Theological Studies
56 (1995)

CURRENT THEOLOGY

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: A REVIEW OF RECENT BOOKS (1989–1995)

Comparative theology is an exciting and quickly developing field, and a relatively uncharted one. Hence it may be beneficial to offer a descriptive assessment of what is happening today across the range of its new questions, ideas, and theses, as these are put forward by many authors in a wide variety of projects. We begin with some general observations on its nature and scope, observations which will become clearer as we work our way through the subsequent bibliographical survey.

SETTING SOME BOUNDARIES

As theology, comparative theology consists most basically in faith seeking understanding; its ultimate horizon can be nothing less than knowledge of the divine, the transcendent. As one of the theological disciplines, comparative theology is marked by its commitment to the detailed consideration of religious traditions other than one's own. It is detailed, deeply reflexive, self-corrective in the course of its own investigation, even in regard to its basic questions, methods, and vocabulary. Though one must be hesitant about using the term "theology" univocally in reference to many religious traditions (we tend to understand the word against its Christian background), it is useful to work with the hypothesis that comparative theology can be pursued from within any of the religious traditions of the world.[1]

In 1987, David Tracy reminded us that although the realities of pluralism have never been so evident as they are today, reflection on "other religions" has of course been present in the Christian tradition from its beginnings, and it has proceeded with subtlety, sophistication, and boldness in many contexts.[2] The term "comparative theology" has been in use since at least the 19th century, either in contrast to "theoretic theology" or to indicate the study of religious doctrines.[3] In many of its Christian instances, however, it seems to have designated what today might simply be called the "theology of religions," i.e., Christian reflection on the general idea of other religions, in light of some particular understanding of the Christian faith. The fact that

[1] Nevertheless, most of the books considered here are written by Christians and addressed to a Christian audience, and this essay itself is written from a Christian starting point.

[2] David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 14.446–55.

[3] Ibid. 14.446.

"theology itself is now widely considered one discipline within the multidisciplinary field of religious studies impels contemporary theology, in whatever tradition, to become a comparative theology. . . . [O]n strictly theological grounds, the fact of religious pluralism should enter all theological assessment and self-analysis in any tradition at the very beginning of its task."[4] Exploring the interplay between theological method in general and method within comparative theology, Tracy notes four major shared premises: the reinterpretation of central religious symbols in a religiously pluralistic world; the construction of new foundations for traditions; the addressing of questions of religious pluralism on explicitly theological grounds; both the hermeneutics of suspicion and critique, and the hermeneutics of retrieval.[5] Against this background, he suggests two understandings of comparative theology today: first, it can be taken as a discipline within the history of religions, in which theologies from different traditions are compared; second, it can be taken as "a more strictly theological enterprise . . . which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds."[6]

In addition to Tracy's two interpretations, I suggest a third: *comparative* theology can also be thought of as truly constructive *theology*, distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its foundation in more than one tradition (although the comparativist 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 the comparative practice. Comparative theology in this third sense is a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions; it is a theology that occurs truly only *after* comparison.

In all three of its meanings (the comparison of theologies, the posing of theological questions in a comparative setting, the doing of constructive theology from and after comparison) comparative theology remains subject to the same possibilities and limitations shared by other theological disciplines practiced within the community. Comparative theology requires nuance by other areas of theology, and in response to wider issues related to culture, society, science, and a variety of local concerns; as a relatively new discipline, it is perhaps all the more vulnerable to the shifting moods and boundaries of modern study. Its situation is distinguished by cultural and religious pluralization (even as the world becomes more uniform in some ways) and by our increasingly acute consciousness of this; by a more vulnerable and open world consciousness, and a postcolonial, postmissionary sensitivity; by the vast availability of detail about traditions, information which makes casual stereotyping more difficult; by skepticism about liberal syntheses; by the assertion of new faith perspectives, particularly in non-

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid. 14.452.
[6] Ibid. 14.446.

Western contexts where familiar categories are not taken for granted; by the inscription of the self in study, so that the relation of the author to what he or she studies becomes a primary concern; finally, by the more general debates about education and society today. Comparative theology clearly stands in a close relation to area studies, the history of religions (and religion), historical studies (particularly those which investigate the interconnections of traditions), studies concerned primarily with the methodologies brought to bear on religion, and the range of inquiries related to local theologies, inculturation, and missiology.

Comparative theology as a Christian enterprise needs also to remain connected with the lineage of missiology and the deep practical concern, frequently evident in missionary writings, for the particularities of other religious traditions and for the specific ways in which the Christian faith interacts with faiths encountered in different places. Though its motives are likely to intersect only partially with those of missiology, comparative theology likewise respects both the concrete and the integral, as has significant strands of the missionary tradition, exemplified especially in those pioneering figures, in the Middle Ages with reference to Islam, in the 16th and 17th centuries with respect to the religions of India and China, who undertook the first serious studies of non-Christian traditions according to Western scholarly methods. In the end, though, comparative theology needs to be understood nonreductively, as distinct from all these related disciplines and concerns.

We must also admit that comparative theology in either its theoretical or practical dimensions is still not mature; a great deal more of it must be carried through, in conversation with other ways of doing theology, before one can make a formal survey of the field and of major themes which define the discipline. I therefore stress the process of what actually happens when one engages in attention to traditions other than one's own; in doing so, I of course sacrifice some of the clarity that might come through model-building or a strictly thematic approach. My goal is less the ambitious project of a nearly complete bibliography of the normative works and ideas in comparative theology today than the identification of some of the styles, practices, and concerns which are directing energies in this field and in its reception in wider and noncomparative theological contexts. Finally, limitations of space occasion temporal limitations: this study is restricted primarily to books published since 1989, including a few that are in press at the time of this writing.[7]

[7] On the preceding five years, see the paired review essays by Francis X. Clooney, "Christianity and World Religions: Religion, Reason, and Pluralism," *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989) 197–204, and Paul Knitter, "Making Sense of the Many" (ibid. 204–7). Of course, certain older books remain influential, often referred to by the authors cited here, such as the works of Raimundo Panikkar (e.g. *The Intrareligious Dialogue* [New

DEALING WITH PARTICULARITIES

Let us begin with a number of complete, full-scale comparative studies which impressively and at length draw on several traditions, trying to balance them within a single theological study. These books move consciously back and forth, with the goal of a comparison that is objective, not as merely detached or merely disinterested in the compared traditions, but rather as fair to both sides of the comparison, especially the "other side," the tradition to which one does not personally adhere.

Leo Lefebure's *The Buddha and the Christ*[8] adopts a dialogical approach, relying in a straightforward, back-and-forth fashion on the presentation of comparable themes in each tradition, e.g. "Jesus the Christ and Shakyamuni Buddha," "Dionysius the Areopagite and Mahayana Perspectives," "Augustine and Mahayana Buddhism," and "Gustavo Gutierrez and Thich Nhat Hanh." The book is valuable as a prudent assessment of what is possible in a particular, constructed comparison between two very different traditions; its goal is the fair presentation of the two traditions on an even, common ground, and as such it is instructive.[9]

Of a more philosophical bent is Michael von Bruck's intricately woven *The Unity of Reality*,[10] which takes up Lutheran Christian theology and India's Advaita (nondualist) Vedanta, focusing on Advaita's "theology" of Brahman/Atman and the Christian theology of the Trinity. In appreciating Advaita as a dynamic nondualism, and not a static monism, he prepares the ground for a fruitful comparison of Brahman with the Trinity as a *perichoresis*, as this "Trinitarian dance" has been understood from John Damascene to Hegel. While admitting that unity and duality do not have the same metaphysical and epistemological status in Advaita and Christian theology, von Bruck stresses how proper interpretation brings them into fruitful interplay. The book thus makes a provocative contribution to our reflection on trinitarian theology, and it need not be taken as of interest only to specialists in Indian thought or comparativists.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's *Den Löwen brüllen hören* is an equally philosophically sophisticated work, even broader in scope.[11] Schmidt-

---

York: Paulist, 1978]), W. C. Smith (e.g. *Toward a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981], and William Christian, Sr. (e.g. *The Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* [New Haven: Yale University, 1987]).

[8] L. Lefebure, *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist and Christian Dialogue*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

[9] Regarding the Christian appropriation of Buddhism, also noteworthy are Ruben Habito's two books, *Total Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) and *Healing Breath* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

[10] M. von Bruck, *The Unity of Reality: God, God-Experience and Meditation in the Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, trans. James V. Zeitz (New York: Paulist, 1991).

[11] P. Schmidt-Leukel, *Den Löwen brüllen hören: Zur Hermeneutik eines christlichen*

Leukel opens a wide perspective within which to examine closely the relationship of Buddhism and Christianity, and his study admirably moves beyond generalizations, both positive and negative, about their relationship. He insists that the issues of hermeneutics and dialogue must be addressed jointly if either is to be profitable; our understanding of traditions other than our own must be rooted in the self-understanding of those traditions, and this as particular enough that the encounter is truly concrete. The concluding sections of the book accentuate the challenges put to the Christian who would venture to engage in a study of Buddhism that is informed by textual, philosophical, and theological expertise.

Very important too, regarding both content and method, is David Carpenter's *Revelation, History, and the Dialogue of Religions,*[12] a conscientious and very thorough comparison of the thought of the fifth-century Indian grammarian and theologian Bhartrhari and that of St. Bonaventure, with a particular focus on their understandings of revelation in its theoretical and practical dimensions. Carpenter's work is distinguished by his impressive scholarly grasp of the sources regarding both thinkers (this may well be the most complete, erudite, and balanced comparative study available today), by his mastery of important writings in contemporary hermeneutics and the history of religions, and by his bold, constructive assessment of what it would mean to find theological significance in a comparison as formidable as this. Admitting that he had undertaken this research to use Bonaventure's Logos theology in an evaluation of a non-Christian theology of revelation, by the end of his writing he had concluded to the futility of any approach which invests one tradition with the fullness of truth: many traditions witness to truth, none stands as *the* authoritative witness, and all require critique in regard to the credibility of their witness. In conclusion, Carpenter suggests that the similarities he has discovered between Bhartrhari and Bonaventure indicate a dialectical and historical understanding of truth, in which differing concrete linguistic practices embody moments of alterity rather than the potential contradictions of a statically conceived, objective truth. In this situation, he says, the solution lies in an ongoing dialogue which is grounded in, rather than ended by, the disclosive power of revelation.

It is one thing to be writing a comparative study in the contemporary academic scene, where attention to pluralism still can appear both novel and optional, and another to embark upon a comparative study in contexts where religions have been meeting for millennia. India, of course, is a place where pluralism has been the norm informing every

Verständnisses der buddhistischen Heilsbotschaft (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1992).

[12] D. Carpenter, *Revelation, History, and the Dialogue of Religions: A Comparative Study of Bhartrhari and Bonaventure,* Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

religious consciousness, and two fine works by a Jesuit and a Salesian, both Indian, are recent fruits of this milieu. Ishanand Vempeny's *Krsna and Christ*[13] and Joseph Jaswant Raj's *Grace in the Saiva Siddhantham and in St. Paul*[14] both conscientiously balance Hindu and Christian materials. Vempeny focuses on the understanding of Krsna and Christ in scriptural sources, along with related doctrinal developments (such as incarnation and *avatara*); Jaswant Raj focuses on the bases and developments of the doctrine of grace in St. Paul and in the South Indian devotional religion known as Saiva Siddhanta. The aim of both books is to show commonalities and specify just where differences lie and how and to what extent they matter, and so to make it easier for Christians and Hindus in India to enter upon dialogue. The books' primary impact will of course be in the Indian context; yet by virtue of their detail, their conscientious balancing of both sides of their comparisons, and the theological importance of their chosen topics, they should be of use to theologians outside India as well.

COMPARATIVE ETHICS, COMPARATIVE SPIRITUALITY

If the core of comparative theology lies in detail, it should come as no surprise that some very fine work is being undertaken in the field of comparative ethics, where the requirements of ethical decision making and responsible action give comparative study a practical urgency. Though many of the works already mentioned are sensitive to ethical concerns, the following exemplify the ethical turn.

Lee Yearley's *Aquinas and Mencius* is the model for comparative ethics today.[15] This elegantly composed but ambitious volume explores virtue in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas and in *The Mencius*, the collected teachings of Meng Tzu (4th century B.C.E.). It touches on a range of topics: lists of virtues and their presuppositions, specific characterizations of virtue and virtues, views on the interaction of reason and natural inclinations as formative of emotions and dispositions, the relationship between understandings of self and virtue, and the nature of failures in virtue. Chapter 4 is an extended treatment of a single example, courage, the "intelligent disposition that allows people to respect but control the effects perceptions of danger produce."[16] The concluding chapter sorts out what is helpful or not in the effort to interpret the similarities and dissimilarities one finds

[13] I. Vempeny, *Krsna and Christ: In the Light of Some of the Fundamental Concepts and Themes of the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament* (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash; and Pune: Ishvani Kendra, 1988).

[14] J. Jaswant Raj, *Grace in the Saiva Siddhantham and in St. Paul: A Contribution in Inter-faith Cross-cultural Understanding* (Madras: South Indian Salesian Society, 1989).

[15] L. Yearley, *Aquinas and Mencius: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York, 1990).

[16] Ibid. 113.

in comparisons that are neither abstract nor merely particular. A careful combination of a bold comparative agenda and an honest skepticism about it characterizes the whole book, and we learn a great deal about useful ways in which comparativists can negotiate their way through a maze of similarities and differences of varying significance. Though Yearley correctly notes that his own lens on the world and his own English language form the context in which Aquinas and Mencius are considered, his personal appropriation of the authors' ways of thinking and writing makes this book an opportunity for readers actually to begin to read Mencius through Aquinas's eyes, and Aquinas through Mencius's eyes, and at the same time to come to a clearer understanding of virtue.

Admirable too is John Kelsay's *Islam and War,*[17] published soon after the Gulf War and taking its urgent complexities into account. The book sketches a diversified religious perspective on questions related to war, looking into both traditional and modern Islamic understandings of peace, the causes and conduct of war, the goals and methods of achieving a just world order. One of the book's achievements is that its positions are recognizable to Muslims and Christians alike. Kelsay's concluding words resonate well among those committed to comparative study:

> The current task facing advocates of the just war tradition is to turn the theoretical universality of that tradition into a practical one, particularly by incorporating non-European, non-North American perspectives. . . . [W]hile I think we are a long way from a truly international 'just war tradition,' and that attaining such a goal will require sifting through the many layers of cultural traditions like Islam, the idea is noble and perhaps, from certain perspectives, a religious or moral imperative. . . . My immediate goal is much smaller, however, and I can put it this way: To learn, through careful study, the wisdom of a tradition that, through force of intellect and long experience with power, has crafted a working doctrine on the relationship between ethics, war, and statecraft. That this tradition is not my own matters little; that I do not always agree with its judgments matters less. From my perspective, to study Islam, as to study ethics, is to acknowledge the admonition of *Proverbs* 4:5: "Get wisdom; get insight." There follows a promise: Wisdom will "keep" those who seek it. May it be so.[18]

[17] J. Kelsay, *Islam and War: The Gulf War and Beyond* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

[18] Ibid. 122. William LaFleur's *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992) is a fine cross-culture study in ethics; even if not specifically theological, it raises questions and offers models for ethicists who are seeking to sort out what is at stake in debates such as that over abortion. See also the brief essays in *Healing and Exorcism: The Nigerian Experience,* SIST Symposium Series 1, ed. Chris U. Manus (n.d.), in which we find explorations of West African practices, how they are to be understood, and how they are can be apprehended by Christians in Africa. So too, *Embodiment, Morality and Medicine,* ed. Lisa Cahill and Margaret Farley (Norwell, Mass: Kluwer Academic, 1995), includes a number of important essays, including Cheryl Sanders, "African Americans and Organ Donation: Reflections on Religion, Ethics and

Some ethicists make a point of insisting that sophisticated deliberation on moral issues has taken place in non-Christian and non-Western traditions, and they desire to see this reflection taken seriously into account by Western scholars. On this basis, they have undertaken to assemble and present non-Christian views on specific contemporary issues, in a way consonant with the categories of contemporary ethics. For instance, in their *Hindu Ethics,*[19] Harold Coward, Julius Lipner, and Katherine Young have brought Hindu perspectives to bear on three important issues: purity (with special reference to gender perceptions), abortion, and euthanasia. Their project was first of all simply to "see what Hinduism has to say about ethical problems which are posing a serious challenge to modern scholars," so that "the strengths and weaknesses of Hindu ethics will be immediately apparent to the Western Christian, Jew, humanist, or secularist who wrestles with how abortion, euthanasia, and purity are to be dealt with in our modern world."[20] Their conclusion deserves the attention of ethicists in all fields: "These three case studies in Hindu Ethics demonstrate that Indian thought has not ignored deep reflection on problems which are presenting serious challenges to the modern world. They also demonstrate that Hinduism is more than metaphysics—that it has a firm grounding in ethics even when the most difficult questions are raised."[21]

Though much of the Western study of non-Christian religions has been sparked by an interest in mysticism and spirituality, the study of spirituality as a facet of comparative theology is best defined rather narrowly, with reference to extended efforts to understand spiritual practice by some rather definite comparative standards. For here too the point is to grapple with the details of traditions in particular and in their own context, without moving too quickly to a metamodel or to the posited universalities of experience. A number of good examples of what can be accomplished come to mind here, but I will highlight only three.

First, there is the collaborative effort of Patrick G. Henry and Donald K. Swearer, *For the Sake of the World,*[22] which compares in a nuanced and sensitive fashion the monastic traditions of Buddhism

---

Embodiment," and June O'Connor, "Ritual Recognition of Abortion: Japanese Buddhist Practices and U.S. Jewish and Christian Proposals."

[19] H. Coward, J. Lipner, and K. Young, eds., *Hindu Ethics: Purity, Abortion and Euthanasia,* McGill Studies in the History of Religions (Albany: State University of New York, 1989). For a different approach to the task of drawing out the ethical significance of the moral reflection of non-Western religious communities, see Francis X. Clooney, S.J., "Back to the Basics: Reflections on Moral Discourse in a Contemporary Hindu Community," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* (forthcoming).

[20] Ibid. 1. [21] Ibid. 7.

[22] P. Henry and D. Swearer, *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).

and Christianity, showing some important differences but also stressing that it is enlightening and nourishing to consider these traditions together. Second, Donald W. Mitchell's *Spirituality and Emptiness*[23] is a study of fundamental themes in Christian trinitarian mysticism from the perspective of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, as this has been expounded in the Kyoto School of Japanese Buddhism, particularly by Masao Abe. The book is an exemplary synthesis which combines impeccable scholarship with an integral sense of the two traditions and, evidently, the author's own personal appropriation of the ideas about which he writes.[24] Third, Michael Stoeber's *Theo-monistic Mysticism*[25] comes at questions of spirituality from a more theoretical angle. Stoeber seeks a new, surer basis for comparative spirituality by synthesizing monistic and theistic discourses, based on the results of a study of Hindu and Christian mystical texts. Arguing on the one hand against the *constructivist* model which stresses socioreligious categories which preform mystical experiences and likewise the gap between cultures, and on the other against an *essentialist* model which tends to collapse mystical experiences into a state safely beyond the differences of language, with his *experiential-constructivism* Stoeber seeks a middle ground, drawing on the variety and continuities of both experience and interpretation. Even though, as he admits, his work is more suggestive than complete, it does indicate a viable way for a theologically responsible comparative study of mysticism to proceed. When we couple it with the work of Mitchell and of Henry and Swearer, we have begun to delineate the foundations of a more complete and much richer comparative study of mysticism and the related religious and theological issues.[26]

TRANSFORMATION OF THE COMPARATIVIST

In the course of dealing with the particularities of other traditions, and particularly as comparative study moves to its third level (a constructive theology from and after comparison), the theologian must deal with the problems attendant upon crossing boundaries, as comparison turns out to be an event *within* the comparativist, who changes in the course of his or her effort to appropriate another tradition. Some comparativists, either by claim or by effective practice, are more ex-

[23] D. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1991).

[24] On the intersection of Buddhist and Christian spirituality, see also Paul Mommaers and Jan van Bragt, *Mysticism Buddhist and Christian: Encounters with Jan van Ruusbroec* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

[25] M. Stoeber, *Theo-monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994).

[26] Stoeber's earlier *Evil and the Mystics' God: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) is likewise informed by attention to religious materials from India.

plicit about this project of interiorizing comparative study. Here I highlight several such works.

M. Thomas Thangaraj's *The Crucified Guru,*[27] which can be profitably read along with Jaswant Raj's *Grace in the Saiva Siddhantham and in St. Paul,* is a careful and balanced comparison which is also explicitly self-aware. In composing this new articulation of Christology in light of the Saiva Siddhanta understanding of the divine and human guru, Thangaraj takes into account his own Indian heritage, his family roots in Hindu and (Protestant) Christian culture, and his bilinguality in English and Tamil. Well informed with regard to the Indian religious tradition Thangaraj (now a professor at Emory University's Chandler Divinity School) has also addressed the concerns of the contemporary West, writing with a double audience in mind.[28] Offering valuable insights into both the highly sophisticated theology of the *guru* in the South Indian Saivite community and the Indian Christian reception of this concept of *guru,* Thangaraj offers his own constructive theology of "the crucified guru," drawing on the Saivite tradition with intelligence and prudence while yet understanding quite clearly where the centers of balance are in the Christian tradition. The last chapters extend his thinking of the *guru*-image to address more general issues which concern a much wider range of theologians: contextualization along with globalization, liberation along with conversation, tradition along with transformation, and finally the contours of a responsible contemporary Christology. This is a book about the Christian and the Hindu, the teacher and the guru; as such it is itself infused with a consciousness of its own place in regard to both traditions and styles of exposition.[29]

In *The Meaning of Christ,*[30] John P. Keenan seeks to state what it means to be enlightened by Christ as this reality might be informed by a Mahayana Buddhist perspective. Keenan seeks to understand Christian awakening by "pondering the scriptures and commentaries of the Buddhist Mahayana tradition. This exposition of the Christ meaning is the result of an ongoing intrareligious dialogue, a dialogue between an affirmed Christian faith in Christ and a Mahayana understanding of faith awakening."[31] Arguing for the fruitfulness of this creative synthesis, Keenan suggests that

[27] M. T. Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

[28] Less well developed, but also instructive, is Thomas Puttanil, *A Comparative Study on the Theological Methodology of Irenaeus of Lyon and Sankaracharya* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1990).

[29] As a work on the notion of guru, it is nicely complemented by Catherine Cornille's *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation?* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), which explores both the theoretical and practical implications of the efforts of Indian Christians to adopt the language of *guru* and *ashram.*

[30] J. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology,* Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

[31] Ibid. 1.

this Mahayana perspective offers a language that may be of value in expressing hitherto unnoticed depths of the meaning of Christ. Precisely because it is a different language, a different set of interlocking terms, its adoption will lead to a different set of mediated insights. It is particularly to be recommended because, although it indulges in no metaphysical thinking and attempts to construct no overall systematic or ontological theology, it still is able to enunciate the traditional understanding of Christ as the word and image of the Father and to call for commitment to Spirit-filled action to transform the world.[32]

Though his language here draws specifically on the Mahayana material he had been studying, Keenan's approach exemplifies the deep transformative spiritual and intellectual engagement that stands as one of the ideal conclusions for all comparative study: it is a book which is admirably from and after comparative research.[33]

In her widely noted *Encountering God,*[34] Diana L. Eck skillfully weaves together the narrative of her scholarly encounter with Hindu traditions in the course of numerous journeys, writings, meetings, and conversations, with reflection on the meaning of this study for herself as a committed and changing Christian. Though the book is not an autobiography, it effectively inscribes the author in her work, exploring how her starting points affect what she has learned and what it has meant. Though this is not formally a comparative theological work either, its spirit of openness, dialogue, and attentiveness admirably capture elements essential to reflective comparative study.

The issues related to self-appropriation in the comparative project are raised in a more explicit fashion in John H. Berthrong's *All under Heaven,*[35] a study of the encounter of Confucian and Neo-Confucian

[32] Ibid. 262.

[33] Similarly, Keenan's *A Mahayana Reading of the Gospel of Mark,* Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, forthcoming) is a remarkable effort by a believer in one tradition to understand another's tradition's way of viewing the world. Imbued with insights from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, which he believes to be particularly appropriate, linguistically and conceptually, as an avenue into the reading of Mark, Keenan seeks to strip away the numerous layers of interpretation and practice through which one reads a text such as Mark, so as to be able to appreciate again its fresher and more powerful original meanings. As a verse by verse commentary, this book is not easily summarized; its real worth will depend on a slow, thoughtful reading of it and on the consequent judgment about whether, indeed, a valuable pathway into Mark runs through the Mahayana view of the world. It makes for interesting reading along with Bede Griffiths's *River of Compassion* (Warwick: Amity House, 1987), his explicitly Christian commentary on India's *Bhagavad Gita.* Both commentaries impress upon us the fact that mature comparative study affords a fresh starting point from which to approach basic sacred texts of our own and other peoples' traditions.

[34] D. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Boseman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

[35] J. Berthrong, *All under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue,* Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York, 1994).

thought with Christian theology. Much of the book is rightly devoted to setting up the encounter: a characterization of the main features of Confucian thought; how it has interacted with its cultural and religious neighbors and responded to domestic and foreign influences; modern developments in Neo-Confucianism; possible interconnections between Confucian thought and process theology. But its most memorable section is where Berthrong addresses the question of dual citizenship as a possibility for the comparativist:

> Within the general matrix of the developing debate on religious pluralism, the question of syncretism and multiple religious participation is one of the most difficult to be faced by the Western proponents of interfaith dialogue. . . . On the one hand, no one actually consciously argues for the creation of new religions in formal dialogue circles; but on the other hand, it is clear that one of the outcomes of dialogue is the enrichment and transformation of the original position. Such an outcome can and has been labelled syncretism. It does little good to point out that one person's syncretism is another's creativity. The same kinds of moves cluster around the notion of whether or not a person can participate with integrity in more than one religious tradition.[36]

The book's foundation on a study of Confucianism give this exploration of loyalties a specific tone and color; other traditions will certainly raise other kinds of problems for the comparativist faced with the possibility of multiple commitments. But the basic issue is a constant one, and one of the most prominent to be faced by comparative theologians. As one's research progresses, where are one's loyalties? Are they still to just one tradition, or to both, or to neither?

I place my own work in this section on the self-consciousness of the comparative act, since the reflective angle has been at the core of experiments in comparison. In *Theology after Vedanta,*[37] I elaborate the comparative theological method in light of the dynamics of the reading process, and undertake a detailed reading of some key texts in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, with attention to how authors within the Vedanta tradition read, how Christian theologians might read with them, and then how the Christian might re-read the Christian tradition thereafter. As became clear to me in writing the book, and as is indicated in its subtitle, the issue was very basically an attentive understanding of the process by which one becomes aware of what one does when one tries to understand something in its particularity, how one reads before, during, and after acts of comparison. In the subsequent *Seeing through Texts,*[38] I turn to the intensely emotional devo-

[36] Ibid. 40.

[37] F. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology,* Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

[38] F. Clooney, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas,* Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York, forthcoming).

tional poetry of the saints of South India, materials that become intellectually and historically related to the Vedanta materials, but in important ways remain quite different, more poetic, imaginative, local, affective, and thus raise quite different and more personal issues for the comparativist. In studying this poetry and its reception among South Indian Hindus, I found myself drawn into the world of the Vaisnavas; the "virtues" of impartiality and distance became problematic, and the possibilities of transformation and conversion become more real, as research and identity became more closely intertwined.

The questions raised in such works—detailed comparisons and the interiorization of such comparisons as an intellectual and ultimately personal process—must be understood in terms of "a comparative pedagogy." Many comparative works, such as those already mentioned, are important because of their exemplary value: done well, they are more helpful in supporting the doing of comparisons that are elaborate treatises on method. But there are ongoing efforts which are contributing to the refinement of comparative praxis. For instance, the books in the SUNY series "Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions"[39] are dedicated to bringing together the philosophy-of-religions traditions in the West, the newly appreciated value of comparative study, and the research of those in more empirically oriented disciplines, in the social sciences, history of religions and, indeed, comparative theology. Works in the Orbis "Faith Meets Faith" series are also very helpful and, as our bibliography indicates, they stand at the forefront of the development of comparative study. Of course, too, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* has for a generation and more pioneered the kind of exploration indicated here. Similarly, the work of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and the newly founded Society for Hindu-Christian Studies and their journals have been helpful in offering instances of specific research aimed at respecting, but crossing, religious boundaries, in the context of ongoing dialogue among actual proponents of religious traditions.

Within the scope of this reflective study, special attention must still be paid to pedagogical issues. In his essay "Beyond a Mono-religious Theological Education,"[40] Paul Knitter argues for a broader theological education, to which the study of non-Christian religious traditions is integral, and in which the dichotomy of theology and religious studies is overcome. In "The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church: Reflections on the Emerging New Situation,"[41] I sought to estimate the likely weight of comparative

[39] Edited originally by Frank Reynolds and David Tracy, now by Paul Griffiths and Laurie Patton.

[40] In *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education,* ed. Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 151–80.

[41] *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (1991) 482–94. See also my "The Transformation

study according to the prior theological education and ecclesial experience of the comparativist; comparativists educated entirely after the Second Vatican Council are less likely to have to accommodate new information about religion with already formed and set classicist understandings of theology; comparison and theology have been learned together, not in sequence. As pedagogical issues are given serious attention in our pluralistic environment (where Christian theological backgrounds are themselves greatly varied), it seems inevitable that we will have to identify more specifically the correlations between comparative study and the specific theological resources, developed or not, that individual comparativists bring to their study.

Though one might be inclined not to group historical studies with those giving priority to personal reflective issues, an awareness of history provides necessary data for comparative theology's own self-understanding as a discipline. So it is appropriate to mention here some of the historical studies which are filling in the "prehistory" of comparison, giving it a deeper sense of its own identity—and so to dispose of the notion that until now Christian theology has been innocent of creative interaction with the other religious traditions. For at least a decade David B. Burrell, already a well-respected Aquinas scholar, has been extending that expertise through a series of experiments in "comparative philosophical theology," exploring issues familiar to him from his study of Aquinas and later Thomists in light of the other "Abrahamic faiths," Judaism and Islam, represented for the most part by Maimonides and Ibn-Sina. Admitting his Christian tradition and standpoint, Burrell nevertheless argues for the theological and philosophical corrective which comparative work brings to chosen topics. His first major effort in this direction was *Knowing the Unknowable God,*[42] where he explored the relationship between God and the world as a limited but real basis on which God can be known. In his more recent *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions,*[43] he explores the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and human freedom as these are worked out in the three traditions; here too Burrell challenges the area specialist to think beyond the limits of cultures and contexts, the philosopher to take them seriously, and the theologian to think, at least twice, before attempting a "purely" Christian, or Jewish, or Islamic, theology or ethics of creation and human freedom. Interreligious thinking on these topics is a venerable part of each tradition; we might as well be comparativists, since we have been for quite some time.

Noteworthy too is Roger Arnaldez's *A la croisée des trois monothé-*

---

of the Scholar as a Factor in Hindu-Christian Studies," *Hindu-Christian Studies* 3 (1990) 1–6.

[42] D. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986).

[43] D. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993).

ismes.[44] Like Burrell, Arnaldez is interested in the interactions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle Ages, and provides a broad horizon within which to study them. He studies Mohammed's views on Judaism and Christianity, and Islam's beginning and differentiation into theological schools, and then traces further interactions in Spanish Cordova, and the ways in which all of this works out in the Christian theology of figures from William of Auvergne and Alexander of Hales to Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, and how thereafter this conversation waned and fragmented. In his concluding pages, Arnaldez pleads for a resumption of this conversation that is rooted in all three traditions.

Like its encounter with Islam, Christianity's encounter with Judaism is a contemporary and ongoing event, not reducible to historical questions. Certainly, the challenge of a contemporary post-Holocaust Christian theological response to Judaism necessarily raises questions which touch very deeply on the core identity of the Christian. Here comparison takes a particularly intense turn, for the authenticity of the comparativist is at issue. In *A Guest in the House of Israel,*[45] Clark M. Williamson seeks to construct an attentive, honest "post-Shoah" theology for Christians which does not reject the covenant with Israel:

> The tasks I have undertaken in this volume are a dismantling of the anti-Jewish tradition of Christian theology and a restatement of some of the central themes of the Christian faith. . . . Post-Holocaust theology pursues this same task [of self-critique in specific encounters with specific hitherto excluded people] on behalf of the Israel of God and various members of the Israel of God whom we have seldom if ever heard in one context—that of the covenant between the God of Israel and the Israel of God—in which they can be understood. What post-Holocaust theology seeks to do is to criticize and revise Christian self-understanding in ways appropriate to the radically free grace and total claim of the God who redeems the ungodly, hence in ways that do not "nullify the faithfulness of God" (Romans 3:3) to the Israel of God.[46]

Though of course many theological works that do not think of themselves as comparative deal with the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, it may turn out to be particularly fruitful to treat this relationship from a comparative perspective, wherein similarities and differences can be freshly appraised and appreciated without a rush to the confirmation or critique of already fashioned theological answers.[47]

[44] R. Arnaldez, *A la croisée des trois monothéismes: Une communauté de pensée au moyen-âge* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993).

[45] C. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

[46] Ibid. vii–viii.

[47] Finally, we note the importance of works which critically retrieve the missionary tradition. Wilhelm Halbfass's *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988) offers a valuable overview of the intellectual context in which missionaries strove to interpret new cultures, and in which their infor-

FROM COMPARATIVE PRAXIS TO SYSTEMS TO GLOBAL THEOLOGIES

However deeply and permanently rooted it ought to be in specific practices, the comparative project fails if it remains entirely the domain of specialists, such as those trained in languages. Though I have argued that practical issues are key, there are generalizable, broader issues which may subsequently occupy a wider range of theologians. We turn now to efforts to sketch the ramifications of comparison for the wider range of theological research.

Several expert authors whose work is not explicitly comparative theology nevertheless deserve special attention as providing excellent resources to undergird the comparative project, rubrics by which this study can move forward.

José I. Cabezón's *Buddhism and Language*[48] studies these topics within the framework of a "comparative scholasticism." In order to make "scholasticism" usable in comparative study, Cabezón suggests six criteria which describe "scholasticism" in general: tradition, proliferativity, completeness and compactness, systematicity, rationalism, and self-reflexivity. Though we must expect modifications and exceptions to Cabezón's characterizations in any particular case, these are nuanced and useful measures by which to determine whether any given (religious) tradition is scholastic or not, and hence by which to open the wide range of theological issues related to scholasticism.

Paul Griffiths's *On Being Buddha*[49] argues for a retrieval of the practice of "a doctrinal study of doctrine," a study which does not reduce doctrine to the "epiphenomena of social settings or institutional arrangements of any kind,"[50] and which proceeds with specific attention to the kinds, meanings, and functions of doctrines and the resources we draw on to understand them and make judgments about them. Though Griffiths works with a solid understanding of the place of doctrine in the Christian tradition, the book is distinctive by reason of its attention to Buddhist materials (drawn from medieval monastic Buddhism as available in Sanskrit and Tibetan sources) and what they have to tell us about the nature of the Buddha. Griffiths formulates his project in these terms:

I shall, in the body of this study, attempt to analyze, understand and assess the

---

mation was received in Europe. When it comes to the study of particular encounters between missionaries and people in other traditions, David E. Mungello's work on China is exemplary, both his earlier *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1989), and his recent *Forgotten Christians of Hangchou* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1994).

[48] J. Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language: A Study in Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*, Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York, 1994).

[49] P. Griffiths, *On Being Buddha: The Classical Doctrine of Buddhahood*, Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York, 1994).

[50] Ibid. 4.

buddhalogical doctrines evident in some Buddhist discursive practices entirely in doctrinal terms: as substantive claims and injunctions governing the intellectual lives of the virtuosos who engaged in such practices, and in what these claims and injunctions state or imply about the ontology, metaphysics, anthropology, and soteriology of those who assert them.[51]

The book's last chapter, a valuable critical intellectual assessment of the coherence of the various doctrinal systems, shows how the evaluation of doctrines is a plausible venture even within a comparative setting.[52]

Writing in a way that is more explicitly Christian and theological, in his *The Diversity of Religions,*[53] Joseph A. DiNoia, O.P. offers a stimulating reworking of the project of a Christian theology of religions, putting forward many points that should be of great interest to comparativists. Though the book does not claim to be deeply informed by comparative study, it does draw quite competently on the Buddhist tradition. Moreover, it acknowledges and argues, against a series of well-presented and serious opposing arguments, that contemporary articulations of Christian doctrine ought to be informed by knowledge of the doctrines of other communities. DiNoia helpfully ponders the problems that beset most theologians who would become informed about traditions other than their own, e.g. the enormity of detail, the limits on the capacities of the outsider, the possibility that such information will actually distract the theologian from the proper formulation of doctrines. Generally speaking, he takes a moderate position which should be acceptable to many who would be reluctant to undertake more in-depth comparative study: "If Christians have occasion to interact (in dialogue or in other settings) with religious communities whose doctrines manifest the features [the Christian theologian] adduces [in previously describing those doctrines], then Christian doctrines about other religions should be formulated in ways that will do justice to these doctrines."[54] Moreover,

proposals here would be advanced in such a way as to remain systematically open to developments that might be required if specific doctrines of other religious communities actually came to be entertained in dialogue or other settings. A theology of religions in this vein would be sufficiently general and

[51] Ibid.

[52] Noteworthy too is Griffiths's *Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue,* Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991) which, according to the meta-reflective approach indicated by its title, cautions us against too irenic a view of the encounter of religions and doctrines, and which offers us a framework in which interreligious critical judgment can occur. Similarly, Harold Coward's *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990) makes an important preliminary philosophical contribution, exploring how the comparative project is better pursued along with an explicit understanding of the postmodern age.

[53] J. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1992).

[54] Ibid. 158.

well within the bounds of its competence as a product of reflection within the Christian community, yet it would still be fit to rise to the challenges posed by engagement in interreligious dialogue.[55]

In an interesting balance of exclusivist and inclusivist sympathies, DiNoia defends the particularist roots of Christian exclusivism and argues for a productive response to this particularism precisely *through* more serious attention to the doctrines of other traditions, instead of by the benign or polemic ignorance of them that still besets many theological writings.

Wilfred C. Smith's *What Is Scripture?*[56] is neither merely a survey nor merely a hermeneutical exercise, but rather an effort to attend to specificities and details and from them to gain a better, more apt way of thinking about what scripture is. Smith's short answer is given early on: " 'scripture' is a bilateral term. By that we mean that it inherently implies, in fact names, a relationship. . . . [N]o text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way. I suggest: *scripture is a human activity.*"[57] After illustrating his thesis by a vivid review of the reception of the Song of Songs in medieval and modern Jewish and Christian communities, Smith devotes the major part of the book to the longer version of his answer, describing how texts have become, and function as, scriptures in the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. After delving into the notion of the "classic" in Chinese and Western (Greek, Christian) contexts, and a catch-up chapter on lingering questions (Do Shintos have scriptures? How can we distinguish and interweave the Indo-European, Semitic and Chinese strands of the idea of scripture? Is it erroneous to say that oral traditions have "scriptures"?), Smith's conclusion reaffirms the initial thesis: "*There is no ontology of scripture.* The concept has no metaphysical, nor logical, reference; there is nothing that scripture finally 'is' . . . [A]t issue is not the texts of scripture that are to be understood and about which a theory is to be sought, but the dynamic human involvement with them."[58] Comparative study becomes all the more urgently informative if Smith's insight is taken seriously.

Equally ambitious, though rather different in approach, more pastoral, more varied in its foci, is John B. Carman's *Majesty and Meekness.*[59] Carman's investigation is rooted in the phenomenological approach to the study of religion proposed by W. Brede Kristensen and Gerardus van der Leeuw, in Carman's own studies of the 11th-century

[55] Ibid. 160.

[56] W. Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

[57] Ibid. 17–18.

[58] Ibid. 237.

[59] J. Carman, *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

Hindu theologian Ramanuja, and in Ramanuja's emphasis on polarity in God, i.e., God's "supremacy" and "accessibility." Carman seeks an overview of several traditions—Hindu, Catholic and Protestant Christian, Islamic, Japanese Buddhist—sufficiently broad that his theme can be upheld, yet with a responsibly deep grasp of the particulars of the traditions he considers. The book achieves a skillful balance between personal faith and scholarly distance, wealth of detail and the discernment of generalizable patterns. Its concluding section is more directly theological, as Carman traces the consideration of paradox and polarity in modern theology, and how we might go about the task (which he does not undertake) of reformulating the Christian theology of God on the basis of this broad evidence for polarity in God in various non-Christian *theologies*. For many theologians, the book should be a very helpful initiation into the practices and purposes of comparative theology.

Though it would be unfortunate to reduce comparative theology to the questions which govern the ongoing theology of religions debate (for example, Is Christ unique? Can people be saved through other saviors? Who is the God at work among the Hindus? etc.), it is important to mention several works which raise general theological questions while at the same time remaining attentive to the particularity of other religious traditions.

In *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions,*[60] Jacques Dupuis, S.J., proposes a theology of religions that was thought through and articulated during his many years in India. After an interesting survey of positions on how Christ was understood by Hindus, Dupuis offers mature reflections on biblical and ecclesial resources, classical and contemporary, for an adequate response to other religions; he is motivated by the concern to balance faithfulness to the tradition with openness to how Christ works in the world, particularly in the various religions in their concrete existence. Steadfast in his Christocentric perspective, Dupuis insists that God's covenants with Jews and Muslims remain in force even after Christ, and indeed that "the other religious traditions, as well, still have the positive meaning assigned them by God in salvation history";[61] that terms such as "the word of God," "holy scripture," and "inspiration" may be validly used with reference to extra-Christian traditions; that "a prolonged encounter with the nonbiblical scriptures—practiced within their own faith—can help Christians to a more in-depth discovery of certain aspects of the divine mystery that they behold fully revealed in Jesus Christ";[62] and, finally, that there is a "complementary uniqueness of the mystery of Jesus Christ vis-à-vis other salvific figures and the founding experi-

[60] J. Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions,* trans. Robert R. Barr, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991.)

[61] Ibid. 124.

[62] Ibid. 177.

ences of other religious traditions."[63] In his conclusion, he argues that dialogue is integral to evangelization, and offers the concept of mutual conversion: "under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the partners in the interreligious dialogue are called—together and by each other—to a more profound conversion to God."[64] For Dupuis, comparative theology is evangelical, preaching the gospel is a comparative venture.

The contributions of David Tracy and Schubert Ogden are worth noting here, since their theological reflections are enriched by their experience in dialogue with Buddhists, and to some extent are generated from that basis. Tracy's interesting *Dialogue with the Other*[65] is particularly instructive, in that each chapter of this small book begins from a different starting point: Mircea Eliade's understanding of the primitive; the Greek religions; Buddhism; the mystical and prophetic strands of religion. We are thus vividly reminded of the flexibility that must always remain an attribute of comparative study, as it revises itself in the light of specific encounters and the issues they raise. Near the end of the volume, Tracy insists on the openness of the current moment:

> That we should examine critically all prior Christian theological answers in the light of the interreligious dialogue I do not doubt. That we should risk articulating new Christian theological answers (like the move past "christocentric" to "theocentric") I also do not doubt. Yet if we have good reason to think that "theocentrism" simply recalls the issue of "christocentrism" by another name, then we may need to ask more questions in actual dialogues with others and ourselves before announcing a new christology or a new theocentrism. It is, in fact, more exact to speak of two crucial and related dialogues: first, the interreligious dialogue which provides the principal new religious praxis which is transforming all of us and which gives rise to new theological thoughts and theories; and second, the inner-Christian dialogue, where Christian theologians attempt to report to others what possibilities they now foresee.[66]

The new situation, to which comparison may perhaps be leading us, will be truly transformative, more radical than anything thus far experienced in the Christian tradition.

Ogden's *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*[67] seeks to move beyond a mere acknowledgement of pluralism to a more constructive, positive understanding of religions in comparison with one another. Developing a pragmatist position, he cites Clifford Geertz approvingly, that "what all sacred symbols assert is that the good for

[63] Ibid. 205. [64] Ibid. 229.

[65] D. Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs (Louvain: Peeters; and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[66] Ibid. 97.

[67] S. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1992).

man is to live realistically; where they differ is in the vision of reality they construct."[68] Ogden concludes to a non-monistic inclusivism in which there *can be* many true positions, whether or not there actually are. Both liberal and conservative views have generally been definitive: "for Christian monists, whether exclusivists or inclusivists, this event [the saving event of Jesus] not only represents the possibility of salvation but also in some way *constitutes* it."[69] Moreover,

> the possibility of salvation itself, as distinct from the specifically Christian representation of it, is constituted solely and sufficiently by God's primordial and everlasting love. This means, as I understand it, that, just as it is of the essence of God's love to create creatures and to consummate them by accepting them into God's own all-embracing life, so it is also essential to God's love to save sinners by being the necessary condition of their salvation.[70]

With this bold position, Ogden also proposes some wise cautions:

> But if my own experience of interreligious dialogue is any indication, it is likely to remain exceedingly difficult, even after the most extensive study and first-hand experience of another person's religious claims, to know just where, or even whether, one's own religion expresses the same religious truth. . . . I have become increasingly convinced that, for all of the obvious differences between the formulations of our respective positions, there are striking similarities between the understanding of human experience for which my Zen Buddhist partners typically argue and what I as a Christian theologian understand to be our authentic self-understanding as human beings.[71]

For Ogden, all of this leads to a pointed question, that he has helped make into a viable one worth asking: Are there many true religions? For if the Christian claim to truth is valid, and if the same can be said for the option that there is at least one true religion—which opens the possibility of there being many— one cannot avoid asking if there actually are many true religions.

In *Salvations,*[72] S. Mark Heim provides a nuance to Ogden's question, if not a full answer. He locates the plurality of religions theologically by emphasizing a plurality of *salvations* rather than by locating diversity in the truth of God, Christ: even if all are saved, salvation may not be the same for everyone, nor need every salvation, even when real, be equal to others in its completeness. Heim's work has its own flavor, in part because at several points he draws on his own encounters with various people of other religions who opened for him new possibilities, new views on his own Christian experience. One of his basic concerns is to estimate the significance of the small experiences which occurred in the course of doing his theological reflection in

[68] Ibid. 66, citing C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 130.
[69] Ibid. 84.
[70] Ibid. 99.
[71] Ibid. 60.
[72] S. Heim, *Salvations: In Search of Authentic Religious Pluralism,* Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, forthcoming).

America and when visiting India. In this situation, where plurality is to be taken very seriously, and where our personal encounters matter theologically, there is an urgent need for a postpluralist and inclusive conversation which yet draws on the consciousness of the modern West and its deepening awareness of pluralism.

Robert C. Neville's *Behind the Masks of God*[73] balances a concern for larger philosophical schemata with a respect for plurality that is deep enough to initiate a significant process of thinking, one that balances detail with legitimate, careful abstraction:

> The point of getting behind the masks is not to abandon them but to understand the contexts in which they are true expressions of divinity. The theological task then is to find out how and why the various theistic conceptions are true, how and why divinity is sometimes Brahman, Siva, or Krishna, how and why the Buddha-mind is nirvana which is also samsara, how and why Heaven, Earth, and human beings constitute a trinity, and why and how the Tao that can be named is not the true Tao. As a Christian I am convinced of the truth of the theistic approach, and participate in the cultic life of a theistic religion. What is not apparent in my conviction are the limitations of the theistic approach, how it relates to the other approaches, how it is blind to their truths, how it compensates for their inadequacies. Theology is out to understand these limitations from all the appropriate angles. As a theologian, therefore, I am more than a cultic Christian, as must be the case with any Christian theologian who aims at truth in divine matters rather than at mere sociological reportage about what Christians believe, or ought to believe, in order to maintain this or that connection with their tradition.[74]

Though Neville's approach invests heavily in models for better abstractions, and does not tarry long with the concrete realities of individual traditions, it is an impressive response to pluralism that should be taken into account by those who would move beyond specific experiments in comparative study.

In *The Divine Matrix*,[75] Joseph A. Bracken draws on Neville's work (as well as von Bruck's, noted earlier) in rethinking comparative problems with the help of process theology. He develops his understanding of comparative issues by drawing on Whitehead's understanding of creativity and the idea of the "extensive continuum," arguing that these ideas are equivalently at work in many world religions, albeit under different names. Bracken sees himself as following Neville's methodology: abstracting a pair of categories from one tradition, "freeing" them from particularities, and then extending their use to interpret understandings of ultimate reality in other traditions. For Bracken, this is to reveal the world as a "transformational matrix"

[73] R. Neville, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991).

[74] Ibid. 2.

[75] J. Bracken, *The Divine Matrix: Creativity as Link between East and West*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

within which God and humans encounter one another and by so doing give form to the world. This philosophically sophisticated volume also delves with patience into the details of certain Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist concepts, bringing them together in an extraordinary way with Christian theology and Whitehead's process thought.

There are, of course, efforts to map out the future of religion and theology by more general and ambitious categories that cover the whole range of possibilities. John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*[76] is a signal and mature example of his lifelong quest to understand and organize religions by a model that accounts for all of them, in their plurality and unity. Though heavily schematic in its quest for such an explanatory model, Hick's book nevertheless draws knowledgeably on examples from different traditions and, as he states his goal in the preface, explains religions from a properly religious and nonreductionist point of view. Even if one comes away from the book with the sense that Hick has achieved too little (the traditions remain vague, silent, still to be considered) or too much (everything has been explained), it is important that comparativists observe Hick, the great pioneer, in his search for a meaning for plurality that is religiously and theologically responsible.

A World Theology[77] is a collaborative effort by Edmund Perry and N. Ross Reat to offer a schema by which to understand the world's religions (along with modern atheism), balancing respect for both diversity and commonalities, searching into "the central spiritual reality of mankind," i.e. what people often call "God." Perry and Reat attempt this according to a series of calibrated categories: undeniability, desirability, elusiveness, each considered according to four kinds of symbolism: intellectual, mythological, spiritual, and moral. The authors offer this ambitious scheme in a disarmingly open fashion, ending their book with an attractive appeal for reactions, criticisms, and improvements on their work, an appeal that deserves response.

Probably the best among these more ambitious works is David Krieger's *The New Universalism.*[78] This book draws on a number of sources, particularly the work of Raimundo Panikkar, to devise "a seven-step method based upon a *diatopical model* of communication in which the idea of an *intra*-religious dialogue and a conception of 'methodological conversion' emerge as central for any interreligious and intercultural understanding."[79] Using Habermas, Krieger elaborates the implications of communicative action and offers a model of nonvi-

[76] J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989).

[77] E. Perry and N. Reat, *A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind* (New York: Cambridge University, 1991).

[78] D. Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology,* Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

[79] Ibid. 5.

olent community, constructing an intelligible basis for conversation among people of various religions. Thus he provides a convincing and relevant foundation for global conversation.

But despite the evident value of all these more schematic works, perhaps they are premature. For now, it seems better to focus on the parameters of correct comparative practice, and to leave larger theological syntheses to a future (the next?) generation.

REWRITING NON-COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Though comparative theology should remain incomplete for now, an open, experimental, and provisional enterprise, its contribution to the wider range of theologies need not be entirely postponed. A specialization can be as specialized as its practitioners want it to be, but its health and relevance depend in part on how much specialized knowledge is fed back into the more generalized domain of theological knowledge. By way of indication, let us attend to how comparative study and the issues it raises feed back into the work of theologians who are not comparativists. I will illustrate this development briefly, by reference to two rather different works in which the pursuit of mainstream theological systematics and constructive theology is accompanied by an attentiveness to the data of other traditions.

First, Franz Josef van Beeck's systematics, *God Encountered,*[80] is attentive to the responsibility of theologians who are not trained comparativists to work with those who are, in drawing out the comparative import of the study of religions. Thus, he makes his notion of the sovereignty of Christ a more responsible one by informing it with a realistic attitude toward other religions that is open to correction and development. For instance, and most strikingly, the chapter "Professing the Creed among the World's Religions"[81] seeks to place the Creed (and continuing commitment to it) in the context of a recognition of structural and substantive parallels with non-Christian traditions, as the various religions have organized themselves and their beliefs differently. Van Beeck goes further, arguing that the Creed with its universalist claims is the basis for Christian attention to other traditions, and indeed serves as a mandate for interreligious dialogue. "Why? If respect for the universal order of nature undergirds the Christian profession of the order of grace, then this respect must naturally extend to the ways in which other religions have acknowledged and interpreted that natural order. Consequently, *respectful dialogue with world religions, precisely inasmuch as they make their particular claims in a*

[80] F. van Beeck, *God Encountered: A Contemporary Systematic Theology,* thus far in three volumes, with several more planned: vol. I, *Understanding the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988); vol. II/1, *The Revelation of the Glory: Fundamental Theology,* and II/2, *The Revelation of the Glory: One God, Creator of All That Is* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992 and 1994).

[81] Ibid. II/1. 41–71.

universalist perspective, must undergird the Christian mission."[82] Though van Beeck's project is not thoroughly imbued with a sense of the complexities of comparative and interreligious concerns, nevertheless it is genuinely open to and supportive of developments in that concrete direction, and it shows us why this openness is important and interesting.[83]

As a second example, I call attention to Gordon Kaufman's *The Face of Mystery*,[84] an ambitious systematic work which confronts a wide range of contemporary issues, including the ecological, scientific, feminist, postmodern, and pluralist. Though Kaufman repeatedly confesses that he is not the person to undertake the wider comparative studies which would fill out and nuance his study, nevertheless his presentations of God, Christ, and Trinity open the way for the influence of such studies, inviting a new plurality of voices into theology. No theologian should dismiss lightly the destination charted by this theologian who has tasted the fruits of comparison: "I write, thus, as a western Christian theologian who has begun to glimpse something of the richness and importance of the world beyond the West, and beyond Christian frameworks, for understanding the deepest problems of life and death; and who is intent, therefore, on finding ways to remove the barriers which block off our modern western Christian ways of experiencing and thinking from this wider world beyond."[85] In his own way, like van Beeck, Kaufman reminds us that the health of *comparative* theology must be measured in part by the vitality of its efforts to express and evaluate its results in dialogue with a wide range of theologians, that is, as *theology*.

EXTENDING THE CONVERSATION

Just as comparative theology seeks its place in relation to postcomparative theological studies, it must also be evaluated by the measure of its openness to voices that often appear marginal to theology, due to geography or gender or even our tendency to privilege the literate traditions of the so-called "major world religions." A. Sugirtharajah has been an important leader in widening the scope of our attention, most notably with his two edited collections, *Voices from the Margin*[86] and *Asian Faces of Jesus*.[87] These volumes, focused on biblical exegesis, offer an impressive array of examples from non-Western settings, just a taste of the richly varied efforts to make the gospel and the

[82] Ibid. II/1. 49–50.

[83] See also his essay, "Faith and Theology in Encounter with Non-Christians," *TS* 55 (1994) 46–65.

[84] G. Kaufman, *The Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993).

[85] Ibid. xv.

[86] A. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

[87] A. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993).

Christian heritage at home in Asian contexts where, though the Church is hardly new, it is still heavily wrapped in its Western styles. These volumes demonstrate why it is increasingly implausible to discuss developments in biblical interpretation and theology without getting outside the walls of modern Western academe. They remind us that comparative theology ought not to become yet another project carried on mainly in universities in American and Europe, with resources imported from elsewhere in the world and processed according to Western modes of thought.

The critique of theologies and their cultures from the vantage point of women's experience and reflection now has a fairly long lineage.[88] Recent scholarship, well informed by the study of particular traditions, sharpens our understanding of how gender functions in different traditions, with what implication. Exemplary in this regard is Rita Gross's *Buddhism after Patriarchy,*[89] which sets forth "a feminist sketch of Buddhist history," "a feminist analysis of key concepts in Buddhism," and "an androgynous reconstruction of Buddhism." In her afterword, Gross offers this apt summary:

> Therefore, the compelling justification for this book is not that it is another study in the history of religions or Buddhism, but that it is a rare study in the history of religions and Buddhism that is thoroughly grounded in women studies and in feminism . . . [T]he women studies perspective is more relevant to historical discussions while the perspective of feminist philosophy is more relevant to the post-patriarchal reconstruction of Buddhism. . . . The women studies perspective is less radical, claiming only that scholars *must* include women in their data base if they wish to claim that they are discussing humanity (rather than human males). Feminist philosophy in its many varieties proposes reconstructions of current religions and societies to render them more just and equitable to women, and thereby, also to men.[90]

Buddhism after Patriarchy calls for feminist theologies deeply informed with knowledge of non-Christian theological traditions, themselves opened with sensitivity to gender concerns.[91]

Regarding nonliterate traditions, the work of the typical compara-

[88] In the Indian context, e.g., it was over fifty years ago that Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (New York: Blue Ribbon, 1927) raised severe questions about what the great religious traditions of India look like from the point of view of women. Mary Daly's *Pure Lust* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) extends Mayo's critique, examining the patterns by which men have oppressed women and, in many cases, instilled in women the ideals of this oppression.

[89] R. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

[90] Ibid. 291.

[91] Instructive too are the feminist and womanist essays, on the African-American, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Native American traditions, collected in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991). For perspectives on gay and lesbian theology in a comparative perspective, see José Cabezón, *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992).

tivist, who is used to reading and writing books, becomes all the more challenging. He or she must not only spend a great deal of time finding ways to understand diverse local beliefs, but also in carefully noting the imbalances and distortions that inevitably result when the formidable techniques of the modern scholar, honed on written texts, are applied, well or poorly or not at all, to nonliterate traditions. In *An African Tree of Life*[92] Thomas Christensen imaginatively develops a Christian theological appropriation of the *soré* tree, a symbol from the Gbaya tradition of Cameroon:

> The Gbaya say that the *soré* tree is for cooling murder. If a person from Adzia's family has killed someone from Abbo's family, a *soré* branch may be thrown between the two families to prevent revenge. That *soré* branch between them is at once a barrier to further fighting and a doorway opening up a new possibility for life with other people. To jump over the *soré* barrier is to do a *simbo*-thing, because it violates that which is inherently inviolable, the gift of life itself. But to step peacefully over the branch is to do a *soré*-thing; it affirms, serves, renews and preserves human life and society. *Simbo* represents for the Gbaya that which limits human beings. . . . But *soré* serves *simbo* by giving human beings a way to cope with their limitations, their 'sin.' *Soré* is a tree of life among the Gbaya; like the cross, it appears at the center of a people's life to lead them through the threat of death and into new life.[93]

By an imaginative extension, Christensen adds,

> Jesus our *soré*-cool-thing, say Gbaya Christians, looks out from his cross to all of us, East and West, North and South, who put him there, and says, "Father forgive them. . . . " Jesus our *soré*-cool-thing lives to make intercession for us, to save us who can draw near to God only through him. There are many villages, say Gbaya Christians, but only one *soré*-cool-thing, where our villages meet to be at one with one another, there to find each other as members, finally, of a single village called God's kingdom, where we may be ourselves and where we may be with and for one another because we are in Christ Jesus our Lord.[94]

Christensen describes *soré* and the metaphors gathered around it in a Geertzian "thick description," though admittedly an anecdotally completed one. Wary of the temptation to a facile juxtaposition of this description with elements drawn from the Christian tradition, he develops a nuanced pattern for relating the Gbaya and Christian traditions, drawing on the insights of Gbayan Christians and on his own experience as well. The result is an exemplary essay in inculturated theology, a kind of comparative theology suited to dealing with nonliterate and ritually centered traditions.[95]

[92] T. Christensen, *An African Tree of Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).
[93] Ibid. 3. [94] Ibid. 5.
[95] See also the essays collected in *Healing and Exorcism: The Nigerian Experience*, ed. Chris Manus, Luke Mbefo, and E. E. Uzukwu (Enugu: Snaap, 1992), and Augustine C.

Paul Steinmetz's *Pipe, Bible and Peyote*[96] deals with Native American traditions, and in that context it parallels Christensen's book. Steinmetz centers his reflections on Christian identity in relation to the sacred pipe, the sacred Calf Pipe brought by the White Buffalo woman, and in relation to the use of peyote in healing practices, among the Oglala Lakota. His observations on the Oglala practices and beliefs are then connected with an understanding of an analysis of the development of Christian communities, both mainstream and new, among the Oglalas. Steinmetz struggles more with methodological issues than does Christensen, and at the same time is more explicit and emphatic about his personal involvement in the life of the Oglala community even, he says, to the point of effecting some changes in the community's self-understanding. His stated purpose is provocative: "One purpose of this study is to broaden the anthropological study of Native American religions and to show that a person with a Christian perspective is in a privileged position to understand them. It is the Christian, and especially the Catholic, who has a sense of sacramentalism, which I believe, along with the presence of spirits in nature, is the basic foundation of all primal religion."[97] The book's conclusion offers valuable and sophisticated observations on the mutual influences of Pipe, Bible, and Peyote, the function of Pipe and Peyote as mediating symbols, the differentiation of practices in relation to symbols, the continuities and discontinuities of Pipe and Bible, and the continuing dynamism of these interactions. Though the book is not a comparative theological study in the sense of most of the works considered here, it certainly opens fruitful possibilities not only for theologians, but also for comparativists who have not worked with nonliterate traditions. Together, Christensen's and Steinmetz's books seem to me to be successful in showing us how to think about comparative theological study in contexts where we do not enjoy the more comfortable range of written resources we are accustomed to.

NON-CHRISTIAN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGIES?

I noted at the beginning of this survey that in practice I am treating comparative theology particularly in its Christian form. I have postponed for now a consideration of other hypotheses, such as the view that comparative theology is a particularly Christian response to today's pluralism, or the view that theology itself is a discipline which, for certain historical reasons, has developed only within the Christian tradition. Still, evidence of comparative theology in other traditions must be explored, with attention to all the complexities this explora-

Musopole, *Being Human in Africa: Toward an African Christian Anthropology* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1994).

[96] P. Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible and Peyote: Among the Oglala Lakota* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1990).

[97] Ibid. 9.

tion will entail. Some works come immediately to mind. For example, David Novak's *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*[98] consciously formulates a Jewish response to the larger currents of interreligious dialogue forming today, with a particular awareness of the Christian dimensions of dialogue as we are familiar with it. Likewise, the Japanese scholar Masao Abe has seriously and profoundly engaged Western philosophical and theological thought, making it possible for many Christian theologians to enter upon meaningful explorations of Buddhist parallels to their own traditions.[99] Other writers, though less systematic in their theological reflection, give evidence of rethinking their traditions in the light of pluralism, and of seeking to build foundations for mutual enlightenment, e.g. the writings of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh[100] and reflections on religious depth and unity by monks of India's Ramakrishna Mission.[101] In any case, comparative theology will reach maturity only when its development and nuance in non-Christian traditions are noted, appreciated, and taken into account.

CONCLUSION

This survey has described ways in which some contemporary writers are doing comparative study. I have given multiple indications to suggest that this way of doing theology ought not to be thematically defined, at least for now; the field is young, and its implications are best appreciated as touching on every aspect of theology, not as special, narrow topics.

We have seen key issues: particularity, commitment and education, the task of generalization and systematization after comparative practice. Such issues are mediated in various kinds of comparative theological writings: those that are largely comparisons of theologies, those that are comparisons tested by the posing of theological questions, and those that are theologies generated after and from comparative practice.

Still, one may ask: Are there themes which are specifically those of the comparativist, by which one can define this discipline thematically? Are the questions of the theology-of-religions discipline (such as how religions are connected, which religion is true, or truer?) the issues that ought to preoccupy comparative theologians? Certainly,

[98] D. Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University, 1989).

[99] See, e.g., his essay and the Christian and Jewish responses to it in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation,* ed. John Cobb and Christopher Ives, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

[100] See, e.g., his *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1992).

[101] E.g. Swami Lokeswarananda, *The Way to God as Taught by Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1992), and the essays by the swamis in *Living Wisdom: Vedanta in the West,* ed. Pravrajika Vrajaprana (Hollywood: Vedanta, 1994)

those and other themes can be taken up in the course of comparative study, but at this point, two things seem true: comparative theologians are still finding out how to do their work properly, they have not agreed on a specific thematic agenda; and the fruits of comparative work pertain to every area of theology, they are not comfortably apportioned to one corner of theological discourse.

I have not attempted to argue the importance of comparative study, instead simply reviewing some of the many current works which can be classified as comparative theology. I am content to let that sketch speak for the value of comparative theology. By now, I hope, that reticence will have been proven wise. Tracy concludes his essay by remarking, boldly, that "any theology in any tradition that takes religious pluralism seriously must eventually become a comparative theology."[102] Perhaps, though, given the practical issues I have been emphasizing, it is just as well to conclude in another way: depending on how well comparativists do their comparisons, and depending too on how well the general theological community pays attention to these new resources, we will be able to see in practice whether comparative awareness is to become a central and pervasive feature of theological studies.

Boston College FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.

[102] Tracy, "Comparative Theology" 454.