognized as 'full and proper theologians'. Ward distinguishes between confessional theology, 'the exploration of a given revelation by one who wholly accepts the revelation and lives by it', and comparative theology, 'an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions' (Ward 1994: 40). The former is focused on revelation, the latter on God's wider work in the world. Ward locates his four-volume work in the latter category as primarily comparative and not confessional in nature, even if it quite evidently also sheds light on the doctrines and values treated in a confessional theology.

While it may be useful to distinguish between comparative and confessional theologies, these need not be formally divided as disciplines between which a theologian must choose. Rather, we have entered an era where constructive, confessional theology will ordinarily be comparative in its practice. Comparative theology can also be, and normally is, a theology that remains primarily constructive in a more narrow sense. As such, its deliberations are rooted in multiple (p. 659) traditions, even if the comparativist normally, perhaps necessarily, remains a member of just one community. One reads another tradition while remaining mindful of one's own; one brings to bear all the expectations

and skills one has developed in one's home tradition, while keeping mindful of the ways in which this approach is necessarily different from and even inadequate to the tradition one is studying. Then, after a close reading and appropriation of the other, one reads again one's own, this time in accord with the affect generated out of one's study of the other.

This dialectical process leads to a certain kind of change in one's own theology—having less to do with content and more to do with approach, how one reads familiar documents, for example. Traditional and newer themes are rethought in light of comparative study for the sake of knowledge of God and also with respect to theological concepts related to one's knowledge of God. This is undertaken also for the sake of a more intense confessional conversation within the comparativist's home tradition, for comparative theology, like other theological disciplines, is always primarily for one's own community. These key activities are accompanied by all the smaller choices that theologians make when seeking to render their work meaningful and useful for their faith community. All this is a reading practice that attends to the smallest of differences, while yet changing the entire context for theological reflection. Even if the specific content of one's theology may have changed only minimally or not at all, on a quieter level context and nuance will have shifted rather deeply.

II. THE MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Although comparative theology is a specialist discourse deeply informed by attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions, like other modes of Christian theology it can be specified according to a variety of possibilities and purposes. It is no more likely to be successfully narrowed to a single method or purpose than are other modes of theology. Comparative theology's engagement with other theologies is a complex enterprise, usefully understood within a fuller set of moments of which the comparative is only one. Around comparison, before and after it, we can highlight its interreligious, dialogical, and confessional (or apologetic) dimensions.

First, if theology is to be comparative, we must first of all concede the interreligious nature of theology itself. Theologizing, defined as faith seeking understanding or in some analogous way, is a religious thinking that is undertaken by (p. 660) people in different religious traditions. Theologies occur within the bounds of specific religious traditions, but such thinking occurs in ways that are broadly and commonly human, cultural and linguistic differences notwithstanding. Faith may be a gift that neither originates in nor is quantitatively improved by ratiocination about that gift; but theological reflection occurs when believers begin to think through, probe, and explain what they believe, in a process that seems necessary whenever faith is more than a finished artefact simply transmitted from one generation to the next.

Although 'theology' is a term which, judging from its history in the Christian West, possesses a range of specific meanings, to claim that it is interreligious means that it is not wise to reserve the term entirely for the Christian context. Thus, for example, we can refer not only to Christian theology but also to Hindu theology, whether we use a definition as basic as 'faith seeking understanding', or more expansively refer to reflection on revealed truths preserved in a canon of texts and handed down in a tradition, etc. For we can notice that the Hindu traditions of India are sensitive to the differentiations that make room for the 'theological' (Clooney 2002). Thus, in traditional India, reasoning carried forward without an immediate appeal to authoritative religious sources is distinguished from reasoning marked by early attention to scripture and other religious authorities; the latter is valued highly, and is to a large extent what we call theological reasoning. Some Hindu reasoning is only very indirectly allied with religious truth claims or religious practices. For example, some Hindu piety is deeply religious and is presented as immune to critical examination. But reasoning and piety often cooperate to distinguish a faith that is received and reviewed in a critical fashion. Since modern India has in fact been influenced by many ideas that originated in the West, and since the designation 'theology' need not be pejorative, there is no *a priori* reason to avoid talking about 'Hindu theology' as a properly Hindu mode of thought that can be usefully distinguished from 'Hindu philosophy' and 'Hindu religiosity'. Similarly, one might argue for Islamic and Jewish theologies, with specific differences noted, but also, though in light of greater differences requiring further explanation, for 'Buddhist theology' or 'Taoist theology' and even for theologies orally transmitted in Native American or African traditions.

Such uses of the term 'theology' can be valuable even when we still do not pretend that all such traditions are theological in exactly the same way. The point is rather to insist that very little of importance in method or content belongs exclusively to one theological tradition or one religion, even when concepts and themes are indeed properly located in specific contexts and remain rooted in the particularities of specific faith traditions. As an intellectual project, theology is composed of intellectual practices that can be recognized by intelligent believers in multiple traditions and are not likely to be unique to any particular tradition. But again, this is not to deny that for the most part theology can and should still be undertaken in accord with particular traditions' beliefs, doctrines, and practices. (p. 661) 'Theology' and 'comparative' will still have their strongest resonances in the Christian tradition.

Second, if theology is an intellectual religious activity practised in various cultural settings, and if theologians can profitably notice similarities and differences in method and content across religious boundaries, then it is in keeping with its own integrity that this interreligious and comparative theology can and ought to be conceived and practised as a properly dialogical activity. What is learned from interreligious and comparative perspectives must be tested and extended in a richer interactive encounter among the two or more traditions being compared, as believers learn to think together across

religious boundaries. The theologian owes it to members of the tradition she or he studies to understand and appreciate what they say and mean, whether or not she or he agrees with it. Those whose texts are studied must be able at least to recognize what is being said about them.

It is also important to note that the theologian who ventures into contact with another religious tradition is faced with the prospect of becoming an object of study as well, as her or his theologizing is assessed according to the expectations of the other tradition. Once theology is practised with attentiveness to the interreligious context, theologians are doubly accountable. Giving reasons for their faith, they become accountable to their religious others for interreligious accuracy and theological sensitivity and acumen in what they write about the other religions. For the sake of mutual understanding, they are likewise called to give an account of themselves and their tradition in light of what believers in other traditions are saying about the specific theological positions in question.

While 'comparison' and 'dialogical accountability' can mark much the same terrain, the two terms can be usefully conceived as consecutive: comparative attentiveness leads to dialogical accountability, to mutual learning, and thus to the constitution of a wider community of conversation and learning. The task of theologians on both sides is, ideally, to choose to enter upon a conversation that flows from mutual study, and thereafter upon an ongoing theological practice deepened in light of that conversation. In this new dynamic, no one partner gets to determine finally what the conversation means. If theology is interreligiously dialogical, theologians must work with an awareness that others' positions are already multi-dimensional, reflective, and theological in ways analogous to those held by the Christian theologian. It will no longer be acceptable to survey other traditions as if from a higher position or as if other traditions are simply raw materials for interpretation.

Like Christian theologians, the theologians of other traditions have their own personal and communal agenda, their own hierarchy of sub-disciplines, their own expectations about the qualifications of an audience, and their own estimates of outsiders. They may still have strong opinions about 'theology' and 'comparative' and whether these terms usefully apply to their own traditions. On both sides and together, myths are heard and images contemplated, rites observed, divinities (p. 662) described, explained, revered. All of this occurs in studies that may begin as 'our' scrutiny of 'their' religious ideas or texts, but that in the longer run also become occasions for reversal, wherein the theologians of the other religion submit the 'visiting' theologian and her or his tradition to a scrutiny appropriate to the visited tradition's own methods of investigation. Accordingly, even the foundations of theology and one's basic motivations become the matter for interreligious conversation. Such is the ideal, even if we must also admit that this mutual accountability is at present only a desideratum only rarely witnessed in practice.

Third, the inevitably and permanently dialogical character of an interreligious and comparative theology does not mean that such a theology always eventuates in mutual agreement and understanding. Such a theology can remain confessional, even apologetic. The dialogue essential to an interreligious theology must be vital enough that it can become an argument in which differences are highlighted, accentuated, and debated. Even after comparison and during the give and take required by dialogical exchange, theologians should remain able to affirm the content of their faith as true, with a deepening sense of its intelligibility for those who believe it already; they should remain able to offer arguments in favour of the truth of their faith and to attempt to persuade their interlocutors. If some comparative theologians choose to be more or less confessional and apologetic than others, here too comparative theology only demonstrates the same range of choices found in theology in general.

However comparative theology proceeds, the theologian can still adhere to the norms of theology as ordinarily practised in her or his own tradition. Doctrines can be received as true and practices taken very seriously as efficacious means of grace. If reading is the primary instrument of one's theology—as is the case for most theologians most of the time—one will be able to continue reading the works of one's own great theologians, even if one also reads theologians from other traditions. Comparative study need not obviate doctrine, truth, or value; conversely, no amount of reflection on the presuppositions, methods, or importance of one's own tradition can succeed in obviating the need actually to read and learn from other traditions. Insofar as possible, then, this textual scholarship should be filled out in interreligious theological conversation. One talks and interacts with theologians from the other tradition, explains one's beliefs and writings, and asks questions about their beliefs and writings, showing a willingness to learn from those theologians of other faiths. In ideal circumstances, one also sees, hears, tastes, smells, and touches the 'reality' of the other tradition. While it is proper and necessary to study the classic texts of other traditions—from its oldest scriptures to its medieval treatises and modern monographs—one must also be alert to still more recent developments, as each tradition stakes out its contemporary meanings in new situations which will, one presumes, be substantially but not entirely predictably conformed to older texts and doctrines or to any single notion of religious reflection or theology.

(p. 663) Finally, to state a point that by its very nature cannot really be illustrated here, it is crucial that comparative theology be practised, and not merely described in theory or with respect to method. This is in part because the field is a new one and in need of a richer store of examples before definition can be satisfactory; in part because a merely theoretical representation of comparative theology will be likely to remain the property of only one of the traditions involved; and in part because comparative theology, as comparative, is essentially reflection on practice, subsisting in its practice. Accordingly, it is at this point that we might well take up a series of examples by which to make the preceding points more specific. Thus, again staying with India, we might study a passage from chapter 6 of the Chandogya Upanisad, with special attention to its account of the origins of the world and of the nature of the self; we might then examine its interpretation according to the Brahma Sutras, the commentaries of Sankaracarya (in the

non-dualist school of Vedanta) and Rangaramanujamuni (in the qualified, theistic Vedanta tradition); finally, we might turn to analogous texts, interpretations, and themes in the biblical and Christian traditions. Or we might take up a devotional text composed in Tamil or Bengali and, with attention to its differences from the texts of the Sanskrit tradition, explore more deeply the images and expressions of love and religious love in such a text, and then, again reflectively, trace and be touched by similar images in the texts of the Jewish and Christian spiritual traditions. Or, more to the point of this essay, we might explore some classical *loci* in Sanskrit and Tamil with an eye toward understanding what might count as a Hindu or Vaisnava or Saiva theology, so as further to assess how such a theology would be similar to and different from the content and methods of a Christian theology. Specific studies like these three examples from the Indian context as read by a Christian theologian provide the necessary basis for observing comparative theology in the act, and a descriptive essay such as this present piece ought not be taken as replacing this more primary work.

III. SOME PROBLEMS

Multidimensional and complex, comparative theology is a practice deeply rooted in particular faith communities; yet it is also generative of new configurations that challenge theologies and their established faith communities, and possibly move beyond them, too. Comparative study is always, of course, complicated in ordinary ways, because it is hard to make good comparisons and because its intellectual production is to be analysed in the harsher light of wider debates pertaining to culture, society, the arts and sciences broadly imagined, and a host of local and (p. 664) global political concerns. As a relatively new discipline, it is perhaps all the more vulnerable to the shifting moods and boundaries of a modern scholarship distinguished by cultural and religious pluralization (even as the world becomes more uniform in some ways); by the growing availability of detailed information about traditions, making stereotypes, reductions, and ignorance ever more inexcusable; by a more vulnerable and acute global consciousness in a post-colonial, post-missionary context; by scepticism about the possibility of neutral or detached scholarship syntheses; and by the (re)insertion of the author's own self in her or his study, so that all scholarship is essentially and even explicitly autobiographical. But within this broad complex of problems, six can be noted as of particular importance.

A first problem, already alluded to, arises in light of the current turn to popular religion, particularly with respect to religions in actual practice. In this context, one may object that a comparative theology defined in terms of texts and reading becomes a narrow and elitist discipline, possibly an obstacle to a more ample interchange among religious people today. Surely, though, most theology by most theologians is textual. It has always been, materially at least, a matter of reading texts that have stood the test of time, and there is no reason to expect a so very different approach from comparative theologians. Moreover, texts are often the easiest way to access another religious tradition,

particularly in its articulate classical forms. But even if reading is the most practical and solid means of theological learning, there is no reason why some comparative theologians cannot choose to proceed by way of attention to art, music, ritual, and the various modalities of popular religion; they will still, however, turn the fruits of that attention into writing, and thus return to the conversation of those who write and read.

Second, it may seem likely that comparative theology, even if named a Christian (or Hindu or Muslim, etc.) theological enterprise, will after some time smoothly transmute into comparative religion or a similar discipline, thus becoming a mode of comparison linked to a theological frame by way of ancestry but lacking a specifically religious commitment or finality. What begins as theological may end as a simpler and flatter comparison of religious ideas on neutral grounds, without theological identity and grounding in a faith community; the theological frame becomes thinner and thinner even as comparative detail accumulates. Judgements may be postponed or entirely ruled out, while even a commitment to objectivity and impartiality in a pluralistic society may seem to push communal and theological perspectives decisively to the side.

But there is no reason why the dynamic of comparative theology must be assessed in terms of this rather extreme eventuality. Comparative theology engages a wide array of issues and draws upon varied disciplines, but still in a way similar to that employed by theologians who do not do comparative study. If a theologian or ethicist can delve deeply into the world of science or literature or psychoanalysis (p. 665) without losing her or his faith bearings, so too the comparativist can study another tradition deeply without ceasing to be a believing theologian or without ceasing to contribute to her or his own religious tradition as an enterprise nourished by many inquiries that reach beyond the context of theology narrowly defined. The attention to the dynamic described above—the comparative theologian engages in a study that affects and is affected by the theologian's own person and personality—should help prevent immediate or gradual detachment from the intensity of the faith perspective and theological inquiry, just as theological commitments are not entirely marginalized by philological or historical questions. If comparative study is consciously reflective, it should intensify rather than relativize religious and theological commitments.

Third, and from the opposite direction, one may insist that comparative theology, however neutrally or pluralistically described, remains a rather deeply, even narrowly, Christian enterprise. Despite all the nuances and cautions stated above, 'theology' is still a Christian construction with roots and a history distinctive to the Christian tradition. Comparative theology, deeply implicated in a Christian context, may then appear to remain a mode of discourse that other traditions cannot adopt without contortion. It may in effect be a largely one-sided conversation among Christians shared with just a few others willing to adopt a Christian mode of religious reflection. Certainly, it remains necessary to remember that comparative study has a largely European and Christian history, and that 'theology' is a mode of religious intellectual discourse defined and practiced most comfortably in the Christian tradition. Even in this essay, comparative theology has been presented largely as a Christian production in terms of its history and

features. It is also true that if we consider the multitude of religious languages proper to different traditions, 'theology' remains at best an analogous term that will not be exactly applicable in traditions other than the Christian. But as has been stated above, one need not conclude that theology and comparative theology have been or will have to remain only Christian productions. Believers in every tradition have 'faith', they need to think about what they have faith in, and they live in a world that is increasingly pluralistic. We can still insist that inquiry into one's faith, so as to understand and make sense of it, surely occurs in other religious traditions, and that such thinking is best named 'theology'. Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and people of other traditions all do theologize and cannot but enter into conversation with theologians of many other traditions. Thus they too have to become comparative theologians: these are legitimate claims, even if claims rooted in Christian intuitions and analogies that can never become entirely or simply matters of fact. 'Comparative theology' is still a better name for faithful religious reflection in this context—preferable to other terms that one might use in naming the kind of interreligious reflection sketched in this essay. In any case, 'theology' has a future as well as a past, and its meanings will continue to change during the ongoing conversation among believers.

(p. 666) Fourth, even if attention to detail, close reading, etc., are important, one might still object that in the end the real goal of comparative theology is to discern some truth parsed according to the norms of Christian theology—a truth which can only be articulated after and apart from comparative practice in a theology of religions, and even then according to more systematic judgements about the uniqueness of Christ and of Christianity among world religions. In this light, comparative theology cannot answer the questions it raises, but stands only as a propaedeutic exercise that may usefully provide resources for more explicit and traditional Christian theological reflection. Comparative theology may even be charged with concealing the assumptions of the theology of religions according to which comparative work gains theological significance. Certainly, we need to acknowledge the necessarily broader context in which comparative theology is possible—its interreligious, dialogical, and confessional frame—and the related scrutiny of Christian sources that occupies the theologian of religions. But the theology of religions, which is primarily Christian reflection on Christian resources, remains distinct from comparative study and by itself always falls short of those practices and purposes that are inherent in comparative study and evident only in its actual practice. Comparative theology remains substantively theological on its own, even if it does stand in a fruitful relationship with a subsequent theology of religions.

Fifth, close attention to another tradition's theology may in fact lead to a basic scepticism about the viability of concepts and words across theological boundaries. Different languages and theological traditions, the danger of identifying similarities which are only apparent, and innumerable distinctions and subtle differences may make it almost impossible to speak theologically across boundaries. So too, the sheer amount of data may become overwhelming. The meaning of other religions endlessly subdivides, from a simple question about 'the religions', to a nearly infinite series of complex choices and smaller questions about particular theological topics. Progress on the largest questions—

Which religion is the truest or best? How does God save the world?—slows down to the point that one realizes that one will never know enough to draw conclusions. Comparative study might then seem merely a ploy for permanently postponing difficult theological judgements about other religions.

It is simply true that comparative study makes the project of posing and answering large questions more difficult, even as swifter progress is being made in clarifying many smaller theological topics. We may thus determine that different traditions do not mean the same thing by words appearing in English as 'God', 'sin', 'grace', etc., and we may learn very much from each tradition on how to nuance such words, even in English. It is also true that, once traditions are recognized as theological, they are less easily categorized, and they become resistant to the efforts of other traditions to determine 'the' theological meaning to be assigned to them. Facts can be annoyingly stubborn resisters to theory. A key question then is whether one can really state a meaning for the ongoing theological conversations (p. 667) that occur among religious intellectuals who have something in common but still differ from one another, who share the task of a dialogical accountability, and who have both to listen and yet still to confess and argue for their faith. It is not that conclusions become impossible or are ruled out, but only that the skills required for drawing conclusions become greater and more demanding. The future of theology may in part lie in this comparative project, but for now a trade-off may be inevitable: vastly more and more sophisticated knowledge on each theological topic, but also a postponement of answers to the great questions. Yet it is not necessary to conclude that the situation will forever remain this way. Perhaps we must simply be patient for a century or two, until the implications of comparison become more familiar and coherent.

Finally, and to head in yet another direction, the preceding pages may seem to suggest that comparative theology implies and even calls into existence a new religious community with a new 'interreligious faith' explored in 'comparative theology' and no longer viably traced back to a particular faith community and its theological discourse. Understanding will not be able to stop neatly at the edge of experience, and believers who share new experiences may in fact bring new spiritual insights to new communities, with new questions, new ways of responding to them, and new answers with their own additional implications. If theology is faith seeking understanding within a community context, then this new faithful search and gradually dawning understanding may seem to transform basic religious understanding, pushing it beyond a community's boundaries, and possibly convening a new community of comparativists. A Christian comparative theology, or a Buddhist one, might then conceivably cease to be exclusively Christian or exclusively Buddhist.

Comparative theology may, in this way, be seen as a rather dangerous enterprise. The emerging of a new community may occur not because of explicit contradictions to or breaks with Christian or Buddhist doctrine, nor because specific novel teachings are added to a given tradition, nor merely because many comparativists are liberals, but rather because comparative theological practice is increasingly comprised of questions, investigations, and research that fit within the confines of no single religious community.

If we think differently, this affects how we live and, in some way, how we believe. A new theology may indicate a new theological community, comprised of believers, many of them theologians, who are committed to thinking across religious boundaries, balancing the questions of their own home tradition with attention to the questions of other traditions as well, and drawing on norms and authorities traceable to multiple traditions. Still, such intellectuals will ordinarily and for the most part remain members of more traditional religious communities, intent upon introducing the comparative questions back into that community. Faith will normally be deepened, not altered or redirected. Further speculation is needed on where comparative work actually leads, sociologically and theologically, perhaps in the theology of religions (p. 668) discipline that follows upon comparative theology. Again, patience is required given the novelty of the situation created by comparative theology.

Comparative theology is a constructive and reflective theological discipline that is not yet mature in either its theoretical or its practical dimensions. It must be practised at greater length, in still more particular instances, by theologians from outside the Christian tradition, and thereafter analysed and explained with attention to other emerging and fresh ways of doing theology. Only then can we imagine making a more settled assessment of the field, its major themes, its impact, and where it leads. For now, we must keep paying attention to what actually happens when one attends to traditions other than one's own, drawing comparisons on a small scale and prizing both similarities and differences, and for a time sacrificing the clarity to which we may feel accustomed in more well-established areas of theology.

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