

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AT TWENTY-FIVE: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

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Introduction

"Comparative theology" in the sense used in this article is some twenty-five years old.¹ Several significant figures could be said to have been practicing it, absent the title, at that point, including Robert Neville, Keith Ward, Raimon Panikkar and David Burrell. But Francis Clooney's *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (1993) set the most influential template.² Work on that pattern has spread dramatically since then.³ The closest thing to a standard definition says comparative theology "marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions."⁴ In *Theology After Vedanta*, Clooney wondered whether it would be better to call his work simply an "experiment in theology," to avoid the suggestion that the qualifier "comparative" denoted only another specialization within theology. In fact he saw his project as one which "though begun modestly and with small examples, intends a re-thinking of every theological issue and a rereading of every theological text."⁵ Comparative theology belongs to a constellation of recent related developments that

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¹ The four books considered in this review article are: 1) Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch, editors, *How to Do Comparative Theology*. Comparative Theology: Thinking across Traditions (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); 2) Michelle Voss Roberts, editor, *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*. Comparative Theology: Thinking across Traditions (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); 3) Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin, editors, *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*. Routledge Research in Religion and Education (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016); and 4) Francis X. Clooney and John Berthrong, editors, *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology* (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2014).

² Francis Xavier Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology*, SUNY Series, Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

³ See the summary in Judith Gruber, "(Un)Silencing Hybridity: A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Theology" in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, edited by Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 1-2.

⁴ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

⁵ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 6.

includes dual scholarly communities (e.g. the Society for Hindu-Christian studies, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies), the scriptural reasoning movement, forms of interreligious education, Christian theological commentaries on non-Christian texts, and initiatives around a “theology without walls.”⁶

Like these, comparative theology rides the tide of several cultural and intellectual trends: growing awareness of religious diversity as a major cultural and political force; increasing opportunities for interreligious dialogue; expanding populations of people in religiously hybridized settings (produced by social and political circumstances or through a purposeful choice of religiously mixed practice); and burgeoning numbers of those without specific religious affiliation who address spiritual interests with an eclectic set of sources. At its origin as an elite academic sub-specialty, comparative theology answered to an imperative its practitioners felt as more intrinsic than popular, whether that imperative came from personal experiences of insight and illumination in varied faiths or from a sharp intellectual awareness of the logical *aporiae* that left religious views beyond one’s own tradition uncanvassed. Comparative theologians typically can give an account of the autobiographical and scholarly factors that led them into appreciation for interreligious sources, of the nagging problem in their own tradition that animated a search for new light in another, of the systemic and apologetic embarrassment of interreligious ignorance, or of all three.

David Tracy’s encyclopedia essay on comparative theology in 1986 framed it as an historical inevitability, contending that “the fact of religious pluralism should enter all theological assessment and self-analysis at the very beginning of its task.”⁷ Just as historical and scientific study opened up a distance between interpreters and the world of classic texts that required new hermeneutical sophistication, so did the recognized distance between religious cultural-complexes demand a new theological hermeneutics. Tracy went on in 1988 to suggest that “we are fast approaching the day when it will not be possible to attempt a Christian systematic theology except in serious conversation with the other great ways.”⁸ The subsequent growth of comparative theology more than amply confirmed his judgment about the direction of development, if not his expectation about the speed with which it would assume a central role.⁹

⁶ On scriptural reasoning, see David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Malden, MA: Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). On interreligious learning, see Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press 2018). Catherine Cornille is the editor of the Eerdmans series “Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts.” On theology without walls, see Jerry L. Martin, “What Is Theology without Walls?,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 443-9.

⁷ David Tracy, “Comparative Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan 1987), 446-55; at 446.

⁸ Quoted in Michelle Voss Roberts, *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 3.

⁹ The list of recent systematic theologies that have undertaken what Tracy suspected would become necessary is not extensive. That list includes the massive undertaking of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s recently completed five volume project — beginning with Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013) — and the more introductory treatment in Kristin Johnston Largen, *Finding God among Our Neighbors: An Interfaith Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013). The multivolume works of Robert Neville and Keith Ward, begun in the early 1990s, still constitute the most notable examples.

Comparing Faithfully

The work of comparative theology (hereafter CT) has not yet become a staple of theology generally. This is a concern taken up by both of the primary books under review here. The editor of *Comparing Faithfully*, Michelle Voss Roberts, sees it as comparative theology's constructive goal to make interreligious learning a constituent part of Christian self-understanding. CT arises at the convergence of two trajectories. One stems from the Christian theology of religions, as it moves from an assessment of the truth and significance of other religions on the premises of Christian thought toward a detailed learning from specific non-Christian sources for constructive effect within Christian thought.¹⁰ The other comes from religious studies or comparative religion, among those scholars who seek or acknowledge the inevitability of normative, personal commitment within such study. The confessional theology of religions and the secular comparative study of religion long stood in opposition to each other. Recent critiques of supposed neutrality in religious studies and of the forces shaping its categories have blurred this contrast.¹¹ Comparative theology is one strategic response to suspicions of an implicit normative content in the "liberal universalism" of religious studies, as it is equally a response to dissatisfaction with a theology of religions that operates only at the wholesale level.¹² Comparative theology acknowledges its normative commitments but sets these in a comparative practice that "encourages wider accountability and authentic vulnerability."¹³

The slow pace of CT's integration in systematic theology is due not only to resistance from religious exclusivists who deny the value of other religions or from certain kinds of postmodernism that deny the possibility of comparison (either because the traditions compared are arbitrarily and imperialistically constructed or because their categories are incommensurable). It relates also to the practice of comparative theologians themselves, a practice as a rule fine-grained and experimental, hesitant to draw the kind of conclusions that could be readily folded into wider theological arguments. *Comparing Faithfully* intends to press this process forward. It sets out five theological *loci*: divinity, theodicy, humanity, Christology and soteriology. For each of these, it provides two illustrative essays from comparative theologians and a response from another theologian who attempts to weave the contributions into the wider discussion of this topic.

For instance, on the topic of divinity, Jon Paul Sydnor compares the Mahayana Buddhist writer Nagarjuna's doctrine of emptiness with Jürgen Moltmann's doctrine of

¹⁰ A good example of this shift in perspective may be found in a recent World Council of Churches document. Unlike prior statements that evaluated other religions for their salvific and historical value on Christian terms, this one asks how Christian self-understanding may be shaped by awareness of the faith of others. See World Council of Churches, *Who Do We Say That We Are?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Religious World*, trade edition (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches Publications, 2016). For a broader perspective on the trajectory of the theology of religions, see S. Mark Heim, "The Shifting Significance of Theologies of Religious Pluralism," in *Understanding Religious Pluralism: Perspectives from Religious Studies and Theology*, edited by Peter C. Phan and Jonathan S. Ray (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 242–59.

¹¹ For instance, Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹² See Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (June 2010): 477–514.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 477.

the social trinity¹⁴ while Elaine Padilla compares trinitarian thought with ancient Mesoamerican notions of divine immanence and multiplicity.¹⁵ Kristin Kiplinger responds with an essay focused on the work of John Caputo.¹⁶ She explores how the religious perspectives outlined by Sydnor and Padilla might be reconfigured through Caputo's understanding of religious language, while also extending the cross-religious application of Caputo's work.

In the section on theodicy, Klaus von Stosch offers an extended reflection on the writings of a contemporary German Muslim theologian, David Kermani,¹⁷ and Hindu scholar Jeffrey Long explores a Vedantan view of evil informed by conversation with Christian theologian John Hick and process theologian David Griffin.¹⁸ Wendy Farley's response reflects on the danger that theodicies will function as implicit justifications for human violence, a tendency that comparative study may reinforce rather than confront, since it is shared by both traditions.¹⁹ She recognizes that "protest" theodicies may be closely tied to monotheistic presumptions, but seeks common ground in the divine support for human agency that recoils against suffering and evil.

In the section on theological anthropology, Holly Hilgardner and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier both frame the theological topic through women's experience. In Hilgardner's case, this is a comparison of the thirteenth-century Christian mystic Hadewijch with Mirabai, a sixteenth-century Hindu mystic and poet.²⁰ In Tiemeier's essay, the focus is on the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic teaching and on the figure of Kannaki, an ideal wife in a fifth-century Tamil text, the *Cilappatikaram*.²¹ Amir Hussain's response to these pieces explores resonances (the extensive material on Mary in the Qur'an) and dissonances (the ascetic practices prominent in both the Christian and Indian examples are atypical in Islam) with his tradition.²²

On Christology, Bede Bidlack²³ gives a close reading of the Lukan birth narrative alongside the birth narrative of Lord Lau, from a sixth-century Daoist text, the *Huahu jing*. Marianne Moyaert contributes a comparative reading of Isaiah 53 and the suffering servant, through post-Shoah Jewish and Christian theological interpreters.²⁴ Hugh

¹⁴ Jon Paul Sydnor, "The Dance of Emptiness: A Constructive Comparative Theology of the Social Trinity," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 23-5.

¹⁵ Elaine Padilla, "Flower and Song: A Comparative Theology of Teotlizing in Aztec Theology and Karl Rahner's View of Divine Self-Disclosure," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 46-65.

¹⁶ Kristin Beise Kiplinger, "Comparative Theology and the Postmodern God of 'Perhaps': A Response to Sydnor and Padilla," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 66-88.

¹⁷ Klaus von Stosch, "Developing Christian Theodicy in Conversation with David Kermani," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 89-106.

¹⁸ Jeffrey D. Long, "Like a Dog's Curly Tail: Finding Perfection in a World of Imperfection: A Hindu Theodicy in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 107-25.

¹⁹ Wendy Farley, "Only Goodness Matters: Reflections on Theodicy with Klaus von Stosch and Jeffrey Long," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 126-48.

²⁰ Holly Hilgardner, "Longing and Letting Go: Lessons in Being Human from Hadewijch and Mirabai," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 149-70.

²¹ Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Women's Virtue, Church Leadership, and the Problem of Gender Complementarity," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 171-84.

²² Amir Hussain, "Longing and Gender: A Response to Holly Hilgardner and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 185-94.

²³ Bede Benjamin Bidlack, "What Child Is This? Jesus, Lord Lao and Divine Identity," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 195-215.

²⁴ Marianne Moyaert, "Who Is the Suffering Servant? A Comparative Reading of Isaiah 53 After the Shoah," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 216-37.

Nicholson's response notes that these two cases differ radically in that the close similarities in the birth narratives link traditions that have had little extended historical contact, while Christianity and Judaism have been bound together from the beginning of the church. He directly addresses the uncomfortable fact that "inter-communal polemic is theologically productive," and that key elements of Christian self-understanding have been shaped in such polemic. Comparative study poses the question of whether Christians can theologically reconstruct the heart of these Christological elements so as to untangle them from polemic and destructive features.²⁵

Finally, in the chapter on soteriology, Joshua Ralston compares the ways divine law functions on the road to salvation in John Calvin and in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali.²⁶ Sharon Betcher addresses a contemporary writer, Deepak Chopra, whose neo-Vedantan mix of science and mysticism is widely revered among the "spiritual but not religious." She puts Chopra in conversation with Christian theologians Catherine Keller and Jürgen Moltmann.²⁷ Shelly Rambo discusses both essays within a wider theological interest in moving discussion of salvation away from eschatological destiny and toward in-life transformation. She connects this with her own work on trauma, and on ways that brain science indicates that profound trauma cannot be healed with cognitive means alone, but only through an embodied spirituality.²⁸

Even this thin summary of the book gives a sense of the enormous breadth involved. One essay takes its comparative cue from ancient Mesoamerican sources that lack a contemporary religious community to claim or represent them. Another takes it from a contemporary best-selling spiritual writer. Some observe a kind of rough parallel in their subjects (a medieval Christian woman mystic and a Hindu woman mystic who lived within a few centuries of one another, the "reformist" figures Calvin and al-Ghazali) and others construe "comparable" in non-chronological and category-stretching terms (Rahner's theology in conversation with Mesoamerican religious concepts).

How to Do Comparative Theology

The scholarship and intrinsic interest of the contributions is evident. The way in which all belong to a common enterprise called comparative theology is less clear. Many writers address methodological questions in passing. *How to Do Comparative Theology* makes this concern central. It does this under three main headings. Part one, "Doing Comparative Theology—as Theology," focuses particularly on what qualifies comparative theology as a distinct genre of theology. The second part, "Comparative Theology is What Comparative Theology Does," offers a series of paradigm cases. The third section, "Recognizing Comparative Theology by Its Fruits," brings to bear on CT the same expectations that attach to theology more generally, exploring its relevance for reception and pastoral significance in the practical life of Christian individuals and communities.

²⁵ Hugh Nicholson, "Response: Christology in Comparative Perspective," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 238–54.

²⁶ Joshua Ralston, "The Way(s) of Salvation: The Function of the Law in John Calvin and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 255–73.

²⁷ Sharon V. Betcher, "Sleeper, Awake: Considering the Soteriological Promise of Popular Gurus," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 274–95.

²⁸ Shelly Rambo, "Salvation in the After-Living: Reflections on Salvation with Joshua Ralston and Sharon Betcher," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 296–316.

Catherine Cornille addresses a central problem, well-illustrated in *Comparing Faithfully*.²⁹ The range of possible topics, sources, and traditions (and the combined permutations of these) appears virtually unlimited. Nor is the application of comparative theology restricted to one or two of the traditional theological fields (ethics, biblical studies, historical theology, systematics). Theology of religions, one of the precursors for comparative theology, traditionally had a specific location as an adjunct to the theology of mission. Comparative theology applies everywhere, and so is in danger of fragmentation and dissipation. Its commitment to avoid sweeping conclusions and to work on a detailed scale constrains its applicability at the same time that it expands horizons. This makes it difficult to coordinate even the work of comparative theologians all working with forms and texts of Buddhism, for instance, let alone to coordinate that work with comparative reflections related to Islam and to draw out implications for a specific doctrinal topic. Theological “consumers” are left to make connections that are far from apparent.

Cornille notes that there are two very different ways that comparative theology may embrace its distinctive religious presuppositions. It may embrace them in a “truth in advertising” acknowledgement (we are all located and bring religious presumptions) while moving ahead with what is in principle a meta-confessional approach to the search for a universal truth. This is an engaged quest: engaged, because seeking a normative answer and desiring to live in accord with it; searching, in a manner that recognizes no boundaries save circumstantial and provisional ones. Or CT may embrace its religious location in an explicitly confessional manner, seeking to enrich and expand the truth revealed in the tradition in which one practices. The latter approach is often described in terms of a “home” tradition from which a scholar “passes over” into immersion in the study of another and returns with enriched perspectives to be shared with the home community. The difference between the two approaches is clearer in theory than in practice, largely defined by the hypothetical depth of the change that may result from comparative study. This volume is framed around the second, confessional approach, by virtue of contributors’ common interest in making CT an integral part of Christian theology. In this respect, the differences among the writers may have as much to do with their varied understandings of theology’s primary task as they do with issues related specifically to CT.

Glenn Willis presses the point that as theology, comparative theology must serve the constructive needs of an identifiable religious community. Willis does not see how pluralist comparisons of Cornille’s first type “can be constructive for, or questioned by, any specific community of practice: pluralist globalism is rarely talking to anyone in particular.”³⁰ He suggests that theological comparison “is far more likely to become religiously relevant when it not only offers a clarification of one’s own tradition but also provides an apologetic argument in favor of that tradition.”³¹ Like any theology, comparative theology will only thrive if it supports the “ongoing integrity and vitality” of a community that claims it, and the danger of much current work in this area is that it is

²⁹ Catherine Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 19–36.

³⁰ Glenn R. Willis, “On Some Suspicions Regarding Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 122–36; at 129.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

literally “uninhabitable” for more than a handful of people.³² This implies that a viable comparative theology must embody at least an implicit theology of religion that privileges a “home” tradition, as its reception in the community depends upon its power to strengthen that community’s life.

Aaron Langenfeld agrees with Willis that comparative theology must retain a dogmatic normative core. Otherwise it fades out of theology altogether, into generic religious studies. Or it narrows to a subsection of the pluralistic theology of religions, and so becomes the peculiar interest of one school of thought rather than a practice informing theology more generally.³³ But where Willis stresses an apologetic role for CT, Langenfeld stresses a foundational one. Just as theology had to come to terms with atheistic and agnostic philosophical presumptions if it was to uphold its truth claims, so it is natural and necessary that it should address the substance of religious diversity as part of its search for the rationality of faith.³⁴ Comparative work deepens understanding of one’s own tradition, but it also is required if theology is to meet scientific standards of knowledge, by showing “skill in dealing with different interpretations of reality.”³⁵

Where Langenfeld frames CT within the terms of a foundational theology accountable to scientific and philosophical rationality, Axel Marc Oaks Takás employs comparative reflection in the very process of formulating the notion of theology itself and the role of reason. By reading texts from Ibn Al-‘Arabī in dialogue with medieval Christian writers and particularly with the approach of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Takás develops a sense of “method” that is far from that assumed in a scholar’s scientific approach to an unknown object. In contrast, theological knowledge is intensely personal, and the results are not interchangeable when one knowing subject replaces another. Mystical, sapiential wisdom comes from the hermeneutical intersection of scripture (the text of the Qur’an for Ibn al-‘Arabī) with the “Book of the Cosmos and the Book of the Soul (the human person).”³⁶

Other contributors in this section offer additional possible principles of integration for CT. Klaus von Stosch, for instance, sees theology in the problem-solving business. CT could legitimately take its point of departure from social problems, theological problems, or interreligious problems. Von Stosch thinks CT is most promising when it takes up questions combining the last two (so a theological question in some way at issue between traditions). In addition, he suggests that CT work “micrologically”—i.e. through case studies—and that it include a “third party” perspective in its work, to highlight omissions and distortions that arise in any paired comparison.³⁷ As an example, he refers to his investigation of Christology in dialogue with Muslim interpretations of Qur’anic material on Jesus, where “third party” correcting commentary is provided by a scholar in Middle Eastern Studies.

³² Ibid., 132, 128.

³³ Aaron Langenfeld, “The Moment of Truth: Comparative Theology and Dogmatic Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 59–71; at 59.

³⁴ Ibid., 60.

³⁵ Ibid., 68.

³⁶ Axel Marc Oaks Takás, “‘An Interpreter and Not a Judge’: Insights into a Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology,” in *How to do Comparative Theology*, 98–121; at 102.

³⁷ Klaus von Stosch, “Reflecting on Approaches to Jesus in the Qur’an from the Perspective of Comparative Theology,” in *How to do Comparative Theology*, 37–58; at 39.

Hugh Nicholson proposes an approach to CT based upon ideological critique. Given that CT can never be abstracted from challenges related to the distribution of power, the purposes served by the representation of different traditions, and the global cultural context of academic discussion, one can make a virtue of this necessity. Without dismissing the liberative power in religions, Nicholson suggests they can be helpfully compared along their ideological dimensions. Thus, in his essay, he compares the development of the Buddhist No-self teaching and the Christian doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father.³⁸ In both cases, he argues, the strategy that crystalized the doctrines was similar. It was the product of an in-group struggle of identity formation, where one party prevailed by associating their rivals with an excluded "other"—Judaism in the case of Christian doctrine and Brahmanical Hinduism in the case of Buddhist teaching. By presenting the consubstantiality of Word and Father as the maximal antipode of Jewish rejection of incarnational messianism, or presenting No-self as the maximal contrast with the eternal Brahmanic *ātman*, proponents solidified their community's identity and gained an upper hand in defining the tradition going forward. The benefit of comparison in this dimension, despite its "theological unpalatability," is that it draws CT onto the same critical ground where religious claims within single religious traditions are routinely adjudicated today. Such genealogical analysis does not discredit doctrines because of their mixed origin, but requires them to be defended afresh on different grounds than mere traditional authority. And such an approach is particularly helpful for interreligious discussion, as it bypasses the typical stumbling blocks created by simple appeal to venerated sources.

Part Two of *How to Do Comparative Theology* moves from definition to illustration. In her contribution, Michelle Voss Roberts combines elements of Nicholson's ideological critique, von Stosch's problem-focus, and Takás's refiguration of theology. Informed by feminist and other critiques of the centrality of rationality in theological anthropology, Roberts revisits Thomas Aquinas in dialogue with the embodied understanding of humanity found in a Hindu sub-tradition of non-dual Saivism. The relevant texts in her study deal with the *tattvas*, the powers or faculties of the body—"hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, smelling, speaking, grasping, excreting, and sexual intimacy."³⁹ An anthropology that gives full value to these aspects of our humanity promises to affirm children, women, disabled and others who are devalued by standard cognitive norms. It also promises to shift the comparative task, inviting us not only to "think with other traditions but to feel with them."⁴⁰

Marianne Moyaert's chapter, "Comparative Theology After the Shoah," takes up the special Christian-Jewish case.⁴¹ No other portfolio in the comparative project has drawn the same number of scholars and publications, nor has any gone so far to become integrated within theology in general. It is unique in that its practitioners have a broad agreement on a clearly defined problem (the history of Christian anti-Judaism with its toxic effects) and a specific theological aim (the removal of the Christian "teaching of

³⁸ Hugh Nicholson, "Rhetorics of Theological One-Upsmanship in Christianity and Buddhism," in *How to do Comparative Theology*, 72-97; at 74.

³⁹ Michelle Voss Roberts, "Embodiment, Anthropology, and Comparison: Thinking-Feeling with Non-Dual Saivism," in *How to do Comparative Theology*, 137-63; at 157.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴¹ Marianne Moyaert, "Comparative Theology after the Shoah: Risks, Pivots, and Opportunities of Comparing Traditions," in *How to do Comparative Theology*, 164-87.

contempt"). Indeed, given shared scripture and history, it could well be said that Christian theology has itself been a comparative reading of Judaism from the beginning. However, Moyaert notes that virtually none of Christian post-Shoah theology flies the flag of comparative theology. Scholars are all too aware that Christians have intensively theologized Jewish sources and history in the past, to negative effect. They are acutely alert to the risks of CT. Moyaert's comparative offering is a reconciling reading of the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. The typological interpretive mode has been often deployed in the service of supersessionism. Here, drawing on the interpretation of this text by Jonathan Sacks, she explores the story as an account of the need for Jacob to let go of enmity with his brother so that he can hold on to God.

Muna Tatari, a Muslim scholar, shares a personal glimpse of her path into comparative study and of the development of her dissertation research.⁴² She began with a desire to explore the grounds in Islamic thought for human ethical responsibility and legitimate diversity. She pursued comparative study in liberation thought, Trinitarian theology and the anthropological turn in Catholic thinkers like Karl Rahner. This led her to reflect on the Greek philosophical framework shared by Christian and Muslim thought in the premodern period. She had started her studies with an expectation to find a grounding for human ethical agency in the Mu'tazilite school, with its high estimate of human rational powers. Her comparative insights led her to significantly expand the range of promising Islamic sources, and in particular to draw upon Ibn al'Arabī (providing a nice link with the discussion in the Takās chapter).

Francis Clooney is the leading contemporary comparative theologian. The other writers in *How to Do Comparative Theology* all make explicit reference to his work, and many contributions show the direct mark of his teaching and example. His extraordinary productivity and imaginative breadth give his work a somewhat counterintuitive systematic character, unique in the field. This is not a systematic quality born of broad synthetic theses, but of patient, cumulative exploration of varied concrete instances. His contribution here is a good illustration. He provides a close reading of a relatively short portion of a Mīmāṃsa text, the *Jaiminīya Nyāna Mālā*. In another setting, Clooney had already explored the larger text, searching for points of conversation with Christian theological expectations and finding some suggestive parallels in a legal digest, Gratian's *Decretum*, and theological digests, Lombard's *Sentences* or Canisius's *Catechism*.⁴³ Now, in this essay, he reverses field to consider the text in its most comparatively opaque form. The textual portion in question deals with a series of specialized questions about what do to with sacrificial remainders. These are mainly left-over liquids that officiating priests should or should not consume, as determined by sophisticated analysis of an extensive set of ritual principles.⁴⁴ The subject is chosen precisely because it seems least amenable to insight for outsiders. The sacrificial remainders stand, in a way, for the "remainders" in a tradition that cannot be assimilated to outside categories and yet form an unbroken whole in their original setting. Clooney likens this to the specificity of Christ in Christian community. It goes without saying that Clooney

⁴² Muna Tatari, "Using Comparative Insights in Developing Kalām: A Personal Reflection on Being Trained in Comparative Theology," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 188-205.

⁴³ Francis X. Clooney, "Discerning Comparison: Between the *Garland of Jaimini's Reasons* and Catholic Theology," in *The Past, Present, and Future of Theology of Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Terrence Merrigan and John Friday (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 164-83.

⁴⁴ Francis X. Clooney, "Difficult Remainers: Seeking Comparative Theology's Really Difficult Other," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 206-28; at 211.

does not seek to “succeed” in extracting what the text resists providing. But he offers a thoughtful meditation on what a “literal” reading of a text means, in terms of the Mīmāṃsa ritual logic and in terms of Christian historical revelation. His essay suggests that the limits of religious comparison are themselves subject to fruitful theological comparison.

The essay by Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia, indicates that the religious traditions paired in comparative study go far to define what counts as fertile or resistant material. If the sophisticated and abstruse ritual logic of Clooney’s Mīmāṃsa text posed a difficult remainder for Christian reflection, its context seems dramatically less foreign to Gordon-Guedalia in conversation with her own rabbinic tradition. She takes up the same text (but not the limited portion addressed in Clooney’s essay) and compares it with Maimonides’s twelfth-century works *Mishnah Torah* and *Sefer Mitzvot*. She notes that the works in question belong chronologically to the same “codification era,” as the eleventh to thirteenth centuries were “a jurisprudential collation era in several legal systems” including both the Hindu and the Jewish.⁴⁵ This recalls Nicholson’s suggestion that structural—in this case sociological—perspectives can be helpful in framing comparative work. Gordon-Guedalia’s primary interest is in bringing the texts into direct conversation around issues that they both recognize, namely the relative importance to a ritual’s efficacy granted to the fruit that accrues to its performer as distinct from the contribution the performer brings to the ritual. For instance, both texts address the case of a blind person, and of whether such a person is eligible to conduct certain ritual acts: is their eligibility enhanced by the possible benefit that could come to them from it or negated by the need for the “seeing” gaze of the officiant as a causal component in the constitution of the ritual?

Part Three, on the fruits of comparative theology, adds two particular emphases to the discussion. On the one hand, it asks how far comparative theology may enrich or inform what we might call practical or pastoral theology, that dimension of theology that addresses behavior as much as understanding. On the other hand, it asks how far this same dimension in various religious traditions — practice and spiritual experience — is itself the subject of comparative theological study. Picking up on Michelle Voss Roberts’s suggestion that we might “not only *think* but *feel* with other traditions,” Emma O’Donnell notes that comparative theology remains an overwhelmingly textual venture.⁴⁶ This means that the bulk of religion — the performed, the ritual and the experienced, from which texts arise and to which they are usually intended to lead — is pushed to the margins. O’Donnell discusses the difficulties in the comparative exploration of experience, concluding that the social character of religious experience gives sufficient purchase for comparative analysis. Drawing upon her own work on the experience of time in Jewish and Christian liturgy, she argues that we may approach experience through language and observation, since that is the way that adherents themselves must proceed.⁴⁷ She also presses the point that the first-person experience of the comparative theologian is necessarily part of this process—raising but not

⁴⁵ Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia, “*Sagi Nahor—Enough Light: Dialectic Tension between Luminescent Resonance and Blind Assumption in Comparative Theology*,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 229–55; at 234.

⁴⁶ Emma O’Donnell, “Methodological Considerations on the Role of Experience in Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 259–70; at 259.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

directly addressing the question of the extent to which a comparative theologian needs to be experientially participant in the perspectives they study.

Brad Bannon takes up the pastoral topic of preaching, or the communication of scriptural revelation. His contribution stands out for a particularly clear expression of the orientation of his study. As a Congregational (United Church of Christ) theologian, he says he is “committed to remain in academic dialogue with other Congregationalists on issues that are relevant and timely within our denomination.”⁴⁸ A crucial issue of this sort is the minister’s presentation of biblical witness in a religiously diverse society. This leads him to select the work of Gail O’Day, a Congregationalist biblical scholar, and to compare her interpretation of Bultmann’s treatment of the Gospel of John with contemporary Hindu scholar Anantanand Rambachan’s interpretation of Śankara’s perspective on Vedic revelation. The focus is not so much on the theological content of the revelation in each case, but on *how* it is communicated and realized in the hearers. Thus Bannon applies his comparative work to the pastoral challenges of a particular community, and his assessment of the work’s value hangs upon its relevance and appropriation there.

In a related vein, Michael Barnes considers comparative theology itself as part of a lived practice of theological hospitality. The Christian life is the attempt to draw out of the mystery of Christ daily acts which express it, not according to a fixed rule but according to a capacity to “pick up and reflect upon the traces of what is known in the unknown.”⁴⁹ Pastoral theology is the theology that corresponds to this practical, daily journey through concrete ethical, social and spiritual contexts. In this sense, comparative theology is simply the interreligious facet of this engagement with the actual mosaic of human experience. Barnes describes the Buddhapadipa temple in South London, and one of its particularly eclectic murals which mixes into its traditional scenes images of Sherlock Holmes, Mother Teresa, Charlie Chaplin and Margaret Thatcher. What a purely textual or abstract treatment of traditions may miss, he says, is that traditions “only become *properly alive* when they seek to communicate with and enter into another religious or cultural world.”⁵⁰ Comparative theology is a “performative act,” simply one way of striving to be Christian—a way appropriate to the intellectual theological life—within the whole spectrum of interaction with one’s neighbors, from which it cannot be separated.

European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology

Comparing Faithfully and *How to Do Comparative Theology* provide a good synopsis of the current situation. That picture is helpfully rounded out by two other recent anthologies. The first broadens the geographical focus: *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.⁵¹ The “new comparative theology” at issue is in fact the CT discussed in this

⁴⁸ Brad Bannon, “Incarnational Speech: Comparative Theology as Learning to Hear and Preach,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 271–300; at 294.

⁴⁹ Michael Barnes, “Living Interreligiously: On the ‘Pastoral Style’ of Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 301–23; at 315.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁵¹ Francis X. Clooney and John Berthrong, editors, *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology* (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2014), <http://BZ6FJ9FL8E.search.serialssolutions.com/?V=1.0&L=BZ6FJ9FL8E&S=JCs&C=TC0001680308&T=marc>.

article (contributors were asked to take Clooney's 2010 summary statement in *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* as their reference point), in specific contrast with the work of European precursors like Rudolf Otto or Max Müller.⁵² Several writers note that CT in Europe is marked by a different institutional setting, where theology is frequently located in state university faculties. These are most often organized confessionally and church bodies may control specific appointments. If we ask *where* theologians and scholars from various religious traditions are to come together for this kind of comparative work, we must acknowledge that neither the European nor the North American theological academies are organized for CT. In both settings, students training in CT must find the resources to pursue doctoral level study in a religious tradition other than their own, alongside similar theological preparation. Such training is one of the distinguishing features of contemporary CT, and it means that many of its scholars participate in the religious studies field dealing with their comparative tradition, as well as perhaps also studying within some confessional educational programs in that tradition.

In the United States there are a few doctoral and undergraduate programs in Roman Catholic schools with explicit CT focus, where faculty members include both Christian theologians and committed scholars from other faiths. There are divinity schools and a few seminaries where this is also true. And there are the comparative academic societies and venues already mentioned (like the Society for Hindu-Christian studies). In Europe, it is structurally more difficult to include groups other than Protestants and Catholics in theological faculties, at the same time that these faculties themselves are under some stress in certain countries. Nevertheless, CT work goes on through groups like the Center for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religion at the University of Salzburg, the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies, and the Center of Comparative and Cultural Studies at the University of Paderborn, Germany.⁵³

Klaus von Stosch, perhaps the leading figure in European CT and the co-editor of *How to Do Comparative Theology*, places CT in the lineage of the search for a liberal, critical and public theology.⁵⁴ This search has two branches. One, in the train of Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, drives toward universal theory and a global theology. The other retains a universal character but tempers it with a deeply contextual and existentialist spirit, as with Tillich and Rahner. Von Stosch identifies CT with this second branch, in distinction from postliberal perspectives that would problematize any universalistic aim in liberal theology. Other contributors follow this lead in framing CT in relation to the grand modern hermeneutical and philosophical traditions of the West. Reinhold Bernhardt, for instance, proposes that "interreligious comparisons are to be conducted by the standards of religious studies," while theological reasoning comes into play in the motivation that

⁵² This is somewhat confusing since Clooney's book was supplemented in the same year with another that he edited, entitled *The New Comparative Theology*. That book highlighted a next generation of scholars, many of them Clooney's students, who expanded and revised work in his paradigm. See Francis X. Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2010); *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁵³ See Ulrich Winkler, "Reasons for and Contexts of Deep Theological Engagement with Other Religious Traditions in Europe: Toward a Comparative Theology," in Clooney and Berthrong, *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

⁵⁴ Klaus von Stosch, "Comparative Theology as Liberal and Confessional," in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

occasions the comparison and at “the level of interpretation that follows it.”⁵⁵ He likens interreligious comparison to the historical exegesis of biblical texts, as a scientific task whose results can be taken up in wider theological reflection. Claudia Bickmann, by contrast, wonders whether the “post-metaphysical premises” of the European academy can be stretched to true encounter with the metaphysical schemes embedded in many comparative religious sources—in her case sources from Chinese traditions.⁵⁶ Jacques Scheuer further questions whether CT may not be an evasion of the challenges of atheism and indifference so prominent in European culture, a practice that can hardly find an audience while the audience for theology of any sort declines.⁵⁷ Is comparison itself outdated, as identities become increasingly fluid and particular, both the possibility of comparison and the value of its fruits less and less obvious?

The authors in our two primary volumes look to enhance the impact of CT within theology more generally. One area where one might project an early impact would be the theology of religions: do the results of CT or the prerequisites of its practice compel a choice in favor of one of the views contending in the common typology, or do they substitute some other understanding in their place? Is the reticence of many CT practitioners on the theology of religions a prudential silence aimed at avoiding ecclesial discipline and maintaining credibility with more conservative co-religionists, or does it reflect a conviction that these questions will answer themselves only when the “re-thinking of every theological issue” in a comparative light has permeated the whole? The European anthology presses these issues with particular force.

Comparative theology was commended by some as an alternative to the theology of religions. Perhaps the strongest case for this was James Frederick’s article in 1995 proposing a moratorium on theology of religions in favor of investing in the vast concrete, preparatory comparative work that would have to undergird any plausible effort at evaluation.⁵⁸ Ulrich Dehn supports viewing CT as an alternative, primarily because he sees its *a posteriori* approach as a salutary check on a pluralistic theology of religions.⁵⁹ But there is little sympathy among other contributors for the substitution of CT for theology of religions. The editors note the irony that if the theology of religions was often criticized for postponing actual engagement with other religions, CT is often reproached for postponing “the explication of some expected, allied theology of religions.”⁶⁰ Perry Schmidt-Leukel stands at the opposite pole from Dehn, contending that CT logically requires a pluralistic theology of religions if it is to be coherent.⁶¹ Others who express

⁵⁵ Reinhold Bernhardt, “Comparative Theology: Between Theology and Religious Studies,” in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

⁵⁶ Claudia Bickmann, “The Idea of a Highest Divine Principle—Founding Reason and Spirituality. A Necessary Concept of a Comparative Philosophy?,” in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

⁵⁷ Jacques Scheuer, “Comparative Theology and Religious Studies in a Non-Religious Environment,” in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

⁵⁸ James L. Fredericks, “A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions,” *Horizons* 22 no. 1 (Spring 1995): 67–87.

⁵⁹ Ulrich Dehn, “A European (German) View on Comparative Theology: Dialogue with My Own Past,” in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*. The pluralistic theology in view here is that from the common typology of exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist. See Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

⁶⁰ Francis X. Clooney and John Berthrong, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

⁶¹ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Scholars in Europe on the New Comparative Theology. A Pluralist’s Rejoinder,” in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

an opinion tend toward Rose Drew's conclusion that CT "must proceed from provisional inclusivist or pluralist assumptions."⁶²

I have delayed dealing with the last essay in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, because it points our conversation in a different direction. In that chapter, Stephanie Corigliano directly questions the "home and away" paradigm that is otherwise assumed by other contributors. Need comparative theology require an explicit faith commitment and allegiance to a tradition? Its scope and impact could expand, she proposes, if it may be also "a way of exploring and even forming faith identity" for those whose faith commitments are unclear or not "rooted" in a specific faith.⁶³ She suggests the comparative theologian need not identify more with one of the traditions compared than another, so long as she has an engaged theological motivation, and a community of reference of some sort. In her case, this is a community of contemporary yoga practitioners who are interested in the roots of their practice and in its integration in their spiritual lives. Her chapter briefly illustrates how a comparative reading of the *Yogasūtras* (and their interpretation by some contemporary yoga masters) alongside a Catholic writer on devotional practice might illuminate issues of balance between detachment and love.

Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom

The issue raised so sharply by Corigliano, along with other issues that appear in muted form in our discussion so far, takes center stage in another anthology from the same year, *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*.⁶⁴ The turn to pastoral theology in the third section of *How to Do Comparative Theology* shifted the focus to its wider ecclesial audience. This work looks to the classroom as representative of the wider social audience for CT. If in the books discussed above the "home and away" character of comparative theology is largely assumed, in this one the writers are quite clear that the same is not true for the students in their classrooms nor, increasingly, for them. In its first section, the book addresses the characteristics of millennial generation students relevant to the subjects of comparative study. The second section shifts to the way the project itself might be altered by fluid notions of identity, and the third addresses practical strategies and learnings from classroom experience.

Review of all these essays would take us too far from our central theme. But it is fair to say that recurrent themes in the book as a whole are a reservation about any expectations of a clear religious identity for the comparativist and a reservation about reliance on the very notion of bounded religious traditions. Judith Gruber's nuanced but highly critical reading of Clooney concludes that his project "engages in the politics of essentialism," by framing "religious traditions as homogenous and stable entities with clear borders to their others."⁶⁵ She argues that this obscures the fact that hybridity is

⁶² Rose Drew, "Challenging Truths: Reflections on the Theological Dimensions of Comparative Theology," in *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*.

⁶³ Stephanie Corigliano, "Theologizing for the Yoga Community? Commitment and Hybridity in Comparative Theology," in *Comparing Faithfully*, 324–50; at 324.

⁶⁴ Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin, *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, Routledge Research in Religion and Education (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

⁶⁵ Judith Gruber, "(Un)Silencing Hybridity: A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Theology," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 21–35; at 28–9.

the dominant feature of religious existence, and the selective representation of some texts for attention is not the marginal peculiarity of comparative theologians, but the very power-controlled “mode through which tradition takes its shape.”⁶⁶ The tensions and trials supposed to arise for comparative theologians who cross traditional boundaries are in fact somewhat contrived markers that serve to reinforce the picture of a home tradition “imagined to be essentially stable and homogenous.”⁶⁷

Mara Brecht takes a different tack, questioning whether the religious boundaries are often distractions from more engrained and functionally essentialist categories. We do not choose our conditions of racial privilege or disadvantage, and these apply regardless of our mode of interpretation. Thus, a kind of “soteriological privilege” attaches in our culture to the nominally Christian or even to unreflective “nones” coming from that cultural background, continuous with the white privilege of which it is a facet.⁶⁸ Brecht taxes CT with failing to adequately address these fault lines of racial-social location, whose objective significance it underplays in contrast to the borders between religions whose actual artificiality Gruber stressed. Contrary to any pretense to prescind from the theology of religions, comparative work should emphasize it, in the sense of confronting students’ and scholars’ own assumptions about the dynamics of salvation and their own racial identities. The common critique of theology of religions as self-referential is misguided in that such critical self-analysis is a necessary goal. She contends not only “that other religions cannot be understood *on their own terms*, but also that they *ought not to be*.”⁶⁹ Unlearning racism is the precondition of any authentic religious education. That work can be most directly carried out in the context of the theology of religions and may only be obscured by the conceit of immersion in another religion on “its own terms.”

In two other essays, Syed Adnan Hussain, and Lisa Gasson-Gardner and Jason Smith, add perspectives from queer theory and suggest that when essentialized traditions are compared, it is likely that the normative versions of each will reinforce the exclusion of gendered minorities or minority sexual orientations.⁷⁰ Only rigorous attention to intra-religious diversity and to critical reading strategies can deliver comparative theology from perpetuating the negative trajectories of existing religions. Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier stresses that the “home and away” model fails to correspond to the empirical situation of many students and scholars, who may be embedded as belonging to or practicing more than one religious tradition, or who may manifest a kind of “interstitial religiosity” composed of multiple elements.⁷¹ Tiemeier likens this to a multiracial identity. There can be an “interstitial integrity” in the practice of theological reflection from these locations, no less than in the more familiar comparative settings.

Both theology and religious studies, the constituent disciplines of CT, are undergoing a new phase of theoretical and practical sensitization to race and gender. Many of the critiques in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom* arise from such

⁶⁶ Ibid., 31, emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁸ Mara Brecht, “Soteriological Privilege,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 85-97; at 89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁰ See Syed Adnan Hussain, “Teaching Tawhid: Unity through Diversity,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 98-112; Lisa Gasson-Gardner and Jason Smith, “Feeling Comparative Theology: Millennial Affect and Reparative Learning,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 113-25.

⁷¹ Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, “Comparative Theology at the Intersection of (Multi)Racial and (Multi)Religious Identities,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 75-84; at 80.

intersectionality, and raise the question about where religious difference should figure in that syllabus. Insofar as the current generation of comparative theologians go through a kind of parallel education in their chosen traditions, they are of necessity trained in fields like East Asian studies, Indology, or Islamic studies. This means that in contrast with the typical theologian, they often have an additional orientation to post-colonial perspectives and the ideological and racial concerns in cross-cultural work.

Francis Clooney provides an "Afterword" to this book which responds to its themes and criticisms. His essay is of particular interest for its brief survey of the trajectory of CT over the course of his career and its reflections on the vocational challenges involved in nurturing the growth of the discipline within both the academy and the Roman Catholic Church. In regard to the objection that many in the millennial classroom (both students and teachers) might be better served by revising the "faith seeking understanding" paradigm to start instead "from 'seeking' rather than 'faith,'" (in the sense of engagement with a particular tradition), he observes that there is much worthwhile and important learning that is not theology and need not wear the label.⁷² The distinctive task of CT—carrying sufficient daunting demands of its own—need not be pulled out of shape in an attempt to encompass all worthy forms of interreligious reflection. In this connection, he draws upon the essay contributed by Reid B. Locklin. Locklin points out that just as there is a scholarly practice of theology (or its analogue) within a religious community, in contrast to that community's grassroots practices and beliefs, so too CT can be seen as a specific scholarly task alongside others. CT's assumptions need not be shared by all the millennial students referenced, nor do the premises of those students' valuable spiritual quests need to be incorporated in its method. Clooney says something similar in regard to the theology of religions. Beyond the frank statement that his theology is in broad terms inclusivist, he has practiced a strategic silence in those somewhat polarized debates. He has done so the better to do "what few were doing—actual comparative work; ... I have sought to have comparative theology judged not by an implied theology of religions measured by non-comparativists but rather [by].... its actual fruits for those willing to read my writing."⁷³

As to the charge of essentialism and of framing religious traditions as stable and homogenous units, Clooney dryly observes that this "may possibly miss the dynamic operative in my work."⁷⁴ Though every one of his comparative studies deals with sources that belong to "Hinduism" in some sense, the term and the idea itself (as also the term "Christianity") play virtually no role in his discussion. These works are one continuous illustration that even a single text or author is rarely "homogenous" in the manner suggested, that tenkalai and vatakalai schools of Vaisnavism are not to be conflated with each other, any more than are Lombard, Aquinas and Bonaventure. "Close reading is a sure way of confirming that nothing is assumed to be the same as anything else."⁷⁵ Clooney's discussions unsettle abstract essentials precisely by proceeding so richly and effectively without any reference to them.

⁷² The quotation is from Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Among the Nones: Questing for God in the Twenty-First Century Classroom," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 141-52; at 143. Francis X. Clooney, "Afterword: Some Reflections in Response to Teaching Comparative Theology in the Classroom," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 219-34; at 229.

⁷³ Clooney, "Afterword," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, 223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

Clooney's work focuses with great intensity on texts, and in most cases on texts of enough significance within a particular stream of religious experience to have attracted a train of commentators whose thoughts have likewise become influential (if by no means always concurring) parts of that stream. This has the great virtue of allowing him not only to read a text *from* another tradition but to read it *with* some in another tradition. It appears that for many critics it is easy to mistake this attention to sources that loom large in a tradition, to "classics" of a sort, for an endorsement of an essentialist or homogenous construct like "Hinduism." But, as just described, this is quite contrary to the way that his study actually works. Any who have followed his work will know that from the beginning he did not restrict comparative theology to the particular kind of textual conversation he pioneered, to the exclusion of other media. This is evident not only in his descriptions, but in his students. Almost all of them have extended comparative theology's scope, whether by addressing more experiential subjects or by shifting its prior paradigm in significant ways.

Clooney readily welcomes the voices reminding readers that CT cannot "float above or apart from issues of race and gender," while counseling care that post-orientalist critiques not crowd out the actual doing of theology, any more than theology of religions should crowd out actual comparison.⁷⁶ It is worth noting that the very colonial denigration of racial others that Brecht emphasizes manifested itself in the dismissal or denigration of their religions and cultures as well. Few have done as much as Clooney not just to reverse that conviction in the abstract, but to practice the concrete respect of a theological learner toward the substance and spirit of those traditions. If religious difference belongs to the intersectional syllabus as a cause and object of injustice in its own right, and not only as a proxy for race and gender, then that work of theological respect and reform has an important place of its own.

Conclusion

The breadth and energy displayed in these books— *Comparing Faithfully*; *How to Do Comparative Theology*; *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology*; and *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*— reflect the significant scholarly work currently underway in CT. The contributions also illustrate that the incorporation of this literature into Christian theology more generally remains a matter of concern for its advocates. One hope is that the input of CT would lead to a Christian theology that is more supple, dialogical and credible in a religiously diverse world. But there is an integration challenge, an often-unbridged gap between what comparative theologians articulate as the learnings that emerge from their interpretive journey and what is picked up for its resonance and relevance within theology's wider work. At the same time, as indicated in the latter part of this review, CT faces an identity challenge. It is caught between the dynamic just described, the validation of CT's significance *qua* theology, and another that pulls in an almost opposite direction. In the broader religious academy, significant numbers of students and scholars seem intrigued with the liminal space for religious reflection "between" traditions that CT occupies. But they question whether this requires the presumption of a home base, of any location in a particular religious identity (or at least whether it may allow for very hybridized and polyglot "home"

⁷⁶ Ibid., 225.

locations). In such a case, CT would be not so much the outreach, and (likely) unsettling of, an existing “faith seeking understanding,” as a constitutive theological activity that elicits a practitioner’s emerging religious identity. This perspective retains an explicit faith engagement that distinguishes CT from religious studies, but disaffiliates that engagement from tradition or community in the service of a kind of CT “without religion.” Accordingly, it is difficult to identify any specific religious community as the audience for this scholarship. Its relevance is judged not by reception in a home religious tradition but perhaps by fruitfulness for some possible subset of a population without fixed confessional allegiances. It is an irony of this approach that a firm confessional identity and dense connections to tradition may be appreciatively valued in sources chosen for comparative work, but are matters of indifference, or active suspicion, in terms of the qualities of the practitioner or of their expected audience.

Our review has highlighted significant questions about the way forward for CT. We have focused on the story line and on some of the major voices in the field. We should not lose sight of the more important fact that twenty-five years ago there was no story line, because there was not yet a protagonist. Though still institutionally a somewhat fragile movement, CT has grown to have a distinct status within both theological and religious studies scholarship. That growth stems from the impressive achievements of individual scholars and from the trends noted at the beginning of this essay. Together, these assure that the questions and the substance of comparative theology have become a permanent feature of theology itself.

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