

Article

# Philosophical Theology for a New Age

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**Abstract:** Having distinguished the primary philosophers of religion, those whose philosophies of “Everything” entail something about religion, from those who study only or mainly religion, this article discusses the necessary comparative base for the future of the field. It distinguishes the approach that begins with the subject matter from the approach that sticks with a home tradition to which comparison adds new material, arguing for the former. The religions of West Asia, South Asia, and East Asia are discussed, noting the naturalistic form of the last. The fundamental comparative category for philosophy of religion is the Ultimate, of which I give my own version. This version also requires categories defining determinate things, their togetherness of various sorts, and their essential and conditional components. To be plausible, this theory needs to be associated positively and negatively with the main religious traditions and with our relation to nature and society. Religious lives need to be scaled from the primitive and literalistic all the way to the philosophical. Philosophy of religion or philosophical theology of all sorts is fallible and needs to prepare for the next step.

**Keywords:** big and small picture philosophers; determinate things; diverse cultures; God as ultimate in West, South, and East Asian religions; harmonies; ontological creative act; togetherness; Ultimacy

## 1. Introduction

Primarily, philosophical theology is that part of a great philosopher’s work that deals with religion, theology, and other topics in the area. These are the people we teach in undergraduate courses in philosophical theology. Think of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Aquinas, Scotus, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, James, Dewey, Whitehead, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, *the Laws of Manu*, *The Brhaspati Sutra*, Kapila, Patanjali, Shankara, Abhinavagupta, Ramanuja, Madhva, Aurobindo, *The Anguttara-nikara*, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Nagarjuna, Seng-chao, Chi-Tsang, Hsuan-Tsang, Chih-I, Fa-tsang, Hui-neng, Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Mengzi, Xunzi, Wangbi, Han-u, Zhou Dunyi, Cheng-hao, Cheng-Yi, Zhu Hsi, Wang Yang-ming, Yen Yuan, and Kang Yu-wei. These philosophers were primarily known for their metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics, yoked together, and yet they all had implications for religion and theology.

Only secondarily do we count as philosophical theologians those philosophers whose primary topic is religion or theology and who work within the ambiance of someone with a sense of the whole. The reason for this is that the serious alternatives for their views rarely come from their compatriots within their sense of philosophical theology. Rather, they come from the spectacular shifts of the whole picture caused by a larger philosophers of the whole. To be sure, there are borderline cases, and the distinctions between the larger and smaller philosophic visions themselves are functions of perspectives. Nevertheless, the distinction is very important to make. The reason for its importance is that the Big Picture philosophers are the ones who are sensitive to the alternatives that come from unexpected places. Small Picture philosophers have greater precision, often, and can speak in the language of the great majority of their audience. However, they merely assume some Big Picture, they do not argue for it in comprehensive ways. Most philosophers are indeed Small Picture. This is how they are trained in most graduate schools of philosophy or religion. Most dissertations are defined as Small Picture and ideally are fit into something missing in the local Big Picture. Most jobs are defined in Small Picture ways, and so are



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promotions and tenure. After all, who can expect young philosophers to deal with the big issues? One can expect philosophers to start small, in ways recognized by their colleagues, and only then include larger interests, perhaps. The pressures remain to stay small all the time.

Big Picture philosophers are very rare, of course. However, they do exist. In American philosophy, Peirce began as a scientist and published in the sciences all his life. William James began as a medical doctor. Whitehead began as a mathematician and never really studied philosophy in school. John Dewey alone began as a Small Picture German Idealist academic but woke up to envision vistas for pragmatism that made his work Big Picture. All four of them had Big Picture work that focused on something different from religion: Peirce on epistemology (Pierce 1878), James on morals (James 1942), Whitehead on metaphysics (Whitehead 1926), and Dewey on experience (Dewey 1934). However, all four also treated religion and made unique contributions.

All this having been said, most of the people interested in this book and this article are going to be Small Picture philosophical theologians, working within the confines of some generally accepted Big Picture and debating about Small Picture issues. They will be hoping that we will offer some new ways to advance Small Picture issues despite the statistical fact that job openings in philosophical theology, philosophy of religion, and cognate fields are rapidly diminishing at the current time. As I continue to deal with the Small Picture, let everyone be warned about the revolutionary effects of Big Picture work on the scene, and be prepared to jump to the latter when they show up.

## 2. A Comparative Base

Philosophical theology nowadays needs to work from a comparative base. Perhaps this has not always been so in the western tradition, but we no longer are only westerners. For us and others in the near future, our conclusions should be offered to anyone who is interested, which now includes thinkers from many traditions. Big Picture thinkers such as Kant could avoid comparison, though his immediate successors such as Schleiermacher (1988) and Hegel (2007–2008) could not. James, Dewey, and Whitehead wrote mainly for a western audience, although they engaged to some considerable degree in comparison. For us, now that most texts are translated into English, which has become the international language, the need for comparison is overwhelming (Neville 1978, 1982, 1991, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

There are many ways of making comparisons and none of them is really complete. Philosophical comparisons will always be incomplete by virtue of dealing with only some things to be compared, by virtue of starting from different backgrounds, by virtue of employing different methodologies, and by virtue of dozens of accidents. Individual scholars will always deal with only a part of some larger scheme of comparison. Nevertheless, over the next 50 years, we can assume that a large body of diverse comparisons will yield a reasonable comparative base. Two approaches to comparison can be brought to mind to understand something of the layout of the field. For historical reasons and associated with the intimacy of debate, one approach is associated with Boston College and the other with Boston University.

The Boston College approach was originally developed by Francis X. Clooney, S.J., and Catherine Cornielle, although they have evolved over its course. The principle is to begin with one's home tradition and explore how some other tradition relates to it. This approach is best acknowledged by the phrase "faith seeking understanding." The folks from Boston College are Roman Catholic and therefore embrace that large and nicely inclusive Catholic tradition as home. For them, faith is religious and considerably positive, although large and sprawling. For others, for instance some analytic philosophers, the faith is much broader, such as the assumption that the Western tradition is mainly true, perhaps in its Platonic or Aristotelian mode. For many of them, non-Western traditions are the source of comparison, brought to bear on the Western. For many members of the movement of

Philosophy without Walls, education has been almost entirely in the Western modes, and specialties in Chinese or Indian philosophies are taken on as late afterthoughts.

The biggest limitation of this approach to comparison is its commitment to Small Philosophies. The home tradition is always a Small Philosophy, no matter how large it is. However, that home tradition is modified by being brought alongside some other tradition, one is still loyal to that Small Picture. Additionally, of course, true comparison might call any Small Picture into question, perhaps even calling for its abandonment.

The Boston University approach to comparison is associated with the late John Berthrong and myself. Its principle is to start with the subject matter or topic and determine what the traditions being compared have to say about it. To be sure, we always start with some adolescent knowledge of comparative matters, and usually we begin with Christianity or Judaism. However, we take as our focus the subject matter of comparison and hunt for places where it is found. We might begin with what is necessarily a home tradition but find that our comparison reveals some other tradition as having much more to say about the topic and the home tradition to be weak or just plain wrong. Moreover, when looking at traditions, we are much more likely to find several contradictory or competing places where the subject matter appears differently. In these cases, different traditions might have closer associations with one another than with other elements in those compared traditions. This begins to break down the integrity of traditions themselves, teaching us to look at their histories as intertwined and borrowing from each other to a great extent. Themes cut across traditions in various ways, and those same traditions have contrary or even contradictory themes. Most traditions, for instance, have both positive and negative takes on the issue of free will, or on whether the Ultimate is full or empty.

By Ultimate I mean first what anyone in any tradition (or none) considers to be the category that is the last step in consideration of what is unconditioned. For some people, it might be the Big Guy in the Sky, for others that which is beyond personality, the Infinite, Pure Act (as in Thomas), Brahman without Qualities, the Dao, or the Great Ultimate Nothing. Second, for myself, I believe, after many long chains of arguments, that the Ultimate is an ontological creative act that is itself contingent upon nothing (Neville [1968] 1992). Our reasoning about the Ultimate always supposes the contingent existence of logic, so our view of the Ultimate is contingent, though necessary within our thought (Neville 2013). The ontological creative act does not exist without a product, and so we are just lucky it creates.

This leads comparative inquiry of the Boston University sort to pursue two lines of development. One is to explore in ever-more detail the specifics of comparison. This means explicating texts for more details of positions, comparing different positions with somewhat different outcomes, and filling in the details of comparisons.

The other line of development is to constantly shift the comparative categories. Two comparativists begin with some vague comprehension of the category according to which their comparisons proceed. However, they quickly learn, for instance, that by "God" one means a finite super-being and the other means an infinite being beyond beings. So they agree that by "God" the comparative category, they mean a deliberately vague notion for which either specification might be true. Then, a third comparativist comes along who says that, whereas the infinite being beyond beings means the fullness of being, another version of God is the emptiness of being according to which all determinations of being are wholly created. Cobb (2012), for instance holds the first view, Thomas Aquinas holds the second (Aquinas 2009, ST I QQ.1–64), and Rene Descartes (1966) holds the third. The comparative conception of God must allow for all three.

However, how then does this relate to the conceptions associated with South Asia according to which there are hundreds of conceptions of God, telescoping into a few major conceptions, telescoping again into a super God, who cannot sustain himself or herself on the Law of Karma and who is transformed into a deeper principle such as Brahman, even Brahman without Qualities? Can God be conceived according to a sliding scale of gods/God/Emptiness, as well as according to John Cobb's finite God? What about

the Buddhists who officially believe (at least some of them) that there is nothing at all behind the appearances of things in consciousness but also are devoted to worshipping Avalokiteshvara or Guan Yin when seeking favors?

The religions associated with China, Daoism, and Confucianism, have no personal metaphors for God but are fully naturalistic. The religions of West Asia, insofar as they believe God is a being or being beyond beings, assume that the person carries the traits of agency, of rationality, will, creativity, and such things and that these are manifested somehow in God. The religions of South Asia assume that Gods are more similar to consciousness and that the “higher” one progresses, the more similar to pure consciousness the God is. The traits of agency are precisely those that are left behind. However, the Gods of East Asia, and there are a great many of them, are not serious Gods except for popular culture. By about 1000 BCE, the personalistic Gods had been dropped by the literate people in favor of the spontaneity of Heaven and nature. The metaphors of burgeoning springs and the transformations of the season, especially in the springtime, were the objects of worship. Among sophisticated people, the Dao that cannot be named, the emptiness of non-being, and the Ultimate of non-being giving rise to the Great Ultimate were worshipped and given the most serious thought. The Ultimate non-being from which the determinations of being come can be recognized only from the perspective of what it produces. Some comparativists want to deny the status of “religion” to Daoism and Confucianism because of their rejection of personal being metaphors. Nevertheless, they have public practices to celebrate the Ultimate, personal practices that determine the identity of the self, and theologies and mythologies of the Ultimate just the same as other religions. So we should define them as religions too.

This means that when we are looking for a comparative category of God, we should not stop with God, but go on to the Ultimate. The Ultimate does not carry the personal traits of agency or consciousness with it, although it allows for them in its West Asian and South Asian manifestations. It also allows for naturalistic orientations.

We see through the example of the Ultimate comparative category that the process of comparison continues to review and expand the comparative category itself. It is not limited to filling in specifications. Due to the fact that our knowledge is always fallible, we should look for expanded versions of Ultimacy, perhaps even something beyond Ultimacy.

Now think of all the comparisons going on at once, not just about the Ultimate but about social structures, psychological structures, age differences, and the rest. Here, is my theory about how all these things impact religion and theology. Let us say that religion is anything that deals with the Ultimate, and that theology is thinking about this. The discussion of the Ultimate above is the central part of religion. However, all the other disciplines bear upon this central discussion. For instance, everyone involved in religion has some social standing, or moves through social standings, from memberships to congregations to monasteries, to individual withdrawal from society, to occupying a position where religion does not count for much. The discipline centers on defining social systems of these sorts but also has to deal with religious elements of social systems, the psychological, the economic, political, the historical, the homemaking, the individuating, the data-gathering, the rules of diet, habits of dress, age differences, and so forth. Each of these bears on social systems, but then each of them also is a discipline of sorts with its own center and its bearings on all the others. This is true of all disciplines: each is a discipline that harmonizes many other disciplines according to essential features of its own. All the other disciplines are conditional elements of the given discipline. Any phenomenon can be analyzed according to many disciplines. Care must be taken to analyze with an eye to what is essential and what is conditional to that essence.

Just imagine how complex religious analysis is! Consider a member of a Protestant congregation. The congregation can be analyzed according to the principles of social organization, contrasting it with Catholic congregations and Orthodox ones, with monastic life, and with no congregational life. The person can also be analyzed according to the nature of his or her membership, which might be deep or superficial, or changing, or

negligible. Both of these analyses, however need to be supplemented by an analysis of Ultimacy, which determines just how much the membership in the congregation is in fact religious. We all know of people who are members of congregations but whose religious life has nothing to do with the congregation or with that membership. Perhaps they have no religious life at all, or one located in some other social location. So a demographer's analysis of religion through membership in denominations, or congregations is not really an analysis of religion, but of that membership. How easy it is to think something is truly religious when it is only membership in a religious congregation without religion, or a psychological state that has no religious relation to Ultimacy, or economic activity that might have no religious bearing!

Now add to the complexity two more factors. Given the essential qualities of religion as having the features of harmony with the harmonies of sociality with those of politics or economy and the levels of indirection of influence and the complexity is extraordinary, often missed, but often also noted. The second factor is that most of these disciplines are also changing, both as disciplines and in terms of what they study. Academics are fairly well aware of the constant drift of disciplines. However, conditions are changing as well. In India, for instance, some people observe the age distinctions that mark off the student from the householder from the retired person from the wandering ascetic. Changes in health considerations, however, lead to much greater numbers of the wandering ascetics who now rely on political handouts more and more and so increase greatly the number of people who might find Ultimacy in very old age. How interesting!

To be sure, no single scholar is going to look at all these data. Most comparativists work with just a part of a part of a part. However, it is interesting to know about the whole range of things that might come into religious comparison, and reflections on this being theological comparison.

### 3. Philosophical Theology on a Comparative Base

Working out comparisons is one thing. Working with the results of comparisons is quite another, however it is easy to step from one to the other. Strictly speaking, the results of any comparison ought to be objective and to fit in to its proper place in the swirling maelstrom of comparisons. No claim is made that anything compared is actually true of religion in any normative sense, although nearly everything compared is true of some religion at some time and somewhere. Genuine comparisons are normative in the sense that they weigh the importance of the things compared. For instance, are the differences in social roles according to age in India of much importance, or are they mainly just mentioned in the literature? Are the West Asian agential approaches to Ultimacy just as good as South Asian consciousness approaches and East Asian naturalistic ones? How do we reconcile the differences? How do we account for the presence of one tradition in elements of another? How do we identify the changes taking place in the interactions of various traditions? We expect good comparisons to be sensitive to these and related questions and to deal with them. However, you see how home traditions will bend the answers to the benefit of the home tradition. Or resolute disregard for the validity of any religious essentialism might diminish the striking tingle of various phenomena. It is far better for comparativists to take their clue from the topic and to let their own religion follow along.

Suppose, however, that a philosophical theologian worth his or her salt has no interest in making comparisons and is just interested in the topic, for instance Ultimacy, or social organization. These and countless others are proper topics for philosophical theology. However, I think these philosophical reflections should rest upon and come out of a very large comparative base. Instead of just the comparative base of Greek, Roman, French, German, Italian, and British philosophy, philosophical theologians ought to have as their active background East and South Asian philosophies as well as Muslim and Western. They should also know the thinking in tribal religions in Africa, the Mound Builders in North America, and the Maya, Aztec, and Peruvian empires. The latter would be harder to acquire because there is little literature from the African and American bases, but the material

should be known at least a little. Even with the Asian and Muslim philosophies, the specific background of the philosophical theologian would give him or her more knowledge in one than in the others, at least for a while. Then, there are the mixtures that provide backgrounds that are dislocated from the geographic areas. However, my point is that, despite the variations, that wide range of material should provide the background out of which the philosophical theologians develop their own views. Philosophical theologians, of course, are fallible.

These remarks presume that philosophical theologians want to develop their views through inquiries that at least partially are located in history. As soon as one identifies, positively or negatively, with an historical position, one is obliged to locate that position with regard to others in comparative ways. Most of us do this naturally, and it is a way of identifying trends in thinking. Those of us who are along in years remember when philosophers could debate only about God as agent, defending or attacking finite conceptions or infinitely full conceptions. Nevertheless, it is harder these days to avoid naturalistic conceptions, or conceptions assuming that agency is what is wrong with religion and that consciousness is more on the mark. To be sure, not every paper or even book on a narrow topic needs to consider its wider comparative context, but at least the authors should know from what positions their papers are read.

More important, a genuine philosophical theologian will want to position his or her views in the comparative context of a large range of thought. This is not a minor connection with a comparative background but a major one. Unevenness of treatments is to be expected, and it helps to live a long time and work one's view into connection with a great many aspects of the environment. This involves, among other things, a general interpretation of the general context in which comparisons run across and through many traditions, with varying depths of significance. It helps to begin your work very young and live to be very old. However, it does not help to leave your contextual studies until late in life and then try to catch up: your habits of the range of your thinking are set very early.

I began the elaboration of my philosophical theology earlier with the expansion of inquiry from a Western agency view of God to a South Asian consciousness view to a wholly naturalistic East Asian view. Each of these traditions exhibits sub-traditions, and cross-traditions of many sorts. However, what conception of the Ultimate allows for any of them to be true and for their comparison? Any of them has at least initial plausibility because arguments can be made for them, at least initially. All those conceptions are at least vaguely true as contradictories or as having different specifications of the overall comparative category. What is that comparative category?

My suggestion is that the comparative category of the Ultimate is an ontological creative act that creates everything with the slightest bit of determinateness. As an act, this Ultimate is known by what it creates, in this case everything determinate. Determinate things are contingent upon the act. The act is contingent upon the determinate things. All necessities are contingent upon the ontological creative act that includes the determinate things.

The ontological creative act has no nature of its own except for what it creates. The creatures cannot be separated from the act, for that separation would be just another creature. The determinate creatures by themselves are impossible. What the ontological creative act contributes is making the creatures together. The determinate things need to be made together. The ontological creative act is singular in making the determinate creatures together. However, it is not one in that it does not provide a determinate pattern in which they are together. Rather, there are pockets of order among the determinate things.

In addition to the category of the Ultimate, which is the ontological creative act, we need a comparative analysis of determinate things, showing them to be creatures.

Determinate things must be many, because only one determinate thing could not be determinate. It would not be determinately this rather than that, or this rather than nothing. Determinate things must also have the unity of relating directly or indirectly. If two things are not directly related, they are indirectly related through the mediation of other things.

Therefore, each determinate thing is a harmony of two kinds of components, essential and conditional. By virtue of its essential components, a harmony integrates all its components and is different from all other things. By virtue of its conditional components a thing is related to some other things, directly or indirectly. Each harmony, therefore, is both external to each other harmony, by virtue of its essential components, and also internally related to the other harmonies, by virtue of its conditional components, directly or indirectly.

How are determinate things together? They obviously are together through their conditional components. This is their cosmological togetherness. However, they are also external to one another and hence are together as externally as well as internally related. This is their ontological togetherness. In their ontological togetherness they are simply made to be together by the ontological creative act. They fit together in patterns according to their conditional components, but this would not be possible if they were not also ontologically together. The ontological creative act simply makes them be together ontologically so that their essential components are together while remaining outside one another. This makes possible their cosmological togetherness with its patterns of relationships.

#### 4. Ultimacy

The remarks about the ontological creative act as the category of the Ultimate by themselves are extremely abstract, disconnected, silly, and probably disconnected from religion. They need to be connected with the main religious themes, to be grounded in them, to provide them with interpretations, and to guide our inquiries.

The clue to connecting our own thoughts with the theologies of the world traditions is perhaps best found in India although it appears in every tradition. Recall that there are stages in life's order for different approaches to the Ultimate. This is something to be expected in India, and at least some time that expectation was expressed in real life. In Hinduism of some sorts, the stages are that of the student, the householder, the aged grandparent, and the very aged seeker after solitary enlightenment. This order is not to be found easily in religions organized according to congregational life, where the whole congregation is supposed to agree more or less. Nor is it found easily in naturalisms where congregational life is missing or rather non-religious. Nor is it easily found in religions such as Confucianism where the religion is learned in families, not congregations, and in private meditation. Nevertheless, it can indeed be found in all these contexts because aging makes a real and substantial difference.

What this suggests is that most or all religions of sufficient size have a kind of scale that goes from popular or primitive religion through various developments into something sophisticated. People can begin at any stage on the scales, and some of them move toward or into the sophisticated levels. The scales might be widely different, as the West Asian is from the South Asian and both from East Asian. There are many scales that mix these three, or some other kinds of religion. The more sophisticated, the more the practice of religion includes philosophy of religion or philosophical theology. As these philosophical theologians become more sophisticated, they come to agree more and more, for instance, on the indeterminacy of the Ultimate, or its not being indeterminate (that is a disagreement with very little vagueness about its definitions). I wager that some of these theologians extend their discussions of Ultimacy to my own position, namely that it consists of an ontological creative act that includes the determinate things it creates but that itself has no necessity to take place.

Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy would seem to be unique. His God is finite and requires the world, so that God plus the world is really his Ultimate. However, he is slow to call that combination Ultimate. He simply does not ask the ontological question of that combination of God and world. If he did, he would have to say that the Ultimate is an ontological creative act, without an antecedent actor, that creates both his God and his world. However, he does not ask that question, and so leaves the God plus world to be contingent. Uninterestingly contingent. How different is that from my view?

However that may be, there are trajectories coming from the main religious traditions, trajectories all different in their starting place, but aiming at similar conclusions, namely the ontological creative act. That act is not simple, as I described it above, but is the culmination of each trajectory, and thus bears that trajectory as a line. A given philosopher can master as many of those lines as are attractive to him, master them in different terms, and still bring them closer together as the sophisticated end of the scale is reached. The philosopher might stay with the sophisticated end, especially since that helps communication with other philosophers at the sophisticated end of their own trajectories. Or the philosopher might also keep a tight connection with some more popular position on the spectrum, as those do who identify with many unsophisticated people in congregations, or with scientific people who remain unsophisticated about the Ultimate, however sophisticated they might be about their science.

This is how philosophical theologians maintain the connections of their trajectories with their sophisticated ending points. Whether the connection is one of transcendence or of affirmation, the scale of the trajectories makes the connections. The more the trajectory is affirmed rather than known and then transcended, the more the world religions are tightly connected with the trajectories. We should always remember that philosophical theologians are always changing, that occupying a position really means moving from one to another.

## 5. Conclusions

This essay began by distinguishing Big Picture philosophy of religion or philosophical theology from Small Picture versions of it. Big Picture philosophy probably does not think of itself as doing philosophical theology or philosophy of religion, just philosophy. Small Picture philosophers identify themselves with their narrow discipline, and a small version that is true.

The way for Small Picture philosophy of religion to move forward is by doing comparative work in that field. Of course, comparison is always partial and depends a whole lot on accidents. Every little bit helps, however, and it all adds up to a much broader base from which to do philosophical theology. Exploring changes in the categories for comparison as well as making the specifics count in comparison is not by itself to be philosophical theology or philosophy of religion. One needs to move into normative categories, affirming what is to be affirmed, denying what is to be denied, and even inventing new categories as the need arises. I have developed a short version of my own philosophical theology as both illustrative and, hopefully, persuasive. Most importantly, I have pointed out the involvement of every philosopher in religion as on the way to sophistication and affirming or transcending the religious trajectory or trajectories occupied.

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