THEOLOGICAL Studies

Article

Discipleship in Hindu-Christian Comparative Theology

Theological Studies
2016, Vol. 77(4) 869–885

DOI: 10.1177/0040563916666826
tsj.sagepub.com
SAGE

Catherine Cornille
Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

Abstract
Comparative theology involves systematic dialogue with another religion aimed at deepening and expanding one's own tradition. The process of interreligious learning may take various forms which I have identified as: intensification, rediscovery, reinterpretation, appropriation, or reaffirmation. This article explores these types of learning through a focus on the topic of discipleship in Christianity and Hinduism. Though the notion of church may be less central to Hinduism, Christianity has much to gain from a systematic theological engagement with Hindu notions of discipleship and with their anthropological and philosophical underpinnings.

Keywords
Advaota Vedamta. appropriation, ashram, Avery Dulles, comparative theology, ecclesiology, discipleship, Francis Clooney, guru, Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda, hermeneutics, intensification, reaffirmation, rediscovery, reinterpretation, reaffirmation, Shankara, Raimon Panikkar

The idea of the church as the community of disciples of Jesus points both to the most distinctive and the most common aspects of Christianity. As a community formed around the particular person of Jesus Christ, it is absolutely singular and irreplaceable. It is defined by the example and the message of Jesus, and it is the spirit of Jesus Christ that continues to enliven and inspire the community. The community exists for the sake of the establishment of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus and gathers in memory of the life and passion of a concrete historical individual.

Corresponding author:
Catherine Cornille, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA.
Email: catherine.cornille@bc.edu

It also has a particular history in which each member, whether religious, cleric, or lay, has contributed to the shaping of this concrete community. As such, the church is genuinely unique and inimitable. On the other hand, the idea of a religious group as community of disciples of a particular religious leader, reformer, or spiritual master represents one of the most basic and universal sociological realities. Just about every historical religion can be traced to the experience and example of a particular founder who was able to attract disciples and whose message led to the formation of particular social groups, each with their own institutional structure. To be sure, the religious status or importance of the founder differs from one religion to the next, but the members of most religions continue to define themselves in relationship to the original messenger or leader of the tradition. This pattern continues in new religious movements which erupt at different times and places around a particular charismatic leader who is believed to bring a new and superior religious message or insight. Even when these founders or leaders refer beyond themselves to a text or a teaching, they continue to occupy a central role in the tradition. From this perspective, the idea of the church as community of disciples of Jesus is but one instance of a very common religious pattern.

The recognition of certain commonalities with other religions may be regarded as a threat to the unique claims of any particular tradition, but it may also serve as a basis for mutual understanding and learning. The possibility of learning from another religion lies at the very basis of the discipline of comparative theology. Grounded in the belief that other religions may contain elements of truth and revelation, comparative theology may be understood succinctly as faith seeking understanding in dialogue with another religion. In this article, I will focus on what the Christian understanding of the church as community of disciples of Jesus might learn from engaging in dialogue with Hinduism. The Hindu tradition is vast and complex and any insights drawn from this tradition will be derived from particular traditions, lineages, and strands within the tradition. But one element common to these various lineages—and which partly explains the internal diversity of Hinduism—is the centrality of the relationship between the guru and disciples. While the idea of a "church" as community of disciples of a guru is less developed in Hinduism, the notion of discipleship is very important, and we will explore what Christianity might learn from a constructive engagement with Hinduism on this particular topic.

The very idea of learning from another religion may seem theologically threatening and methodologically vague. It requires a theology of religions which recognizes the very possibility of discovering elements of distinctive validity and truth in other religious traditions. And it requires a certain reflexivity about the method employed in discerning such truth. In this article, I will focus mainly on the types or modes of learning which may occur through comparative theology. I have come to distinguish five different approaches to comparative theology, defined largely in terms of their outcome: intensification, rediscovery, reinterpretation, appropriation, and reaffirmation. The topic of discipleship lends itself particularly well to illustrate each of these types of learning and thus also offers an opportunity to reflect on the discipline of comparative theology.

Intensification

The first and probably most familiar way of doing comparative theology is through the practice of reading passages from sacred texts of different traditions side by side and seeing one's own text anew in light of the other. This is the approach which predominates in the work of Francis Clooney, one of the main proponents of contemporary comparative theology. The effect of reading sacred texts across religious traditions involves an intensification of the meaning of one (or both) texts. Clooney states that when texts from different religions "are read in proximity this doubled intensity deeply affects the reader twice over, such that each text intensifies and magnifies the other rather than diluting its impact."[1] In reading sacred texts in light of one another, "all their meanings become sharper and clearer, even as the possibilities of a single meaning and single conclusion seem all the more unlikely because now we see clearly what is involved."[2] This approach may be regarded as similar to the practice of scriptural reasoning, except that comparative theology is typically done by a single scholar who is steeped in two religious traditions, and that the goal of comparative theology is not only to enhance interreligious understanding and respect but also to advance theological insight by learning from another religious tradition.

Against the suspicion that such reading across sacred texts of different traditions involves a type of relativism, Clooney suggests that "This doubling of memories intensifies rather than relativizes the deep yet fragile commitments of our singular, first love."[3] The recurrence of certain symbols, experiences and ideas in different religions is here thus thought to amplify, rather than diminish their meaning.

In using this approach to comparative theology with a focus on discipleship in Christianity and Hinduism, one might select any number of texts that prescribe or exemplify the attitudes or dispositions of the ideal disciple, of which there are many in both traditions. Not only is the notion of discipleship central to both religions, but it has also taken particular forms in many schools, orders, or lineages. I will focus here on the more radical conceptions of discipleship in the monastic traditions of Christianity and Hinduism, and in particular in the Rule of Saint Benedict and in the teachings of the founder of Hindu monasticism, Shankara. Both traditions place very high, and remarkably similar conditions upon the disciple. According to Shankara, the highest teachings should only be taught to a disciple or to a seeker "whose mind has been pacified, who has controlled his senses and is freed from all defects, who has practiced the duties enjoined by the scriptures and is

1. Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2008) 183.
2. Francis X. Clooney, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnava Hindus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008) 182.
3. Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu–Christian Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2014) 126.

possessed of good qualities; who is always obedient to the teacher and aspires only after liberation and nothing else."[4]

This attitude of self-control and self-surrender resonates with the description of a monk in The Rule of St. Benedict:

> They no longer live by their own judgment, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another's decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot above them. Men of this resolve unquestionably conform to the saying of the Lord: "I have come not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). (5:12)[5]

The juxtaposition of these two texts may be seen to simply point to certain common patterns in monastic life, or to a similar understanding that the attainment of the highest goal of a religion requires complete abandonment of one's own will and desire. Such similarities may be noted as a matter of curiosity, or they may generate communality and a bond among those who practice this ascetic religious path, as has been the case among monastics involved in inter-monastic dialogue. This is already apparent among some of the early pioneers of the inter-monastic dialogue in India. Having studied the tradition of Indian spirituality and monasticism, two French missionaries, Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda) attempted to establish an Indian Benedictine ashram which would integrate the best of both monastic traditions. While the experiment did not succeed (partly because it was ahead of its time) its pioneers experienced a deepening or intensification of their own spiritual life through the study and integration of the monastic rules and customs of the Hindu tradition.[6]

In *Beyond Compare*, Francis Clooney reads the *Essence of the Three Auspicious Mysteries* by the Hindu philosopher and theologian Shri Vedanta Deshika (1268–1369) side by side with Francis de Sales's *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616). This exercise reinforces for believers the central importance of complete submission or loving surrender to God. It also enhances the importance and use of certain passages. Clooney draws attention to De Sales's frequent use of the scriptural reference to Jesus's last words, "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit,"[7] which, within the broader purview of Hinduism, may come to be viewed and used as a mantra. "Although," as Clooney notes, "nothing of doctrinal substance has changed by rereading the words of Jesus after Deshika's Divya Mantra, we will have nonetheless learned from Deshika

4. *Upadeshasahasri* (A Thousand Teachings) of Sri Shankara, 1.16.72, Swami Jagadananda, trans. (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984) 189–90.
5. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, J. McCann, trans. (Westminster: Newman, 1952) 5:12.
6. See Abbe J. Monchanin and Dom H. Ke Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram* (Isle of Man: Times, 1964).
7. From the translation by Henry Benedict Mackey of Francis of Sales's *Treatise on the Love of God* (Rockford: TAN Books, 1997).

how to find in a few simple biblical words the truth and power of the entire Catholic tradition, now remembered, recited, even ignited."[8]

The need for complete surrender and single-minded focus on God, or on the guru as God, is emphasized in various scriptures of the two traditions. In the *Bhagavadgita*, Krishna calls Arjuna to complete surrender and mindfulness of him only with the following words:

> Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer, whatever you give away, whatever asceticism you perform—Son of Kunti, do it as an offering to me. Thus you shall be liberated from good and evil results, from the bonds of action. With your self disciplined by the yoga of renunciation, liberated, you shall come to me. (9:27–28)[9]

This call to exclusive focus on Krishna resonates with the gospel of John which calls on the disciples of Jesus to remain in intimate and continuous relationship with him:

> As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. (15:4–6, RSV)

Both texts thus emphasize the need for complete and exclusive dedication of oneself to Krishna or to Christ. This raises the specter of the risks involved in the juxtaposition of sacred texts. It may indeed intensify or reinforce the importance of surrender to one particular object of devotion. But it may also lead to a questioning of the absolute claims of each, or a diminishing of their power of appeal over disciples or devotees. This points to the need for every comparative theologian to clarify the particular theology of religions, or understanding of the relationship between different religious truth claims, from which he or she engages the religious other.

Rediscovery

A second type of learning in comparative theology takes the form of rediscovery or recovery of forgotten, neglected, or marginalized figures, movements and ideas within one's own tradition. It is often through a journey into another religion that attention is drawn to dimensions of one's tradition that may have faded on a personal or collective level. In the course of the history certain ideas or figures may have been sidelined with or without serious theological reason. The detour via another religion then offers the opportunity to revisit these ideas and experiences and, if appropriate, to bring them

8. Clooney, *Beyond Compare* 182.
9. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. W. J. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994).

back into to focus. It is, for example, through his study of Shankara, that Rudolph Otto came to press for a revalorization of Meister Eckhart. And interest in the Hindu belief in reincarnation has led to a new examination of such belief in figures as Origen or among groups as the Cathars.

The process of rediscovery or recovery often contains an element of chance or randomness. What Jonathan Z. Smith states about the ethnographic method in comparative religion also applies to some extent to comparative theology:

> Something "other" has been encountered and perceived as surprising either in its similarity or dissimilarity to what is familiar "back home." Features are compared which strike the eye of the traveller; . . . As such, ethnographic comparisons are frequently idiosyncratic, depending on intuition, a chance association, or the knowledge one happens to have.[10]

This idiosyncrasy need not necessarily be regarded as a problem or a liability for comparative theology. Not only is it impossible to master the full array of possibilities for comparative theological reflection, but even the focus on one particular text or aspect of another tradition as focus for recovery depends on one's knowledge of the other, as well as of those submerged dimensions of one's own tradition. A certain dimension of randomness or selectivity moreover applies to all theological reflection, and the very fact of drawing renewed attention to forgotten or ignored but inspiring elements of one's tradition provides ample justification for this type of theological reflection.

In the comparative theological engagement with Hinduism, it is the early idea of the church as community of disciples of Jesus that may be recovered or receive particularly sharp focus. In the course of history, the institutional, hierarchical, and juridical understandings of the church have often come to dominate, as Avery Dulles points out in his *Models of the Church*. Study of Hinduism, and in particular of communities developing around charismatic spiritual leaders or gurus, may trigger the image of the early church as a community of disciples gathered around Jesus Christ as their guru. The simplicity of this image may seem sacrilegious to some, but it may also draw attention to neglected or forgotten aspects of the church. Though, as Dulles points out, the image of the church as a community of disciples of Jesus "scarcely appears in the Catholic theological literature of recent centuries,"[11] it is "not alien" to the Christian tradition and it "can be traced to the New Testament and even to the early ministry of Jesus as constituted by biblical scholars."[12] Dulles consideres the model of church as community of disciples to be in fact "broadly inclusive" of all of the other models that had been developed in recent ecclesiology.[13] The lived Hindu experience of discipleship may bring home certain aspects of this reality. In particular, the understanding

10. Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *A Magic Still Dwells*, ed. K. Patton and B. Ray (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) 27.
11. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 207.
12. Ibid.
13. These models include the church as institution, as mystical body of Christ, as sacrament, as herald and as servant.

of discipleship as a process of spiritual growth and development toward attaining the state of holiness or realization of the master or teacher has tended to be downplayed in the Christian tradition. Jesus's call to perfection (Matt 5:48) does not always receive much attention or has been submerged through emphasis on original sin and the salvific efficacy of the cross and resurrection. The Hindu model of discipleship thus brings home the goal of discipleship as personal and spiritual transformation and growth, and the attainment of a state of holiness.

In some cases, it is not so much a particular idea or practice, but rather the intensity with which it is lived or experienced that forms the occasion for self-reflection and recovery. It is the importance of love of God as an essential part of Christian discipleship that Daniel Sheridan rediscovered through his reading of and commentary on the eleventh-century Hindu text, the *Narada Sutras.* For him, "attention by Catholics to a Hindu text like the *Narada Sutras on Loving God*" is "part of a global religious *ressourcement* and re-foundation."[14] Each verse of the Narada Sutras sends him back to a variety of Christian theologians and spiritual writers who have similarly written with great passion about the love of God as the beginning and end of Christian discipleship. He refers to the Hindu text as a "catalyst" for attaining a deeper self-understanding.

The history of Christianity is indeed replete with figures and texts expressing intense and passionate love of God. However, the notion that one may live a life entirely consumed by the love of God, or that being a disciple of Jesus means loving him with all one's heart and soul, has become somewhat alien, outmoded, or even embarrassing for many Christians. Commenting on his own classroom experiences, Sheridan states, "If I ask whether there is anyone in the class who loves God, even if only with a little bit of heart, soul, mind and strength, there is only an awkward silence. Such an unfair question! In such poor taste!"[15] The focus among contemporary Catholics has shifted almost entirely to the second part of the commandment to love. While love of neighbor of course constitutes an essential dimension of loving God and being church, Christians (at least Catholics) have often forgotten how to speak of, experience, and express their love of God. This is where the *Narada Sutras*, or any other Hindu Bhakti text may serve as a catalyst or resource for recovering the rich Christian tradition of loving God.

They may reawaken Christians not only to the principle, but also to the concrete practice and progress of loving God. In response to sutras dealing with the practical means of loving God, Sheridan comments that

> Like Narada in the Hindu tradition of Vaishnavism, the Christian also has many accomplished teachers and spiritual guides to turn to. Some of them, Augustine of Hippo, Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventure, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross were lyrical in their teaching. These Christian teachers teach of what they know. They break into song about the one they love. They unashamedly announce in direct discourse their love for God and Christ.[16]

14. Daniel Sheridan, *Loving God: Krishna and Christ; A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 8.
15. Ibid. 5.
16. Ibid. 95.

He focuses in particular on Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), "perhaps the greatest Catholic teacher on loving God."[17] Laying out four steps or degrees of love, Bernard states with regard to the highest degree:

> From this point that fourth degree of love can be possessed forever, when God is loved alone and above all, for now we do not love ourselves, except for his sake; he is himself the reward of those who love him, the eternal reward of those who love him for eternity.[18]

This intense love of God is often seen as the prerogative of mystics and saints, whose type of discipleship tends to be regarded as of a different degree, if not kind. However, their experience of love of God represents the apex of what every Christian disciple might or ought to hope for, and what the idea of Church as communion of saints, or community of those who love God as Trinity, might be.

The early community of Christians or followers of Jesus were bound together by their common love for Jesus Christ. Return to that originating experience that so many Christian exemplars have described as all-consuming and fulfilling brings balance to the more institutional and worldly models of the church that have developed through the centuries. Hindu texts may thus help in bringing Christians back to the more spiritual and experiential dimension of discipleship and church.

When visiting the ISKCON temple in Boston, my own students are often struck by the joy and happiness emanating from devotees of Krishna. This, of course, has something to do with the very nature of Krishna, and with the type of devotion developed within the tradition (*kirtan*, chanting and dancing). But it also derives from the very centrality of love of God in the tradition of Krishna Bhakti. This experience seems inspiring and infectious for younger Christians.

Reinterpretation

One of the more challenging forms of comparative theology involves the reinterpretation of elements of one's own tradition through the categories and worldview of another tradition. This has of course taken place to some extent for as long as religions have been in contact with one another. However, while in the past those categories borrowed from other traditions were reinterpreted in traditional Christian terms, comparative theologians today explore whether and how the original meaning of those categories and alternate philosophical systems may be used to enrich and expand Christian self-understanding. Some theologians (John Keenan, Joseph O'Leary, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, etc.) have thus used Madhyamika philosophical systems to reinterpret the Christian message, while others (Henri Le Saux, Raimon Panikkar, Sara Grant, etc.) have focused on Advaita Vedanta as a basis for understanding Christianity.

17. Ibid. 207.
18. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God* 199, in G.R. Evans, trans., *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 174.

This type of comparative theology as interreligious hermeneutics is based on the idea of the contingency of all philosophical frameworks. As John Keenan puts it:

> Greek philosophy, for all its glory, remains but one philosophical tradition in a world full of traditions. It can claim no exclusive privilege for interpreting the Christian faith, or, for that matter, anything else. The concepts of nature, substance, essence and person that determined the structure of this thinking are not present in all cultural contexts, and when they are, they are often negated as philosophical errors. A naïve claim for the universal validity of such philosophical notions ill serves either clear thinking or theological understanding.[19]

Raimon Panikkar similarly states in support of his engagement with Hindu philosophical systems that "christophany that takes into account the other religious traditions of mankind cannot accept the conceptual algebra of the West as a neutral and universal paradigm."[20]

While Hinduism contains various philosophical strands that are more akin to the traditional Christian Hellenistic one, the tradition that has spoken most to the imagination of Christian theologians is that of non-dualism, Advaita Vedanta, attributed to the eighth-century philosopher Shankara. This tradition interprets the basic scriptures of Hinduism in terms of the non-duality between the deepest self (*atman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Already in the late nineteenth century, Indian Christian theologians such as Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861–1907) sought to use categories derived from this tradition, such as the notion of *Sat–Cid–Ananda* (being, consciousness, and bliss) to interpret the notion of the Trinity in Hindu terms. In the course of the twentieth century, numerous other Christian theologians (J.N. Farquhar, Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, Pierre Johanns, Sara Grant, Richard De Smet, Bede Griffiths, Francis D'Sa, etc.) have further explored the possibilities (and limits) of understanding Christianity in non-dualistic terms. I will focus here on the work of Henri Le Saux (1910–1973) or Abhishiktananda, who may be regarded as one of the early pioneers of this type of comparative theology.

Though part of the movement toward inculturation, Abhishiktananda understood his engagement with Hindu philosophical and spiritual traditions as more than a service to the local church and culture. It was for him a matter of integrating the truth of Hinduism within Christianity and demonstrating the true universality of the Christian teaching:

> If Christianity should prove to be incapable of assimilating Hindu spiritual experience from within, Christians would thereby at once lose the right to claim that it is a universal way of salvation.[21]

---

19. John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 62.
20. Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 26.
21. Ibid. 49.

> The Pleroma of Christ will never be the fullness that it is intended to me, either in the individual believer or in the Church at large, so long as that experience has not been integrated by Christianity.[22]

This also led him to reinterpret the Christian understanding of discipleship from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta. In this tradition, discipleship is oriented toward attaining liberation (*moksha*) through complete surrender to a spiritual master or guru. The guru is regarded as the embodiment of the state of liberation and as the highest authority. Though a guru may be regarded as unique and irreplaceable by disciples, anyone who has attained (or who is recognized by disciples as having attained) the state of liberation may become a guru and establish a lineage or *sampradaya*.

Shortly after his arrival in India as a Benedictine monk and missionary, Henri Le Saux became the disciple of Hindu gurus, first Ramana Maharshi and later also Gnanananda. Though originally taken aback by the expressions of worship and idolization of the guru by Hindu disciples, he gradually came to understand its importance, and attributed various experiences to their presence and guidance.[23] This led him to speak increasingly of Jesus as his guru and of the church as the "teaching tradition" or the lineage of followers of Jesus, the *Isha sampradayat*.[24] This reinterpretation of Jesus and discipleship in Hindu terms draws attention to the ultimate goal of discipleship as spiritual development, and to the experience of Jesus himself. Some comparative theologians such as Raimon Panikkar have readily interpreted Jesus's proclamation of oneness with the Father (John 10:30) in terms of the advaita experience of non-duality.[25] While more hesitant to equate the two experiences, Abhishiktananda also believed that the experience of Jesus included that of advaita and that Christianity could "learn much from the experience of the Absolute to which India's mystical tradition bears such powerful witness."[26] For both Abhishiktananda and Panikkar, it was the focus on interiority and spiritual progress which the Christian understanding of discipleship might learn or re-learn from the Hindu guru–disciple relationship.

The understanding of Christian discipleship through a Hindu lens raises the more challenging question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as guru. While the Hindu guru exercises a functional uniqueness in relationship to the disciple, there is no sense in

22. Ibid. 71.
23. Upon his second meeting with Ramana Maharshi, he reports, "Before my mind could even grasp or express it, the intimate aura of this sage had been perceived by something in me, in the depth of my Self. Unknown harmonies awakened in my heart . . . It was a call which shattered everything, which dissolved everything, which opened wide an abyss." In *Souvenirs d'Arunachala* (Paris: Epi, 1978) 27.
24. Henri Le Saux, *La montée au fond du Coeur: Le journal intime du moine chretien-sannyasi hidou 1948–1973* (Paris: O.E.I.L., 1986) 315 (1963).
25. Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 106–20.
26. Henri Le Saux, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to the Advaitic Experience* (London: ISPCK, 1974) 82.

Hinduism of the ontological uniqueness of the guru. In relating to Jesus as his guru, Abhishiktananda therefore at times feels the need to distinguish Jesus as guru from other Hindu gurus: "All that the Maharshi and countless others before him knew and handed on of the inexorable experience of non-duality, Jesus also knew himself, and that in a pre-eminent manner."[27] "No one has realized God as he did. No one has been able to possess as he did the sense of divine Consciousness. Christ is the Master Guru."[28]

However, he also eventually came to minimalize the distinction between Jesus as guru and other gurus, and between the sonship of Jesus and that of all human beings:

> Whoever awakens to the mystery of Brahman in the name of the Father is the unique son.[29]
>
> The person of Jesus is unique, just as every person is unique.[30]
>
> Every person is as unique for the Father as is Jesus. The distinction of Jesus with relation to other human beings is the distinction itself of every human being in relation to others.[31]
>
> The only important thing: that Christ be Everything for me. That there be nothing held back in me with regard to him. That every human being be unique, my everything to whom I give myself wholly. In this I shall have the experience of the Unique.[32]

This abandonment of the Christian understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus is indeed the direction in which an advaita interpretation of Christianity inevitably pushes. While we cannot go into the doctrinal problems of this position,[33] the understanding of Jesus as guru does remind Christians of the importance of complete surrender to Jesus as the core of discipleship and the basis for spiritual development and growth.

Abhishiktananda's rendering of the Christian tradition and the church as the *Isha sampradayat* indeed stresses importance of a personal relationship to Christ as the basis and goal of the church. While the Hindu understanding of discipleship thus focuses mainly on personal spiritual growth, the Christian understanding of the Church

27. Le Saux, *Saccidananda* 82.
28. Le Saux, *La montée au fond du Coeur* 51 (1952).
29. Le Saux, *Interiorite et revelation: Essais theologiques* (Sisteron: Présence, 1982) 299.
30. Ibid. 303.
31. Le Saux, *La montée au fond du Coeur* 409 (1971).
32. Ibid. 455 (1973).
33. Abhishiktananda himself does this in the following passage: "In this experience the supreme agony for the Christian is this—that not only is he stripped of himself in his own deepest being, but that literally everything is torn from him. No doubt, if it was only a question of sacrificing himself to the Lord, he would do it willingly and joyfully in the faith of the Gospel. But this radical purification seems at the same time also to deprive him of the Lord himself, his Lord, together with the forms in which he reveled himself and even the words in which he has spoken to man. Further, it appears to tear him away from the Church and from the sacraments which bind him to Christ." *Saccidananda* 67.

as the mystical body of Christ puts more emphasis on the communal dimension of discipleship. Abhishiktananda attempted to reconcile both in the following terms:

> In truth, there is no duality, no separation, no distinction between his own progress toward God and the progress of the universe and of the Church towards the fullness of Christ. In finding God he deepens his communion with mankind; in finding his brothers he deepens his communion with God . . . The Church is essentially agape (love) and koinonia (being-with, being together). She is the sign and the sacrament of the divine koinonia of Being.[34]

Reinterpretation of the Christian notion of discipleship in Hindu terms thus sheds new or renewed light on certain aspects of discipleship. It also raises challenging theological or doctrinal questions which relate to the fundamental question of the possibility and limits of interpreting Christian faith through alternate hermeneutical frameworks. This is one of the most pressing questions for comparative theology.

Appropriation

In addition to reinterpreting the tradition through alternate philosophical frameworks, comparative theology may also involve a process of theological growth through the appropriation of particular elements from another religious tradition. Borrowing teachings and ritual elements of other religions has been an integral part of the history of religions. However, in comparative theology this is done with clear acknowledgment of the source of such borrowing and in a spirit of humility.

This again requires a theology of religions which is receptive to the presence of elements of truth and goodness in other religious traditions, even in teachings and practice that may be different from Christianity. To be sure Christian revelation will remain normative in Christian comparative theology, and the process of appropriation will involve elements which are not in contradiction with Christian teachings. But openness toward the presence of distinctive truth in other religions also allows for the possibility of learning something genuinely new.

This form of learning may be subject to critiques of syncretism and hegemony.[35] In the process of appropriation, semantic shifts inevitably occur as symbols, ideas, and rituals are transposed from one religious context to another. This may indeed be regarded as violence or distortion from the perspective of the original religion. But it may also be seen as affirmation of the particular truth and value of those teachings or practices which other religions seek to appropriate.

With regard to discipleship, the elements from Hinduism that Christianity has come to appropriate relate mainly to Hindu forms of spiritual community or ashram life, and to the centrality of the guru. In the course of the second half of the twentieth

34. *Saccidananda* 137.

35. See Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011).

century, Christians ashrams appeared in different parts of India and in different Christian denominations. They were open communities, centered around a Christian guru, and oriented toward spiritual growth and development. In addition to the simple lifestyle and the general spirit of ashram life, Christian ashrams also adopted certain Hindu religious practices such as yoga, meditation, chanting of basic mantras, and Hindu ritual elements such as the waving of lights (*arati*), the anjali greeting, and Hindu decorative elements. All of this was meant not only to adapt Christian spiritual practices to the Indian context, but also to enrich Christian spirituality and make it more accessible to lay practitioners. Some Christian ashrams (such as Anjali Ashram in Mysore, and Saccidananda Ashram in Kulithalai) became very popular retreat centers for both Indian and Western Christian seekers. They opened the path of renunciation not only to monks but also to lay Christians, and shed light on the ideal of discipleship as a process of inner growth and transformation.

The focus on discipleship as spiritual development also led more widely to the appropriation of techniques such as yoga in Christianity. The broad popularity of this form of religious practice among Christians attests to the desire or hunger for more integrated or embodied forms of spiritual practice. While there has been some resistance to the practice of yoga by Christians, it has been broadly "baptized" or reinterpreted in Christian terms and used to enhance Christian spiritual life.[36]

Discipleship in an ashram centers around the figure of the guru. This has raised some questions regarding the focus or object of discipleship in Christian ashrams. While it is generally understood that the guru in a Christian ashram is ultimately Christ, the living guru of the ashram is often treated with the same respect and reverence as a Hindu guru, who is regarded as divine by his or her disciples. The gurus of Christian ashrams have tended to use qualified terms such as *acharya* (teacher), *upa-guru* (the guru who is near but under the real guru), or the *karana* (instrumental) guru to refer to themselves in relationship to the ultimate guru who is Christ.[37] All appropriation thus requires certain adaptations in order to fit the new tradition.

In his book, *The Crucified Guru*, Thomas Thangaraj appropriates the term guru as understood in the Shaiva Siddhanta tradition of Hinduism to shed new light on traditional Christology while also pointing to areas in which the life and teachings of Jesus exceed the notion of the guru or could serve as corrective to it. With regard to discipleship, he notes that

36. I will not here engage in the debate over the legitimacy of such practice, either from a Hindu or from a Christian perspective. Suffice it to say that it has taken on many forms within the Hindu tradition, and that it seems to be broadly adaptable to theistic, non-theistic, and secular contexts. See Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga* (London: Continuum, 2004); and Stephanie Corigliano, "Towards a Hermeneutic of Yoga in Modern Times: A Comparative Study of Practice and Detachment in Hinduism and Christianity" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2015).
37. Catherine Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation* (Leuven: Peeters, 1991) 155–81.

> Whereas Christian discipleship is expressed in and through a community of disciples who gather around the Eucharistic table and go out into the world as Christ's disciples, Saivite discipleship is founded on a one-to-one relationship between the guru and the disciple. Furthermore, the crucifixion and the nexus of events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus give a distinctive character to the vision of Jesus as guru.[38]

However, Thangaraj argues that the Shaiva Siddhanta notion of the guru as the nexus of God (*pati*), the soul (*pasu*), and bondage (*pasam*) does bring out aspects of the Christian teaching and of the notion of discipleship which are not evident in traditional Christology. Not only does it bring into sharper focus the three areas of Jesus's teaching, but it also sheds new light on Jesus's ministry as leading his followers to union with God. Guru Christology, moreover, "offers freedom from Docetism, because the guru is always a historical human being."[39] It also protects against what Thangaraj calls the reification of Jesus as God. The guru is always to be understood in relation to disciples which thus brings him into the intimate human sphere, rather than being worshipped as a reality "out there."[40]

While for Thangaraj and other proponents of inculturation, the use of categories of other traditions mainly serves to better communicate the message of the gospel to different cultures, for comparative theology it is a matter of broader theological interest. The engagement of categories from other religions may expand theological insight and understanding not only for local Christian communities, but for the church at large. Thangaraj also refers to an Englishman, Robert Van de Weyer, who regarding traditional titles of Jesus as meaningless, "became a follower of Jesus by regarding him as a Guru."[41] Though such Hindu categories may not become dominant or mainstream, they do offer the possibility for some to broaden their religious imagination and nourish their spiritual life.

Reaffirmation

The learning that takes place through comparative theology need not always be a matter of gaining a new perspective or adding new contents or insight to one's own tradition. It may also lead to a reaffirmation or revalorization of certain teachings or practices which are put in a new light by way of comparison and contrast with other religions. While resembling the method of intensification, this approach focuses more on the differences between religions and on those elements one would wish to preserve, or which one would not wish to compromise. This may sound triumphalist or reminiscent of traditional attempts to establish the superiority of one's own religion over against the other. But it may also be seen as a simple affirmation of faith, reassessed through engagement with the religious other. As with all forms of comparative

38. Thomas Tangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 104–5.
39. Ibid. 122.
40. Ibid. 123.
41. Robert Van de Weyer, *Guru Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1974) ix.

theology, this process of reaffirmation is to be understood primarily from within and for one's own religious and theological tradition.

With regard to the notion of the church as the community of disciples of Jesus, the focus might be on the particularity of the life and teachings of Jesus as compared to particular Hindu gurus. Such comparison, however, may not yield much fruit, as it would require a multiplication of comparisons, based on unequal data or information. But it may also focus on the more specifically theological and formal Christian conceptions of discipleship in terms of its communal dimension and its focus on the uniqueness of Jesus as guru. Though discipleship in the Hindu tradition also leads to the creation of communities, these generally consist of a collection of individuals with a one-to-one relationship to the guru. The Christian communal understanding of the church as the Body of Christ or the People of God, on the other hand, focuses "on the mutual service of the members toward one another and on the subordination of the particular good of any one group to that of the whole Body or People," as Avery Dulles points out.[42] This emphasis on the priority of the community also comes to the fore in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church as the *Communion of Saints* when he states that "The community is constituted by the complete self-forgetfulness of love. The relationship between I and thou is no longer essentially a demanding but a giving one."[43] The understanding of church as communion thus shifts the attention of the believer from solely focusing on oneself and one's own salvation or liberation to that of the larger community and of the world. It also points to the essentially historical and social or communal understanding of salvation within the Christian tradition. The church as community exists not only in the service of its members but also of the world at large.

One of the dangers of the communal model of the church as the Body of Christ according to Avery Dulles is that it tends to "an unhealthy divinization of the Church"[44] and to opposition to other religions and communities. This certainly bears consideration, as Christianity has indeed a more oppositional relationship to other traditions than most communities of disciples of Hindu gurus. However, a proper understanding of the distinction between the historical and the eschatological church may avert this danger, all the while countering the tendency to religious individualism.

The second element of Christian faith that is put in relief in relation to Hinduism is the belief in the uniqueness of Christ as guru and mediator of salvation. Whereas the Hindu tradition demands complete and exclusive surrender to a particular guru, it does not deny the existence of other gurus who have also attained the highest levels of spiritual realization. Some may regard this as an important asset of Hinduism and a model to cure Christianity from its exclusivism or exceptionalism. However, emphasis on the uniqueness of Jesus may serve broader spiritual and social purposes which come into focus through a process of comparison. While the Hindu belief in the divinity of the guru and in the potential of all humans to realize their divine nature provides a powerful motivation for spiritual effort, it offers few checks on claims to

42. Dulles, *Models of the Church* 53.
43. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 123.
44. Dulles, *Models of the Church* 55, 60.

divine realization and authority and thus opens the door to spiritual delusion, posturing, and the manipulation of disciples. Among other effects, belief in the uniqueness of Jesus precludes claims to divine status and authority among his disciples. Christian discipleship thus includes a permanent attitude of humility, consistent also with its teaching of original sin. Even highly respected spiritual masters and abbots in Christianity view their authority as instrumental and derivative, keeping them also in a position of accountability toward the larger community.

The common reference to a higher authority or truth has (or may) also serve as a basis for unity among Christian churches. The diversity of gurus with absolute authority within Hinduism has led to a dissipation of the tradition into different lineages or teaching traditions (*sampradayas*). While the Christian tradition has also become splintered into innumerable denominations and churches, the common reference to the person of Jesus Christ and to the Bible allows for at least the possibility of mutual understanding and purpose, and the potential for mutual correction.

Conclusion

The comparative theological engagement with Hinduism on the topic of discipleship allows for a variety of modes or types of learning. With a tradition as rich and diverse as Hinduism, any number of texts or traditions may serve as a resource for theological insight or inspiration. We have here touched only on a few examples to illustrate the various methods in comparative theology, or ways in which engagement with another religion may enhance and enrich religious self-understanding. These different approaches to comparative theology may work together to complement or reinforce one another.

In general, the study of Hinduism brings Christianity back to its most original and basic understanding of church as the community of disciples of Jesus. While this is not new or revolutionary, it does shed light on certain dimensions of discipleship which may have been ignored in the course of history, while also challenging the tradition to come to terms with its understanding of uniqueness. Discipleship in the full sense of the term presupposes sacrifice and complete self-surrender to the teacher or guru. This is most evident in the radical discipleship as manifested in the monastic life in both Hinduism and Christianity. But it forms the basis of all spiritual growth and development. In an age where personal autonomy and independence are so highly prized, this aspect of discipleship merits particular attention. Second, the experience of complete self-surrender presupposes a singular object of loving devotion. The claims to supremacy and uniqueness by Krishna, Jesus, and various living gurus may thus be understood in this light. In both Hindu and Christian devotion, surrender to God is less a matter of asceticism or sacrifice, but an expression of passionate love for God, and for the guru as God. Though love of God of course plays a central role in the Christian tradition, the intensity of this experience and the ways it is expressed in Hinduism may serve to rekindle this experience as part of Christian discipleship.

The Hindu tradition of guru–disciple relationship also raises the question of the goal of discipleship. The focus within Christianity on the unique divine nature of Jesus

and his redemptive suffering have led to a greater emphasis on devotion to, rather than imitation of Jesus. In the Hindu tradition, however, the guru represents the ultimate goal of spiritual realization and liberation that every disciple seeks to attain. The desire for spiritual development and the need for spiritual direction has led to the appropriation in Indian Christianity of the ashram model of religious communities of lay and religious followers of a particular spiritual master or guru. The reinterpretation of Christianity in Hindu non-dualistic terms in and beyond these ashrams have fostered a pursuit of deep spiritual realization among Christians inspired by Hinduism. The understanding of discipleship through a Hindu lens sheds new light on the exemplary role of Jesus Christ as a model for his disciples to emulate.

Comparative theological engagement with Hinduism inevitably raises the question of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. The reinterpretation of Christianity in non-dualistic terms leaves little room for any ontological exception or uniqueness, and the understanding of Christian discipleship in relation to Hindu forms of discipleship may seem to place Jesus Christ alongside Hindu gurus. However, encounter with the Hindu tradition may also lead to a revalorization of the traditional Christian understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus, or to a new appreciation of dimensions which may not be directly evident when considered only on its own terms. The idea of a unique divine savior or guru whose experience can never be fully attained or imitated generates an attitude of permanent humility and relative equality among the disciples of Jesus, as well as a broad unity and community across time and cultures.

As the church has become an established institution, it is often difficult to return to the original experience of discipleship and to make that experience one's own. The ubiquity of living gurus and their disciples in the Hindu tradition may serve as a trigger for the imagination, while also inviting some of the questions and insights discussed in this article. Many of these insights may certainly be derived from an internal Christian reflection on the meaning of church as a community of disciples of Jesus. But the comparative theological engagement with Hinduism points to ways in which Christianity may grow in its understanding of discipleship both by learning from the other tradition, by questioning anew established assumptions, and by rediscovering and reaffirming essential elements of the tradition.

Author Biography

Catherine Cornille is the Newton College Alumni Professor and Professor of Comparative Theology at Boston College. Her teaching and research focus on theoretical questions in theology of religions, comparative theology, and interreligious dialogue. She has authored or edited sixteen books, including *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (2008), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (2013), and *Christian Identity between Secularity and Plurality* (2015). She is founding editor-in-chief of the book series "Christian Commentaries on non-Christian Sacred Texts."