The Return of Comparative Theology
Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson*

In this essay, we examine the emerging discipline of comparative theology as a valuable window into the problematic of the return of religion and theology after “religion.” The first section discusses recent historical critiques of comparative religion, focusing particularly on its emergence from a late nineteenth-century discourse that was also called “comparative theology.” This critique focuses attention on the unacknowledged normative commitments implicit in the category of “religion” as an object of scientific study. The second section presents the new comparative theology as one of several constructive responses to the dilemma, with this critical difference: whereas the recognition of normative commitment remains a methodological problem for most scholars in religious studies, it belongs to the very nature of the comparative theological project. Insofar as it encourages wider accountability and authentic vulnerability in its comparative practice, we argue, the new comparative theology represents both a way past the legacy of liberal universalism and a useful model for comparative enquiry in theology and religious studies alike.

THE THEME OF “religion after ‘religion’” asks us to reflect on a paradox. At the same time that religion has become a more prominent subject in public discourse, both popular and academic, the category of

*Reid B. Locklin, St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, 81 St. Mary St., Toronto, ON Canada M5S 1J4; E-mail: reid.locklin@utoronto.ca. Hugh Nicholson, Department of Theology, Loyola University Chicago, 1032 W. Sheridan Rd., Crown Center, Room 302, Chicago IL 60660; E-mail: hnicolson@luc.edu.
“religion” has been subject to sharp critique in the academy. The paradox, however, is only apparent. The two sides of this problematic—the return of religion and the critique of “religion”—are in fact symptomatic of the same basic phenomenon: a breakdown of the ideology of universality and neutrality that has sustained the tradition of modern liberalism. As the pithy statement of the theme—“The Return of Religion after ‘Religion’”—makes clear, the apparent paradox rests on an equivocation in the meaning of the term “religion.”

The “religion” whose return is being heralded is the “other” of modern liberal society. According to its founding narrative, the tradition of modern liberalism was formed in reaction to the so-called Wars of Religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The fundamental aim of the Enlightenment was to displace Christianity from its hegemonic position in culture and society. The modern liberal state eventually adopted a stance of neutrality and tolerance toward non-coercive, “de-politicized” forms of religious commitment. And yet, as recent critics have argued, the modern model of society is religiously neutral only for those who accept as unproblematic what Bruce Lincoln calls its “minimalist” concept of religion, that is, the understanding of religion as merely one of a number of autonomous cultural spheres (e.g., Lincoln 2003: 4–5, 56–61). The global resurgence of “maximalist” (or, more pejoratively, “fundamentalist”) religious movements wherein religion permeates all aspects of social life, including the political, can be understood as a kind of “return of the repressed,” the militant re-assertion of those forms of religion excluded by the modern secular model of society. The return of this religion has forced the advocates of liberal society to question its pretensions of neutrality and universality and to acknowledge the exclusions upon which it was established.

The concept of “religion” under fire in the academic study of religion, by contrast, is an expression of the very same universalist ideology that such religious movements call into question. In the tradition of comparative religion that stretches from Müller to Eliade, this “religion” was taken to be a universal category of human experience. The historical forms of religious belief and practice were only so many manifestations of religion as such, the historically conditioned responses of “religious man” to the transcendent reality of “the sacred.” Against this tradition, scholars like Talal Asad (1993), Richard King (1999), and


2Throughout this essay, we use the designations “the academic study of religion,” “comparative religion,” “history of religions,” “religious studies,” and the like more or less interchangeably.
Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), building on the ground-breaking work of W. C. Smith (1991; cf. Asad 2001), have argued that “religion,” far from being a neutral, universal phenomenon, is itself the product of the European Enlightenment. As such, its use as a universal category of human experience is at once historically anachronistic and cross-culturally imperialistic. Far from being a neutral descriptive category, the religion concept embodies a set of culturally specific normative commitments. Those commitments are arguably theological in nature, as we shall see presently when we trace the concept back to the Christian fulfillment theology of the nineteenth century.

This critique of the religion concept has shaken the understanding of comparative religion as an objective, “scientific” (wissenschaftlich) discipline. For, as a number of scholars have argued, the self-understanding of comparative religion as an objective science was sustained in large measure by the discipline’s projection of a theological other (Bell 1996: 183, 187; Roberts 2004: 149; Griffiths 2006: 72–73). For some, in fact, the critique sounds the death knell for the academic study of religion, at least as we know it. Exemplifying this type of response is Tim Fitzgerald, who argues that the study of religion remains a form of “liberal ecumenical theology” and that “religion,” accordingly, is unsalvageable as a valid analytical category. He proposes that “religious studies” be “rethought and re-represented” as “cultural studies” (2000: 10; cf. King 1999: 53–61; Dubuisson 2007).

At the same time that such critiques have challenged the notion of a science of religion or Religionswissenschaft, they have also offered, perhaps unexpectedly, a measure of vindication to theology. Few have argued as forcefully along these lines than Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Griffiths. In the case of the former, the genealogical critique of “religion”—as a particular instance of the broader genealogical project—may be read to expose, and also to exemplify, the invariably partisan character of all enquiry whatsoever (see MacIntyre 1990: 117–118, 150–152). As a consequence, MacIntyre recommends the re-conceptualization of the university as a “place of constrained disagreement,” in which each scholar and teacher abandons the pretense of neutrality and engages in a controlled, sympathetic, and rigorous contest as “the protagonist of a particular point of view” (231). Griffiths, for his part, advances what he holds to be the inevitable result of such a contest: an open acknowledgment of the normative claims that sustain the non-theological study of religion, and, with this acknowledgment, recognition of their relative inadequacy vis-à-vis those of traditional theology. Ultimately—if only eschatologically—religious studies will be folded into the “warm embrace” of theology (2006: 77, 120–121; cf. MacIntyre 1990: 55–57, 170–215).
In this essay, we examine a relatively new discipline that, while stopping short of the kind of theological apologetics advocated by Griffiths (1991), recognizes a legitimate place for theological commitment in the comparative study of religion. The emerging discipline of “comparative theology” defines itself in part through its contrast with the classic, foundationalist model of comparative religion we have been discussing. Generally speaking, its aim is not to understand how particular texts, symbols, and practices exemplify the larger phenomenon of religion (Clooney 1993: 8–9; Fredericks 2004: 97–98), but rather to reflect theologically—and creatively—on one tradition of faith in light of the particular teachings and practices of another. At the same time that it distinguishes itself from the (ostensibly) non-theological study of comparative religion, the new comparative theology presents itself as a critique of what is known as the “theology of religions,” especially as exemplified by pluralists like John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Paul Knitter. Comparative theology challenges two features of the theology of religions project that it takes to be definitive, particularly in its pluralist varieties: namely, its universalist presuppositions and its a priori method. Both contrasts—to the classic model of comparative religion, on the one hand, and to a pluralist theology of religions, on the other—are ultimately founded on a critique of liberal universalism familiar from the genealogical critique of “religion.” For a pluralist theology of religions that regards the various historical religions as so many responses to the Absolute represents the ideological superstructure of the regnant world religions discourse which, in turn, remains a presupposition of much of the teaching and research in the discipline of religious studies (Masuzawa 2005: 12 and passim; McCutcheon 2008: 755).

As a discipline that emerges in reaction to the tradition of liberal universalism, the new comparative theology thus provides a window into the problematic of the return of religion and theology after “religion.” It represents one promising direction—though certainly not the only one—that the study of religion after “religion” might take. In this paper, we attempt to explore the special promise and distinctive

---


4 For a vivid illustration of this parallel, one can compare James Fredericks’ critique of theology of religions in Horizons (1995) and Russell T. McCutcheon’s critique of Jeffrey Kripal over ten years later (2008). Though their conclusions differ considerably—Fredericks commending comparative theology, McCutcheon advocating “theory-based, explanatory work” against any implicit or explicit theological agenda (760)—both construct their arguments against the foil of liberalism, a purportedly universal “religious experience” behind the diversity of religious claims and, in particular, the pervasive legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher (see esp. Fredericks 1995: 68–72; McCutcheon 2008: 752).
challenges of this approach, highlighting along the way its complex interrelationship with the broader development of contemporary comparative religion.

Our paper is organized in two parts. In the first, we examine in more detail the above-mentioned genealogical critique of the discipline of comparative religion. A convenient focus for this line of critique is a late nineteenth-century discourse that was also called, ironically enough, comparative theology. The older comparative theology epitomizes the universalist ideology that has since become so problematic. Acknowledging the link between the discipline of comparative religion and the comparative theology of the nineteenth-century allows the universalism and the “theologism” of the former to stand out in bold relief.

This critical examination of the academic study of religion in relation to the older comparative theology sets the stage for the second part of this essay. There we present the new comparative theology as a promising response to the current crisis in the discipline. The lesson to be taken from this recent genealogical line of critique, we contend, is that any credible study of religion today will have to balance an acknowledgment and defense of its normative presuppositions with a willingness to revise those presuppositions in light of the widest possible accountability to scholarly peers and the claims of particular religious traditions. This double demand presents itself as a problem for both self-consciously non-theological and traditional theological approaches to the study of religion, albeit for different reasons. The former generally finds it difficult to reconcile its self-understanding as a scientific discipline with the idea of acknowledging its normative commitments in order to justify and defend them. A more traditionally confessional approach, for its part, is apt to deny the necessarily comparative and self-reflexive stance such acknowledgment also entails. The new comparative theology, by contrast, embraces both dimensions of acknowledgment as integral to its proper task. Comparative theology, in other words, locates its primary focus precisely where the former two approaches step only gingerly and with serious methodological concern, namely, the inevitable tension between the particular normative commitments of the comparative interpreter, on the one hand, and her critical openness and dialogical accountability to alternate such commitments, on the other.5

5As formulated, the comparative theological project reveals significant affinity with MacIntyre’s more explicitly agonistic and conflictual program, discussed briefly above. Insofar as the Thomistic model of reconciliation between apparently incommensurate views serves as the primary model for such study (see especially 1990: 105–115), rather than what appears in MacIntyre’s account to be the considerably less hopeful conflict between contemporary Thomism and its encyclopedist and
CLASSIC COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

One of the most perceptive and articulate studies of today’s discourse of “religion” and “world religions” is Tomoko Masuzawa’s Invention of World Religions (2005). Masuzawa’s historical analysis, which focuses on the nineteenth century, is guided by the hypothesis that today’s regnant discourse of religious pluralism unwittingly preserves the logic of European hegemony that was formerly expressed in the language of Christian universalism (2005: xiv, 33, 327, and passim). An acknowledgment of “the legacy of comparative theology” is central to her argument (2005: 72–104). Masuzawa notes a curious tendency on the part of scholars of religion to expunge the comparative theology of the nineteenth century from the history of their discipline, despite the fact that comparative theology arguably has more in common, in terms of its fundamental assumptions and aims, with today’s world religions discourse than does the Victorian anthropology whose legacy these scholars duly acknowledge (2005: 22–23, 73–74). Today’s discipline of religious studies, eager to disavow the theological elements in its pedigree, has posited a sharp distinction between the religiously motivated enterprise of “comparative theology,” on the one hand, and the ostensibly scientific enterprise of “comparative religion,” on the other (2005: 22). And yet, in the formative years of the discipline in the late nineteenth century, the boundary between “comparative religion” and “comparative theology” was considerably more permeable and fluid than most scholars today acknowledge. As implausible as the notion might sound to us today, the Christian universalism espoused by such works—the view that Christianity, of all the religions of the world, is uniquely qualified to answer the religious needs of all humanity—was believed to cohere with an objective and impartial science of religion (see Masuzawa 2005: 102–104). It is in the context of this effort to genealogist rivals, his proposal strongly resembles those of many of the comparative theologians we survey below.

One need to look no further for evidence of this terminological fluidity and ambiguity than Max Müller’s Introduction to the Science of Religion, generally recognized as one—if not the—founding document of comparative religion (see Sharpe 1986: 35). Contrary to what the anachronistic dichotomy between comparative religion and comparative theology might lead us to expect, Müller prefers “comparative theology” as a designation for the new science of religion; in his preface, in fact, he implicitly associates his work with the “growing literature of comparative theology,” including works that are clearly religiously motivated and partisan (1882: viii–ix). Eric Sharpe regards this preference as something of a terminological idiosyncrasy, a holdover of a time when “theology” was held in high regard (1986: 43). And yet Müller (1899: 45) seems to have self-consciously preferred the term comparative theology over comparative religion as a designation for the new science because “theology” connotes a reflexive dimension vis-à-vis “religion,” its object of study (cf. Clooney 2007: 655).
reconcile Christian commitment with the notion of impartial science that we can best understand the use of the concept of religion in nineteenth-century comparative theology. The generic concept of religion formed the nexus between the science of religion and the universalist theology of nineteenth-century Christian liberalism. A work that beautifully illustrates this nexus is George Matheson’s *The Distinctive Messages of the Old Religions* (1894). Matheson begins his treatise with the observation that the aim of science is to discern the presence of a universal law under diverse phenomena. He then generalizes this characterization of the scientific enterprise to include all other forms of intellectual enquiry. “Every advance of thought,” he declares, “has been an advance of unity” (1894: 39). Religion has generally lagged behind the other departments of human knowledge in arriving at this basic insight as attitudes of religious parochialism have blinded previous generations to the presence of a common element in religion. But with the liberalism of the nineteenth century, Matheson contends, people “have awakened to the recognition of the fact that in addition to *religions* there is a religion” (1894: 40). This recognition of a principle of unity underlying religious differences brings religion into the ambit of scientific enquiry. At the same time, it allows one to recognize a providential role for other faiths in God’s economy of salvation. The concept of religion at once grounds a liberal vision of Christianity and a science of religion.

The Christian nature of Matheson’s putatively universal concept of religion becomes abundantly clear when he goes on to specify its content. “The principle of unity which underlies the different forms of religion” (1894: 43) is none other than the idea of incarnation, which Matheson defines as “the belief in the identity of nature between man and the object of his worship” (1894: 57). Against the anticipated charge of Christian parochialism, Matheson insists that the doctrine of incarnation “is the basis not of Christianity alone, but of all religions and all possibilities of religion” (1894: 60).

One can scarcely imagine a clearer demonstration of the partiality of the concept of religion than one which rests on the central and defining doctrine of Christianity. The task remains, however, to demonstrate

---

7 Compare with James Freeman Clarke’s (1883: 15–16) definition of religion as “the worship and service by man of Invisible Powers, believed to be like himself, yet above himself.”

8 Thus understood, the concept of religion forms the basis of a more effective missionary strategy. The Christian missionaries no longer have to convince potential converts to repudiate their native faiths. Rather, all they have to do is to enable non-Christians to recognize that the basic presupposition of their own faith is enlarged and fulfilled in Christianity (Matheson 1894: 58–60).
the continuity between a comparative theological project like Matheson’s and later works of comparative religion in which the parti-
ality is not quite so obvious. In order to bring this continuity into view, we must first try to understand how such a self-evidently partisan view could be thought to cohere with the ideal of an impartial science. Put differently, we must recognize the conditions under which a concept of “religion,” even one defined in terms of the idea of incarnation, could pass as a generic category upon which a purportedly objective science could be founded.

A clue to such an explanation can be found in Roman Jakobson’s thesis that binary oppositions rest on a distinction between marked and unmarked categories (Jakobson 1990: 134–140). Following this line of enquiry, we might hypothesize that the generic or “unmarked” character of the category “religion” was sustained less by its actual neutrality than by its sharp contrast with a traditional theological vocabulary—including terms such as “revelation” and “faith”—which was strongly marked as “Christian.” However bold the expressions of Christian commitment found in a work like Matheson’s Distinctive Messages might appear to contemporary readers, we must keep in mind that the comparative theological enterprise was quite suspect in its day. Comparative theological works were written with an acute consciousness of objections coming from more traditional theological circles. One can detect a trace of defensiveness in the almost ubiquitous reassurance that, as J. A. MacCulloch (1902: 10) puts it, “the comparative method in theology […] will detract nothing from Christ nor from the doctrines set forth in His teaching.” Such a statement, which is typical of the genre, betrays an anxiety that the liberal religious sensibilities of a new age marked by rapidly expanding horizons of knowledge will outgrow the “narrow” creeds of historical Christianity (see, e.g., Gordon 1896: 22–28). To allay such concerns, comparative theologians reaffirmed their commitment to the absolute truth of Christianity. At the same time, however, they positioned themselves in conscious opposition to more traditional, exclusivist forms of Christian theology that refused to recognize a place for non-Christian faiths in God’s salvific plan.

9A more recent example of this phenomenon is the change in the title of this journal and the association it represents. The eventual change from the "National Association of Biblical Instructors" (NABI) and its Journal of Bible and Religion (JBR) to the "American Academy of Religion" and the Journal of the American Academy of Religion reflects this organization’s self-understanding as an “association of a generic sort.” See the “Editorial Preface” (1962: 185–186).

10They thus distinguished between Christian absolutism and Christian exclusivism. This distinction is implicit in John Hick’s paradigmatic argument that the trend in mainstream Christianity away from an intolerant exclusivism to a benevolent inclusivism nevertheless preserves
By rejecting the standard apologetic categories of revealed religion and natural religion to describe Christianity’s relations with other faiths, comparative theology announced a clean break from the tradition of Christian apologetics. Seen in relation to narrower forms of Christian confessionalism, comparative theology appeared as a decidedly non-parochial, general, and even scientific discipline. It thus seems plausible to suppose that the generic character of its concept of religion was artificially generated by an oppositional contrast with more traditional forms of Christian theology.

We can discern this same projective mechanism in more recent forms of “comparative religion,” but with this difference: that the boundary separating the science of religion from dogmatic theology has shifted to the left, as it were, now including in the latter term Christian theology of a more liberal variety. A generation of scholars, including Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa, and Friedrich Heiler, envisioned the study of religion as a middle way between the normative disciplines of theology and the philosophy of religion, on the one side, and the empirical disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history, and psychology, on the other.  

Paradigmatic of this new positioning of the study of religion vis-à-vis theology is the “fundamental distinction” Joseph Kitagawa makes between “humanistic” and “theological” approaches to the history of religions. The theological approaches to be distinguished from the history of religions proper include the enterprises of the “Theology of Religions,” “Comparative Theologies,” and Paul Tillich’s “Theological History of Religions” (1983: 556). Here we witness that break between comparative religion and comparative theology which, as suggested above, was largely unknown to the previous century. Kitagawa’s chief methodological concern is to pry apart the two components of the of nineteenth-century comparative theology: namely, the comparative study of religion and liberal universalist theology. He regards the widespread and persistent confusion between the enterprises of comparative religion and liberal theology—the dubious legacy, at least in the United States, of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions—as the greatest threat to the integrity of the former as a legitimate academic discipline (1983: 558–559).

Kitagawa’s proposed shift in the line of demarcation between science and theology brings into view the continuity between liberal...
and dogmatic theologies that was suppressed by the previous demarcation. This continuity can be inferred from Kitagawa’s assertion that normative, theological approaches to the history of religions, much like traditional apologetic ones, are guided by a “speculative purpose” and proceed from “an a priori deductive method” (1983: 560, 1959: 21). It is instructive to contrast this characterization with James Freeman Clarke’s declaration that the “science” of comparative theology “does not dogmatize: it observes” (1899 [1871]: 3). Kitagawa’s reconfiguration of the relation between Religionswissenschaft and its theological “other” entails the redescription of comparative theology, against the self-understanding of its practitioners, as an essentially dogmatic enterprise.

There is considerable irony in the fact that the conception of the history of religions articulated by Kitagawa, Eliade, and their contemporaries has since itself been subject to this same kind of devaluing redescription. Arguably, most scholars today would regard a commitment to the notion of a “sacred dimension of life and the world,” a basic presupposition of Kitagawa’s “humanistic approach to the history of religions,” as an essentially theological notion. The accusation that such a “transcendentalist” conception of the history of religions—one that interprets putatively religious phenomena as so many human responses to “the sacred”—represents a form of pseudo-theology is hardly new. It was well known to its proponents (see, e.g., Kitagawa 1983: 562–563). Since then, however, a more radical line of critique has appeared on the scene. Exemplified by the work of scholars like Asad (1993), Russell McCutcheon (1997: esp. 16–18), and Fitzgerald (2000), this more radical mode of criticism extends the critique of Religionswissenschaft beyond any particular interpretation of the category of religion to the discipline as a whole. In his incisive analysis of Clifford Geertz, Asad (1993: 27–54) argues that the very notion of religion as an analytically separable—and thus definable—dimension of culture is the contingent product of the reconfiguration of society that occurred in the European Enlightenment. Accordingly, its use as an interpretive category for pre-modern and/or non-Western cultural experiences necessarily distorts. At a still deeper level, the thrust of Asad’s critique is not epistemological but political. Inasmuch as the study of religion seeks to organize the data of other cultures in terms of a normative vision of society in which religion is separated from the

\[\text{12Cf. Wach’s (1968: 125) characterization of the proper task of theology as “identifying its own confessional norms” and “understanding and confirming its own faith.” A dogmatic understanding of theology is also implicit in Eliade’s (1959: 88) claim that the history of religions is distinguished from theology by its use of “an empirical method of approach.”}\]
realm of power, he argues, it both reflects and unwittingly perpetuates
the global hegemony of Western modernity.

The radical critique of the study of religion represented by Asad,
McCutcheon, and Fitzgerald is, of course, only one of a wide range of
responses to the current crisis of the discipline. For example, scholars
like Donald Wiebe and J. Samuel Preus (1987) diagnose the current
crisis quite differently, in terms of a falling away from the
Enlightenment tradition of naturalistic explanation. According to
Wiebe, the phenomenological shift from explanation to understanding
(Verstehen), from a preoccupation with the causes of religious phenom-
ena to their meaning, undermined the properly scientific project of
comparative religion (see Wiebe 1999: 181–182 and passim). It is
important to note, however, that while this unabashedly “modernist”
trajectory in the study of religion may see itself as restoring the scienti-
fic paradigm of the Enlightenment tradition, it has been forced to ques-
tion the naive foundationalist conception of science held by its
predecessors in that tradition. The genealogical critique of the religion
concept encourages a pragmatist shift in the understanding of science
away from an emphasis on its foundations in an underlying objective
reality to an emphasis on its self-corrective method (see, e.g., Sellars
1963: 170). The study of religion can claim a measure of scientific legiti-
macy not because its claims correspond to a putative object called “religion,”
but rather because they are rendered vulnerable to a process of
constant refinement and correction.13

Lying somewhere between those who seek to restore the classic,
modernist enterprise of Religionswissenschaft and those who argue for
its dissolution are those scholars who accept the genealogical critique of
“religion” as a discursive tradition rooted in a particular history but
who reject the conclusion that this critique necessitates an abandon-
ment of any project that understands itself as “the study of religion.”
According to this third line of argument, religious studies or the history
of religions remains a legitimate field of study so long as “religion”

13Perhaps the best example of such a pragmatic approach to the scientific study of religion is
Robert C. Neville’s method of comparison based on “vague” comparative categories, an approach
that views the comparative process as “an ongoing dialectic of correction” (Neville and Wildman
2001b: 205). Neville and Wildman recognize a tension between this emphasis on constant testing
and revision, on the one hand, and their overall goal of producing “stable comparative hypotheses,”
on the other. They concede that producing stable hypotheses “without endangering the virtue of
vulnerability” is “a matter of delicate balance” (2001a: 13). This tension in Neville and Wildman’s
theory of comparison corresponds to the tension Helen Longino sees between the two “missions”
of the scientific enterprise more broadly, namely, “knowledge extension” (or explanation) and
criticism (see Longino 1990: 34; cf. 224).
remains, for good or for ill, a powerful discourse in today’s world. So long, in other words, as “religion” belongs to the stock of everyday certitudes that ground the thought and behavior of real people, it warrants an academic discipline dedicated to its study, even if much of the labor of the discipline will consist of problematizing or “denormalizing” the discourse of “religion,” “world religions,” and the like.14

This brief survey of responses to the ongoing “identity crisis” of the discipline of religious studies is, of course, far from comprehensive. Even such a cursory treatment can, however, draw attention to one consequence of the postmodernist critique of “religion” as a discursive formation that we see as highly significant. This is the willingness on the part of some of those non-theologians who accept this critique of “religion” to recognize theology itself as a legitimate intellectual endeavor in its own right.15 For example, Timothy Fitzgerald, even though he pejoratively characterizes the discipline of religious studies as a branch of “liberal ecumenical theology,” is willing to concede that theology is a “perfectly legitimate intellectual enterprise” (2000: 7; cf. 20). Fitzgerald directs his criticism not against theology as such, but rather against “theology masquerading as something else” (2000: 20). Another scholar who distinguishes between theology proper and a form of pseudo-theology is Jonathan Z. Smith. In marked contrast to Fitzgerald, Smith makes this distinction in the context of a commitment to the modern discipline of religious studies. Smith sees the principal threat to this discipline in what he terms, following Eric Sharpe, a “transcendentalist” approach, “which attempts to look beyond traditions to some ultimate reality” (1997: 60). Smith regards the “transcendentalists,” not the theologians, as the real antagonists to religious studies (1997: 61). Like Fitzgerald, he is willing to concede the latter group a measure of recognition, albeit a recognition severely qualified by his view that “the theologian is a native informant” for the scholar of religion (1997: 60).

Examples such as these are significant because they evidence a shift away from—or at least an emerging critique of—the long-standing tendency for scholars of religion to define their discipline in opposition to theology. The willingness to recognize theology as a legitimate activity reflects a growing awareness that the academic study of religion is based, as is any form of intellectual activity in fact, on a set of normative commitments. To be sure, important differences remain between

---

15 To be sure, such recognition is far from universal and, in any case, should not be confused with the view that theology has a legitimate place in the academy.
theological and non-theological approaches to the study of religion, particularly, as we shall see below, with regard to their respective attitudes toward these commitments. Such differences notwithstanding, religious studies and theology can be—and increasingly, at least in some quarters, is coming to be—viewed as normatively grounded activities of the same basic type.\textsuperscript{16}

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AFTER “RELIGION”

This recognition of the legitimacy, at least in principle, of a theological approach to the study of religion points out a way beyond the rigid binaries that characterized both nineteenth-century comparative theology and its twentieth-century successors in comparative religion. It also opens the door to the contemporary sub-discipline of comparative theology, which, though certainly not classifiable as an unprecedented novum in either theology or religious studies, does claim to represent, “in its current formulation,” a genuinely new scholarly enterprise (Clooney 2007: 654).

The genesis of a reformulated comparative theology can be traced at least to the late 1980s: David Tracy’s entry on the topic in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987) retains considerable relevance and currency in contemporary discussions, and an influential bibliographical review of this “emerging field” begins its survey with publications from 1989 (Clooney 1995). As it has developed, comparative theology has come to comprehend a number of initiatives which might not label themselves as such. In the English-speaking world, these include the Boston University “Comparative Religious Ideas Project” (Neville and Wildman 2001a, 2001b) at one end of the interpretive spectrum, and more self-consciously devotional projects such as Scriptural Reasoning at the other (see Clooney 2007: 657, 2008: 27–31). At the same time, a growing body of scholarship now takes up one or another form of comparative theology in an explicit way, including monographs by Joseph Bracken (1995), Michael W. Myers (2001), James L. Fredericks (2004), and John J. Thatamanil (2006), as well as multi-volume projects by the prolific Oxford theologian Keith Ward and the Jesuit Indologist Francis X. Clooney, who currently holds one of very few endowed professorships in the sub-discipline, at Harvard Divinity School. Institutionally,

\textsuperscript{16}Cf. Tim Fitzgerald’s (2000: 7) remark that “in one form or another we may all be engaged in an activity somewhat akin to theology.” Ultimately, perhaps, this line of argument leads to what Sheila Greeve Davaney calls the “everything is really theology in disguise, so theology should be included in the academy” argument (2002: 149).
comparative theologians have found their scholarly homes primarily in divinity schools, theology departments and associations like the Catholic Theological Society of America. Yet the practice of comparative theology also has deep roots at the American Academy of Religion, through the work of related organizations such as the Societies of Hindu–Christian Studies, Buddhist–Christian Studies and Scriptural Reasoning, within long-standing program units such as Comparative Studies of Religion and, beginning in 2006, in the Comparative Theology Group.

Read in light of the contemporary critique of “religion,” it is evident that the new comparative theology epitomizes the postmodern shift toward an acknowledgment of the normative underpinnings of the academic study of religion. When scholars like Tracy and Clooney revived the term “comparative theology” in the 1980s, for example, they designated it as “theology” instead of “religion” precisely to mark a contrast with the universality and value neutrality of the classic model of comparative religion.\(^\text{17}\) Now, from our present vantage point their understanding of comparative religion may appear somewhat anachronistic; few religion scholars today, we suspect, would be entirely comfortable with Clooney’s characterization of their work as adducing particular texts, symbols, and practices in order “to understand better the larger phenomenon of religion which they exemplify” (1993: 8).\(^\text{18}\) Comparative theology can therefore be regarded less as an alternative to comparative religion, running alongside the latter in a parallel track, than as one of a range of critically self-conscious approaches to the study of religion after “religion,” albeit with at least one important difference: whereas the recognition of normative commitment remains a methodological problem for most scholars in religious studies even today, it belongs to the very nature of the comparative theological project.

In comparative theology, as elsewhere in the field, the precise level of critical self-consciousness and explicit recognition of such normative commitments can vary. Familiar rhetorical patterns do recur in the work of comparative theologians (see Nicholson 2007: 232). In one oft-cited example, Keith Ward draws a rather sharp demarcation between “confessional theology” and “comparative theology.” The latter, he

\(^\text{17}\) See Tracy (1987: 446), Clooney (1993: 8), cf. Fredericks (2004: 97–98). This usage of the term “comparative theology” thus differs from that of the nineteenth century, as we will develop in greater detail later.

\(^\text{18}\) It seems reasonable to suppose that Clooney’s characterization did, however, correspond to the self-understanding of many scholars of comparative religion in 1993, when he formulated it.
claims, functions “not as a form of apologetics for a particular faith but as an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions” (1994: 40). Knowingly or unknowingly, Ward replicates the binary pattern advanced by Matheson and, in its revised forms, by Eliade, Kitagawa, and other architects of modern comparative religion.

On precisely this point, however, most other comparative theologians will take Ward firmly to task (e.g., Clooney 2001: 25–27, 2007: 658–659). From Clooney’s point of view, comparative theology represents simply one among several forms of theological enquiry, distinguished not by its object or intent but only by its sources and methods (1995: 522). According to one formulation, it aims to produce a new, “rejuvenated” theology that is “interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional”... or, more forcefully, “confessional and even apologetic” (2001: 8, 11). The critical difference is not that most theology is “confessional” whereas this one is not; the critical difference is that comparative theology takes such a confessional stance in and through a sustained “interreligious, comparative and dialogical” engagement with persons, sources, and arguments from outside theologians’ home traditions. And this, in turn, changes the character of its confession in ways that cannot be predicted in advance of comparative enquiry. “Comparative theology,” Clooney argues, “…is a theology deeply changed by its attention to multiple religious and theological traditions; it is a theology that occurs truly only after comparison” (1995: 522). If one defining feature of nineteenth-century comparative theology was its readiness to redescribe distinctively Christian teachings as generic, universal features of “religion,” one defining feature of its contemporary namesake is the tendency of practitioners such as Clooney, Fredericks, and even Ward (e.g., 1999: 4) to redescribe the putatively generic practice of comparison as a distinctively theological endeavor, driven by theological concerns, delimited by diverse, particular theological traditions and shaped by each theologian’s distinctive interests and expertise. In the former case, this strategic redescription was covert; in the latter, it is self-conscious and ideally acknowledged at the beginning of each comparative exercise.

In this respect, contemporary comparative theology reveals considerable affinity with what William E. Paden and others have labeled a “new comparativism” (1996a, 2000), that is, a comparative practice chastened by many of the postmodern and postcolonial critiques alluded to in the first part of this article. Drawing inspiration from Smith’s important 1982 essay, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” this reformulated approach to
religious studies purports to reclaim the “magic” of comparison as “an intellectually creative enterprise... an imaginative and critical act of mediation and redescription in the service of knowledge” (Patton and Ray 2000: 3–4; cf. Mack 1996: 256–259; Smith 2000). In Smith’s own terms, the basic orientation of such comparison shifts from “discovery” to “invention” (2000: 238–239), from the discernment of invariant structures to the playful, metaphoric generation of new insights and new meanings, all driven by comparativists’ diverse, particular theoretic concerns (Smith 1990: 51–53; Gill 1998).

According to Paden, this new comparativism can be situated in relation to other proposals in several ways. It can be distinguished, first, by its bilateral and heuristic perspective. That is, it does not purport to discover universal comparative patterns or categories in the traditions it studies, but merely uses such categories as tools to facilitate further discovery about the traditions themselves, particularly attentive to the ways an apt conceptual pattern can disclose previously unseen, culturally specific differences as well as similarities (2000: 184–187). With few modifications, we suggest, these two descriptors could also be used to characterize contemporary comparative theology. Fredericks offers a good model in this respect. The comparative theological project, he suggests, proceeds by means of “comparative experiments yielding limited, very tentative results and eschewing encompassing theories about religion in general based on claims for or against a universal experience” (1995: 82).

Now, comparative theologians do tend to seek out common ground and points of convergence among the traditions they study (e.g., Clooney 2007: 657–658, 2008: 26–27), and Ward does not shy from identifying—in a moment of only mildly chastened universalism—a “common, if rather general, core of belief in a number of traditions about the ultimate goal of religious practice” (1994: 337, emphasis added). Yet, even here attention remains steadfastly on the particularities of each tradition, along with the heuristic goal, at least on the part of the Christian comparativist, further to clarify and to elaborate distinctively Christian claims (325). This requires a clear-eyed analysis of both similarities and differences (Fredericks 1995: 85–86), intentionally open to the possibility that some texts and traditions may be judged truly incommensurable.

---

19 This is a relatively minor theme in Ward’s work, but it is one from which he does not substantively depart, either in the concluding volume of his comparative theology (1999: 346) or in his more recent work (2008).

20 Particularly in light of the example drawn from Matheson, earlier, it is worthwhile to note that comparativists such as Clooney and Ward tend to locate such incomparable texts and traditions precisely where one would most expect them: that is, in the most distinctive claims of Christian tradition. For example, Clooney (1993: 175–179) isolates Thomas Aquinas’ account of the passion.
More interesting, perhaps, is the way that comparative theologians evoke this enquiry as an imaginative, generative, and even, in at least some cases, self-consciously transgressive activity.²¹ Scriptural reasoners Peter Ochs and David Ford address this dimension of comparative practice by appeal to a “superabundance of meaning” in the scriptural traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This vast and threatening abundance cannot be fixed or resolved in any particular theological system, but it can be “coped with” and can speak creatively in the present moment through a shared performance of interpretation—what Ochs characterizes as a shift from a binary logic of “either–or” to a “triadic” and relational participation in “a potentially infinite process of semiosis” (Ford 2006: 357–359; Ochs 2006: 471–472; 478–479). While Clooney does not confine his comparative work to scriptural traditions, he nevertheless focuses on world-shaping “Texts” which, when re-read in a “designedly arbitrary,” comparative manner, possess a similarly generative and unsettling dynamism:

To contextualize, to read one’s Text along with other texts, is to create new meanings. Established meanings, simple or complex, are extended through previously unintended juxtapositions. Something of the independent, first meaning of one’s Text may be changed, even distorted or lost, while new meanings, not intended by the author, occur to the reader (Clooney 1990: 170).

In this practice of extended signification, differences obviously play a central role; for it is only through difference that compared texts and traditions, once juxtaposed, can generate previously unintended meanings. From a strictly theological point of view, in fact, it may be the similarities rather than the differences that prove most transgressive and

²¹Mathew Schmalz (2003) effectively brings out the transgressive elements of Clooney’s project in particular, insofar as Clooney “transgresses” both the stability of Christian and other traditions and the boundaries between scholarly disciplines and institutions. He observes, however, that “Clooney does not address how the specific institutional, ecclesiastical, and disciplinary contexts of his work shape the choices that he makes as a comparative theologian” (2003: 136), leaving him vulnerable to the charge that he may ultimately exclude the most potentially unsettling voices from the comparative theological project.
disruptive of traditional claims. Skillfully deployed, the identification of similarity can undercut what Clooney calls the “rhetoric of uniqueness,” as well as bringing to light those more troubling differences within any purportedly self-enclosed religious system. This happens, above all, when the comparativist realizes that her intellectual alliances on one or another theological question cut across the boundaries of religious difference rather than along them (Clooney 2001: 164–165, 173–175).

This is not the end of the issue, of course. Comparison is not merely a matter of intent, no matter how pragmatic, transformative, or transgressive; the actual methods and categories employed in the comparative exercise decisively shape its outcome. So it comes as no surprise that, in his defense of the new comparativism, Paden also articulates what might be regarded as two fundamental principles of an appropriately reformulated comparative practice: namely, that responsible comparison proceeds according to a “controlled, aspectual focus” as well as an enlarged “concept of pattern” that draws categories freely among and beyond readily identifiable “religious themes” (2000: 187–189; emphasis added). With regard to the first of these principles, it is hard to imagine greater concurrence between Paden’s proposal and those of the new comparative theology. Behind both projects stand stronger and weaker forms of the assumption that, in Paden’s terms, compared texts, arguments, and/or other objects “can belong to the same reference class in one stipulated respect, but differ from other objects in that class in every other way and for every other purpose” (188). Among the comparativists surveyed here, only Ward presumes to treat “Christianity,” “Buddhism,” or “Hinduism” as in any sense cohesive wholes, and he does so with circumspection and constant reference to well-defined topics of enquiry, in an effort “to counteract the inevitable element of generalization and therefore of superficiality” (1994: 337). So too Fredericks insists that “comparative theology should proceed by means of limited case studies in which specific elements of the Christian tradition are interpreted in comparison with elements of

\[22\] For reasons that will become obvious, we have here changed the order of Paden’s original exposition.

\[23\] Though both Ward and his critics often characterize his project as a Christian theology constructed in dialogue with the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, it is only really the first volume, on revelation (1994), which fits this model. A consideration of Buddhism drops out of the volume on God and creation (1996), and a treatment of the secular state as a religious “tradition” of contemporary Western history drops into the volume on community (1999). In addition, Ward makes self-conscious, strategic decisions about what sorts of sources are selected to represent these traditions in each comparative exercise—differently in each case (see 1999: 340). This functions to render the texture of each volume unique and to unsettle any claim to comprehensiveness.
another religious tradition” (1995: 83). Clooney’s *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001), finally, represents what may be the most radical application of this principle to date, freely extracting very specific comparative examples from a range of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions so as to exhibit a range of positions on several narrow, sharply contested *topoi* of theological debate.

When, however, we turn from Clooney’s aspectual method to these *topoi* themselves—namely, God’s “existence,” “identity,” “embodiment,” and revealed “word”—the scope of his comparison appears considerably reduced—even, perhaps, impoverished. The same might be said for the categories that define both Ward’s four volumes and Neville’s Comparative Religious Ideas Project, such as “ultimate realities,” “human nature” or “the human condition,” and “revelation.” In the case of the second of these two projects, such categories are singled out for special attention because they can be “purified” of their roots in particular traditions and rendered sufficiently “vague” to permit different, even mutually contradictory specifications (*Neville and Wildman 2001a*: 14–16; cf. Ochs and Ford 2006: 161). Nevertheless, the skeptical outsider might be forgiven for surmising that they very much appear to reflect the distinctive preoccupations of Western Christianity.

The comparative theologian could respond by adverting to the self-confessed, explicitly theological agenda that motivates these comparative exercises. In this particular case, it could be argued, the distinctive theoretic interests of the theologian naturally limit the range of interpretive categories in a way that is fully commensurate with the carefully situated and delimited goals of enquiry. And this response would be perfectly legitimate, as far as it goes.

Nevertheless, when one looks at the actual practice of comparative theologians, the picture becomes considerably more complex. First of all, precisely because the Christian comparativist takes up theological questions “only after comparison,” in Clooney’s formulation (1995: 522), there is no compelling reason why the primary interpretive categories for any particular enquiry need to be drawn from Christian sources. Thus, Clooney himself freely deploys categories of Vedānta exegesis to navigate a comparative reading of Āmalānanda and Thomas Aquinas (1993: 168–170) and re-presents Francis de Sales’ *Treatise on the Love of God* as an *exemplum* of the Śrīvaishnava ideal of *prapatti*, specified here as “loving surrender” (2008: 23–24 and passim). As well, John Thatamanil sees no difficulty in taking up a well-traveled Buddhist trope—namely, the understanding of the human predicament as an illness in need of cure—as a suitably vague pattern for comparing the theologies of Śaṅkara and Paul Tillich (2006: 16–18). Such variations
may seem rather minor, particularly in light of Clooney and Thatamanil’s exclusive focus on so-called classic religious texts.\(^{24}\) As contemporary comparative theology has gained ground and its practitioners diversified, however, so also has its interpretive range. Comparativists employ categories drawn from literary theory (Clooney 1993: 172–173), from aesthetics (Clooney 2005b, 2008: 133–139), from feminist theory (Clooney 2005a; Hill Fletcher 2005), from cultural theory (Hill Fletcher 2007: 546–549; 2008), and from ritual studies (e.g., Phan 2003: 153–173; Raj 2000, 2004), to name but a few. In one particularly deft recent example, Michelle Voss Roberts situates her comparative reading of the “fluid theologies” of Mechtild of Magdeburg and Lalleśwarī of Kashmir at the nexus of feminist theories of embodiment, on the one hand, and critiques of these same theories from the field of disability studies, on the other (2008). Here, the comparative practice goes beyond merely borrowing a category like “embodiment” from other fields of discourse; it also, in the very act of comparison, makes itself accountable to their distinctive—and conflicted—concerns.

It is on the precise question of accountability that the new comparative theology stands at its furthest remove from both classic comparative theology and the new comparativism. Mindful of the criticisms directed against Eliade, Kitagawa, and other architects of modern comparative religion, William Paden—among others (see esp. Eck 2000)—insists upon what he calls “the factor of reflexivity: the self-awareness of the role of the comparativist as subject, a cleaner [sic] sense of the process and practice of selectivity, and a pluralist, contextualist sense of the comparative enterprise itself” (1996a: 13, cf. 1996b: 39–40). Such reflexivity both requires and encourages a certain “modesty and restraint” about the limited if also essential role played by comparison in the cross-cultural study of religion (1996b: 38, 42). But Paden attempts to foster this awareness by drawing yet another sharp demarcation—this time, between two equally valuable but fundamentally different “domains of knowledge”: that of the comparativist, which aims at generalization, and that of the religious insider, which does not (2000: 189). The comparativist is empowered to articulate recurring patterns and general features of religious behavior, features invisible from the necessarily “myopic” perspective of the insider. “A single culture does not explain itself,” he argues, “but the comparative study of culture begins to” (1996b: 47).

\(^{24}\)For a critique of this aspect of Clooney’s work, see Phan (2003: 171–172).
This statement invites further reflection. On the one hand, one might question whether Paden’s very willingness to generalize, and in particular to posit “world-making” as a distinctive, cross-cultural human behavior that grounds his generalizations, may well render his position closer to the classic liberal project than he might wish, as Marsha Hewitt has suggested (1996: 19). On the other hand, and more importantly for our purposes, one can also interrogate the “relative place of insiders’ and outsiders’ perspectives” in this schema (Paden 2000: 189). It is clear from Paden’s analysis that the distinctive categories and domain of the comparativist offer an otherwise unattainable level of intelligibility to the distinctive categories and domain of the religious insider (e.g., 1996b: 46–47). It is, however, not so clear what the insider provides to the comparativist, other than cultural material for comparative analysis. We can ask: is it possible that the distinctive claims and categories of the insider can also contribute to our deeper understanding of the work of the comparativist, qua comparativist? Does the comparativist remain immune from analysis, or does she stand in a mutually implicating relation with those whom she sets out to interpret? If the former, then it would seem that the two domains are not merely distinguished one from the other, but are set into a definite hierarchical relation. And this, in turn, suggests that the new comparativism continues to participate to some extent in the binary rhetoric of demarcation and redescription exemplified by Kitagawa and, reaching just a bit further back in the history of the discipline, the fulfillment theologies of Clarke, Matheson, MacCulloch, and their peers.

The new comparative theology faces the same fundamental dilemma, of course, but its advocates attempt to address it in a rather different way. They transpose the rhetoric of interpretive privilege into a rhetoric of wider accountability to the claims, texts, and traditions of others. In his account of Scriptural Reasoning, for example, David Ford locates its practice in a transient middle space—a “Tent”—that can be distinguished


26Once again, we note an affinity with the analysis of MacIntyre, particularly when he makes the (necessarily speculative) case that traditional Hawaiian observers in the nineteenth century could have offered at least as plausible an account of European theorists of “taboo” as such theorists purported to offer of Polynesian societies (1990: 178–189, cf. 1988: 387–388, 166–167). According to MacIntyre, the justification of a superior interpretive framework follows, not from its purported neutrality or its unique vantage above the fray, but from its greater capacity to enter into another framework, adduce its flaws in native terms, and assimilate its authentic insights. Largely absent here, we note in passing, is an adequate discussion of the role of relations of power in this process of negotiation, reinterpretation, and integration. For a critique of MacIntyre’s theory of tradition along these lines, see Mahmood (2005: 115, no. 56).
from the “Campus” of the academy and the separate “Houses” of participants’ religious communities, while also remaining inseparably connected and permanently accountable to both (2006: 351–357). Ford’s colleague Peter Ochs employs a similar image to situate their project in a kind of third domain of discourse, between and beyond the claims of liberal universalism, on the one hand, and the thorough rejection of these claims by resurgent, maximalist religious movements, on the other. Thus, faced with an apparently binary choice between “our House alone” or “the identity of all Houses” in “some universal humanity,” Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars are summoned to reason together outside all of these Houses—“but still in sight of their open doors” (2005: 47; also see Ochs and Ford 2006: 156–157).

Though the dialogue envisioned by Clooney is far more interior than exterior, taking place more in the person of the comparativist than in a classroom or hotel conference center, he too casts it as the creation of a liminal, intersubjective, and dialogical interpretive space (see McKeown 2008: 264–266). Not a few comparativists describe this process in terms of “passing over” to the distinctive claims and commitments of another tradition, an image proposed by the philosopher and spiritual writer John S. Dunne in a significant study of religious autobiography:

You find yourself able to pass over from the standpoint of your life to those of others, entering into a sympathetic understanding of them, finding resonances between their lives and your own, and coming back once again, enriched, to your own standpoint...This process of “passing over,” as I shall call it, is a method by which personal questions can be broadened and pursued in a much wider context than they would ordinarily be in an autobiography or a personal creed (Dunne 1967, 1969: viii–ix).  

According to this vision, the comparative theologian is “doubly accountable” to the religious others in relation to whom she “passes over” in comparative conversation, obliged both to represent these persons’ texts and traditions as accurately as possible and “to give an account” of her own “tradition in light of what believers in other traditions are saying about the specific theological positions in question”

27 Later, in The Way of All the Earth (1972), Dunne himself extended this metaphor to describe the process of “passing over” to other religious traditions and “coming back” to one’s own. “When you pass over to other lives,” he writes, “and by way of other lives to other cultures and other religions, you come back again with new insight into your own life, and by way of your own life to your own culture and your own religion” (1972: 220).
(Clooney 2007: 662, cf. 2001: 168–172). Ideally, this skilled comparativist eventually shifts “from reading at a distance, with a professional control that correctly and necessarily prizes detachment, toward a submission to these texts, immersion finally in a double reading that makes us vulnerable to the realities of God and self as imagined by the authors” (2008: 22).

Here and throughout his corpus, Clooney in particular stresses the importance of the comparativist’s historical and philological proficiency. Without attaining an impressive level of scholarly rigor, in his view, one cannot speak of any comparative theology worthy of the name. At the same time, the cultivation of such tools represents merely one essential feature of a much more complicated intellectual and existential terrain. Equally essential, and in many ways far more difficult to achieve, is the willingness of the comparativist herself to be transformed, to see her own tradition(s) in a new light, and to make herself vulnerable to the distinctive claims of other persons, other traditions, and other domains of scholarly and religious knowledge. For this reason, the ideal situation for most comparative theologians is not one in which a particular comparativist stands at some remove from the claims and practices of various traditions in order to generalize about them. It is one in which the comparativist, as a self-confessed insider, is joined in a community of shared enquiry with other scholars, comparativists, and religious insiders—as often as not, the very same persons in each case—drawn from as many different traditions and interpretive perspectives as possible (e.g., Clooney 2007: 661–662; Ward 1999: 5–6). In the process, the very “theology” from which the project begins can itself be destabilized, rendered open to other specifications, other redescriptions, and even, of course, the sharpest possible critique on the part of anyone who wishes to join the conversation with a reciprocal sense of intellectual rigor and wider accountability. The language of risk, vulnerability, and relationship assumes central importance (see Fredericks 1995: 86–87). As both insider and outsider at one and the same time, the comparative theologian addresses herself to other religious cultures and other religious insiders less as someone with something to add to them, such as “generalization” or “intelligibility,” than as someone with something yet to discover.

To the extent that such a sense of wider accountability and authentic vulnerability is actualized in the work of its practitioners—and only to this extent—the new comparative theology does not seem to represent some new version of the “theologism” or “ontologism” that has long served as the shibboleths of religious studies. On the contrary: It is, at least in intent, something closer to their opposite.
CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY?

The histories of both theology and religious studies in the Western academy, particularly as these histories have been interrogated in the critical work of scholars such as Asad and Masuzawa, obviously commend a degree of humility on the part of contemporary scholars in both disciplines. One should never idealize the degree to which any new insight or initiative will necessarily or easily shake itself free of the suppressed narratives and ideological legacies of its forebears. This is true a fortiori for the new discipline of comparative theology. To offer just one example, we note that most of the practitioners and sympathetic observers of the discipline would have to concede that Clooney and Ward’s ideal of a shared, multi-religious, and interdisciplinary community of enquiry around the comparative theological project remains very far from being realized in any but the most notional sense. The methods and language of comparative theology remain recognizably Western in orientation, and the vast majority of its practitioners identify with one or another tradition of Christianity. A gift is not a gift, McCutcheon helpfully reminds us, if it is merely offered; it must also be accepted (2008: 761–762). And it is not at all clear that this is what is happening in the development of a new comparative theology.

In one of the most fascinating essays to emerge in the discipline, however, the prominent Nyāya scholar Parimal Patil has offered helpful reflections on why this may be the case, based on a searching analysis of the “asymmetry” between Christian and Hindu scholars in the academy (2001). The problem, Patil suggests, is not that the language or practice of a Christian comparativist like Clooney is necessarily foreign to other religious insiders. In Hindu scholastic traditions, at least, there are ample precedents and analogies to ground a vigorous, reciprocal “comparative theology”—albeit one whose warrants and methods would differ profoundly from those of most Christian comparativists. The obstacles to such a response are not then, strictly speaking, theological or even ideological in character. They are primarily institutional. Patil writes:

28 Fredericks (1995: 85) isolates the contribution of Masao Abe (1990) as an exemplary model of comparative theology. Since then, a growing body of scholarship from exponents of various traditions—often under the rubric of “dialogue”—whose theological commitment and scholarly approach bring it into greater or lesser resemblance to the comparative theology treated in this essay. In addition to the Scriptural Reasoning project, for example, one could certainly cite the work of Ravi Ravindra (2004), Mahmoud Ayoub and Irfan Omar (2007), Michael S. Kogan (2008), and the National Jewish Scholars Project (Frymer-Kensky et al. 2000) as examples of Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish comparative theologies, respectively.
Although the invitation to participate in the project of “comparative theology” is issued to all Hindu intellectuals, it is, in reality, directed toward those already capable of writing in the languages and style of the Euro-American academy. And since there are, in effect, no professional Hindu theologians, the invitation is directed more narrowly still to Hindu intellectuals in disciplines such as Anthropology, Indology, or History of Religions. In such disciplinary contexts, however, constructive and normative work is rarely respected and, in fact, is generally believed to reveal that those who produce it lack the “scholarly” distance that is necessary for rigorous and responsible work for these disciplines. The participation of Hindu intellectuals in the project described in [Hindu God, Christian God] may come, therefore, at a very high professional price. (188)

Patil does not draw conclusions from this analysis for the scholarly disciplines he mentions here, such as Anthropology, Indology, or History of Religions. Instead, he recommends that this asymmetry should be addressed by creating space for constructive and normative work by Hindu theologians, as well as by scholars from other religious traditions, in the more secure institutional space of traditionally Christian theology departments and divinity schools.

There is obviously much to commend this vision of a more thoroughly pluralistic approach within the discipline of theological studies. It is a recommendation that corresponds closely to the vision of the comparative theologians surveyed here, and it is an approach that is already—in fits and starts—underway in a number of North American colleges and universities with historically Christian roots. Nevertheless, particularly in light of the critique of the category of “religion” treated in the first part of this essay, it seems rather short-sighted to remove the discipline of religious studies from the same kind of searching critique. Both scholarly disciplines, in their pursuits of various shared areas of enquiry, in their shared history of participation in one or another form of totalizing discourse, and in their curious inability—at least in the West—to shake free of their preoccupations with one another, may well be called to return to the more fluid terms that characterized their mutual relation in the nineteenth century, albeit in a way shorn of the supporting structure of liberal universalism. This involves more than folding religious studies into the “warm embrace” of theology, as we heard Paul Griffiths predict in our introduction, or—much less—begrudgingly conceding theologians a marginal place at the religious studies table. It involves a sharpened reflexive awareness of the normative theoretic and political agendas that already shape study in these disciplines, particularly comparative study, along with a
willingness to exhibit these normative foundations and render them accountable to the vigorous criticism of those whose theoretic and political agendas may differ profoundly from one’s own.

This ideal—namely, that both the explicit, normative commitments of the scholar and a responsible practice of wider accountability might function as core values for the scholarly study of religion—does not represent a unique contribution from the field of comparative theology. We have already noted significant points of resonance with William E. Paden and other proponents of a new comparativism in religious studies, and the resonance would certainly become more pronounced—if also, probably more vigorously contested—were we to shift our attention to more provocative initiatives, such as Hugh Urban’s vision of an “interested” and “placed” comparative practice that redescribes comparison as a “technique of persuasion” not so different in its essential features, perhaps, from the “confessional and even apologetic” comparativism of Clooney (Urban 2000: 370–373; Clooney 2001: 10–12). In addition, the kind of spirited, mutual engagement across various boundaries of normative commitment we are proposing here arguably reflects the common experience of many teachers and scholars even now, at least in North America. This is particularly true for those who teach in smaller departments, where the institutional distance between those who self-identify as theologians and those who self-identify as historians, sociologists, or anthropologists may be very narrow indeed.

To the degree that this is already the case on the ground, then, the most urgent task may not be primarily to create more fluid, liminal, and creative discursive spaces, as advocated so strongly by many comparative theologians. Many of these spaces already exist, albeit sometimes only in potentia, at local levels and in the wider academy. The primary task in the present time may instead merely involve a clearer and more creative articulation of the discursive practices most suited to such spaces—that is, those practices that more closely correspond to reality on the ground, that generate room for creative engagement, and that foster ever greater levels of scholarly rigor, dialogical accountability and intellectual honesty on the part of those who participate in them. This, it now seems clear, is precisely what the oppositional binaries of “religion”—“dogmatic” versus “comparative,” “normative” versus “descriptive,” and of course “theological” versus “scientific”—have largely failed to do. So the newly reformulated discipline of comparative theology, among many other initiatives in the contemporary period, rushes to fill the void.

Only time will tell whether comparative theology and the “third space” it purports to occupy may accompany and herald a broader
transformation of the study of religion, or whether this very feature may condemn it to wander, homeless, across an ever more fragmented academic landscape. If the former, then we may witness the deepest irony of all: namely, that the troubling legacy of nineteenth-century universalism may be most effectively undermined by a return—at least in name—to the very discipline that gave it birth.

REFERENCES


Clarke, James Freeman
1883

1899 [1871]

Clooney, Francis X.
1990

1993

1995

2001

2005a

2005b

2007


Dubuisson, Daniel 2007 “Exporting the Local: Recent Perspectives on ‘Religion’ as a Cultural Category.” Religion Compass 1/6:787–800.


Heiler, Friedrich  
1949  
Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion.  
Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag.  

Hewitt, Marsha A.  
1996  

Hick, John  
1987  

Hill Fletcher, Jeannnine  
2005  
2007  
2008  

Jakobson, Roman  
1990  

King, Richard  
1999  

Kitagawa, Joseph M.  
1959  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Comparative Theology.</td>
<td>London: Methuen and Co.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Masuzawa, Tomoko 2005 *The Invention of World Religions.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.


1899 *Natural Religion.* London: Longmans, Green, and Co.


Neville, Robert Cummings and Wesley J. Wildman, 2001b


Nicholson, Hugh 2007


Ochs, Peter 2005


2006


Ochs, Peter and David F. Ford 2006


Patil, Parimal G. 2001


Paden, William E. 1996a


1996b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title and Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


Smith, Wilfred Cantwell
1991

Thatamanil, John J.
2006

Tracy, David
1987

Urban, Hugh B.
2000

Voss Roberts, Michelle
2008

Wach, Joachim
1968

Ward, Keith
1994

1996

1998

1999
2008  

Wiebe, Donald  
1999  