

Types of Comparative Theology

In the centuries since its first use – which has been traced back to 1700¹ – the term “comparative theology” has been used in various ways, or applied to different types of engagement with religious plurality. It has been put forth as a counterpart to apologetic approaches to other religions, as proto-comparative religion, as a means to develop a universal or world theology, and as a new form of constructive systematic theology. It may involve any two or more religions and any schools or denominations within larger traditions. There is thus a natural proliferation of different types and expressions of comparative theology.

In one of the early systematic discussions of the modern field of comparative theology, David Tracy developed a basic distinction between comparative theology as “a comparative enterprise within the secular study of the history of religions in which different ‘theologies’ from different traditions are being compared” and comparative theology as “a more strictly theological enterprise (sometimes named ‘world theology’ or ‘global theology’) which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds.”² Though the difference between the secular or historical and the normative or theological approaches to the discipline seems clear, there is in the actual practice of comparative theology often less of a marked differentiation between the two. Historians of religions have come to duly recognize their own normative biases, while comparative theologians at times refrain from explicit normative statements or conclusions.

There are, nevertheless, still important differences between historical and theological approaches to the comparison of religions. These differences are manifest in both the starting point and the goal of the comparativist. While the comparative theologian and the scholar of comparative religion alike may declare their particular historical and religious or other identity and location,

scholars in the history and comparative study of religions generally disclose their personal biases in order to minimize their impact. In contrast, comparative theologians fully embrace their religious presuppositions as constitutive of their work. Though recognizing the continuity between comparative theology and comparative religion, Reid Locklin and Hugh Nicholson highlight this important difference:

Comparative theology can therefore be regarded less as an alternative to comparative religion, running alongside the latter in a parallel track, than as one of a range of critically self-conscious approaches to the study of religion after “religion,” albeit with at least one important difference: whereas the recognition of normative commitment remains a methodological problem for most scholars in religious studies even today, it belongs to the very nature of the comparative theological project.³

In addition to its starting point, comparative theology is also distinguished from the comparative study of religion by its goal. While the scholar of comparative religion may be driven primarily by intellectual curiosity and the desire to understand a particular phenomenon in light of a larger whole, the comparative theologian seeks to deepen and advance theological truth. The ultimate goal of comparative theology thus involves comparison not for its own sake or only for the sake of greater scholarly insight, but for the purpose of enriching and enhancing the self-understanding of a particular religion, or theological truth more broadly conceived. While comparative religion is oriented to a deeper understanding of the nature of religion or the meaning of a particular religious idea or phenomenon, comparative theology is more interested in their meaningfulness or validity. It is this normative question which ultimately separates comparative theology from comparative religion.

Within the field of comparative theology itself, different types or approaches to comparative theology have developed rooted in varying conceptions of theology and of theological truth. While some view theology as a reflection on the faith and practice of a particular community, others view it more generically as a discourse on the gods, or as the study of divine realities. And while some conceive of theological truth as based on a body of revealed or received teachings and practices, others do not limit theological truth to any particular religion. I mark the difference between these two approaches by distinguishing between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology. The term confessional is here thus used to denote a tradition-specific type of comparative theology. It may be practiced from within any religion and it is oriented to advancing the self-understanding of that particular tradition. Meta-confessional comparative theology, on the other

hand, uses the teachings of different religious traditions to pursue a more encompassing or universal truth. The difference between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology is at times only a matter of degree. Meta-confessional comparative theologians are often still shaped primarily by a particular religious tradition, and confessional comparative theologians often test and push the boundaries of the revealed teachings of a particular religion. But the two approaches still use slightly different methods that also warrant different nomenclatures.

Both confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology themselves arose from the checkered history of the comparative study of religions, and remain grounded in some of its basic methodological principles. The term comparative theology was originally used to designate an attempt at a more neutral and scientific approach of religious differences and as a counterpart to the apologetic and normative approaches to other religions. Adding to the confusion about terms is the occasional discrepancy between the stated and the actually apparent goals of the work of some comparative theologians. Whereas early forms of comparative theology claimed to offer a neutral and scientific comparison of religions while being in reality profoundly biased, more recent forms readily admit their normative and religious presuppositions without always drawing out the normative conclusions of their work. In basic terms, comparative theology involves comparing theologies from a normative starting point and/or with a normative goal.

1.1 **Comparing Theologies**

The origins of comparative theology and the comparative study of religions are intimately intertwined. Early attempts to develop a more historical and descriptive approach to other religions often used the term comparative theology to distinguish it from the explicitly normative and apologetic approaches to other religions. As Louis Jordan points out in his early history of comparative religion (1905), there was some debate among scholars about what to call the new science of religion. Historians of religions such as Friedrich Max Müller and James Freeman Clarke favored the term comparative theology, but since “the designation in question would cover only a part of the field which has to be surveyed” and since “it would limit inquiry to the purely dogmatic teaching of the several Faiths that chanced to be compared,” it was decided that the designation comparative religion was “decidedly to be preferred to that of Comparative Theology.”⁴ Within this framework, comparative theology was thus to be seen as “only a department of Comparative Religion.”⁵ Clarke spoke of the “science of Comparative Theology” and stated

that "It may be called a science, since it consists in the study of the facts of human history, and their relation to each other," adding that "It does not dogmatize: it observes."⁶ He also took aim at Christian apologetics and its tendency to denigrate religious others, writing, "Comparative Theology, pursuing its impartial course as a positive science, will avoid the error into which most of the Christian apologists of the last century fell, in speaking of ethnic or heathen religions."⁷

Nevertheless, these early attempts at a neutral and scientific comparison of theologies were themselves infused with overt apologetic aims. When, in the middle of the nineteenth century, James Freeman Clarke wrote *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology*⁸ his intent was thus to offer a scientific and historical introduction to the different religions. His approach to different religions was based on the evolutionary theories of his time, and he complemented the historical, descriptive or "analytical" parts of his work with a "synthetic" part which:

considers the adaptation of each system to every other, to determine its place, use and value in reference to universal or absolute religion. It must, therefore, examine the different religions to find wherein each is complete or defective, true or false; how each may supply the defects of the other, or prepare the way for a better; how each religion acts on the race which receives it, is adapted to that race, and to the region of the earth which it inhabits ... It shows that both the positive and the negative side of a religion make it a preparation for a higher religion, and that the universal religion must root itself in the decaying soil of partial religions.⁹

Clarke ends each chapter with a comparison with Christianity, and states that whereas earlier apologists had attempted to "prove Christianity to be true," his approach would "show it to be true."¹⁰ Clarke's work was thus from beginning to end informed by Christian faith and by the desire to demonstrate objectively the superiority of Christianity.

Max Müller's approach to the science of religion similarly contained a mixture of normative and non-normative notions. Though he is recognized as the father of the comparative study of religions, some of his views are unabashedly theological, and some of his comments might be seen as a blueprint for comparative theology. Like Clarke, he believed that the comparative study of religion would "give a new life to Christianity itself."¹¹ His interest in other religions was based on clearly religious foundations. "Every religion," he stated, "even the most imperfect and degraded, has something that ought to be sacred to us, for there is in all religions a secret yearning after the true, though unknown God."¹² And his description of the process of learning not only about but also from other religions captures the heart of comparative

theology: “If we can teach something to the Brahmins in reading with them their sacred hymns, they too can teach us something in reading with us the Gospel of Christ.”¹³

In *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa thus rightly takes issue with the pretensions of objectivity or neutrality of the pioneers of the comparative study of religions.¹⁴ Drawing from examples of a number of nineteenth-century comparativists (Frederick Denison Maurice, James Freeman Clarke, John Caird, Charles Hardwick, John Wordsworth, and Frank Field Ellingwood), she points out that “what today’s historians might consider an illicit collusion of interests – between the scientific and the evangelical – was unapologetically championed by numerous nineteenth-century comparativists.”¹⁵ Though twentieth-century historians of religion and scholars of comparative religion have attempted to approach the discipline from a more neutral or objective perspective, many, from Friedrich Heiler and Gerardus van der Leeuw to Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade, have also been accused of being covert theologians, as their presuppositions, categories, and conclusions were thought to be inflected by religious presuppositions.¹⁶ The work of Eliade has been widely scrutinized for its traces of Eastern Orthodox Christian theological motifs,¹⁷ and Jonathan Smith laments that Eliade’s integration of morphological and historical methods happened “at an extraordinary cost – by encompassing both within an onto-theological hierarchy.”¹⁸ Even the very attempts “to demarcate the science of religion from recognized forms of theological discourse” have been judged to “appear as moments within the larger liberal theological project of liberating the discourse on religion from dogmatism and exclusivism.”¹⁹ As such, most of the early history of the comparative study of religion might effectively be read as the history of comparative theology. Both disciplines ultimately emerged on different sides of the checkered attempts to engage the reality of religious diversity in a scholarly manner.

It may be somewhat misleading to trace the origins of the new comparative theology directly to the older use of the term, since its intention was to develop a scientific comparison of religions. However, in contrasting the old and the new usages of the term comparative theology, some of the distinctive features of comparative theology clearly come to the fore. While the comparative study of religions continues to pursue the goals of scholarly neutrality and scientific understanding, comparative theology has come to acknowledge and fully embrace its normative starting point and goal. The distinctiveness of what has come to be called the “new” comparative theology involves “an honest acknowledgment of its own normative commitments and interests as the principal means – paradoxically – of avoiding the kind of distortion and bias of its nineteenth-century predecessor.”²⁰ Nicholson identifies three ways

in which the new comparative theology differs from its old “namesake”: its resistance to generalization, its attempt to understand the other religion on its own terms, and the acknowledgment of its own normative commitments. In contrast with the new comparative theology, Francis Clooney also states that “the older comparative theology seems, on the one hand, too comfortably immune to the complicated implications of what is learned, and on the other hand, too diffident about how a faith bravely vulnerable to scholarship might truly profit from the deep study of another tradition.”²¹

Though the explicit normative starting point and/or goal of comparative theology distinguishes it from the comparative study of religions, and from the historical and scientific comparison of theologies, comparative theology is still steeped in the methods and materials of the comparative study of religions. One of the primary principles of comparative religions as well as of comparative theology involves generating accurate historical understanding of the other religion in its internal diversity and development. Though comparative theologians are keenly aware of the inevitable biases coloring their understanding of the other, they still attempt to enter into the self-understanding of the other and affirm its distinctiveness. In *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, Francis Clooney states that “We do well to learn to read along with readers in the traditions, so that our own persisting ways of reading can be assessed and critiqued in light of the interests and interpretations of these respected traditional readers.”²² And in his Christian commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindus, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, he delves deeply into important Hindu commentaries on the text before advancing his own Christian resonances and reflections.²³

Like historians of religion and scholars of comparative religion, comparative theologians have come to narrow the focus of their comparison. While earlier comparative work sought to draw insight from the comparison of massive amounts of material on a variety of different topics, comparative scholarship today focuses on discrete phenomena in a limited number of traditions. In *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (originally published in 1933), Gerardus van der Leeuw attempted to cover most of the important religious topics in all of the religions known by him,²⁴ and in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade similarly drew from a vast number of oral as well as scriptural traditions to develop his theory on the role of cosmogonic myths in the history of religions.²⁵ By contrast, in her work in the comparative study of religions, Wendy Doniger dedicates an entire volume to the theme of “splitting” or creating a double in Greek and Hindu myths,²⁶ while Kimberley Patton engages in comparative work in order to make sense of images on Attic Greek vases of gods offering libations.²⁷ Similarly, Francis Clooney’s work in comparative theology focuses on specific themes in the work of particular

Christian and Hindu texts, such as the theme of surrender in the works of the Christian Francis of Sales and in the text of the Hindu Vedānta Deśika, or on a limited number of devotional texts dedicated to feminine expressions of the divine in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*.²⁸ In discussing human nature and the relationship between the transcendent and immanent realities in Christianity and Hinduism, John Thatamanil focuses in particular on Paul Tillich and Shankara, and Michelle Voss Roberts limits herself to Mechthild of Magdeburg and Lalleshwari of Kashmir in teasing out the theme of fluidity in the relationship between the human and the divine.²⁹

This focused approach to comparative theology is a way to overcome generalities. With regard to his comparison of the Virgin Mary and Hindu Goddesses, Clooney states: “Experiments in careful and comparative reading also help us to avoid essentializing the problem and solution, as if there is any unitary problem such as patriarchy or any unitary meaning for words such as ‘goddess’ or ‘human’ or even ‘mother.’”³⁰ It also allows the theologian or the comparativist to gain reasonable control of the material and to preserve a certain scholarly accountability and respectability. One of the challenges for all comparative work is that of mastering two religious traditions and avoiding superficiality or amateurishness. The focus on a relatively limited body of materials in two traditions goes a long way toward addressing these concerns. However, comparative theologians, like scholars of comparative religion, still need to account for the meaning of particular texts, teachings, and practices in the broader tradition and in its own reception history. The drawback of focusing on ever more detailed or narrow aspects of particular religions in comparative work may be its diminished relevance or impact, and the difficulty of inserting the work within broader intellectual or theological discussions.³¹

As is the case with the comparative study of religions, comparative theology proceeds by way of generating a *tertium comparationis*,³² or what Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman have called “vague comparative category” as the basis for comparison.³³ It represents a bridge between the traditions which allows both similarities and differences to appear. It may be derived from one or the other tradition, but is then abstracted or neutralized in order to form a generalized category applicable to different traditions. As such, while “bat mitzvah” represents a distinctly Jewish category, “girl’s puberty rite of passage” might represent the comparative category, and while “the dark night of the soul” might be a Christian concept, “mystical drought” might be the more generalized concept. Much has been made in the field of comparative religion about the nature and the bias of these vague categories.³⁴ Since they are generally derived from a particular tradition, they might be seen to color the perception of the other religion by imposing a particular alien focus or

distorting the material. Neville and Wildman therefore caution that “a vague comparative category ought to be vulnerable to correction through the discovery that aspects of the ideas being compared by means of it do not fit within its scope.”³⁵ In his discussion in *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God*, Francis Clooney states that the expression “loving surrender” “is found explicitly in neither text.”³⁶ It is a theme that permeates both texts and that is expressed through images and analogues.

The religious origin or bias of certain comparative categories may represent less of a methodological challenge for comparative theology than for the comparative study of religion. In the former it is generally acknowledged that the comparative quest arises from a particular religious tradition and with particular theological interest. Comparative theologians must of course also develop comparative categories that allow them to probe the proper analogues in another tradition. But comparative theology does not engage in comparison for its own sake, or only for the sake of greater scholarly understanding, but in order to gain deeper understanding of a topic of religious interest to the theologian. The difference with the comparative study of religions may not always be obvious or pronounced. After all, the commitment of the scholar of comparative religions to engage in a prolonged comparative effort is also often based on a profound personal interest in the material. Yet comparative theologians might also feel called to tackle some of the broader theological questions of their respective traditions. It is thus not surprising that the *tertium comparationis* in comparative theology is often shaped and informed by the tradition of the comparative theologian.

While comparative theologians may use vague comparative categories as a bridge into other religions, some focus theological reflection on the vague categories themselves. Thus, in the Comparative Religious Ideas project, comparative theologians Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman attempt to develop more overarching theories on the very categories of “ultimate reality,” “the human condition,” and “religious truth,” based on the materials harnessed from different religious traditions.³⁷ This approach may be seen to exhibit more affinity with classical comparative religion or with philosophy of religion.³⁸ The beliefs and insights of the various religious traditions are used as preliminary to the philosophical work, which is arguably ultimately the focus and goal. Neville indeed defines comparative theology “in terms of its subject matter, not in terms of the antecedent theological commitment of the comparativists.”³⁹

Comparative theology, like the comparative study of religions, focuses on both the similarities and the differences between the objects compared. Whereas in the case of comparative religion, similarities may shed new

interpretive light on the nature and function of a particular phenomenon, in the case of comparative theology, it may cure a religion of its sense of uniqueness, while also reinforcing the truth or validity of a particular religious idea or practice. As Clooney puts it, the purpose of comparative theology is for theologians to become “professionally aware that the details of their own theological traditions are more often than not shared with the theologies of other religious traditions.”⁴⁰ Differences, on the other hand, shed light on the particularity of certain religions, which may also serve purely intellectual or normative interests. From a normative perspective, they may lead to a reappraisal of the distinctive truth of one’s own tradition, or to a process of learning something new from the other religion. Though comparing theologies and texts with a focus on similarities and differences may seem clear-cut, Clooney points out that the difficulty of this type of comparative theology lies in knowing “what to do with these similarities and differences once they are identified, how to decide which ones matter more, and how to determine which are the significant questions raised by them.”⁴¹ In his own work, Clooney focuses mainly on drawing attention to the similarities and differences. After a close and detailed comparison of the Virgin Mary and Hindu goddesses, for example, he notes a series of similarities in that “they are all honored as persons with bodies, as mothers, as defined in relation to the males in their lives but also as possessed of their own power, and as willing to get involved in human affairs in particular ways that male divinities do not rival.”⁴² The comparison, however, also sheds new light on the particular status of Mary as not-God:

As not-God, Mary is entirely here, all the more powerfully present. She combines the material and spiritual in a way most analogous to the portrayals of the divine feminine in our three Hindu hymns. The “not” in “not-God” is productive in the construction of Mary as a focus of veneration, as the miraculous person in whom the divine is suddenly present.⁴³

These comparative insights may be understood in either historical or comparative theological terms. Clooney himself does not tend to draw normative or comparative theological conclusions from his comparative work. He certainly does not suggest that Christians should worship Hindu goddesses, nor does he seek to argue or conclude from his study of Hindu and Christian conceptions of God that “Jesus is God and Siva is not God.”⁴⁴ But neither does he elaborate on the implications of his comparative insights for Christian theology. This he leaves to his readers or to other theologians.

Clooney’s approach to comparative theology may thus be typified as a comparison of theologies. It provides an immense service to comparative

theology in that it models an expert and patient study, and a careful and detailed comparison of ideas and texts. However, since Clooney does explicitly identify himself as a Catholic theologian in all of his books, his work may thus also be considered as an example of confessional comparative theology.

The difference between comparative theology and the comparative study of religions is at times thin, or not always clear-cut. In the Comparative Religious Ideas project, Neville and Wildman emphasize the “primacy of *cognition* in comparing religious ideas”⁴⁵ and they ground their approach in careful methodological considerations which include a systematic effort to “avoid imposing biases”⁴⁶ on the comparative categories themselves and on their application. All of this indeed represents sage advice for both comparative theology and the comparative study of religions. However, if comparative theology is defined “not by the theological commitments of the comparativist but by the subject matter, religious or theological ideas and how they are well studied,”⁴⁷ then there is little to distinguish comparative theology from the comparative study of religions. Nevertheless, Neville himself also wants his comparative theology “to aim at theological truth.”⁴⁸ His work may thus also be considered as an example of meta-confessional comparative theology.

1.2 Confessional Comparative Theology

Confessional comparative theology involves a process of engaging in constructive theological reflection with other religions from within the religious framework of a particular religious tradition. This tradition provides the impetus, the theological questions or problems to be probed, and the guiding norms for discerning truth in other religions. It also represents the ultimate goal and arbiter of the comparative theological work. Theology is here thus understood as reflection on the faith and practice of a particular religious community, and comparative theology is done at the service of that community.

The confessional approach to comparative theology manifests itself in four principal ways: in the avowedly religious identity of the comparative theologian, in the choice of topics, the criteria of discernment, and the stated goal of the comparative theological exercise. We will examine each of these in turn. Thus, when Francis Clooney compares St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on loving surrender to God, or the biblical Song of Songs with the Tamil Holy Word of Mouth on divine absence and longing, readers presume and accept the fact that he approaches these texts as a member of the Society of Jesus and as a Roman Catholic theologian. Especially in his earlier works, Clooney is very explicit about his own religious and intellectual starting point

and location. In *Theology after Vedānta*, he states: “Theology, to characterize it in a non-technical fashion, is distinct from the study of religion (with which it overlaps in many of its procedures) because theology is an inquiry carried on by believers who allow their belief to remain an explicit and influential factor in their research, analysis and writing.”⁴⁹ Though he immersed himself as much as possible in the traditions and texts he was studying, Clooney states in *Seeing through Texts*:

I was always quite open about the fact that while I came with a determination to be more than a spectator and was seeking earnestly to step back from my presuppositions about what I was hearing and seeing, I nevertheless remained always a Jesuit, a Roman Catholic priest who was also helping out on Sunday mornings in a large urban parish.⁵⁰

In *Hindu God, Christian God*, he acknowledges that “I write from within the Christian tradition and from a Christian perspective.”⁵¹ This firm commitment and grounding continues into his most recent work, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, where he proclaims: “To love deeply and affirm deep truths in a world where many loves flourish in the particular, we need first of all to be grounded in the specificity and particularity of our own enduring love – for this author, in Jesus Christ.”⁵² In confessing their religious starting point, confessional comparative theologians seek to fully utilize it in various stages of the comparative exercise.

This religious starting point of the comparative theologian plays a role in the first place in the choice of texts and topics to be compared. All comparative theology involves some degree of arbitrariness. Not only are there numerous religious traditions, but each religion has a multitude of texts, teachings, practices, and artistic expressions which might become the object of comparison. For a confessional comparative theologian, the choice of another religion will likely have to do with a combination of exposure and appeal. Comparative theologians may be drawn to a particular element in another tradition by their personal religious quest, by more theoretical questions, or by way of the social and historical importance of a particular idea or practice. But in the case of confessional comparative theology, each of these will be shaped by the religious background of the theologian.

James Fredericks describes the process of choosing a focus for comparison as happening “dialectically”:

Comparison begins with the critical study of another religion, sometimes by means of the reading of classic texts, sometimes by means of personal dialogue with the practitioners of the other religious paths, and optimally by taking both

routes. The conversation with the other tradition eventually becomes a conversation within the home tradition in which its classic texts, art, rituals, ascetic practices, etc. are reinterpreted in light of the other tradition. The critical correlations established in the work of comparison can be positive or negative – sometimes the correlation will be a recognition of similarity, sometimes of difference.⁵³

Comparison usually begins with the recognition of striking similarities with the theologian's home tradition. It is the awareness of similarities between the role of Amida in Pure Land Buddhism and Jesus Christ in Christianity that led several Christian theologians (Karl Barth, Henri de Lubac, John Cobb) to engage in comparative theological reflection on its meaning for Christian faith.⁵⁴ And David Burrell's work on the relationship between medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers is also inspired by the similarities in their notions of creation and freedom.⁵⁵

Most of Francis Clooney's comparative theological work is based on some form of "recognition" of close parallels to Christian theological themes in Hindu texts and a subsequent focus on an analogous Christian text for the purpose of comparison.⁵⁶ Thus, in *Beyond Compare*, he notes: "After reading Deśika's *Essence*, I considered a number of possible analogues in my own tradition and found in the *Treatise* a Catholic text that promised to read well with and in light of the *Essence*."⁵⁷ It is thus often the experience of being touched or inspired by elements from another tradition that leads to a search for analogues or regrounding in the home tradition. In the end, however, Clooney, like other confessional comparative theologians, frames the comparative endeavor from within his own tradition. "Not only have I begun my chapters with Christian theologians," he states, "but I frame the questions and discover the answers that fit nicely into the categories and expectations of the Christian theological tradition."⁵⁸

The series *Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts* illustrates the dialectical process involved in the choice of material for comparative theological engagement.⁵⁹ The authors are drawn to a particular text partly due to their religious background and predispositions. But the text from the other tradition in turn brings them back to their own tradition and to a recovery or reinterpretation of their own texts or ideas in light of the other. In his Christian commentary on the Hindu *Nārada Sūtras*, Daniel Sheridan speaks of the sacred texts of other religions as "catalysts" which

can help to grasp afresh our own tradition and to make it our own in a way adequate to the demands and challenges of the modern culture that we live in. The catalyst will function to reinvigorate our imaginations and our enthusiasm,

to re-stimulate our jaded perception of the beauty of God so that we may respond with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength to the lovable and personal reality of God.⁶⁰

As is evident in the Christian commentaries on the Bhagavad Gītā, one and the same text may draw comparisons with any number of Christian texts and thinkers, from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius to the *Book of Common Prayer*, and from the Patristic theologian Evagrius Ponticus to the modern mystic Simone Weil. The very diversity of possible texts and topics for fruitful comparative theological reflection may raise the specter of arbitrariness but also suggests the endless potential of comparative theology.

The choice of material for comparative theology may also arise from pressing theological questions and challenges in the home tradition. The confrontation with certain existential or theological problems may lead to inquiry into how the same questions have been dealt with in another tradition, and what one may learn from this. The Buddhist thinker Masao Abe, for example, was mainly interested in Christianity in order to learn from the ways in which this tradition had tackled the questions of secularization or “the problem of religion and irreligion.”⁶¹ And Christian comparative theologians such as Henri Le Saux, Raimon Panikkar, John Keenan, Joseph O’Leary, John Thatamanil, and Michelle Voss Roberts have all turned to Hinduism or Buddhism to deal with some of the intractable problems of Christian dualistic metaphysics.⁶² Besides these large theological questions, comparative theologians may also look to other traditions to address concrete social and ethical questions such as economic injustice or ecological devastation.⁶³ Thus, Laurenti Magesa and other African Christian theologians have drawn from the communitarian approach of traditional African religions to garner a greater sense of solidarity and sufficiency in Christian approaches to economic development and ecological awareness.⁶⁴

In his work on the problem of moral struggle in Christianity and Buddhism through a comparative theological engagement of Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, David Clairmont argues that “every potentially transformative inter-religious encounter is based, at least to some degree, on mutual acknowledgment of personal weakness and struggle (both moral and intellectual), and as such presupposes that religious traditions carry through time, in multifarious exemplars and sustained arguments, tentative answers to fundamental human questions which few if any individual religious persons ever fully answer or embody.”⁶⁵ It is thus an experience of moral failure or powerlessness that here drives the comparative theological exercise. Among the various reasons for engaging in comparative work (facilitative, persuasive, dialectical, and reconstructive), Clairmont focuses in particular on the “transformative

rationale” which “seeks through its work to bring religious communities to more acute sensitivities to their own past moral failures and future possibilities, precisely through the process of comparison that emphasizes mutual moral transformation within strong religious difference.”⁶⁶ The transformation here envisaged has less to do with new constructive ethical proposals or with religious change, but rather with a return to one’s “own tradition with new approaches to reading its resources gathered through the comparative study, balancing attention to real and irreconcilable diversity of life with a hope that visions of what is good and fitting for human life are not ultimately incommensurable.”⁶⁷

In these confessional approaches to comparative theology, the home tradition thus represents the starting point or the point of reference in engaging the other religion. It determines not only the focus for comparison but also the relative importance of certain similarities and differences. Though the other tradition is treated with openness and respect, each tradition thus approaches the other with its own theological questions.

A second characteristic of a confessional approach to comparative theology is the use of criteria of discernment derived from one’s own religious tradition. For believers or members of a particular religion, all truth is ultimately derived from the core texts, teachings, and practices of that tradition. Hence, these will inevitably play a role in judging the truth or validity of other religions.

Though the general principle of relying on religion-specific criteria in confessional comparative theology may be clear and evident, the actual identification and application of such criteria is more complicated. Every religion is based on a whole range of normative truth claims that are expressed in narrative, precepts, and doctrines, and it is not always easy to determine a clear hierarchy of norms, or which principles or criteria apply to a particular instance of discernment. The normative criteria of a tradition may moreover themselves shift and develop through time, as the interpretation of certain texts may change in response to historical and social developments.

The complexity of identifying clear criteria of discernment within any religious tradition is evident in the volume *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, where theologians from different religions reflect on their own religious principles and processes of discernment.⁶⁸ Theologians from the same tradition may emphasize different general criteria, while certain criteria may at times overlap in different religions. In his discussion of criteria of moral discernment in the Jewish tradition, David Elcott also points to the general “messiness of moral deliberation.”⁶⁹ Though the prohibition against idolatry and the Decalogue represents a constant and central criterion in the Jewish tradition, he doubts that there are any other criteria which would be

accepted as normative in all contemporary varieties of Judaism. In reflecting on Christian criteria of discernment, Reinhold Bernhardt states that he finds these principles “not in the first instance in propositional beliefs about Jesus Christ but in the foundational attitudes Jesus Christ proclaimed to be essential for the God-relationship and that thus have become essential for Christian faith at the existential level.”⁷⁰ He identifies in particular transcendence, freedom, agape, and responsibility. Gavin D’Costa, for his part, focuses more on Jesus’s unconditional love and self-sacrifice as a criterion for assessing the truth of another religion or religious practice.⁷¹ Perry Schmidt-Leukel also uses this criterion of self-negating love for recognizing validity and truth in the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of the Bodhisattva (and vice versa, for Buddhists to recognize elements of truth in the person and example of Jesus Christ).⁷² Besides texts and founding figures, comparative theologians may also turn to the example of saints or leaders as guides in the process of inter-religious discernment.⁷³

In addition to the criteria themselves, it is not always clear how and by whom the process of discernment is to take place, or who becomes the ultimate arbiter of truth. Some traditions may refer to a highest teaching authority or else the reception of the community as the final authority. But any integration of new ideas or practices within a particular tradition is generally a slow process and the result of various factors. In the case of confessional comparative theology, discernment may at least start with comparative theologians belonging to the same tradition,⁷⁴ and lead to a broader dialogue with other theologians and with the religious community at large.

Even though the idea of the normativity of one’s own tradition does not provide a clear and ready answer to the questions of interreligious discernment, it is the intention to judge the other tradition not on the basis of one’s own personal or subjective views, but in accord with the given teachings of a tradition that characterizes the confessional approach to comparative theology. The use of religion-specific criteria of truth does not necessarily presuppose belief in the uniqueness and superiority of these criteria above those of any other religious tradition. A good number of criteria of discernment are in fact shared by numerous religious traditions. And resorting to the revealed norms of a particular tradition may be regarded as an expression of humble recognition that from a position of faith one cannot but understand and assess the teachings and practices of another from within the contours of one’s own tradition. Additionally, it may be regarded as an expression of respect for the other insofar as only the use of criteria derived from one religion with its own history of revelation and collective discernment would be equal to the task of discerning truth in another.

The third distinctive characteristic of confessional comparative theology relates to its goal, which involves contributing to theological reflection within a particular religious tradition. Confessional comparative theology seeks to deepen, enrich, enhance, or critique the teachings and practices of a given religion without questioning or going beyond its basic beliefs and religious presuppositions. This, of course, sets certain limits to the possibilities of comparative theology. It does not entertain religious questions or practices that have no relevance for the religion seeking to learn from the comparative exercise. And it does not consider the possibility of discovering truth that would fundamentally exceed or clash with the contours of that tradition. But in focusing on a particular tradition, it aims at ultimately enriching the lives of all those who belong to that religion. In the process of attempting to enrich a particular religious tradition, the confessional comparative theologian thus remains mindful of the particular community of believers for whom he or she develops his or her theological thinking. In his comparative theological engagement with Hindu conceptions of God, Clooney maintains that he seeks “to develop plausible views on God’s existence, character, embodiment, and revelation in a way that is recognizable to Christians and able to be affirmed by Christians.”⁷⁵ Elsewhere, he also emphasizes that comparative theology “needs to remain in living connection with the tradition and faith experience of particular communities, which must be convinced that a comparativist’s work is actually theological ... Accordingly, we have to continue using tradition-specific theological language in setting up and working out our comparisons, as we ‘read from’ and ‘write for’ communities with specific theological cultures.”⁷⁶ And with regard to his particular focus on moral struggle, Clairmont states that “one who adopts a theological perspective in a comparative conversation is committed to keeping the person who believes in the wisdom of a tradition, despite her or his doubts and inability to live by that tradition’s moral judgments, at the center of comparative investigation.”⁷⁷ Though this does not mean that all comparative theological thinking has to be immediately understood by or translated for people in the pew, it does mean that they are never far from the theologian’s mind and remain as ultimate recipients of the comparative theological effort.

Essential to confessional comparative theology is thus its sense of accountability to a larger theological and religious community. Though the work of comparative theology is often solitary, involving demanding scholarly engagement with the other tradition, it is open to critical reflection by scholars from the other tradition, by fellow comparative theologians, and by the broader theological and religious community. This communal approach to comparative theology may be more easily achieved in some traditions than in others. Some religions may have more developed institutional structures which allow

for the theological vetting of ideas, and which support theological experimentation. But institutions may also be more conservative and resistant to change. Comparative theologians may themselves also become torn between religions, or develop some degree of hybrid religious identity which may come to lessen concern with the orthodoxy or orthopraxis of any particular religion. Confessional comparative theology thus requires mutual commitment and openness on the part of the theologian as well as the tradition it seeks to serve.

The question of the confessional identity of the theologian and the confessional boundaries of a tradition presents itself of course differently from one tradition to the next. Each religion has its own approach to initiation and sets its own parameters of membership and belonging. While some may be well-defined and stringent, others may be more vague and flexible, and while some religions attach great importance to orthodoxy, others might be more focused on orthopraxis. As such, the negotiation of confessional boundaries may differ significantly for comparative theologians from different religious traditions.

1.3 **Meta-Confessional Comparative Theology**

While comparative theology may be firmly anchored in a particular tradition, it may also be approached as essentially unconstrained by the doctrinal or ritual constraints of any particular tradition. This type of comparative theology has been called interreligious theology,⁷⁸ transreligious theology,⁷⁹ or interstitial theology.⁸⁰ I here use the term meta-confessional theology to point to both the continuity and discontinuity with confessional theology. It still uses the theological insights of different religions or confessional traditions in order to attain to religious truth that is not limited to any one religion. For J. R. Hustwit, transreligious theology indeed “involves a theologian encountering the other and, rather than applying the fruits of that encounter to her own tradition, proceeds in a process of collaborative inquiry that transgresses the boundaries of what can be accommodated by the tradition. Coherence with any particular tradition is not strictly necessary.”⁸¹

Proponents of this type of comparative theology often draw inspiration from Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the famous historian of religions and founder of the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions. In his *Towards a World Theology*, he seeks to develop what he calls a “Theology of Comparative Religion” in which “the material on the basis of which a theological interpretation shall be proffered, of the world, man, the truth, and of salvation – of God and His dealings with His world – is to be the material that the study of the history of religion provides.”⁸² By drawing a distinction between a

universal experience of “faith” and particular “cumulative traditions,”⁸³ he sought to develop a “theology of the faith of man” which “when constructed, should be acceptable to, even cogent for, all humankind.”⁸⁴

This meta-confessional approach to comparative theology has found a home in the “theology without walls” scholarly group and forum and in the *Open Theology* journal. Jerry Martin, one of its pioneers, presents transreligious theology or theology without walls as an alternative to comparative theology. While the latter “looks beyond their traditions, but keeps intact sufficient elements to provide compasses and rudders,” he sees transreligious theology as a way “to go further and to consider the total spiritual resources of humankind, every source of revelation and enlightenment and insight anew, without dragging our traditional anchors behind us.”⁸⁵ Wesley Wildman also agrees that, though transreligious theology has its roots in confessional comparative theology, it should be clearly distinguished from the confessional orientation of the latter.⁸⁶ Though he recognizes the necessity of religious traditions to nourish transreligious theology at this stage, he also envisions a state beyond such dependency when “its parasitic relationship with positive religious traditions falls away.” He describes that type of theology as a “postreligious theology, or nonreligious theology – that is, theology that makes intellectual sense with no specific religious tradition at its root and remains socially viable with no living religious institution for support.”⁸⁷ Wildman is especially concerned with the place of theology in the secular academy and with the need to divest it from any sectarian basis or biases while still allowing for the “highest level thinking about ultimate reality and the human condition.”⁸⁸ Thatamanil defines transreligious theology as “the quest for interreligious wisdom,” and as “constructive theology done in conversation with and drawing from the resources of more than one tradition.”⁸⁹ Unlike confessional comparative theology, transreligious theology does not “make a neat and singular point of origin or mode of religious belonging normative for transreligious theology.”⁹⁰ Perry Schmidt-Leukel uses the term interreligious theology and defines it as “that type of doing theology that reflects on the major issues of human life by drawing on insights from more than one religious tradition.”⁹¹ The goal of such theological exercise is again not so much the furthering of any particular theological tradition, but the development of a “World Theology,” a “Global Theology,” or a “Universal Theology.”⁹²

The main difference between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology thus lies in its conception of religious truth. Whereas confessional comparative theology accedes to the conception of truth developed in a particular religion, meta-confessional comparative theology starts from a more open-ended and undefined conception of religious truth as not limited to the normative teachings of any one religion, and thus requiring “conversation

and collaboration” between religions.⁹³ Thatamanil here adheres to Gordon Kaufman’s dynamic and dialogical understanding of truth as always “in the process of becoming” and as “emerging (quite unexpectedly) in the course of conversation.”⁹⁴ Meta-confessional comparative theologians thus consider their approach to truth to be more universal or encompassing than that of confessional comparative theology. Robert Neville argues that “commitments to certain ideas as true, for us comparative theologians, should come at the end of the inquiry, not the beginning.”⁹⁵ Rather than “faith seeking understanding,” he thus views his approach to comparative theology as “understanding seeking faith.”⁹⁶ Meta-confessional comparative theology thus moves toward a philosophical, rather than a traditional, theological understanding of truth. Neville acknowledges that “my theology is a systematic philosophical theology that I turn back on the comparative base to line up new comparative perspectives to investigate.”⁹⁷ In a similar vein, Raimon Panikkar speaks of his approach as “imparative philosophy” involving an “open philosophical attitude ready to learn from whatever philosophical corner of the world, but without claiming to compare philosophies from an objective, neutral and transcendent vantage point.”⁹⁸ His “diatopical hermeneutics” also moves away from identification with one specific tradition toward an attempt to speak a more universal language: “I am attempting to speak a language that will make sense for the followers of more than one philosophical tradition – a risky task perhaps, but necessary if one is to do justice to a cross-cultural investigation.”⁹⁹

While confessional comparative theologians are consciously grounded in a particular religious tradition, meta-confessional comparative theologians often identify with more than one religious tradition. The phenomenon of religious hybridity, multiple religious belonging or spiritual fluidity has become more widespread in society at large as individuals have ready access to the teachings and practices of many religious traditions.¹⁰⁰ Theologians steeped in the study of one or more other religious traditions may also find themselves torn between religions, or drawing from the teachings of different religions without privileging any one, in the process of forming their own theological views. While some experience this as a source of conflict and even torture,¹⁰¹ others celebrate it as a source of freedom to develop their own religious views without submitting to the confines of any one tradition. Religious hybridity is thus characterized by the freedom to move back and forth between the teachings, practices, and normative criteria of different religions.

With regard to the choice of topics for comparative theological engagement, meta-confessional comparative theology tends to focus on theological questions common to various religious traditions, or on broad religious topics. For example, Robert Neville’s volumes thus focus on *Ultimate Realities*,

The Human Condition, and *Religious Truth*, while Keith Ward's work in comparative theology centers on revelation, creation, human nature, community, and human fulfillment.¹⁰² John Thatamanil's book *The Immanent Divine* also has the subtitle *God, Creation and the Human Predicament*, and the topics proposed in the Theology without Walls forum were presented under such general topics as "the meaning of life, the role of narrative, love, death, eschatology, prayer and meditation, or the theological relevance of one's own life experiences."¹⁰³ Each of these topics is discussed drawing from the teachings of various religions and without privileging any in particular.¹⁰⁴

The criteria for determining or discerning the truth of particular teachings or the validity of certain practices are here derived not from one particular tradition, but from various traditions, depending on the topic at hand, or else on criteria extrinsic to all religions. As a Buddhist-Christian, Paul Knitter states that for him Christianity represents the norm when it comes to questions of social justice and engagement, while Buddhism has become the norm with regard to questions of spirituality.¹⁰⁵ Wesley Wildman, for his part, argues that science might become the starting point for a transreligious theology, testing religious hypotheses and claims and providing the basis to adjudicate the greater validity or plausibility of the teachings of one religion over the other.¹⁰⁶ Perry Schmidt-Leukel still views himself primarily as a Christian theologian and he regards "Jesus as a normative exemplar of what a genuine mediation of divine presence is like."¹⁰⁷ However, he immediately qualifies this by allowing for "the possibility of other savior figures of equal status ... who may also reveal something of God that is normative."¹⁰⁸ There is thus no conformity among meta-confessional comparative theologians regarding criteria of truth. Though sympathetic to the overall project of transreligious theology, J. R. Hustwit remarks that the absence of given criteria for intelligibility represents the greatest challenge for meta-confessional comparative theology, since "no matter how many experts agree, or how elegantly a theological hypothesis coheres, in the end, truth claims can never be verified with finality. I suspect that the best we can do are 'better' and 'worse' judgments, cobbled together from various indirect and worldview-contingent truth criteria."¹⁰⁹ He suggests elsewhere that criteria of truth may here derive simply from the inner coherence of the theological insights, or else from "the relative consensus of a community of experts."¹¹⁰ He does not specify, however, how such a community might be constituted.

Meta-confessional comparative theology is addressed not only to members of a particular religion but also to individuals who find themselves outside, beyond, or between religious traditions. John Thatamanil, for example, speaks of the relevance of this work for those who belong within the category of "spiritual but not religious" or "nones."¹¹¹ Perry Schmidt-Leukel also speaks

of interreligious theology as the expression “at an extremely high level of intellectual sophistication” of what takes place on a more popular level among individuals with multireligious identities. “People with different degrees of multireligious identities,” he states, “represent on a micro level a development which on the macro level of our global society indicates the overall future of theology.”¹¹² Tinu Ruparell develops his “interstitial theology” as “a form of cross-cultural philosophy which seeks to consciously hybridize elements of disparate traditions to better articulate the religious location of many people living in pluralistic societies.”¹¹³ He envisions this type of comparative theology to lead to what he calls a “recombinant religious tradition,” the validity and truth of which would be tested on pragmatic grounds:

If sufficient people settle this liminal land, the newly formed recombinant tradition will have been found to be viable. Interstitial theology thus asks pragmatic questions: does the new tradition “speak” to people, does it fill their needs, reflect their unique place between traditions? A viable tradition will retain ties to its parents yet exhibit the open-endedness and novelty which will be its hallmarks, but being pragmatically justified, the viability of a recombinant tradition can only be ascertained after the fact.¹¹⁴

Since meta-confessional or interreligious comparative theology situates itself consciously outside or beyond traditional theological and institutional structures, its impact is more difficult to measure. It may indeed lead to new communities, based on a synthesis between particular religions. Clooney also states that comparative theology may call into existence “liminal communities” which will be rooted in multiple communities and draw people who also remain committed to one or the other primary community. He also suggests that “As the number of persons living this complicated intellectual and spiritual life grows larger, the fixed boundaries separating religions become all the less plausible, not due simply to demographics or social change, but now also because the theological insights arising in comparative study will push the boundaries.”¹¹⁵

One of the challenges for meta-confessional comparative theology, however, remains the tension between its universal claims and the absence of actual communities of theologians or practitioners who might be the arbiters and recipients of comparative theological insights. In aiming to be more universal, meta-confessional comparative theology paradoxically tends to become more idiosyncratic. It may speak to a certain number of individuals, but there is no ready mechanism to adjudicate between one and the other comparative theological synthesis. Though claiming to go beyond any particular theological tradition, meta-confessional comparative theology may still play an important critical role with regard to confessional theologies

in that it may, as Hans Gustafson puts it, “nudge religious and interreligious theology and dialogue out of their usual secure comfort zones and possibly oversimplified view of religious identities and pull them into the liberative and imaginative growth-filled spaces of transreligious theology.”¹¹⁶

1.4 Between Confessional and Meta-Confessional Comparative Theology

Though confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology represent two different conceptions of the meaning and goal of comparative theology, there is in actual practice also some continuity between the two. Meta-confessional comparative theologians who aim or claim to go beyond the borders of any religion tend to still be shaped predominantly by the conceptual or symbolic framework of a particular religion, whether consciously or not. And confessional comparative theologians at times push the boundaries of their respective traditions so far that they challenge or test the self-understanding of particular religions. The notion of universality moreover applies to both confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology, as confessional comparative theology generally considers its particular teachings and practices to be universally true and valid.¹¹⁷

Though pursuing a truth that is not limited to the revealed teachings of any one tradition, the worldview, symbol system, and values of meta-confessional comparative theology are often still indebted primarily to one or the other tradition. Some comparative theologians might also move back and forth between theological and more philosophical approaches to truth. A case in point is Raimon Panikkar. While his early work is clearly confessional, engaging Hinduism from a normative Christian position, his later work becomes less incarnational or Christocentric and focuses more on a conception of reality beyond or encompassing the particularities of all religions.¹¹⁸ He comes to refer to theology as “the handmaid of philosophy”¹¹⁹ and stretches Christian terms or develops his own neologisms (the cosmotheandric experience, christophany) that may be interpreted in more abstract and inclusive ways. While using Christian symbols and texts, he thus knowingly interprets them in ways that transcend traditional Christian meanings. Though never rejecting his Christian identity, Panikkar speaks paradoxically of his “refusal – as a Christian – to belong to a simple religious sect that has existed on its own for only two thousand years.”¹²⁰

Other comparative theologians might claim identification with more than one religion, but still seek to orient their work toward consideration by one religion in particular. Though moving back and forth between Buddhist and

Christian categories and criteria, Paul Knitter still states in *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* that he is writing for his “fellow Christians” and that the questions of orthodoxy that are raised in the book are “directed to the Christian community, not the Buddhist.”¹²¹ While John Thatamanil seems to be in search of a “consensus” between Hindu and Christian conceptions of the relationship between immanence and transcendence,¹²² he also emphasizes the importance for comparative theologians to have and engage a home community:

Ultimately only sustained conversation between theologians and their home communities will determine whether the fruit of any particular venture in comparative theology will be received by those communities as contributing to their collective flourishing. Comparative theologians cannot afford to be solo operators. They are obliged to articulate why their proposals ought to be received by their home communities even if globally valid a priori criteria are unavailable.¹²³

Conversely, confessional comparative theologians may at times find themselves temporarily in between traditions and without firm mooring in one or another religion. Even though Clooney emphasizes the importance of a primary commitment in comparative theological work, he also suggests, especially in his later work, that this type of theology may come to unsettle that commitment and that in-depth knowledge of another tradition leaves the comparative theologian “if she is successful, at a border between two worlds, in a space distinguished by a seeming multiplication of loyalties.”¹²⁴ He speaks in this regard of a “cultivated hybridity” which may lead to the creation of a “liminal religious community that seeks to understand faith that is complexified by comparative learning.”¹²⁵ He thus openly reflects on the possibility of a loss of a primary or dominant commitment for those involved in comparative theology:

We are then left in a vulnerable, fruitful learning state, engaging these powerful works on multiple levels and, paradoxically, learning more while mastering less; we have more teachers and fewer masters. It may appear that by this practice we acquire a surfeit of scriptures, yet have no Scripture; multiple languages and words and images, yet no tested, effective manner of speaking; a wealth of theological insights, yet no sure doctrine; not one but two rich religious traditions from which to benefit, and yet – because we know too much – no single, normative tradition that commands our attention.¹²⁶

Throughout *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, Clooney gives expression to the tension involved in immersing oneself fully in another tradition and imagining

ourselves “falling, mostly by choice, into the somewhat obscure and unstable space lying between traditions”¹²⁷ and the desire or need “to find our way back into Christian theology.”¹²⁸ He plays with the notion of divine presence and absence that is the theme of the texts compared in this book to express his sense of loyalty to two different traditions:

In the unfinished drama of our times, we are always stepping away from the certainties of faith, even if we return a moment later, steadfast again until the beloved departs again. When we expect one love to put aside all others but come to see that the intensity of one love does not diminish the intensity of another, then we stand onto admittedly uncharted ground.¹²⁹

Though there is no doubt that Clooney remained established within the Christian tradition, he voices the experiences of other confessional comparative theologians who become personally implicated and enriched by their study of another religion. The very engagement in comparative theology generally arises from a fascination and identification with certain teachings or practices of another religion and a desire to integrate something of these in one's own. Michaël Amaladoss likens in-depth dialogue with another religion with a state of liminality, or with individuals who “exist on the border between two communities and their symbolic universes, feeling at ease within both, and thus experience religious solidarity with each of the two communities.”¹³⁰ While for confessional comparative theologians, this liminal state is temporary or transitional, it may become a more permanent reality for meta-confessional comparative theologians.

Some comparative theologians may use criteria of truth that are only tangentially related to one or the other tradition. In her work, Michelle Voss Robert alludes to the importance of the “normative gesture” in comparative theology.¹³¹ It is not always clear, however, whether that normativity is grounded in a particular religion or whether it transcends the religions compared. Her book *Dualities* compares the writings of Christian mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg and the Kashmir Shaiva theologian Lalleśwarī, who are both considered outsiders within their own religious traditions. Through a careful reading of these theologians, she surfaces the metaphor of fluidity as an important theme in both religious thinkers. Voss Roberts uses it as a resource to develop a feminist theology which draws on both traditions to break through the traditional dualisms and develop a more intimate and fluid relationship between the divine and human bodies, between human beings and between humans and nature. Though the criterion for discerning truth in the Christian and Hindu texts is not clearly derived from one or the other tradition, the starting point and goal of her work is

still the Christian theological tradition: “The interplay of the texts and lives of Mechthild and Lalleśwarī has drawn us more deeply into a fluid dynamic that deserves greater prominence in Christian theology.”¹³² Similarly, in her book *Tastes of the Divine*, Voss Roberts attempts to develop a “holistic theology of the emotions,” and she challenges traditional Christian theology by demonstrating the spiritual richness and depth of the Hindu theory and expression of the *rasas*: “Although there is nothing predictable about this interplay, I have suggested that Christian readers might enhance their peaceful contemplation, reinforce their heartfelt love of God, or find fuel for their prophetic zeal as they immerse themselves in Hindu texts.”¹³³ There are thus different ways in which individual comparative theologians might conceive of their confessional or meta-confessional religious identity (as criteria and/or as target) and the way in which it plays out in their comparative theological work.

The point of demarcation between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology is at times determined not by the intention of the comparative theologian, but by the religious or confessional tradition itself. While a comparative theologian may hope to contribute to theological reflection within a particular tradition, some traditions may be averse to all comparative theological work, or to the work of a particular comparative theologian. In rejecting certain comparative theological insights or conclusions, a tradition thus places them automatically within the realm of meta-confessional comparative theology. The confessional nature of comparative theology thus also depends on the receptivity of a particular tradition, its theologians, believers, and guardians of orthodoxy or orthopraxis.

Robert Neville suggests that, in the case of Christianity, the difference between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology may lie in the particular denomination of the comparative theologian, Roman Catholic comparative theologians being more invested in “contributing to this Roman Catholic theological firmament on the principle that locating here is how to be a good Catholic Christian,” while Protestants maintain a more critical attitude toward their tradition, believing that “true religion ... has to do with direct relationship between individuals and God.”¹³⁴ The difference between religions and denominations and their respective institutional and theological structures may indeed play a role in the sense of identity and purpose of comparative theologians. Some traditions may have clearer avenues for theological engagement and discernment than others. Similarly, some religions or denominations may be more open to critical and constructive theological work than others, or have more clearly defined theological boundaries than others. The interaction between comparative theologians and their home traditions thus undoubtedly differs from one tradition to the next. But the main

distinguishing element between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology lies in its sense of accountability to a practicing community and its connection with a community of theologians or religious thinkers who reflect on the broader theological questions and the meaning of such practice.

Though there are significant differences between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology that could justify a completely different nomenclature, there are also sufficient similarities and continuities between the two approaches to the discipline to view them as variations of the same fundamental theological enterprise. Both approaches share the acknowledgment and constructive engagement of the reality of religious plurality in the pursuit of theological truth. There are, moreover, more subtle variations in the way comparative theology is conducted, depending on the epistemological status attributed to other religions. This will be the focus of Chapter 2.

Notes

1. Francis Clooney has identified the first English use of the term comparative theology in 1700 in a work by James Garden, *Comparative Theology: Or the True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology*. Here, the search is for a common ground between religions which would do away with violence over less important elements of religions. Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 31.
2. David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. L. Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 13: 9126.
3. Reid Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, "The Return of Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 490.
4. Louis Henry Jordan, *Comparative Religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1905), 27.
5. Jordan, *Comparative Religion*, 27.
6. James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1889), 3.
7. Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, 4.
8. The text was originally published in the journal *The Atlantic* in 1868 and in book form in 1871.
9. Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, 2.
10. Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, 15.
11. In Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1874), xix.
12. Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, xxx.
13. Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, xxv.
14. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 72–105.

15. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 100.
16. See the articles in Christian Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, *Hermeneutics, Politics and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
17. See, for example, Bryan Rennie, "The Influence of Eastern Orthodox Christian Theology on Mircea Eliade's Understanding of Religion," in *Hermeneutics, Politics and the History of Religions*, ed. C. Wedemeyer and W. Doniger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 197–214.
18. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 96.
19. Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.
20. Hugh Nicholson, "The New Comparative Theology and Theological Hegemonism," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. F. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 59.
21. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 35.
22. Francis Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.
23. Francis Clooney, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008).
24. Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). The book covers 106 general topics, subdivided into the general topics of "The Object of Religion," "The Subject of Religion," "Object and Subject in Their Reciprocal Operation," "The World," and "Forms."
25. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).
26. Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
27. Kimberley Patton, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); see also Kimberley Patton, "Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion," in *A Magic Still Dwells*, ed. K. Patton and B. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 157ff.
28. Francis Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2008); Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*.
29. John Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); Michelle Voss Roberts, *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).
30. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, 231.
31. For all of its shortcomings, the work of Mircea Eliade is still part of broader debates about the nature of religion.
32. See Philippe Bornet, "Comparison as a Necessary Evil: Examples from Indian and Jewish Worlds," in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, ed. P. Schmidt-Leukel and A. Nehring (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 74–77.

33. The notion of the “vague comparative category” and its particular properties is developed in some detail in Robert Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 191–208.
34. Bornet, “Comparison as a Necessary Evil,” 72–94.
35. Neville, *Ultimate Realities*, 205.
36. Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 23.
37. The three volumes of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, edited by Robert Neville, were published in 2001 by SUNY Press in Albany. They are entitled *The Human Condition*, *Ultimate Realities*, and *Religious Truth*.
38. Paul Hedges also notes this in *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 14.
39. Robert Neville, “On Comparative Theology: Theology of Religions or a Trans-Religious Discipline,” Annual Comparative Theology Lecture at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, March 2017 (forthcoming in the *Brill Companion to Comparative Theology*, ed. W. Valkenberg).
40. Francis Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.
41. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 167.
42. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 227.
43. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, 229.
44. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 179. However, Clooney admits that “theological decisions of that sort can in principle be made – and made persuasively – if someone is willing to do the work involved.” In the introduction to the same book, Clooney also states: “Although I do not attempt to decide here the truth of particular claims about the nature of reality, God, and the interaction of God with humans, this volume aims to restore a proper context in which professions of truth can become intellectually credible, and a well-informed apologetics can be plausible and useful” (11).
45. Neville, *Ultimate Realities*, 188; emphasis added.
46. Neville, *Ultimate Realities*, 213.
47. Neville, “On Comparative Theology,” 11.
48. Neville, “On Comparative Theology,” 16.
49. Francis Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 4.
50. Francis Clooney, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 46.
51. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 21.
52. Francis Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), x.
53. James Fredericks, “Introduction,” in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. F. Clooney (London: T&T Clark, 2010), xi.
54. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God, part 2 (London: T&T Clark, 1961), para. 17; Henri de Lubac, *Amida* (Paris: Seuil, 1955); John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

55. Cf. David Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); David Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
56. Patterns of theological reasoning in *Hindu God, Christian God*, the importance and role of the feminine divine in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, the centrality of loving surrender to God in *Beyond Compare*, and the dynamic of the presence and absence of God in *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*.
57. Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 14. Similarly in his latest work, it is the ritual texts of the Mimamsa tradition of Hinduism that is the starting point for comparison with Christian ritual and legal texts.
58. Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 181.
59. Volumes in the series, published by Peeters, are Catherine Cornille, ed., *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gītā* (2006); Daniel Sheridan, *Loving God: Kṛṣṇa and Christ: A Christian Commentary on the Nārada Sūtras* (2007); Clooney, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*; Leo Lefebure and Peter Feldmeier, *The Path of Wisdom: A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapada* (2011); Reid Locklin, *Liturgy of Liberation: A Christian Commentary on Shankara's Upadeśasāhasrī* (2011); John Keenan and Linda Keenan, *I Am / No Self: A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (2011); Joseph O'Leary, *Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on The Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (2017); Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *The More Torah, the More Life: A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot* (2018); Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddha Mind – Christ Mind: A Christian Commentary on the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (2019).
60. Sheridan, *Loving God*, 6–7.
61. Masao Abe, "Buddhism and Christianity as a Problem of Today," *Japanese Religions* 3, no. 2 (1963): 15.
62. John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989); John Keenan, *The Emptied Christ of Philippians* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015); Joseph O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) down to his latest, *Buddhist Nonduality, Christian Paradox*.
63. See, for example, Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); Catherine Cornille and Glen Willis, eds., *The World Market and Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011).
64. Laurenti Magesa, "African Indigenous Spirituality, Ecology and the Human Right to Integral Development," in *The World Market and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille and G. Willis (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 164–89.
65. David Clairmont, *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics: On the Person as Classic in Comparative Theological Contexts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2.
66. Clairmont, *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics*, 193.
67. Clairmont, *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics*, 194.
68. Catherine Cornille, ed., *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009).
69. David Elcott, "Meeting the Other: Judaism, Pluralism and Truth," in *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 39.

70. Reinhold Bernhardt, "Coordinates for Interreligious Discernment from a Protestant View," in *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 56.
71. Gavin D'Costa, "Roman Catholic Reflections on Discerning God in Interreligious Dialogue: Challenges and Promising Avenues," in *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 69–86.
72. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Christ as Bodhisattva: A Case of Reciprocal Illumination," in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, ed. P. Schmidt-Leukel and A. Nehring (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 204–19.
73. Buddhist theologian Judith Simmer-Brown focuses on the Dalai Lama, who judges other religions according to "their capacity to promote harmony and peace for both individuals and the world, and to produce warm-hearted human beings." Judith Simmer-Brown, "Without Bias – The Dalai Lama in Dialogue," in *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 253.
74. This typically happens through scholarly societies and journals such as the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* or *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, and equivalent scholarly groups as part of the American Academy of Religion.
75. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 27.
76. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 114.
77. Clairmont, *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics*, 195.
78. See, for example, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017).
79. See, for example, J. R. Hustwit, "Myself, Only Moreso: Conditions for the Possibility of Transreligious Theology," *Open Theology* 2 (2016).
80. See, for example, Tinu Ruparell, "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Interstitial Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 117–32.
81. Hustwit, "Myself, Only Moreso," 236.
82. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 126.
83. In his famous distinction he defines faith as "an inner religious experience or the involvement of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative or real," and cumulative traditions as "the entire mass of overt objective data that constitutes the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question." Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 16–17, 36.
84. Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 126.
85. Jerry Martin, "Introduction to the Topical Issue 'Is Transreligious Theology Possible?'" *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 261.
86. Wesley Wildman, "Theology without Walls: The Future of Transreligious Theology," *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 243.
87. Wildman, "Theology without Walls," 247.
88. Wildman, "Theology without Walls," 247.

89. John Thatamanil, "Transreligious Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom," *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 354.
90. Thatamanil, "Transreligious Theology," 355.
91. Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 113.
92. These are terms that meta-confessional comparative theologians borrow directly or indirectly from Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Towards a World Theology*.
93. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*, 3.
94. Thatamanil here quotes from Gordon Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 199.
95. Neville, "On Comparative Theology," 18.
96. Neville, "On Comparative Theology," 20.
97. Neville, "On Comparative Theology," 19.
98. Raimundo (Raimon) Panikkar, "What Is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?" in *Interpreting across Boundaries*, ed. G. Larson and E. Deutsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 127.
99. Raimundo (Raimon) Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 381.
100. I have elsewhere distinguished different types of multiple religious belonging: involuntary versus voluntary, temporary versus permanent, and equal versus unequal belonging to more than one tradition. See Catherine Cornille, "Multiple Religious Belonging and Interreligious Dialogue," in *Understanding Inter-Religious Relations*, ed. D. Thomas, D. Cheetham, and D. Pratt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 324–40; Catherine Cornille, "Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging," in *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*, ed. G. D'Costa and R. Thompson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 143–60.
101. I have commented at length on the tortured experiences of multiple belonging of the French Benedictine monk and Hindu sannyasin Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktānanda in Jeffrey Bloechl and Catherine Cornille, *Christian Identity between Secularity and Plurality* (Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2015), 107–35.
102. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Keith Ward, *Religion and Creation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Keith Ward, *Religion and Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Keith Ward, *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
103. These were the topics proposed for forum discussions during the 2017 American Academy of Religion meeting.
104. Keith Ward's books do pay greater attention to the Christian view on these topics and to what it may learn from other religions.
105. Paul Knitter, "Comparative Theology Is Not 'Business-as-Usual Theology,'" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35 (2015): 185–91.
106. Wildman proposed this approach to normativity in the area of Transreligious Theology or Theology without Walls at the American Academy of Religion meeting in 2016.

107. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 158.
108. Here Schmidt-Leukel quotes Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 281.
109. Hustwit, "Myself, Only Moreso," 241.
110. J. R. Hustwit, *Interreligious Hermeneutics and the Pursuit of Truth* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 115.
111. Thatamanil, "Transreligious Theology," 362. "Nones" describes a category of those who have no particular religious affiliation and who may be "spiritual but not religious." Thatamanil distances his approach from the "market-driven hybrid spiritualities now so much in vogue" by developing an in-depth study of the two traditions and thinkers which may come to "critically evaluate" such spiritualities.
112. Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, 11.
113. Tinu Ruparell, "Inter-Religious Dialogue as Interstitial Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. C. Cornille (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 121.
114. Ruparell, "Inter-Religious Dialogue," 129.
115. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 161–62.
116. Hans Gustafson, "Is Transreligious Theology Unavoidable in Interreligious Theology and Dialogue," *Open Theology* 2 (2016): 259.
117. This is, of course, particularly true for universalistic religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which is not the case for tribal religions or traditions such as Judaism and Hinduism whose teachings and practices are considered to be applicable primarily to those who belong to these traditions by birth.
118. Erik Ranstrom traces this development in Panikkar's thought in his doctoral dissertation, "The Unknown Body of Christ: Towards a Retrieval of the Early Panikkar's Christology of Religions," Boston College, 2014.
119. Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 143.
120. Panikkar, *Christophany*, 168. His work never did receive either approval or condemnation from the teaching hierarchy of the Catholic Church.
121. Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), xiv.
122. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*, 26.
123. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*, 172.
124. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 158.
125. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 160–62.
126. Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 209.
127. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, xi.
128. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, 114.
129. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, 121.

130. Michaël Amaladoss, "La double appartenance religieuse," in *Vivre de plusieurs religions. Promesse ou illusion?* ed. D. Gira and J. Scheuer (Paris: l'Atelier, 2000), 52.
131. Voss Roberts, *Dualities*, 4.
132. Voss Roberts, *Dualities*, 159.
133. Michelle Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 191.
134. Neville, "On Comparative Theology," 7.

