INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Comparative Theology in the Academic Study of Religion: An Inquiry

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Abstract

This essay asks whether the new comparative theology merits a place in the academic study of religion. In the process, the meaning of “theology” and “comparative” (the latter with special reference to the comparative study of religion) in their current applications is clarified, and various distinctions are drawn between “old” and “new” modes of doing comparative religion and comparative theology (in the latter case, with special reference to the work of Francis X. Clooney). Several key questions relating to such study are raised and answered: whether there is a need to reveal the ideological stance of the scholar; whether “comparative” study in both disciplines is a viable exercise; whether fractal theory is applicable; what the nature of “truth” might be in these disciplines; and what kind of qualities or virtues they are expected to generate or require. Finally, a conclusion is drawn as to whether the new comparative theology merits a place in the academic study of religion.

Introduction

Comparative Theology (CT) in its modern form is a relatively new field of study, and debate on the theorisation of various of its aspects and its credentials for inclusion in the academic study of religion has already generated a burgeoning literature.[1] In a recent review, S. Mark Heim has commented that CT in the sense used in this essay:

> is some twenty-five years old. Several significant figures could be said to have been practicing it, absent the title [*sic*], at that point, including Robert Neville, Keith Ward, Raimon Panikkar and David Burrell. But Francis Clooney's *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (1993) set the most influential template. Work on that pattern has spread dramatically since then.[2]

This extract implicitly distinguishes between an old form of CT (OCT) and a new form of CT (NCT), a distinction explicitly acknowledged and addressed by a number of writers.[3] But there is another allusion in the Heim extract: Clooney is indeed generally recognised as being the best-known, and most debated and active marshalling agent (through conferences and edited works) for developing the subject, so it is perhaps no accident that we shall turn to a recent work edited by him (and Klaus von Stosch) – *How to do Comparative Theology* – as the access-point for some of the problematics that have arisen in discourse about the "new" CT.[4] Though we shall range, as the reader will see, much further afield in discussing our topic, this work will provide some of the material we need for key discussions in this essay. It is a book that engages with five major religious traditions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – in the course of 15 essays by scholars of different gender and seniority; as such it can be perceived as an up-to-date litmus test of what Comparative Theology professes to be.

But first we must clarify how we understand the term "theology", especially in its present context. This is by no means a straightforward question. In many Christian circles "theology", as its name implies, is discourse about God (*theou logos*), that is, reasoned discourse – a *scientia* in Scholastic terminology – about the Christian (personal) God based on a Christian faith-stance. It instantiates the 11th century prelate-philosopher, St. Anselm's, well-known dictum, *fides quaerens intellectum:* "Faith seeking understanding" (which Clooney himself reprises), to signify an approach rooted in a particular religious faith that seeks to understand a particular kind of deity (viz. the Christian God) with the help of reason (*ratio*).

This restriction to a Christian stance is, in fact, a predilection of a number of exponents of the NCT. They tend to assume that CT is in the first instance primarily – we may even say, paradigmatically – a Christian enterprise (as if theology itself were a Christian appropriation). Thus Nicholson writes as if this is *de facto* the case[5], while Marianne Moyaert can say:

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[1] For a good bibliography and quite comprehensive account of the subject's main features till recent times, see Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective*, Leiden: Brill: 2017.

[2] S. Mark Heim, "Comparative Theology at Twenty-Five: The End of the Beginning," *Modern Theology* 35.1 (2019): 163-80, 163.

[3] Cf. for example, Hugh Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77.3 (2009): 609-46, Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011 (see the Introduction and Part 1 of this work), and Paul Hedges, "The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions," *Religions* 3 (2012): 1120-137. For a review of publications undergirding the rise of the discipline in its new mode, see Francis X. Clooney, "The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology: A Bibliographical Review (1989-95)," *Theological Studies* 56.3 (1995): 521-50.

[4] Francis X. Clooney, & Klaus von Stosch, eds, *How to do Comparative Theology*, New York, NY: Fordham University Press: 2018.

[5] Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology", 618. Nicholson quotes another exponent, James Fredericks, as defining "this new theological subdiscipline" as "the attempt to understand the meaning of *Christian faith* by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions" (italics added).

> [C]omparative theology sets out to understand the meaning of Christian tradition by exploring it in light of the teachings of other religious traditions."[6], and again, "Instead of trying to 'solve the problem of religious diversity' in a theological meta-narrative [the aspiration of a traditional theology of religions], comparative theologians engage in crossing borders….Instead of circling around the doctrinal heart of Christian tradition [*sic*], trying to find definite answers to the theological meaning of religious diversity, comparative theologians practice theology in a marginal area.[7]

But since CT is predicated on the theological enterprise itself, it cannot be appropriated by a particular theological tradition in so far as, with the passage of time, the term "theology" itself has outstripped its original etymology. "Theology" is now used to describe any considered attempt, based on any faith, to understand any Supreme Being or Transcendent Reality (personal or impersonal) and its relationship with the world, through rational discourse. So there can be, among others, a Hindu theology, a Muslim theology, a Jewish theology etc., as well as a Christian theology (hence the title of Clooney's book, *Theology after Vedānta,* intimating some kind of input from Hindu theology), though it may well be the case that for largely historical reasons Christian models of theology act as paradigms for interreligious theological dialogue in many contemporary non-Christian circles.[8]

In an article entitled "Theology and Religious Studies" published many years ago, I drew a distinction between "theology" in the strong sense and "theology" in the weak sense:[9]

> In the strong sense, the theologian functions from the standpoint of personal commitment to a particular religious response. Whether this response be labelled "Hindu", "Christian", "Muslim"…or whatever is not really to the point, though in cases the affixing or acknowledging of such labels may have important social/political implications. In any case, the theologian is concerned to draw out and to live out, often in an explorative manner, the implications of the principles for right belief and practice of the religious standpoint to which s/he is committed….[T]o do his or her work *qua* theologian s/he will need to subscribe to an overview of the goal and values of his/her religious response and be prepared to give a reasoned account of its adequacy and rightness.[10]

This may be viewed as unpacking the dictum, "Faith seeking understanding." But I also noted a weak or broad sense of "theology." Here the inquirer systematically investigates matters relating to the theological status of various topics without necessarily committing to a particular religious point of view. The philosopher of religion, philosophical-theologian, or exegete often functions as a "theologian" in this sense. Thus, one can work out the philosophical-theological implications of the non-dual (*advaitic*) stance of the Hindu theologian, Śaṃkara (ca. 8th century CE), without subscribing to the *advaitic* or some other religious standpoint, or one may analyse exegetically the theological status of Jesus in the Qur'ān from a perspective that belongs neither to Islam nor to some other faith-stance. It would generally be accepted, I think, that one would be doing the work of a theologian in both instances, but this would be in the weak or broad sense of "theology."[11]

In her contribution to *How to do Comparative Theology,* Stephanie Corigliano investigates this point. Her essay "questions the idea that an explicit faith commitment is a necessary criterion for comparative theology".[12] She continues: "I propose that for some, comparative theology is a way of exploring and even forming faith

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[6] Marianne Moyaert, "Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness," *Modern Theology* 28.1 (2012): 25-52, 39.

[7] Marianne Moyaert, "On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology," *Religions* 3 (2012): 1144-61, 1151.

[8] The fact that the term "theology" is no longer bound to its etymological sense can be seen from its use sometimes in such designations as "Buddhist theology" or "Daoist theology", in which there is often no professed belief in God (rather than in "gods") or some Transcendent Ground. In Clooney & von Stosch, eds, *How to do Comparative Theology* we have examples of Jewish and Muslim exponents of the field.

[9] Or, alternatively, theology as understood in the "strict sense" and in the "broad sense."

[10] Julius Lipner, "Theology and Religious Studies: Thoughts on a Crisis of Identity," *Theology* LXXXVI.711 (1983): 193-201, 197-8. I have slightly modified this excerpt to make it more gender-balanced.

[11] For example, Keith Ward, in his philosophical-theological works, professes to write in this vein.

[12] Stephanie Corigliano, "Theologizing for the Yoga Community? Commitment and Hybridity in Comparative Theology," in *How To Do Comparative Theology*, eds Clooney & von Stosch: 324-50, 324.

identity, thus faith commitments may be unclear or not "rooted" in a particular tradition at the beginning of a comparative exercise"[13], or even at the end, we may add. Corigliano then goes on to develop her argument. This is an important contribution to the debate, and, to my mind, reflects what might often be the case. Nevertheless, the accepted paradigm for the NCT seems to be *a starting point based on a particular religious faith,* and in *How to do Comparative Theology* this is stated clearly.[14] Comparative Theology, it is said in the Introduction, is meant to be *theology* proper: "which may be briefly described as faith seeking understanding, grounded in community, cognisant of claims regarding truth, and open to the implications of study for spiritual advancement and practice".[15] There seems to be a clash here with Corigliano's view, one well worth pointing out not only for our understanding of the kind of theology that is at stake, but also for entering a discussion, as we shall in due course, concerning the methodological relationship that obtains between doing the NCT and the New Comparative Study of Religion(s) (NCSR). Nevertheless, it seems to be the case that for most exponents of the NCT their project acquires traction by being an exercise in theology proper, and by extension an "open" enterprise to any faith-stance that is regarded as religious.[16]

Before we go on to other matters, we can consider here a stipulation often made by new comparative theologians, viz. that practitioners reveal their religious affiliation, that they come clean about "where they are coming from." This is thought to be a necessary condition for the methodological transparency of their engagement with their subject. The Old Theology of Religions (OTR), was, to quote Alan Race, who gave it its current description, "the attempt, on the part of Christian theologians, to account theologically for the diversity of the world's religious quest and commitment".[17] Race distinguished three paradigmatic forms of this theology which he dubbed "exclusivism" (roughly, the rejection of the religious view of the other as lacking any salvific value), "inclusivism" (roughly, accepting the religious tradition of the other as salvific only in so far as it could be perceived to conform to one's own faith-stance), and "pluralism" (roughly, accepting at least those religious faiths that fall under the standard rubric of "world religion"[18] as being vehicles of salvation or ultimate human fulfillment, each in its own right).[19]

This approach, in all three of its forms, has come under severe criticism in recent times for presuming to operate from a vantage point that universalises, essentialises and homogenises its own stance and that of the other by neglecting internal and external differences with *a priori* (soteriological) ends in view. Exclusivists insist that there is no salvific point-of-contact between their faith and that of the other; inclusivists assimilate the other only in so far as the other reflects their salvific point of view, ignoring or dismissing genuine difference, while in an exercise of conceptual "flat-lining"; pluralists fillet the faith(s) of the other in their attempt to arrive at shared conditions of universal salvation. In expressing their point of view, none of these positions shows awareness of its predatory character. As such, OTR has an (unacknowledged) "political" agenda through its lack of methodological transparency.[20] In so far as the (old) CT relies on this approach it likewise suffers from this procedural defect.

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Does this title ask an implied question notwithstanding the absence of a question mark, or is it meant to be prescriptive? Both, I think.

[15] Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosh, "Introduction", in Clooney & von Stosch, *How to do Comparative Theology*: 1-16, 1. In Francis Clooney, *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies: A Theological Inquiry*, London: Routledge, 2017, 92, Clooney states, emphasising what I have distinguished as the strong sense of "theology": "[N]o quantity of scholarly inquiry adds up to theology if faith is still missing".

[16] With possibly one or two exceptions, Corigliano included, all the contributors to *How to do Comparative Theology* seem to buy into this assumption.

[17] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian theology of religions*, London: SCM Press, 1983, 3.

[18] A category implicit in Race's definition, but itself now contested, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2005.

[19] These three distinctions of the OTR have been repeatedly refined since Race's treatment.

[20] Nicholson has raised and maintained this critique with forceful articulacy; see, for example, his treatment of the issue in Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology".

To avoid this act of hermeneutic naivety, the new comparative theologians demand transparency by having practitioners acknowledge their faith affiliation from the outset.[21] This, it is contended, will help expose and counter various lurking personal prejudices that may adversely affect the hermeneutic transparency of their project. Indeed we learn in overwhelming detail from some of the contributors to *How to do Comparative Theology* where they are coming from, and how they got there, during the course of their discourses.

One can see where this argument, demanding personal transparency, is itself coming from, but one also cannot help registering an objection or two. What and how much does one need to know? And is this epistemic introduction itself a procedural red herring? Autobiographical notes are notoriously deceptive: they are subject to change without notice, misinterpretation by self and the other, suppression of relevant information and spin, and a host of other interpretive pitfalls. Moyaert, for her part, asks a series of questions pertaining to the hermeneutic demand for personal divulgence by comparative theologians:[22] "Whence their interest in this or that specific strange text?" One could honestly answer: "Suppose I don't really know? With all the psychologies of the self now swirling around, can I assume that I am an open book even to myself?" She continues: "What commits them theologically to enter into the textual world of a religious other?" Answer: "Even a tentative response might be misleading or misinterpreted…". And she asks finally: "What do they expect to find?" Answer (with horror writ large): "This is a real hostage to fortune! Must one have expectations in this regard? Expectations that might tendentiously assess or determine the course or outcome of one's inquiry? Heaven forbid!"[23]

Would not the comparative theological exercise work just as well if it were presented as a *hypothetical* theological experiment without revealing personal details? "If one inquired openly along these lines, from this theological point of view, let's see what readings/conclusions one might arrive at." Then the theological (or indeed, non-theological) reader could assess the exercise for the way it comes across, and make sense of it in his or her own way. And on a private self-reflexive basis, such an assessment could apply to the practitioners of these exercises themselves.

As to whether the divulgence of personal details should extend to *other* disciplines in the academic study of religion (as demanded by some scholars) to help avoid the ideological contamination of conclusions or trajectory, this is a further moot point. Does it help in this regard to know that the distinguished comparativist of religion, Bruce Lincoln, has (had?) personal leanings towards Marxism? I am not at all sure. I had read several of his books before being apprised of this fact, but with retrospection have not changed my (scholarly) evaluation or appreciation of his work. This may point to some deficiency in my reading, but I doubt it. The trained scholar

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[21] So, according to Moyaert: "It would…be wise for comparative theologians to actually make explicit their fiduciary interests and theological presuppositions when entering the hermeneutical circle." In Moyaert, "Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue," 43.

[22] Moyaert, "Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue," 43.

[23] And we have a chastening case in point of misinterpreted expectation. In an article awaiting publication which he has kindly made available to me, Clooney defends both himself and his views against some thinly veiled but robust criticisms by the pluralist Perry Schmidt-Leukel in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures – An Extended Edition*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017; see Francis Clooney, "Fractal Theory, Fractal Practice: Theology of Religions, Comparative Theology," in *Incarnation, Prophecy, and Enlightenment*: *Perry Schmidt-Leukel's Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity*, eds Paul Knitter and Alan Race, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, forthcoming. It is not for me to take up Clooney's case – he seems to do a pretty good job of defending himself against Schmidt-Leukel's clearly inattentive reading of his work with its subsequent misapprehensions. It is for us to note, however, that there seems to be a personal element in Schmidt-Leukel's critique of Clooney's theological stance, which Clooney finds objectionable and misrepresentative. Referring to Schmidt-Leukel's book, Clooney writes: "In the first chapter…[Schmidt-Leukel] goes out of his way to comment on my practice of comparative theology, seemingly a rival to be removed from the scene early in the book", see Clooney, "Fractal Theory, Fractal Practice", 2-3 (from article sent to me). Clooney continues after some observations: "Schmidt-Leukel thinks that this [viz. the call for a moratorium on the theology of religions] has to do with the Vatican's rejection of pluralism, and with the fact that Catholic theologians (of the less courageous sort) play it safe [here he quotes Schmidt-Leukel]: "Given the explicit and sharp rejection of religious pluralism by the Roman Catholic Church, some (primarily Roman Catholic) theologians have suggested a moratorium for the theology of religions." [Clooney now continues:] I gather that this means that in the Catholic Church it has been dangerous to be a pluralist, and so some Catholic theologians, such as Clooney and [J.L.] Fredericks, have pulled back and stopped doing the theology of religions altogether", see ibid, 4. Clooney goes on to demonstrate convincingly that this is a misrepresentation of his stance, implying understandably that he resents Schmidt-Leukel's impugning of his academic integrity. Such exchanges merely reinforce my point that reference to personal data in the academic enterprise is liable to misinterpretation and its consequences.

should be able to detect subtle ideological shifts, should they arise, in work presented. In fact, it could be argued that being apprised of such personal facts before one's reading could well skew the reading itself towards "expected", tendentious or imposed interpretations.[24] The point is that autobiographical fragments do not add to methodological transparency. They do not assist the de-politicisation of the hermeneutic process; they present too many interpretive hostages to fortune. They are a form of distracting, procedural clutter. Besides, they can easily descend to a display of self-indulgence. Finally, may it not be the case that those shriller summons to "come clean" – and the readiness to comply – resonate to the tyranny of the darker side of the spectrum of political correctness that is beginning to dog western cultural mores? This suggestion calls for careful consideration.

The "Comparative" in Comparative Theology

We can now investigate the qualifier "comparative" in the expression, "comparative theology." This will bring us to the heart of the matter. It will help to start with the implications of the "comparative" in "comparative religion" (or the "comparative study of religion" (CSR)), for the two subject-areas have often been closely aligned methodologically. As an area of academic pretension, CSR was finding its feet towards the transition of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. In one of the best-known academically respected early encyclopedias of religion, the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* edited in 13 volumes by James Hastings (the first volume of which was published in 1908), there is, in a long article on Religion written by Stanley Cook,[25] a section entitled, "The comparative method." Here Cook states:

> Among the most conspicuous features of modern research has been the application, in their widest extent, of anthropological and comparative methods of inquiry…. Now, the comparative method is the unbiased co-ordination of all comparable data irrespective of context or age. It has led to the accumulation of much valuable material.[26]

There are aspects of this statement which seem to beg the questions: how do we know what "comparable" data are? What is the criterion for making comparisons? We shall return to this issue in due course. But note the use of "unbiased" in the passage above. It was supposed that CR could be undertaken from a "neutral" or "objective" standpoint, where the biases of the researcher did not come into play. These were biases, presumably, bound up with value-judgements about the worth of the elements compared, the assumed superiority accorded to one approach over another, but more interestingly, biases inherent in the researchers themselves, such as tendentious presuppositions and expectations. But observe how quickly Cook seems to violate his own hermeneutic caveat: "The comparative method", he continues, "is commonly bound up with certain persistent and prevalent notions of the 'evolution' of thought and the 'survival' of rude, superstitious or otherwise irrational beliefs and practices from an earlier and more backward stage in the history of culture."[27]

While Cook goes on to nuance this statement, he does not retract its basic thrust, so that there is displayed here a pre-determined readiness to judge worth and value in terms of some evolutionary theory – a favoured theory of the times – which is hardly the characteristic of an unbiased approach; we are also left with unacknowledged assumptions about what may comprise "rude, superstitious or otherwise irrational beliefs and practices." Today, however, the implementation of an ideology-free approach in the humanities generally, not to

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[24] Nicholson quotes Lincoln to following effect: "I not only grant but insist that scholarship – like human speech in general – is interested, perspectival, and partial and that its ideological dimensions must be acknowledged, ferreted out where necessary, and critically cross-examined", and then rightly comments: "The crucial phrase in this statement is the tantalisingly unspecified 'where necessary.'" See footnote 43 in Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology," 636. For further literature on this issue, see the following two footnotes on the same page.

[25] Described as "Lecturer in the Comparative Study of Religions and in Hebrew and Syriac in Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge", under "Authors of Articles" in Vol.13.

[26] Stanley Cook, "Religion," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol 10, ed. James Hastings, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1918: 662-93, 664.

[27] Ibid.

speak of comparative study in particular, is rightly reckoned as methodologically naïve. Nicholson warns: "[T]he issue of the political [in his sense of "ideological"] comes strongly to the fore when one compares religious traditions".[28] He goes on to state:

> Various critiques associated with postmodern thought have… revealed the putatively universal principles and structures supposedly uncovered by cross-cultural comparison to be little more than ideological projections of the culturally particular and historically contingent pre-suppositions of the comparativists themselves. From a postmodernist perspective, the classic, foundationalist systems of comparative religion now appear as exercises in cultural imperialism.[29]

Notwithstanding a tendency to overstate the ideological short-sightedness of the old comparative method here, it seems undeniable that the new comparative method is much more self-aware. We have come to realise more clearly that the scholar of such study must acknowledge and work through the hazards of a range of biases: the externally edited description of subject-matter presented to one, one's own edited contribution to the subject under scrutiny in terms of particular methodological preferences, psychological leanings, and personal agendas of one sort or another, and so on.

Three matters call for further inquiry at this stage: (i) the alleged impermeability of the "body" of each religious tradition (or at least of those that fall under the rubric of "world religion") that disallows, on a methodological basis, the piecemeal comparative study we have come to know so well; (ii) *the epistemic foundation* that generates the comparison, once this objection is put to rest, and finally (iii) the nature of any "truth" that might arise from the findings of the comparative study. Let us address each topic in turn.

(i) Religious tradition as a fixed and impermeable body

This "totalitarian" argument has been well-expressed by a theologian of earlier times who still commands respect in exclusivist circles. In his still influential work, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, the Dutch theologian, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965), declares that a religious tradition is: "a living, indivisible unity", so that:

> [e]very part of it – a dogma, a rite, a myth, an institution, a cult – is so vitally related to the whole that it can never be understood in its real function, significance and tendency, as these occur in the reality of life, without keeping constantly in mind the vast and living unity of existential apprehension in which this part moves and has its being…. Thus, a real insight is possible only if one applies this "totalitarian" approach to a religion and its constituent parts.[30]

Therefore, "[s]cientifically speaking", Kraemer continues:

> the most fruitful way to acquire true insight into a religion is the "totalitarian" approach, namely, to take a religion as one whole body of religious life and expression, of which all the component parts are inseparably interrelated to each other and animated by the same apprehension of the totality of existence peculiar to it.[31]

Selected ideas, topics etc. then are not eligible for comparison because their very extraction irremediably distorts the contextual integrity of the elements selected. The result is an intellectual exercise that is methodologically deeply flawed. In more modern times, a similar objection has been raised by theologians like George Lindbeck, who sees religions "as *comprehensive* interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualised, which structure human experience and

[28] Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, xii.
[29] Ibid, 40.
[30] Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938, 135-6.
[31] Ibid, 146.

understanding of self and world."[32] But there is a deep hermeneutic flaw in these totalitarian objections, based on a misapprehension of how religious traditions have lived and developed, and continue to do so.

Let us first take up our critique by turning to the theory of fractals which has made an appearance in the academic study of religion with special reference to the relationships between religions. Religious traditions it may be argued – let us say, to simplify the argument, at least the salient religious traditions of the world – seem, in present understanding, to present themselves as subject to some form of fractal theory, a proposal raised by Perry Schmidt-Leukel in a recent book of his, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (see Chapter 14):

> The mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot (1924-2010) introduced the term "fractal" in 1975. It refers to certain patterns, structures, or forms that display either a rough or strict self-similarity across various scales. That is, a component of the pattern or structure constitutes an identical or similar copy of the whole. Recursiveness or scale invariance [*sic:* or rather, "proportionality"?] are the two key elements of fractals.[33]

We see this in the way individual leaves of a fern reflect the pattern of the whole frond, or individual crystals of a snowflake might reflect the structure of the whole flake. Similarly, he affirms:

> A fractal interpretation of religious diversity proposes that the differences that can be observed at the *interreligious level* are, *to some extent*, reflected at an *intrareligious level* in the internal differences discerned within the major religious traditions, and that they can be broken down at the *intrasubjective level* into different religious patterns and structures of the individual mind.[34]

This schema is, as Schmidt-Leukel's text indicates, still but a proposal, requiring clarification – note the vague "to some extent" emphasised by us in the excerpt above – by much more analysis of religious phenomena across the board, and subsequent confirmatory argument. The paragraph above is only suggestive – suggestive, perhaps, of the argument that because fractal theory applies at the "intrasubjective level" as the way the mind is "hard-wired", it must also apply at the "intrareligious level" as an expression of how the human mind functions across cultures and faiths. But this remains only a proposal, and requires *evidential* analysis on a fairly detailed scale to warrant acceptance. To make his indicative point, Schmidt-Leukel's argument, so far as I see it, is as follows. He first refers to comparative studies of an earlier era citing such scholars as G. van der Leeuw (1890-1950), and W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953), F. Heiler (1892-1967), and more recently, Hans Küng and Elmar Holenstein, before averring:

> [I]t became increasingly clearer that almost no specific features or clusters of features are exclusively present in just one religion while being totally absent from another one. [While] it was possible to distinguish different hierarchies, different degrees of emphasis, elaboration, or combination of such elements and features…almost everything that is found in one of the major religious traditions seems to reappear *in some way or another* in other religions as well…*Obviously*, the typological efforts of comparative religion and, in particular, of the phenomenological school, suggest that religious diversity is, as much as cultural diversity, marked by fractal structures".[35]

But this is not obvious at all. As Schmidt-Leukel himself has pointed out, fractal structures follow a precise proportionality: they display, to use his own words, "recursiveness" and "scale invariance" (see earlier quotation). But to say that with respect to "specific features or clusters of features" in the religious and cultural structures across the traditions "it is possible to distinguish different hierarchies, different degrees of emphasis,

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[32] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, London: SPCK, 1984, 32 (italics added).
[33] Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 233. Schmidt-Leukel quotes Mandelbrot: "I coined *fractal* from the Latin adjective *fractus.* The corresponding Latin verb *frangere* means "to break": to create irregular fragments. It is therefore sensible…that, in addition to "fragmented" (as in *fraction* or *refraction*), *fractus* should also mean "irregular", both meanings being preserved in *fragment*.", see ibid, 224.
[34] Ibid, italics added.
[35] Ibid, 229-30, italics added.

elaboration, or combination of such elements and features" which "reappear *in some way or another* in other religions as well" does not amount *per se* to a display of fractal structures which require a *precise* form of recursiveness and scale invariance. Mere reappearance of various features across the board of religions *in some way or another* is not enough for fractal theory to apply. Extensive research must be undertaken to transform Schmidt-Leukel's vaguely described similarities into the specificity of structures countenanced by fractal theory, and to make of this theory a heuristically useful tool for the study of interreligious theology, CR and CT. And this has not yet been done. Though Schmidt-Leukel continues in this vein for a few pages more, nothing is done to remedy this methodological flaw in his argument, and the conclusion that his suggestion that fractal theory applies to religious and cultural diversity is but an afterthought to his overall thesis (after all, this suggestion appears only in the final chapter of the book), is inescapable.[36]

But *suppose* we could discern what appear to be fractal structures across the religious faiths, what then? At the present stage of inconclusive study, where the applicability of the theory remains unproven with regard to deep-structure analysis, it could be argued that such resemblances as seem to support the theory are no more than *superficial* and *chance* patterns of agreement between the faiths, and as such insufficient to warrant the kind of in-depth comparative study desired. In this light, the totalitarian objection which effectively seeks to make of the religious traditions of the world closed systems of meaning and practice impervious to the putative gains of comparative study, still stands.

To overcome this objection with a view to showing that the comparative study we recommend is a viable one, we must look to the long history of faith traditions. While these may well be cultural and linguistic nexuses of a kind, there is also no doubt that they have developed over time by way of selective interaction between various elements of culture, practices, beliefs, ideas, narratives etc., to arrive at the continually developing and shifting amalgamated identities that they possess. Indeed, this is why religious faiths are susceptible to being incorporated into such phenomena as "dual" and/or "multiple religious belonging", and a "shared religious landscape", about which study continues apace.[37] Religious traditions have developed interactively both *internally*, within their contingent and constitutive nexus of growth, and *externally*, often through a historically haphazard range of interactions with other traditions. This has resulted in many of their conceptual and performative aspects "hanging loose", so to speak, in readiness for continuing assimilation and growth.[38]

Put another way, religious traditions are clusters of multiple interpretations of data accumulated over time. This has made it possible for various facets *within* a religious tradition to develop (or become extinct) through argument and counter-argument, or rejection or acceptance, or de-emphasis or re-emphasis, in connection with one view or other both intra- and inter-religiously, i.e. in relation to one internal or external interpretation or other. This is also why most if not all religious traditions have been subject to processes of reform throughout their histories. Perhaps yet another way of putting it is to say that religions are not *sui generis* entities hovering like spaceships in our cultural landscapes emitting and incorporating a range of esoteric data. Religions, rather:

> should be studied as… social and historical entities, within their proper cultural context. They must be studied not only as phenomena that change over time as the result of their own internal dynamic, but more importantly, as expressions of broader conflicts and tensions within specific social and historical configurations and, what is more, as vehicles of change and conflict.[39]

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[36] As Clooney points out in the unpublished article mentioned earlier, "The turn to fractals [in Schmidt-Leukel's book] is not an explicit theme throughout, but [….] indicates ways [in which] Schmidt-Leukel might consolidate his work in the future", see Clooney, "Fractal Theory, Fractal Practice," 2.

[37] For comment about these phenomena, see Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 52-3; also see the bibliography of his monograph.

[38] As Moyaert puts it: "Religious traditions are not constituted by sharp boundaries but are rather marked by a certain fluidity, permeability, and hybridity from the outset. Religious traditions were never pure in the first place: they have always been affected and influenced by other religions.", see Moyaert, "On Vulnerability," 1151.

[39] Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On and With Comparison*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018, 21.

Religions are an integral part of the landscape. As such, they have *porous* semantic, conceptual and performative boundaries, and this makes them available for continuous comparative study, judiciously conducted.

(ii) Epistemic foundation of comparison

The epistemic foundation that generates comparison, especially in the comparative study of religion, has come under renewed scrutiny in recent times. As Bruce Lincoln says in his recent book, "The problem is not *whether* to compare, but *how*".[40] There are two main positions taken on the matter: (a) the "genealogical"; and (b) the "analogical."[41] The genealogical is supposed to characterise the OCR. Here there is belief that one "objectively" compares phenomena from two or more traditions, from a "neutral" standpoint, so as to uncover data across the divide that are structurally or inherently similar. We have seen how Cook in his *ERE* article slipped up in expressing this belief. Another methodological faux-pas would be implicitly or explicitly to lump data from the traditions to be compared under headings taken from only one of those traditions, as if the data to be compared were allotropes or substitutive forms of each other, viz. "different ways of being the same thing." This is a form of the colonisation of data, and occurs quite often even today. Thus, comparing canonical sacred texts from Hinduism and Christianity, e.g. the Veda and the Bible respectively, under the heading "Revelation", runs the risk of assimilating the Veda to the Bible in a number of questionable ways, since "Revelation" is specifically a Christian term implying a complex of concepts and objectives that do not (entirely) apply to mainstream Hindu perceptions of the Veda. But the wrong application of a belief does not mean that the belief itself is mistaken or wrong.

It is important to note that by "genealogical" we are not advocating here the classifying of comparable religious phenomena "according to characteristics which correspond as far as possible to the *essential* and *typical* elements of [the different expressions of] religion",[42] as if these were uncontested and discernible heuristic categories – territory of the old comparative religionists. This would be a highly dubious claim, well susceptible to the criticism made by the "analogists" that such comparison is "constructive" in a pejorative sense. We are not using "genealogical" in this sense. Rather, for us, a "genealogical" approach rests on the view that the elements compared derive *constitutively* from their respective data-bases, often on the grounds of "direct historical relations between the phenomena compared".[43] The "analogical", developed by J.Z. Smith among others, is perceived differently. Nicholson contrasts the two approaches as follows:

> [The new comparativist] movement can be conveniently understood, in fact, as advocating a paradigm shift from genealogical comparison to analogical comparison as the standard of comparison. Comparison is now understood less as a "scientific" method of uncovering objective facts and more as a pragmatic, rhetorical device to further the task of understanding. The New Comparativists generally accept [J.Z.] Smith's understanding of comparison as an imaginative "redescription" of the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar in order to impart intelligibility to the former, or, alternatively, as a strategic "defamiliarisation" of phenomena, the perception of which has been dulled by long familiarity.[44]

There are several points of note in this excerpt. For one, Nicholson's use of "standard" when he speaks of the "paradigm shift from genealogical comparison to analogical comparison as the *standard* of comparison", raises a query. Does his statement imply that this shift is not absolute, and that there is still room for genealogical comparison? One would hope so, since it can be proven that historically there have indeed been "direct historical relations between the phenomena compared", repeatedly, on genealogical grounds.[45] Again, the

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Cf. Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 41.
[42] As quoted from W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953) by Perry Schmidt-Leukel in Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 228.
[43] Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 41.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Consider, for instance, the relations between early Christian doctrine and practice, as they developed, and Greek, Manichean and other traditions of the time. There are plenty of grounds for conceptual genealogical comparison here. To take another example: this also applies to the world of art. One only has to visit the finely curated exhibition, *van Gogh and*

headlong rush to favour the "analogical" over the genealogical approach in the new comparative method should not blind us to the fact – though such myopia seems to have occurred in the case of many advocates of the analogical approach – that this approach itself often implies the unacknowledged assumption that there is little or no ground for genealogical comparison in the first place. On what non-assumptive basis can one say that? As for the imagination driving the "imaginative redescription" of the elements compared, well, where should the task of the imagination begin and where should it end? What corrals the imagination in this way rather than in that so as to enable the comparison effected to become intelligible or meaningful to maker and observer? Surely the answer must be: something residing *within* rather than being imposed or projected from without into the context at hand (perhaps by a rampant, projective imagination…)? It is all very well to compare things with the intention of de-familiarising the conjuncts involved, but even this requires acknowledgement of perceived stasis in the things compared for effectuating the comparative act.

Finally, with regard to the use of the term "analogical" to describe the newer approach: this is something of a misnomer. "Analogical" (perhaps one can include "analogous" too) derives from the theory of the "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) developed in the West in medieval times. According to this theory there resides in all grades of being – starting from the Perfect Being or God whose nature it is *to be* (sometimes described as *esse per essentiam*), and devolving through the hierarchy of being to its lowest forms – *real* grounds for ascription of the predicate "existence", in so far as all actual being participates in the being of God. It is on these terms that the *analogia entis* gains traction. This is not a metaphorical ascription. But the "analogical" theory of comparison is largely metaphorical in nature, based on "imaginative" predication. Hence the misnomer.

What are the grounds, then, of comparison advocated by the new comparative *theologians*? To the best of my knowledge, we look for theorised discussion here in vain. Paul Hedges has perspicaciously observed that in this regard Clooney speaks vaguely of "intuition" coupled with "rational insight".[46] So, Clooney can write in one of the more detailed descriptions of his approach to the subject:

> *Comparative* in this context marks a practice that requires *intuitive* as well as *rational insight,* practical as well as theoretical engagement. It is therefore not primarily a matter of evaluation…Nor is it a scientific analysis by which to grasp the essence of the comparables (*sic*) by sifting through similarities and differences. (Rather) *comparison…*ordinarily starts with the *intuition* of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities – texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons – near one another, so that they may be seen over and again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and *intuitive* practice we understand each differently because the other is near, and by cumulative insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently too. Finally, we see ourselves differently, *intuitively* uncovering dimensions of ourselves that would not otherwise, by a non-comparative logic, come to the fore."[47]

There is a lot of "intuition" here (and rather less "rational insight"), but we are not much the wiser as to what the term means. Is Clooney talking of a "hunch" or "feeling", an "educated guess", or of an intuition rather like the intuition formally posited by a Bergson, Fichte, or Kant? One gathers, not the latter. If so, then on what are the comparative hunches or guesses based? Does an analogical or a genealogical approach apply here? From Clooney's language one would tend to plump for the latter, though this is by no means clear (there is more than one instance in the excerpt above where, *mutatis mutandis,* "intuition" could be substituted by "imagination"). Clooney says elsewhere that for CT to fulfil its comparative function, it must be:

Britain, at the Tate Britain (27 March-11 August 2019), to actually see the obvious scope for genealogical comparison between the work of artists (Constable, Doré, Gaugin, Pissaro etc.) who, by van Gogh's own acknowledgement, influenced him, and van Gogh's own work, and between van Gogh's paintings and that by artists who acknowledged their indebtedness to him (Gilman, Gore, Matthew Smith etc.). One could give many other examples.

[46] Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 19-20.

[47] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology, Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 10-11, italics added.

> "*familiar with and respectful of the best work in comparative studies of religion today*, yet also committed to learning from both outside and within one's own community in a way that remains theologically sensitive and conducive to mutual transformation in study."[48]

Hints and allusions apart, none of this properly theorises the comparative method of CT. We learn from the quotation above that CT must rely on the findings of CR, but specifically how and why remains largely unsaid. I have argued above that CR (and, one must now add, CT too, if as Clooney says it is to rely on the comparative religious method) must incorporate the genealogical approach in a foundational manner. In this respect, for it to be properly grounded, the imagination can have no more than a catalytic or explorative function.

With respect to giving purport to various hermeneutic phrases often used in this context with heuristic intent– "*a priori/a posteriori*", "insider/outsider", "participant-observer" - we can start with Hedges' statement given below:

> [W]e may note that there are moves to restore comparative religion as a central part of the academic study of religion. In brief, it involves seeking the commonalities and linked threads, as well as disjunctions and differences, that can be ascertained in relation to those traditions we commonly term religions. However, whereas comparative theology seeks to stand within one religious tradition and so approaches this from an insider, or devotee, perspective, the scholar of comparative religion stands as an outsider to each tradition and simply observes historical, philosophical, phenomenological, or other categories of comparison. The distinction between comparative theology and comparative religion is therefore one between what may be termed insider and outsider perspectives (accepting the limitations of these terms). Or, as Stosch puts it, the "crucial difference" is that comparative theology 'asks the question of truth and validity'.[49]

We shall come to the question of "truth and validity" in CT in due course, but besides noting that Hedges sensibly opts for the genealogical approach here, we can ask in light of what we have been saying about the "political" (to use Nicholson's term) constantly seeking to raise its head in the study of CT and CR, is the distinction between these two disciplines as clear-cut as Hedges seems to make out? Keeping what has been said about the two methods at work here in mind, we can answer in the affirmative, because the political that dogs the practitioner in both disciplines does not sublate the difference between the methods applied in each. In the comparative study of religion, the practitioner avowedly strives to work from the outside, while in comparative theology commitment is avowedly from the inside. This is what I take the binary phrase "participant-observer" to really mean.

Let us look more closely now at the specifics of Clooney's pioneering comparative theological method with this in mind, for it has become the paradigm for many practitioners of the discipline (it is endorsed by several of the contributors to *How to do Comparative Theology*). In his book, *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India*, Clooney studies the *Tiruvāymōli* (ca. 9th century), a body of Tamil verse by the sage, Śaṭakōpan. Here, in considerable detail, Clooney examines the Tamil text's language, form and structure, its imagery, themes and audiences, its commentarial tradition, and its comparative potential in relation to certain Christian texts.[50] Clooney describes his comparative approach as follows:

> [F]inding my way, as much as possible, *into* the Śrīvaiṣṇava community, listening, watching and learning, making friends, finding some boundaries that could not be crossed, discerning my theme, purpose and audience in the process of writing and rewriting, learning how to teach and do theology at home (xvii)…

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[48] Clooney, "Introduction", in *How to do Comparative Theology*, eds Clooney & von Stosch, 1, italics added. And again: "Although scholarly expertise – linguistic skills, historical awareness, the ability to read critically – is indispensable, interreligious theological learning must be a transformative learning indebted to the religious other; grounded and open, it learns to 'see inside' that other tradition", see Clooney, *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 113. This statement leans towards the genealogical approach.

[49] Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

[50] Francis X. Clooney, *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India,* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.

> [a] great opportunity becomes available to us when we decide to read with the [Śrīvaiṣṇava] commentators rather [than] in a merely utilitarian fashion whereby we borrow their explanations *without respecting their interpretations.* With their help we are drawn, in a certain way, *into* each song's worldview, and *into* the deeper moral and spiritual commitments it entails.[51]

The goal here is to share the viewpoint of the other through a process of disciplined empathy,[52] to become a participant-observer at least to some extent both psychologically and practically, with a view to learning from the other, and by learning, to transform one's own theology and self. The goal is not to make soteriological judgements about the other or their faith-stance from a theological vantage point as in the OTR or OCT (however well-meaning),[53] but in the first instance to understand, and then, where relevant, to change one's position, and be transformed personally. For Clooney and his colleagues, CT starts *a priori* from a position of faith, proceeds *a posteriori* along the pathway of the respectful comparative religionist, acknowledging and striving to compensate for personal and disciplinary biases in both phases of the task, and ends *provisionally* with conclusions that are incrementally changing, as well as change the comparative theologian during the course of this form of study. With Kraemer, it is not so: the content of the conclusion is pre-determined; there seems to be little or no disposition to learn. His method is to gather and to sow from a *triumphalist a priori* stance; Clooney's, on the other hand, brings in a theology of respect, attentiveness, a readiness to learn and to be transformed, without sacrificing the original commitment that initiated it. This is the driving force behind it. We can now deal with another criticism of it made recently by the pluralist thinker, Perry Schmidt-Leukel.

For this we turn to Schmidt-Leukel's recent work mentioned earlier, where he attacks Clooney's new comparative theological approach as (to use Clooney's own words, since he sees this attack as applying particularly to him), "timid and yet implicitly bonded to an odious form of the inclusivist theology of religion."[54] It is an approach which, predicts Schmidt-Leukel, is heading for extinction in the face of the rise of his own kind of pluralist theology. This inclusivist approach, avers Schmidt-Leukel, is objectionable because:

> According to religious inclusivism other religions are not entirely false, but they are inferior or insufficient *to the extent* that they differ from one's own religion. If one's own religion or denomination is seen as the highest expression of religious truth, others can be true only in as much as they resemble one's own faith, and they are false to the extent that they differ. So, according to both exclusivism and inclusivism, religious difference or diversity is perceived as ultimately negative. It indicates either falsity or at least inferiority.[55]

We can dispatch this objection (with Clooney's method in mind) as a prime example of a criticism that misses its mark through lack of accuracy and nuance. Granted that Clooney has acknowledged his Roman Catholic commitment as a theologian,[56] the comparative *method* he has pioneered is imbued by an approach that proceeds towards tentative conclusions not by summating findings shaped, in the first instance (in the manner of a Kraemer, for example), from an *a priori* soteriological vantage point, but by painstakingly accruing insights *learned* from the studied, *a posteriori* stance of the (new) comparative religionist. In Clooney's case, this is then respectfully integrated into an incrementally transformed Christian (Catholic) identity. Such a deferential, methodologically aware starting point does not result in the colonisation of the other's data. It does not gloss over the origin of the changes initiated; it acknowledges them as beneficial and new. As Clooney himself pointed out in an earlier work:

> I bring what I learn into my reconsideration of Christian identity. This is an "including theology" […] it draws what we learn from another tradition back into the realm of our own, highlighting and not erasing the fact

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[51] Ibid, 35, italics added
[52] On acquiring this discipline which I have also called "constructive empathy", see Julius Lipner, "Seeking Others in their Otherness," *New Blackfriars* 74.869, (1993): 152-65.
[53] An analysis of how some exponents of the OCT did this is given in Hedges, "The Old and New Comparative Theologies."
[54] Cf. the unpublished article mentioned earlier, p.2.
[55] Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 6.
[56] We are informed by Clooney that he is "an Irish-American Roman Catholic, born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1950… male, a Catholic priest, and for over 40 years… a member of the Society of Jesus" etc, see Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 16.

> of this borrowed wisdom. Done honestly and with a certain detachment that chastens grand theories, such acts of including need not be seen as distorting what is learned or using it for purposes alien to its original context.[57]

Nor may it be seen in this light as rendering religious difference or diversity as, in Schmidt-Leukel's blunt phrase, "ultimately negative" (see excerpt above). On the contrary, religious difference or diversity is treated here as potentially creative, capable of being respectfully incorporated into a fresh, theologically enhanced vision from the viewpoint of the including theologian. In this sense, it is perceived as ultimately positive, not negative.[58] Further, whilst the cut-and-thrust of the Kraemerian approach *erects* or *reinforces* boundaries between the Christian faith and other faiths, Clooney's method, because of its theological hospitality, can be reckoned to work towards *eroding* longstanding boundaries between religious faiths.

But does not this method, because of its particularism, leave untouched – and so implicitly condone – the existing architectonic of the theological home from which it operates, an architectonic that seeks only to supersede and not to tolerate its rivals? Initially yes, perhaps ultimately, no. Yes, in so far as the *modus operandi* of the particularistic method is slow, provisional and minimally incremental. It sets out to engage with the microcosm of individual trees, rather than with the macrocosm of the wood itself. But in time, as this incrementalism builds up through joint scholarly effort, so that its findings are integrated into an emerging whole, the macrocosm itself is likely to undergo tectonic changes - through a kind of kaleidoscopic effect – resulting in an overall, respectful theological approach in which such terms as "false", "inferior", "negative" (*pace* Schmidt-Leukel), as descriptors of the other's stance, seem entirely out of place. We must wait and see.

In *How to do Comparative Theology,* Glen Willis gives an additional, powerful reason for doing the NCT, which may be regarded as expatiating on Clooney's method:

> It is an experiential truth of the comparative process that in the process of exploring another tradition, in recognising the dynamics of an unfamiliar soteriology or anthropology, the theologian's own tradition is made strange, renewed as an object of mystery and inquiry. That renewal is very likely to produce new insight and curiosity in ways that historical and systematic investigations, on their own, may not.[59]

In accord with what has been said earlier, Willis speaks here of the catalysing nature of the NCT, of its power to stimulate new perspectives and thought.

Finally – and here let me attempt a prediction myself – because of the dynamics of religious conviction, so long as people remain religious, the inclusivist stance in general will always remain popular (probably more so than that of exclusivists and pluralists). If this is to be the case, then it is Clooney's way that will stand the test of time.

But Clooney's down-to-earth method is not without its problems. In its "particularistic" approach it is possible to miss the wood for the trees. This can be seen in an example taken from an analysis by Clooney himself. In his contribution to *How to do Comparative Theology* , Clooney first takes us through, at some length, the exact reading of a section of a 14th century text[60] by an exponent of the literalist (Hindu) Pūrva Mīmāṃsā school. Then, in much briefer compass, he alludes to the reading of the Christian Gospel by Henri de Lubac (a French Jesuit priest and theologian, 1896-1991), from whose approach he derives the conclusion that "[t]he literal and historical remain deeply theological in significance, as the ground for all further interpretations".[61]

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Whilst I can see the point of it, I am not sure if the distinction Clooney desires to enforce between "includer" and "inclusivist", viz. "I am an includer – and not, if we must observe the ordinary usages, an inclusivist" merits adoption; see Clooney, "Fractal Theory, Fractal Practice," 11. After all, Clooney remains within an inclusivist stance, though a methodologically revised one. Applying Ockham's razor, one could argue that when usage of existing terminology is challenged, one should in the first instance seek to rehabilitate rather than to multiply terms.

[59] Glen R. Willis, "On Some Suspicions Regarding Comparative Theology" in *How to do Comparative Theology*, eds Clooney & von Stosch: 122-33, 126.

[60] "The *Jaiminīya Nyāya Mālā* (*Garland of Jaimini's Reasons…*) of Mādhava (1297-1388)", see Francis X. Clooney, "Difficult Remainders: Seeking Comparative Theology's Really Difficult Other", in *How to do Comparative Theology*, eds Clooney & von Stosch: 206-28, 209.

[61] Ibid, 223.

Where does this take us? What is the *yield* of this comparative exercise from Clooney's point of view as a Catholic theologian? He goes on to say:

> By turning to the literal as affirmed and passed down in tradition, we are confronted with Jesus as the Gospel's deep, literal, and indispensable meaning. His is a specificity that cannot be diminished or generalised; and yet, because he stands at the core of meaning in the early Christian community, Jesus embodies a significance accessible to cognitive assent, moral imitation, spiritual response, and constructive theological reasoning.[62]

All this from a literalist reading of an historically disconnected Hindu text that is not even properly theological? After all, Clooney has himself pointed out earlier: "Mīmāṃsā is strikingly different in its content, resistant to efforts at generalisation, and even dismissive of appeals to the transcendent and experiential such as those that drive much of Christian theology".[63] Just because Mīmāṃsā insists on a literal reading of the Veda does not lead in any intelligibly constructive way to Clooney's theological conclusion that by reading the Gospel "we are confronted with Jesus as the Gospel's deep, literal, and indispensable meaning"! Is this not a conclusion that has *already* been established by traditional Christian scriptural reading? Where is the connection between arriving at this conclusion and Clooney's non-theological, literalist reading of Mīmāṃsā? In fact, the conclusion cannot be supported by the weight of the comparative exercise undertaken.[64] If it is allowed to pass, *any* comparative data could be contrived to produce *any* desired comparative effect. This does not mean, of course, that Clooney's particularistic method is vacuous. Far from it. His *oeuvre* in general has produced an abundance of valuable comparative insights which we cannot expatiate on here. But from this cautionary example we can learn that for the comparative exercise to be a success or worthwhile, there needs to be sufficient accredited cognitive load-bearing ground linking the "comparables" that are brought into play.

(iii) Deriving "truth" from comparison

And now to the question of "truth and validity" as it pertains to CT. In *How to do Comparative Theology,* Catherine Cornille writes:

> While comparative religion is based on historical methods and maintains the ideal of religious neutrality, comparative theology is a *normative* discipline that reflects not only on the meaning but also on the truth of particular beliefs and practices.[65]

And we have seen that for Klaus von Stosch, the "crucial difference" between CR and CT is that CT "asks the question of truth and validity".[66] Well, so does CR, as we have seen. This theoretically "outsider" discipline works with different notions of truth: historical truth, statistical truth, factual truth etc., not to mention what we may call "comparative truth" both (a) positive and (b) negative (e.g. (a) "In both Christianity and Islam, the scriptures as revelation, derive from a personal God", but (b) "this is not the case for Mīmāṃsā schools in Hinduism where the Veda as canonical text is *apauruṣeya* or "non-personal", i.e. not ultimately derived from some personal divine revelation"[67]). Surely these are not the kinds of truth claimed as *distinctive* by/for CT *per se*, else how would the two disciplines differ in their understanding of truth? What kind of truth, then, are Cornille and Stosch, and for that matter other comparative theologians, claiming for their nascent discipline? Would that be the banality of platitudes like: "By means of dialogue between us, you can help me find my truth and I

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[62] Ibid, 224.
[63] Ibid, 209.
[64] One wonders why Clooney would draw this logically unwarranted conclusion after jumping from one side of the comparative exercise to the other. Is it because he is at pains to emphasise the *theological* character, overall, of his method? One must leave it at that: to step further might lay us open to the charge of playing the psychologist here.
[65] Catherine Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology", in *How to do Comparative Theology*, eds Clooney & von Stosch: 19-36, 20, italics added.
[66] Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 11.
[67] That is, as depending on the will or intention of a Revealer (viz. as *buddhipūrvaka*).

can help you find your truth"? What would such a jejune statement really mean? I find that the problematic of "truth and validity", as in the case of establishing the epistemic foundation of the comparative act (see above), is also greatly under-theorised in the NCT. There is much talk of the search for truth here, but very little hard philosophical discussion about it. And one could say the same for the related issue of the validation of truth.

This is how the well-known mathematician and cosmologist, Professor John D. Barrow of the University of Cambridge, describes the scientific method for the pursuit of truth and its validation:

> The empirical method in science has generally been taken to mean the pursuit of knowledge based on evidence gained from experience – experimental or observational. This could mean simply collecting facts about the world but that isn't really science. Science involves the compression of the list of facts into shorter pieces of information by finding patterns, programmes or rules that can be used instead of the list of all the facts. So, astronomers replace the list of all the locations of a planet in space over time by the equation for its orbit. This opens the door for verifying or falsifying predictions about what those patterns are by using observations. If such a compression of the facts is impossible, then the sequence is said to be random. You can't prove a sequence is random in this sense… but you can show a sequence is not random by displaying the compression (pattern) that it follows…. [Y]ou don't know if an observation that appears to disagree with a theory's prediction occurs because of erroneous experimental method or erroneous theory. Also, some observations are subject to bias (bright galaxies may be relatively more numerous because they are easier to see than faint ones). In reality, all any observation or experiment can do is change the likelihood that a theory is true. It can never verify or falsify any theory with complete certainty.[68]

This statement by a distinguished mathematician and scientist is particularly interesting for us because, according to current understanding, it describes succinctly what passes for truth and its validation in the "hard" sciences, which are generally recognised as providing a universal standard of truth. From it we can glean that: something can be taken as true if it can be (provisionally) verified by accredited methods of observation or experimentation. A theory reduces experiential data thus derived to a law, theorem or pattern that is potentially predictive. But it must be cleared as far as possible of bias, and is falsifiable by counter-observations, which means that we can never have complete certainty that a theory is true. In effect, science proceeds on the basis of *consensus* about provisional truths derived ultimately from experience (and based on logical and rational thought). With this in mind as a "hard" template for what we mean by truth and verification, let us now look at the domain of the humanities with special reference to CR and CT (since these two disciplines purport to fall into this domain).

In his still useful but now somewhat dated work, *Religions and the Truth*,[69] Hendrik Vroom mentions several modes for discerning "truth" in common use, viz. by way of "correspondence", "coherence", "intersubjective" agreement, a "pragmatic" approach and so on.[70] Granted that by Vroom's own admission, these are ways of discerning truth "by a Western, secularised-Christian representation of matters",[71], how may any of these apply to the NCT? All of these modes are based on the *consensus* of other appropriately skilled minds with reference to various kinds of declaration of truth, which is a key feature of "Barrow's Template" (viz. the consensus of the interpretation of data and its (provisional) predictive value). In this light, let us make an attempt to (briefly) theorise the discernment and validation of truth in the new comparative *religion* first, since this has been vaunted as the basis for the CT method.

We have already noted that CR works with notions of truth familiar to students of the humanities and social sciences (historical truth, logical truth, statistical truth, comparative truth etc.). Here it is the *consensus* of other scholars with regard to one's own findings that gives some guarantee of the truth of these findings – "some

[68] Excerpted from a personal email sent to me on 17 April 2019.
[69] H. M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives*, Michigan, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1989. This work sets out not mainly to provide an argument, but to describe: "We will attempt to draw several universally valid conclusions from a *description* of what is said about religious truth within religious traditions themselves", 25 (italics added).
[70] Ibid, 40.
[71] Ibid, 24.

guarantee", because in the humanities (in which domain the comparative study of religion falls) commonly accepted conclusions can be overturned if, in Popperian fashion, sufficient new instances of what is agreed to be contrary evidence come to light. Further, researchers in CR have the best chance of arriving at conclusions accepted as true if, as we have seen, they become methodologically aware of relevant and intrusive personal and subject-biases, and then compensate for this by seeking to eliminate or minimise such proclivities in various ways (a caveat to which the Barrow Template also makes reference). No doubt, various modes of truth as distinguished by Vroom also apply within this consensus: the grounded "correspondence", as we have seen, between the "comparables" in the comparative act, the "coherence" of the findings as they are integrated incrementally into a larger picture, and so on. And these must all be subject to the consensus of the relevant scholarly community in the academic study of religion.

Now, does this consensus pattern of truth and its validation apply in the new comparative *theology*? Could one argue that new insights gleaned in the comparative theological enterprise when adopted (or not contested) by other theologians of the same stripe and incrementally integrated into an emerging, larger *theological* whole, amount to new "truths" of that faith? Would the transformative and transformed shared experience in terms of these new "truths", as accepted within the relevant worshipping community of the faith-tradition(s) concerned, be a criterion of the "validation" of these "truths"? How could all this be ratified by the regulative authorities involved – perhaps in terms of shifts, new nuances etc. in the articulation of doctrine? These are relevant questions that await proper consideration in a new approach that gives the NCT its own understanding of "truth."

As to the "rationality" of the scriptural and doctrinal resources underpinning CT, this raises a further key issue, since rationality remains the basis for the establishing and articulation of truth. In his essay in *How to do Comparative Theology*, Aaron Langenfeld avers that "the specific task of theology is the reflection on and analysis of the rationality of a certain religious faith."[72] But, we may ask, is not the "rationality" of the doctrine of the Trinity, or of the *māyāvāda* (illusionism) of Advaita Vedānta (described in the tradition as "unutterable", *anirvacanīya*), or of the Buddhist tetralemma, or even of the claimed revelatory nature of the Qur'ān (or Bible, for that matter) – all core "truths" for their respective faith traditions – vanishingly elusive? How is their rationality to be established? Underlying all this is a crucial distinction that is often overlooked: the distinction between "truth" and a *"truth-claim"* (which then becomes subject to rational scrutiny)? How would the objection that the core "truths" of a religious tradition that lie at the foundation of the faith they nurture are in fact only particular "truths", viz. specific to the faith they express, be handled? They are not shared "truths", so how can they (glibly) be spoken of as "truths" without obfuscating the issues involved?

The well-known philosopher of religion, John Hick (1922-2012), understood what was at stake. This led him to defend a form of post-mortem verification of the truth of religious statements which he called "eschatological verification."[73] The idea here is that religious truth-claims would be sifted and verified, in what form of religious experience is not clear, in the ultimate salvific state (should this ever occur). This is a highly contentious notion for all sorts of reasons we cannot go into here, but at least it acknowledges the need for some form of accredited verification of religious truth-claims.

It has been our intention in this section only to raise critical issues that seem to have received less attention than they deserve in discussions of CT, and to provide some incentive to bring them more into the forefront. No doubt, we have focused on textual or propositional forms of truth with respect to the NCT, rather than other forms which have sometimes been mentioned, such as experiential or "lived" truth, performative truth, and so on. These aspects too need consideration as part of the larger picture.

Ethical Questions in Comparative Theology

We come now to the final section of this essay: inquiry into what Moyaert has described as "the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology".[74] Such inquiry should come as no surprise in view of the repeated

[72] Aaron Langenfeld, "The Moment of Truth: Comparative and Dogmatic Theology", in *How to do Comparative Theology*, eds Clooney & von Stosch: 59-71, 59-60.
[73] Cf. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* 2nd ed., London: Macmillan, 1988, see Chapters 7-8. For a brief discussion, see John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism,* London: SCM Press, 1995, 71-6.
[74] In the title of Moyaert, "On Vulnerability".

claims by Clooney and others that doing CT should lead in time not only to a change of view but also to a personal "transformation" and the deepening of "moral and spiritual commitments", in short, to the acquisition of virtue. [75] Moyaert deals with this topic from a specific angle, that of the "vulnerability" inculcated by adopting Clooney's approach. "Vulnerability is one of the key words in Francis Clooney's comparative theology project.… [C]omparative theology can be regarded as a form of vulnerable theology".[76] Though "vulnerability" can be understood in a negative way, Moyaert is keen to point to its positive connotations.

> "In this reading, vulnerability becomes the basic condition of reciprocity"[77] …. Cultivating vulnerability in the proper way, "can bring about innovation"[78], "openness to the unexpected", and other virtues such as "creativity and responsibility"[79]; in so far as vulnerability exposes us to failure, loss and pain, it rests on a "*choice that exhales power and courage*".[80] Further, CT's "search for truth is preceded by a pledge to justice" towards the religious other "who deserves to be heard and understood", which itself "entails the cultivation of a certain humility as the appropriate attitude by which to approach a religious text".[81]

However, we should note that the pursuit of CR also requires from its practitioner a certain sense of subjection to the material studied and of vulnerability to error and its recognition, not to mention acknowledgement of the need to be "just" and "responsible" to the material studied. The nuances of the *expression* of the "vulnerability" applicable in both disciplines, however, would not always coincide, in so far as its cultivated qualities via the insider stance of CT would differ from those of CR's outsider approach (for example, comparative theologians must be "responsible" not only to their craft and objects of study, as in the case of CR, but also to their co-religionists in the development of their faith, as well as, in "justice", to listening to and respecting the religious other).

Daniel Soars has also taken up this topic in his paper, "The Virtues of Comparative Theology".[82] He mentions a number of virtues practitioners of the new CT recommend as deriving from the discipline: the taking of risks (viz. courage); patience with ambiguity; living creatively on the margins of the faith-community concerned (implying openness and resilience); "doctrinal or epistemic humility"; commitment to a particular religious tradition; active belief in the spiritual/moral/theological relevance of the tradition(s) of the other engaged with; empathy; and hospitality to the possibility of truth in other religious traditions.[83] One could add "hopeful persistence" (!), though it is not our intention here to provide an exhaustive list of the relevant virtues that may be needed for or acquired by doing CT.

We may note that such virtues are intimately bound up with the practice of the comparative theological method Clooney has pioneered. This method, as we have seen, unlike that of some of the practitioners of the OCT mentioned earlier which seeks to supersede and triumph over the faith engaged with from the heights of a theological vantage point, calls, rather, for a dialogic interaction with the other's faith through what has been dubbed a "home-and-away" strategy. Here, one begins from the rootedness of one's own faith-stance and moves back and forth between the faith of the other and one's own, in the process "finding one's way, as much as possible, *into* the faith-community of the other, listening, watching and learning, making friends…learning how to teach and do theology at home, not in a merely utilitarian fashion, but respecting the interpretations of the other, while being drawn into their world view with the deeper moral and spiritual commitments this entails".[84] This is a process, as Soars observes, whose "basic claim… is that a deepening rootedness in one's own religious tradition does not exclude, but in fact enables, *a dialectical openness* to the religious other."[85] The

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[75] Clooney, *Seeing Through Texts*, 35.
[76] Moyaert, "On Vulnerability," 1144-5.
[77] Ibid, 1146.
[78] Ibid, 1147.
[79] Ibid, 1148.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid, 1156.
[82] Danial Soars, "The Virtues of Comparative Theology," paper delivered at the meeting of the American Academy of Religion Denver, Colorado, 2018.
[83] See Soars, note 7. Clooney also stresses "prayerful" humility: cf. Soars, note 8.
[84] From Clooney, see earlier
[85] Soars, "The Virtues of Comparative Theology," 3, italics added.

visceral, intimate dimensions of such a commitment are perhaps the reason why some exponents of this method feel prompted to recall the personal journeys they have made while adopting this approach, though they have not always found it easy to avoid a tone of self-congratulation or self-indulgence while doing so.

Conclusion

We can now draw our discussion to a close by asking what status the new comparative theology might have in the academic study of religion. Does it belong there as an academic discipline? We can break up our answer into two parts:

(i) In so far as the NCT relies on and incorporates the comparative study of religion, applying as rigorously as possible this discipline's a *posteriori* "outsider" method as its first mode of inquiry, I would contend that it does. This method could be indefinitely refined, indefinitely producing in the process a new array of truths in the way described earlier – truths arising from the specific angle of approach of the particular project in hand, and not envisaged by the normal run of inquiries in comparative religion *per se*.

(ii) But from the discipline's specifically *theological* standpoint, I believe that the case is not so clear. This is because it is not yet clear (at least to my understanding) whether the NCT's findings qua *theological,* important though they may be for the finder's co-religionists and, indeed, dialogue partners, are properly academic, whether, in fact, these findings may properly fall under the categories of "truth" and its validation. In short, can an avowedly *normative* starting point such as that professed in CT yield anything approaching "objective" conclusions that may be shared through a consensus of scholars, which must be the ideal of the academic study of religion? In answer to this question, I believe the jury is still out.

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Julius Lipner, who is of Indo-Czech origin, was Professor of Hinduism and the Comparative Study of Religion at the University of Cambridge.

He was born and brought up in India, for the most part in West Bengal. After his schooling in India, he obtained a Licentiate in Theology (summa cum laude) in the Pontifical Athenaeum (now Jnana Deepa Vidyapith) in Poona, and then spent two years studying for an M.A. in Indian and Western philosophy at Jadavpur University in Calcutta (Kolkata). Before sitting for his final examinations, he was invited by the well-known philosopher H.D. Lewis to undertake doctoral research (under Lewis' supervision) on the self with reference to Indian and Western thought, at King's College, University of London. Lipner obtained his PhD in 1974, and then spent a little over a year as lecturer in Indian religion at the University of Birmingham (UK), before being appointed to Cambridge in 1975, where he has taught ever since.

Lipner has lectured widely in the UK and abroad, and has been appointed Visiting Scholar and Visiting Professor in a number of universities both nationally and internationally. His special fields of study are Vedantic thought, 19th century Bengal, and inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding, with special reference to the Hindu and Christian traditions. He is a member of the editorial board of several international journals, and has numerous publications in his fields of specialism to his credit, including 13 volumes (authored, co-authored, and edited) and more than 80 articles and translations. Lipner is a Fellow and former Vice-President of Clare Hall – a postgraduate College in the University of Cambridge – and in 2008 he became a Fellow of the British Academy.

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