

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: FROM SOTERIOLOGICAL OPENNESS TO HERMENEUTICAL OPENNESS

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One of the main challenges to interreligious dialogue is in locating a proper balance between commitment to one's own religion while maintaining openness to the other.¹ "Can one combine openness and identity, dialogability and steadfastness in the interreligious dialogue?"² It is generally understood that the problem of the tense relationship between identity and openness should be addressed from a theological perspective and that interreligious dialogue should be *based* on a correct theological evaluation of religious traditions. It is up to theological reflection to clarify why Christians must be open—or, conversely, should not be open—to those of other religions. It is theology that sets limits as to how far that openness extends and if there should be limits to one's openness when encountering the religious other. If Christians are to become more open, the questions of *why* this openness is appropriate (or not) and how this openness to the faith of another is related to one's own faith commitment, are answered, one by one, through theological reflection on, and interpretation of, religious diversity.

In the first section of this article I explicitly take up the challenge of reflection from a theological perspective on the relationship between faith commitment and openness. This implies turning to the so-called theology of religions and the threefold *soteriological* typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. My primary interest is to show precisely how the Christian

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focus on soteriology determines the ways that both identity and openness are interpreted, as well as the dialogical tension that exists between them. From this perspective, I intend to bring to the surface how these soteriological models differ in their appreciation of the dialogical tension between openness and identity.

In recent theological literature one might note an increasing dissatisfaction with the way the theology of religions has appointed itself as the *prolegomena* of interreligious dialogue.³ One of the main criticisms is that the soteriological approach amounts to a perversion of the virtue of openness. These models are often abstract designs, developed without reference to any particular religious tradition other than the Christian tradition⁴. Many theologians feel that the soteriological threefold scheme is both insulting⁵ and patronizing⁶ because the religious other is understood without being heard. These criticisms are articulated especially within *particularism*, a model that sets out to move beyond the soteriological fixation of the classical theology of religions.⁷ Because this relatively new model has yet to be analyzed systematically in the relevant literature, I will explicate in the second section of this article some of its main tenets. I will focus especially on the way this model sets out to alter the terms of the discussion on the dialogical tension between openness and commitment by claiming that *hermeneutical openness* should *precede soteriological appreciation*.⁸ From this perspective, the emerging *fourth paradigm* heralds the turn to *hermeneutics* in interreligious theology.

In the third section, I turn to comparative theology as a fertile expression of particularism. Comparative theology presents itself as a genuine and adequate way to understand and appreciate the otherness of the religious other without losing sight of one's own identity. "At issue is . . . the fashioning of a way to encounter the other as true other who is neither too alien nor falsely similar, and from whom one can thus actually learn."⁹ Original to comparative theology is the way it gives a new twist to the discussion on the dialogical tension between openness and commitment. Comparative theology can be thought of as a never-ending hermeneutical circle which moves between identity and openness, conviction and critique, commitment and distancing. Whereas the classical theology of religions seems to be actuated by the conviction that it is both possible and necessary to come to a final and definite soteriological appreciation of other religions, comparative theology, on the other hand, sees interreligious encounter, first and foremost, as an ongoing conversational process which can yield preliminary results only. That, I will argue, is what marks the nature of real and authentic dialogue.

I. The Theology of Religions and the Quest for Soteriological Openness

Christian theology of religions turns on soteriological questions. What is the nature and function of non-Christian religious traditions in light of Christian faith in the salvific character of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ? Are all religions valid in God's eyes—are they all equally effective in putting people in contact with the Divine? Does God regard different religions as a curse or a blessing? In answer to these soteriological questions the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism has emerged.¹⁰

Each soteriological model is not merely limited to a theological speech act but it likewise promotes or hinders a certain relationship to those of other faiths.¹¹ The “theory” of the theology of religions has consequences for the “practice” of interreligious dialogue and for the tensive dialogical relationship.¹² In the following paragraphs, I will explore the connection between the soteriological models and interreligious relational patterns. What content do these models give to the tensive dialogical relationship between openness and identity? What does faith commitment mean in each model and how does exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism respectively define “openness”?

Exclusivism and the Pretension of Certainty at the Expense of Openness

Though exclusivist theology does not play a pioneering role within the theology of religions nor within the practice of interreligious dialogue, its importance, primarily within Evangelical Protestantism, should not be underestimated. “To ignore, or downplay, the strength, importance, and challenge of . . . Evangelicals within contemporary Christianity is to cut off, or do injustice to, a large part of the Christian family”.¹³

At the cornerstone of the exclusivism model lies a pessimistic anthropology that emphasizes the sinfulness and lostness of human beings.¹⁴ Although humans were created in the image of God and thus have innate value, human nature has been perverted by sin. The theological-anthropological focus on the sinfulness of human beings is matched by a high Christology that emphasizes the divinity of Christ. Because people cannot liberate themselves from their tragic situation, Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, took upon himself the lot of sinful humanity in order to reconcile humankind with God. The divine incarnation in Christ is therefore *ontologically* constitutive for salvation. But not all are redeemed: only those who recognize Jesus Christ as their personal Savior sent by God can be redeemed. This is the *epistemological* requirement of redemption. Within exclusivist theology, Christian faith functions as a demarcation line between those who are already saved and those who will remain separated from God forever.¹⁵

What is more, exclusivism looks at religious plurality from the perspective of human sinfulness, and leaves little to no room for offering a positive appreciation of other religions. Religions are understood as the expression of human attempts to achieve salvation on their own power, neglecting thereby the fact that salvation comes only through faith in Christ.

It should not come then as a surprise that interreligious dialogue is not high on the exclusivist agenda. Exclusivists fear that behind the argument for

dialogical openness lies not so much a concern for what is true and good as a narcissistic interest. One Evangelical theologian expresses his concern strikingly as follows:

Faith is not simply a wax nose that can be shaped and reshaped to meet the subjective requirements of personal preference. Along this line, we may need to be reminded that openness, tolerance, and willingness to dialogue may mask a kind of narcissism, not to mention the fact that our real concerns probably lie elsewhere. "Where your treasure is," Jesus might have said in the contemporary context, "there you will prefer certainty to ambiguity and truth to dialogue."¹⁶

This does not of course mean that exclusivist theologians like the one quoted above reject interreligious dialogue altogether. "Growing numbers of evangelicals seem optimistic about the possibilities of interreligious dialogue. Their writings seem to recognize the need for some kind of language for talking to those with whom [they] disagree on the most important questions of life."¹⁷ But they do draw clear lines as to what is and is not allowed with respect to interreligious dialogue. Exclusivists may participate in interreligious dialogue on the condition that it does not cause them to waver or doubt the truth that has been revealed in a definitive and decisive way by God through Christ. Still, their main concern in the context of religious plurality is not dialogue, but the proclamation of "the universal and definitive consequences of the concrete once-for-all event that occurred at the cross."¹⁸

Exclusivism is often associated with the values of commitment, steadfastness and *identity*.¹⁹ Though the association between exclusivism and commitment is a way of giving this model a positive significance in the context of interreligious dialogue, it is also problematic, for it suggests that the construction of "identity" necessarily implies "exclusion of others who are different."²⁰ The soteriological *a priori* rejection of other religions offers a clearly described identity, but it is an identity that comes at the cost of openness for the religious other.

In the exclusivist model the religious other is seen as someone who must still convert rather than as a believing subject in her own right who can speak for herself and can make an independent contribution to dialogue. For exclusivists, only one difference counts in assessing adherents of other religions, i.e. faith or the lack thereof. The antithetical structure of the exclusivist worldview leaps out: Christians vs. non-Christians. *Theologically*, as far as exclusivism is concerned, it is not really relevant to introduce other distinctions into the collective group of "non-Christians." The designation "non-Christians" or "unbelievers" is not inappropriate within the exclusivist model. It is more inappropriate to speak of believers of *other faiths*, for there is only one faith and that is the saving faith in Jesus Christ.

The antithetical structure of exclusivism is sometimes—although this is certainly not necessarily always the case—reflected in a *binary* grammar of

selfing and othering.²¹ This grammar can be understood as a kind of primary anthropological reaction to the other: we are good/they are bad; we serve/they are selfish; we know the truth/they live a lie; we know God/they live turned away from God. The list goes on. Humankind is divided into two. "Self" and the "other" are related to each other like a "negative mirror image." The self is the good and constitutes the horizon against which the identity of the other is determined to be a *privatio*. The other lacks grace, salvation, faith, etc.

This binary grammar is directed, in the first place, towards making the discontinuity between identity and otherness as obvious as possible. Indirectly, it functions as a strategy for dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty.²² According to Dirk Hutsebaut and Bart Duriez, exclusivists are orthodox believers. They derive the meaning and content of their faith from authority and have the tendency to think in a literal way. The Bible is thus read within a literal context. Different interpretations of the Bible cause a certain amount of insecurity: therefore, a literal reading of the Bible is necessary in securing a perspective of absoluteness and surety in faith.²³

I regard it as a real danger that exclusivism claims the discourse on "identity", as if the certainty of religious commitment is necessarily joined with a literal faith affirmation, as if identity has to do only with what remains the same and is thus opposed to otherness, diversity, and change, as if truth and dialogue exclude each other and identity and openness are opposed to one another. Although it is correct to say that exclusivism goes along with a strong religious commitment, it concerns, in my view, a very one-sided view of commitment and identity. We should be wary, therefore, of seeing the identification of exclusivism with its pole of identity as self-evident, because this view of identity can impact the relation with the religious other negatively. It is not improbable that in the lives of many believers soteriological exclusivism functions primarily as a policy that strengthens boundaries.

Theologically, one could say that soteriological exclusivism, with its antithetical structure, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The theology that emphasizes the brokenness of the human being, his sinful nature that makes him turn away from God and his neighbour, tends to produce a view of the world where there is only room for a relationship with the neighbour who is known. The reality of the Kingdom of God, towards which exclusivist theology strives with such commitment and steadfastness, seems so far away. The prophecy of being lost seems to promote broken and discontinuous relations.

Inclusivism: the Ambiguous Relation between Solidarity and Particularity

Unlike exclusivists, inclusivists do not emphasize the necessity of a personal confession in Christ as Savior but more "the way in which Christ's saving power is made available to people in particular times and places."²⁴ The focus shifts, in other words, from a personal relationship with the unique *mediator* of God's will for universal salvation to the *mediation* of that will. For the

inclusivist, salvation is still Christological, but in an ontological rather than epistemological sense: one can be saved even without knowledge of Christ at all.²⁵ Still, soteriologically speaking, there is an asymmetry between Christianity and other religions. Inclusivism clings to the definitive reality of salvation in the divine incarnation.

Different from exclusivism understood within an evangelical framework, inclusivism appears more *theologically* appreciative of interreligious dialogue. According to Jacques Dupuis, interreligious dialogue rests on four theological foundations that emphasize primarily the connectedness and unity of all people and display an optimistic anthropology and theology. First, dialogue is based on the belief that all people share a common origin: "All stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth".²⁶ As such, all of humankind constitutes one family. Secondly, not only do we share a common origin, but the salvific goal of the history of humankind is the same, i.e. the triune God. The same divine plan of salvation involves all people. Third, there is the idea that the one divine mystery of salvation is mediated in different ways and made accessible to adherents of other faiths. Dupuis sees a very important and continuing role here for religious traditions. Religious traditions are the different paths to salvation along which the trinitarian God seeks contact with all people through his Word and Spirit. The universally present and shared "Reign of God" constitutes the fourth element of the theological foundation of interreligious dialogue.

By responding in the sincere practice of their religious tradition to God's call addressed to them, believers of other religious faiths truly become active members of the Reign. Through participation in the mystery of salvation, they are members of the Reign of God already present in history, and their religious traditions themselves contribute in a mysterious manner to the construction of the Reign of God in the world.²⁷

Theologically speaking, the inclusivist view of the relationship between God and human beings, and among human beings themselves, is quite different from that found in exclusivist theology. It is not the story of the Fall primarily—and thus of the brokenness and the rupture—that are central, but the idea of creatural and eschatological connectedness which can be experienced already in the present. This connectedness forms the basis of interreligious dialogue and the turn to the religious other. The other is not a threat but, as a child of God, is seen more as a partner on the way to the coming "Reign of God." Despite their differences, believers from different religious traditions belong to the fellowship of salvation: "Communion in the reality is more foundational than differences in the sacramental structure and elsewhere."²⁸ If the emphasis in the model of soteriological exclusivism lies on exclusivity, discontinuity, and distinction, and often at the expense of relation, in inclusivism the emphasis lies precisely on the search for points of contact, overlap and continuity.²⁹ It is a more harmonizing approach.³⁰

"The great strength of inclusivist thinking for interfaith cooperation is its vision of the religious universe as a coherent whole. To the inclusivist . . . various human descriptions of the cosmos are *integrated* into a single system."³¹ Because of this, the religious other and her tradition might seem less strange than it was first thought. But the power of integration is also precisely this model's weakness. The danger exists that the inclusivist focus on the continuity continues one-sidedly with respect to openness, whereby the other appears not so much in her otherness as in the degree to which she connects with, or shows affinity to, the Christian tradition: what is strange is "swallowed up" in what is known and familiar.

Inclusivism employs a grammar of "selfing" and "othering" which is called "encompassment". This grammar entails "an act of selfing by appropriating, perhaps one could say adopting or co-opting, selected kinds of otherness."³² In the strategy of "encompassing" only two levels are relevant:

The lower level of cognition recognizes difference, the higher level subsumes that which is different under that which is universal. To put it somewhat polemically: 'you may think that you differ from me in your sense of values or identity, but deep down, or rather, higher up, you are but a part of me'.³³

Furthermore, inclusivism is essentially hierarchical. The "truth" of the other religious tradition is true only insofar as it agrees with or confirms one's own truth. The tension between oneself and the other is shown here as a tension between the universal (all-encompassing) and the particular. The balance in this model swings from "encompassment/integration" to the disadvantage of the specific, the different, and the particular. That is also the most important criticism of the inclusive integration model: this model "reminds one of the traveller who understands everything he encounters 'abroad' as something familiar to him from his home country."³⁴ Inclusivism includes the other but likewise robs the self of a sense of her own strangeness and thus of her unique singularity.

Pluralism: the Democratization of the Religious Landscape

Pluralism is often introduced as the dream partner of interreligious dialogue, a view that is not unfounded but, as I will show, is not unproblematic either.³⁵ Let me first clarify what is distinctive about "pluralist" interreligious dialogue.

The core of the pluralist hypothesis is that the various religious traditions "constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it."³⁶ Epistemologically speaking, the pluralist theory is inspired by the Kantian distinction between the "noumenal" and the "phenomenal". John Hick, for example, distinguishes between the divine Transcendent *an sich* and the way it is expressed within the various religious traditions. As such,

transcendent reality is ineffable.³⁷ Hence, different religions do not "describe the transcendent as it is in itself but as it is conceived in the variety of ways made possible by our varied human mentalities and cultures."³⁸

And thus Hick formulates his pluralist hypothesis suggesting that:

the same divine reality has always been self-revealingly active towards mankind, and that the differences of human responses are related to different human circumstances. The circumstances—ethnic-geographical, climatic, economic, sociological, historical—have produced the existing differentiations of human culture, and within each main cultural region the response to the divine has taken its own characteristic form.³⁹

Despite their historical and culturally different interpretations of ultimate reality, diverse religions participate in a similar soteriological process that Hick describes as the liberating transformation from egoism to being centered on ultimate reality. In that respect, all religions are contexts of liberation and salvation. Although religions are very complex entities and no single person can gather sufficient knowledge on each religion to make a complete and comprehensive comparison, Hick holds that one is justified in claiming that, historically and at present, no single religion is superior with respect to soteriology. Hence, the pluralist hypothesis implies a certain soteriological parity.

The pluralist interpretation of interreligious dialogue rests on four pillars: (1) a phenomenology of commonality, (2) the de-absolutization of truth, and (3) a symmetrical reciprocity between the dialogue partners. This leads to (4) a dynamic relational understanding of religious identity that makes openness for the religious other possible.⁴⁰

Unique to pluralism is first of all the assumption of a common ground for different religions. This concerns not only establishing commonalities, similarities, or overlaps between two or more religions; it also seeks a "common ground in a deeper sense".⁴¹ The idea is that there is one single religious ultimate reality and that it can be expressed effectively by a wide variety of doctrines.⁴² Pluralism presupposes unity in diversity.

Second, the hypothesis of a common ground, which is ineffable and mysterious, leads to a de-absolutization of truth. The mystery of the truth is always greater than can be grasped in symbols and doctrines of religious traditions. A prerequisite for interreligious dialogue is the readiness to accept the contingency and thus relativity of one's own perspective.

Third, the perspective of the adherent of another faith can constitute a supplementation of one's own faith tradition. If one wants to transcend one's own perspective and get a better view of ultimate reality, then people should listen and learn from the truth of others.

The [pluralist] hypothesis may thus provide a framework for inter-faith dialogue, and an explicit basis for the hope that each tradition may learn

from and be changed by its encounter with the others. For if each represents a different human perspective on the Real, each may be able to enlarge its own vision by trying to look through the lenses that others have developed.⁴³

This dialogical concept of truth changes, finally, the way the tensive relationship between openness and identity in dialogue is perceived. Openness and identity are not contrary to one another, but inseparably interconnected. The religious other helps one transcend one's own limited and well-worn cultural and religious patterns, and enables believers to fill in the gaps in "their" truth.⁴⁴ New perspectives open up and until now unknown facets of the (transcendent) reality are revealed: interreligious dialogue unfolds as a place of meaning.

However, despite its promising prospects, pluralism is not the natural partner to interreligious dialogue. The main critique is that a presupposed common ground between different religions ends in a homogenization of religious heterogeneity. This criticism is not unexpected. "[This theory] attempt[s] to transform religious diversity from an apparent embarrassment for claims to religious truth into supporting testimony for one truth subsistent in all. It is not surprising that the specifics that distinguish the traditions are pushed into the background."⁴⁵ In short, the emphasis lies more on the unity, universality, and commonality, and less on the plurality, the difference, or the specificity, of the various religions. Though it may sound plausible "to invoke the imagery of paths up the same mountain or rivers flowing into the great ocean . . . [.] such high-minded metaphors can turn out to be subtly oppressive"⁴⁶—oppressive for everything that does not fit and withdraws from the pluralist schema. What the pluralists do not take into consideration is the possibility that all religions do *not* point in the same direction, that all religions do *not* pose the same questions (of salvation), that religious pluralism will *not* be sublimated in a unified pluralism. The assumption of a common ground is problematic especially in view of interreligious dialogue.

John B. Cobb summarizes the above argument as follows:

Even when the topic of common ground does not obtrude into the discussion directly, the assumption of common ground inhibits real dialogue. This is because real dialogue involves listening to genuine strange ideas, whereas the *assumption of common ground limits the strangeness of what can be heard*. The listener who is convinced of common ground will not be able to hear the full novelty of what is said.⁴⁷

Cobb's remark shows a suggestive parallel with an objection formulated earlier against the inclusivist paradigm. Earlier we made the criticism that inclusivism

prevents me from truly *hearing* what my Buddhist or Muslim friend is trying to tell me. In claiming to open myself to the "truth" of Buddhism,

I am really only opening myself to what I will fit into, what I already have in Christ, i.e. to what is already implicitly contained in Christian revelation. In my deeper feelings and convictions that Jesus is God's last word, *I cannot hear, because I cannot recognize, any other Words that might say something different and new.* And if I cannot hear what my partner is trying to say to me, I cannot really dialogue with her.⁴⁸

The analogy between the criticisms of inclusivism and pluralism is remarkable. Cobb reproaches the pluralists for not being able to *hear* the true otherness of the religious other because of their presupposed common ground, and Knitter reproaches the inclusivists for not being able to *hear* the newness and otherness of the religious other because of their Christological criterion. Pluralism shows strong parallels with inclusivism and thus encounters similar problems.

Pluralism wants to confirm as well as advance the solidarity between religions. Pluralism does this just like inclusivism by emphasizing primarily the continuity between the religions.⁴⁹ The negative flipside of the affirmation of religious continuity (inclusivism/pluralism) is that the discontinuity is not taken seriously enough: the conflicts, the contradictions, the breaks.

Just like inclusivism, pluralism also follows the grammar of encompassment/ integration.⁵⁰ According to this grammar, only two levels are relevant: "The lower level of cognition recognizes difference, the higher level subsumes that which is different under that which is universal."⁵¹ Pluralism functions as a norm that obtains for all religions and stands higher, with respect to authority, than the confessional perspective. Its most important difference from Christian inclusivism is that the "encompassing term" lies, as it were, on a higher level. Neither Christ nor God, but the *Ultimate* is the final end of all religions. Pluralism formulates an integrative perspective that is imposed on all religions that relativizes them.⁵² Thus, all religions are understood to be ways to the Ultimate and their adherents are anonymous pluralists.

II. Particularism: Moving away from Soteriological Fixation to Hermeneutical Openness

Since the 1990s the irreducible particularity of religions has become an important theme in the theology of religions.⁵³ Some authors even speak about a new model for interpreting religious plurality. The rather recent character of this development can be seen from the fact that there is still no single name for this model. Moreover, this model has yet to be elaborated on systematically.

Paul Knitter calls this new model the "Acceptance Model": "the religious traditions of the world are really different, and we have to *accept* those differences."⁵⁴ The power of this model lies, according to Knitter, in the fact that "it provides Christians with the opportunity not only to refocus and

reaffirm the distinctive identity of Christianity, which had been worn away by the winds of modernity." It also creates space for "the distinctiveness of other religions."⁵⁵ This model thus claims to succeed where the classical soteriological models have failed, namely, in finding a balance between openness and identity. Douglas Pratt speaks along the same lines of "radically differentiated pluralism" and notes that "[r]eligious differences signal *Irreconcilable Differentiation of Religious Identities*. That is to say, there is no reasonable ground to assume a link across religions: their individual, or particular, identities militate against any such linkage. The difference between them is of such a nature that, strictly speaking, it is illicit even to consider that there is any point of meaningful conceptual contact among the religions."⁵⁶ In like fashion, Yuang Huang states about particularism: "different religions are regarded as different in their fundamentals."⁵⁷ Thus, the concept "particularity" refers to an irreducible difference, i.e. a difference that cannot be traced back to a common ground or universal structure. Because of its relative "newness", the main tenets of this model have not been systematically analyzed, which I will do, in the following section.⁵⁸

Particularity and Faith Commitment

Particularism is especially wary of generalizing theories on a common ground, on mutual experience or purpose or on focusing on faith traditions as they are *practiced*. Reducing a living faith to a system of abstract schemas ignores the way in which faith is always experienced concretely. One should never abstract the particular elements of a religious tradition from the way that the adherents of that tradition practice them. For "what is seen as accidental or (historically) relative by outsiders can be of essential 'importance' for the religious person himself".⁵⁹ Meanings are always acquired through concrete practices and cannot be detached from the context in which they are experienced.⁶⁰ If one wants to understand what religion is, one should investigate how religion functions in the lives of religious people. The question then is: What does it mean to be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu?

Particularists point out that religion functions as an all-encompassing interpretative scheme that forms and moulds the identity of the believer. The emphasis here is less on the cognitive than on the practical dimension of religion. Religion is like "a set of learned skills and only secondarily and inessentially . . . the possession of information".⁶¹ What religion consists of is seen as a kind of tacit or practical knowledge. It is knowing *how* rather than knowing *that*. Particularists thus speak of religion as a way of life⁶², a pattern⁶³, or a paradigm.⁶⁴

Inspired by the so-called cultural-linguistic theory of religion⁶⁵, particularism confirms the analogy between language (in the broad meaning of the word) and religion, including the crucial idea that "language" has priority over "experience." The appropriation of a way of life and the speaking of a religious language is the *conditio sine qua non* for an inspired and vivid

religious life. Furthermore, this immediately emphasizes the communal dimension of religion. Religious identity is acquired not by digging into one's deepest self but by becoming a member of a community that gathers together within a religious tradition.

That people understand themselves and others comes from the fact that they share a certain way of life. They agree in the way of life. Being brought up is being inducted into a way of life. . . . The way of life precedes "everything": the conceptual, knowledge, identity, all similarities and differences—and thus also each theoretical understanding of [the concept of] "way of life."⁶⁶

Clearly, particularism presupposes a kind of holistic approach to religion: ethics, doctrine, spirituality and ritual are inseparably connected with one another. This connection forms the religious framework on the basis of which people *live* in the world and make *concrete choices and decisions*. The world in which people live is therefore dependent on their particular way of life. The religious object and the ultimate goal of salvation are thus given quite different content within different traditions, which immediately entails that the actions that help their respective believers in moving towards the ultimate are very different.

In line with this, the religious way of life is fundamentally different, depending on the tradition to which one belongs. What people find important, how they organize their lives, the values for which they strive and the virtues that they attempt to instill, and ultimately what one attempts to be and become as a believer—all these questions are answered quite differently within each religion.⁶⁷ The believer orients his or her life to a "concrete" ultimate goal (salvation, righteousness, nirvana, enlightenment, etc.) and gears his or her whole life to attaining that goal on the ethical, spiritual, ritual and doctrinal levels.

For example: a Brahmin (a high-caste Hindu) who attempts seriously to live as such might see his Brahminism as providing a frame for all the other forms of life he belongs to. If he is married, he will understand the fact of his marriage, together with all the particular activities that constitute it, as in large part prescribed by the perspectives on marriage enshrined in the relevant ethico-legal injunctions found in the texts, [rituals, symbols] and traditions that are authoritative for Brahmins. The same will be true for his mode of dress, the physical posture he adopts while defecating, and what he does to make a living. There will be no form of life and no particular action or pattern of action, that fails to seem to him to be a proper part of Brahminism.⁶⁸

Belonging to a certain religious tradition is determinative for concrete—everyday and not so everyday—choices and decisions: "choices between truth and falsehood, friend and foe, life and death."⁶⁹ Religion is thus not a certain

aspect of personal life but “seems to those who belong to it, to be comprehensive. It seems to them to take account of and be relevant to everything.”⁷⁰

Precisely on the basis of the focus on what it means to be committed to a certain tradition, particularists pose questions regarding easy pleas for openness, transformation, complementarity, and convergence. Diversity and plurality are accepted and respected within particularism, but this respect is not expressed in a “flirting with and adoration of otherness” that would be at odds with a deep and concrete faith commitment. With respect to this, William Placher expresses his resistance to the so-called *Don Juans of myth* who pay court to every religion:

Faith embodies a powerful vision of the world, and such visions are neither abandoned nor entered into lightly. . . . Openness really is important, but arguments for openness can encourage an ideal of occupying many different positions which then becomes a surrogate for the old dream of occupying no particular position at all. If we are honest, we will admit that we stand somewhere. If we are serious, we will feel serious *commitments* to the place we stand.⁷¹

According to particularists, faith commitments are exclusive. They cannot be combined with another religious way of life. People cannot simultaneously live in both Buddhist and Biblical worlds. In addition, religions are not simply interchangeable. When it comes to values, norms and convictions, religions do not point in the same direction. In this regard, the possibility of interreligious conflicts has to be taken into account. Though there are certainly similarities or points of agreement between different religions regarding what is held highly, differences persist.⁷²

From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness

The attention to particularity translates into doubt about the hermeneutical meaningfulness of the soteriological approach of religious diversity.⁷³ The criticism reads that the soteriological approach amounts to a perversion of the virtue of “openness.” The presupposition that “salvation” is a universal and unequivocal term is especially problematic. The classical soteriological models seem to be insufficiently aware of the complexity of this term.⁷⁴ It is precisely this complexity that particularism places on the interreligious agenda by pointing to the strong connection between “the path” and “the goal.” The religious path that a believer follows leads to the goal he or she has in mind. Therefore, it is improbable that Muslims will ultimately attain the salvation postulated by Christianity. Speaking about the different but equal paths of salvation in this regard likewise makes no sense.⁷⁵

Particularism points out that the other is *not* like me and demands that interreligious dialogue create a space for the other as other. Precisely that space—that hermeneutical openness—is all too quickly filled up by the soteriological approach to religions. “The soteriocentrism of theology of religions

... seems bound to equalize or absorb the ineffaceably particular soteriological programs of other religious communities."⁷⁶ The soteriological models immunize Christians against the concrete otherness located in different religious traditions. The religious other is understood from the perspective of a Christian soteriological structure of prejudices. And once the other has been "understood and categorized," it is no longer perceived as necessary—and certainly not as urgently demanding—a serious and deep knowledge of the other in his or her particularity. Therefore, a theology of religions is found to be too quick with formulating simple solutions to calm our fears.⁷⁷

Homogenizing accounts that have become commonplace in much philosophy and theology of religions short-circuit interreligious conversations before they can get under way. Such theories are pre-emptive in that they state as presuppositions for dialogue the very things that such conversations might disclose or, for that matter, fail to disclose. Viewed from the perspective of the logic of interreligious dialogue, participation in such dialogue demands at least the recognition of the other as other and perhaps the acknowledgement of incompatibility among some doctrine-expressing sentences of some religious communities.⁷⁸

In the first place, the dialogue between religions presents a hermeneutical challenge. It involves the question of mutual understanding or the degree to which individuals belonging to one religion can grasp the meaning of symbols, teachings, and practices of another. The religious other is the strange other, i.e. "the other who does not think like me, who eludes me and whom I do not understand."⁷⁹ The other cannot fit into one's understanding without further ado in a theological metatheory.⁸⁰

Dialogue first and foremost entails the willingness to *understand* the other in his or her otherness and to avoid reading one's own presuppositions into the religious world of the other. Henceforth, we will call this form of openness *hermeneutical openness* as distinguished from *soteriological openness*. Hermeneutical openness begins with the acknowledgement of the "intractable otherness of other religions."⁸¹ The religious other expects his or her dialogue partner to be willing to be addressed and interrupted by "an unfamiliarity that does not meet patterns of expectation."⁸² Not meeting this request for hermeneutical openness is an expression of misrecognition. Put more forcefully, a lack of willingness to take the other seriously in his or her otherness is a form of *closedness*. Before judging, before assessing, before appreciating—either positively or negatively—the religious other deserves to be heard and understood.⁸³

III. Comparative Theology: From Hermeneutical Openness to Theological Transformation

Particularism is a model that encompasses many different expressions,⁸⁴ one of which is comparative theology. Comparative theology presents itself as an

alternative to the classic soteriological approach, avoiding the hermeneutical biases that might be found in the classic approach to theology of religions. This relatively new discipline is characterized by a theological commitment to the comparative study of religion.⁸⁵ First, it moves away from a *a priori* theological interpreting schemes, which disregard the self-understanding of religious traditions. Although a *a priori* reasoning is certainly important in theology, it does entail a certain risk. "[T]he danger is that [a *a priori* theologizing] begets a complacency that one's work is finished. The illusion blunts any sense of need for detailed study of the aims and forms of life pursued by non-Christians. Certainly lack of concern for specifics is not ingredient to an *a priori* theology of religions, but it is fairly common."⁸⁶ Comparative theology, rather, pretends that comprehension (hermeneutics) precedes judgment. Next, it rejects the theological assumption of a global, meta-perspective on religion, which (implicitly) claims to know other religions better than their own adherents, "whether as the vain products of human presumption, as in . . . exclusivism, as various expressions of anonymous Christianity, as in . . . inclusivism, or as various forms of Reality-centeredness as in . . . pluralism."⁸⁷ Third, comparative theology sets out to understand the meaning of Christian tradition by exploring it in light of the teachings of other religious traditions. Comparative theology thus might be said to be an interreligious theology: it is marked by a critical theological engagement with strange religious sources. In this article I primarily focus on the way Francis Clooney approaches the comparative theology project.⁸⁸ Clooney is one of the main proponents of comparative theology and defines this project in the following way:

... as truly *constructive* theology, distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its *foundation in more than one tradition* (although the comparativist always remains *rooted in one tradition*), and *by reflection which builds on that foundation*, rather than simply on themes or by methods already articulated prior to comparative practice. Comparative theology is a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions, a theology that occurs only after comparison.⁸⁹

Comparative theology sets out to understand the identity of the other in their wholeness and particularity. Comparative religion shares the intention to understand other religions in the most objective and fair-minded manner as possible. It aims at articulating "a viable understanding of the 'other' in which the encountered 'other' is not manufactured to the comparativist's prejudices and expectations."⁹⁰ This implies, first of all, that the theologian "must achieve a certain distance from his or her own starting point, in order to be able to learn from another tradition by understanding it on its own terms, and in a way that can never be entirely predicated on the expectations of one's home tradition, because it reformulates those expectations regarding

the home tradition."⁹¹ It also implies a detailed consideration of religious traditions that are other than one's own. The other is the one who does not fit completely and without remainder into our preconceptions, and who challenges us to leave the realm of the known. Hence, comparative theology is "not the domain of generalists but rather of those willing to engage in detailed study, tentatively and over time."⁹² That is why comparative theologians usually concentrate, in particular, on one different religious tradition.

This detailed comparative theological approach primarily concerns a close study of certain religious texts that differ from one's own religious texts.⁹³ The appropriate attitude of the reader is one of submission rather than some sort of "consumerist . . . mining of texts in service of a preconceived agenda neglectful of the text's own purposes."⁹⁴ The relation between text and reader is comparable to that of a teacher and his student. Texts serve to educate their students and there is a clear asymmetry present. For what a text means always precedes, exceeds and even supersedes its readers.⁹⁵ To understand the text implies a certain "self-effacement before the text; patience, perseverance and imagination."⁹⁶ Only then will it be possible for the reader to be drawn into the strange world of the text.

Different from the study of comparative religion, this venture remains a theological project. "Theology, to characterize it in a non-technical fashion, is distinct from the study of religion (with which it overlaps in many of its procedures) because theology is an inquiry carried on by believers who allow their belief to remain an explicit and influential factor in their research, analysis and writing."⁹⁷ The detailed study of other traditions happens from a commitment to God. In this sense, comparative theology acknowledges its normative and *prejudiced* underpinnings: it does not claim to start *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, comparative theology recognizes its theological interest: its critical study of other religious texts is incited by a theological concern.⁹⁸ As *fides quaerens intellectum*, comparative theology aims at "knowing a loving God more completely and intelligently."⁹⁹ In this sense, comparative theology derives its particular nature not from its object, but rather from its sources and methodology.¹⁰⁰ Comparison is "alternated" within theological reflection of the Christian faith commitment to God.

Comparative Theology: a Deeply Ambiguous Discipline?

According to Clooney, comparative theology integrates theology and comparison, engagement and distancing, commitment and hermeneutical openness, conviction and critique. Still, not everyone is equally convinced about the success of this integration. Comparative theology has been criticised for being a deeply ambiguous discipline.¹⁰¹ The critique is often that the relation between theology and the comparison of other religions remains theoretically underdeveloped. Gavin D'Costa highlights two problems in this regard. First, it seems that comparative theology needs to reflect further upon its precise relation to theology of religions and its threefold soteriological

paradigm. Although Clooney rightly points to the fact that hermeneutical openness should precede soteriological judgment, D'Costa notes that "if one is going to argue with a particular type of pluralist, inclusivist, or exclusivist that they should be open to the 'power and novelty' of other religions, one has to do so theologically. If an exclusivist held that other religions are of no interest except in terms of mission, one would have to challenge the theological axioms that generate this attitude."¹⁰² D'Costa challenges Clooney to make a strong *theological case* as to precisely what he is doing and to explicate his *fiduciary interests*. Of course this would not exclude the possibility of theological revisions *after comparison*. In other words, the importance of hermeneutical openness to theology should be argued theologically.

D'Costa's second critique likewise addresses the relation between comparison and theology, but different from his first point this critique does not focus on the theological *presuppositions* of the comparative theology project, but rather on the relation between comparison and theological judgment. Whereas the first critique addresses the question *why should we theologically speaking enter into comparison*, the second critique relates to the question *what happens after comparison*? According to Clooney, comparison should precede judgment. To judge before gaining a deep understanding would amount to a form of closed-mindedness. D'Costa, however, notes a certain hesitancy within the comparative theology project to actually make judgments. In Clooney's case, this hesitancy reflects an attitude of theological prudence. Clooney, time and again, emphasises the importance of not jumping to conclusions because theology should avoid over-hasty theological judgments. The latter requires a long and patient engagement with the textual world of the other. Still, D'Costa thinks more is at stake than a "healthy humility" and theological prudence. He thinks this reticence could be "a psychological reaction" to the charge that theological judgments of other religions are actions of imperialism. The question to be answered is whether the latter is really the case: is it a form of "imperialism" to judge strange religions by alien criteria?

Understanding Comparative Theology as a Hermeneutical Circle

Both criticisms formulated by D'Costa highlight a lack of clarity regarding the precise relation between theology and comparison. In the following, I will take D'Costa's criticisms as a challenge to further reflect upon the comparative theology project as developed in Clooney's work. I will argue that it is possible to achieve a better integration of comparison and theology. This might especially be realised if we were to think of comparative theology in terms of a hermeneutical circle, understood as a never-ending process of moving between commitment and distanciation.¹⁰³

The work of Paul Ricoeur helps elaborate on the notion of the hermeneutical circle. His theory of interpretation, elaborated especially with respect to texts, focuses on the moving *back and forth* between one's own familiar

perspective and the strange.¹⁰⁴ This finds its expression in Ricoeur's theory on the three phases of the hermeneutical circle: a first naïve understanding, followed by a phase of critical analysis, and finally a phase of appropriation whereby one attains a certain "second naïvete." Ricoeur calls these three phases the hermeneutical arc. The hermeneutical arc is driven by a dialectic between understanding and explaining: *Explaining more is to understand better.*¹⁰⁵ As in comparative theology, commitment and critical distance alternate in a fertile way.

The first phase of the hermeneutical arc is a preliminary, pre-critical reading. In this phase, the reader approaches the text starting from his or her own perspective. Every reader is always first and foremost someone whose identity is formed by a linguistic tradition, a cultural context, a historical background and a religious commitment. This can also be seen in the case of interreligious dialogue, because "religious identity naturally entails commitment to the epistemic priority of one's own set of beliefs and practices, which function as the lens through which the world is understood and evaluated."¹⁰⁶ This is the place where the process of interpretation begins.

In the first place comparativists, like all textual critics or dialogue partners, can do their work only by entering the hermeneutical circle, for Christian comparativists consciously or unconsciously bring to their work a specific pre-understanding, a prior set of postulates drawn to their own faith and from their tradition and its theologies.¹⁰⁷

Every reader guesses at the meaning of the text. She does so from the limitedness of her own horizon. When reading a strange text, "we always begin with the assumption of familiarity. Schleiermacher notwithstanding, we always assume that the text will be intelligible, not the reverse, and thus we do not begin by guarding against misunderstanding, but rather we make our projections on the basis of a presumed community of meaning."¹⁰⁸ Ricoeur calls this first reading naïve: it is an interpretation which is content with the immediate meaning which comes to mind when reading the text for the first time. It is reading a text as if exegesis does not exist. Here the effect of culture and context are fully manifested; they determine the space within which the reader makes the text her text. It could be argued that comparative theologies try to pursue a "humble hermeneutical approach, i.e., to admit that unavoidably one's own tradition will shape at least the initial horizon for understanding the other tradition."¹⁰⁹

Like Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, Ricoeur defends prejudices. "Prejudice is not the opposite pole of a reason without presupposition; it is a component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of the human being."¹¹⁰ The idea that we can read a text without presuppositions is a modern illusion, which generally results in blindness. For the meaning of what is strange can only reveal itself when it is approached from and connected with the familiar horizon of understanding. There is no

"spectator's point of view" that allows the whole of reality to be surveyed and understood. People are *linguistically* contextualized beings who always begin *in medias res*. Comparative theology is right to recognize its normative underpinnings and its theological commitments. In a way, this project succeeds in overcoming the modern illusion that one can enter the hermeneutical circle without interests and prejudices. It would, however, be wise for comparative theologians to actually make explicit their fiduciary interests and theological presuppositions when entering the hermeneutical circle. Whence their interest in this or that specific strange text? What commits them theologically to enter into the textual world of a religious other? What do they expect to find? Doing so would meet D'Costa's critique that comparative theology should disclose as much as it is possible its own fiduciary interests when entering the hermeneutical circle.

That a strange text appeals to the reader, and that the reader can already understand something of it, is of course due to the *horizon* of the reader. However, this first naïve reading needs to be checked, validated and if needed, corrected to preclude the reader from projecting her own cultural, religious or historical background into the text. A good interpreter avoids reading her own presuppositions into the text. Understanding implies following the inner dynamics of a text. For that, Ricoeur claims the necessity of a second critical phase, which sets out to *explain* the text in a more *scientific way*. The scientific reading places the text at a distance.¹¹¹ The latter is necessary to prevent the hermeneutical circle from becoming a vicious one, i.e. to prevent the interpreter from encountering only his own mirror image. The interpreter's "anticipations of meaning" are tested on the text itself. It is not possible to establish and ground the meaning of the text with certainty and in an unambiguous way, but it is possible to introduce arguments and proofs and to draw conclusions, analogously to the juridical process. Confirmation is more a question of argumentation and follows the path of logical probability.

Critical analysis treats the text as a study object in the hands of the reader. Readers can make use of several methods to decode the world of the text: the historical-critical method, literary criticism, structuralism, even psychoanalysis. Whatever method is used, the critical analysis is a necessary phase in the hermeneutical process. It allows the reader to transcend a superficial and too general first reading of a strange text and move toward a close and deep reading of it. It enables a distinguishing between productive and unproductive prejudices. Understanding the meaning of a strange text demands such a confrontation with the "objectivity" of the text. The alternative is mere subjectivism: one reads and interprets a text according to what one wants.

Clooney would agree with Ricoeur. What the latter calls critical analysis, Clooney calls close reading. Without critical analysis, readers would project meaning *into* the text rather than the other way around. Close reading is one way to gain a deeper meaning. In this process of close reading, Clooney

claims that the reader fulfils the role of a commentator, highlighting the fact that his personal and subjective commitments are bracketed. Clooney acknowledges that this close reading is a highly demanding, intellectual process, requiring various sets of critical skills, such as language learning, but also cultural, linguistic and historical study. In this sense, the critical work of comparative theology can also be regarded as a form of textual exegesis, which similarly uses various critical methods, such as literary criticism and the historical-critical method.¹¹² Of course, comparison takes central stage as a “critical method for the testing and revision of the categories” through which theologians approach and interpret the *religious other*.¹¹³

Following the phase of critical analysis (explanation), the reader asks, “What does this text mean for me today?” This question is central to the last phase of the hermeneutical arc, namely that of appropriation, which “actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader.”¹¹⁴ Appropriation is the ontological grounding of interpretation in lived experience. Only when a text is “appropriated” does it realize its power to transform the reader. Nowhere does Ricoeur state this more clearly than in the following passage: “By appropriation I understand this: that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently or simply begins to understand himself”.¹¹⁵

Appropriation is not a matter of imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self. Thus, understanding is quite different from a constitution of which the subject would possess the key; on the contrary, it is rather that the process by which the reader is constituted by the text. Ricoeur puts it as follows: “as a reader I find myself by losing myself. The movement toward listening requires giving up (*désaisissement*) the human self in its will to mastery, sufficiency, and autonomy.”¹¹⁶ Ricoeur also speaks about “la dépossession du soi narcissique”. Understanding means to understand oneself in front of the text. This imaginative appropriation of the strange or different text can be a creative theological source that warns the faith community that God cannot be fixed to or reduced to the familiar—just like, by way of a humbler analogy, the text cannot be fixed or reduced to the familiar. It is a way of giving form to the notion that it is not up to theology to determine *a priori* the limits of God’s activity. Or as Clooney would put it, being taught by a strange text entails undergoing a spiritual process, which changes the reader and perhaps reveals God in an unexpected way. “Neglected meanings of the Christian tradition may be retrieved, established meanings may be extended and enhanced; meanings perhaps unintended by authors of our texts may . . . occur to newly situated readers.”¹¹⁷

D’Costa is right in addressing the importance of theological judgment. Comparative theology cannot be limited to understanding the religious other. If interreligious dialogue is to be theologically relevant, the question of God must be posed. Understanding the other is one thing, the other’s

theology, another. Hermeneutical openness for the other is “alternated” with theological reflection on the Christian faith commitment to God. Interreligious dialogue cannot stop at the phase of appropriation without asking what the newly discovered meanings say about God.

From a theological perspective, the purpose of encountering the other is not to gain a sort of complementarity between religions. Nor does interreligious theology have in mind a consensus that removes the conflicts between religions. Comparative theology is also not concerned with a simple comparison of the differences between religions. In interreligious theology we gropingly ask where God comes into view and we do so with an attitude of hermeneutical openness.

That is why in this last phase the “normative theological judgments” that were temporarily suspended are brought back into the hermeneutical circle.¹¹⁸ “The accurate understanding of another religion is never the end of the process; the [interpreter] must also consider the impact of such knowledge on Christian thinking and living.”¹¹⁹ Although comparative theology rightly highlights the fact that deep learning should precede theological judgment, it would not be wise to postpone the moment of theological judgment time and again out of fear of being charged with imperialist motives. Drawing on Ricoeur, I would rather instead that, if preceded by hermeneutical openness, to judge is not a form of closedness or an inability to transcend one’s own confessional perspective, as pluralists would claim. On the contrary, the fact that judgments are made means that both the challenge of the other and one’s own faith commitments are taken seriously. Ethnocentricity is not judging as such, but rather making a judgment (positive or negative) that precedes hermeneutical openness and which does not take root in critical analyses.¹²⁰ It is both a question of openness for the religious other and one of openness for God’s transcendence not to determine *a priori* what is and what is not theologically meaningful. Taking one’s own faith commitments seriously, and thus also acknowledging one’s own roots, means accepting that not all possibilities that appear in interreligious dialogue are truly possible. Integrating certain aspects of a religion into one’s own religious identity testifies to more openness than rejecting certain aspects of another religion does. However, both can display superficiality.

Conclusion

I began this article with Hans Küng’s question: does a theology exist that makes it possible to combine openness with commitment? By addressing the problem of the dialogical tension this way, Küng continues on the path of classical theology of religions with its threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Indeed, most often theology seems primarily concerned with promoting the search for a “theological solution” to the

tension between openness and faith commitment. The idea is that it is not possible "from a Christian perspective, seriously [to] engage in interreligious dialogue without a sound theology of religions."¹²¹ Each of these soteriological models seems to share the assumption not only that it should be possible to find a theological solution to the problem of the dialogical tension, but also that this *can* and *should* be done *a priori*. In a certain sense, we could say that all three models try to master the encounter by clearly marking its theological boundaries.

Comparative theology not only questions the *a priori* approach of three soteriological models and claims that hermeneutical openness should precede soteriological appreciation/judgment, but it also seems to throw doubt upon the assumption that it is possible to formulate a final and definitive theology of religions. This new theological project defines itself as an ongoing and never-ending conversational process: particular comparisons yield particular insights, insights that might be revised in the future under the influence of other particular comparisons. In this way, comparative theology remains "pre-systematic and pre-dogmatic." It does not have the ambition to lead up to a "definite theology of religions."¹²² Clooney emphasizes the "unfinished" nature of comparative theology, not as fact, but rather in principle. The theological reflections that follow from detailed comparisons "can only be tentative and should not be taken as precluding what will be learned in further experiments."¹²³ Though faith can be simple and stark, good theology is always patient, tentative and willing to endure complications. This patience, moreover, is also an expression of *hermeneutical* openness, which is the *conditio sine qua non* of real dialogue.

Those who are looking for clear-cut answers to clear-cut questions are likely to be disappointed, for after an in-depth study many questions will be left open, until "more commentarial work has been done, by more theologians, over a much longer period of time."¹²⁴ Instead of probing after a grand narrative in which the religious other is grasped and contained, comparative theologians allow themselves to be challenged by the often unsettling religious reality and belief of the other. Instead of "solving the problem of religious diversity" in a theological meta-narrative, comparative theology accepts that learning from the other entails deranging experiences of alienation, disenchantment, and friction.¹²⁵

Clooney does not want to master the encounter with the religious other; his attitude is rather one of *vulnerability*. The serious reader, engaged in an in-depth interreligious reading, is rendered vulnerable to "intellectual, imaginative and affective transformation", even to the extent of inspiring a radical life change.¹²⁶

The careful reader engaging the two texts in their own two traditions comes to know more than expected, and in a way that cannot be predictably controlled by either tradition. . . . As we learn more about religious

traditions in their depth than has been possible before, we know more deeply the possibilities of several traditions and where they lead us, while yet we also lose the intensity and devotion possible for those who know only their own tradition. We are then left in a vulnerable, fruitful learning state, engaging these powerful works on multiple levels and paradoxically learning more, while mastering less; we have more teachers and fewer masters.¹²⁷

Clearly, the comparative theologian does not solve the tension between identity and otherness, but rather stands in the midst of this tension. The theological presupposition is that Christians who appropriate the skill of hermeneutical openness can be surprised by what they learn about God. After all, one must not forget the call of the verse in Hebrews: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

NOTES

- 1 Catherine Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 84.
- 2 Hans Küng, "Dialogability and Steadfastness: On Two Complementary Virtues" in Werner Jeanrond (ed.), *Radical Pluralism and Truth. David Tracy and the Hermeneutics of Religion* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1991) pp. 237–249, p. 242.
- 3 See, e.g. Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Francis Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); James Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience: Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions", *Horizons*, Vol. 22 (1995), pp. 67–87. George Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 13 no. 4 (October, 1997), pp. 423–450.
- 4 Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, p. 194.
- 5 William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 145.
- 6 Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, p. 15.
- 7 Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Debate between Universalism and Particularism: Searching for a Way out of the Deadlock", *Studies for Interreligious Dialogue*, Vol. 15 (2005), pp. 36–51.
- 8 For a recent discussion of the challenges of interreligious hermeneutics, see Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (eds.), *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010).
- 9 Francis X. Clooney, "Francis Xavier, and the World we (Don't Quite) Share", in Francis Clooney (ed.), *Jesuit Postmodern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), pp. 157–180, p. 178.
- 10 This typology was introduced in theology during the 1980s by Alan Race (1983). Shortly thereafter (1986), Gavin D'Costa published *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) which followed the same threefold schema. Since then, in general, studies on religious plurality and its theological implications have employed this typology. For that matter, D'Costa now criticizes this typology as untenable. Cf. D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions", *Religious Studies*, Vol. 32 (1996), pp. 223–232 and *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000), pp. 19–52.
- 11 Reinhold Bernhardt, *Zwischen Größenwahn, Fanatismus und Bekennermut: Für ein Christentum ohne Absolutheitsanspruch* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1994), p. 41.

- 12 This connection between the theology of religions on the one hand and the practice of interreligious dialogue on the other can already be noted at the beginning of this discipline—i.e. around Vatican II. Thus, in this respect the conciliar document, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, i.e. *Nostra Aetate*, set the trend by developing some important theological initiatives with a focus on promoting the relationships between the Church and the other religions.
- 13 Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 19.
- 14 William Scott “‘No Other Name’—An Evangelical Conviction,” in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas Stransky (eds.), *Christ’s Lordship & Religious Pluralism* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1981), pp. 58–74, here pp. 64–65.
- 15 Theo Sundermeier, *Den Fremden Verstehen: Eine praktische Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996), p. 123.
- 16 Craig Gay, “Plurality, Ambiguity and Despair in Contemporary Theology”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 36 (1993), pp. 209–227, p. 225.
- 17 Terry Muck, “Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue”, *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 36 (1993), pp. 517–529, p. 517.
- 18 Carl Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World’s Religions* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 60.
- 19 Kate McCarthy, “Reckoning with Religious Difference: Models of Interreligious Moral Dialogue”, in Summer Twiss and Bruce Grelle (eds.), *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religions Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 73–117, p. 101.
- 20 Gerd Baumann, G., “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach”, in Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2004), pp. 18–50, p. 18; emphasis mine.
- 21 It is certainly the case that there are evangelicals who have a great deal of respect towards religious others, while remaining exclusivist. For example, see the work of Ida Glaser, who is Academic Director of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies in Oxford. I wish to thank an anonymous reader for *Modern Theology* for this much needed nuanced remark.
- 22 John May, *After Pluralism: Towards an Interreligious Ethic* (Münster: LIT, 2000), p. 12.
- 23 Dirk Hutsebaut and Bart Duriez, “Approaches to Religion and the Moods and Emotions Associated with Religion”, *Journal of Empirical Theology*, Vol. 14 (2001), pp. 75–84.
- 24 Terrence Merrigan, “For Us and For Our Salvation: The Notion of Salvation History in the Contemporary Theology of Religions”, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 64, (1999), pp. 339–348, p. 341.
- 25 McCarthy, “Reckoning with Religious Difference”, p. 85.
- 26 Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), p. 222.
- 27 Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, p. 224.
- 28 Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 346.
- 29 D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, p. 23.
- 30 Andreas Grünschloss, *Der Eigene und der fremde Glaube: Studien zur interreligiöse Fremd-wahrnehmung im Islam, Hinduismus, Buddhismus und Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), p. 272.
- 31 McCarthy, “Reckoning with Religious Difference”, p. 101. [emphasis mine].
- 32 Baumann, “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach”, p. 25.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Bernhardt, *Zwischen Grössenwahn, Fanatismus und Bekennermut*, p. 157.
- 35 Andreas Feldtkeller, “Interreligiöser Dialog und pluralistische Religionstheologie—ein Traumpaar?”, *Ökumenische Rundschau*, Vol. 49 (2000), pp. 273–286.
- 36 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1989), pp. 235–236.
- 37 John Hick, *The Fifth Dimension : An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (Oxford: One World, 1999), p. 8.
- 38 John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (London: MacMillan, 1993), p. 16.
- 39 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1973/1988), p. 138.

- 40 Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Value of Openness: Taking the Vulnerability of Religious Attachments into Account", *The Heythrop Journal* Vol. 51 (2010), pp. 730–740.
- 41 John Cobb, "Responses to Relativism: Common Ground, Deconstruction and Reconstruction", *Soundings*, Vol. 73 (1990), pp. 595–616, p. 604.
- 42 Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 48.
- 43 Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 178.
- 44 Reference removed in the interest of anonymity and double-blind peer review.
- 45 S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 123.
- 46 Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, p. 10.
- 47 John Cobb, "Dialogue Without Common Ground", in Imelda Abbt and Alfred Jäger (eds.), *Weltoffenheit des christlichen Glaubens: Fritz Buri zu Ehren* (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1987), pp. 145–154, p. 148.
- 48 Paul F. Knitter, "Catholics and Other Religions: Bridging the Gap Between Dialogue and Theology", *Louvain Studies*, Vol. 24 (1999), pp. 319–354, p. 330.
- 49 Pluralism, however, differs from inclusivism insofar as it formulates the points of contact not on the basis of a confessional tradition but looks for a common ground that belongs to the essence of each religion.
- 50 Baumann "Grammars of Identity/Alterity", p. 28.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 52 Grunschloss, *Der Eigene und der fremde Glaube*, p. 281.
- 53 Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (New York: Orbis, 2002), pp. 172–191.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 56 Douglass Pratt, "Contextual Paradigms for Interfaith Relations", *Current Dialogue*, Vol. 42 (2003), pp. 3–9, p. 8; emphasis his.
- 57 Yang Huang "Religious Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue: Beyond Universalism and Particularism", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 37 (1995), pp. 127–144.
- 58 It should be noted that "particularism" is an internally diverse "model", which hosts several approaches. I find Knitter's overview quite helpful in this regard. He distinguishes between three approaches, which could all be labeled particularist: (1) the postliberal approach of George Lindbeck (which is also reflected in the positions of William Placher, Garret Green, Joseph DiNoia and Paul Giffiths); (2) the radical pluralist approach, which is mainly associated with Mark Heim, who is based on particularist arguments, (3) comparative theology, which fulfils the basic goal of faith seeking understanding precisely in the detailed study of religious texts from different traditions (Frank Clooney, e.g.). The last part of this article will be dedicated to comparative theology as one of the most promising research trajectories in contemporary theology of interreligious dialogue.
- 59 Terrence Merrigan, "Jacques Dupuis and the Redefinition of Inclusivism", in Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *In Many and Diverse Ways: In Honor of Jacques Dupuis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 60–71, p. 68.
- 60 Henk Vroom, *Religions and Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. 379.
- 61 Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 15.
- 62 Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), p. 12.
- 63 Mark S. Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 20–21; William Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines: A Study in the Logic of the Dialogue Among Religions* (London: MacMillan, 1972) p. 186; Joseph DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims: Beyond Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism", in Bruce Marshall (ed.), *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 249–272, p. 254.
- 64 Garret Green, "Are Religions Incommensurable? Reflections on Plurality and the Religious Imagination", *Louvain Studies*, Vol. 27 (2002), pp. 218–239.

- 65 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984).
- 66 Jaap Van Brakel, "Varieties of Multiculturalism: No Need for a Shared Language", in Barbara Saunders and David Haljan (eds.), *Whither Multiculturalism? A Politics of Dissensus* (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 2003), pp. 145–163, p. 161.
- 67 Marianne Moyaert, "Religion in the Public Arena: Vulnerability, Recognition and Tragedy", *Ethical Perspectives*, Vol. 16 (2009), pp. 283–309.
- 68 Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, p. 9.
- 69 Green, "Are Religions Incommensurable?", p. 223.
- 70 Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, p. 9.
- 71 Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, p. 149.
- 72 The question should be asked if particularism does not become another form of exclusivist theology. There is no straightforward answer to this question, since particularism (see also note 58) hosts several different approaches. I have argued elsewhere that particularism can sometimes amount to a new form of exclusivism [See Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 190–196]. That seems to be the case for postliberal particularism, according to which those who do not speak the Christian language do not know Christ, and those who do not know Christ cannot be saved [see Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 59.] However, the same cannot be said of Mark Heim, who can be called a radical particularist. He seeks to reconcile the concern for "deep religious differences" with a Trinitarian theology of religions [see Mark S. Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, (Maryknoll, NT: Orbis Books, 1995) and *The Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, (2000)]. Heim asks whether there is a place in Christian theology for recognizing other religious ends in addition to salvation. In answer to this question he develops a Trinitarian theology of religious pluralism, which could be termed similar to a form of inclusivism. On the one hand, Heim's concern for religious particularities brings him to speak about salvation in the plural. Doing justice to the self-understanding of religious others entails maintaining that the soteriological ends of various religions are indeed varied and significantly constituted by the paths taken to reach them. On the other hand, he credits the Trinity, understood as communion-in-difference, for providing the grammar to combine religious particularity with God's universal activity.
- 73 Joseph A. DiNoia, OP "Teaching Differences", *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 73 (1993), pp. 61–68, p. 62.
- 74 Grace Jantzen, "Human Diversity and Salvation in Christ", *Religious Studies*, Vol. 20 (1994), pp. 579–592, p. 592.
- 75 Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).
- 76 DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims", p. 43.
- 77 Stephen Duffy, "The Stranger Within Our Gates", in Terrance Merrigan and Jacques Haers (eds.), *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), pp. 3–30, p. 9.
- 78 DiNoia, "Teaching Differences", p. 65.
- 79 Els Walravens, "Het verstaan van de ander: Inleiding", in Els. Walravens et al., *Het verstaan van de ander: Dialogische benaderingen van de diversiteit* (Budel: Damon, 2006), pp. 123–139, p. 131.
- 80 Lieven Boeve, "Religion After Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe", *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 70 (2005), pp. 99–122, p. 120.
- 81 DiNoia, "Varieties of Religious Aims", p. 254.
- 82 Bart Van Leeuwen, *Erkenning, identiteit en verschil: Multiculturalisme en leven met culturele diversiteit* (Louvain: Acco, 2003), p. 64.
- 83 On the criteria of judgment in interreligious dialogue see Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).
- 84 See notes 58 and 73 above.
- 85 Proponents of this "new theological discipline" are James Fredericks, Francis Clooney, Keith Ward, Pim Valkenberg, David Burrell, Michael Barnes, Robert Cummings Neville with western backgrounds and Sebastian Painadath, Joseph Pathrapankal and Francis Veneeth from Asia. See Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theologies of Religions* (Malden, MA: Willey-Blackwell, 2009), p. 37.

- 86 Duffy, "The Stranger Within Our Gates", p. 8.
- 87 Hugh Nicholson, "Reunification of Theology and Comparison", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 77 (2009), pp. 609–646, p. 619.
- 88 Though Clooney is one of the main proponents of comparative theology and his work is often referred to, when introducing this "relatively new research programme" we should be careful not to essentialize comparative theology by solely identifying it with Clooney. In his latest publication, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2011), Clooney himself highlights the internal diversity of comparative theology, touching thereby on the work of David Tracy, Keith Ward, Robert C. Neville and James Fredericks.
- 89 Francis X. Clooney, "Current Theology: Comparative Theology: a Review of Recent Books (1989–1995)", *Theological Studies* Vol. 56 (1995), pp. 521–550, p. 522; emphasis mine.
- 90 Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 7.
- 91 *Ibid.*
- 92 Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Barriers between Religions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 164.
- 93 This exclusive focus on texts is not self-evident. John Maraldo, for example, rightly points out that "[T]here are notable aspects of religion that have nothing to do with texts and little to do with language. . . ." For that reason, he questions the viability of an interreligious hermeneutics that focuses solely on religious texts: "Insofar as religions include nontextual practices, understanding religions requires an approach quite different from the understanding usually conceived in hermeneutics. That approach is through a bodily (re)enactment of the practices rather than a discursive reading of texts and teachings. If interreligious hermeneutics is to account for the full range of religious life, it must articulate an alternative notion of understanding that gives access to religious practices as they are lived." Maraldo argues for *An Alternative Understanding of Interreligious Hermeneutics*, in Cornille (ed.), *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, pp. 89–115.
- 94 Francis X. Clooney, *The Truth, the Way and the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaishava Hindus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), p. 8.
- 95 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 96 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 97 Francis X. Clooney, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaishnavas of South India* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).
- 98 We will come back to this below.
- 99 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 7.
- 100 Clooney, "Current Theology: Comparative Theology," p. 522.
- 101 Hugh Nicholson, "'Comparative Theology after Liberalism,'" *Modern Theology*, Vol. 23 no 2 (April, 2007), pp. 229–251, p. 229.
- 102 D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 40.
- 103 Let me state immediately that the image of the circle is actually somewhat unfortunate, for it evokes the association of a closed immanent system that is curved in on itself, which nothing internal nor external can break. This is precisely the reverse of what hermeneutics advocates. Hermeneutics is not an undertaking that shuts the interpreting subject up in a circle which she cannot break out of. That is why the terms hermeneutical spiral and hermeneutical arch are used—because the idea of circle constantly evokes the connotation of being vicious, even though it is not, as we will see, a vicious circle. Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics", in P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 57.
- 104 Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1991), p. 1.
- 105 Marianne Moyaert, "Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics", in Reimund Bieringer, Roger Burggraeve and Emmanuel Nathan (eds.), *Flesh Made Word: Biblical Hermeneutics as Conversation* (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming).
- 106 Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 79.
- 107 Stephen Duffy, "A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?", *Horizons*, Vol. 26 (1999), pp. 105–115, p. 112.

- 108 Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 109 Werner Jeanrond, "Toward a Hermeneutics of Love", in Conway and Cornille, *Interrligious Hermeneutics*, pp. 44–60, p. 49.
- 110 Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology", in Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, pp. 63–100, p. 71.
- 111 Paul Ricoeur, "Herméneutique. Les finalités de l'exégèse biblique", in Dominique Bourq and Antoine Lion (eds.), *La bible en philosophie. Approches contemporaines* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1993), pp. 28–51, p. 28.
- 112 Richard Schebera, "Comparative Theology: a New Method of Interreligious Dialogue", *Dialogue and Alliance*, Vol. 17 (2003), pp. 7–18, p. 15.
- 113 Nicholson, "Reunification of Theology and Comparison", p. 609.
- 114 Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding", in Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, pp. 145–164, p. 158.
- 115 *Ibid.*
- 116 Paul Ricoeur "Naming God," in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 217–236, p. 224.
- 117 Duffy, "A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology", p. 111.
- 118 Hugh Nicholson "A Correlational Model of Comparative Theology", *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 85 (2005), pp. 191–213, p. 199.
- 119 Berling, *Process of Interreligious Learning*, p. 30.
- 120 Van Leeuwen, *Erkenning, identiteit en verschil*, p. 93.
- 121 Vigo Mortensen, "Theology Meets the Religions", in Vigo Mortensen (ed.), *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. xi–xiv, p. xiv.
- 122 Clooney, *The Truth, the Way and the Life*, p. 176.
- 123 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 164.
- 124 Clooney, *The Truth, the Way and the Life*, p. 184.
- 125 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, p. 165.
- 126 Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, p. 208.
- 127 Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, p. 209.



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