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Challenging Truths: Reflections on the Theological Dimension of Comparative Theology

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Abstract: Given that comparative theology is aimed at learning from the insights of other religious traditions, the comparative theologian's confessional perspective must be engaged and subject to possible transformation through the discovery of truth in those traditions. Despite Francis Clooney's and James Fredericks' attempts to distance comparative theology from the theology of religions, its truth-seeking dimension makes participation in the theology of religions unavoidable. Crucial to integrating what is learned, moreover, is a willingness to allow presuppositions about the other to be challenged and to make revisions if necessary. Keith Ward exhibits this willingness but, on this basis, distinguishes comparative theology from confessional theology, thus obscuring the legitimacy of revision from a committed religious standpoint. Where comparative theologians are willing and able to integrate all that is learned through their study of other traditions, comparative theology can be conceived of as both a confessional enterprise and a contribution to what Wilfred Cantwell Smith called 'World Theology'—that is, the ongoing attempt to give intellectual expression to the faith of us all.

Keywords: comparative theology; confessional theology; theology of religions; world theology; inclusivism; pluralism; identity; Clooney; Fredericks; Ward

Introduction

From the time I first started to study and appreciate Buddhism, I never felt as if I were embarking on a fundamentally different enterprise when I stepped out of a Christian theology seminar and opened an anthology of Buddhist texts; my interest was always in whether or not the ideas I was encountering were true, and how they might relate to what I already believed, as a Christian. In contrast to many of my Buddhist studies peers, whom I'm sure assumed we were doing religious studies, I felt as if I was

doing theology. Yet what kind of theology? If the study of a religious tradition other than one's own can be a genuinely theological enterprise, then those engaged in that enterprise must try to carve out a recognised disciplinary space for it, and to explain as best we can what is at stake. This is, perhaps, particularly important in the modern British academic context where the disciplines of theology and religious studies frequently coexist in single academic departments and the nature of the relationship between them is ambiguous and disputed.¹

Influential in the contemporary attempt to define a theological approach to the study of other religious traditions are advocates of comparative theology. The term 'comparative theology', though long in use, has been popularised by contemporary thinkers such as Francis Clooney, James Fredericks, Robert Neville, and Keith Ward. Not all protagonists understand the discipline in precisely the same way. Initially, I will focus predominantly on Clooney's and—to a lesser extent—Fredericks' understanding. Clooney and Fredericks insist that it is not comparative religion they are recommending, but a genuine form of theology, 'an intellectual discipline grounded in faith' ([2], p. 132). Comparative theology, explains Clooney,

marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition ([3], p. 10).

Ultimately, it is this desire to learn from other traditions that distinguishes comparative theology from attempts to engage theologically with other traditions out of apologetic or missionary motives. And it is also this emphasis on learning *from*—rather than merely *about*—other traditions that distinguishes it from comparative religion, phenomenology of religions, or history of religions, all of which seek to avoid a theological approach. Hence, as Ward explains,

[c]omparative theology differs from what is often called 'religious studies', in being primarily concerned with the meaning, truth, and rationality of religious beliefs, rather than with the psychological, sociological, or historical elements of religious life and institutions ([4], p. 40).

Similarly, Catherine Cornille asserts that '[w]hat distinguishes comparative theology from the historical or phenomenological study of other religions ... is its commitment to and pursuit of truth' ([5], p. 139). Like phenomenologists, comparative theologians attempt, as far as possible, to gain an insider's perspective on the religious tradition they study so as to better understand it on its own terms. But unlike phenomenologists, they undertake this exercise in order to ascertain whether there might be truth and value in the other's religious perspective from which they might learn; they seek insights which may enhance, enrich, or fruitfully challenge the confessional perspective with which they set out.

In this short essay I would like to draw out some implications of the claim that comparative theology is a truth-seeking enterprise by considering some crucial respects in which the confessional perspective of the theologian is engaged in the process. I begin by exploring the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions, before honing in on a crucial respect in which the

¹ See [1], p. 8.

theologian's confessional starting point must be open to being challenged and revised in the process of comparative study. I then consider what such revision would entail, before concluding that comparative theology should be seen as a form of confessional theology, but one which involves the expansion of the theologian's faith perspective to include the truth discovered in the other.

Comparative Theology and Theology of Religions

Clooney and Fredericks are keen to distinguish comparative theology from theology of religions. The latter discipline involves formulating an understanding of other religious traditions that is consistent with one's own theology. Theology of religions is associated by Clooney and Fredericks with abstract, *a priori* theorising about religious diversity. This, they stress, is precisely what comparative theology is not. Clooney, for example, describes theology of religions as involving reflection,

from the perspective of one's own religion on the meaning of other religions, often considered merely in general terms. By contrast, comparative theology necessarily includes actually learning another religious tradition in significant detail ([3], p. 14).

Comparative theology is, crucially, concerned with the concrete task of studying the specifics—scriptures, rituals, artworks, and so on—of particular traditions, in order to learn from them. It is about 'going deep', says Clooney, not about 'generalizing' ([3], p. 107). While Clooney sees a role for both comparative theology and theology of religions, Fredericks goes as far as to suggest the latter enterprise be abandoned altogether and replaced by the former. To embrace a particular stance in the theology of religions is to make up one's mind about other religions without ever having to find out anything about them, thinks Fredericks; it is to 'escape the necessity of taking other religious believers seriously' ([6], p. 115).

As a number of thinkers have pointed out, however, if comparative theology is a genuinely truth-seeking enterprise, then it cannot be as neatly distinguished from theology of religions as Clooney and Fredericks would like,² not least because comparative theology presupposes certain assumptions about the tradition studied. If one studies another tradition with a theological interest in truth, then it is presumably because one's confessional perspective gives one reason to see that tradition as a potential source of truth and value. This locates the starting point of comparative theology with respect to the threefold typology commonly used in the theology of religions, comprising exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Since exclusivists hold that only their own tradition contains salvific truth and value, comparative theology cannot emerge from exclusivism. Rather, it must proceed from provisional inclusivist or pluralist assumptions; either assuming the possibility that the tradition studied may contain salvific truth and value, though in lesser measure than one's own, or assuming that the tradition studied may be equal in salvific truth and value to one's own. In other words, comparative theology depends on a specific theology of religions, even if that theology of religions is not explicitly worked out but only implied by the comparative theologian's confessional starting point. Christians might, for example, assume the Holy Spirit to be active outside the Christian tradition and, hence, potentially responsible for truth and goodness in other traditions, and might therefore engage in comparative theology in the hope of deepening their knowledge of God. Although Clooney has been

² See, e.g., [7], pp. 90–104; [8], pp. 235–36. For further references see [9], pp. 24–25.

reluctant to explicitly endorse a particular stance within the theology of religions as a presupposition of his study of Hinduism,³ he acknowledges that his sympathies are inclusivist—a position he sees as balancing ‘claims to Christian uniqueness with a necessary openness to learning from other religions’.⁴

As well as being motivated by an implicit theology of religions, comparative theology must also include explicit reflection on the types of questions addressed in the theology of religions. For, eventually, the theologian must try to determine whether what is encountered in the tradition studied is in fact true and valuable, a process which requires an attempt to relate the claims of that tradition to the claims of one’s home tradition.⁵ Where the tradition studied is judged to contain truth and value, moreover, that discovery must somehow be integrated into the theologian’s home tradition. It might be, for example, that the insights identified prompt the rediscovery of lost or obscured strands of thought or practice within one’s tradition. We see this, for example, in renewed Christian interest in ‘negative theology’ as a result of the encounter with the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, and in Buddhist theologies which seek to promote social engagement and critique as a result of the encounter with Christian social ethics. Or theologians might start to reflect differently on familiar figures within their own tradition by looking at those figures from the perspective of the tradition encountered. Clooney, for example, finds Christian insight into Mary enhanced by reflection on Hindu devotion to Lakshmi and Devī ([3], p. 93–99). And theologians such as John Keenan and Joseph O’Leary have experimented with more radical integrations by applying a Buddhist hermeneutical framework to the tenets of Christian faith.⁶ But another crucial affect of the discovery of truth in the other, of which proponents of comparative theology do not always take full account, should be reflection on whether the presuppositions about the other which were implicit in their confessional starting points are vindicated or challenged by that discovery. Let us focus on this point.

Clooney speaks of the ‘transformative nature of interreligious study’ ([3], p. 39) and envisages comparative theology leading to a ‘transformed reappropriation of confessional views’ ([14], p. 26) and ‘a significant change in one’s Christian theology’ ([10], p. 64). Fredericks reflects, similarly, that ‘[o]nce Christians begin to take the truths of non-Christian religions seriously, we should not expect that their faith will be left untouched’ ([6], p. 9). Yet neither seems altogether willing to allow their comparative study to challenge their presuppositions about the overall truth and value of the tradition studied. Emphasising the complexity of questions concerning the relative truth of Hindu and Christian claims due to their embeddedness within their distinctive contexts, Clooney recommends ‘the patient deferral of issues of truth’ until further study has taken place and understanding has deepened ([15], pp. 187–93). In the meantime,

provisional theological assessments become the norm... Should enquiry support the faith position of one tradition over against others on a specific point, this specific insight will not be decisive regarding which religion is truest or best. Later on, regarding another issue, the other tradition’s position may appear more plausible ([3], pp. 112–3).

³ Kiblinger ([9]) sees such reluctance on the part of comparative theologians as problematic and urges them to be more explicit about their presuppositions and more forthcoming about the effects on their comparative theology.

⁴ Clooney ([3], p. 16). See also [10].

⁵ Perry Schmidt-Leukel makes this point persuasively ([7], p. 100).

⁶ See e.g. [11–13].

In this way, says Clooney, comparative theology focuses on ‘actual instances of learning’ and ‘leaves to others the large judgments about religions’ ([3], p. 41).

Yet is this an entirely accurate portrayal of Clooney’s own approach, given that there are presuppositions about ‘which religion is truest or best’ implicit in his confessional starting point? Clooney avoids theorising about his presuppositions, and prefers to speak of the *practice* of ‘including’ when discussing his approach, rather than of ‘inclusivism’ ([3], p. 16). He also avoids using the language of ‘superiority’ or ‘inferiority’ when it comes to Christianity and Hinduism. But if Clooney is—or was—affirmative of expressions of Christian faith which *entail* the superiority of Christianity, then the implication that other traditions are inferior cannot be avoided, even if their inferiority is not explicitly stated. Moreover, Clooney admits inclusivist sympathies and inclusivism *involves* a judgement that Christianity is truest and best. Through comparative theology the insights of Hinduism may be brought to bear in all sorts of beneficial ways on Christian theology, but a world-view which entails that Christianity is superior to all other traditions will never be capable of fully affirming Hinduism’s truth and efficacy.⁷

Beginning one’s comparative work with the assumption that the tradition one studies is inferior to one’s own is defensible, given the assertions of uniqueness found in many traditional expressions of faith. In the Christian case, for example, the assumption of superiority tends to emerge from Christological claims about Jesus Christ’s unique divinity and constitutive role in salvation. But if through comparative study one increasingly finds instances of truth and value in the other, would it not be a better expression of the openness towards which comparative theologians aspire to allow the assumption of one’s own superiority to be challenged by that discovery? Of course, Clooney’s careful avoidance of explicit discussion of questions of superiority and inferiority could be taken as significant in itself, but is silence on this issue enough? I am not recommending that comparative theologians relinquish their commitment to the detailed study of other religious traditions, but only that there be greater readiness to integrate all that is learned. Given Clooney’s desire to avoid both assertions of definitive truth or falsity ([3], p. 112) and the mere ‘restatement of an earlier position, after a brief detour into comparison’ ([15], p. 187), any presuppositions about Christian superiority must be subject to revision along with any other theological presuppositions that are challenged by the study of Hinduism. If inclusivist assumptions are treated as non-negotiable, then openness—or willingness to learn—is compromised and comparative theologians fall foul of their own critique of *a priori* theologies of religions which make detailed learning appear unnecessary. As Hugh Nicholson notes, bias and distortion are mitigated not by pursuing an unobtainable neutrality and objectivity, but by acknowledging one’s normative commitments and being willing to submit those judgements to possible revision.⁸ What would such revision involve?

⁷ S. Mark Heim [16,17], for example, suggests a Christian inclusivist theory which attempts to affirm the salvific efficacy of Hinduism by accepting that the religious end sought by Hindus is real and obtainable. But insofar as he sees that religious end as less than fully salvific, his theory does not endorse the Hindu claim that Hinduism is efficacious with respect to *ultimate* salvation or liberation. Hence, what is affirmed is not, in the end, the Hinduism in which Hindus place their faith.

⁸ Nicholson ([18], p. 59). Similarly, Kristin Kiblinger suggests that the comparative theologian’s theological biases about the other be held ‘tentatively, not dogmatically’ ([9], p. 31).

A *Posteriori* Pluralism

Renouncing the assumption that one's home tradition is best would mean rejecting one's inclusivist presuppositions in favour of pluralist assumptions. Fredericks denounces pluralism because, as far as he is concerned, it 'effectively allows Christians to pass over the religious differences that distinguish them from their non-Christian neighbours without ever having to respond to them in any depth' ([6], p. 115). But a pluralism which emerges out of a deepening acquaintance and appreciation of another tradition is an *a posteriori* pluralism, not an *a priori* one. Indeed, as Paul Knitter points out,

[f]or many Christians, it's precisely because they have already engaged in dialogue, ... that they are trying to rearrange their theological baggage and work out new models for understanding other religions. ... What they've seen in the dialogue doesn't quite fit what their theology has been telling them. Before they can explore further in the dialogue, they have to readjust their theological maps ([8], p. 236).

Fredericks, who has been more vocal about—and critical of—theology of religions than has Clooney, argues that pluralism involves a retreat to a meta-religious position outside the traditions in question which diffuses the tension between openness and commitment that is essential to comparative theology. It does this, thinks Fredericks, by claiming that 'all religions are expressions or interpretations of the same transcendent Reality' ([6], p. 170). But the Christian comparative theologian's growing recognition of Hinduism's truth and value comes not from stepping outside a Hindu perspective but from stepping ever more deeply into it, i.e. from a deepening experience of and identification with the truth and value discovered therein, without a corresponding rejection of Christianity. Hence, a renunciation of the assumption of superiority, grounded in one's own discovery of truth in the other, requires no retreat to a meta-position. Rather it can be seen as a confessional stance, an expression of one's growing faith in more than one tradition, as one immerses oneself increasingly in two religious worlds, flitting to and fro between them and identifying increasingly with both.

Cornille claims that although someone belonging to one religious tradition may attempt in dialogue 'to understand the other from within' and, in so doing, gain considerable knowledge of another, those located in one tradition 'lack by definition the element of faith necessary to attain the deepest experience of the other' ([5], p. 144). But is this quite true? If the study of Hinduism has been for Clooney 'an act of religious learning leading to ... deeper knowledge of God' ([3], p. 17), then as someone who knows God through both Christianity and Hinduism, can he not now claim some measure of Hindu faith? Over the years, Clooney has increasingly acknowledged the ambiguity that comparative study introduces to the theologian's location, recognising the complication of his own religious identity through his increasing immersion in the Srivaishnava world. He acknowledges that the sustained effort 'to think, imagine, even pray as would an insider' ([19], p. 103) have not left him unchanged. '[O]ne becomes enough of an insider that the tradition's realities work powerfully and invite assent', he reflects ([19], p. 102). As the comparative theologian takes both traditions to heart, 'she will begin to theologize as it were from both sides of the table, reflecting personally on old and new truths in an interior dialogue' ([3], p. 13). Thus, as Clooney says, comparative theology, 'opens the door to a kind of multiple religious belonging', as through this work, theologians find themselves 'having commitments and intuitions pertaining to at least two traditions' ([2], p. 146). Indeed,

occasionally, this process can go as far as full-blown dual belonging, where there is roughly equal identification with—and full participation in—both traditions.⁹

Kristin Kiblinger argues that the ideal, championed by Clooney, of trying to see the tradition studied as would an insider is an ideal that is never completely met, since comparative theologians always carry their own religious baggage with them, including their presuppositions about the tradition studied ([3], p. 32). But what if those presuppositions are revised as their experience of the other deepens? As Knitter notes, '[w]hile we have to be aware that we bring our theological baggage to the journey of dialogue, that doesn't mean that during the journey we may not have to rearrange, or even dispose of, some of that baggage' ([8], p. 236). Kiblinger might argue that since one's criteria for discerning truth in the other tradition are derived from one's confessional starting point, a kind of inclusivism always operates in comparative study; one always wears the lenses of one's home tradition, and they prevent one from ever fully gaining an insider's perspective on the other.¹⁰ But this fails to appreciate the capacity of dialogue to change and expand one's very criteria for what counts as truth. Certainly one's confessional starting point affects what one finds in the other, but the influence of the other in turn affects what one looks for. This transformation of one's perspective need not signify an abandonment or distortion of one's tradition. Ninian Smart suggests the following structure for how the expansion of criteria might legitimately occur from the perspective of one's home tradition:

If faith F presents C as a criterion of truth, then faith T may turn out to do well or badly by that criterion. If well, then that is a ground for respecting criterion D put forward by T, and so something like an inter-system consensus about criteria cannot be ruled out ([21], p. 68).

Given an increasing immersion in and identification with the tradition studied, pluralism can surely develop, not as an abstract theory about religions in general, but as an expression of the fact that one's own commitments and intuitions now pertain to two traditions. This might lead one to embrace the idea that these traditions somehow express the same transcendent Reality, but this will not be the result of having adopted a supposedly meta-religious stance, as Fredericks claims, but may instead emerge out of reflection on one's own experience, now transformed; for, from one's Christian perspective, how could the truth and value one has discovered in Hinduism bear no relation to the truth and value one knows in Christianity and, from one's Hindu perspective, how could the truth and value one knows in Christianity be unrelated to the truth and value one has discovered in Hinduism?¹¹ Fredericks suggests that pluralism diffuses the creative tension on which comparative theology thrives. But not only does renouncing the assumption that one's home tradition is best not eradicate tensions between the traditions, it can actually encourage greater attention to them, inasmuch the temptation to simply assume that the other tradition is wrong where it differs is diminished.

Moreover, ceasing to assume that one's home tradition is superior need not entail a *definitive* judgement that the traditions in question are equally true and valuable, but only a relinquishment of the

⁹ See [20].

¹⁰ See [9], p. 32.

¹¹ Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that when identification with both traditions develops to such a degree that one identifies fully and equally with both traditions, embracing the idea that both are orientating one towards a single ultimate, transcendent reality becomes both a logical and spiritual necessity ([20], pp. 82–85).

assumption that they are *not* equally true and valuable and a revision of expressions of faith which *entail* that they are not. Perhaps the comparative theologian will never feel able to make a definitive judgement about their equality. But a shift away from a provisional inclusivism to a provisional pluralism is a way of taking theologically seriously the truth discovered in the other. Moreover, each insight discovered in the other's perspective gives one further cause to suspect that pluralism is correct. For, as Perry Schmidt-Leukel points out, '[t]hrough contributing concrete and specific case studies, comparative theology can help to increase or decrease the overall plausibility of an exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist view' ([7], p. 101). In this way Clooney's 'actual instances of learning' can help inform the 'large judgements about religions' that he would prefer to avoid.

Confessional Theology in Transformation

At times Clooney makes statements that suggest that his comparative studies have indeed challenged his presuppositions about the relationship of Christianity to other traditions. He speaks, for example, of learning to be 'resistant to the grandiose rhetoric of either [the Christian or Hindu tradition] about its uniqueness' ([22], p. 205), and of retaining belief in the efficacy of the Passion of Christ but losing the capacity to claim that knowledge of Brahman does not save ([15], p. 192). And elsewhere he writes: 'I confess that Jesus is Lord, but I cannot now assert that Śiva is not Lord nor that Nārāyaṇa did not graciously undergo embodiment in order to enable humans to encounter their God' ([14], p. 181). But such sentiments are frequently set within the context of the tension he perceives between them and the demands of Christian identity. He reflects, for example, that there may not be space within the Christian community for scholarship which defends the worship of goddesses, and so although he is able to understand and appreciate—and is even inclined to recite—the words 'Devī, may you stand forth before us', he feels 'unable to voice so definite an entreaty' because the 'rules governing insider identity in the Catholic community forbid prayer to Devī' ([19], p. 107). Through honest scholarship faith and reason are occasionally brought into 'acute tension', he reflects ([19], p. 110); and one is left 'caught between faith and understanding' ([19], p. 107).

It would seem at such points that, through his 'acts of faith seeking understanding', Clooney has arrived at an understanding which is at odds with traditional expressions of faith found in his home tradition. But while it may be tempting for committed Christian comparative theologians to throw their hands in the air at this point and return to the less agonising task of deciphering Hindu or Buddhist texts, this may ultimately be to do a disservice to the Christian tradition. Christian theologians surely have a responsibility to interpret the Christian revelation in the light of new historical circumstances, including new knowledge of other religious traditions. If that knowledge calls into question certain expressions of Christian faith, they must be willing to rethink those expressions, in faithfulness to the Christian revelation, even if significant shifts are required.¹² As John Cobb notes, if I am to be genuinely open to learning from another religious tradition, then 'I must be ready to learn even if that threatens my present beliefs' ([23], p. 45). Clooney is no doubt right that there is no place for worship of Devī for those operating within a Christian framework. Worshipping Devī simply would not make sense in the Christian context. But this does not mean that the theologian's experience and appreciation

¹² Clooney suggests that careful comparative study 'should rarely make headlines' ([3], p. 112). But is this something that can be known in advance?

of a context in which worship of Devī *does* make sense—and not only makes sense but relates one transformatively to God—cannot receive recognition in the Christian framework. This recognition can come, in part, through a revision of expressions of Christian faith which entail that the Hindu context is inferior because it is different. No one is in a better position to contribute to this revision than those who have witnessed for themselves the efficacy of both frameworks.

Renouncing the superiority claim implicit in one's theological starting point means finding ways of expressing the truths of one's home tradition that do not entail that claim. Within the Christian tradition this requires controversial Christological revisions. Deeming 'theologizing about Christ and the world religions, the uniqueness of Christ, salvation outside the church, and related issues' to fall within the less urgent remit of theology of religions, Clooney excuses himself from this task ([2], pp. 137–8). But given the flaws they see in *a priori* judgements about such matters, is it not incumbent upon Christian comparative theologians, as people who have learnt deeply from other traditions, to enter the fray, or at least not—as Fredericks does—to criticise those who do? For as Clooney says, '[o]nly when an interreligious theological conversation is actually taking place can there be progress in drawing conclusions from it and about it, either to reaffirm or revise established theological positions' ([14], p. 28).

Keith Ward's understanding of comparative theology is rather different from Clooney's and Fredericks' and more accommodating of the potential need for significant theological readjustment. Comparative theologians, argues Ward, should be 'prepared to revise beliefs if and when it comes to seem necessary' ([4], p. 48). He acknowledges that the divine revelation found in the apostolic witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of Christian commitment. But suggests that comparative study must be allowed to influence Christian understanding of these paradigm events ([24], p. 347). Ward supposes, however, that the willingness to revise where necessary is where comparative theology diverges from confessional theology, which he sees as 'a form of apologetics for a particular faith'. Comparative theology he designates, by contrast, 'an intellectual discipline which inquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions' ([4], p. 40). Ward wishes to make clear that comparative theology is not merely about expressing the faith of one's own community, exploring its official beliefs, submitting to its authority and defending its views 'even if critical enquiry begins to question its assertions' ([4], pp. 40, 46); it is not restricted to an 'activity from within the believing community' ([4], p. 38), confined to certain 'protected propositions' which are 'exempt from questioning' ([4], p. 41). Ward does not mean by this that comparative theology requires a 'tradition-neutral investigator' ([4], p. 47); he readily acknowledges that the theologian always works 'from a particular perspective' ([4], p. 49). But he is keen to carve out a genuinely theological discipline in which truth is freely pursued, even where that truth calls into question the beliefs of one's community, and to uphold this discipline as also genuinely dialogical, involving co-operation, discussion, argument, and conversation amongst people of differing beliefs.¹³

While I am in accord with Ward's vision of comparative theology as both a genuinely free enquiry, driven by the search for truth, and a genuinely interreligious enterprise, I am not sure that

¹³ Ward ([4], p. 45). At times Ward's reflections suggest that he does not take the distinction between confessional and comparative theology to be as clear-cut as he at other times presents it. See, e.g. [4], p. 49.

distinguishing it from confessional theology on these grounds is helpful, since to do so detracts from the legitimacy of revision from a committed religious standpoint. Can Christians not be open to pursuing truth wherever it may lead, and to doing so, in part *because* of their Christian commitment? If revisions of the Christian tradition are legitimate, moreover, then that legitimacy must be argued for on Christian grounds and to argue for it on Christian grounds is to be engaged in confessional theology. Hence, in this regard I agree with Clooney's recommendation that we not 'distinguish "the exploration of a given revelation" (in confessional theology) from a broader survey of traditions (in comparative theology)' ([14], pp. 25–6). Ward's notion of confessional theology as mere repetition of traditional understandings is arguably too narrow. I suggest that, insofar as the task of comparative theology is undertaken from a basis of *some* religious perspective or other to which new learning is then related, it should count as a form of confessional theology, broadly construed. Certainly, as the Christian theologian's understanding of Christianity is transformed through immersion in and identification with a second tradition, this *complicates* the sense in which her theology is confessional, since she is no longer drawing on just the resources of her home tradition. After doing comparative theology for a long time, reflects Clooney, one may still be a Catholic in dialogue with Hinduism,

but one is also deeply influenced by the Hinduism of the Hindu with whom one converses. Ideally, it will no longer be possible to seat people neatly around the table according to neatly separated religions, as if people keep coming to the table without having been influenced by the other tradition ([2], p. 139).

But this enrichment of one's Christian identity does not mean that one's theology is no longer grounded in faith.

Here, Wilfred Cantwell Smith's reflections on the theological project that lies before us may be helpful. He called this project 'World Theology' or 'Global Theology', by which he meant a form of theology concerned with transforming Christianity through non-Christian insights. A transformed Christian theology, thought Smith, 'will interpret the history of our race in a way that will give intellectual expression to our faith, the faith of all of us, and to our modern perception of the world' ([25], p. 125). Christians engaged in the process end up with a theology which is thoroughly Christian but also more than Christian—'Christian, plus', as Smith puts it—because it is penetrated and transformed by insights derived from other traditions. And at the same time as Christians engage in this enterprise, so do theologians in other traditions, as they too attempt to step into the perspectives of others to see what light is thereby shed on the world and on their own traditions. World theology can be understood, then, as a kind of permanent interreligious colloquium, generating theologies which, although Christian or Hindu, say, are also *more than* Christian or Hindu: more comprehensive for the integration of the insights of others and, hence, more genuinely universal.

Conclusions

If comparative theologians are sincere in their intention to take the truths of other traditions seriously, then they must be willing to allow those truths to challenge their confessional presuppositions and to make revisions where necessary. I am not arguing that all comparative theologians must abandon inclusivism in favour of pluralism, but only that inclusivist presuppositions cannot be exempt from the effects of comparative study. I have tried to show, moreover, that revision

need not involve making a definitive judgement about the truth and value of the tradition studied in relation to one's own, nor a retreat to a meta-position outside both. Rather it need only involve an acknowledgement that one finds sufficient truth and value in that tradition that one is not able, in good conscience, to hold that one's home tradition is superior and, hence, a willingness to revise expressions of faith which entail that it is.

Being clear about this truth-seeking, constructive dimension of the enterprise is crucial to carving out a disciplinary remit for comparative theology distinct from comparative religion, phenomenology of religions, or history of religions. For if comparative theologians shy away from the theological implications of their growing understanding of other traditions, then their comparative study ceases to bear on their confessional perspectives and their intention to learn from others is compromised. In some cases, this shying away is easy to sympathise with. We must acknowledge the constraints placed upon some theologians by their ecclesial location. Given that Ward is an Anglican, while Clooney is a Roman Catholic and member of the Society of Jesus, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ward is more willing to revise beliefs where necessary. Faced with the threat of Vatican censorship,¹⁴ silence on the question of Christian superiority may be as much as we can reasonably expect from comparative theologians such as Clooney. But where such constraints operate, it is hard to see comparative theology as an entirely free pursuit of truth.

Where comparative theologians are freer—and willing—to follow the dialogue with other traditions wherever it may lead, comparative theology can be conceived of along the lines suggested by Smith: as theology which, working from a particular religious starting point, attempts, through dialogue, to contribute to the task of giving expression to the faith of us all. This kind of theology is not a matter of plundering other traditions for whatever one finds useful and then going on one's way, but of being genuinely open to having one's perspective transformed through dialogue with others; it is a matter of us all, with our diverse commitments, doing theology together. Perhaps we could think of the horizon towards which this kind of interreligious theology reaches as a collaborative alliance of increasingly comprehensive *theologies in dialogue*, theologies which stand in shifting relations of both convergence and creative tension. The alternative is that confessional theology increasingly assumes the role of a reliquary for a faith that is incapable of integrating the understanding that contemporary knowledge of other religious traditions has brought.¹⁵

¹⁴ This has been the recent fate of a number of Roman Catholic theologians who have questioned Christian superiority. Roger Haight [26,27], for example, proposes a Christology which interprets Jesus as the Christ 'in a way that does not construe Christianity as the one and only true faith and way of salvation uniquely superior to all others' ([27], p. 151). In 2004, after investigating Haight's work *Jesus—Symbol of God* [26], the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirmed its verdict that the book contains serious doctrinal errors (see [28]). Consequently, Haight was forbidden to teach theology at Catholic universities and, more recently, to write on theology or to teach at any institution, even if unaffiliated with the Catholic Church.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Francis Clooney, John Berthrong, and Magdalen Lambkin for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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