

Doing Theology Inter-religiously?

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Abstract: *The visit of Professor Francis Clooney to Australia in the winter of 2012 generated a good deal of lively conversation within the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue at Australian Catholic University. Clooney, an American Jesuit, Professor of Comparative Theology and Parkman Professor of Divinity at Harvard University is a leading global exponent of comparative theology. In this essay, we seek to examine the historical development of the discipline, discuss its distinctive features and probe the reasons for its emergence in a revitalised form in the Anglo-American academy towards the close of the twentieth century. Sections 2 and 3 of the article elaborate specific forms of comparative theology—Buddhist-Christian and Christian-Hindu collaborative learning—and suggest potential areas for future research. We conclude that the rejuvenated discipline represents a creative and fruitful way of doing theology in our pluralistic and globalised world.*

Key Words: comparative theology; Francis X. Clooney; religious diversity; comparative religions; theology of religions; interreligious dialogue; Masao Abe; John Makransky; dualism and non-dualism

Although the discipline of comparative theology has remained peripheral to theological studies in Australia, it is by no means a new mode of theological enquiry. It possesses a prehistory, an early history and a present-day incarnation. Its antecedents are readily discernible in the way that religious traditions have always shaped and re-shaped their self-understanding in response to their religious other. For instance, early Buddhists in India reacted against the Vedic tradition's personification of divinity; New Testament authors paid careful attention to their Jewish and Greco-Roman milieu; and the thirteenth century Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas interacted with Jewish and Muslim scholars. Likewise, the renowned Muslim polymath al-Biruni (d. c. 1052) learned Sanskrit in order to evaluate the doctrines and practices of the Hindus, while the Persian-born Islamic historian of religions al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) worked hard to furnish a comparative theological analysis of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Sabianism and Hinduism.¹ Early forms of comparative theology then, were by no means exclusively Christian or solely Western.

Undeniably, Christian and Muslim missionary endeavours played a major role in expanding the frontiers of comparative learning. In northwest India, for example, Ismā'īlī missionaries to Sindh engaged in serious theological discussions with Hindus from at least the tenth century. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, numerous Christian

¹ Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milāl wa 'l-niḥal* ("Book of Religious and Philosophical Texts"; 1127-8), edited from collation of several MSS by Rev. William Cureton (1808-1864) (London: Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts. Vol.1, 1842; Vol. 2, 1846).

missionaries to south India, including St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552), Roberto de Nobili (1579-1656) and Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719) had painstakingly appraised Hindu doctrines and rituals in the light of Christian beliefs and practices. Colonial expansion only served to broaden further the pool of comparative learning in India, with the Portuguese arriving in 1498 and the British, Dutch and French shortly afterwards.

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Contours of Comparative Theology

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an exhaustive historical account of the complex global development of comparative theology. This section of the essay therefore focuses on several key luminaries who significantly advanced the endeavour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in India.² Interestingly, the first person to coin the term “comparative theology” was James Garden (1645-1726), Professor of Divinity at King's College Aberdeen, who in 1700 published his *Comparative Theology; or, The True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology: a subject very necessary, tho' hitherto almost wholly neglected*. Other scholars followed his lead, including the Dutch Protestant scholar Cornelius Petrus Tiele (1830-1902), whose essay “On the Study of Comparative Theology” was read at the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, 1893.³

Throughout the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries and Indological scholars from UK, Europe and North America actively promoted comparative investigations. Overall, their goals and methods varied considerably, resulting in the development of a somewhat complex discipline. Whereas James Garden (1700) had simply hoped for irenic relations between warring Protestant factions and had encouraged his readers to focus attention on beliefs that all groups held in common, the majority of nineteenth century theologians sought to buttress belief in Christian universalism—the view that Christianity alone could speak authoritatively on behalf of all religions. Thus, many Christian theologians at that time vociferously endorsed the notion that Christianity possessed an exclusive grasp on truth. Noteworthy however, were F. D. Maurice (1847), F. Max Müller (1882), James Freeman Clarke (1871), George Matheson (1894) and J.A. MacCulloch (1902), who at least conceded that non-Christian religions could mediate wisdom.⁴

The influential nineteenth century Indologists Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) and Monier Monier-Williams (1819-1899) provide a fascinating insight into the widely divergent approaches to comparative theology that existed in nineteenth century Britain. Müller, who held the chair in Comparative Religions at Oxford, based his thinking on a

² For a far more comprehensive account of the early history of comparative theology in the British, American and European worlds, see Francis X. Clooney SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 24-40. Chapter 3 (41-53) of the same book furnishes a fine account of several important modern-day comparativists.

³ Tiele was unable to attend the Parliament, but his paper was read out at the gathering. Norbert Hintersteiner. “Intercultural and Interreligious (Un) Translatability and the Comparative Theology Project.” In Norbert Hintersteiner (ed.), *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today: Theology in Global Dialogue* (Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2007), 465.

⁴ Frederick D. Maurice, *Religions of the World and their Relations with Christianity* (London: John W. Parker, 1847); F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882); F. Max Müller, *Natural Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889); James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions: an Essay in Comparative Theology*, First pub., 1871. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 28th ed., 1891); George Matheson, *The Distinctive Messages of the Old Religions* (NY: Anson D.F. Randolph and Co., 1894); J.A. MacCulloch, *Comparative Theology* (London: Methuen, 1902).

“liberal” Logos theology, while his colleague Monier-Williams, the Boden Professor of Sanskrit at the same institution, hailed from a conservative evangelical family and supported the notion of Christian universalism.⁵ It is noteworthy that although Müller frequently used the term “comparative theology” to describe his work, his enduring passion was actually *comparative religions*, a different though related discipline. Eventually Müller dissociated his enquiries from Christian apologetics and espoused an impartial investigation. He advocated that researchers adopt a tradition-neutral stance, free from confessional attachment, and remain accountable solely to the academic community.

Ironically, even as the vast majority of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian theologians and missionaries in India insisted on the infinite superiority of Christianity, they aroused considerable public curiosity in other faith traditions by producing precise and wide-ranging accounts of Hindu and Buddhist rituals and beliefs.⁶ Eventually, the blind Scottish theologian George Matheson declared that a universal principle of unity—the doctrine of the incarnation—motivated all religions.⁷ Although his proposition demonstrated an astonishing bias towards Christian theology, he nonetheless managed to project a more tolerant image of Christianity and this, alongside expanding horizons of knowledge in the late-nineteenth century helped propel religion into the realm of scientific enquiry.⁸

Twentieth Century Comparative Learning

A substantial change in Christian missionary outlook occurred in the twentieth century, especially after John Nicol Farquhar (1861-1929), a British Protestant missionary to India and subsequently professor of comparative religion at the University of Manchester popularised “fulfilment theology.” Although Farquhar expressed genuine respect for Hinduism, he anticipated the widespread recognition of Christianity as the “fulfilment” of all religions and the eventual “death” of Hindu ideas.⁹ Bernard Lucas (1860-1921) took up this challenge, championing a Christian Vedanta.¹⁰ Meanwhile in Germany, Ernst Troeltsch

⁵ Paul Hedges, “The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Tradition,” *Religions*, 3/4 (2012): 1120-1137, at 1126.

⁶ Catherine Cornille, “Missionary Views of Hinduism,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 21/1 (2008): 28-32. See also Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism. British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006). Oddie conjectures (305) that missionaries adopted a more tolerant stance towards Hindus after the mid-19th century because their earlier approaches had proven ineffectual.

⁷ George Matheson, *The Distinctive Messages of the Old Religions* (NY: Anson D.F. Randolph and Co., 1894), 39-43; 57-60.

⁸ Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78/2 (2010): 477-514, at 483. George Matheson is famous for his poignant Christian hymn, “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.”

⁹ Catherine Cornille (“Missionary Views of Hinduism,” 31) mentions that the first clear expression of fulfilment theology occurs in John N. Farquhar’s *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Humphrey Milford/OUP, 1913). The conversion to Christianity of the educated Brahmins K. M. Banerjea (1813-1885) and N. Goreh (1825-1895) no doubt encouraged Farquhar’s views.

¹⁰ Bernard Lucas, *Christ for India: being a presentation of the Christian message to the religious thought of India* (London: Macmillan, 1910). Also, Bernard Lucas, *The Empire of Christ: Being a study of the missionary enterprise in the light of modern religious thought* (London: Macmillan, 1907). Later in the 20th century, Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths and Sara Grant also focussed on a Christian Vedanta.

(1865-1923) began to confront Christian theologians about their absolutist claims;¹¹ and in Britain and India the British Anglican missionary-priest and social reformer, Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940) began to question British colonial constructions of Hinduism. Andrews, known affectionately to Mahatma Gandhi by his initials "CFA" ("Christ's Faithful Apostle") and to his students at St Stephen's College Delhi as *dīnabandhu* ("friend of the poor"), preached a radical Christian discipleship and immersed himself wholeheartedly in the activities of the Indian National Congress.

During the twentieth century, theologians like Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), Karl Barth (1886-1968), Paul Tillich (1886-1965) and Jean Danielou (1905-1974) incorporated comparative elements in their writings, as did the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim theologians Swami Vivekananda, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Masao Abe and S.H. Nasr. More than that, the fertile ideas of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Joseph Kitagawa (1915-1992), prominent North American Historians of Religion, intermingled with the ideas of scholars of comparative religions and social-scientific approaches to religion.¹² Concurrently, the articulate Jesuit theologians Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), Karl Rahner (1904-1984) and Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004) rejected the notion that those outside the Church were bereft of God's redemptive grace. True, Rahner and de Lubac did not actually engage in comparative theology, but their insistence on the presence of the incarnate Word of God in and through all of human history had an immense impact on inter-religious engagement.¹³ These theologians virtually foreshadowed the transition within the Catholic Church from an exclusivist to a more inclusivist approach, which the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) ultimately endorsed.¹⁴

Meanwhile, practitioners of Interreligious Dialogue like the Benedictine visionaries Henri le Saux (1910-1973), Jules Monchanin (1895-1957) and Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) encouraged the sharing of beliefs and values across religious boundaries. Establishing the Shantivanam Ashram in south India in 1950, they supported respectful conversations between Hindus and Christians and fostered the inculturation of Christianity in India. Shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council, scholars from the Theology of Religions also contributed to the comparative enterprise by positing a threefold typology to describe Christianity's relation to other traditions: "exclusivism", "inclusivism" and "pluralism".¹⁵

¹¹ Ernst Troeltsch, "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions," in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, edited by John Hick & Brian Hebblethwaite (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1980 [1923]), 11-31. See also, Paul Hedges, "The Old and New Comparative Theology," 1126, 1129.

¹² Social-scientific approaches to religion include the Sociology of Religion, Anthropology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion and Psychology of Religion.

¹³ Henri de Lubac, a close friend of Jules Monchanin, was an influential presence at the Second Vatican Council. Cornille, "Missionary Views," (footnote 15, 31-32) reasonably assumes that early Jesuit missionaries to India would have inspired the approach of Karl Rahner.

¹⁴ Vatican II, quoting Gen 1:26-27 for the first time in conciliar history, affirmed that all human beings are "created in the image and likeness of God" (*imago Dei*) and should be treated with dignity and respect. More than that, the Council summoned Catholics to "learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth" (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* 11) and reject "nothing that is true and holy in these religions" (*Nostra Aetate*, 2.2).

¹⁵ Exclusivists insist that only Christianity possessed knowledge of ultimate reality; inclusivists judge that more than one religion possesses salvific knowledge but *only* Christianity does so in fullest measure; while pluralists like Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), John Hick (1922-2012) and Paul Knitter (1939-) asserted the validity of all religions. On this threefold typology, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism: the Tripolar Typology – Clarified and Reaffirmed," in Paul F. Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious*

Revitalisation of Comparative Theology

Towards the last decade of the twentieth century, new signs of life began to appear within comparative theological circles. It would be unwise to attribute the revitalisation to a solitary factor. It does not represent a straightforward linear development, or a random happening, or even a radical break with the past. Certain continuities link the “old” and “new” undertakings: both sought to engage other traditions intellectually and to come to terms with religious diversity. On the other hand, discontinuities between the old and new ventures are apparent in terms of their objectives and ways of proceeding. Reid Locklin and Hugh Nicholson¹⁶ regard the appearance of the revitalised endeavour as a reaction to the late nineteenth century discourse of Comparative Religions and the twentieth century liberal universalism of the Theology of Religions, “especially as exemplified by pluralists like John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter”.¹⁷ The matter may not be quite as simple as that. The re-energised discipline appears to derive inspiration from several sources: weariness with Christian hegemonic discourse; disenchantment with Western cultural imperialism; an increased understanding of other religions; a growing awareness of religious diversity; and the realization that the “old” style of comparative theology was making little or no headway.¹⁸ In fact, by the closing decade of the twentieth century, theologians from non-Christian traditions were reluctant to rendezvous with Christian theologians, and the latter genuinely struggled to advance their work to a more sophisticated level.

Defining the “New” Comparative Theology

A raft of Catholic and Protestant theologians emerged from within the Anglo-American academy towards the end of the twentieth century, leading comparative theology in new directions. Foremost among the trailblazers were David Tracy, Keith Ward, John Keenan, Robert C. Neville, Raimon Panikkar, James Fredericks and Francis X. Clooney. They did not all agree on the best way to proceed with the work, but they all influenced the discipline appreciably.¹⁹

How are we to define the “new” comparative theological enterprise of the twentieth century? Perhaps the simplest starting point is to affirm what it is *not*. Clooney is quick to state that the venture is not an excursus into another religious tradition because of disenchantment with one’s own. Nor is it an attempt to achieve consensus by sweeping aside major doctrinal discrepancies between traditions. The central aim is not even to

Superiority: a Multifaith Exploration (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 19-20. See also Marianne Moyaert, “Comparative Theology in Search of a Hermeneutical Framework,” in David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler, Oddbjørn Leirvik (Eds.). *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People: Currents of Encounter* (NY: Editions Rodopi, 2011), 162-163. More recently, Knitter has proposed a fourfold schema of “Replacement, Fulfilment, Mutuality, & Acceptance.” Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

¹⁶ Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” 480, 481, 489.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 480.

¹⁸ Paul Hedges (“The Old & New Comparative Theology,” 1121, 1127, 1128, 1134) recommends a more nuanced history of interreligious engagement that takes account of continuities and the growth in understanding of other traditions.

¹⁹ See Francis Clooney’s meticulous bibliographic review of comparative theological studies undertaken between 1989 and 1995 in, “The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology: A Bibliographic Review (1989-1995).” *Theological Studies*, 56/3 (1995): 521-550.

establish complementarities or differences between religions. Moreover, the discipline does not reduce simply to *interreligious dialogue*, which involves either formal or informal conversations across religious boundaries. Nor is it the same as the *theology of religions*, whereby one draws conclusions about another tradition from the standpoint of one's own tradition. Further, one should not confuse *comparative theology* with *comparative religions*, which entails a scholarly investigation into two or more religions but demands a high degree of neutrality with regard to outcomes.²⁰ In clear distinction to these undertakings, Clooney defines contemporary comparative theology as a creative response to twenty-first century religious diversity. It consists in "finding God in all things" and "welcoming wisdom where it exists." It is "faith seeking understanding" in light of truth(s) etched deeply in other traditions. The aim of the endeavour, he affirms, is "to know God better."²¹

Multidimensionality of Comparative Theology

The "new" comparative theology is multidimensional. In the first place, Clooney emphasizes the need for the comparativist to have a strong grounding in and commitment to the theology of her or his own faith tradition before embarking on a journey into another faith tradition. He personally proceeds with the endeavour by juxtaposing manageable portions of Biblical and Christian commentarial texts with appropriate sacred texts from the Śrī Vaiṣṇava Hindu tradition of south India. Having decided on a discrete theme or doctrine, he rigorously analyses his selected textual materials in their original languages, and then reflects at some length upon the outcome. His approach is cautious, meticulous and averse to oversimplification.

The contemporary discipline also possesses a *dialogical* element, which ensures that no one tradition occupies a superior place or encodes beforehand the meaning of the exchange.²² *Comparative* and *interreligious* aspects also play key roles, for the comparativist must cross over long-established religious borders and engage the beliefs, doctrines and practices of another tradition. Finally, Clooney underscores the *apologetic* or confessional dimension of the enterprise. For him, this component not only emerges from the perceived need to engage the other tradition with integrity, but it also emerges from the reality that comparative theology investigates differences as well as similarities and participants may not always achieve a consensus. In the latter eventuality, both parties must be ready to offer cogent arguments for their respective positions.

The following section highlights ways that Buddhist scholars have engaged in comparative theology and recommends productive areas for future Buddhist-Christian collaborative encounters.

²⁰ Clooney (*Comparative Theology*, 8-16) carefully distinguishes comparative theology from these related disciplines.

²¹ Statements made by Clooney at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne campus seminar, 10 July, 2012, and at ACU Sydney (Strathfield) campus seminar, 23 July 2012. See also his *Comparative Theology*, 10.

²² Francis X. Clooney SJ, "Comparative Theology." Eds., J. Webster, K. Tanner & I. Torrance, *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 660-662.

PART 2. BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

The phrase “Buddhist theology” may sound like an oxymoron because it is well known that Buddhism generally has no place for any kind of metaphysical absolute, let alone a personal God. Yet a small number of Buddhists are now starting to do what they call “theology”, freely admitting that they are taking a cue from their Christian counterparts.²³ The question at the centre of Buddhist theology is not so much whether or not there is a God, but the urgent need to re-appropriate widely divergent traditions and inter-relate them in the vastly changed situation of multicultural societies and global pluralism:

Buddhist theology is the self-conscious attempt to present reasoned arguments from within the tradition on issues of importance to Buddhists in order to correct, critique, clarify or expand upon the tradition.²⁴

We may assume, therefore, that at least some Buddhists are in the mood for theology and will no longer tolerate highly educated Western converts accepting uncritically the historically unfounded accounts of Buddhism purveyed by their Eastern teachers. Even more, this amounts to an invitation to Christians to *collaborate* with Buddhists in doing theology.

Such collaborative theology presupposes the kind of comparative theology now being pursued on a number of fronts, and presupposes interreligious communication. Without actual communication and the sharing of experiences no other interreligious project can get off the ground. Of course, now that we have names for these things we find that they have been going on already, though their practitioners have not always been fully aware of what they were doing.²⁵ There have been some extremely impressive offers of theological collaboration by Buddhists, two of which are outlined here:

Masao Abe (1915-2006)

Masao Abe may be called the successor of D.T. Suzuki as a populariser of Zen Buddhist thinking in the West. Far more than a populariser, however, he was a profound philosopher-theologian in the tradition of the Indian dialectician and monk Nāgārjuna (2nd c. CE) and the Japanese spiritual philosopher Dōgen (1200-1253), and like many members of the Kyoto School before him he was astonishingly literate in Western Christian theology and philosophy.²⁶ Abe exploits to the full the paradoxes that entered Buddhist thinking through the “Perfection of Wisdom” tradition (*prajñāpāramitā*) around the beginning of

²³ John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997; Roger Jackson, John Makransky, eds., *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Thinkers* (London: Curzon Press, 2000). Some prefer to speak of “Buddhology” or “Dharmalogy”.

²⁴ John D. Dunne, “On Essences, Goals and Social Justice: An Exercise in Buddhist Theology”, in Jackson and Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, 275-292, at 276.

²⁵ For explicit outlines of Buddhist-Christian comparative theology, see James Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999); *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004). The recent volume of *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31 (2011) contains essays in collaborative theology by Amos Yong, John Makransky, Wendy Farley and Grace Burford.

²⁶ See Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. By William A. LaFleur (London: Macmillan, 1985); “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata”, in: John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 3-65.

the Christian era: oppositions and distinctions are continually transcended, his position is “positionless”, his thinking is “not-thinking”, the self is not-self and is therefore *truly* Self. Transposed to theology, this becomes: the Son of God is *not* the “Son of God”, therefore he is *truly* Son of God; God is not “God”, because God is love, therefore he is truly the God of *love*, identified with all. The death on the cross entails the resurrection by an inner Trinitarian dynamic which transcends “two natures” theory and yields the famous syllogism:

God is love because God is Nichts
Nichts is God because Nichts is love.²⁷

Nichts translates the Japanese *mu*, “nothingness”, which plays upon but is not identical with *kū*, “emptiness”, the translation of the central Sanskrit term *śūnyatā*.

Developing this line of thought, Abe proposed that in the light of Phil 2:5-8 the Trinity may be understood as the reciprocal and absolute self-emptying of the persons, which he calls “dynamic *śūnyatā*”. This is based on a somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of the hymn, in which it is Jesus as the Son who empties himself in taking on the form of a slave, and Abe’s suggestion has not convinced theologians as sympathetic as John B. Cobb or David Tracy. Yet the idea of reconceptualising the Trinity in terms of absolute emptiness as the un-ground (Jap. *basho*, “place”) of divine personhood gives a powerful impetus to Christian theology.²⁸

John Makransky

John Makransky is an ordained Buddhist lama in a Tibetan lineage who teaches Buddhism and comparative theology at Boston College. Inspired by his Christian colleagues he has produced a profound and original interpretation of a fourth or fifth century commentary on the *prajñāpāramitā* literature which opens up – albeit implicitly – extraordinary possibilities of collaboration with Christological and Trinitarian thinking.²⁹ Taking up the tradition of the Three Bodies of the Buddha (*Trikāya*), the commentary approaches *nirvāṇa*, the central mystery of Buddhism, “the state free from the conditions that produced the world and all experiences of the world”,³⁰ by positing that the *Dharmakāya*, the Body of the eternal Dharma, is the embodiment of the Buddha-nature in its essence (*svābhāvika-kāya*). The Body of Communal Enjoyment (*sāmbhogika-kāya*), which figures in the mythical visions of the Mahāyāna Sūtras, and the Body of Manifestation in Created Forms (*nairmāṇika-kāya*), the body in which what Christians would call the historical Buddha “appears”, mediate this utterly transcendent Absolute Emptiness to the realm of experience, but only on the understanding that this Buddha-nature is non-dual, “thusness”

²⁷ Abe, “Kenotic God”, 49.

²⁸ For further discussion see John D’Arcy May, “Absolute Nothingness or Dynamic Emptiness? God and the ‘Cult of Nothingness’ in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue”, in: Norbert Hintersteiner, with François Bosquet, ed., *Thinking the Divine in Interreligious Encounter* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012), 283-300; “Loving Nothingness? Possibilities of Prayer in Buddhism and Christianity”, *Swedish Missiological Themes* 92 (2004), Studies in Honour of Aasulv Lande, 371-381; “Nothingness-*qua*-Love? The Implications of Absolute Nothingness for Ethics”, in Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *Probing the Depths of Evil and Good: Multireligious Views and Case Studies* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007), 135-150.

²⁹ John J. Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), on the attempt to conceptualise the transcendent in the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

(*tathatā*) in its original purity, and is not subject to any qualification whatsoever; all else is imagined, mere conceptual construction (*parikalpita*).³¹ “*Dharmakāya*, itself non-conceptual, is refracted through the conceptual cognitions of sentient beings to manifest as *rūpakāya*” (“form body”, i.e. the *saṃbhoga*- and *nirmāna-kāya*); in this way Buddhahood reconciles the conditioned and the unconditioned, for the eternal Dharma is manifested and mediated through the “form bodies” in which the Buddha is visualised and conceptualised.³²

The concept of “body” in this construction is analogous to the concept of “person” in Trinitarian theology in this respect, that it no more designates an actual body than *hypostasis* or *prosōpon* refer to an individual or a personality. They are extended metaphors, ways of protecting the integrity of the mystery unattainable by knowledge while allowing the thought that this ultimate reality acts and communicates itself in what we take to be history. In the case of Buddhism such analogies must be treated with the utmost caution, for nothing is what it seems in a system of thought that proceeds not from being, but from emptiness expressed as perpetual becoming. This underlines the need to prepare for theological collaboration by careful comparison. But it also provides a stimulus for re-thinking a number of aspects of Christian doctrine that have become problematic.

The following list outlines some areas that invite close scrutiny:

(1) Prayer and Meditation

Can Buddhists be said to pray, if their conception of the transcendent is transpersonal? Meister Eckhart famously prayed to be delivered from God (*Deus, Gott*) in order to attain Godhead (*Deitas, Gottheit*); Wilfred Cantwell Smith called the concept of God the idol of Christianity. The Buddhist discipline of emptiness is not necessarily the same as the *theologia negativa*, the apophatic theology that seeks to describe union with the divine in the darkness of un-knowing, but the relationship is worth pursuing.

(2) Grace and Effort

Grace is absolutely central to the Christian scheme of things; is there an equivalent in Buddhism? Though self-reliance is the dominant theme of the Theravāda canon (“Be a light [or island, *dīpa*] unto yourselves” says the dying Buddha in the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutta*, The Great Sūtra on the Final Passing into Nirvāṇa, *Dīgha-Nikāya* XVI, 2, 26), in the course of time the equally ancient conception of the Bodhisattva, the Buddha-to-be coursing through numberless rebirths at all levels of reality, was drawn upon to embody the notion of compassion. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara achieves enlightenment by renouncing enlightenment as he (later she) turns back to hear the cries of the suffering world (Chin. Guānyīn, Jap. Kannon). Thus “other-power” (*tariki*) came to be accepted alongside “own-power” (*jiriki*), e.g. by Shinran (1173-1263), as the non-dual complement of individual striving.

³¹ See *Ibid.*, 39-47.

³² *Ibid.*, 96; see 104.

(3) Creation and Becoming

Creation is the primordial grace, the state of having-been-gifted which includes all of history with all its sufferings and evils. Christians struggle to reconcile this with the overflowing love of a Trinitarian God. But for Buddhists, the world has neither beginning nor end nor substance of its own (*svabhāva*), consisting solely of the infinite interconnectedness of all phenomena in mutual dependence (*pratīyasamutpāda*). This has profound implications for our conceptions of time, history and consciousness, consideration of which would provide much stimulus to both Buddhist and Christian theologies.

(4) Desire and Renunciation

Each tradition has developed the aim of renouncing, transforming or even exterminating (*nirodha*) desire. Earliest Buddhism was possibly more realistic than later monkish precepts suggest, and the adept was expected to strive energetically to reach the final goal, much as Paul in 1. Cor 9:24-27 compares himself to an athlete. Perhaps the “liberation of desire” as love trying to express itself (Sebastian Moore) could bring asceticism and contemplation in both traditions closer to one another.

(5) Karma and Freedom

Freedom was the rallying cry of the Reformation, but in the contemporary West it has been reduced to “choice” as a response to life style alternatives and consumer goods. Freedom connotes the moral challenge of responsibility as much as the absence of constraint, but the Buddhist doctrine of karma (the “residue” of deeds determining future rebirths) appears to be a sort of determinism that denies the very basis of freedom. Yet Buddhism is the most ethical of religions and places personal responsibility at the centre of its teachings.

(6) Hope and History

It took a century of bitter struggles before “historicity” was accepted as a dimension of Christian theology which throws the scriptures themselves open to critical investigation and allows for the development of doctrine. Faith itself has a historical dimension, looking towards the culmination of both nature and history anticipated in such texts as Rom 8:18-25 or Rev 19-21, and hope is its medium. For Buddhists, at first sight, hope would seem to be a form of delusion, a vain imagination of fulfilment based on notions of substance and continuity. But the structuring of time by narrative is common to both Buddhist and Christian traditions, and a story presupposes both a beginning and an outcome if it is to examine the sources and consequences of responsibility. The arena of history may well be one of the major sites of Buddhist-Christian theological collaboration.³³

³³ See John D'Arcy May, “Time and Narrative in Buddhism and Christianity”, in Clemens Mendonca, and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, eds., *Religion and Culture: A Multicultural Discussion. Festschrift in Honour of Francis X. D'Sa, SJ* (Pune: Institute for the Study of Religion, 2011), 290-299.

This sketch of themes for future Buddhist-Christian collaborative theology can do no more than whet the appetite of those in both traditions who are interested in following up the globalisation of ethics with the globalisation of theology. Each task is far from completion; together they stake out the ecumenical agenda for the 21st century.³⁴

PART 3. POSSIBILITIES OF HINDU-CHRISTIAN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

In this final section, we briefly consider the potential of Christian-Hindu comparative endeavours, especially in the fields of theology, scripture, philosophy, phenomenology and spirituality.

Theology:

(a) *Christian theology has become highly dualistic*

We speak of “God and man”, “heaven and earth”, “good and evil”, “sin and grace”, “church and state”, “faith and reason”, “pure and impure”, “theology and philosophy”. This dualism has had some negative consequences. For example, the gulf created between faith and reason during the mediaeval period led, after the Wars of Religion, to the rejection of faith and the adoption of reason as the only possible foundation of social cohesion. This shift of perspective led directly to the Enlightenment, to the separation of Church and State, and to the relegation of religion to the private domain. In Hinduism, whilst there are dualistic schools such as Sāṃkhya³⁵ and Śaivasiddhānta,³⁶ the greatest respect is reserved for the non-dualist schools. Divisions such as “heaven and earth”, “good and evil”, “sin and grace”, are considered “mental constructs”, mere illusions, sheer ignorance. The thoroughgoing non-dualism of Hindu thought could well be invaluable in helping Christians appreciate their own teaching that “all are made one in Christ” (Gal. 3.28) and that “all things are reconciled through him and for him” (Col. 1.20), the hypostatic union of two natures in one person, and the monotheism of their faith. However, a renewed non-dualist Christian theology involves investigating the vastly different metaphysics and anthropology that India has developed over many centuries. The article, “‘Jesus is the Christ’ (Acts 9.22): can Jesus be called Shiva?” demonstrates how it is possible to present the Christian faith, free of Biblical imagery and Greek terminology, from the vastly different standpoint of Indian thought.³⁷

(b) *Comparative theology works in both directions*

Let us give an example. The Christian faith states that there are three Persons in one God, not three individuals. It thus distinguishes between the terms “person” and “individual”. Hindu thought does not have the sense of the person that

³⁴ See John D'Arcy May and Linda Hogan, “Visioning Ecumenics as Intercultural, Inter-religious, and Public Theology”, in Linda Hogan, Solange Lefebvre, Norbert Hintersteiner, Felix Wilfred, eds., *From World Mission to Inter-religious Witness. Concilium* (2011/1), 70-81.

³⁵ See *L'Inde Classique*, Tome 1. Edited by Louis Renou and Jean Filliozat (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême Orient, 2000), §1421 ff.

³⁶ See *L'Inde Classique*, Tome 2. Edited by Louis Renou and Jean Filliozat. (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1985), §1291 ff.

³⁷ John R. Dupuche, *Theology@ McAuley, E-Journal*, Australian Catholic University, 2003.

Christianity has elaborated³⁸ and since the doctrine of the Trinity is seen by the proponents of non-dualism as dualistic, indeed as tritheistic, it is rejected. Furthermore, the relationship between Christ and the Christian, which is also understood individualistically and therefore divisively, is also rejected. Yet, in the light of Christian understanding of “person” as distinct from “individual”, the relationship of the primordial amorous couple, Krishna and Radha, or the relationship of guru and disciple, for example, could be perceived even more fully.

Scripture

Kālī is the fearsome goddess worshipped in West Bengal, Orissa and Assam. The article, “The goddess Kālī and the Virgin Mary”, presents certain aspects of Kālī’s ferocity and then revisits some Gospel passages concerning Mary.³⁹ It shows through objective exegetical study that Mary can be seen in a new light, not just as peaceful and obedient but also as perceptive and energetic, a fitting icon of the Spirit who “moves wherever it pleases” (Jn 3:8).

Philosophy

Greek philosophy is deemed to have started in the 6th century BCE with Thales of Miletus, who held that water is the basic substance out of which all is created. Plato by contrast argued that the objects of the real world are merely the shadows of eternal forms or ideas. Hinduism proposes a different view. There is no doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, but only a doctrine of emanation. All names and forms are expressions of the primordial Word (*vāc*), the *praṇava* ‘AUM’. All is word, all is expression. God and the world are the same, not in a pantheistic sense but in the way that the speaker (*vācaka*) and the spoken (*vācya*) are one.

Phenomenology

Friends in India do not tend to ask what one thinks, but what one has experienced. This can be a troubling question. What indeed has been one’s spiritual experience? The Indian tradition is remarkable in its ability to analyse the experiences undergone in body and mind and spirit. The process of perception is described with extraordinary accuracy. What does the Christian undergo in the moment of faith? What evidence does the Scripture hold for the emotional journey of Jesus of Nazareth? The Hindu method of phenomenological analysis will be of value to Christians investigating such questions.

Spirituality

The 19th century taunt ran as follows: “Those Christians say they are redeemed—but they don’t look it!” The smile is almost entirely absent from Christian art,⁴⁰ and yet it is commonly portrayed in the sculptures adorning Hindu temples. To what extent does the Hindu spirituality of pleasure,⁴¹ with its constant emphasis on bliss (*ānanda*) show how

³⁸ See *Brahman and Person; Essays by Richard De Smet*. Ed. Ivo Coelho (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010).

³⁹ John R. Dupuche, “The goddess Kali and the Virgin Mary”. In *Australian eJournal of Theology*. 19/1 (2012): 43-57.

⁴⁰ See <http://www.pravmir.com/why-is-no-one-ever-depicted-smiling-on-icons/>, accessed 29 December 2012. A rare exception is the angel on the facade of Rheims Cathedral.

⁴¹ John R. Dupuche, “Field Work on the Kula Ritual in Orissa”, *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 43 (2011): 49-60; “A Spirituality of Pleasure: Deciphering *Vijñānabhairava* Verse 68”, forthcoming, *International Journal of Tantric Studies*.

Christianity is not just a religion of asceticism but also a religion of joy and laughter, of pleasure and indeed of sexual pleasure?

Other themes

The Christian-Hindu comparative theologian might investigate many other possible themes. For example, Christianity speaks of the saviour; Hinduism speaks of the guru who enlightens his disciples. Christianity speaks of sin as consisting in disobedience; Hinduism speaks of sin as due to ignorance. Christian theology favours clear and distinct ideas; Hinduism shows how paradox reveals the divine mystery.

Conclusion

Although our essay has merely cited contemporary instances of Buddhist-Christian and Christian-Hindu comparative theology, all traditions are able to pursue the discipline. Today, Harvard Divinity School, Boston College and Heythrop College (University of London) teach comparative theology and professorial chairs in the discipline exist in several universities. Further, cohorts of younger comparative theologians in America have begun to publish essays on the topic,⁴² while the systematic theologian Klaus von Stosch has established a Centre of Comparative Theology and Cultural Sciences at the University of Paderborn (2009), Germany, at which Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and other theologians work collaboratively. A recent (December 2012) thematic issue of *Religions* highlighted some of the comparative theological efforts that have emerged in the European context.⁴³

Several scholars within the Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue at Australian Catholic University are now moving in a similar direction. We are considering, for example, in what way the apophatic nature of Hindu thought challenges the Religions of the Book, Islam in particular. Western Christian and Asian conceptions of time and history have very different presuppositions, but upon scrutiny, these may be less incompatible than at first appears. For that matter, how does one engage in comparative theology if one of the participating traditions relies on oral stories, singing, dance, music, art and poetry rather than written texts, as in the case of Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander peoples? We suggest that comparative theology is neither fanciful nor exotic; it represents a major challenge to every Faculty of Theology in the postmodern world. By re-contextualising various aspects of our respective faith traditions, we come to understand more fully our own tradition and gain an authentic understanding of other traditions. More than that, the discipline opens up fresh horizons of discovery, peace and hope within the wider community.

⁴² See for example, the collection of essays, Francis X. Clooney (ed.), with an Introduction by James L. Fredericks, in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London/NY: T & T Clark, 2010).

⁴³ "European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology." *Religions*, 3/4 (2012): 887-1197.

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