Comparative Theology

Deep Learning Across Religious Borders

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For my students,
from Kathmandu until now,
who have taught me how to teach.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

(Philippians 4: 8–9)

Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form;
Whichever name pleases his people, that is his name;
Whichever way pleases his people who meditate without ceasing,
That is his way, the one who holds the discus.

(Poykai Alvar, The First Antati 44)

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Preface and Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my students at Harvard Divinity School, many of whom read the entire manuscript in the fall of 2008 and gave me feedback. I wish particularly to thank Brad Bannon, Joshua Daneshforooz, Ari Gordon, Paul Nicholas, Lee Spriggs, and Axel Takacs, for their insightful comments, and to Josh also for doing the index as well. Similarly, Albertus Bagus Laksana, SJ, and Glenn Willis from Boston College offered very helpful advice. Professor Klaus von Stosch (Paderborn, Germany), who visited at Harvard Divinity School for several months in the winter of 2009, gave me many helpful theological and philosophical suggestions. I have also benefited from the advice of participants in the American Academy of Religion's Seminar in Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology, held in June, 2009, at Union Theological Seminary in New York and sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation. I thank John Makransky, my long-time Boston College colleague and friend, for suggesting the expansive subtitle to this book.

I am also grateful to the Catholic Theological Society of America for permission to reprint as chapter 6 my plenary address from the 2003 CTSA Annual Convention, and to Orbis Books for permission to reprint as chapter 8 my essay from *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. All translations in chapter 8 are my own, based on standard editions of the original Tamil and Sanskrit sources.

Writing an introductory book requires a willingness to generalize and explain a discipline in broad terms without footnoting every insight. This can be harder than specialist work, particularly when the effort discloses the limits and rough edges of my own learning. As I now look back on the finished product, it seems to have been a valuable exercise, and so I am happy to thank Rebecca Harkin, Senior Commissioning Editor in Theology and Religious Studies at Wiley-Blackwell, who invited me to write this book.

The longer I am in this field, the more aware I am that the meaning of what we write depends in part on what the reader will do upon reading. The future of comparative theology lies with readers who find their own way, mapped in their own terms, to practice theology – a faith that seeks to understand – in a world where our own religion is always among many religions. I have always depended on my students to make sense of my particular, peculiar experiments in comparative theology, and so it is to them that I dedicate this small book. I likewise have great hopes for you, the reader, as by your reflections and experiments you advance the field beyond where I have for now left off.

The dedicatory verses preceding this preface are lights to guide the way. The translation of Philippians is from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, while the translation of the First Antati (Mutal Tiruvantati) 44 is my own.

Part I

Starting Points

Chapter 1

Religious Diversity and Comparative Theology

We live in a world where religious diversity is increasingly affecting and changing everything around us, and ourselves as well. No religious community is exempt from the pressures of diversity, or incapable of profiting from drawing on this new religious template. No community, wherever it is and however it is configured, will casually abandon its traditional commitments and practices in the face of religious diversity. If we are trying to make sense of our situation amidst diversity and likewise keep our faith, some version of comparative theological reflection is required.

While religious diversity can justly be celebrated as enormously interesting, it is also an unsettling phenomenon for people who actually are religious. Individual religious traditions are under internal and external stress as they are challenged to engage an array of religious others. Some find themselves under siege, threatened by a bewildering range of religious possibilities; some withdraw and demonize their others; some, perhaps too accommodating, begin to forget their identities. Some of us are relatively untouched by the phenomenon, but none of us avoids changing inside and out.

If we want to take diversity and religious commitment seriously, then there is a need for comparative theology, a mode of interreligious learning particularly well suited to the times in which we live. When I speak of "comparative theology," I will be arguing the case for keeping "theology" and "comparative" together, precisely for the sake of specific acts of interreligious

learning appropriate to our contemporary situation. Doing theology comparatively will be more and not less fruitful, when diversity is most evident and most intensely felt.

Like all forms of theology, comparative theology is a form of study. Now it is true that a commitment to study religions may seem a less than urgent response to what is happening in our world today, a detour that distracts us from our own traditions, perhaps even speeding up the dissolution of particular commitments. But, in fact, the cultivation of a more interconnected sense of traditions, read together with sensitivity to both faith and reason, grounds a deeper validation and intensification of each tradition.

In the following pages I take the United States to be the context of my reflection, and I write from an American Catholic perspective. Readers in other cultural settings, and with other perspectives on the United States, will of course want to modify my insights accordingly. But, whatever the cultural and religious setting, diversity similarly challenges concerned individuals who care about the future of their traditions and the meaningfulness of religious and spiritual commitment. Faith and reason, faith seeking understanding in a world of diversity, will still be at stake.

Diversity around Us

The context for today's comparative theology is growing religious diversity. Diversity in and among religions is not novel, but its impact has intensified in recent decades as a pronounced and defining phenomenon that is global but still impacts us in the particular places where we live. Fluid immigration patterns have brought people of many religious backgrounds together in the places where we live and work. Religious traditions previously foreign to one another now flourish nearby to one another. It is by habit that we still apply tidy labels such as "Eastern religions" and "Western religions" to religions that are taking root everywhere; by habit, some of us still imagine that "other religions" are to be found only in far-off parts of the world. In varying degrees

of proximity and intensity, all religions are near to us; whether we are conscious or not, they are becoming part of our lives and influential on our religious identities.

The challenge impacts us more forcefully as a vast increase in available knowledge about religions creates new learning possibilities. Religious traditions are vividly present in every kind of media. Never before has so much been available so easily, in such quality. As never before, we can learn easily about other religions, but we need to learn deeply across such borders. Even were we to limit our attention to theological concerns, we would be on the spot, since we now have available to us an abundance of great theological texts from many traditions, in accessible translations with ample annotations. It is easy to read, and harder than ever to justify not reading inside and outside my own tradition.

Our time and place therefore urge upon us a necessary interreligious learning. Diversity becomes a primary context for a tradition's inquiry and self-understanding; particular traditions in their concreteness become the place where the religious meaning of diversity is disclosed. By such learning, intelligently evaluated and extended, we make deeper sense of ourselves intellectually and spiritually, in light of what we find in the world around us. We can respond to diversity with a distinctive set of sensitivities and insights that balances respect for tradition and community with the wider play of what is possible in our era, such as none of our traditions has been able to anticipate.

The proliferation of available knowledge certainly applies, for instance, to the Hindu traditions of India to which I will keep returning in the following pages. The sheer volume of Sanskrit literature available in translation is formidable, and there is also a wealth of still lesser-known literatures – often in vernacular, regional languages – that lead us deeper into the various religious traditions. Thus, we can read texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which have been available for a long time and for which there are some excellent translations. But we can also study texts of great theological interest that are less known (in the West), such as Bengali goddess poetry, the songs of the saints of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, or Maharastra,

and descriptions of ritual performances in numerous local settings. We have technical scholastic treatises of numerous Hindu traditions, ritual manuals and ritual exegeses, commentaries, poetic works, grand epic narratives, law texts, and the like, and these are pertinent to theology even in its most technical forms. There is also significant modern historical and social scientific research on religious traditions in their origins and in their histories, and much information and interpretation available on the arts in various cultures. We can read the primary sources; we can read about them in some detail as well, and with guidance from traditional and modern academic perspectives.

Where it is possible to learn, there is also a responsibility, if we are not artificially and arbitrarily to cut short our quest to understand our faith. So much information, so easily available, should puncture religious stereotypes and free us of conventional judgments about other religions that persist simply as bad habits. We should be increasingly reluctant to confuse the necessary shorthand claims we make about religions – we cannot ever say all that needs to be said – with the full, adequate accounts of those traditions. Theologians have particular responsibility, since the public credibility of faith positions relies in part on our demonstration that we are interreligiously literate, knowing what to say, how to make measured judgments within the bounds of our learning, and when also to stop speaking about things beyond our expertise. Other religions are not less complex than our own, and there is no reason, no excuse, for not acquiring credible knowledge about them. This learning, and how we use it, is the challenge of comparative theology.

Diversity within Us

Diversity not only envelops us, it works on us, gets inside us; if we are paying attention, we see that attentiveness to other religions affects even how we experience, think through, and practice our own religion. Religious choices become more urgent and more complex, even among people with continuing religious commitments. To make sense of their own faith lives, individuals

have to make choices regarding how to form and balance their religious commitments.

Individual sensitivities heightened in the face of diversity in turn unsettle traditions, as more people find at home only some of what they seek spiritually. Communities may find their most alert members deeply affected by what's going on religiously around them, and accordingly more tentative and fluid in their commitments, more acutely aware of the possibilities available in other religious traditions. At the same time, our culture fosters personal, individual responses to the multiplicity of religious options. (Overly) critical questioning unsettles the learning that traditions have passed down, and raises doubts about whether any particular wisdom is really absolutely superior to other ways of living spiritually and well. Religious diversity, thoughtfully understood, raises awkward questions that can make an exclusive choice seem almost impossible. Perplexed by diversity, we may seek excuses not to take it seriously, on the grounds of the sanctity and sufficiency of our own religion. Or we may find relativism the easier path to tread. But we are better off if we keep paying attention to the dynamics of diversity intelligently and with the eyes of faith. Whatever our commitment and intentions, we need to be able to make intelligent religious choices about where we belong and how we shall be committed. Individuals themselves will make such choices, but cumulatively their choices affect how religious communities remain viable places where God is to be known and worshiped in a religiously diverse world.

If we are attentive to the diversity around us, near us, we must deny ourselves the easy confidences that keep the other at a distance. But, as believers, we must also be able to defend the relevance of the faith of our community, deepening our commitments even alongside other faiths that are flourishing nearby. We need to learn from other religious possibilities, without slipping into relativist generalizations. The tension between open-mindedness and faith, diversity and traditional commitment, is a defining feature of our era, and neither secular society nor religious authorities can make simple the choices before us.

Two points, then, need to be kept in mind. Because diversity is an objective feature of the world around us, we need to keep

looking outward, learning to be as intellectually engaged as possible in studying it in the small and manageable ways that are possible for us. Because diversity also touches upon our faith experience and affects our identities as religious people in our own traditions, it is changing us from the inside out. We need therefore to attend with special care and a fresh eye to the well-being of our faith in our community, and to the quest to understand it. This spiritual and intellectual response to diversity, with its outward and inward dimensions, is the comparative theological venture.

Comparative Theology as a Response to Twenty-first-Century Religious Diversity

The complications crowding in on us may seem overwhelming. But the situation need not paralyze us, and we need not pull back from theological reflection in the midst of diversity merely because we do not, and can never, know enough about those other traditions. Diversity makes it necessary to focus our thinking, to choose a particular path of learning, commitment, and participation. Liberated by the concrete and measured specificity of actual learning, we need no longer find diversity and tradition incompatible; being traditional too is a way of accentuating diversity. Even imperfect and partially realized comparative theological reflection helps us in reshaping both theology and wider cultural expectations about religion and spirituality.

In our religiously diverse context, a vital theology has to resist too tight a binding by tradition, but also the idea that religious diversity renders strong claims about truth and value impossible. Comparative theology is a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and tradition, openness and truth, allowing neither to decide the meaning of our religious situation without recourse to the other. Countering a cultural tendency to retreat into private spirituality or a defensive assertion of truth, this comparative theology is hopeful about the value of learning. Indeed, the theological confidence that we can respect diversity and tradition, that we can study traditions in their particularity

and receive truth in this way, in order to know God better, is at the core of comparative theology.

Distinguishing Comparative Theology from Related Disciplines

The preceding general reflections indicate some features of the exterior diversity and interior complexity which make comparative theology an appropriate, even necessary form of reflection today. Since there are other appropriate ways to think about and respond to diversity, I wish now to venture a few preliminary distinctions regarding various modes of interreligious reflection, so that we can proceed with greater clarity, though still without entirely fixed categories, in understanding comparative theology. The following definitions cannot cover every case, but they help locate "comparative theology" as I understand it:

Comparative religion (along with the distinct but related fields of the history of religions and social scientific approaches to religion) entails the study of religion – in ideas, words, images and acts, historical developments – as found in two or more traditions or strands of tradition. The scholarly ideal is detached inquiry by which the scholar remains neutral with respect to where the comparison might lead or what it might imply religiously. Even if she is deeply engaged in the research and sensitive to communal issues, her responsibility is primarily to fellow scholars.

Theology, as I use the word in this book, indicates a mode of inquiry that engages a wide range of issues with full intellectual force, but ordinarily does so within the constraints of a commitment to a religious community, respect for its scriptures, traditions, and practices, and a willingness to affirm the truths and values of that tradition. More deeply, and to echo more simply an ancient characterization of theology, it is *faith seeking understanding*, a practice in which all three words – the faith, the search, the intellectual goal – have their full force and remain in fruitful tension with one another.

The *theology of religions* is a theological discipline that discerns and evaluates the religious significance of other religious traditions in accord with the truths and goals defining one's own religion. It may be greatly detailed with respect to the nuances of the home tradition, but most often remains broadly general regarding the traditions that are being talked about.

Interreligious dialogue points to actual conversations, sometimes formal and academic, sometimes simply interpersonal conversations among persons of different religious traditions who are willing to listen to one another and share their stories of faith and values.

Dialogical or *interreligious theology* grows out of interreligious dialogue, as reflection aimed at clarifying dialogue's presuppositions, learning from its actual practice, and communicating what is learned in dialogue for a wider audience.

In distinction from the preceding ventures:

Comparative theology – *comparative* and *theological* beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.

Comparative theology thus combines tradition-rooted theological concerns with actual study of another tradition. It is not an exercise in the study of religion or religions for the sake of clarifying the phenomenon. It reduces neither to a theology about religions, nor to the practice of dialogue.

Comparative in this context marks a practice that requires intuitive as well as rational insight, practical as well as theoretical engagement. It is therefore not primarily a matter of evaluation, as if merely to compare A and B so as to determine the extent of their similarity and which is better. Nor is it a scientific analysis by which to grasp the essence of the comparables by sifting through similarities and differences. Rather, as a theological and necessarily

spiritual practice (and, in my use of it, a way of reading), *comparison* is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other. It ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities – texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons – near one another, so that they may be seen over and again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each differently because the other is near, and by cumulative insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently too. Finally, we see ourselves differently, intuitively uncovering dimensions of ourselves that would not otherwise, by a non-comparative logic, come to the fore.

This notion of *comparative*, much less than a fully developed theory of comparison, is important for all that follows. While *comparative theology* might just as well be thought of as *interreligious theology*, by using together "comparative" and "theology" I seek to preserve the creative tension defining this discipline. As we shall see in chapters 2 and 3, I want also to be candid in linking my understanding of comparative theology to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century comparative studies (chapter 2), and to contemporary studies that invoke the name "comparative theology" (chapter 3).

Comparative theology is therefore *comparative* because it is interreligious and complex in its appropriation of one's own and another tradition in relation to one another. In some instances this comparison may involve evaluation, but ordinarily the priority is more simply the dynamics of a back-and-forth learning. It is a theological discipline confident about the possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition. It remains an intellectual and most often academic practice even if, like other forms of theology, it can occur in popular forms as well. While I write from a Christian perspective, there is nothing essentially Christian about comparative theology as I describe it. As I will explain in chapter 5, comparative theology can be grounded in other traditions as well, and even in particular personal pathways, provided "faith seeking understanding" is the operative principle.

I wish now to further clarify the relationship of comparative theology to the academic study of religion and religions, interreligious dialogue, and the theology of religions, since its disciplinary location must be clear, if its theological character is to be appreciated.

Comparative Theology and the Academic Study of Religions

Comparative theology must not be confused with comparative religion, since faith is a necessary and explicit factor in the former and not in the latter, where its influence might even be ruled out. But the fields need not be separated entirely, since comparative theology still has to measure up to expected disciplinary standards regarding the religions being compared. Because the comparative theologian is engaged in the study of a religious tradition other than her own, she needs to be an academic scholar proficient in the study of that religion, or at least seriously in learning from academic scholars. This is necessary if comparative theology is to be faithful to text and language, history and context, and not mistaken or lazy in (mis)using what is known about the religions in question. Shoddy or superficial scholarship about religions produces bad theology. To a certain extent, the comparative theologian works first as an academic scholar, even if she also and more deeply intends the kind of religious and spiritual learning that characterizes theology richly conceived.

While acknowledging this disciplinary responsibility, comparative theologians need also to be candid about a cultural tendency, evident in our universities, to exclude theology from the study of religions. They need to defend a space for studies that are theological in intent, pursued with faith, from a particular perspective, for a community. This more ample agenda – area studies-plus, study of religions-plus – will not merely reconfirm settled doctrines with new information, just as what is learned need not be seen as undercutting such doctrines. Scholars who are Christian believers can, for instance, still assert that Christ founded the one universal religion and that Jesus is the universal savior. Scholars

of other traditions will make similar universal claims. No one needs to put aside faith and its hope when working as a scholar, although we do need to be able to learn vulnerably without letting even deeply held truths become an obstacle to learning. Comparative theologians may even find that research complicates the case for their faith, by making it easier to appreciate faith claims professed in other traditions. This complication is good, and faith need not suffer from the fact that comparative study does not quickly confirm dearly held beliefs or smoothly undercut what others believe.

Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

There are good reasons to keep comparative theology and interreligious dialogue closely connected and clearly distinguished. Just as actual, living interaction among people of different faith traditions enhances mutual understanding, personal encounters in dialogue should remind us that religions flourish in the lives, beliefs, and activities of real people living out their faith day by day. It also reminds us that we must be accountable to other communities when we speak about their religion, even as we must give an account of ourselves to our own community. So too, assuming (as I will explain later) that all traditions have their theologians, we can appropriately expect dialogue among theologians. As essentially interreligious, each particular comparative theology is by itself always incomplete, and theologians need to hear from others how they understand and interpret the beliefs of their traditions, and how they think we ought to correct what we say about them. All of this is dialogue. But even a seriously theological dialogue among learned believers is not enough. The comparative theologian must do more than listen to others explain their faith; she must be willing to study their traditions deeply alongside her own, taking both to heart. In the process, she will begin to theologize as it were from both sides of the table, reflecting personally on old and new truths in an interior dialogue. Since comparative theology is ordinarily an academic theology, this reflection becomes eventually a somewhat specialized

discourse that is different from the rightly broader and more varied conversations that characterize most dialogues.

Comparative Theology and the Theology of Religions

Given that comparative theology and the theology of religions both involve theological reflection on a religion or religions other than one's own, and given the tendency to see comparative theology merely as a version of the more common theology of religions, I need also to clarify further the relationship between these disciplines. As I have already indicated, a theology of religions reflects from the perspective of one's own religion on the meaning of other religions, often considered merely in general terms. By contrast, comparative theology necessarily includes actually learning another religious tradition in significant detail. In brief, neither replaces the other. Neither is merely a prelude to the other; nor is defective because it does not perform the task of the other.

The theology of religions can usefully make explicit the grounds for comparative study, uncovering and clarifying the framework within which comparative study takes place. While this scrutiny of presuppositions is not necessary for the actual work of comparative study to proceed, it can help correct biases that may distort or impede comparative work. Likewise, the theology of religions relies on shorthand characterizations of other religions, and comparative theology – because it is theological and comparative – will help theologians of religions to be more specific, fine-tuning their attitudes through closer attention to specific traditions.

Once traditions are recognized as theologically complex, they are less easily categorized, and it becomes much more difficult to decide their meaning and assign them a particular theological slot that meets our expectations and answers our questions. For instance, consider the large questions common in Christian conversations: Which religion most perfectly expresses God's intentions for the world? How does God save us? Can people in other religions be saved? How are we to understand the fact that they

can be saved? These questions, important in their own way, will have to be handled with greater subtlety once the theologian begins to take into account what might be learned by actual study of several religious traditions. They are not entirely abandoned, but are distinguished first into discrete and more precise questions that can be answered on the basis of specific information acquired in studying specific traditions.

Given the distinct purposes of these disciplines, it is not wise to respond to religious diversity by concentrating solely on producing better theologies of religions, particularly when this amounts to (re)reading theologians who write on this topic in abstraction from religions in the particular. Given the need for comparative theological work and the small number of people doing it, I can sympathize with calls for a moratorium on the theology of religions, if such a moratorium allows us to direct more energy to comparative theology, the less practiced discipline.

Conversely, insofar as a theology of religions is linked to basic truth claims – such as, for the Christian, a confession of the uniqueness of Christ and universality of salvation in Christ – we need also to consider how comparative theology might shed light on matters of such importance. Were a Christian comparative theology never to approach these truths pertaining to Christ and salvation, it could easily be counted a non-theological discipline, its engagement with religious particularities at best a resource for real theologians dealing with issues of faith. Comparative learning should pertain to issues of truth, and not detach itself from matters central to faith. As I will explain more fully in chapter 7, the comparative theologian needs to do this in her own way, by attention to the particular details of traditions wherein key truths dwell, and not by a priori judgments informed only by knowledge of her own religion. This theology is not situated at the distance required for judgments about religions; its engagement in the truth/s of religions is participatory, a practical inquiry that traverses the path from the truth of one's own tradition through the other, most often ending in a return home. If judgments are to be made, they will more likely pertain to the comparativist herself and the meaning of her own faith. Comparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about

learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith. Thereafter, by a more complex route, the comparative theologian can be in conversation with other theologians about basic truths and how they are to be understood after comparative learning is well under way.

I have made the preceding comments on comparative theology, its truth, and its relation to the theology of religions, in resistance to the notion that comparative theology has identical goals with the theology of religions, or is at best a handmaid to more systematic theorizing. But I do not entirely disown the wisdom of the theology of religions discipline. My comparative theology is in harmony with those inclusivist theologies, in the great tradition of Karl Rahner, SJ, and Jacques Dupuis, SJ, that balance claims to Christian uniqueness with a necessary openness to learning from other religions. I do not theorize inclusion so as to imagine that Christianity subsumes all else, but prefer instead the act of including. I bring what I learn into my reconsideration of Christian identity. This is an "including theology," not a theory about religions; it draws what we learn from another tradition back into the realm of our own, highlighting and not erasing the fact of this borrowed wisdom. Done honestly and with a certain detachment that chastens grand theories, such acts of including need not be seen as distorting what is learned or using it for purposes alien to its original context.

Comparative Theology Autobiographically Grounded

A major theme of this book is that we learn best when we learn in detail, in small options and choices we make in the face of the vast possibilities of our religiously diverse world. We ourselves are part of the detail that needs to be noticed. So even here, at the start, I do well to be more specific about the distinctiveness of my own comparative theological practice.

I am an Irish-American Roman Catholic, born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1950. I am male, a Catholic priest, and for over 40 years have been a member of the Society of Jesus. I am of a generation of American Catholics that matured in the decade after

Vatican Council II. This was a time of turmoil, but it was also an era infused with optimism about more positive relations among religions. *Nostra Aetate*, the conciliar document on world religions, signaled a positive and open attitude that made it seem quite easy, in the 1970s, to be Catholic and to be open to religions at the same time:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

I take this passage to be representative of the great tradition of Christian learning to which the Catholic Church belongs, and in harmony with the guiding passage from Philippians 4 which I have placed at the beginning of this book. Faith and reason are in harmony; the true, the good, and the beautiful converge; no question is to be stifled, no truth feared; to know is ultimately to know God. *Nostra Aetate* does not literally say all this, and in any case Church has not always lived up to its high ideal. It has at times attempted to limit inquiry and channel the truth toward predetermined answers that would make research superfluous. The hesitations and worries of recent decades have made the work of learning interreligiously appear less welcome in the Catholic Church. But *Nostra Aetate* nonetheless represents our best instincts. It also helped create the more open context in which I did my studies, and allowed me to set out on the course I still follow. It grounded my hope that the study of Hinduism could be an act of religious learning leading to fruitful interreligious understanding and to deeper knowledge of God.

I have been thinking about Hinduism for a long time, beginning in 1973 when I went to Kathmandu, Nepal, to teach English language and literature and "moral science" (which I soon adjusted to include Hindu and Buddhist wisdom on how to live).

I needed to learn in order to teach, and my Hindu and Buddhist students taught me much about how to think, act, and love religiously; indeed, it was there that I began to learn how faith makes possible, even demands, that we learn deeply from our religious neighbors. In those early years I already found Hinduism more captivating than Buddhism, and since I was already interested in theology, I began exploring the theological traditions of Hinduism. I learned many wonderful things, and also found wisdom supportive of openness to interreligious learning – views ranging from the compassion and attentiveness of the Buddha, to the wide embrace of detached action, knowledge, and love taught by Krsna in the Bhagavad Gita, to Ramakrishna's experiential engagement in multiple traditions and Gandhi's clear and evident respect for Christianity. I also learned that some Hindu traditions have less generous views of outsiders and remain uninterested in dialogue. Yet, as I learned more of the Hindu tradition and more of my Christian tradition in light of Hinduism, I found myself all the more confident that going deep into both of them together – sent as it were from the one to the other, then back again – created the possibility of a deep and clear interreligious learning, insight arising through the chemistry of Hindu and Christian wisdoms in encounter.

Such are the starting points from which my study of India has in fact proceeded; obviously, things could have been otherwise had any of a great many factors worked out differently. One ought not make too little or too much of such biographical data, but in fact I do believe that my comparative theology started in Kathmandu.

After Nepal, I did a Masters of Divinity degree in a program without any comparative or interreligious interests, and then a PhD in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC) at the University of Chicago, without any interreligious or theological focus. From then on, I have simply deepened two sides of my learning, back and forth, and have spent my time weaving these dimensions together. In light of this personal history, my own commitment to "comparative theology" is best explained on two levels. First, I was disposed toward this compound name, "comparative" plus "theology," because I did not

come to theology through the study of Hinduism, and did not learn Hinduism in a theological program. I learned the Christian philosophical and theological traditions, and I learned Hinduism; I did not turn to one from the other, as if disappointed or in need of something more. Neither body of learning replaced the other, and I have chosen not to try to integrate them fully.

Second, I found the term "comparative theology" to be useful in my decades of teaching in the Theology Department at Boston College, a Catholic and Jesuit institution. When I arrived there in 1984, some were still of the view that theology and religious studies were disciplines separate and at cross-purposes; the study of world religions was of course part of the latter, not the former, so interest in other religions was a sure sign that one was not a theologian. Given my background and expertise, I knew I was both a theologian and a scholar of Hinduism, and firmly believed that these distinctive disciplines were mutually enriching. To commit myself to theology and a double learning, I began describing my work as "comparative theology." In the 1980s I did not know (as I do now and will elaborate in chapter 2) that there has been a 300+ year history of "comparative theology." I have had to come to terms with this history, in light of my personal path of learning and in accord with the politics of a Catholic Theology Department. Indeed, by insisting on the name "comparative theology" when this practice might just as well be called "interreligious theology," I am hearkening back to the history of the term and to the paradox inherent when we keep "comparative" and "theology" together.

On the Limits of This Book

I close this chapter with several qualifications that make clearer what to expect in the following pages. First, this book is not an actual example of comparative theology; for the most part, I am speaking about the discipline, not working through instances of it. My chapters remain largely descriptive, even as I make the case that the discipline can truly be understood only in the practice of it.

Second, it may seem a drawback that my examples are drawn almost entirely from the realm of Hindu-Christian studies. Some readers will wish for a more comprehensive view of diversity, with examples drawn from many different traditions. I agree that attention to different traditions in different combinations will raise different interesting questions, and I encourage my readers to undertake and write about such matters, with attention to particular examples. I have simply focused on what is familiar to me, and, in any case, I do not have an encyclopedic mind.

Third, it may seem a related drawback that I most frequently refer to examples of my own work, these books in particular:

Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology (1993), which explores the non-dualist Vedanta of Sankara (eighth century) and the reading practice it exemplifies, and in that light reconsiders the Christian way of theologizing;

Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India (1996), a study of the Tamil religious classic *Tiruvaymoli*, and its interpretation in the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition;

Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions (2001), which highlights the interreligious role of reasoning, showing how key theological themes recur in the Hindu and Christian traditions because they are intelligent questions to ask, irrespective of religious differences that otherwise more deeply divide Hindu and Christian;

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Blessed Virgin Mary (2005) draws upon three lengthy goddess hymns of India to give detail and substance to Christian reflection on goddesses; it draws then upon Marian hymns, to highlight a fruitful Christian response to the theologies and pieties of goddess devotion;

The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnavas (2008) explores core Srivaisnava theological beliefs as enunciated in three mantras key to Srivaisnavism, read along with traditional commentaries;

Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God (2008) argues that comparative study,

properly practiced as religious reading, intensifies rather than dilutes religious commitment and devotion.

Drawing so much attention to my own work may seem to betray an undue measure of self-absorption – are there no other good examples of comparative theology? Of course there are, and I shall refer to some of this literature in chapter 3. But comparative theology is best understood by reflection on practice. If I am going to explain the field, explanation works well as reflection on my own practice. These books have all been experiments in comparative theology as I understand it. Though not intended as a series, they overlap in theme and text, later books picking up on issues of reading unresolved in the earlier ones. But reflection on such examples is meant only as a starting point for broader reflection. I urge readers to make room for their own reflections on diversity and its implications, carried out in light of what they learn of other traditions.

Fourth, my strong emphasis on faith and tradition may seem to marginalize readers who do not identify with any particular religious tradition, either because they have left behind the religion of their upbringing, or never belonged to a religious tradition in the first place. It is true that I do not wish to move to a tradition-neutral stance, as if to suggest that traditional foundations do not really matter. Nor do I wish to define "tradition" so loosely that it turns out that everyone has a tradition, like it or not. People who reject traditional religious commitments entirely or deny the very idea of religious tradition are not likely to find comparative theology compelling – nor are they likely to contribute to it. But others, though unaffiliated with any church or other religious community, do have their own ways of working out issues of faith, tradition, and community. Such individuals will often enough have called into being their own communities and traditions, even without specific allegiance to already-known and settled communities. They may have thoughtfully worked out their own approach to what is true and good, and devised their own understanding of personal and communal history. In this personal way they may proceed to reflect on all religions – as "other" traditions – and help the cause of comparative theology by bringing their

own concerns and sensitivities to bear on the issues otherwise expressed in more traditional theological terms.

Looking Ahead

The case sketched thus far for a comparative theology is only a beginning. That it may be intellectually plausible and has religious and personal value simply marks an ideal. This is a theology that can be realized only in its history and by way of particular experiments and practical choices. Chapter 2 sets the scene for reflection on comparative theology. I first look into the Christian missionary encounter with other religions, particularly Hinduism. I argue that even if missionary zeal and integral learning did not always mesh well, the great missionary scholars nonetheless did learn deeply from other religions, in their own way faced up to enduring tensions of faith and understanding, and provided us with new learning that changed how we think of religions even today. In the chapter's second half, I reflect on nineteenth-century Anglo-American comparative theology and its similarly awkward mix of impressive scholarship and settled faith conclusions. Again, this difficult combination seems to domesticate knowledge for the sake of doctrine, but it is also a tradition of learning integrated with faith that theologians today would be wise not to disown entirely. In chapter 3, I look into comparative theology's more recent history, noting the positions of key figures in the field and also of some younger voices, and situating my work in relation to theirs.

In light of these historical and theoretical reflections, in chapter 4 I offer my own view of comparative theology as a practice, particularly the reading of texts as a most suitable mode of comparative theology. To explain the necessity of making specific choices in order to do comparative theological work, in chapter 5 I review the choices that I, a particular comparative theologian, have made when narrowing my focus to certain aspects of Hinduism read in light of some strands of Catholic tradition. Since comparative theology imagines a theological exchange across religious borders, I also make the case for Hindu theology

and even Hindu comparative theology; on that basis, I hope for an even wider array of theologies and comparative theologies beyond the Christian context. In chapter 6 I offer a plenary address I gave at the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2003 as a full example of approach, and to show how comparative theology begins in detail but in the end still discloses a very broad set of issues.

The concluding three chapters turn to the fruits of comparative study, as it adds up to more than individual insights personally satisfying to the individuals who work in this field. In chapter 7 I explore the possibilities and problems that arise as we reconnect comparative theological study to mainstream, non-comparative theological study. I reflect on the fruits of the knowledge generated out of this study and particularly on the question of truth, giving a series of small examples of theological insights arising in my own work. Chapter 8 reproduces an essay of mine that shows how our knowledge of God can shift and grow due to comparative study. In chapter 9 I reflect on the impact of this theologizing on the comparative theologian, as her identity becomes inextricably involved in two traditions at once. I conclude by highlighting the opportunities and duties of readers of comparative theology, as they move from reading comparative theological writings by others to their own comparative reflection.

Chapter 2

In Generations Past

Some Ancestors to Today's Comparative Theology

There is much about comparative theology that will seem new, but it is important also to claim its connection to older traditions of faith encountering diversity. There is no advantage in imagining or contriving a decisive rupture with the past. If truly theological, today's comparative practice cannot be entirely novel, and so shares the risks and virtues of older approaches. In this chapter, in lieu of the much vaster historical study that would be required, I will examine just two examples of comparative theology's genealogy: its link to the great missionary traditions of the Christian West, and its link to the pre-twentieth-century heritage of comparative theology itself. In chapter 5 I consider the possibility of other genealogies for theology and comparative theology.

Comparative Theology and the Long History of Christian Interreligious Reflection

Interreligious and comparative learning has always been an inescapable dimension in the life of every religious community. Early Christianity, arising in the context of Judaism, was no exception; interreligious exchange is basic to Christianity, in its biblical roots and early growth. Israel knew of God's work among other peoples, and a figure like Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest, was honored in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as a true priest of God. The Gospel writers pondered the encounters of

Jesus with Romans and other non-Jews, and sought a balance between Jesus's mission to Israel and the wider mission of the Gospel. According to Acts 17, St. Paul went to the Areopagus intending to identify common ground as a starting point for his preaching of the Gospel, and in his own way he honored both Greek ritual and Greek literature. The theologians of the early Church were often learned in Greek and Latin literature, and possessed of detailed knowledge of Greek and Roman religion, and philosophy. Though confident about the novelty and uniqueness of the Christian message, they forged Christian identity in light of deep cultural affinities present in the Mediterranean world, fierce ruptures with pagan belief and cult notwithstanding. Though often combative, their arguments for Christian distinctiveness were supported by considerable learning, and articulated through a deep appropriation of what was new and strange to them. Even the more enclosed medieval European Christian era was not lacking in instances of interreligious learning. We can think here of Aquinas's dialogue with Jewish and Muslim thinkers in the *Summa Theologiae*, Raymond Lull's extended reflections on Islam, and Nicholas of Cusa's vision of a dialogue of religions in his *De Pace Fidei*. Similar histories of encounter can be recounted for every religious tradition. While the quantity and quality of our encounters today are more urgent, nonetheless we are never at an absolute starting point, and from that history there developed the basic models for interreligious exchange that still shape our thinking today.

In certain eras the encounters have been more visible and urgent, and of greater impact. The influx of new knowledge about the wider world during European colonial expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries led to more expansive Christian reflection on other religions, with the vitality of Christian faith at stake and the full energies of Christian mission operative. Faith and learning coexisted in a fragile synthesis within Christendom itself, and this synthesis was stretched and contested as the Church expanded into its many new worlds. Colonialism both enabled and disfigured the new interreligious encounters, while Church politics and doctrinal constraints – matched by parallel forces operative in the cultures and religions to which Christianity

came —shaped what the unprecedented encounters might mean. The results were uneven, and we can hardly look to the sixteenth century for viable models of comparative theological learning. But neither should we radically dissociate ourselves from the tensions arising between openness and faith, spiritual and political motivations. We are not so very different today, and much good – spiritual, intellectual – came from those imperfect encounters.

Since India is my chosen example throughout this book, we can consider more closely the Christian approach to India's cultures and religions. In the early Christian era, we find Roman and Greek accounts of encounters with Indian ascetics and sages, even reports of their visits to the Mediterranean world. Tradition holds that St. Thomas the Apostle preached the Gospel in South India, and was martyred there. Christian communities of the Syriac traditions flourished in India in the first millennium CE even if we seem not to have records for these earliest Christian engagements with Indian culture and religion.

The modern era of encounter began with the opening of the European colonial period and the arrival of the Roman Catholic Portuguese on the west coast of India in 1498. The religious interactions of Hindus and these newly arrived Western Christians too were complicated and often enough tainted by politics and power; here, too, learning was often enough narrowed by the presumption that the Indian religious traditions had no salvific value and native learning was inferior to that of the West. Polemic crept into even the most energetic efforts to learn; debates were often counterproductive, even when a concern for truth was central. Yet the missionary documents show real theological concern for God, truth, and salvation. Faith, however hard-edged, made the missionaries curious, and that curiosity instigated a great deal of learning. In the letters and treatises that have come down to us there is much information that would change European views of religion, and much speculation that would affect how we all have thought about religion, its origins and development. While we ought not be naïve about the less than ideal political and intellectual circumstances surrounding missionary work, we should still avoid (over)correctives that would reduce religious interests and questions to their meanest political dimensions.

Western Jesuit Scholars in India

To be still more specific, I wish to reflect briefly on how early missionaries belonging to the Society of Jesus encountered Hinduism, how some pioneering Jesuits thought about, learned from, and related to their religious others. The Society is also the intellectual and faith tradition to which I personally belong, and by attention to its history of encounters I have over the years tried to uncover missionary instincts that may be unconsciously operative even now in my study of India and my comparative theology, plus those elements that separate me from that tradition. In the same spirit, I invite my readers to reflect upon the attitudes toward other religions to which they are heir religiously and culturally.

The early Jesuit work in colonial India was largely a missionary enterprise, aimed at conversions. But this intention to convert was accompanied by a serious commitment to interreligious learning, scholarship at the service of preaching the Gospel, and winning converts. Arising within the Church of the Counter-Reformation, Jesuit learning afforded little room to doubts about the rightness and efficacy of Catholic positions. Jesuit mission was also part of the West's complicated outreach to the wider world, and ought not to be assessed without admitting its implication in colonialism. Still, this Jesuit tradition offers numerous examples of real learning from other religious cultures and traditions, with a resultant influx of knowledge that would in many ways change how Europeans thought about themselves and the wider world.

Beginning with St. Francis Xavier (1506–52), the early Jesuit missionaries in India saw Hindu life close up, and lived among Hindus until their own deaths. Their letters reveal a mix of repugnance, condescension, and intense curiosity, plus their determination to learn from and make sense of all they saw, heard, and read. The first missionaries managed little solid information about Hinduism's theological and philosophical traditions and could not seriously study the great traditions. But some Jesuits, including well-known figures such as Thomas Stephens (1549–1619), Roberto de Nobili (1579–1656), Jean Venance Bouchet (1655–1732), Constantine Beschi (1680–1747), Jean Calmette (1692–1740), and

G. L. Coeurdoux (1691–1777), all studied Hinduism in relative depth and wrote articulately about it, increasingly with an eye toward similarities to and differences from Christianity.

These Jesuits drew the study of India into their formulation of Christian theological and catechetical teachings, all for the sake of their plan to convert Indians and provide a viable context for learning to become Christian. Even in their efforts to disprove the religions they encountered, they strove to be as well informed and learned as possible. They developed sophisticated notions of culture and religion by which to organize and use what they were learning; they wrote about what they learned, in personal and public letters, poetry, and argumentative treatises. They became scholars, because they believed that the Catholic response to the religious cultures of India was best grounded in detailed knowledge of what to criticize and what might serve as a possible foundation for Christian learning. The positive energy that faith brought to their study undeniably carried with it particular strains of bias, but we can also recognize their learning, often achieved under very difficult circumstances. Their synergy of faith and inquiry in a way models the participatory learning essential to today's comparative theology.

Let us take Roberto de Nobili as an example. A pioneering figure in the Christian encounter with Hinduism, de Nobili was both a scholar and an apologist, whose missionary and scholarly interests coalesced to enhance the overall intensity and energy of his work. He knew something of traditional Hindu learning and even of classic religious texts such as the Upanishads. When he attempted to decipher the religious meaning of Indian society's caste system, he seems to have had before him the *Laws of Manu*. His Latin defense of cultural adaptation, *The Report on Indian Customs*, draws a powerful analogy between the creative syntheses that occurred in the Graeco-Roman context of the earliest Church and the possibilities opening up before the Church in Asia. In his 1610 Tamil treatise, the *Dialogue on Eternal Life*, de Nobili argues for the integrity and value of religious reasoning, including its deference to revelation for the sake of truths that, while susceptible to human assent, cannot be grasped simply by reasoning. Some of de Nobili's other Tamil texts, such as the

Analysis of the Self, explain and defend Christian philosophical views; others are directly critical of Hindu beliefs, such as reincarnation, criticized in the *Critique of Rebirth*. But all these works show de Nobili's intense engagement in Hindu society, his desire to enter conversation with its learned representatives, and his desire to make his views known to concerned persons back in Europe.

In the century and a half after de Nobili, up to the Suppression of the Society and the ouster of the Jesuits from India, other missionary scholars continued de Nobili's move toward an informed, seemingly objective grasp of Indian religion. While this quest was aimed at vindicating the truth of the Gospel, it also became a science unto itself, part of the new science of Indology. Jean-Venance Bouchet collected and organized, for long letters home, important bodies of learning about the religion and beliefs of Indians, and also about legal customs and even the geography of India, knowledge which helped even secular scholars to understand India better. Constantine Beschi composed an epic life of St. Joseph in Tamil verse, while Jean Calmette wrote elegant hymns in Sanskrit. At the end of this first great period of Jesuit life and work in India, Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux, in his *The Ways and Customs of the Indians*, explored rather deeply the origins and nature of Brahminical society, offered sophisticated theories about the origins of pagan religion, and introduced nuanced comparisons of Indian culture and religion with Western religion and culture, both Christian and Graeco-Roman pagan.

In all of this, we cannot miss the tension inherent in this early scholarship: a continuing deep commitment to missionary work aimed at the goal of conversion, accompanied by ever more comprehensive and precise knowledge of religion in India, knowledge that would hopefully uncover the flaws of Hinduism and make clear the truth of Christianity. But this solid, careful learning was also at cross-purposes with missionary goals, since it uncovered more and more complexities, as convenient theories did not fit the growing mass of information about Hinduism. The new learning raised questions about the ground and plausibility of evangelical initiatives. The same knowledge that supported mission might also at a later date undercut mission's worldview.

And yet, despite the uneasy balance of learning and mission, these scholars were right in their expectation that faith and reason had to cooperate in honest, faithful interreligious encounter. Without their faith, these Jesuits might conceivably have been better Indologists – but would have had no interest in being Indologists at all.

If we ourselves are faithful to our faith traditions and also intent upon honest encounter with other religious traditions, we are not going to escape the tension that energized and vexed the missionaries, as they sought to understand, but in a certain way for certain purposes. We may have shed their explicit project of learning in order to convert, and we may be inclined rather to learn because we need to learn and to be in dialogue, but the deeper connections and complications that bind faith and knowledge together, to the benefit of both, have not gone away. Faith may still skew and dull scholarship, yet religious scholarship unmoored in deep commitments may remain diffuse, and largely irrelevant to living religious communities. If we do our work well, grounding scholarly commitments in faith, we will always be on the edge of failing in scholarship or failing in faith. Then we will be properly conflicted theologians, comparative theologians.

Comparative Theology as a Discipline (1699–)

I turn now to another among the predecessors of today's comparative theology: its pedigree as an increasingly scientific theology and learning about religions that shares some of the goals evident in both missionary scholarship and our contemporary effort to balance faith and learning. To sketch a field deserving more ample attention, I will offer just a few reflections on how "comparative theology" was understood as early as 1700 and thereafter in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the mere mention of "comparative theology" does not prove continuity in meaning, observing uses of this term will give us an angle on the unwieldy topic of comparative study and help us to understand a history that a twenty-first-century comparative theology should not disown.

"Comparative theology" has been in use in English at least since 1700 when James Garden (1645–1726) published *Comparative Theology; or The True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology: A Subject very Necessary, tho hitherto almost wholly neglected*.[1] In explaining his project, Garden distinguishes two kinds of theology. First, there is *absolute theology*, "that knowledge of religion [which] considers its Object only as revealed and enjoined, or instituted, by God, and its business is to find out those things which are proposed to us in the Scriptures to be believ'd or practis'd, and to discern and distinguish them from all others." Second, there is *comparative theology*, wherein "the respective Knowledge of Religion ponders the weight or importance, and observes the Order, Respect and Relation of things belonging to Religion; whether they be points of Doctrine, or Precepts, or sacred Rites, and teaches to distinguish and put a difference between the Accessories of Religion, and the Principles; the Circumstantials and Substantials; the Means and their Ends."[2] Garden dedicated the major part of his book to weighing beliefs and values as more or less central to Christian life, by a *comparative* rather than *absolute* calculus. He concludes that the core of Christianity is the primal and creative love of God and divine benevolence toward the human race; on our part, the key point is the command to love. Sadly, people quarrel and do violence over the less important rules and doctrines of religion. According to Garden, the point of a comparative theology is to identify the more important and basic truths and values, thereby enabling us to pay them proper attention.

Garden was thinking of intra-Christian and not interreligious differences, but it is interesting that even at its earliest mention "comparative theology" was the discipline by which to identify and privilege common ground; this usage is predictive of some of the more hopeful and vital comparative work that has appeared ever since. Garden's comparative theology is on that basis consonant with the constructive comparative theology I have in mind, a recognition of intellectual and spiritual possibilities that is not thwarted by the fact of differences. There is a need for theologians to learn how to learn from interreligious similarities and common ground, yet without ignoring differences and without theorizing

a common, perennial origin from which particular religions, with their doctrines and rules, arise. This is the work of today's comparative theology too.

At this writing, I cannot assess the actual influence of Garden's work. Available sources are scarce, and I have yet to find later references to Garden. Nor can I say how often "comparative theology" recurred in the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, though, comparison was increasingly respected as a scientific method in many fields of study, and "comparative theology" (re)emerged with a new scientific aura, as a way to link the increasing knowledge of religions with reconsiderations of the Christian faith that would in the long run foster an objective validation of Christianity as the best, universal religion.

For this sketch, I introduce F. Max Müller as a first representative of nineteenth-century comparative theology, even if he did not identify himself uniformly as a comparative theologian. In works such as *Lectures on Natural Religion* (1889) and the *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), Müller speaks with favor of comparative theology. Religions can be compared, but not through a "comparative religion" discipline; religion cannot generate successful second-order reflection on itself. Rather, to think about religion we must back up and move to a higher order of reflection, to a theology that is the reflective discipline in which religions are to be compared.[3] This reflective comparative theology probes the meaning of religions in their particularity; in this way it differs from a theoretic theology that explains the conditions of the possibility of religion in its higher or lower forms. As such, it is more concrete and particular, and is indebted to those historical forms of religion which, Müller reminds us, have only now become sufficiently available for in-depth study.[4] In distinction from general or natural theology, comparative theology engages religions in their particularity, noticing both what is shared with other religions and what is unique to a given tradition.[5] Ideally, theological comparativists do not privilege their own religion as exceptional and do not make judgments on the religions of others. They treat all equally, studying their natural and historical forms.[6] But this new theological discipline will transform theoretic theology, just as comparative philology transformed the philosophy of

language,[7] since comparative analysis moves our understanding of religion forward by the force of its detailed studies and the learning they involve.

Müller did not develop his position on comparative theology consistently, and what he did say did not convince every reader.[8] But his approach merits reconsideration in the twenty-first century, since we are still challenged to offer a rationale for keeping academic learning, theology, and comparison together. Indeed, Müller is making a point central to this book: a theological perspective, provided it is grounded in particularities, need not be conceived of as an obstacle in the study of religions. Indeed, a comparative theological approach can promote a clearer perspective on the whole, and facilitate deeper reflection on what is learned in comparative research. But we can also admit differences. Müller thinks of theology as a science with minimal roots in any specific tradition, and his adoption of a scientific model marks a more detached and neutral comparative theology that is rather different from a learning practice to which faith is essential.

Another and more prevalent version of comparative theology assumed that comparative study would confirm Christianity's unique and superior status. I will mention just two examples of this more standard version.[9] James F. Clarke's *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) serially introduces ten major religions, to explain them and show how their partial and imperfect truths are included in the larger, superior truth of Christianity, the universal religion meant for all humans and not just for particular nations or tribes. His equally large sequel, *Ten Great Religions Part II: A Comparison of All Religions* (1884), draws on the detailed studies of the first volume for the sake of a thematic comparison of the same religions. In a final chapter on the future of religion, he admits that Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all intend truly universal membership, but concludes that it is only Christianity – in its focus on the person of Christ as the core of religion – that attains true universality. Clarke marshals impressive learning in support of a conclusion that, while making sense as a faith position, reaches well beyond the vast score of information supposed to support it. He seems not to see that his conclusions

were also his presuppositions, or that his impressive data might just as well have been read differently, for the sake of other conclusions. Perhaps the enthusiasm of religious scholars is inevitable, as they expect study to confirm the truths of faith. But research does not always serve faith's interests, and the honest scholar must readily confess the gap between expectations and results.

J. A. MacCulloch's *Comparative Theology* (1902) likewise intertwined the dynamics of faith and scholarship. In it, he explored particular thematic comparisons between various religions and Christianity, the absolute religion, on themes such as monotheism, trinity, creation, and incarnation. He too studied the religions in some depth, but with the goal of confirming Christianity alone to be the perfect religion; here, too, research was at the service of faith's conclusions. Like the missionaries, and like Clarke, MacCulloch too seemed unable to see that his data did not necessarily support his hoped-for conclusions. And yet again: it was his faith that compelled him to study other religions very carefully with, as he saw his work, a mind open to the truth. His opening chapter on method is a plea to Christians to expect to find God at work in the religions of the world. Even if Christianity is the absolute religion, God did not leave people in other traditions without knowledge of himself; even if what is best in other religions is perfected in Christianity, this fact should increase and not diminish Christians' interest in them, for the sake of discovering the truth that leads to Christ.

I have introduced these examples to signal the history of comparative theology and to remind us of dangers to which it is liable, but also to make clear that the effort to be scientific while still confessing Christian faith is preferable to uninformed theological opinions or a study of religions that seeks to exclude faith perspectives. Faith in itself is not a problem, since we can rightfully bring specific intentions and expectations to bear in our research and since, for the believer, the world's coherence and intelligibility ought not to be bracketed for the sake of scholarly inquiry. But obliviousness to inevitable bias is a problem, as is the expectation that faith in the superiority of Christianity can suddenly become a conclusion drawn objectively from research. It is no surprise

that today many of us do not sympathize with a comparative theology that jumps from data to the confirmation of faith positions. The older comparative theology seems, on the one hand, too comfortably immune to the complicated implications of what is learned, and, on the other hand, too diffident about how a faith bravely vulnerable to scholarship might truly profit from the deep study of another tradition.

A Moderate Criticism of Missionary Scholarship and the Older Comparative Theology

While the past is instructive, nothing that has gone before us can predict perfectly where we are going as individuals or communities, in today's conversations about our religious others and with people in those communities. I am sympathetic with Garden's hope for a more irenic religious situation after comparative study, but I would be reluctant to reduce the comparative project to an act of ecumenical or interreligious peacemaking. I likewise appreciate Müller's preference for comparative theology over theoretic theology – particularly since now, as then, the latter is common and the former rare – even if I am more concerned to promote keeping a truly *communal* and *faith*-grounded character for my comparative theology. I likewise respect Clarke and MacCulloch for their impressive scholarship and their insistence that faith and scholarship belong together. While we must note clearly the drawbacks of comparative theologies seemingly preoccupied with proving the superiority of Christian theological positions, we should not imagine neutral scholarship as a foolproof remedy. Comparative study reminds us that the tendency to confirm one's own faith through reflection on the other occurs also in our own but also in other traditions, which likewise interpret the world from settled faith perspectives. However, what we need is not the exclusion of such faith-motivated theologies, but a comparative reflection that uncovers their inevitable bias, that we may observe its effects, good as well as bad.

Once we confess bias and seek to correct it, we need no longer devalue the energy produced in the combination of faith and

understanding exemplified in missionary and early comparative writings. Faith can drive the study of religion, and the study of religion can over and again purify a faith that rushes to comfortable conclusions. "Faith seeking understanding" remains a viable base from which to learn of religions other than our own, and this is key to comparative theology as I understand it. If we are aware of theology's inevitable biases and the gap between comparison-as-science and the confirmation of faith-conclusions, this more reflective comparative theology can, without disowning its nineteenth-century ancestors, rightly and stubbornly maintain a necessary connection between faith and inquiry, with roots in one tradition enabling and guiding the study of other traditions. "Comparative theology" today *still* signifies the intention to engage in comparative study with theological – faith, performative, communal, encountering-God – dimensions and ramifications. The historical and comparative limitations of "theological" still matter, because a theological perspective motivates study and helps us to enter upon learning religions other than our own, by analogy with how we have learned our own. Chastened and ever imperfect, this combination of comparison and theology is a viable discipline with advantages unavailable to comparative religion non-theologically conceived.

We, like our predecessors, need to keep working for an alliance of faith and inquiry, even if for us the marriage will be chastened and necessarily imperfect. But we must do this without romanticism. In *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa casts a harsh light on the mix of a seemingly scientific study of religion and settled, predetermined faith conclusions that do not arise from the research itself. We can sympathize with her puzzlement and distaste: "Nowadays, we generally discredit this claim [to the objective superiority of Christianity] as naïve at best, disingenuous at worst. We behold in disbelief the seriousness with which some of those comparativists with strong dogmatic views pronounced that their surveys of other religions were – not just in principle, but in actuality – 'fair,' 'sympathetic,' and 'impartial.' "[10] Immediately thereafter, however, she observes that we miss out if we simply turn away puzzled from such authors – if only because facing up to their blindness may give us some insight into our own.

In the next chapter I will say more about the contemporary state of comparative theology, but here I anticipate the still longer view. A century from now, scholars may look back with astonishment on the ways in which scholars like myself theorized and practiced comparative theological study in the early twenty-first century. The blind spots of the nineteenth-century theorists may sit nicely next to our own. But our engagement with religious diversity will, I hope, still be seen as an energetic encounter that was enlivened by faith and that remained honest in its intellectual inquiry. While it would be a bit dramatic to say that God desires that theology be comparative – just as it would be to say that God desires more or less of any particular theological discipline – we do well to see our effort to learn across religious borders as in harmony with God's plan. To suggest that God has not envisioned the actual world in which we live, where neither faith nor religious diversity will vanish at any time soon, would also be a strange thing for a theologian to propose. Knowing God today requires a retrieval of faith, tradition, scripture, and practice – precisely as we open ourselves to learning other traditions, in their own comparable complexities. Some faith in the larger spiritual significance of the comparative theological enterprise is necessary, if the discipline is to flourish as theology.

At the End of the Era

Let us finish this brief historical reflection by noting the waning years of the missionary era in Catholic India. Since missionary scholarship and the older comparative theology were deeply linked fields, a brief consideration of the "end" of missionary scholarship will shed light on how we should configure our comparative theology.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, we still find instances of missionary scholarship that combined a Christian faith perspective with careful, detailed scholarship, but the goal of actual conversion seems more a receding horizon than a goal soon to be accomplished. Pierre Johanns, SJ, wrote a series of small studies, most just several pages long, that were published serially in

Calcutta during 1922–34 in *The Light of the East*, and under the title, *To Christ through the Vedanta*. These learned and detailed analyses of Vedanta religious and philosophical ideas aimed toward identifying their enduring meaning and value. Johanns's hope was to "save" Vedanta by clarifying what is positive and deficient in each of its schools (led by Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, and Vallabha), and to integrate their best insights together in accord with the systematic higher viewpoint of Aquinas. Johanns engaged Vedanta as a theological system and was clearly determined to honor the truths he found inscribed in the great commentaries, even if he also concluded – and probably had to presuppose – that none of the Vedanta thinkers successfully fashioned a fully coherent system. Only Thomism's higher viewpoint could bring the fragmentary truths of Vedanta to wholeness. Unlike de Nobili, Johanns does not pit Christian images of God against Hindu images, nor does he strive for the eradication of religious beliefs deemed contrary to Christianity. His approach was to make an intelligent though controversial suggestion about how knowledge is to be systematized; it enabled him to honor the Indian intellectual traditions, even if Vedanta practitioners would be unlikely to agree with him.

In the mid- and late-twentieth century, the theologian Raimon Panikkar, Jesuits such as the Indologist Richard de Smet, and spiritual theologians such as the Benedictines Henri Le Saux and Bede Griffiths,[11] all studied Hinduism with more consciously configured combinations of scholarship and spiritual commitment. Their work was detailed and respectful, and intellectually and spiritually open to the project of rethinking the Christian tradition through seriously learning from Hinduism. Their projects involved detailed textual study, sometimes with Hindu teachers, along with conversation with representatives of India's spiritual and intellectual traditions. They were more respectful of Hindu wisdom than many of their predecessors, and more vulnerable to the spiritual impact of serious study. They show that theology and interreligious study can produce a learning in harmony with traveling the spiritual path. Even if comparative theology will usually be more academic than the writings of Griffiths, Le Saux, and even Panikkar, it ideally shares their attentiveness to the

particularities of other religious traditions, their concern for ways in which the Christian faith interacts with other faiths, and their insight into the transformative nature of interreligious study.

I close, then, by noting just one scholar whose writing clearly exemplifies a perspective both Christian and Indological, spiritual and theological. Sara Grant, RSCJ (1922–2002) lived in India for much of her life. She was a contemporary and colleague of Richard De Smet and other Jesuit Indologists, and herself a scholar of Vedanta. Her scholarship richly combines diligent Indological research with more personal reflection on the interior possibilities opened for the student of Vedanta. Her *Sankaracarya's Concept of Relation* (1998) is a dense and difficult study, probably necessarily so, given the technical nature of Sankara's Vedanta theology and her nuanced theological comparisons. In it, she explores Sankara's concept of the relation between the infinite and finite – created and creator, world and God – read in light of Aquinas's teaching on relation. After an overview of Sankara's vision of reality and the goal of his Vedanta, read from a Christian perspective, in the core section of the book she examines his teaching on the metaphysics of the divine-human relationship. This Indological inquiry in turn opens into a comparison of Sankara's views with Aquinas's doctrine of relation. Grant finds their positions, on many issues quite different, to be surprisingly close on key points in the divine-human metaphysics, particularly with respect to their understanding of the significance of relation for their larger spiritual projects. Her book is, then, simply a very interesting contribution to comparative theology.

But Grant also points the way to a more forthright harmony of the intellectual and the spiritual. In *Toward an Alternative Theology* (2002), she reflects autobiographically on the Christian engagement in Indian and Hindu spirituality and theology, and on the challenge of Vedanta to an integral Christian theology that would more deeply apprehend the divine reality. In her view, commitment to Christ can be deepened through a dedicated even contemplative study of figures such as Sankara. Her study of Vedanta therefore turns out to be a Christian spiritual practice, in which study is paired with a vulnerability to be changed by what one studies. This is an interreligious learning that is neither merely

academic nor merely spiritual, a weaving together of intellectual inquiry with spiritual vulnerability that can illumine comparative theology even today. If it lacks the doctrinaire edge that we find in the old polemics or in the confident comparative theologies of the nineteenth century, it is not because faith has been neatly separated from inquiry, but rather because faith and inquiry have, in the work of scholars like Grant, been allowed to challenge and purify one another.

Chapter 3

Comparative Theology Today

The preceding chapter leaves us in a delicate position. After the generalities of chapter 1, chapter 2 has afforded us at least an initial hold on the needed longer historical perspective. Knowing how some earlier theologians and scholars have dealt with religions other than their own will make us ambivalent regarding the intellectual projects of the missionary scholars and nineteenth-century comparativists who were determined to make sense of world religions even while remaining steadfastly Christian in their presuppositions and conclusions. It is hard to do the work of comparative learning without overlaying it with meanings not arising from the learning itself, even if faith itself is not an obstacle to scholarship. Yet we achieve little, and may do harm, by drawing conclusions, conservative or liberal, ahead of time, as if to make further learning unnecessary. Honest study has its own dynamics, and we cannot predetermine the conclusions to which our encounter with other religions will lead. We are better off if we remain patiently and persistently committed to actual instances of learning, specific experiments, deriving our insights from the actual comparisons and not from a theory about religions or about the methodology of comparison. The comparative theology that I am recommending foregoes the optimism of its ancestors and leaves to others the large judgments about religions. It is faithful – from and for communities of faith – but has little faith in easy vindications of doctrinal positions. It cares about truth, but expects that an engagement in truth will captivate critical

inquirers, who will have to raise impertinent questions that may annoy both detached scholars and overconfident believers.

I will speak more of the practical nature of comparative theology and its allergy to theory in chapter 4, but in this chapter I consider how several contemporary scholars have balanced faith, theology, and interreligious learning. I begin by considering in turn the views of David Tracy, Keith Ward, Robert Neville, and (more briefly) Raimon Panikkar, highlighting several features of their contributions to comparative theology. Thereafter, I will point very briefly to several other important figures and to still newer currents in the development of this discipline. I make no pretense of an exhaustive survey, since my point in this brief chapter is rather to clarify the nature of this discipline, offering my own nuances to the work of some important contributors to the field.[1]

David Tracy

David Tracy does not describe himself as a comparative theologian – he has not engaged in actual comparative study – but he has written an influential essay that deserves mention here. His 1986 essay on "comparative theology" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* calls to our attention the work of Müller, Clarke, MacCulloch, and others. At the same time he also elaborates his understanding of comparative theology from the perspective of his own deep understanding of theological inquiry. In Tracy's view, our experience of religion today is interreligious, as is our understanding of things religious. Since reflection on God and the human condition cannot neglect religious diversity, theological reflection inevitably becomes interreligious learning; in a way, all theologies are properly termed comparative theologies. Nor is this merely an extrinsic observation. Theology is in need of a deep renewal of its symbols and a new articulation of its foundations; addressing questions of religious diversity on explicitly theological grounds is an essential instrument of this renewal.

Tracy highlights two ways in which comparative study might proceed, in accord with whether we emphasize "comparative" or

"theological." As *comparative*, it can be taken as a discipline within the history of religions, by which the theologies of different traditions are compared; as *theological*, it is "a more strictly theological enterprise … which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds."[2] I wish to highlight a third understanding, complementary to Tracy's twin ways. A comparative theology can itself be a truly constructive theology, a theological activity distinguished by its grounding in a faith perspective, and by its manner of proceeding, its serious and prolonged attention to more than one tradition, and by constructive theology arising from that comparative work, not apart from it. This comparative learning does not simply nuance already familiar themes or repeat methods already settled prior to the comparative practice, and it does not remain simply a matter of observing another religious tradition from a distance. It is rather a theology deeply changed by its serious engagement in the particularities of more than one religious and theological tradition; it occurs only after comparison, in a complex learning that cannot be left behind once the comparative work is done.

Comparative theology thus understood earns its place among core theological disciplines, as it engages seriously the central truth of traditions; it can be what Tracy has in mind, but it is also "Tracy-plus," a closer, more particular engagement that thinks through the truths of several traditions in a way that transforms both theology and the theologian.

Keith Ward

In the 1990s, British theologian Keith Ward undertook an impressive project in comparative theology: *Religion and Revelation* (1994), *Religion and Creation* (1996), *Religion and Human Nature* (1998), and *Religion and Community* (2000).[3] Each volume reconsiders a major theme in the Christian theological tradition, seen anew in light of Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist materials. Excepting the thematic approach governing *Religion and Human Nature*, each volume begins with fairly detailed considerations of the volume's theme as treated in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and

Buddhism, with his own theological questions governing how he treats the theme in the several traditions. After this theologically governed survey, he reflects more amply on the theme as understood in Christian theology, now as problematized and enriched by the fact of comparative study. In *Religion and Creation*, for instance, Ward explores our human language about God as creator and then discusses at length the nature of this creator God, concluding with reflection on cosmological issues and the relationship between creation and Trinity. Or, in *Religion and Community*, Ward begins with attention to various views of community – Judaism and the nation of Israel, the Islamic understanding of the universal *umma*, the Buddhist *sangha* and Hindu *sampradaya*, and even modern secular understanding of the state. With that information in place, he reconsiders the Church as a teaching, charismatic, sacramental, and moral community, and in turn uses this fresh understanding of Church to review the history of Christian understandings of Church. This fourth and final volume concludes with an essay on "Christian theology in a comparative context."

In the entire project Ward remains steadfastly theological, balancing his enduring commitment to the fundamental disclosure of God in Jesus with recognition that comparative study changes our understanding of that disclosure. This insight promises a more integral interreligious Christian theology, and in these volumes Ward shows us the fruitfulness of comparative theological work. Rich in substance and admirably developed through the four themes in four volumes, Ward's work exemplifies a commendable method of comparative theological study. His achievement is particularly important because, as Ward readily admits, he is not a specialist in the other traditions, but has studied them through secondary literature and in conversation with experts, including members of those traditions.

One other point is worth noting. In *Religion and Revelation* (1994), Ward, like Garden and Müller before him, distinguishes between confessional (or "absolute") theology and comparative theology, the former focused on revelation, the latter on God's wider work in the world.[4] Ward locates his four volumes in the latter category, as comparative and not confessional; yet the point

of his entire project is actually that we should *not* separate comparative theology from confessional theology. The exploration of a given revelation (in confessional theology) and a broader survey of traditions studied deeply and with the eye of faith (in comparative theology) mark dimensions of the overall Christian theological project that today will not make sense unless both are operative. I am in substantial agreement with Ward, but suggest that we need to leave room for the further step that occurs when by serious study we study another tradition more deeply and over a long period of time – as we have first studied our own – so that as a result faith itself is deeply infused with the spirit and influence of comparative work. This more intensely vulnerable theology arises in encounter with revelation, moves forward by way of a series of discrete intellectual inquiries that cross religious borders, and bears fruit in a transformed apprehension of our original confessional positions. Comparison retains a confessional dimension, while confession is disciplined by comparative practice, and in the process the theologian sees beyond the expectations of her tradition and changes accordingly. Here, too, I am simply suggesting that Ward's important work is open to enhancement, "Ward-plus."

Robert C. Neville

Robert C. Neville is a leading theorist of comparative reflection who often couches his work in terms of "comparative theology," while also appealing to "comparative philosophy," "comparative religious ideas," and simply "comparison." A significant portion of his writing in recent years illumines his interest in comparative study and search for its best methodologies. In monographs such as *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay toward Comparative Theology* (1991), *On the Scope and Truth of Theology* (2006), and *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (2008), Neville maps the intellectual and practical space for constructive philosophical and theological reflection across religious and cultural boundaries. In *Ritual and Deference*, for instance, Neville suggests five models for comparative theology: (i) a "social

scientific" model that explains how theological ideas arise and compare with one another; (ii) "historical comparative theology" that traces the genealogy of philosophies within traditions and across boundaries; (iii) the derivation of comparative theological meanings from a prior metaphysical scheme used to sort and classify actual and possible ideas; (iv) comparative theology as a fundamentally Christian theology, such as draws on other traditions' theologies to make clarifications, and to identify where Christian positions are distinctive; and, in a kind of appendix to the preceding, (v) the singular work of Raimon Panikkar, whose writing exemplifies a creative syncretism among preferred religious ideas, words, and images.

Neville finds that while various models of comparison deserve consideration, many fall short of the truth claims for which theologians, in their communities, must be accountable. His preference is for normative comparison, in which we remain able to move from comparative reflection to normative conclusions relevant to contemporary issues. He also favors an integral philosophy attuned to the great public conversation that is happening across religious and cultural borders in our religiously diverse world. Since no philosophical or religious authority or single idea controls this global public conversation, participation requires that we be agile in comparative thinking and speaking, holding our own while still listening to and learning from others who speak in accord with different conceptual systems. Because diversity suffers inconclusiveness and even incoherence if normative position are permanently deferred, the religious intellectual, even while sensitive to the limitations of comparative study, must insist that coherent and persuasive conclusions can be successfully drawn.

Encouraged perhaps by a seeming abundance of Chinese scholars ready for conversation, Neville warmly highlights the value of collaboration in comparative study. Scholars versed in various religious traditions (as members or simply as experts regarding them) can collaborate in crafting a flexible terminology that with fine-tuning helps us to understand and make sense of all the traditions involved. The positions proposed and comparisons drawn are able then to reflect accurately what the

involved traditions teach, without merely mimicking any of the positions. Conclusions drawn in this way retain credibility with those who engaged in interreligious conversation even while still committed to their home traditions.[5] Ultimately, Neville sees "comparative theology" as a moment within a larger theological project and not as itself the end point of a complete theology. Not only is comparative work in principle endless, but it also is not the end of the process. Appropriate judgments of truth remain necessary, and these do not merely arise from comparative studies, but from further reflection on them in rejuvenated theological categories.

Due perhaps to the combination of his areas of expertise – American pragmatism, process thought, Confucian traditions – Neville values comparison as a process of increasingly refined approximations crafted wisely. Words, methods of comparison, and the substantive tenets of tradition achieve a certain balance in comparative study, but they are always still open to adjustment as further insights occur across cultural and religious borders. The expert comparativist masters both the particular and the general, and can explain the rules by which we learn interreligiously. "Comparison" is ultimately an art.

A Note on Raimon Panikkar

I admire Neville's work greatly, and the difference between my understanding of comparative theology and his has to do primarily with style. While his study of Chinese thought draws him toward subtle distinctions perfected with an air of detachment, my own work moves toward deeper engagement in stubborn particularities, risking an irreversible involvement in the truth and ways of the Hindu communities I study. Perhaps the study of Confucianism leads to an elegant detachment, while the study of Hinduism fosters a messier, more passionate engagement? To illustrate what is at stake here, it is helpful to return briefly to Raimon Panikkar (already mentioned in chapter 2), the Catholic theologian who has meditated deeply on Hinduism over his very long career.

When discussing Panikkar in his account of the five models of comparative theology, Neville offers this criticism of Panikkar's

> syncretistic penetration of several religions by mutually inhabiting them, articulating from the inside the sense in which each is true … While [Panikkar's] model produces a comparative theology that is normative and responsible for its selections of comparative material, it is highly selective in what to compare and does not deal readily with the many forms of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism that do not fit into the synthesis. This model does not promote vulnerability to correction from comparisons with what might be radically critical.[6]

Perhaps unintentionally, Neville is showing us why Panikkar's work, in its very selectivity, highlights a necessary component of our understanding of comparative theology: Panikkar aims at "mutually inhabiting" two traditions, with an openness to a (syncretistic) blurring of boundaries, so as to be able to see "from the inside the sense in which each is true." He is indeed selective in his choice of materials to work with, and while offering wise maxims usually avoids broad theoretical generalizations.

Panikkar's decision to entangle his Christian faith and theology inside the Hinduism which he inhabits demonstrates a version of the intense, engaged learning that in my view is essential to comparative theology. His preferred "mutual inhabitation" seems to me a worthy goal, the price of the engaged model of comparative theological practice I will be proposing in the next chapters. Intense particularity, becoming a part of that other tradition in some way, is the goal, rather than elegance in explanation. While we do well to avoid the wise persona he assumes in works such as *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (1999) – as if the comparativist, the wise man, sees what no one else sees, rising beyond each of the religions compared – I am sympathetic with his insight into how each religion is necessarily chastened and humbled by the truths of other religions. Even his idiosyncratic vocabulary suggests that his mode of intense reflection cannot be easily explained in the settled vocabulary of one or another tradition. It is nearly impossible to read Panikkar without paying

special attention to the author as someone who, ever the poet, crafts his own wise speech. Panikkar wants to inspire his readers likewise to reflect on their personal location and personal choices, as they encounter the mystery of God, in person, in their embodied reality. All of this attests to what may be a shared Catholic and Hindu sacramentality. Perhaps here, too, the choice of which religion one studies is again at issue. While Neville's attunement to *Confucian* sensitivities leads him toward a comparative philosophy with a detached air, it may be that studying *Hinduism* has more to do with personal engagement, loss of independence in the presence of the other, and a rediscovery of ourselves again in the home where we began.

James Fredericks

James Fredericks adds an important dimension to our understanding of comparative theology by emphasizing its interpersonal dimension. In his *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (2004), he makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of comparative theology by speaking of interreligious learning as a kind of friendship. His comparative theology is grounded in ongoing conversations with representatives of living Buddhist traditions and in enduring friendship with Buddhists in Japan and here in the United States. Fredericks envisions an inherently dialogical way of interreligious theology that requires collaboration among Christians, Buddhists, and people of other faith traditions. This dialogue among friends is perhaps more basic for Fredericks than a solitary interior dialogue proceeding by way of the study of texts, even if he certainly does not see interior reflection and conversation as exclusive alternatives. Those who emphasize textual study can only profit from Fredericks's emphasis on interreligious interactions and friendships, while those favoring interreligious conversation can still recognize the importance of interreligious learning gained through study. Moreover, the models may merge in practice, as dialogue is deepened through study and the fruits of study open into richer conversations.

New Directions

Since the field of comparative theology is currently in a new phase of its long history, how the discipline will develop in the next decades remains to be seen. But I can at least notice still newer contributions to the field, with four examples from the work of emerging scholars.

John Thatamanil is a younger theologian with theoretical interests similar to Robert Neville's, yet with a research agenda grounded in the study of Vedanta. *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* is his constructive contribution to comparative theology, in which he brings Paul Tillich into conversation with the non-dualist Vedanta theologian Sankara. Thatamanil, like Neville, argues that truly theological comparative work does not stop with detail, but must grapple also with the normative issues and truth claims always implicit in comparative study. His work highlights both theoretical clarity and engaged, transformative practice. But Thatamanil, perhaps due to his interest in Hinduism, also ponders the experience and risks of comparativists whose study leaves them in a marginal position, on the edge of the communities of which they wish to remain members. I will return to the issue of marginality in chapter 9.[7]

In her *Dualities: A Theology of Difference*, Michelle Voss Roberts skillfully weaves together reflection on Mechthild of Magdeburg, a thirteenth-century Christian beguine, and Lalla of Kashmir, a fouteenth-century Kashmiri Saiva *yogini*, for the sake of a theology of bodily experience that, while rooted in a Christian starting point, is deeply indebted to Saiva Hinduism as well. As a result, we are invited to make room for lived human experience, and so re-imagine the frame for any of our theologies, comparative or not.

Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier's Boston College doctoral dissertation, *Restless Hearts: A Comparative Asian American Woman's Theology*, is a theological inquiry into cultural identity that attends to the complexities of Asian-American identity in light of both feminist studies and the intensely physical, erotic poetry of Antal, a medieval Hindu female saint and poet.

Hugh Nicholson is perhaps the leading theorist of comparative theology in the younger generation. While he has done serious study of Hindu texts, here I will point only to one of his essays, "A Correlational Model of Comparative Theology" (2005), which interestingly illumines the relation of comparative theology to apologetics. Drawing on the work of David Tracy, Nicholson argues that

> the inclusion of non-Christian beliefs and practices among the materials for explicit theological reflection calls into question the common understanding of apologetics as a secondary and extrinsic theological task. When the religiously pluralistic character of the theological situation is fully acknowledged, the correlational model suggests that Christian identity is actively constructed in a dialectical process of comparison and contrast with other traditions, and that, moreover, apologetically motivated representations of the religious "other" are invariably shaped by a prior concern to establish Christian identity … the "objective" differences noted by apologetics simply confirm an already-established conception of Christian identity. In thus demystifying the apologetic project, the correlational model of theology [discussed earlier in the essay] implies a conception, presented in the third, of comparative theology as the replacement of traditional apologetics. (194–5)

Rather boldly, Nicholson concludes,

> An increase in knowledge and religious sensitivity has thus revealed the representations of the religious "other" in opposition to which Christianity has traditionally defined itself to be little more than projections of an underlying desire to establish religious identity. Thoughtful comparison exposes this basic need to establish religious identity by invalidating many of the representations through which this need has been at once expressed and concealed. We might say that comparative theology represents the demythologization of apologetics, where demythologization is understood in Rudolf Bultmann's sense as the recognition of an expressive function underneath an appearance of objective description. (210)

If Roberts and Tiemeier open up a very promising conversation with feminist and cultural studies and show how comparative

work cannot remain purely theological in a traditional sense, Nicholson faces head-on the traditional apologetic approach to religions and shows us how in fact comparative theology may change even our most traditional way of encountering and critiquing the other.[8]

At this writing I am also fortunate to be editing a volume tentatively entitled *The New Comparative Theology: Voices from the Younger Generation*, which brings together in conversation nine young scholars working on a range of comparative projects involving various pairings of Christianity with Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Scholars in this new generation favor comparative study, but also insist on critiquing it in light of other urgent theological concerns, such as embodiment, gender, race, and the critique of the persistent colonialist tendency to coopt our others, consuming them simply for our own purposes. Doctrinal theology remains important, but lived religion and cultural exchange is more central to their work than to mine. "Theology" itself is vividly in transition in their work.[9]

These younger scholars offer a necessary critique of comparative theology as it is done today; they rightly stretch the boundaries and indicate new possibilities that they will have to bring to maturity. A generation from now, their work will have pushed us significantly farther along the path, and then we will need a still further reconsideration of comparative theology and its prospects. By then, the very particular and narrow focus of my own work will be all the more evident, its disadvantages and (I hope) merits all the more clear.

From Theory (Back) to Practice

The interpretations reviewed in this chapter show the variety of explanations of comparative theology. We can find any number of assessments of the relationship of comparative theology to theology and the study of religions other than one's own. To some, comparative theology can be simply a comparison of doctrines, but it may also include evaluations, from one tradition's perspective, of two traditions' doctrines placed next to one another. Others among

us may distinguish it from confessional theology or identify it closely with comparative philosophical reflection. Some of us will be happy that comparative theology is inspired by faith and faith's confidence in the face of truth. Or, as I prefer, we may see comparative theology as a practice that can be understood primarily when we reflect on the doing of it. This comparative theology in practice will be more confessional and probably less philosophical, more personally engaged and more deeply rooted in the choices of a particular comparative theologian who, in our postmodern world, is necessarily making her own choices and then hoping to make sense of them to her communities.

My approach will not provide answers to all the questions posed by other, more conceptual, approaches, and at first the turn to practice may seem simply to evade the question of whether faith impedes understanding; it may certainly exclude some of the theorists. But by focusing our attention on the act of interreligious learning and the practices and choices it entails, we can also appreciate more vividly and vulnerably what we do learn when we try very hard to learn from another religion.

In the next two chapters I reflect more amply on the practice of comparative theologizing – theological comparing – of which I speak, first with respect to the nature of this practice, and then regarding the necessary choices I have made in fashioning my particular study of Hinduism. In chapter 6, I show how a very particular starting point can still open up broad theological vistas.

Part II

Doing Theology Comparatively

Chapter 4

From Theory to Practice

As I understand it, "comparative theology" favors experiments, instances of learning. Practicing it cultivates a tension that is felt in practice: "comparative" pushes us toward wider knowledge, emphasizing a freedom that is more tolerant and objective, less rooted in personal and communal views, while "theology" drives us deeper, into the world of commitment, faith, and encounter with God. Together, "comparative" and "theology" are untidy but in the long run fruitful: by going broad, out to our others, we end up learning deeply across religious borders, in a journey that makes us forego utter clarity and precise answers, that faith may again be at the center of our theology. This chapter recommends a particular way forward, a manner of reading that seeks to be faithful, and in search of understanding. Chapter 5 shows how I have done this myself.

The Practice of (Comparative) Religious Reading

Theological reflection can be done in various contexts. It may sometimes be rooted in prayer or liturgy, in music or art. It may arise from social analysis in solidarity with the oppressed, or it may be based primarily on a critical reading of the authoritative teachings of a particular tradition. It may be polemical, finding its energy and meaning in fierce argument, or it may be by way of serene philosophical reflection. All of these modes of theologizing can become modes of comparative theologizing as well, once the theologian, working in whichever mode, seriously engages another tradition.

In my view, the foremost prospect for a fruitful comparative theology is the reading of texts, preferably scriptural and theological texts that have endured over centuries and millennia, and that have guided communities in their understandings of God, self, and other. If we wish to learn and be changed by what we learn, we are unlikely to find another practice as reliably rich and fruitful as such reading. Just as we can learn religiously by going to a temple or hearing sacred recitation, comparative practice occurs when *acts* of reading have been undertaken, as we read back and forth across religious borders, examining multiple texts, individually but then too in light of one another. To claim this is nothing extraordinary: texts have been central to most theologies as they have been to most disciplines in the humanities, and there is no reason to imagine that interreligious learning should be primarily non-textual learning. Reading can be primary even if religion is not lived only or mainly through books, and even if religious learning is not always a matter of book learning.

Two books show us how a focus on reading can itself be a spiritual practice. Reading as spiritual discipline is ably introduced by Paul Griffiths in *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*. Even while describing details of education and book production in several religious traditions, Griffiths also draws our attention to the worldview and *habitus* of faith proper to religious reading. To learn, we must read the text before us with deep respect for its depth and expansiveness. We must be vulnerable to possibilities we can probe only to a modest extent, and ready to surrender ourselves to the mysteries latent in what we read. The bond of text and reader can be very strong. The reader is as it were reconstituted in relation to the text, re-created as a person who learns-by-study, a "homo lector." Learning to be and act as this *homo lector* is not a neutral or cost-free activity; it entails a combination of innate capacities with prolonged study and spiritual practice, self-effacement before the text, patience, perseverance, and imagination. This humble practice changes readers, as they are inevitably drawn into the worlds brought to life in their reading. Readers who are willing to take this risk become competent to read religiously and, upon receiving the riches of the great texts, they also become able to speak, act, and write with spiritual

insight and power. Comparative theology seeks to exemplify the dynamic Griffiths has in mind by the further and more particular act of an interreligious reading that demands vulnerability to two texts, that never manages to restrict loyalty to one or the other tradition alone, and that in the end is intensified by the spiritual power of both of the texts to which one has surrendered.

Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* aptly confirms Griffiths's insight into the integral way of life demanded by religious reading. Hadot is particularly alert to how philosophy can be envisioned and enacted as a spiritual practice. This learning defers to the wisdom of "old" learning, the truth given in the master's texts, passed down from generation to generation. The teacher (often as commentator) transmits not only the texts, but also the proper way of reading. The enduring truth of the tradition is made available, by oral and written instruction, for ever renewed sets of students, readers. Both the transmission and the reception are instances of spiritual practice. By extension, I suggest, the reading of religious texts as comparative theological practice is an instance of this direct and unitary reflection, action intended to transform human ways of living, so that we can receive wisdom – now the wisdom of another tradition – as our wisdom too. The real edge of comparative theology lies in the transit from academic study and simple faith – both at first narrowly imagined – to a more complex religious and intellectual learning that draws on several traditions, receiving each in its integrity and changing each by reading it in light of the other. Since many of the great texts of religious traditions already cross the boundaries of faith and reason, insight and practice, it is no great thing to insist that comparative theology proceed in the same manner, respecting boundaries so seriously that crossing them is seen as a spiritual event as well as intellectual accomplishment.

Intelligent Reading

The real issue, then, has to do with how we might best read religiously. Some practices essential to reading, and to reading across religious borders, can be easily listed. If we decide to read for

the purposes of comparative theology, our choices are immediately narrowed, as we decide which text or texts belonging to which religion form the site of our study. We then have to learn the language or languages required for this reading, unless we choose to work with translations (which can be a commendably realistic way to proceed). And then we need to pick up the text and actually read it, spending a great deal of time with it. We need to study what it says with loving attention, follow its clues when it points beyond itself to textual and historical contexts. In all of this, the reading should be patient and persistent, careful and committed, privileging insights strictly indebted to the reading. We need also to know ourselves as discerning and reflective readers, so as to understand the limits and capacities of our reading. Our history matters: we come to any of our new reading projects with literacy in our own tradition, and what we have read affects how we read and make sense of what we read in another tradition. And, as we learn another tradition in some depth, we will then begin also to re-read our own in light of that other. In the end, because we are theologians, we must also put the whole back together, so as to be able to communicate our learning to wider academic and faith communities. Comparative theology requires readers, not consumers, and our reading comes to fruition in teaching or in writing that enables our listeners to take up the work themselves with spiritual sensitivity.

Commentary as a Religious Practice

Religiously and interreligiously, we ought not to read alone, as if we need no guidance in interpreting classic texts of our own or another tradition. Commentary – close reading bounded by respect for the text and respect for tradition – is of course a widely practiced and respected mode of religious learning. Except in eras when a return to the original text has seemed the necessary corrective practice, the deference of commentary has long been appreciated as most appropriate in religious matters. It implies reverence for the text that is studied, a recognition of the truth it passes down, and a willingness to subordinate personal interests

and novelty to the wisdom of the tradition that has preserved and cared for the texts in which that wisdom is inscribed. Commentary is the quintessential act of (inter)religious reading, and reading with commentators is a perfect way to learn how to be a comparative theologian. While we cannot permanently suspend our modern sensitivities, as if to approve wholesale of every ancient idea or practice, learning does require that we do more listening and less judging. Interreligious learning requires all the more that we not rush to impose our values on their theological traditions before long and patient study makes us able to speak to some good purpose.

Reading with the care of a commentator is a difficult way to learn. When we honor commentary as a way of learning even a tradition other than our own, we are faced with subtle and complex challenges, since learning from commentaries is difficult. The fruits of commentary mature slowly – word by word, in obedience to the logic of a text that may not yield its wisdom readily – and this indicates also what to expect from comparative theological study. If we commit ourselves to the comparative theological reading of another tradition's text, this study must first of all be done well, in fidelity to the texts involved, their grammar, citations, allusions, and in light of issues that are important within the text and its tradition, on its own terms. Getting all of this straight takes a long time and cannot be undertaken merely to get to results known already, before the reading. In addition to traditional norms for proper reading, modern academic scholarship has set high standards regarding what counts as proper reading and right interpretation. We know that perfectly adequate commentaries are written on biblical and later Christian texts by authors who have no religious commitments or who, at least, bracket personal beliefs for the sake of academic scholarship. While comparative theology can and should go deeper and draw explicitly on faith perspectives, it should nevertheless be difficult to distinguish a "scholarly commentary on the *Gospel according to John*" from a "*Christian* commentary on the *Gospel according to John*," if we mean more than supplementing scholarly exegesis with homiletic and pastoral comments for the preacher and pastor. In the same way, it should at first be difficult to

distinguish "a *Christian* commentary on a Hindu or Buddhist text" from "a scholarly commentary on a Hindu or Buddhist text." Yet, in all such instances where theological commentary is integral to scholarly commentary, the faith perspective should in the long run open this scholarly reading to a fuller range of issues: questions of truth, ethical application, conversations with the relevant communities, and the possibility even of meeting God through careful reading.

Hindu traditions, ever my interreligious example of choice in this book, greatly respect commentary as a primary vehicle of learning and also of constructive theological argument. While my love of reading is indebted to my early study of Greek and Latin, it is all the more indebted to my long years of studying Hindu commentarial theology. The orthodox liturgical school of Mimamsa, for instance, is a predominantly commentarial tradition. In their constructive hermeneutical work, Mimamsa scholars relied on their close reading of texts to make the case for ritual and the orientation of revelation to ritual performance. As they defended the Vedic rites against external challenges, they were also defending an understanding of their religion and its practices that is deeply, centrally rooted in the powers of language, the primordial meaningfulness of the Sanskrit language, the specific value and power of the Vedic corpus, and, in cases of conflict, the priority of verbal knowledge over sense knowledge, ordinary experience, and reasoning. Refusing to allow experience and reason to replace religious positions spelled out in sacred texts, Mimamsa scholars insisted that the Veda was a source of knowledge nowhere else available, knowledge by which to live and act properly. Only if one grants to the Veda this priority can its truth be appropriated; only by study with expert readers can one truly benefit from the unique wisdom of the Veda. Those who are taught properly, act properly, and they become proper teachers. All of this adds up to a formidable commentarial tradition, from the early Mimamsa Sutras of Jaimini through a millennium of schools of commentary and sub-commentary. Nothing much can be understood in Mimamsa if we do not read its commentarial works. After Mimamsa, it is hard not to think of theology as a manner of religious reading.

Vedanta, a more philosophical and theological school that is justly termed the Uttara or "Later" Mimamsa, extends the same exegetical methods to the Upanishads, again arguing for the primacy of the revealed word, now with respect to salvific knowledge of the self and of ultimate reality. The Vedanta interpretation of the Upanishads, formalized in the Uttara Mimamsa Sutras, likewise gives priority to verbal knowledge. In disagreement with Mimamsa, the Vedanta theologians argue that scripture is revelatory also when it informs us about the nature of reality, not just in telling us what to do. Differences aside, Vedanta theologians still follow their Mimamsa counterparts in working out their theologies primarily through commentary and in accord with the same interpretive principles.

Interreligious Commentary

Interreligious commentary is interesting and difficult because complicated loyalties are at play when we venture to read reflectively and slowly the religious text of another tradition. If we pick up the text of a tradition that believes that sacred truths are contained therein, such belief cannot be neglected or dismissed by careful readers, particularly theological readers who do not believe that words and truths are easily separated. Nor can such readers imagine that reading is a merely neutral activity, with no long-term effects. They will then have to consider what they learn by reading, alongside the convictions they have brought to the reading from their own traditions. For instance, if a text praises a deity and is intended to draw readers into relationship to that deity, religious readers from outside the tradition will have to take these textual dynamics seriously, without attempting to render the text safe and ineffectual. They will have to respect the potency of the text of the other tradition, and in turn think more deeply about their own religious identity as textually mediated. In the context of reading, reflecting on other religious realities with an openness and willingness to learn need not threaten readers' faith; nor need faith be an obstacle to learning. What matters

most is a commitment to the careful and slow learning of texts, reading the other as we would read our own.

Commenting on the text of another religious tradition as a comparative practice will normally involve continued loyalty to our home community, even if now that loyalty is accompanied by the cultivation of empathy for a new tradition. For example, it is as a Roman Catholic that I read Srivaisnava Hindu texts and commentaries. Admitting that I am a Christian commentator rules out a guise of entirely neutral scholarship – objectivity remains important, but more is at stake. Bias is hard to eradicate but, good or bad, it gives us a direction. If we see our biases and watch them in operation, we can become freer, more vulnerable in our reading. Even if the complexities created by multiple loyalties might be finessed by strict neutrality, we do better to face directly the vital religious tensions involving individual and community, faith and reason, learning my tradition and learning another tradition. This provides a better template for the costs and profits that accrue to reading across several religious traditions by the practice of comparative theology.

Catherine Cornille (2006) has observed that we should not take for granted that a Christian has the right to study the great texts of other traditions, even for religious purposes; what seems right for us may still be a violation of sacred matters beyond our reach.[1] While I do not think that we need permission to read the published sacred texts of traditions other than our own – entering sacred spaces and other kinds of religious encounter are another story – we should certainly consider ourselves continually accountable as we read, and we should welcome criticisms of our presuppositions, methods, and conclusions. Reading *with* readers in the other tradition entails accountability, learning with deference. Even sincere efforts to learn from another tradition, pursued with modest expectations, may be problematic if we seem to have asserted a right to do as we wish, regardless of reactions. But read we can, and this is for the better; at certain times and in some respects, a Christian might do another religious tradition a great service by reading a familiar text in a new way, just as Hindu or Buddhist readings of Christian sacred texts should be welcomed by Christians. But these cross-readings are religious as well as scholarly acts, and should be performed in that spirit.

Let me illustrate all this with an example. As mentioned in chapter 1, I wrote *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnava Hindus* (2008c) for a new series of Christian commentaries on the sacred texts of non-Christian traditions. My book is a reading of three brief mantras – fewer than 25 words altogether – which have been traditionally taken as encoding the entirety of the teaching and practice of the Srivaisnava community. In writing it, I decided from the start not to read alone. I am therefore heavily indebted to the commentary of Vedanta Desika, the great fourteenth-century Srivaisnava Hindu theologian. The project was therefore a somewhat lavish act of attention to three brief mantras, and yet, by the obligations arising in that project, a plunge into the much broader world of a particular faith community. Rather undramatically, the book is simply the act of study, as if valuable in itself.

As comparative theology, *The Truth, the Way, the Life* is first of all about three mantras expressive of Hindu spirituality and theology. But because it is a theological work in which the reading is informed by Christian faith, it is also about what happens when, through careful reading and reflection, a Christian takes to heart three intense and powerful prayers of the Srivaisnava tradition, so as to recognize something of the depth and power accruing to a deep commitment to Narayana with Sri. By design and with care, I wanted to learn in such a way as to make myself able to take to heart words such as those of the Tiru Mantra:

> Aum, obeisance to Narayana with Sri.

I wanted to read the tradition of the mantras in such a way as to enable me to pray differently when I returned to words familiar to my own tradition, now with a double mindfulness crossing spiritual borders:

> Abba, Father
> Aum, obeisance to Narayana with Sri.

The logical fulfillment to this reading practice might be the utterance of the mantras in worship of Narayana with Sri. This is probably

impossible for the Catholic, but an impoverished reading that simply neglects the prayerful power of the mantras, or a denial of their spiritual depth, would also be unacceptable. An interreligious reading should at least mean that a Christian reader takes the mantras to heart and finds in them a way to hear and utter anew prayers central to the bible and Christian tradition. When we pray "Abba, Father," we can learn to hear an echo of the Tiru Mantra. This intense and difficult balance at the edge between traditions takes us to the heart of comparative theology.

Leaving Room for Other Readers and Their Readings

To read and to invest that reading with meanings arising from the reading is not a process leading to closure. We keep reading, and necessarily leave the door open to other readings as well. There are no generic readers, nor in the end will there be a final group of readers who all agree on the reading. First and last, we will have readers with overlapping and distinctive commitments and expectations, Christian and of other religions, who make differing choices regarding what to read and which meanings to draw from the reading.

Easiest to imagine are other starting points in one or another Christian tradition that has received and read the Bible differently, and from that starting point reading other traditions differently as well. As Mimamsa and Vedanta have taught me, comparative theological reading can begin still other ways, in choices made by persons within other religious traditions who, in accord with their traditions, make their own best choices regarding how to study other religious traditions from their own faith perspective. A Hindu comparative theology – such as I will propose hypothetically in the next chapter – will most often be a reading theology, rooted in commentary and exegesis. Such a reading, and its counterparts in other reading traditions, will be welcome and more striking than most Christian approaches, since it will generate a comparative theology arising from a different history of reading and of theology. Those of us who are Christian theologians will learn how better to read the texts even

of our own tradition when we learn from Hindu ways of reading, and from parallel practices in many other traditions.

Necessarily Elite Choices

Comparative theological work distinguished by a commitment to particular acts of reading is surely a demanding practice. It highlights a very focused mode of learning across religious borders that may seem elite or even elitist – by and for the few. So serious a textual focus may also seem to run counter to the current turn toward popular religion, the legitimate concern for lived and unwritten dimensions of religion. Many will prefer the fluidity of a lived religious diversity that prizes multiple interactions of all sorts and is not confined by specific choices about how to study texts and commentaries. Religion in actual practice may seem more vital and relevant than peering deeply into difficult texts.

I agree that alternative ways of studying religions can be a solid basis for comparative theology, even if I do believe, as already stated, that reading itself is actual religious practice. Certainly, there is much that cannot be written down, and books provide only a partial record of any given religious moment. But reading and writing work very well if we understand the limits of these fundamental learning practices. Texts are only a part of religion, but in my view they remain the single best resource, among many good resources, for knowing religious traditions deeply and subtly. They are legitimately the main object of comparative theological study; if imaginative theologians can also draw on other materials and weave together comparative theological narratives that are text-plus, all the better.

Other versions of comparative learning are possible; no one is required to focus on textual study if it does not suit her purpose. What matters is that we remain aware of what we are and are not doing. The narrowing of our choice to privileged sites of reading greatly amplifies the set of the things we have *not* chosen, including non-theological and non-textual resources, all manner of other Christian and Hindu resources, as well as the vastly wider set of other things that might be studied in various ways. But a

narrow focus in the face of diverse possibilities is a feature of all academic disciplines. Comparative theologians can do more than concede grudgingly that their particular comparisons are limited; they can also admit gladly how the limitations of particular comparative fields – such as the Hindu-Christian – are worthwhile as small areas of study that nonetheless rule out grand conclusions. Writers committed to concrete, particular instances of study will not speak grandly, as if they were theorists explaining in advance what others can find in their ways of learning. Readers turning to this kind of comparative theology will not quickly gain *the* meaning of comparative learning or of diversity. They are simply gaining particular insights that facilitate small, useful engagements in diversity. Admitting a kind of elitism, confessing what we have and have not chosen, is the best way to keep open wider possibilities that stretch beyond our books and writing. Similarly, anyone choosing other ways of engaging religious diversity and learning across religious borders should be similarly sensitive to the limits of their work.

In the next chapter I look more closely at specific choices I have made in my reading of Hindu sources, as I have focused my comparative theological work in particular examples. I hope this too will be of use to readers in making their own choices intelligently and boldly, in small projects.

Chapter 5

Getting Particular
A Christian Studies Hinduism

The Importance of Focus

Comparative theology is a practical response to religious diversity read with our eyes open, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with a willingness to see newly the truths of our own religion in light of another. There is great advantage in engaging diversity by an intentionally focused study that lavishes attention on particularities proper to one or another tradition, as they are brought into encounter with one another, (re)read with a deference and patience that unlocks the meaning and truth of each tradition, and of both together.

But the generalizations I have made about comparative theology as a practice are only a beginning, given how many possibilities are in play across so vast a range of traditions. How are we actually to do comparative theologizing? Even if we are committed to reading as a primary comparative theological strategy, we must still decide intelligently what to read and not read; and then we must give ourselves time for actual reading and reflection on it. Serious interreligious learning begins to make sense when we focus on particular traditions in particular ways. To usefully explain this discipline, the comparative theologian needs to make choices in accord with her particular, idiosyncratic priorities, so that the process becomes clear, costs evident, and biases a matter of public record. Choices about what to study also concede what we are *not* studying, and how in any case our reading can never

be encyclopedic. So I am hoping that focusing still more closely on my own work in comparative theology will illustrate how the discipline might work out in anyone's practice.

(Self)Identifying This Particular Comparative Theologian

When I explain how I have studied Hinduism as a comparative theologian, it is well to remember my personal starting points, mentioned in chapter 1, as an American Roman Catholic priest and Jesuit who in the 1970s learned Hinduism alongside my Catholicism. This particular mix of Catholic identity and Hindu studies deeply affects how I receive and understand Hindu traditions even today. Being a Jesuit links me to the long history of Jesuit–Hindu interactions, back to St. Francis Xavier (after whom my parents named me). To do my work as a scholar, out of my background, I have had to think about Hinduism in a particular way. But still, my views are hardly representative of all Catholic thinking, and readers will think of other Christian starting points, even of other Catholic grounds for comparative work. Readers will also think of potentially interesting comparisons that involve Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and many other traditions large and small. Some will even have in mind other interesting forms of Hinduism that deserve comparative study. There is no reason to think that my way of bringing Catholic theology and Hindu theology together, however fruitful, is the only way to proceed. But such are the choices I have made, narrowing a large field in order to get something done.

Making a Map, Marking the Field: Hinduism in Brief

As a Christian comparative theologian who has chosen to read Hinduism from an explicitly Christian starting point, I have had to make decisions about the Hinduism I want to study, narrowing down a vast range of possibilities to manageable, small-scale projects that I find useful for specific reasons.

But what is Hinduism, such that it can be a plausible field of comparative study? Scholars often say "Hinduism" does not exist as a unitary religion that can fit neatly into a row of world religions. Rather, it is only a name for a broad range of religious possibilities alive and thriving across South Asia. As evidenced among its elite practitioners and among the wider Hindu communities, Hinduism revels in sheer expansiveness, resists definition, and demands great imagination and improvisational skills from scholars who must keep venturing beyond tidy boundaries and neat distinctions. Hindu words, rites, images, and experiences come in many different configurations and with differing modes of authority, and reducing Hinduism to a simple essence would be counterproductive. But none of the specific Hindu communities and traditions is without structure, and none is neatly comparable to a chosen Christian analogue. Therefore, there cannot be a single narrative of Hindu–Christian relations that necessarily shapes all comparative theological approaches to Hinduism. This situation, frustrating and exciting, puts a premium on inventiveness and encourages the multiplication of strategies of engagement. That there is no single Hinduism should diminish expectations regarding what Hinduism might mean theologically for non-Hindus. But neither should we go to the other extreme, as if to say "Hinduism" does not successfully conjure up a particular range of religious possibilities.

So let us get specific. To frame a workable understanding of Hinduism for my students and for myself as well, years ago I composed a single-page overview of Hinduism, a summation that I have revised now and then over the years. Since to expand it properly, as one might do orally when teaching, into a fully defensible written form, or even simply by way of adequate bibliographical support,[1] would turn the list into a chapter, and the chapter into a book, I reproduce the summary here in the same tightly condensed form:

1. *"Hinduism" is a set of human, cultural, and religious energies* developing, complexifying, adjusting over time, beginning with the indigenous (and largely pre-documentable records) religious traditions of India, probably including

the cult of multiple local gods and goddesses, belief in rebirth, the practice of yoga,

2. *plus the linguistic, social, cultural, ritual, religious, and polytheistic heritage* of the Indus Valley and Indo-European civilization (taking shape around 3000 BCE).
3. *Together, these many sources contribute to forming the Vedic tradition of ancient India,* comprised, over multiple generations, of the Vedas (1200 BCE), the Upanishads (after 1000 BCE), an accompanying array of rites, social arrangements, oral and then written texts, theoretical developments such as Mimamsa ritual exegesis and the Vedanta exegesis of the Upanishads, plus other developing intellectual systems such as Grammar and Logic,
4. *all of which is in turn regularized as the brahminical heritage* in the theory and practice of orthodoxy – the Dharma – a heritage which proves to be enormously resourceful, elastic, and inclusive for millennia, and
5. in turn, *this orthodoxy is critiqued* by Buddhism (*c.*500 BCE), Jainism (before 500 BCE), and other ascetical alternatives such as yoga, and many emerging popular movements,
6. *and thus an array of changes and challenges* leading to the reformation and expansion of the Vedic, brahminical tradition into what many of us tend to call "Hinduism."
7. *This Hinduism combines* the complex indigenous and Vedic heritage, brahminical orthodoxy and ascetical extensions and alternatives, epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata plus other important texts and practices, devotion to new, popular Gods such as Siva, Visnu, Rama, Krsna, leading to the formulation, particularly in brahminical discourses, of major theistic traditions, plus an array of holy places, images, pilgrimages, etc., connected with devotion – some traditions being dedicated to one supreme Deity or Reality.
8. *All this flourishes as a complex Hinduism constantly and continually enriched and challenged by further input* from the indigenous traditions, the cults of new, local deities who become widely popular, particularly goddesses such as Sarasvati, Sri Laksmi, Devi, and Kali, plus new and renewed systems

of practice such as the tantra that draws on yoga, the vernacular theologies and literatures, the perspectives of marginal and excluded communities.

9. *We might therefore speak more accurately – yet still respectfully – of "Hinduisms,"* and yet too, all this is further transformed by the arrival of Islam (around and after 1000 CE), the rise of Sikhism (fifteenth century), the arrival of the European colonial powers (1498 CE), and then the colonial scholarship and representations of the meaning of Hinduism,
10. *and this complex set of Hindu traditions continues to change today* in light of new social, economic, and political realities in India and globally, learning from Indian Hindus abroad and from converts to Hindu traditions, by learning from previously marginalized voices and from scholars and students globally constructing new intellectual discourses stepping beyond the colonial heritage, by attention to gender studies, new social, political, and religious analyses, and from revived older Hindu traditions. All of this occurs in relation to other religions, which also keep changing in our changing world.

The artificial limit of a page's length notwithstanding, I think I have succeeded in mapping territory that scholars can agree on, that is not unacceptable to Hindus themselves, and that my students have found helpful. Though brief, my 10 points are sufficiently complex and self-consciously provisional as to safeguard against any naïve reduction of Indian and Hindu traditions to any single thing. In any case, my hope is that readers interested in comparative study will construct similarly broader and then increasingly more refined maps of the religious tradition/s they choose to study. Or readers might start by attempting a one-page summation of their own religious tradition.

In any case, it is necessary for the comparative theologian who has ambitions to learn from another tradition to sketch it broadly, after that moving to ever more precise and particular cases for closer study. Without this larger horizon and the theological questions it forces upon us, our work may become a mere

accumulation of details; without the subsequent narrowing of focus, it may become merely an endless repetition of generalities.

Getting Particular: Mimamsa, Vedanta, and Srivaisnavism

After making our map, we can make our choices about where to go. How we plot narrower fields for study will be a matter of deliberate choices combined with opportunity. In graduate school I had the opportunity to learn some Sanskrit and Tamil. Both are classical languages, but not only that. Sanskrit is used in ritual even today, and Tamil in its modern form is the first language of over 60 million Indians. Learning these languages attracted me because even in secondary school I had studied Greek and Latin and learned to love classical literature. I enjoyed learning to read Sanskrit and Tamil poetry, theological treatises and commentaries. In focusing on such materials, I was also finding the deeply text-oriented traditions I was in a sense looking for from the start. Though implicated in wider matrices of religious practice and life, the Sanskrit and Tamil materials I preferred nonetheless privileged commentarial discourses where substantive learning could occur through reading. Though reading the classics of Hinduism might seem to exclude much of contemporary Hinduism in India and worldwide, a focus on classical texts opens rich possibilities that more than suffice for any theologian's lifetime. So too, most of these discourses do in fact draw readers into their context, the life that flourishes from and around the text.

Learning these languages narrowed my possible fields of study, but still left me a vast body of literature. Given my theological interests, from the great library of Sanskrit literature, I chose to focus on two ancient theological traditions that developed over several millennia, the Mimamsa and Vedanta exegetical theologies to which I have already alluded in chapter 4. These are rich traditions of interpretation and practice, philosophy and theology, deeply invested in the reading of scripture. Mimamsa, a school of ritual interpretation, and Vedanta, with its added interest in psychological, philosophical, and meditative issues, constitute theological wholes.

The great scholars of these traditions are attentive to scripture and commentary, alert to the importance of tradition, sensitive to the ritual and moral implications of ideas, willing to argue vigorously in defense of right ideas, and committed to great and definitive values, be it the integral well-being of the dharmic order of the natural and social world (in Mimamsa) or ultimate liberation (in Vedanta). I have found that studying these systems was already a manner of theological study, a complement to my study of Christian theology and the ideal beginning for theological reflection across religious borders.

Studying Tamil and its independent and distinctive literature has enriched and expanded greatly what I learned from the Sanskrit tradition. Tamil offers a different feel, with vivid imagery and intensely nuanced affective states. From the large body of available pre-modern literature, I sampled the old traditions of love and war poetry, subsequent narratives of religious quest and devotion, and then focused on Vaisnava literature, particularly the songs of the eighth- to tenth-century poet saints known as the alvars. Their compositions were later formed into a canon of 4,000 verses of great beauty and emotion that had, for Srivaisnavas, revelatory authority. The songs' value is greatly enhanced by the tradition of commentaries on them, interpretations that weave together Sanskrit and Tamil sensitivities, harmonizing two distinct religious cultures into a unitary theology and wisdom of great insight and effect.

I might, of course, have worked in other areas of Sanskrit or Tamil literature, just as I might have studied Bengali or Gujarati or another of the great religious and literary traditions that have flourished in India. My specific languages and consequent areas of focus have narrowed my mastery of Indian religious thinking, but the materials I study are so rich in theological implications that they suffice for a career of comparative theological reflection.

Appreciating Similarities

How we use what we learn also involves choices in line with our intentions when we took up the study in the first place. I usually give preference to similarity over difference, preferring to foster

theological conversation between specific Hindu and Christian theological discourses that seem in harmony with one another. Even the non-dualist schools of Vedanta, which deny primacy to our usual notions of personhood, and the pragmatically atheist forms of Mimamsa, in which gods are necessary but not primary beings, are scholastic traditions which I judge to be analogous to great Christian scholastic traditions, and accessible to anyone up to the task of reading them. It is important to resist easy resemblances, since attention to specifics undoes many a quest for sameness, but I have never taken the accentuation of difference to be the center of my work. Hindu and Christian traditions differ in innumerable ways, and differences are obvious.

Of course, we need theologians who do comparative theological work stubbornly focused on differences. In the context of Hindu-Christian study, for instance, a comparative theologian could look to forms of Hindu religious discourse – mythic, ritual, imagistic – that seem steadfastly non-theological, polytheistic, atheistic, or simply not scholastic. Or a theologian could begin with Christian claims that seem unique, and then not find parallels in Hinduism. Even with reference to Sanskrit and Tamil sources such as those I have chosen, one could stress doctrinal and faith differences that call into question seeming common ground or complementarity. Or, finally, one might simply turn to the study of religious traditions more strikingly different from the Catholic Christian – for example, Tibetan Buddhism or Chinese Daoist thought, or a West African ritualization of encounter with deities. Such alternative strategies can and should be pursued – by other theologians. It has simply been my preference, at this early stage in today's comparative theological discourse, to study Hindu texts of evident theological interest. In this way I have hoped to open lines of communication that encourage interreligious learning, because of the interesting substance of what we read, and by showing that these traditions are comparable to one another in interesting theological ways, and ripe for comparison.

But, in fact, the specificity of my comparative experiments has made sweeping claims to similarity or difference irrelevant, since it is only on a smaller scale that judgments can be made. At a basic level, I have simply thought that privileging similarity and

resemblance is my contribution to Christian theology, a reflection on our "near others" that I am able to make. Comparative theological reflection on Sanskrit and Tamil materials in light of Christian theological and faith perspectives has been taken up by hardly anyone else. As I privilege similarities, other theologians are free to highlight differences, even with respect to the same texts.

Theistic Hinduism as a Useful and Comfortable Focus

Moreover, while my study of Mimamsa and Vedanta could have taken many turns, my Christian religious roots and theological instincts turned me toward theistic traditions. I have traced the influence of Mimamsa on the schools of Vedanta in order to see how the Mimamsa disinterest in God purified and deepened reflection on God in Vedanta. For even if Mimamsa thinkers did not intend to offer this service, it happened that Sankara, Ramanuja, and other Vedantins profited greatly from reflecting on Self and God in light of the Mimamsa heritage. In turn, while greatly respecting Sankara's nondualist Vedanta, I have increasingly found of more interest Ramanuja's Vedanta, which is theistic even while deeply nondualist. So, too, in studying the intersections of the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions, I have privileged the richly theistic Srivaisnava traditions of south India that draw on both the alvars and Ramanuja's Vedanta. These are narrow choices, which make sense to a Roman Catholic, but I make them explicit for all to see, and I do not claim that the Hindu theistic traditions are (or are not) the highest form of Hindu theology. Nor do I claim that the similarities I find so interesting prove that Hinduism and Christianity are in some essential way similar, the same, or grounded in a single reality.

My choices and preferences are evident in the books I mentioned near the end of chapter 1. The themes taken up in *Hindu God, Christian God* gave prominence to theistic traditions, within the framework of Indian logical debate about God's existence and nature, and then in the devotional traditions of Saivism and Vaisnavism. In *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, I extended this theistic

interest to the goddess traditions of India, finding the goddesses to be more familiar than strange and, real differences notwithstanding, interestingly comparable to the Mary, the mother of Jesus, as revered in Christian tradition. My more recent *Beyond Compare* draws deeply on the work of the Srivaisnava theologian Vedanta Desika read alongside Francis de Sales, as I again emphasized the spiritual riches that become available in reading together two comparable authors in two traditions.

Theology as a Hindu Discipline

Not only can I, a Christian, make use of materials from other traditions for Christian theological purposes, but I can see the texts of Hinduism and other traditions as theological resources, acts of faith seeking understanding. Believers in every tradition have "faith" (even if faith too may differ from tradition to tradition) and raise questions about what they believe; they too live in a world that is increasingly diverse in its religiosity, and need to make sense of diversity in a way that also remains responsible to their tradition. My choices of texts for study presume that I am making theological comparisons, involving Hindu and Christian theologies. When I assert that Hindu traditions such as Mimamsa and Vedanta are best described as "theological" I am also arguing that there are theologies in many if not all religious traditions, and that these theologies are crucial resources for a comparative theology that opens into a truly interreligious conversation.

By way of example, I will argue for Hindu theology and Hindu comparative theology, though without arguing that "Hindu theology" is exactly like Christian theology. Even as I take up this topic, I concede the necessary cautions about using Western, Christian, and English-language words to characterize realities otherwise described in their own traditional contexts. But it seems to me that this process of translation and adaptation is inevitable, and that "theology" serves well to characterize Hindu religious thought, even schools of thought that are not theistic but that engage in a way of religious thinking, attentive to scripture and tradition and rooted in faith, that is most aptly described

as theological discourse. Hindu religious thinkers too have inquired into the meaning of their faith, explained and systematized the meanings of scripture, sought to foster and explain ritual and ethical performance, and drawn on philosophical and scientific disciplines in explaining the truths of their faith. All this is theological reasoning, and "philosophy" is simply an inadequate name for this work of Indian religious intellectuals. Indeed, something like the theology–philosophy distinction is required. Reasoning carried forward without regard for authoritative religious sources needs to be distinguished from reasoning marked by attention to scripture and other religious authorities. Some Hindu and other Indian forms of reasoning are only very indirectly connected with religious truth claims and religious practices, while some are indeed richly intertwined with religious sources and ways of thinking. The former might be labeled "philosophical reasoning," and the latter "theological reasoning." These distinctions, even if not without problems, are important, since "theology" most accurately describes some of the major trajectories of Hindu thought.

Since modern India has been influenced by many ideas originating in the West, it would seem precious to rule out "theology" on the grounds that it is a foreign concept, particularly if we continue to use other imported words, such as "philosophy," "commerce," "science," and "religion." All these words are imperfect loan words, but they are received into the Indian context and given workable Indian meanings. A correction of Western biases and a legitimate and understandable resistance to the imposition of alien categories therefore need not add up to a complete rejection of "theology." Even so, it may still be a fact that many Hindus today will not embrace "theology," since this has been stereotyped as a way of thinking that is inferior to philosophy; the usage is also problematized by the fact that it has often been Christian theologians who have severely criticized Hindu traditions. But, since we are speaking of *Hindu* theology and not a *theology of Hinduism*, the final test must occur in the Hindu context, if and when there are thinkers willing to identify themselves as both "Hindus" and "theologians."[2] They must decide whether to agree that there is Hindu theology; I hope they do.

Comparative Theology in Hinduism and Other Traditions

Were comparative theology in fact only a Christian discipline without close analogues in other traditions, the very idea of an interreligious theological conversation might fall on hard times, since comparative theology might then be simply a Christian project, a conversation among Christians. But if it is plausible that theology takes place in multiple traditions, we can add that "comparative theology" too is possible in multiple traditions. Religiously attentive people in every religion live in our religiously diverse world and need to learn from the traditions around them.

It is certainly true that, like Christian traditions, Hindu traditions have always been in contact with other religions, and always in the process of reconsidering their faith in light of such encounters. Hindu traditions have, of necessity, been conscious of more or less friendly religious neighbors – from the Buddhists and Jainas to Greeks, Muslims, and Christians who came to India – raising questions about their beliefs and practices. No Hindu tradition grew up entirely in isolation, and of course the very distinction of "Hindu" from "Buddhist" and other forms of "religion" in India should not be taken as indicating a neat separation of one sharply defined religion from others. We have already seen earlier in this chapter how answering the question, "What is Hinduism?" requires a complex narrative involving many elements. Nevertheless, Hinduism is not entirely without distinctiveness, and, if so, it must enter into relationship, theologically or not, with its religious others. In earlier Indian history, the "Vedic" marked off a realm of speech and practice, and of expert speakers and practitioners, distinguished by proper Sanskrit utterance, the correct hierarchization of social relationships, and ritual practices defined and delineated in distinction from a wider array of popular practices. These elites were recognized as different from their religious neighbors, even when they were borrowing and re-using their neighbors' ideas and practices.

Hindu traditions have most often taken into account their "others" by a kind of inclusivism, drawing other gods and significant

religious teachers into Hinduism, sometimes renamed as Hindu deities and teachers, and sometimes simply as lesser figures dependent on a supreme deity such as Krsna or Siva or a goddess. The inferiority yet reality of other deities is at times simply a fact of created reality, and at times explained in terms of constitutive material and spiritual impurity, with a consequent fashioning, by God's plan, of religions and deities suited to people's limited capacities. In more philosophical contexts, medieval Hindu theologians were more forthright in judgment, lining up competing theologies and philosophies of other traditions, showing how only in their own tradition does one find the fullness of truth and right practice. Texts such as the Sarvadarsanasamgraha ("Collection of All Views") of Madhavacarya and the Paramatabhanga ("The Breaking of Other Positions") of Vedanta Desika list, order, and evaluate differing views, ranking more or less correct philosophical positions and contrasting those who rely merely on perception and inference, and those who rely also on verbal knowledge, revelation. In such texts, the author's own tradition comes last, and is recognized as best.

In the nineteenth century, when Christian–Hindu encounters became more frequent, figures such as Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), Keshab Chander Sen (1838–84), and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) engaged Christian thought in theologically interesting ways that appropriated the Christian. Faced with Western ideas and the arguments of Christian missionaries, Vivekananda, for instance, taught an inclusive universalism that explained how religions might thrive in their particularity, while yet pointing beyond themselves to a more universal truth that only mature religious persons – proponents of Vedanta, for instance – could adequately recognize. Honor is given to religious individuals who cultivate higher consciousness and see the deeper and higher meaning implicit in all traditions. In all of this, and in ways that cannot be detailed here, Vivekananda and his heirs are rethinking traditional Hindu ideas so as to account more benignly for the persistent plurality of religions. In recent decades some Hindu intellectuals have been much more critical of (foreign) Christian presence in India, and of social and political dimensions of Christian mission, and refused to engage in what to others might have seemed to be irenic

interreligious exchanges. Ironically, in this resistance these Hindu intellectuals have assimilated the exclusivist theological tendencies of the missionaries they dislike.[3] In light of the history of Hindu relations with other religions and Hindu conversations with various non-Hindu interlocutors, and as Hindu identity took on new identities through ancient and modern exchanges, it is only a further step to speak of a "Hindu comparative theology" in one or another of the many Hindu traditions.

I close this section with a caution and suggestion. First, for there to be a Hindu comparative theology that is constructively theological in the sense I have been recommending in this book, there will have to be Hindu faith that is seeking understanding, and seeking it in part through intentionally learning from other religious traditions. Exchange across religious borders must be distinguished not simply by historical necessity, but also by a recognized *need* and even positive desire to learn from the other, with a capacity to be transformed in that learning. But if the preceding sentences are correct, then this must honestly be added: as I observe traditional and contemporary Hindu intellectuals, it is difficult to notice this need and desire to inquire and to learn from the other. There is work to be done in identifying examples of Hindu theologians, ancient or modern, who with conscious determination have sought to learn from their religious others not for political considerations but because they wanted to learn in this way. If we cannot find many such examples, it may be that here at least the model of "comparative theology as faith seeking understanding" will have to be adjusted so as to be useful in reconfiguring comparative theology to suit the Hindu context.

My suggestion makes a more obvious point. Reflection on the possibility of a Hindu comparative theology must be accompanied by similar reflection on other religious traditions, in search of their comparative theological potential. How this works out in detail in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other traditions, requires study of those traditions' intellectual religious discourses in their proper contexts, and reflection on the theological dimensions of their encounter with other traditions. I am certainly not prepared merely to generalize regarding the history and character of comparative theology in such traditions. Still, I am confident that

there are theological and comparative theological resources everywhere around us, since reflective religious intellectuals everywhere have worked out attitudes toward their religious others and, in important ways, learned from those other traditions. We simply need to be persistent and creative as we detect the comparative theologies that arise in different traditions.

My Comparative Theology, Indebted to Hindu Theologies

In addition to the straightforward plausibility of Christian comparative theologies, and the probability of counterparts in the Hindu and other traditions, there is also the further rich cross-fertilization by which a comparative theology rooted in one tradition becomes a theology indebted to one or more other theologies as well. My Christian comparative theology has certainly been shaped by my choices in studying Hinduism over several decades. In chapter 1, I have already mentioned some of my books that exemplify how I do comparative theology: *Theology after Vedanta* (1993), a reflection on nondualist Vedanta theology, in light of which I began thinking about how to rethink/rewrite my Christian theology through Vedanta; *Seeing through Texts* (1996), a study of a large Tamil devotional text, the Tiruvaymoli, with close attention to the theological problem at the core of the commentaries on it, how they thought that God could be known and experienced; *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001), wherein I argue that much of Christian reflection on God has counterparts in Hindu reflection, with the consequence that we should consider Hindu theologians our peers with respect to many of the theological issues we care about, and so listen to them on such issues; *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* (2005), wherein I make the plea that our reflection on God, gender, and related concerns raised in feminist theology will be considerably strengthened if we take into account Hindu worship of goddesses and the many centuries of Hindu reflection on the distinctive meaning of goddesses; *Beyond Compare* (2008a), a constructive reflection on loving surrender to God as reasoned, imagined, and intensely felt, explained and promoted

in key treatises of St. Francis de Sales and Vedanta Desika; and *The Truth, the Way, the Life* (2008c), a theology-through-commentary, in which I learn from Vedanta Desika how to understand the three holy mantras of the Srivaisnava Hindus. Such books exemplify the theological choices I have made in particular instances of comparative study that are substantially indebted to Hindu as well as Christian sources. If my theological instincts shaped how I have thought of Hinduism, in turn Hinduism has reshaped how I think theologically as a Christian.

Two related observations are pertinent. First, the theological perspectives of the Vedanta traditions have affected my understanding of comparative theology as a resolutely faith- and tradition-based perspective on a wider world of religious diversity. In Vedanta, the meditative knowledge variously described in the Upanishads is extended in such a way that philosophical claims can be proposed without moving away from foundations in scripture and tradition. According to this view, we need not, cannot, distance ourselves from a faith perspective in order to engage in a more neutral project of understanding. Despite Vedanta's strong intellectual commitments, its great teachers had little confidence that a common ground could be found with those refusing to enter upon a religiously conceived view of the world. Proper reading proceeds with close attention to grammar and verbal structures, and not by reliance on independent reasoning or ideas generated outside religious sources. There is no extra-textual common ground for conversation or argument. Rather than seek neutral ground, to no purpose, the Vedanta teachers found ways to speak more generally from within their scriptural perspective, if necessary rephrasing scriptural ideas in more general terms.

But I do not mean to suggest that ancient Vedanta simply provides without adjustment the textual yet open practice we need for today. Much of the Vedanta reflection on other religions was polemic, and aimed at refutation. It was also an elite system that would exclude most of us. Vedanta teachers had high standards about linguistic competence, breadth of traditional learning, birth, caste and related sociological matters, and about the basic faith – in the truth of Vedanta and in the teacher – that is required for learning to be real. Few contemporary academics could measure

up to traditional Vedanta expectations; I certainly would not. So adjustments need to be made, particularly a more expansive confidence regarding the prospects for teaching and learning.

In reflecting on what I have learned from Vedanta, I have brought a Christian intellectual confidence to my appropriation of its way of grounding arguments in scripture, and so do not find the door closed for learning across religious borders. As for competence, Vedanta teachers chose to teach and write, their words were passed down, and are available in Sanskrit and in translation. However they taught, they also became the source of written texts. That is to say, verbal communication, oral or written, was for them a primary mode of religious learning. When we choose to learn through reading, we are sharing their belief that the word is a powerful vehicle of spiritual insight. The Vedanta focus on reading and the consequent generation of right knowledge offers the prospect of a narrowly defined but promising starting point for reflection on religious diversity, and for a faith- and tradition-based perspective, rooted in scripture, that still enables us to respond creatively to religions other than our own. Theologians can reflect upon the world seriously and without racing to conclusions, yet still from the starting point of their own tradition. From this vantage point, we can see that an intertextual interreligious reading of the world can be a productive vehicle of learning and understanding even now, since language is not only *about* the world, but constitutive *of* it. This is why careful reading is theological and not just comparative.

I have likewise found Srivaisnava commentarial material ripe in theological wisdom that has affected my comparative theology. A particularly interesting feature is its employment of a *manipravala* ("jewel and coral," Sanskrit and Tamil) writing that draws together the Sanskrit and Tamil language traditions, inscribing Vedantic concepts into writing still richer in Tamil words, imagery, and dramatic scenarios. What intrigued me about this writing, in addition to its acuity, profound beauty, and passion, was the idea that the two languages, and the cultural worlds inscribed in the literature of each, were now read together and written together, neither obliterating the other's content or manner of expression. The Srivaisnava teachers saw clearly that Tamil and Sanskrit

enhanced one another, each literature profiting from a manner of writing in which both remained evident.

My comparative theology finds literary inspiration here. My comparative theology is a kind of *manipravala*, the product of two mutually inscribed languages, traditions, sensitivities, colliding and melding in a combination irreducible to just one theological language or, perhaps worse, to a third language replacing both. Two religious traditions can be read together and woven together in writing, without either erasing the integrity and difference of the other's style, vocabulary, and rules. Reading and understanding are then non-homogeneous, resistant to systematization while stimulating creative insight. The reader of a *manipravala* text, a comparative theology, is constantly reminded that she is receiving two traditions together, neither forgotten, both read and written on the same page as it were.

While my theology has surely shaped my study of India, my understanding of comparative theology is deeply indebted to Mimamsa, Vedanta, and Srivaisnavism as particular Hindu traditions understood theologically. I assume that as my readers engage deeply in the study of more than one religious tradition, they are also finding that their study shapes not only how they picture the traditions they study, but also how they think, read, and write their own tradition as well.

I wish now to show still more vividly what is gained from this kind of comparative theological study, by illustrating the fruits of comparison. In the next chapter, I offer an extended example of how very particular starting points disclose a nearly infinite horizon of linked insights.

Chapter 6

"Learning to See"

Comparative Practice and the Widening of Theological Vision

I hope by now to have established the plausibility of my claim that comparative theology can be fruitfully conceived of as a practice, and most effectively as the practice of reading. This is a theology that thrives not on its theoretical clarity or comprehensive reach, but in the small, practical choices a theologian in fact makes regarding what to read, what to compare in which combinations, and what lessons to draw from what she does in this way. In this intentional narrowness there is disclosed a great breadth; specific choices open possibilities across a broad spectrum of religious realities. To show how this works, in the following pages I offer a single extended example of my own comparative theologizing, a chain of thoughts that begins on a particular street in a particular town but then, by association, extends into a wider range of possibilities across several vexed religious borders.

The context is simple. In 2003 I was invited to give a plenary address at the Catholic Theological Society of America Annual Meeting, where the convention theme was "the vocation of the theologian." At the time, I was finishing *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*. While that book was already meant for a relatively wide audience, my plenary address aimed at a still wider audience of theologians in a context where I could

This chapter is taken from my plenary address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, Cincinnati, June 5, 2003, Annual Convention. Reprinted by permission of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

presume little or no knowledge of India or Hinduism. I wanted to address some large truths, from a very small starting point.

Plenary Address at the Catholic Theology Society of America, 2003

Near a Goddess

The Vedanta Desika Koil is a rather old Hindu temple in the Mylapore section of Chennai, India. During 1992–3, I used to visit it several times a month. Inside, to the right, and at the side of the main shrine for Lord Visnu, there is a smaller but nonetheless imposing shrine for the Goddess Laksmi, Visnu's eternal consort.[1] The shrine is dark, quiet, and attractive. It has a kind of aura to it. I also knew from my reading that in the Vaisnava tradition Laksmi is presented as the perfect spouse who gives life to Her husband, Visnu. She is a maternal figure, gracious and compassionate, welcoming strangers and outsiders, a friend to the poor. I felt oddly, entirely at home at her shrine. I used to stop in and stand there for a few minutes when visiting the temple, as long as I might stay without attracting too much more attention than a foreigner usually does in India.

To visit this temple and stand before the Goddess Laksmi opened for me new possibilities of vision beyond what I had seen or thought before. I was face to face with a reality – a kind of real presence – from within a living religious tradition other than my own. I knew that according to the Hindu tradition I was also being seen by Her. I did not have, nor do I have now, some easy words by which to explain this concrete and in some ways very foreign moment of encounter. There is no room for Laksmi in Christian theology, no easy theory that makes sense of Her presence. Seeing and reflection ought to lead to an appropriate response. I suppose I might even have worshipped Her, because I was already there, as it were seeing and being seen. But Christians do not worship Goddesses, so I did not. I just stood there, looking.

Where there are visions and moments of contemplation, there are also powerful words that keep on echoing and evoking what we have seen. Standing there, I could also recollect traditional prayers offered to Laksmi, verses as heartfelt as these twelfth-century verses:

> Your lotus feet,
> One dangling, ready for my reverence,
> The other tucked beneath you;
> You sit on the middle of a lotus throne,
> Your lotus hand gesturing fearlessness.
> O Mother, may we see you every moment;
> Your pleasing, beautiful face
> Carries surpassing, wide waves of compassion
> Flooding forth from the corner of your eyes.
>
> Your sidelong glances are comprised of bliss and
> By them Lord Visnu, drenched up to the neck in love,
> Becomes intoxicated, indolent –
> Because of them, people like us fill up with tender love,
> Rivers overflowing their banks, we drown in your compassion –
> For each and every drop of which
> Actors like Brahma the world-creator fight,
> and due to which even persons whose dominion is on the rise stammer –
> By your glances, O Lotus, protect me, I have no other refuge.[2]

These words are beautiful, but such words too can be hard. Hymns want to be listened to, understood, adopted, and uttered as real praise. But it may be impossible for us to utter such verses as Christians. We can hear them more clearly, little by little, we can read them with learned commentaries, but we may still feel perplexed, we may still want to evade or resist the world they show us. We do not want to speak them as our own words. Perhaps we cannot.

When we are theologizing properly, I suggest, we often find ourselves in this situation, seeing beyond the limits of the predictable and permissible, standing at the point where we begin understanding things we cannot easily put back into words. This is an

awkward situation, but a good one. It requires allowing such moves to the edge to happen, without being afraid of what we see and hear. Then too, if possible, it is also about turning such experiences into words, even imperfect and incomplete words, by which others can share the vision. Such, I believe, is the vocation of the theologian. The following reflections are dedicated to exploring how seeing anew can turn into powerful words that change things we have already seen and heard throughout our lives.

Devi's Beauty, Devi's Pleasure

For me, at least, scholarly work is indeed a way of turning experiences and things I've seen into words. I work with texts and commentaries. Accordingly, as a kind of sequel to my temple visits, I have been writing a book entitled *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*.

I will comment later on the comparative aspect of this book, but first of all it is simply a reflection on how for millennia Hindus have theologized the significance of female deities, even when male deities are also available for worship and reflection. The Hindu theologians reflecting on these Goddesses are almost all males in a male-dominated society – but who nevertheless chose to worship Goddesses and to place those Goddesses above gods, even when there was no compulsion to do so. This is, in my view, very interesting.

Because the issues are large, this is also a book about just three Goddess hymns, the Vaisnava *Sri Guna Ratna Kosa* ("Treasury of Her Qualities"), the tantric *Saundarya Lahari* ("Flood of Beauty"), and the Saiva *Apirami Antati* ("Linked Verses Honoring the Beautiful One"). They are respectively from the twelfth, eleventh, and eighteenth centuries, more or less. These hymns are lovely poetry, rich in vivid imagery and adorned with elegantly balanced claims about the Goddesses in relation to well-known gods. They offer constructive insights into Goddess-oriented paths of knowledge and devotion. Each is enriched by classical and modern commentaries that show us how it has been traditionally understood and valued. These hymns, 261 verses in all, are only small instances

within a broader religious context of Hindu reflection on Goddesses, still other images and practices explained in systematic discourse. But, read properly, they are richly evocative of that wider context. Studying them with an eye toward their full meaning produces deeper, more luminous insights into the dynamics and significance of Goddess worship in its intellectual, spiritual, and ritual concreteness.

These hymns not only speak about Goddesses, but they also enable the devout reader to approach those Goddesses most intimately. They are acts of living speech, generative of worship: each tells us about its particular Goddess, but also addresses hHer directly, and so initiates the attentive listener into the realities of which it speaks. If the hymns are carefully heard and allowed to have their full effect, both the believing author and the listener are drawn into praise and encounter with that Goddess. All of this can begin to happen to us as well, even if we think we are just doing some research.

Take, for example, the first of the hymns, the *Saundarya Lahari* or "Flood of Beauty." This hymn of 100 verses praises the great Goddess, Devi, supreme ruler of the universe, daughter of the mountain, beautiful consort of Siva. At the same time, it also clarifies who She is, and how She is to be encountered. Right from the first verse, claims about Her are superlative:

> Only joined with Power is Siva able to rule,
> Otherwise he cannot even quiver –
> O Devi, You are worthy of adoration by Visnu, Rudra, Brahma,
> and all the rest –
> So how dare I –
> Who've done nothing meritorious –
> Reverence and praise You?[3]

Devi is Siva's consort and virtuous wife, yet She is also the one on whom he depends entirely. She is transcendent, yet approachable and irresistibly desirable to Her spouse and to devotees wishing to praise Her. She is power itself, energy, and life. Unlike a god, Devi does not exercise power, because She is power. She is subtle – not a warrior Goddess who asserts Herself violently to

dominate, even for the sake of defeating evil. She is life, vitality, beauty, desire, She conquers by Her presence, simply because of who She is. It is only when Devi acts out Her pleasure that other beings live. On Her depend the gods and goddesses, all lesser conscious beings, and the entire universe.

But conceptual thealogy is not enough. The author of the hymn desires to gaze on Devi's figure in loving detail, and so he prays, "May you stand forth before us!" (7) He wants to see Her materially as well as with a spiritual eye. The major part of the hymn is about how to see Her properly. (Before going any further, I must confess one thing: How women are to relate to Devi is not explained. My impression is that women are idealized as being already with Devi, in Her company, and not in need of contemplative practices leading to union.)

For the male author, in any case, Devi must in some way be seen, and he chooses to start looking with conventional standards of female beauty in mind. Devi is at first presented according to rather standard cultural norms. Her figure is full. She dresses better than anyone else. She wears the finest jewelry and flowers in Her hair. But Devi also surpasses every conventional image and expectation about female beauty. Seeing Her must therefore be purified, stripped of cultural accretions. The devotee must purify conventional expectations, and experience Devi in pure touch, sight, and sound. And so, She is manifest most intensely in pure centers of physical and psychological energy known as *cakra*s. She is seen most finely in the geometric detail of diagrams known as *yantras*. She is heard most purely in the utterance of the pure sounds of Her secret 16-syllable name.

This purification of the senses prepares the way for a second and more important visualization of Devi, carried out over some 50 verses. She is now contemplated, a second time, head to toe. Each verse focuses on a particular detail of Her material form as a sacramental sign expressive of a spiritual reality: Her hair, vermilion forehead mark, eyebrows, eyes and glance, ears, nose, teeth, smile, throat, hands, breasts, navel, waist, hips, thighs, feet, toes, nails, Her manner of walking. The poet looks intensely, passionately, and the attentive listener too is being taught to look closely,

to analyze and seek the origins of beauty. We are invited to see, all the more vividly, everything we had noticed only conventionally at first glance.

Devi returns, and She arouses an ever deeper contemplation that travels from bliss to beauty to bliss. In the hymn's final verses, the repeatedly deferred intimate pleasure of Siva and Devi seems to reach a climax that is just beyond what words can say. It finally becomes possible for the poet to imagine, imperfectly and in a teasingly incomplete fashion, the blissful union of Devi and Her Siva. Devotees are invited to enter Her inner precincts, to enjoy all beauty and bliss. But no more is said about what happens then. You have to go there, the experience is something you have to find for yourself. Seeing leads to words, words to action, action to participation and bliss.

Rediscovering Mary

I have spoken of the *Saundarya Lahari* at length because it illustrates the method for a way of theologizing today that is based on insight and instinct, prolonged attentiveness, beauty, and bliss, going broad by going deep. It is of use as we learn to be better theologians by way of the study of religious traditions other than our own. We see for a greater distance and greater breadth; we learn to let go and then return to the things we'd seen at the beginning; we see ourselves anew in light of the other, in a vision of self and other stripped of illusions, clutter, confusion. Then we can look more broadly yet again, to see everything afresh and newly alive, and so to write accordingly.

Of course, learning from verses praising a Hindu Goddess after visiting a Goddess temple is only the beginning of this practice of wider vision. I have found my study of Goddesses also deeply connected to an awakening of other areas of theological interest for me, including a look back into my own Catholic tradition. There are no Christian Goddesses, but there are inevitable, fruitful parallels that crowd in upon the mind's eye.

For instance, and by an intuitive move I cannot fully justify, I have felt a connection between reflection on Laksmi and Devi

and renewed attention to the Virgin Mary. The study of India has enabled me once again to see an aspect of my own tradition in a new light – to see anew the Marian devotion all but lost to me as I went through high school and college in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Seeing Laksmi, seeing Devi, it becomes easier to see Mary.

We know that the cult of Mary remains important for many people today, in the Orthodox traditions and throughout the Roman Catholic world. Even if the veneration of Mary is necessarily understood within the constraints of Christian faith, creed, and theology, there is still much that stands parallel to Hindu language about Goddesses in India, waiting to be noticed attentively. Mary is the one who is both "not a Goddess" and yet also "like a Goddess." We can try gazing upon her appropriately, with a critical eye, alongside Laksmi and Devi. Her personality, her materiality as the person in whom the divine and human surprisingly meet, her role as mother, her being a woman physically, psychologically, intellectually, spiritually – all of this makes her vividly like Laksmi and Devi.

I say all this with due caution. Like you, I know that today we are discovering a renewed Trinitarian theology and an inclusive ecclesiology. We are committed to reappraising the roles of women and men in the Church. In light of these changes, much about the traditional cult of Mary seems antiquarian, mistaken, or downright harmful. Nevertheless, there is no reason to turn away entirely from that tradition. Even if we do not anoint Mary a "Christian Goddess," we can nonetheless learn more than we imagine from looking at her side by side with Devi and Laksmi.

Here, too, I try to work locally, with texts, on a small scale. In writing my book, I have accordingly also studied just three Marian hymns: the Greek *Akathistos* hymn from the fifth century, the nineteenth-century Tamil *Mataracamman Antati*, and the famous medieval *Stabat Mater*. Let us for a moment consider just the last of these.

The *Stabat Mater* envisions Mary, vulnerable and at the cross, contemplating the death of her son; we watch her watching him. The hymn insists that she stands upright throughout; it finds in this most honest and terrible moment the source of her power to act as the agent of our own journey with Jesus through death to

a resurrected life. She weeps, but she is the one to whom we turn in desire, as we hear:

> O mother, font of love, make me feel the force of sorrow, that I lament with you,
> Make my heart burn in loving Christ, God, that I might be pleasing to him.
> Holy mother, do this, fix the wounds of the crucified firmly in my heart.
> Share with me the punishments your so worthy, so wounded son suffered for me.
> Make me truly weep with you, sorrowing with the crucified as long as I live.
> To stand near the cross with you, to be with you gladly, wailing – so I desire …[4]

The more we contemplate Mary as she stands there facing death, the more we see her power grow. By the hymn's end, Jesus is dead, and she stands there alone, now the font of hope for those who wish to live.

I did not find in the *Stabat Mater* a theory about how Mary, her son, and God are to be understood. Rather, after thinking about Laksmi and Devi, I found a path of transformative vision. We look upon God to the point of God's own death. We see Mary in grief, yet strong enough to resist violence, to remain standing. Our vision of God and humanity are stripped to their basics in the face of death. We gain hope along with Mary, after the Son of God has died.

In a peculiar way, the *Stabat Mater* is therefore like the *Saundarya Lahari*: "He" recedes, "She" comes to the fore as the source of life and hope; seeing Her empowers the one bold enough to look, opening the way to salvation. The *Saundarya Lahari* is about beauty and bliss while the *Stabat Mater* is about death and resurrection, but in both cases, the fulfillment of desire becomes possible.

Encountering Hindu Goddesses in temple and text is not therefore a diversion or detour, but a way into our own past, this time with our eyes more widely open. Encountering Goddesses, we also see Mary, her son and her God all the more clearly. However we sort out our Catholic Marian tradition in the twenty-first century, we will do this better because we have been freed

from some of our misconceptions about how other people in other religions have contemplated the divine feminine.

Laksmi in her temple, Devi on her couch, Mary at the cross: these are but three figures approached in three specific contexts. This is already a lot to think about, but there is no end to the series of such particularities. There is also no grand narrative that tells us how to see them, what they mean. Rather than generalize about religions or even about gender in religion, it is better to go forward by intuitive leaps, according to instinct. How this further widening of theological vision works in practice occupies the remaining portion of this presentation.

Mary and Her Son Jesus, through Muslim Eyes

First, I turn to an issue that already occupies our attention. We are all mindful of the sometimes troubled and unhappy relations between the West and the Arab world, and in addition to that, logically or not, the uneven relationship between Christians and Muslims in many places today. Many issues come to mind: Iraq and the war; the aftermath of September 11, with the tension and confusion that terrible day brought to Muslim–Christian relations; bias against innocent Muslim Americans in the current atmosphere of suspicion; tension and conflict in Indonesia and parts of Africa; the role of Europe and the United States in the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. None of this reduces to questions about "Islam in itself" or "Christianity in itself." There is certainly no simple or merely objective "problem" for us to solve. But the world situation certainly makes those of us who are not Muslim ponder more intensely our relationship with our Muslim sisters and brothers.

We are theologians, and we also know that there are theological questions to be faced as Muslims and Christians listen and learn from one another. We know, for instance, that the Qur'an highly reveres Jesus but denies that he is divine or that he died on the cross. Christians cannot agree with such a view of Jesus. Similarly, Christians do not believe that Mohammed voiced a revelation

surpassing that announced in and by Jesus. I presume that Muslims cannot accept the Christian claim about the insurpassibility of Jesus. Such differences can by themselves cause misunderstanding and bring conversations to a halt. We may be tempted to sidestep them for the sake of polite conversation and keeping the peace.

But we can do better. If we turn back to particular things that Muslims and Christians care about religiously, new insights become possible, new doors are opened. To be sure, it is not necessary or inevitable to connect the first part of this paper – Laksmi, Devi, Mary – to seeing through Muslim eyes. But I suggest that opportunities arise if we remember what we have already seen, and if we are willing to make yet another intuitive leap beyond the ground thus far occupied. To put it briefly: Laksmi, Devi, and Mary open a way to connect with the Qur'anic tradition, by thinking about Mary from yet another angle. Mary is an important presence in the Qur'an. She is the only woman mentioned there by name, and one of the most frequently named persons of all. By patiently reading the Qur'an, we find a new way to see Mary and her son Jesus.

Consider just one text. In Sura 19 of the Qur'an, we find reflection on a variety of prophetic figures – Zechariah and Jesus, Abraham and Moses. Along with them, much attention is paid to Mary. In the middle of Sura 19, the angel Gabriel visits Mary and speaks to her in words like those found in Luke. The angel announces God's intention that a son be born to her. Mary receives a powerful divine word that makes her a mother by virgin birth. This is simply a matter of divine power.

Similarly, what Mary does after the angel leaves also dramatizes the power of God:

> When she conceived him, she went away to a distant place. The birth pangs led her to the trunk of a date-palm tree. "Would that I had died before this," she said, "and become a thing forgotten, unremembered." Then (a voice) called to her from below: "Grieve not; your Lord has made a rivulet gush forth right below you. Shake the trunk of the date-palm tree, and it will drop ripe dates for you. Eat and drink, and be at peace. If you see any man, tell him: 'I have verily vowed a fast to Ar-Rahman and cannot speak to any one this day.' "

> Then she brought the child to her people. They exclaimed: "O Mary, you have done a most astonishing thing! O sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked person, nor your mother sinful!" But she pointed toward him. "How can we talk to one," they said, "who is only an infant in the cradle?" "I am a servant of God," he answered "He has given me a Book and made me a prophet …"[5]

Remarkably, as the infant Jesus continues, he too declares his submission to the one true God. As Mary, so Jesus.[6]

Most powerful for me is how Mary is held up in this Sura as a person entirely open to God's word. She and her son have no support other than God alone. She is very much in isolation, bereft of family and friends. She is in a strange and desert place, alone and in distress. There are no shepherds, no angels, not even a Joseph. She cries out, "Would that I had died before this, and become a thing forgotten, unremembered." But God has not forgotten "this thing." He feeds and shelters her at this most difficult moment. And then he sends her back to her people, a voiceless messenger to them.

She may be voiceless, but Mary is not simply a foil to Jesus, a woman measured by the standard of the Son of God. Instead, both Jesus and Mary are measured entirely by their submission to God's will. Gender does not radically distinguish Mary from Jesus, or God from humans. Attention to gender – looking at Mary, looking at Jesus – indicates rather how a man dependent on God and a woman dependent on God both live by faith, in submission to God's will. Jesus is venerated, but so is Mary. By their absolute dependence on God, they signify what it means to know, love, and serve God in this world.

Much changes as we reflect on the Qur'an's austere and powerful reading of Mary and her son Jesus, as we let Muslim wisdom jostle against how we traditionally have seen Jesus, Son of God, and Mary, God's mother. After the Qur'an, we may remain Christian and confirm the Creed, but we also see Mary differently, as a woman who shows us how God changes the way we live. We see Jesus as the son of Mary, like unto us in all things, a hope for what we can become, if we too admit our humanity and

utter dependence on God. We may not know at first what to do with all this, since the theological and historical problems will not have disappeared. We are offered a very particular common ground much older and deeper than American politics and Middle East disruptions. Whatever else Mary may be, however we envision her in this new millennium, she nonetheless mediates a spiritual insight shared by Muslims and Christians alike. But we will be better off for having seen Mary and Jesus through Muslim eyes, outside our accustomed ideas and words. And if this insight into Mary is further purified by reflection on Laksmi and Devi, all the better.

Sojourner Truth's Liberating God

The world is very large, and my brief reflection on the Qur'anic tradition serves only to suggest, by way of a single example, an array of potentially endless possibilities around the world of other such intuitively related insights into other traditions. This path of comparative reflection – seeing, reflection, intuitive leaps to other possibilities, new insights into what we had seen previously – is a winding one: from Hindu Goddesses to Mary, and Mary in two traditions. I have thus followed a single thread through a sequence of religious contexts. None of this has been done very deeply here, and perhaps I have gone far enough for one evening.

But there are still other steps to be taken, still other things to be seen, other intuitions to be followed. Going forth also means coming home again. Being a Christian is simple, but we have to keep trying to do it right, inside and outside our accustomed communities. I also know that I need to transform my Christian identity by listening to what other Christians are saying, close to home. Here then is just one more example.

Like you, I know that American Catholicism is already richly diverse, and changing even as we meet. I know that Native Americans, Asian immigrants, Latinos and Latinas, and African-Americans are bringing new life and diversity to the notion of "American Catholic." I also know that "American Catholic theology" ought not to be neatly separated from a wider theological

conversation in the Christian community, Protestant as well as Catholic. I know a little about the various living Christian theologies growing out of these communities and conversations, and I know enough to respect them greatly.

But knowing about these things is not really enough. Much depends on how and where you know, the energy you invest in learning, the price you are willing to pay for keeping your eyes wide open. Otherwise, theology may end up being simply a matter of words and concepts and systems respected in isolation from the religious communities for which they were articulated and in which they have been passed down. I may nod, approve, and then go back to my office, to go on reading my texts and writing about India in relation to my favorite Christian theologians. If so, comparative theology risks becoming something white guys do in their offices, while most of the Church happens elsewhere. That is not acceptable.

In preparing this presentation, I therefore stopped thinking about India for a moment. I started reading around in all the different theologies I've just mentioned. Like finding my way in Chennai, India, or learning Sanskrit, or rediscovering medieval Christian piety, or reintroducing myself to Mary and her son Jesus in the Qur'an, I've had to listen yet again to new voices expressed in unfamiliar styles and tones. I've had to learn new religious grammars, to think about God from a different place, in light of a Bible proclaimed and practiced in other voices, other rhythms, other ways of worship.

And again I got very specific. By chance, while looking for useful accounts of African-American theology, I stumbled upon the *Narrative* and *Book of Life* of Sojourner Truth. She was a fellow New Yorker, even if her family came to New York under tragically different circumstances than did my ancestors, and even if she lived out both her slavery and freedom in nineteenth-century New York, before most of my ancestors got off the boat at Ellis Island. Born Isabella in an enslaved family in New York State, she reclaimed her freedom in mid-life. She became a preacher and a defender of the rights of defenseless women and men, and a powerful witness to Christ's liberating power. Though she was a product of her time, she was also an early proponent

of women's rights. She offered a fresh and honest interpretation of what it means to be a Christian, how the Gospel is to be spoken in American society. God even spoke to her, God gave her the name by which we know her – she became a sojourner, destined to speak the truth in season and out. She reminded those who flocked to hear her – and now reminds me – of how people living near to one another can have very different lives, even very different American Christian lives, even right in New York. God spoke to her as God has not yet spoken to me, and I need to listen.[7]

So I found my way through her *Narrative* and *Book of Life* – sorting out layers of text, reports about her, words attributed to her, editors' improvements on her – all as distant to me as 150 years can be. Here too, as I paid attention, I began to connect intellectually and imaginatively with a world previously not my own. One example from her *Book* must suffice to show what I mean.

A central moment is her account of her real liberation, an unexpected encounter with God that transformed her familiar world, all in a flash, a moment of remarkable discernment. One day, at a relatively low and dry point in her life after gaining her freedom, she is planning to visit her old master's home. But she is stopped in her tracks:

> Well, jest as I was goin' out to get into the wagon, *I met God*! an' says I, "O God, I didn't know as you was so great!"

She is overwhelmed by this sudden encounter with God, and she ran to her room:

> An' I turned right round an' come into the house, an' set down in my room; for 't was God all around me. I could feel it burnin', burnin', burnin' all around me, an' goin' through me; an' I saw I was so wicked, it seemed as ef it would burn me up.
>
> An' I said, "O somebody, somebody, stand between God an' me! for it burns me!"

Suddenly, she realizes there *is* someone there, but she does not know who it is. This makes her look more deeply into her experience to identify the stranger who is already with her:

> Then, honey, when I said so, I felt as it were somethn' like an amberill that came between me an' the light, an' I felt it was *somebody* – that came between me an' God; an' it felt cool, like a shade; an' says I, "Who's this that stands between me an' God? … *Who* is this?"

She does not know, and so must enter on an exercise in discernment:

> An' then, honey, for a while it was like the sun shinin' in a pail o' water, when it moves up and down; for I begun to feel't was somebody that loved me; an' I tried to know him. An' I said, "I know you! I know you! I know you!" An' then I said, "I do n't know you! I do n't know you! I do n't know you!" An' when I said, "I know you, I know you" the light came; an' when I said, "I do n't know you, I do n't know you," it went jes' like the sun in a pail o' water.

Her discernment culminates in enlightenment:

> An' finally somethin' spoke out in me an' says I, "*This is Jesus*!" An' I spoke out with all my might, an' says I, "*This is Jesus!* Glory be to God!"

This insight infuses the whole world around her with a new light, a living, material divine presence:

> An' then the whole world grew bright, an' the trees they waved an' waved in glory, an' every little bit o' stone on the ground shone like glass; and I shouted an' said, "Praise, praise, praise to the Lord!" An' I began to feel sech a love in my soul as I never felt before – love to all creatures.

Thus ends her account in the more polished, presumably more widely known version of it. But in the version I have been following, the account goes a step further, breaking another social boundary. Sojourner's insight resists even the violence of slavery and the bitterness arising from it:

> An' then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an' I said, "Dar's de white fools that have abused you, an' beat you, an' abused your people – think o' them!"

But then there came another rush of love through my soul, an' I cried out loud – "Lord, Lord, I can love *even de white folks*!"[8]

Sojourner found God in a most peculiar way, and learned to calm the waters, to look up from the dazzle of distractions, to turn from reflections to the light itself in order to see beyond the boundaries of her life as she had lived it up to that point.

Sojourner's enlightenment and her words about it are not systematically developed, but they can hardly be surpassed in their power to illuminate the whole of our Christian experience. She explains to me very clearly what we Jesuits have been trying to say for centuries about the discernment of spirits and the freedom God gives to those who pay attention.

She is, of course, also one of the mothers of American Christian theology, our ancestor in the work of speaking Christ in this country. She is in a way like Mary at the cross or in the Qur'an – a woman alone, just a woman – who nonetheless lives by the word of God and makes God eloquently present to her people, slave and free, male and female, family and stranger alike. She is not, to be sure, a Goddess, but, like Laksmi, she offers a refuge outside the normal power structures for those with nowhere else to go, nowhere else to hope. By reading her book and finding her voice in the midst of so many voices, I have started learning to see differently yet again, this time along with Christian sisters and brothers whose lives and faith have rarely intersected with mine. The worlds of comparative theology and African-American theology begin to be worlds not entirely separate from one another.

All in Christ, but Still All

All of this – Laksmi, Devi, Mary, Mary and her son in the Qur'an, Sojourner Truth testifying – constitute a very wide, imaginatively linked range of reflections. My examples, tumbling against one another, could keep on multiplying. I could go on tracing other analogies and echoes, reading other texts, reflecting on other holy encounters and extraordinary witnesses, incorporating a yet wider

range of practices, images, and relationships that make up living religions far and near.

You may wish to compliment me for my openness: black and white, slave and free, male and female, old and new, God and Goddess, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Christian – it is all here. Perhaps, though, I've lost my way. You may wonder whether there isn't something more, and simpler, to the Christian Gospel and Christian theology. I have been going broad; you may be wondering when I will go deep. It is a matter, after all, of returning to the core of our faith, our encounter with Christ, to die and rise with him.

Take, for instance, the familiar and powerful text from Galatians, where Christ changes our categories and transforms how we relate to one another:

> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.
> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.[9]

In Christ, God has changed everything. Many differences are now behind us, some mistaken or out of date, some irrelevant, some evil. The difference that matters lies in Christ and our emerging Christ consciousness. Or, as Paul says earlier in the same letter, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."[10] To put on Christ, to see Christ in myself and my neighbor may shatter the ordinary categories by which I do my work. This too is the vocation of the theologian.

Attention to the infinitely wide religious possibilities of our world is no reason to ignore Paul's insight. Our appreciation of Laksmi and Devi, Mary at the cross and in the desert place, and even Sojourner Truth's brave resistance to bitterness – all of this may sit uncomfortably next to Galatians, which makes a simpler demand on the theologian. This is not a bad situation. There is no reason for a theologian to think according to a single, comprehensive insight. Even if the pieces do not fit together – seeing

everything just as it is, in itself, yet also seeing everything in Christ – we still need to see Laksmi and Devi, Mary – twice over – and Sojourner Truth, all in light of Galatians, as if it really is Christ seeing through our eyes.

Going deep in Christ cannot mean going blind. It would be a mistake to erase the slender imaginative path we have been traveling through different religions, the divine and the human, the female and male, the slave and free. Neither words nor the Word should blind us to the living realities that stand before us when we open our eyes. Christ crosses the boundaries of difference, but this crossing means more if we are actually seeing all those real and holy differences that will not disappear in this millennium either. It is rooted in Christ that we traverse the boundaries of Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, divine and human. It is in Christ that we encounter Laksmi in Her temple, read our way into the presence of the beautiful Devi, stand with Mary at the cross or in the desert, walk with Sojourner Truth into uncharted freedom.

Paul is right then to remind us that even after new birth in Christ we remain heirs to the promise of Abraham and Sarah. Our heritage becomes wider, not more narrower, over time. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:,

> For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his …[11]

As heirs and as God's children we remember, we keep the faith, and we see with our eyes wide open.

Vocation

In this reflection, I have traced a winding path of intuitively connected examples. I have implied that there is no overarching narrative that explains, already and in advance, how we are to make our own the multiple religious insights and experiences of the human race. I have not proposed a theory about God and the world. I have not suggested a new theology of religions. I have

not methodically uncovered my own presuppositions. I have not acknowledged all the theologians here tonight whose words make possible my words tonight. Such things can be done, of course, and should be.

But the skills I have suggested – loving attention to concrete particularities, keeping our eyes open, a willingness to leap intuitively from one possibility to the next, seeing ourselves differently in light of the new – must keep coming first, if we are to have something worth stating in more theoretical terms. To live and write and act and worship with our eyes open is essential to our vocation as theologians today, even when it puts us in situations where words fail us. To be a Christian is simple and startlingly clear. We focus on Christ, we see everything.

But, if so, we lose control. Every now and then, we find ourselves standing anew before God, in faces, voices, and words we did not know before. It may be a Laksmi in her temple, reminding us how the holy feels close up. Or the most beautiful Devi teaching us to see the divine clearly, materially, blissfully. Or Mary giving us hope by her brave witness, standing there at God's death, or teaching us what it means not to be God, having no voice but God's word. Or Sojourner Truth telling the stark truth about loving our neighbors, every one of them. Or Paul seeing Christ, right through all the separations we make. Or all the other things we see because we have seen these things first.

It looks, in fact, as if we've barely begun the work of theology God has given us. This is a vocation to give our lives to, a vision to live for.

After "Learning to See"

This was my effort to open up, for a general audience of theologians, a particular kind of interreligious reflection that is selective and intuitive, yet disclosive of a series of theological reflections within traditions and across their boundaries. I chose a most particular place that has been for me a starting point: an ordinary neighborhood temple and a shrine of Sri Laksmi within that temple. It is not famous, it is quite easy to miss, and few tourists

would think of visiting the temple. It was just a place where we can pray easily. In this way I highlighted the phenomenon of my reverence for Sri Laksmi in the very specific locale of this temple, but I did so also for the same of a larger point, that from a very particular place we can travel more widely, engaging our own and other traditions more widely. The plan of my lecture was also meant to map a traversal of the ground from place to experience to texts to faith and back again. My strategy was an intuitive and never fully thematized series of choices by which to leap from one instance to the next, taught every step of the way. This is what it means to gain wider insight not by generalizing but by going deep, opening a wider theological conversation without having to retreat to a generic discussion of religions.

I was determined at the end to reflect on Jesus and his central place in my Christian reflection, even after comparative work. Comparative theology, however labyrinthine, can lead us back to our core commitments; the wider learning need not undercut faith's particularity. It has been my particular commitment to Jesus Christ that energizes most deeply my vision of comparative theological practice as a disclosure of the widest meaning in the most particular instance. If my comparative theology leads anywhere, it should lead (back) to Christ. The intensification involved is in fact quite distant from the relativism about which many are rightly concerned today. But this is not to say that comparative theological work necessarily vindicates particular Christian doctrines or necessarily leads to Christian conclusions, since it is the theologian's faith, rooted in her own tradition, that will be intensified by comparative study.

My hope, until now largely unfulfilled, is that the plenary address would also have instigated comparative theology at one remove, among a wider audience of theologians not doing the kind of tradition-specific research I have done. Theologians, like other scholars, often build on the primary research done by others, so in theory my plenary address might inspire theologians to think differently about familiar Catholic topics. A theologian new to comparative work might pick up on particular references in my address, or trace the links between my various insights. It might also be a matter of understanding the point I was making,

so as then to test it in another area of expertise and with a similarly extended set of linked insights. I believe I made my points well enough that others can build on them, but the proof lies in the work of other theologians who actually take up the task.

A difficult question still lurks in the corner of this reflection: what does comparative theology have to do with the truth of the faith, or even with theological truth? Is the comparativist really a *theologian*? I turn to this issue, though necessarily in my own way, in chapters 7 and 8.

Part III

The Fruits of Comparison

Chapter 7

Theology After Comparison

Comparative Theology and the Larger Work of Theology

In the preceding chapters, I have argued for a comparative theological response to religious diversity. It is a religious and theological practice undertaken in response to religious diversity. It proceeds slowly and by steps, making particular choices about what to study and how it might mean something to us in light of our starting points. By its discipline, we remain committed to one tradition even while learning from another; by grace, we may even deepen our knowledge of God through this study.

It is time now to emphasize that this comparative practice remains closely connected to mainstream non-comparative theology. It can in non-trivial ways be in harmony with traditional (doctrinal) theology. Indeed, if the trajectory of comparative study is such as I have been imagining it, it should be impossible that there *not* be substantive contributions to the wider theological enterprise.

As I have stressed, this comparative theology does not seek a theory by which to account for all religions or to rank them from one tradition's perspective. It is not about such judgments. Neither need it be neutral with respect to truth, nor intent upon using research to explain away particular truths, lessening their force. It is a particular engagement with truth as uttered, inscribed, and enacted in traditions; on that basis, it also has to do with the truth

of God, the truth that is God, insofar as this can be apprehended by a faith that seeks understanding.

Comparative theologians therefore can respect and take into account commitment to the truth known and believed within our particular traditions. Along the way, they can defend truth's value in the context of religious diversity, allow the light of comparative study to banish misunderstandings regarding truth claims, rule out exaggerated opinions regarding the truth of their own tradition, and achieve fresh insight into the creeds and doctrines precious to their community. In all of this, they remain responsible to their home community, and in a different but real way to the other community whose texts they have been studying.

Comparative theology is rarely unambiguously definitive, but its insights, in their particularity, need not conflict with dogmatic truths. Conversely, comparative theology's contribution will not occur merely in the repetition of claims already familiar to non-comparativists. If it does not disrespect doctrinal expressions of truth, neither does it merely repeat doctrinal statements as if nothing is learned from comparative reflection. Rarely, if ever, will comparative theology produce new truths, but it can make possible fresh insights into familiar and revered truths, and new ways of receiving those truths. Since it flourishes in the particular, it creates new configurations of concepts and words, with new implications, and by so doing subtly alters how we receive even the most important of truths.

As in non-comparative theology, here too careful study should rarely make headlines. It is more likely to reveal nuances and distinctions, with an appreciation of the advantages and disadvantages of various theological positions, rather than assertions of definitive truth or falsity. Most research is tentative in this way, but comparative study all the more complicates the prospects for final judgments, since once we are well informed about a religion other than our own, complexities appear, and we see both sides more vividly. Subtler, provisional theological assessments become the norm, even interreligiously. Should inquiry support the faith position of one tradition over against others on a specific point, this specific insight will not be decisive regarding which religion is truest or best. Later on, regarding another issue, the other

tradition's position may appear more plausible. But this preference for the particular, with appreciation of contextual nuance, does not mean that truth is unimportant or that we can no longer make universal claims about truth and the force of truth in our own lives and for the lives of others. Even when interreligious learning yields insights that extend beyond positions that might have been held for centuries, the new can be integrated slowly, on multiple levels and by small choices, without any dramatic contradiction to older positions.

To make the above observations more concrete, in this chapter and the next I begin with some simpler observations, and proceed to more complex issues.

The Multiple Responsibilities of the Comparative Theologian

Comparative theology may first of all play a corrective role in theological conversation. Even a simple comparison of theologies should help believers to unburden themselves of misconceptions they have about what other traditions believe or about the uniqueness of their own tradition's claims. In its insistence on particularity and the serious consideration of diversity, it should helpfully undermine the excessive self-confidence that arises from reading only what confirms our long-held views, or talking only with those with whom we already agree. Comparative theology may purify doctrinal claims by uncovering the cultural and philosophical accretions that inevitably surround truths held over a long period of time, and by showing that most theological expressions of truth have in some form appeared elsewhere too. This ability to distinguish doctrinal truth from cultural overlays, and fidelity from self-congratulation, echoes the dynamic recurrent throughout the history of interreligious learning: whatever reasons we have when we begin to study the other, we in fact end up also demythologizing in the process.

As we receive insights from other religions, and observe how truths have been received, explained, and passed down in those traditions, we can also deepen our repertoire of theological ideas

regarding the nature of God, God's action, and God's involvement in the world. We can do this with theological sensitivity, a faith that truly seeks to understand. Once we have begun learning in this way, we are given many new options regarding how to think and make decisions theologically. Sometimes we have to make prudent choices about what to do with all that we are learning, in ways that support yet also shake up our own theological projects.

Comparative theology needs to remain in living connection with the tradition and faith experience of particular communities, which must be convinced that a comparativist's work is actually theological. Making sense of comparative learning is my work but also our work, since the theologian must in some way remain in conversation with her community, which in turn is itself obligated to be serious in its interreligious learning, even as this learning occurs in the work of individual theologians. Accordingly, we have to continue using tradition-specific theological language in setting up and working out our comparisons, as we "read from" and "write for" communities with specific theological cultures. I, for example, need to write in a way that makes sense to Catholic Christians.

We must do this even while still responsible to the other tradition, mindful that many of our ideas, words, and practices have appeared in analogous forms, and persuasively too, in other traditions as well. This is why I, a Catholic theologian, go to great lengths in my work to honor and understand the theological language of several Hindu traditions, and cannot sacrifice respect for them simply to make the task of Catholic theology easier.

Some Theological Presuppositions Implicit in Comparative Theology

I wish now to show in three ways the issue of comparative theology's relationship to the broader truth of faith and theology. First, I make explicit some general insights into God and world that are presumed and confirmed in my comparative work. Second, I offer four examples showing how specific, focused studies open up

significant new perspectives on truths known otherwise by other theological disciplines. These two ways take up the remainder of this chapter. Third, in chapter 8, I offer an additional and extended example of comparative theological learning that offers a promising insight into how God responds to us amidst the religious diversity providentially given to us.

First, a comparative theologian can have solid theological grounds for thinking that comparative work will be fruitful. Here, for example, are several rather general (theistic) insights which many comparative theologians in many (though not all) traditions might well presuppose, and find vindicated in their research:

1. God chooses to be known, encountered, and accessible through religious traditions as complex religious wholes, in fragile human ideas and words, images and actions.
2. That God is present, even fully, in one tradition does not preclude God's presence in other traditions; robust commitment to one tradition is compatible with still recognizing God at work outside that tradition's language, imagination, and doctrine.
3. God can speak to us in and through a tradition other than our own, even if we do not, cannot, embrace as our own the whole of that tradition. We are not compelled to affirm every aspect of other traditions, but neither does faith compel us to presume that what we know is always superior to what they know.
4. The intellectual and affective dimensions of a relationship to God are accessible through words, in language. Coming to know God in this richer way proceeds valuably through the study of our own tradition, but also in the study of other traditions.
5. How we learn from traditions other than our own cannot be predicted on the basis of our own tradition. There is no substitute for actually studying another tradition, and the trial-and-error progress that is made by trying to learn.

These are some starting points that give credence to the comparative quest, and the actual comparative study will confirm their

value. Of course, as I have stated them, they are rather understated, even sketchy, and in need of elaboration and refinement. So, too, they need to be concretized with reference to specific instances where reflective comparative learning points us back to such insights. As practical guides, they need not be taken as complete, as if to exclude more particular claims familiar in the theological discourses of particular traditions. But they do make it harder to move swiftly from *our* faith positions to judgments on *their* religions, because our own traditions teach us to know God as one who can well be at work in other traditions, even in their theological doctrines.

But we can say more. I wish also to indicate how my study of Hindu and Christian traditions confirms and deepens my understanding of God. Reading the two traditions together has highlighted for me several claims about what God is like. In *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001), for example, I found it possible to recognize the following claims as common to Christian and Hindu theistic theologies:

1. God is omniscient, omnipotent, without beginning.
2. God can be recognized as the maker of the world, because the world requires an intelligible and intelligent source, and this source can be named as "God." This is true even if much more needs to be said to explain what it means to say that God makes the world.
3. God is accessible, loving, and intent on the good of the human race.

Such claims indicate shared theological ground, while other claims highlight ground that is shared by Hindu and Christian thinkers, though not fully:

4. That God is without flaws is agreed upon by Hindu and Christian theologians, but they do not agree on whether having-a-body and being-possessed-of-desires are flaws or essential dimensions of the divine reality. At least some Hindu theologians see divine materiality and divine desire as goods, not flaws.

5. Christians and some Hindus agree on the possibility and importance of divine embodiment; while terms such as "incarnation" and "avatara" do not point to identical claims about God and humans, they do highlight a shared conviction about what God is like and how God becomes involved in our world.
6. While Hindu theists and Christians will agree that we are in some real ways like God who nonetheless transcends our every category, there is no agreement whether this perfect God too can be described as male or female, or both or neither.
7. Both traditions respect complexity and relationality within the divine simplicity. For Christians, this is manifest in the doctrine of the Trinity, while for Hindus a more likely form of relationality is the male–female relationship of a divine couple. Either way, the divine person is one, yet relational.

We need to study such claims carefully in much more detail before these instances of partial agreement are truly useful, but noting them is a start. Moreover, just as the fact that several traditions agree on particular divine attributes does not prove their truth, so too disagreement need not mean that at most one of the disagreeing traditions understands God properly in that respect. Nonetheless, noting even partial common ground can strengthen our confidence in the claims we make, clarify what is at stake, and disabuse us of the notion that our theological insights are unparalleled.

Comparative Theological Learning, in Particular

Against the background of these more general claims, I devote the remainder of this chapter to particular examples that more specifically characterize the work and fruits of comparative theology. Again, I draw examples drawn from my own comparative Christian-Hindu theological reflection: first, the image of God in particular strands of Christian and Hindu tradition; second, the meaning for Christians of "Narayana" as a name of God; third,

Christian theological encounter with Hindu goddesses; fourth, the spiritual progress in relationship to God that may occur when two intensely spiritual texts are studied together. Since the topics are complex and might be handled in numerous ways involving multiple texts, my own intuitions have necessarily shaped the comparisons I offer. Throughout, I have had to make sure that my expectations as a Christian do not prevent me from hearing as fully as possible the ideas and insights of Hindu scriptures and theological texts, and I ask the reader to exercise the same dispassion. On that basis, we must also decide how to weave old and new insights into a robustly theological and faithful reflection that is spiritually and theologically fruitful.

The Imago Dei *and Our Destiny in Bliss*

In 2008, I was asked to make a presentation to the American Theological Society on the biblical and Christian understanding of *imago Dei* – the view that we are created in God's own image, by a likeness or capacity instilled at the moment of creation – compared with some parallel Hindu theological views.[1] I first surveyed Hindu resources that could, with due diligence, contribute to a comparative appreciation of the *imago Dei* theme, and then explored one example in depth. I made no claim to improve the Christian understanding of *imago Dei* in some qualitative way. My study has thus far been too brief, and in any case comparative work rarely improves old doctrines in dramatic ways. But I did aim to promote fresh thinking about the *imago Dei* by attention to what can be learned from Hindu traditions. For this purpose, I turned again to the *Essence of the Three Holy Mysteries* of Vedanta Desika (see my *Beyond Compare* regarding this text), whom we have met several times in the preceding chapters.

In chapter 22 of the *Essence*, he explores the meaning of the *Mundaka Upanisad* claim that upon final liberation the self attains "full likeness" with God. To reflect theologically on his treatment of the topic, I had first to understand the nature of that likeness according to Desika. In his view this likeness is a kind of natural yet graced shared capacity, the perfection of a mutual enjoyment

shared by God and all dependent ("created") beings. All persons become as it were mirror images of one another, and God is included in this dynamic of likeness, divine and human. This likeness is shared by all liberated selves in a single fullness, and there are no hierarchical differences after liberation. Desika positions himself between Sankara's radical nondualist rejection of any difference between divine and human reality, and the position of another Vedanta theologian, Madhva, who held that even after liberation there are gradations in the human capacity for God.

All of this might in itself be of interest to Christian theologians, simply to see how Desika explains divine-human resemblance by arguments and scriptural resources quite different from the Christian. But to make clearer the comparative theological possibilities, I concluded with a still closer parallel: the treatment of created (human and angelic) vision of the divine essence by Thomas Aquinas in just several sections of *Summa Theologiae* I.12. In *Summa* I.12.2, Aquinas asks whether the essence of God can be seen by the created intellect, through an intellectual image. He defends the view that the created intellect can see God's essence – not by its own natural powers, but through assimilation to the divine self. In I.12.5, he asks whether the human intellect needs any created light in order to see the divine essence. To the objection that created light is necessary, he quotes Psalm 35 – "In Thy light we shall see light" – and argues that the intellect must be informed with the uncreated light of divine presence in order to know God. God's own essence becomes as it were light and life for the soul in this event of "dei-formation": "By this light the blessed are made dei-form, i.e. like to God, according to the saying: 'When He shall appear we shall be like to Him, and we shall see Him as He is' (1 John 2: 2)."

Aquinas in this way captures something of Desika's insight into full likeness. For he too stresses the cognitive and interpersonal destiny of persons brought by grace into a certain kind of identity with God that is neither a merely visual resemblance nor an obliteration of distinction, but a freely willed intimacy that endures ever after. Aquinas's appeal to illumination and Desika's image of blissful experience derive from different sources and take different conceptual forms, but this complexity is itself interesting,

since it suggests multiple ways of understanding how intelligent and active persons, in free response to a divine initiative, reach the perfect fullness of life and nearness to God.

Indeed, as a comparative theological project grows more precise, we find differences that are more interesting, though on a less dramatic and smaller scale. For example, in *Summa Theologiae* I.12.6, Aquinas raises a question, analogous to Madhva's, about gradations in knowledge of God: among those who see the essence of God, does one see more perfectly than another? He answers in the affirmative, thus agreeing with Madhva that there are differences even in the capacity of souls for the beatific vision, gradations geared to the nature, action, and cultivated capacities of the recipient. By contrast, Desika's understanding of the conformity of divine and human demands that all share fully in the vision that is the destiny of all. At this point, therefore, not only do we have an interreligious comparison, but also an interreligious dispute of some theological sophistication. Aquinas may be recognized as an ally to Madhva who defends differences in the ultimate state, while Desika and his allies – Hindu and Christian, I would think – insist on a more perfect likeness of God with all humans.

Reflection on this material tells us much about how certain pre-modern thinkers understood the divine-human resemblance, and not very much about the large issues of religious pluralism. That is the point; comparative theology is small-scale, particular, a matter of examples diligently worked through, one after another. The differences and similarities between Desika and Aquinas are interesting and real, but of the sort that encourages rather than blocks fruitful conversation. If we value precise theological reflection, then we can recognize the modest but real value of a comparative theological reflection on *imago Dei*. We do not prove the truth of a position merely by showing it has occurred to both a Hindu theologian and a Christian theologian; nor can we expect to uncover a stunning deficiency in one tradition that will clear the way for the triumph of the other. Comparisons such as the one I have proposed will be of little use to those interested primarily in deciding which religion is best. But they will be of interest to attentive theologians who want to understand more deeply the *imago Dei*.

What "Narayana" Might Mean for the Christian

My second example pertains to "Narayana," a particular name of God that is revered in the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition. When interpreted properly, with reference to how the tradition has in fact understood it, it should interest and challenge even those who do not pray to God by that name. In *The Truth, the Way, the Life* (2008c), my study of the three Srivaisnava mantras for a new book series of Christian commentaries on non-Christian sacred texts, I again drew on Desika's *Essence*, this time in order to study the Tiru Mantra, Dvaya Mantra, and Carama Sloka which, though no more than twenty words combined, constitute a powerful summation and utterance of Srivaisnava faith and theology. I wanted to know how the mantras were explained in commentaries, analyzed for theological meaning, and shown to disclose and facilitate powerful religious speech and a radical way of religious living. As a commentator and with due respect for the tradition of the mantras, I took the time to study carefully each word of each mantra. I devoted the first substantive chapter to the Tiru Mantra, *aum, namo Narayanaya* ("Aum, obeisance to Narayana").

"Narayana" is rich in theological meanings. First, like earlier commentators, Desika explains the word etymologically, indicating that Narayana is the sure foundation (*ayana*) for all beings (*nara*) but also, at the same time, the one who finds his dwelling place in those same beings. Since the *-ayana* in "Nara-ayana" may also be construed as "the way," the "goal toward which one goes," and "the abode on which something rests," the Lord Narayana is the way, goal, and abode for living beings.

Second, Desika attributes 108 perfections to "Narayana," in a list which still later commentators have grouped under these categories: Narayana is protector (characterized by 8 attributes); the possessor of the qualities of a protector (10 attributes); the person for whom all exists (8 attributes); the one who enables conscious beings to be responsible agents (10 attributes); the possessor of paradoxical qualities (15 attributes); the one who is the primary topic of the scriptures and the recipient of religious

practice (30 attributes); the one who is the destiny of the self (19 attributes); the one in whom lies our ultimate bliss (8 attributes).

The perfections mostly have to do with the divine relationship to the world and to humans and other living beings, particularly those seeking refuge. Or, to use terminology familiar to the Christian tradition, the names distinguish the "economic," engaged reality of God graciously engaging the world, not "God in Himself." The characterization is broad, and almost every quality could apply universally to God in relationship to the human race. Desika's preference for a general characterization of Narayana does nothing to bar devotional attention to Narayana as a specific deity who is the object of popular cult and devotion, engaged in specific divine descents, the doer of deeds celebrated in the epics and mythic narratives – that is, much of what would be popularly known about the divine Person with the proper name Narayana. But, apart from brief references to Sri, the divine consort of Narayana, and to karma and rebirth, hardly any of the perfections are peculiar to Srivaisnava Hinduism.

There is almost nothing in "Narayana," as Desika understands it, that could not be accepted by the Christian. Indeed, in my book, I concluded that once we learn from Desika the perfections latent in "Narayana," the question of whether or not we can use the name "Narayana" to focus our thinking on God in Christian theology becomes less difficult. We may indeed appreciate "Narayana" in accord with most if not all of the 108 perfections Desika attaches to the name. Taking a step further, we might also imagine invoking the name "Narayana" in Christian prayer – and thus the whole mantra as possibly our prayer too—since we can really have no objection to praising God in most of these 108 ways.

To say that we may be able to use this particular name of this particular Hindu deity in Christian prayer is not to state a general principle, as if to hold that all divine names are interchangeable. This instance, and others like it, involving other traditions, need to be discerned in the particular, once we have studied enough to know what we are talking about. Reflection on "Narayana" in this particular fashion does not in any case lead to decisive judgments on Catholic Christianity and Srivaisnava Hinduism. But it does

change the dynamics of how we learn from another tradition and how we understand what we are doing when we name God in theology and prayer.

Encountering Goddesses

A third example serves to highlight a still more delicate discernment requiring yet more agility, as I draw upon my 2005 *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*, already alluded to in chapters 4 and 6. At the book's beginning I admit that ever since visiting a goddess temple in Nepal in 1973 I have been fascinated by Hindu goddesses, by the words, images, and practices of their cult. But, as a theologian, my more deliberate intention was to contribute to contemporary feminist and theological conversations about goddesses and the great Goddess, by emphasizing the value of learning from the three long Hindu goddess hymns I translate and explain, in accord with traditional Hindu commentaries.

Goddesses pose difficult and compelling challenges to the Christian conception of the divine, and, as we try to understand, we stretch our theological and interreligious categories. To celebrate and glorify a supreme Goddess is more specific and unsettling than simply pondering God's presence in other religions. To take goddesses seriously, we need to think about gender as an important aspect of divine character, and about the advantages accruing in actual traditions when the divine person is worshiped and conceptualized as female as well as male. Reflection on goddesses invites us to consider the relationships among "gendered body," "self," and "divinity," and to face the complexities arising when we who are not Hindu seek to balance fidelity to our own traditions with what we might learn from very different theologies.

These matters raise large theoretical issues, but in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* too I did not want to stay on the level of theory. Accordingly, I presupposed that wherever we find ourselves on the spectrum of theological positions regarding gender and the divine, we benefit from learning carefully from women and men who worship goddesses intelligently and devoutly, especially

Hindus who have for millennia worshipped goddesses in accord with nuanced and subtle understanding. Richly understood, goddess discourse offers a plausible theological option that should be considered reasonably by theologians who have studied the matter, and affirmed (or rejected) based on that study and not merely on an a priori basis.

For the sake of this specific experiment, I turned to Hindu goddess hymns and commentaries on them. I studied the *Sri Guna Ratna Kosa of* Parasara Bhattar, the *Saundarya Lahari* attributed to Sankara – both of which Sanskrit hymns I have already mentioned in chapter 6 – and the *Apirami Antati* of Apirami Bhattar. These hymns respectively praise the Goddesses Sri Laksmi (the auspicious, eternal consort of Narayana), Devi ("the Goddess," a supreme Goddess, yet associated with Siva), and Apirami (the "beautiful one," consort of Siva). Much of the book was simply a reading of the hymns in accord with traditional commentaries, since this is the ground for interesting comparative theological work. The hymns are complex and fascinating, and draw in the reader intellectually and spiritually; the commentaries, deep and difficult, stretch the mind and compel the reader to think freshly on the hymns and the topic of Goddesses. Studying the hymns draws in the reader; understanding them opens the way to possible assent and even to the possibility of using the hymns in prayer. All of this added up to a particularly challenging case for comparative theological reflection, and so I wrote *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*.

It is good for a theologian to be instructed and challenged by resources as seemingly exotic as goddess hymns, but there is still more that a comparative theologian can do. In reflecting on the goddess hymns I needed also to return home, lest I remain forever in the ambiguous space where goddess worship becomes intelligible yet impossible for the Catholic. I needed to find a way to connect this learning back to an insight that could engage interested Christian readers. To be vivid and concrete in my return, I pondered anew the Virgin Mary and her place in my Catholic tradition. I drew upon three Marian hymns, the Greek *Akathistos*, the Latin *Stabat Mater*, and the Tamil *Mataracamman Antati*, hymns that give voice to key dimensions of Christian Marian wisdom. Here,

too, reflection on the hymns was indispensable. My particular Catholic upbringing had not adequately prepared me to encounter and meditate upon the traditions of Sri Laksmi, Devi, and Apirami, but the Marian hymns and their piety offered by way of resemblance a mirror in which I could envision the wisdom of the goddess traditions. When we return to Mary after learning from the Goddesses, our Marian devotion will be different, richer, and more captivating of our minds and hearts as well.

Some issues were not resolved in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*. For instance, I chose not to affirm or deny the existence of goddesses. But new light was shed on many issues of enduring interest to theologians who reflect on God, divine gender, and related topics: in the goddess traditions, we see the divine and ourselves differently. Progress can be made in our understanding of God because in a study of this sort the doors are left open to learning, and Christian doctrine does not quickly shut down unlikely avenues of reflection. The larger issues that divide religions do not disappear, but neither do those enduring questions foreclose progress on smaller, particular points that cumulatively change us and the questions that we ask.

Comparative Theology and the Intensification of Devotion

For the fourth and final example of comparative theological practice as theologically fruitful, I return to my 2008 book, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God*. Both Desika's *Essence* and Francis de Sales's *Treatise on the Love of God*, the seventeenth-century Catholic spiritual classic I read alongside the *Essence*, are written so as to instruct, correct, inspire, and draw the reader into ever more intense love of God. Each book is a world unto itself, offering a complete spiritual path. In *Beyond Compare*, I worked with the general chapter themes of "Thinking, Writing, Reading: Finding a Path to Loving Surrender," "Awakening: Reading and Learning on the Way to God," and "Loving Surrender: Insight, Drama, and Ecstasy." By highlighting those themes I sought to learn not only

from what de Sales and Desika taught, but also from how they wrote and how they aimed to stir the minds and hearts of their readers. Throughout, I wanted to show that reading comparatively need not diminish the intensity of either tradition's great respect for this utter dependence. Comparative theological study intensifies rather than dilutes the deep religious instinct to surrender to God.

Still, it was difficult to read the *Essence* and the *Treatise* together, precisely because each is a formidable classic, expressive of a complete religious world that may be taken as exclusive, leaving no room for alternative religious worldviews. Each is quite sufficient, if a reader wants to know the way to God. While the theme of surrender can be seen in any number of traditions, these texts particularize it in vivid ways and draw in the reader rather compellingly, thwarting the kind of comparative work that would simply use the texts to illustrate a general theme generated elsewhere for other purposes. Such is their beauty. Even now, after writing the book, I find that reading one of the texts makes the other seem unnecessary, since one complete religious path, so eloquently expressed, is enough. But if we do honor and unsettle the texts by reading them together – because we believe in the truth of the goal of loving surrender of which they speak, and because we want to rediscover that ideal precisely in the midst of today's religious diversity – then we are doing what we need to do in our day, facing challenges and opportunities unknown to Desika and de Sales. Our reading becomes an agile dance, each text taken with utter seriousness, each deferring to the other, each read by itself for a moment just before the other steps again into the foreground. When read together, each tradition's case for abandonment into the hands of God is purified and intensified by acknowledgment of the case made in the other tradition.

Through this disciplined reading, extended over a longer period of time, the comparative theologian can acquire something at least of the psychological and spiritual freedom needed to accept what she is learning, and to grow spiritually in accord with it. In the process, she may also become increasingly well disposed toward simpler yet extraordinary religious goals such as loving surrender. Integral intellectual and spiritual education of this kind

is very much needed in our current situation of diversity; careful reading across religious boundaries may indeed put us on the path to God. The double reading is never done with, and no synthesis beyond de Sales and Desika emerges. The endless, intensifying spiral of reading is clearly more than the reader can master; the reality of surrender becomes all the more vivid as the theologian herself loses control of her own project.

Theology on a Smaller Scale

I have offered four instances, drawn from my own work, to illustrate the incremental gains that arise slowly from small-scale interreligious study: re-reading *imago Dei*; evoking "Narayana" as God's name; encountering Goddesses; intensifying the prospect of loving surrender by comparative study. The work of setting up and carrying through on these comparisons is essentially an event of faith seeking understanding. The issues exemplified here are small but they are also real, arising in the face of inescapable diversity and in accord with the dynamics of a faith that seeks to understand. The details are context-specific and require some study and a great deal of patience, but the topics remain recognizable theological topics. The work of theology can continue as before, though now with a serious interreligious component. We come to see differently doctrines already familiar to us, we learn to extend and modify our methods of learning, we enter conversations with new colleagues from other traditions, and we come to receive truth, the truth, in hitherto unexpected ways.

At any point, to be sure, this process can be flawed or break down, since the theology will not be better than the theologian, and no theologian is infallible. Comfort in my own tradition can smother inquiry; the suspension of beliefs can degenerate into comfortable academic neutrality; professional distance can permanently postpone a return to faith's concern for the truth. But such problems should not stop us from finding something of use in the experiments themselves.

Chapter 8 completes the work of this chapter by offering a still richer example of comparative theological learning.

Chapter 8

"God for Us"

This chapter was originally an essay for the volume entitled *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. It is a (low-key) detective story in which I grope my way through a weave of quotations and interconnected theological reflections toward an insight into the truth of what God is like. A single Tamil-language verse, first encountered out of its original context, affords me insight into how God is present and responsive to the situation of religious diversity in which we find ourselves. It thereby confirms that comparative theology, like any good theology, in its own imperfect way and in dependence on grace does really tell us something of God.

"God for Us": An Essay

A straightforward way to approach the issue of "multiple religious identities" would be to begin with a review of the resources within one's own tradition – such as already shape one's identity – in order to see what is permissible and sanctioned according to the tradition. I, for instance, might look to the Catholic and Jesuit traditions to consider clues regarding how one is to relate to other

First published in Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). Reprinted by permission of Orbis Books. Except if otherwise noted, translations are my own, based on standard Tamil editions of the named works.

religions. Or one might postulate universal religious experience, and then stress its implications for the possibility of multiple religious identities. But in this essay I begin elsewhere, in what I have been learning more intentionally through years of the study of Hinduism. I shall turn secondly to consider my own tradition in light of this excursion into a Hindu tradition.

A Verse, a Clue

In 1984–5, my first year as a professor at Boston College, I taught a course on saints of the Hindu religious traditions. For a section of the course, I translated a 1940s Tamil-language account of the life of Antal, the ninth-century south Indian saint who composed two poetic works in Tamil, Tiruppavai and Nacciyar Tirumoli.[1] This account by K. R. Govindaraja Muthaliyar is really an elevated hagiography which reconstructs Antal's life with clues extrapolated from her poetry. Govindaraja recounts her birth so as to suggest that she is a Goddess, but his account of her childhood and growing up treats her like a young person distinguished by her intense love of her God – Lord Narayana – and of that God's favoring her. In one key incident, little Antal becomes accustomed, early in the morning, to garlanding herself with the fresh flowers reserved solely for use in temple worship. When her father discovers this "tainting" of the purity of the flowers, he is horrified. But Narayana appears to him in a dream and assures him that the flowers are all the more pleasing because they have been worn by Antal. Finally, the Lord chooses her for his bride, and she is invited to the great temple at Srirangam for her wedding with the Lord who resides there.

The latter part of the account narrates this journey to Srirangam. On the road, the women accompanying her are skeptical that the Lord would approach a human in this way in their time and place, even selecting someone like Antal as his bride. In response, Antal recites or sings this verse:

> Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form;
> Whichever name pleases his people, that is his name;
> Whichever way pleases his people who meditate without ceasing,
> That is his way, the one who holds the discus.

As we love God, God adjusts and comes to us accordingly; if someone loves like a bride, God comes as a groom.

This charming account has been useful in courses aimed at illuminating Hindu devotional piety, and it provides an interesting counterweight to Antal's own poetry. But it is the verse that has most of all stayed with me, distilling and focusing my understanding of a Hindu way of thinking. Although the verse appears in a very specific devotional context, it is strikingly universal. I wondered about the mode of love of God it encourages, how general and how specific. The verse seemed to deserve closer attention, so I began to look deeper into its meaning. Much of this essay is about what I have found in that search, and what I have learned by thinking about it. As we shall see, it has provided me with a way to respond to this volume's thematic question regarding multiple religious belonging. My hypothesis is that in contemplation we construct a path of religious belonging that suits our own spiritual imagining; we do this according to our traditions but also the possibilities available in our time and place. In all of this, God agrees to meet us there; if our contemplation happens to cross religious boundaries, God agrees to meet us there too. But let us see how I arrived at this hypothesis.

What Hindus Thought about the Verse

When I searched out the source of Antal's lovely verse, I discovered right away that she had not composed it. Rather, it is verse 44 from a work known as the Mutal Tiruvantati,[2] attributed to Poykai Alvar, a Vaisnava saint (alvar), who lived a generation or two before Antal. Poykai Alvar was by tradition "found" by his parents nestled in the wall of a water tank. By tradition, too, he and two other saints, Pey Alvar and Bhut Alvar, found their mission by chance. During a wild thunderstorm one by one they took refuge in a small shelter, and found themselves mysteriously and increasingly squeezed together by a fourth and unseen presence. In fact, they were being overwhelmed by

the growing presence of Lord Narayana who had unexpectedly visited them and was crowding in upon them. Upon realizing this they burst into song, each composing 100 verses, of which Poykai's verses are placed first and known simply as the Mutal Tiruvantati.

Poykai Alvar's general question has to do with how God has been accessible to humans, and how one learns to see God now. The verses of the Mutal Tiruvantati immediately preceding verse 44 set up its context. Poykai Alvar had been reflecting on the ways in which God is both great and merciful, and how the divine justice, though uncompromised, leaves room for a gentle compassion and a divine intention to find devotees wherever they may be. The Lord focuses intently on those who depend on him (25); he is the cause of the world, yet also compassionate to individuals in their individual needs (29); he has expressed his gracious intent in deeds performed in past divine *avataras* (34, 35, 36), but also in certain places, most importantly the temple on Mount Tiruvenkatam where he is easily accessible, though remaining transcendent and mysterious (37–43). After verse 44, Poykai Alvar continues to investigate the path toward union with the Lord, the simplicity of true meditation, the power of evoking the sacred name, etc.

Verse 44 thus serves as a kind of intermediate summation: the transcendent Lord, source of the universe, who has engaged in astounding deeds in ancient times and who dwells most graciously in the temple at Tiruvenkatam, is also present in every place, any time, wherever devotees may be. God remains creative and accommodating now. Because of this, he can be found now, in meditation, however devotees imagine him.

Since first impressions are not always correct, I was reluctant to read the verse out of context or to overextend it interreligiously merely according to my own wishes. My next step then was to ask how the Vaisnava tradition actually interpreted the verse and its claim about divine graciousness. I found two ancient commentaries directly on the Mutal Tiruvantati: a detailed commentary by Periyavaccanpillai in the thirteenth century, and a prose summation by Appillai in the fifteenth century.

Periyavaccanpillai offers a straightforward exegesis of Mutal Tiruvantati 44, which also puts it in a larger textual context. Most importantly, he emphasizes the specific realizations of divine graciousness in form, name, and deed, by linking each of the first three lines of the verse to an illustrative parallel. The first line, "Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form," is illustrated with an anecdote about an unusual and humble divine form. The great teacher Ramanuja was out walking near the Srirangam temple, and saw some boys at play. In fact, they were playing priests, and for this had outlined a shrine of Lord Narayana in the dust. Ramanuja not only was not offended by this, but indeed was certain that the Lord was present even in so trivial form as that produced by playful boys. So he prostrated himself before the image sketched by the boys, and even took its dust as *prasadam* (the food given to one who worships in a temple).

Periyavaccanpillai illustrates line 2, "Whichever name pleases his people, that is his name" with an anecdote recollecting the favorite name by which Nanciyar, an earlier teacher, evoked God. Lord Narayana appeared to a teacher named Visnucittar, and asked for alms, identifying himself as "the cowherd God." When Visnucittar asked him why he answered to that unusual name, he replied that this was the name that pleased Nanciyar, so it pleased him as well.

Line 3, "Whichever way pleases his people who meditate without ceasing, that is his way" prompts an anecdote about Rama's self-forgetfulness in the Ramayana (Yuddha Kanda 117). Although prince Rama was really Lord Narayana come down on earth and his kidnapped wife Sita was really his eternal consort Laksmi, Rama became absorbed in his earthly deeds and acted as if he was simply a human being. He even thought of dismissing his wife Sita, whom he had just rescued from captivity, on the grounds that perhaps she was defiled by her captor, Ravana. The gods spoke to Rama, lamenting that he seemed to have forgotten his real identity as supreme Lord of the universe, and likewise his wife's true divinity, and also that in his true nature he was not

susceptible to the cruel doubts which divide other men from their wives. Rama responded by admitting that he had indeed been so immersed in his mission that he had forgotten his divine identity. Accordingly, he asked the gods to remind him of who he was, and Brahma, spokesman for the gods, complied. Periyavaccanpillai's point, of course, is that the Lord is like that: God becomes immersed in his salvific tasks even to the point of self-forgetfulness. Similarly, God always thinks more of "us" than of God's own self.[3]

These anecdotes – Ramanuja's simple commitment to finding God in all things, the Lord taking for himself the name Nanciyar enjoys, Rama's self-forgetfulness in service – illustrate Mutal Tiruvantati 44 and give a rich contextual "feel" to the notion that the Lord actually accommodates his devotees. Accordingly, the reader is encouraged to recollect such anecdotes along with the verse, and thus to be more confident in encountering God.[4]

The Verse and Its Wider Context

In addition to direct commentary on the verse, Periyavaccanpillai explicates it by linking it to a verse from the much more well-known, Sanskrit-language Bhagavad Gita:

> However someone takes refuge in me, in that way do I favor them, Partha! (Bhagavad Gita 4.11)

Thereafter, this Gita verse serves as a kind of all-India Sanskrit-double for the local Tamil insight of Mutal Tiruvantati 44.

The Gita verse has an appropriate theological tradition of its own. Ramanuja, the key teacher of the tradition to which Periyavaccanpillai belongs, had used Gita 4.11 as an occasion for summarizing the double purpose of divine descent, i.e., the restoration of righteousness and the promotion of divine accessibility. According to Ramanuja, the divine descents are first of all freely chosen divine acts aimed at defeating evildoers and uplifting the good. But more importantly, in fact, these acts of divine entry into the world provide devotees with more immediate access to God, an access which is distinctive and good in itself, an

opportunity which the Lord graciously provides for his people. Mutal Tiruvantati 44 is understood to be making the same point: God desires to accommodate his people, meeting them wherever they happen to be.

The message of Gita 4.11 and Mutal Tiruvantati 44, that the Lord is near and available, is also taken by Periyavaccanpillai as referring particularly to divine temple images. At Mutal Tiruvantati 44, he also cites Visnudharmottara Purana 103.16, a puranic text which makes explicit the value of constructing a temple image of gold:

> The lovely form of Visnu, his image, his pleasing face and glance –
> making this image in a way that pleases him, from gold or silver,
> he should then honor it, bow before it, love it, meditate on it.
> His flaws removed, he will then reach that form of Brahman.

The point of Mutal Tiruvantati 44 is thus made even more concrete: the Lord is willing to be present in whatever material form and shape his devotees construct for him, and the temple image – idol – expresses the same accessibility known in ancient times through the divine descents. We are thus reminded of Antal's approach to Lord Narayana at Srirangam where, for all his enduring transcendent mystery, God can be found all the time, every day.

Appillai summarizes the meaning of the citation of Visnudharmottara Purana 103.16 in this way:

> Thus the Lord does not consider his own greatness, but holds as his own forms, names, deeds, etc., those which please people who take refuge in him. Thus Poykai Alvar reflects on and makes known the excellence of the nature of the image-form with which the Lord serves those who take refuge in him.

Later Srivaisnava theologians confirm what had clearly become a standard belief in the tradition: as devotees seek the Lord, so the Lord makes himself found by them. The fourteenth-century Vedanta Desika, for example, makes the same connection of Mutal Tiruvantati 44 with the same Gita text:

> The person surrendering should meditate on the Lord's making himself dependent on those who seek his protection in a manner

that cannot be understood by the mind or described in words. As it says, "However someone takes refuge in me, in that way do I favor them," (Bhagavad Gita 4.11); the same is also stated in Tamil, "Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form." (Mutal Tiruvantati 44)[5]

An Aside on How to See God and on How God Wills to Be Seen

To deepen our sense of the meditative process and theology of divine accessibility promoted by Mutal Tiruvantati 44, let us detour for a moment by taking a look at the interpretation of another alvar song, Tiruvaymoli 3.6, one from among the hundred by the poet Satakopan. Here is a characteristic verse from among the eleven which comprise the song:

Never manifest, never decaying, yet he does both,
unique in form, the bright eyed Lord abides,
so that one who receives both his grace and anger can enter beneath his feet;
fragrance, manifestation, taste, sound, approachability:
all of this is my bull of the heaven-dwellers –
except for him I have belonged to no one else, not even for seven births.

This song is traditionally understood as a key locus for reflection on temple presence, and in this light it was commented on extensively by an earlier teacher, Nampillai, the teacher of Periyavaccanpillai.[6] In explaining Tiruvaymoli 3.6, Nampillai introduces Mutal Tiruvantati 44, along with Gita 4.11 and Visnudharmottara Purana 103.16. But he also extends the intertextual connection by introducing several other interesting references which enrich our understanding of the kind of contemplation this tradition had in mind in commenting on Mutal Tiruvantati 44 and Bhagavad Gita 4.11.

First, Nampillai cites a section of the fourth-century Visnu Purana (5.17), in which we hear of the visualization practice of Akrura, the minister of Kamsa, a king who is a fierce enemy of

Krsna (Lord Visnu come down on earth). Akrura himself is a good man deeply devoted to Krsna, intent on seeing Krsna who has made himself accessible to humans. When Akrura finally meets Krsna, he notes in rich detail the details of the person before him – Krsna's color, his physical features, how he walked, the clothing he wore, the flowers in his hair. The next day Akrura goes down to the river to bathe and meditate. This time he visualizes Krsna anew by recollecting what he had already seen, re-creating in his imagination those same vivid details of Krsna's appearance. After this powerful visualization, Akrura meets Krsna once again, and confirms the reality of his contemplation: "I saw a marvel at the river, and now I see it before my eyes, in bodily form. For it is you that I encountered in the waters, Krsna. The entire world is filled with your marvelous presence." God is really present, in direct encounter and as one recollects God in meditation.[7]

Second, Nampillai connects Tiruvaymoli 3.6 with the practice of *uruvelippatu*, visualization. The Lord is accessible according to how intensely the devotee imagines the divine presence. In introducing the song he cites a scene from the Ramayana, Sundara Kanda 21.19, where Sita, kidnapped and captive, spoke to king Ravana, her captor. In warning Ravana to allow Rama to rescue her, she referred to Rama as if he was actually present, next to herself and Ravana. She was so preoccupied with Rama that he was vividly present in her imagination, wherever she herself might be. Likewise, Nampillai notes, Ravana himself became increasingly preoccupied with Rama who was coming to fight him and take back his wife, so he too could not help but visualize Rama's presence everywhere around him. Sita's longing, Ravana's guilt: intensity of emotion – longing or fear – made Rama vividly present. This process could be imitated in the more reflective process of meditation.[8]

In introducing Tiruvaymoli 3.6, Nampillai also indicates the importance of the visualization that occurs regularly in the temple context by citing the Srirangarajastavam, a hymn composed by Ramanuja's disciple Parasara Bhattar in praise of divine accessibility:

> Let us stop counting your births
> which overflow with auspicious qualities

and let us stop numbering all that is good about you, O Lord of Srirangam!
Your real delight is being worshipped in this world
In temples, homes, and hermitages, bearing all things and in a condition of complete dependence upon the temple priests.
Tender-hearted persons are stunned at this character of yours! (2.74)

That is, the Lord is tender-hearted because he is present in temples, homes, and hermitages, enduring all things, and remains in a condition of complete dependence on temple priests. That this point is the same as made in Mutal Tiruvantati 44 is made clear by Nampillai's series of cross-references, as he connects for us Mutal Tiruvantati 44, Bhagavad Gita 4.11, Tiruvaymoli 3.6, and Srirangarajastavam 2.74. These linked texts support one another, and all confirm the basic theological point: the Lord is willing to make himself approachable in a form suitable to humans.

In the fifteenth century, the great teacher Manavalamamunigal closes this particular circle by citing Mutal Tiruvantati 44 along with Srirangarajastavam 2.74, emphasizing the connection of both to temple worship:

> "Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form." I.e., as [the Lord] takes that form for himself which the devotees imagine as his divine body, he makes himself present in any material which the devotees choose, such as gold, silver, or stone. Here it is not like the specialties of manifestation, incarnations such as Rama, Krsna, etc., where he made himself present with a fixed norm, with respect to places such as Ayodhya, Mathura, etc., regarding the time such as 11,000 years, 100 years, etc., regarding the fitness of the person, Dasaratha, Vasudeva and so on. Here there is no norm regarding place, as it is said, "[Your real delight is being worshipped in this world] in temples, homes, and hermitages." Here there is no rule which limits time, place, form, in some already established way. The Lord overlooks the shortcomings of devotees, since he is tolerant – as it says, "Bearing all things." (Srirangarajastavam 2.74)[9]

In modern times, the same interconnections of text, image, and affect are reaffirmed, for instance, in the modern Tamil editions

and commentaries by Krsnasami Ayyangar, today's premiere Srivaisnava editor and commentator. After linking Bhagavad Gita 4.11 to Mutal Tiruvantati 44, and to other texts we have seen, Visnu Purana 5.17.5 and Tiruvaymoli 3.6.9, he also extends the intertextual connection by adding a citation from the Sanskrit-language Jitante Stotra 1.5, which notably reinforces the theme of divine accessibility:

> You have no form, no shape, no weapons, no abode,
> But nonetheless you shine forth in the form of the Person for those who love you.

Ayyangar interprets this verse too as stressing the extreme nature of the Lord's accommodation: God has no form, shape, power, place; indeed, he is nothing, except insofar as he formulates himself in accommodation of his devotees:

> In the previous verse you were described as the means; this verse explains how you make yourself and what is proper to you suitable to those crossing over worldly existence (*samsara*). The fact that devotees and their proper nature exist for the Lord is indeed due simply to what is proper to them; but that he should make himself and his proper nature exist for their sake is due rather to his tenderness, good character, etc. Therefore, this verse explains his tenderness, good character, etc., such that he is the object of refuge. For tenderness, good character, etc., are supporting aspects of the definition of him as the object of refuge who is both transcendent and accessible.

When we return finally to K. R. Govindaraja Muthaliyar's telling of Antal's story in the 1940s, and review his decision to use Mutal Tiruvantati 44 in illumination of Antal's hope, we can see clearly that by putting this verse in her mouth he aligns himself with the old tradition of citing it when there is a need to highlight the Lord's determination to be accessible to his devotees according to their wishes – even as Antal might dream of marrying God. He also stresses the value of the accessibility of temple presence, and accentuates the remarkable, counterintuitive ease of this access. This "modern" reformulation poses the old value

in the face of skeptics, represented by the women: in the past God came very close to us, as a bridegroom, but "it does not seem right that now, in his temple form, the Lord would marry Antal." She replies with vs. 44, and adds, "if he has appeared to people in the past, why should it be extraordinary now?"[10] The long tradition of reflection on the immediacy of God's presence, particularly in temples, is represented vividly when Antal is given the verse to quote.

Mutal Tiruvantati 44 itself is just one key to one traditional Hindu way of seeing God and God's accessibility, incorporating the piety of ancient teachers, practices of meditation and worship, and a powerful theology of divine accommodation. As I traced the verse in its various contexts, I was also learning to think and imagine along with the commentators, and to see more vividly for myself some of the possibilities opened by the verse and its logic of human-divine accommodation: the promises made by Narayana to these Hindu writers come alive as promises I can at least imagine as promises made to me as well. While the tradition has not extended its reflection on Mutal Tiruvantati 44 in support of a theology of God's presence in other religions – it remains thoroughly focused on the Vaisnava tradition itself – I can well imagine how that extension might appropriately be made.

Noticing One's First Citizenship: Reflection on Ignatian Insight and My Home Citizenship

But we really cannot talk about the acquisition of a new, more complex identity unless we are also clear about our first belonging and how it functions in shaping our consciousness, as a limit and as a resource. So let us turn to the topic of "first belonging," mine in particular. If I have made some progress in learning about Hindu spiritual theology by my study of Mutal Tiruvantati 44, the process would still fail to be satisfying were there no application to what I know of God and how I know it. How does one's first "religious belonging" shape what follows thereafter, one's new loyalties?

I myself have been studying and writing from a fairly clear and rather traditional religious identity; it is only because I thus locate myself within a specific Christian tradition that my writing might seem to some to be adventuresome or perilous. As mentioned in chapter 1, I am a Roman Catholic priest, and a member of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. This tradition of Catholic Christianity, centered on Jesus Christ, likewise places a priority on contemplation, the value of visualizing God – in Jesus Christ – and on a gradual approach to God's presence. Throughout the preceding reflection on Mutal Tiruvantati 44, I have already and naturally had in mind Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, the basic text which guides Jesuit meditation and contemplation. Some comments on this Ignatian resource are in order.

Ignatian spirituality is, of course, deeply rooted in the Gospel narratives which recount the life, words, and works of Jesus of Nazareth. Even apart from the specific theologies of each Gospel, there is affective power in the stories the evangelists tell about Jesus and the people he met, those who followed him and loved him, those who killed him. If one reads the Gospels imaginatively, one begins to visualize his birth and childhood, his time in the desert where he was tempted, the outpouring of the Spirit and the beginning of his ministry. We see him teaching the people, healing the sick, raising the dead. We follow him as he walks up to Jerusalem to meet his destiny and fulfill his Father's will. We mourn as we see him die on the cross, and we rejoice in his resurrection, and recognize that we too are filled with his Spirit and sent forth to make him known in the world. Christ became like us in all things – that we might likewise become like him.

What Ignatius Had to Say

Drawing on a medieval contemplative tradition,[11] Ignatius makes particular use of this tradition of Gospel contemplation by his concerted practice of applying the imagination to scenes from the life of Christ, composing such scenes so as to encourage the active engagement of the meditator. Indeed, Ignatius organizes much of

his *Spiritual Exercises* in relation to these simple Gospel mysteries, for it is here that God and humans meet. In Jesus we find a common ground, and in a marvelous sense God and humans become adequate to one another. Ignatius offers a series of contemplations which invite meditators to enter upon the scenes themselves, to find their place in the famous stories, and engage in conversation with Jesus. They are to make a mental construction of the "place for contemplation" so as to be able to see the relevant spiritual and mental realities more clearly, and enter affectively upon the scene. Consequently, these meditators are asked to ponder each scene lovingly, composing the details of the place as vividly as seems profitable, for example, imagining Jerusalem or the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the room prepared for the Last Supper, the tomb in which Jesus was laid. In describing a meditation early in the "second week" of the *Exercises*, Ignatius sets the pattern:

> First Prelude. This is the history of the mystery. Here it will be that our Lady, about nine months with child, and, as may be piously believed, seated on an ass, set out from Nazareth. She was accompanied by Joseph and a maid, who was leading an ox. They are going to Bethlehem to pay the tribute that Caesar imposed on those lands.
>
> Second Prelude. This is a mental representation of the place, It will consist here in seeing in imagination the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Consider its length, its breadth; whether level, or through valleys and over hills. Observe also the place or cave where Christ is born; whether big or little; whether high or low; and how it is arranged.[12]

Once the scene is set, one enters it as a participant:

> First Point. This will consist in seeing the persons, namely, our Lady, St. Joseph, the maid, and the Child Jesus after His birth. I will make myself a poor little unworthy slave, and as though present, look upon them, contemplate them, and serve them in their needs with all possible homage and reverence. Then I will reflect on myself that I may reap some fruit.

> Second Point. This is to consider, observe, and contemplate what the persons are saying, and then to reflect on myself and draw some fruit from it.
>
> Third Point. This will be to see and consider what they are doing, for example, making the journey and laboring that our Lord might be born in extreme poverty, and that after many labors, after hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, after insults and outrages, He might die on the cross, and all this for me. Then I will reflect and draw some spiritual fruit from what I have seen.[13]

As the meditator imagines Christ in these locations, Christ becomes present to the person, as if there, now. Although the forms are of course understood as rooted in historical fact, Ignatius presumes that God is willing to accommodate the images generated by the person who contemplates that history now. The great energy behind imaginative practice in the *Exercises* is rooted in Ignatius's expectation that there can be an immediate relationship between God and the person who meditates, by way of the vehicle of the meditator's honest use of the imagination. As Ignatius explains in his introductory notes, contemplation gives the meditator a "taste" of God:

> Second Annotation: The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of facts, and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer or better understood. This may arise either from his own reasoning, or from the grace of God enlightening his mind. Now this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if one in giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.[14]

This imagining is not a mere connection with ancient events, but also the event of direct contact with God:

> Fifteenth Annotation: But while one is engaged in the Spiritual Exercises, it is more suitable and much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate Himself to the devout soul in quest of

> the divine will, that He inflame it with His love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future. Therefore, the director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord.[15]

God engages the individual in a deeply personal way, preventing even traditional images of God and ordinary mediating authority structures from standing in the way of an active and effective use of the imagination.

Some Contemporary Views of the Intensification and Emptying of the Imagination in the Spiritual Exercises

Roland Barthes's *Sade Fourier Loyola* (1976) is one of the freshest studies of Ignatius's meditation techniques. It focuses in part on his strategies for the purification and intensification of the active imagination. Barthes is intrigued by Ignatius's project, seeing it as a controlled manufacture of certain feelings and emotions in the meditator, a clearing out of old images and an intensely defined admission of the new. Barthes notes that "anyone reading the *Exercises* cannot help but be struck by the mass of desire which agitates it," and

> the immediate force of this desire is to be read in the very materiality of the objects whose representation Ignatius calls for: places in their precise, complete dimensions, characters in their costumes, their attitudes, their actions, their actual words. The most abstract things (which Ignatius calls "invisibles") must find some material movement where they can picture themselves and form a tableau vivant: if the Trinity is to be envisioned, it will be in the form of three Persons in the act of watching men descending into hell; how, the basis, the force of the materiality, the immediate total of desire, is of course the human body; a body incessantly mobilized into image by the play of imitation which establishes a literal analogy between the corporeality of the exercitant and that of Christ,

> whose existence, almost physiological, is to be discovered through personal anamnesis. The body in Ignatius is never conceptual: it is always this body: if I transport myself to a vale of tears, I must imagine, see this flesh, these members among the bodies of the creatures.[16]

Yet in the midst of this concreteness, as Barthes rightly notes, exterior images are stripped away, in effect giving the interior person full control over the construction of images:

> in the isolated and darkened room in which one meditates, everything is prepared for the fantastic meeting of desire, formed by the material body, and of the "scene" drawn from allegories of desolation and the Gospel mysteries. For this theater is entirely created in order that the exercitant may therein represent himself: his body is what is to be occupied.[17]

The role of the meditator is focused on Jesus throughout:

> this theater is entirely created in order that the exercitant may therein represent himself: his body is what is to occupy it. The very development of the retreat, throughout the final three Weeks, follows the story of Christ: he is born with Him, travels with Him, eats with Him, undergoes the Passion with Him. The exercitant is continually required to imitate twice, to imitate what he imagines: to think of Christ "as though one saw Him eating with His disciples, His way of drinking, of looking, of speaking; and try to imitate Him."[18]

Key to Barthes's understanding of Ignatius's method is this project of combining acts of imagination with the emptying of the imagination. Established images are noted and observed, and then stripped away so that the meditator can create more immediately her own image of the scene chosen for meditation; personal engagement in the contemplative process is given maximal opportunity. By extension, I suggest, the religiously plural and interreligious environment too provides genuinely religious opportunities for the disciplined meditator who both uses and empties the imagination.

In a recent essay on Ignatius's understanding of seeing in the *Exercises*, Richard Blake, SJ, notes Barthes's insights and further sharpens our understanding of the dynamic of emptying in the *Exercises*:

> the one making the contemplation deliberately empties the mind of past images, like a favorite painting, statue, or pictures derived from the words of Scripture, from poetry, or ascetical writing; thus the retreatant begins with a blank canvas, and the process of filling it provides the opportunity for "the Father in heaven [to meet] His children and [speak] with them," much as God does with the words of Scripture. In other words, creating the images from nothing without adapting prior material can, under the guidance of grace, become an experience of divine inspiration … The personal, private image created under God's inspiration clearly holds a greater value than the image recollected and reconstructed from external sources.[19]

Blake goes on to observe that this imaginative process is virtually "limitless, and thus not bound by historical or archaeological reality." Rather, everything is accommodated to one's own desire, as one imagines God in one's own way, and finds God anew in strikingly novel places:

> For example, rather than trying to picture the clothes and utensils Jesus used, the look on his face (as suggested from prior experience of a painting, perhaps), and the sound of his voice (speaking the American English of a fine actor or radio announcer), it may be just as "accurate" for the purposes of contemplation to see Christ in the face of a loved one, in the wasted body of an AIDS patient or in the African or Asian features of those we join in ministry. Perhaps, too, the school or parish or prison may provide a more suggestive setting for meeting the Lord than Galilee as presented in the pages of the National Geographic or as reproduced in biblical movies.[20]

The concluding "Contemplation to Attain Love" [of the *Exercises*] moves from the specificity of the Christocentric focus to a wider and deeper imagining of Christ everywhere in one's world:

> Ignatius encourages a series of reflections on images of concrete, visual realities, but in characteristically schematic fashion. As in so

> many instances, he provides stark outlines, like drawings in a coloring book. He expects the exercitants to color in the details from their own favorite collection of oils, water colors, or Crayolas.[21]

The meditative process is concrete and imaginative. God operates in accord with the very acts of imagining undertaken by the persons who meditate. There is a delicate and important balance between the insistence that pre-established or traditional, even scriptural images, decisively limit and focus meditation, and the insistence that we can imagine God – in all the ways one can imagine – and know, in humble awareness – that God will find us there.

Multiple Religious Belonging, Human but Also Divine

In the first part of this essay I outlined in detail – more detail perhaps than readers of this volume may have expected – a traditional interpretation and intertextualization of a Tamil verse about God's accessibility, and reflected on the kind of religious consciousness that is cultivated among both learned and simple readers. In the second part I returned to my own spiritual tradition, paralleling Mutal Tiruvantati 44 with a few suggestive (and hardly original or complete) comments on the imaginative religious practice of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order to which I belong first of all.

In Ignatius's understanding of meditation, as in Mutal Tiruvantati and the texts related to it, there is an emphasis on the constructive aspect of meditation and the possibilities for real encounter with God through specific experiments in human imagining. Two different meditative traditions remain different, yet both teach us to see how God wishes to be recognized in recognizable terms. Accordingly, each can be re-viewed in light of the other, as old and new visions of God are refracted in the proximity of the two. I do not wish to claim that the two traditions have the same view of human religious imagining or identical theologies of divine accommodation, but I do assert that the similarities are real and striking, that in our time the dynamic of their visions of divine accommodation enmeshes the traditions

with one another, and that today this shared dynamic enables us to understand multiple religious belonging at a deeper and richer level.

I conclude with several reflections on these new possibilities with special reference to comparative theology. First, while one could focus on shared religious experience, the common features of human nature, or the imperative of the biblical tradition toward universalism, my choice has been to stress rather that multiple religious belonging is in important ways as accessible and ordinary as any process of attentive reading. Reading across boundaries is not entirely different from religious reading within particular religious traditions. With some focused effort, a Christian reader can pick up and read a Hindu text such as Mutal Tiruvantati 44, trace the use of it within the Hindu tradition, re-read it in light of some remembered Christian parallels, and then re-read some Christian sources in that new light. In some cases, at least, this complication and expansion of the reading process changes us religiously. We do read; we do learn from what we read; we do ponder our reading; this does affect how we read other texts; and all of this does have a yet deeper effect on how we imagine our encounter with God. If a Christian reads a Hindu verse and ponders it according to traditions of Hindu learning, this eventually has an effect – salutary, I suggest – on how she thinks and reads, contemplates and encounters Jesus of Nazareth, who even today wishes to encounter us.

This religious reading offers a renewed contemplative practice which that complexifies and deepens how we imagine and see God. We are what we read, and if we read in complex ways we become persons with complex religious identities. Reading Poykai Alvar and reading Ignatius end up as mutually complicated acts of reading; the texts become intertexts – which can now be cited in both commentarial traditions. At least, thus far, Mutal Tiruvantat*i* 44 has now been cited by a Jesuit who reflects on the meaning of Ignatius's heritage. Ignatian spirituality disposes one to appreciate Poykai Alvar's point; even if one is deeply devoted to Lord Narayana's accommodating approach to devotees like Poykai Alvar and Antal, this need not be a barrier, intellectual or spiritual, to learning from Ignatius's imaginative

practices. If in the end we bring to our spiritual understanding and practice images which that belong to more than one tradition, we ourselves begin to belong to those multiple traditions in new and complex ways. In a sense, we are "intertexted" in our spiritual practice. Even the most cautious believer need not find anything in this process of learning that has to be dangerous or objectionable. There is no good reason to avoid cultivating an awareness of God's active accommodation to human effort as appreciated in both traditions.

At a secondary level, we are also given a new consciousness of what God and we are doing when we use our imaginations in Christian contemplative prayer. Grace comes first, but we remain agents in the construction of our own religious self-identity and our understanding of God and, according to the contemplative practices endorsed by Poykai Alvar and Ignatius, God graciously meets us where we manage to be. If we ponder what we know and what we learn from Mutal Tiruvantati 44 and the *Spiritual Exercises*, we then see our original belonging differently, understand God's initiatives and responses more broadly, and so have at least an initially richer and more complex starting point for reflection on where and how God can be found in the future. Apart from any specific theoretical commitment, one begins to *imagine* differently.

In both the Vaisnava and Christian traditions – and of course more broadly too – God remains sovereign over the possibilities of encounter. Since God can come in *any* form, then *any* form will suffice if humans imagine sincerely and God responds. A purification process may be involved, of course, but this will not rule out in advance images that occur to us inside and outside our original tradition. This is a kind of vacancy, an expectation for which the way has been cleared, which in practice is simply a recognition that there are no obstructions – sin, ill-will, ignorance aside – which must necessarily prevent us from contemplations that cross religious divides. Instead of merely being confronted with myriad competing images of God – and there are many, in both Christian traditions and other traditions – an attentive emptying which leaves room for true encounter with God also leaves the traditions unobstructed by one another in the minds of

meditators who draw on both traditions. In this context, multiple religious identities receive a deeply spiritual foundation.

One might consider the texts together, to absorb more deeply the basic insight:

> But while one is engaged in the Spiritual Exercises, it is more suitable and much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate Himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that He inflame it with His love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future.

> Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form;
> Whichever name pleases his people, that is his name;
> Whichever way pleases his people who meditate without ceasing,
> That is his way, that one who holds the discus.

How we meet God depends in part on how generously open – imaginative, vacant – we stand in expectation of this God who promises to adjust to us, accommodating us as we are.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that this complexification of religious identity is not just a human production. Rather, as in every instance where we grow spiritually because we continue to share a living relationship with God, this too is a response to God in interaction with a God who responds to us. It is a matter of acknowledging a truth that has to do with God's way of accommodating us and meeting us. In the past, Srivaisnavas have meditated on the graciousness of Narayana's accommodation to the variety of ways people imagine, name, and tell stories of God; those of us who are Christians have found the Gospel stories of Jesus, imagined and extended differently in different times and places, to be graced points of encounter with the living Christ. Today it seems to be the case that God is approached in acts of contemplation which are in part the fruit of new images generated by meditators who expect that God will still come near and be accessible – even when they are praying along with Poykai Alvar and Ignatius at the same time. The traditions remain different in important features, and at some level may seem contradictory, but these differences do not cancel out a common spiritual expectation: God is everywhere, one finds God everywhere and in everything. We seek in new

ways, and God responds accordingly, agreeing to meet humans who find God differently because they imagine and remember in more than one religious tradition. It seems now to be the case that the form, name, deed, and condescension of God can all become consciously interreligious on God's part too – not simply because humans are responding to pluralism differently, so as to project different images of the divine, but because those who meditate are complicating and rearranging the names, and forms, and deeds according to which they are pleased to wait upon God. Accordingly, and as ever, God meets them in these new ways.

On a theoretical level, we can therefore propose that it is not necessary to assert that God is immobile and unable or unwilling to respond to the new situation of multiple religious belongings. If a considerable number of good, sincere, genuinely God-seeking (and God-finding, being-found-by-God) human beings learn, think, reflect, and see across religious boundaries, and bring a new multiplicity to their prayer and reflection, then it seems proper to assume that God can graciously accommodate us and meet us in the complexity of this new spirituality, theology, community.[22]

On a practical level, we can say that humans who truly seek God have honestly created new religious situations where God bears more complex names, forms, and histories. It is not unimaginable then that God, who is not confined by what we are accustomed to and who does not hesitate to reach out to those who meditate, would graciously agree to encounter us in this new situation in new ways. Multiple religious belongings may at an early stage seem merely or uncomfortably multiple, until we – who are Christian, who are Hindu – notice that even when our imaginations have become religiously more complicated and diverse it is still the same God who is seeking us out, accommodating us where we are. Govindaraja was on to something perhaps more universal than he realized when, in order to respond to skeptical bystanders who complain that nothing new can happen in our time and place, he put Poykai Alvar's words into Antal's mouth:

> Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form;
> Whichever name pleases his people, that is his name;

> Whichever way pleases his people who meditate without ceasing,
> That is his way, that one who holds the discus.

Even in our time and place, God still graciously enjoys the possibility of finding us where we are pleased to look for God.

"God for Us" as Comparative Theology

"God for Us" exemplifies how careful comparative reflection, theological in its content and method, promises particular insights into who God is and what God wants of us. The essay is admittedly rather complex as it traces a thread of textual references, gradually discovering how spiritual learning was set forth in the Srivaisnava tradition. But, as I understand it, the result is clearer insight into what God is like, so the process and the result should be of interest even to non-comparative theologians who likewise balance scriptural interpretation and theological reasoning in their quest to understand faith's claims.

Studying another tradition eventually brings us home again. My reading brought me back to the Christian tradition and to today's diversity, and yielded fresh insight into Christian and even Ignatian ways of visualizing God. Upon re-reading, and in the course of class discussions of the essay, I have also come to see all the more clearly how God graciously takes seriously our religious diversity and the effect it has on our religious and theological imagination. God keeps up with us, finding us where we are. In Srivaisnava Hinduism, and by extension in my Christian tradition as read comparatively after Srivaisnava insights, God may be recognized as choosing to communicate to us even beyond the limits of our own traditions, even in the ambiguous space where we keep thinking of our own and other traditions at the same time. That God has adjusted and now intends to meet us in the midst of religious diversity is a theological claim in need of further discussion before it can be fully accepted. Because it has arisen from comparative work and was not a hypothesis merely validated by

comparative data, discussion of it will have to include reflection on the details I have put forward.

Like other forms of richly conceived theology, this comparative practice is – ought to be, can be – more than narrowly academic. At its best, it opens into greater knowledge of God and more intimate encounters with God. No matter how complex the process, or how many small-scale examples have to be accumulated, real knowledge of God, in reality ever simple, is what this is all about. Comparative theology is therefore not only an intellectual exercise but also a spiritual event that will keep overflowing our expectations. For the Christian, this culminates in encounter with Jesus Christ who still encompasses and redeems all reality; all our experiences and truths are transformed by new insights into who Jesus is for us. For a Srivaisnava Hindu, it will, I expect, culminate in knowledge of and encounter with Narayana with Sri in whom all reality finds its fullness, a bliss now experienced more fully in a new grasp of the reality of this divine couple. For other traditions, the return home to particular commitments will likewise occur by other fresh insights that make all things new while still confirming basic truths. Yet, if lasting insight can be gleaned from an example such as the one proposed in this chapter, it may be this: all of us need to face the fact, the gracious fact, that God encounters us anew and differently in the context of today's diversity. God is ahead of us, religious diversity is already a place where we can meet God.

If "God with Us" and other such reflections help us to know God better – again, in the small ways that any theology can bring people closer to God – we will no longer be just facing "Christianity" and "Hinduism" as impermeable religions that sit alongside one another. Rather, we will be gaining skill in finding our way across a matrix of significant theological insights, some inside and some outside our home tradition. All of this happens in the course of study: by reading we learn to read, by doing comparative theology we learn what it is we are doing. No shortcuts for the armchair theorist.

This odd and bountiful learning is untidy on both the academic and religious levels. It can be personally uncomfortable to know too much, to understand across borders. But it is where God

wants us to be today; the encounter of intelligent faith and religious diversity is providential. If comparative theological study may, within its limits, have these good effects, it is also the source of further tensions for the individual and her community: this new theology may change us, teach us to speak differently, and it may even precipitate the formation of secondary communities to which many of us will belong in part. But seeing where this leads returns us to the personal and communal location of the comparative theologian, and this is the topic of our final chapter.

Chapter 9

Comparative Writer, Comparative Reader

Comparative theology is fruitful primarily in practice; doing it well requires wise practitioners who know by experience the power and limits of words. In the end, therefore, much depends on the comparative theologian herself, and thereafter on the reader as a second practitioner who receives and finds meaning in what the comparative theologian has written, and then undertakes her own experiments. The writer and reader together have to put to good use the new knowledge acquired in comparative theological study, since otherwise theology may be diminished or recede into its old security, while comparison may become simply an accumulation of information. We need therefore to refine our expectations about comparative theologians and their readers.

Certain points are obvious, applicable to comparative work as to other fields of learning. We need expertise in the several traditions we study, and expertise takes a long time and perseverance. Beyond sheer technical competence, it is also a matter of wisdom in choosing the right details for study, seeing them as particulars and in light of the larger wholes of text and context. The circumstances of history and vagaries of theory, the challenges and possibilities of diversity writ large but studied on a small scale: all these come together when someone skillfully constructs a site for reflection on two traditions learned together, guided by our best choices regarding what to study, how to progress in learning, and how to make sense of that learning. It seems that few will be ideally suited for this work.

This comparativist is interesting as an individual because she is to a large extent on her own. There is no governing body that can predict progress or conclusions inevitable to comparative theology. It is in our individual choices that we will be successful or not in making sure that comparative theological investigation yields fruitful insights. Study of a religious other at its best must also be self-exploration, learning woven into a personal narrative of interreligious study.

As personal practice, comparative theology has ethical implications. We must be broadly curious yet able to focus narrowly. We must be full of questions, yet disciplined in following through on just one or two of them at a time. We have to find a way to be unthreatened by what is new, unsettled and unsettling, without being enamored by novelty or disrespectful toward tradition. Adventuresome and bold, we have to remain humble enough to accept the critique of specialists, insiders, and authorities within the religious tradition to which we continue to belong. We need a home from which to go forth, yet must actually go forth, learning from another religious tradition, hearing questions to which we do not already have answers. We need to face up to what is very similar to or different from what we have come to expect, and find ways to bring all this into conversation with the truths and values of our home tradition. In our writing, we document the progress of a comparative and interreligious reflection that is very personal – yet not private property. The external and internal dimensions of comparative study are necessarily linked, so we can neither immunize comparative theology by unduly privileging private experience (as if theology were like keeping a diary), nor hide the personal interpretative dimension (as if theology were simply a repetition of truths passed down to us). These virtues and obligations make us ready to enter the narrowly defined, limited realm of inquiry wherein comparative theology occurs.

The Comparative Theologian Transformed

In chapter 1, I observed that today's religious diversity happens around us, yet too also within us, as our own personal religious identities are rethought and reconfigured. Comparative theological

study is a learning calculated to get inside us; studying another religious tradition patiently and in detail changes how we experience ourselves and our world. This new learning disabuses us of false ideas about the other. In doing so, it changes our self-image, the truth about ourselves that is always connected with and distorted by habitual ways of thinking about self and other. And so, although I have emphasized the value and necessity of returning to our home tradition after studying another tradition, the return home may be more difficult than we might wish. As we learn honestly, extrinsic or simplistic reasons for staying in our own religion may evaporate. We find that our tradition is not the only one that is reasonable, committed, or open to God, that we have real choices about religious belonging, because the other traditions are neither foolish nor inaccessible. Even if we choose to remain in our original tradition, remaining is now a real choice made in light of real alternatives.

Theological insights are not easily systematized, and the work of the comparative theologian is never more than partially done. She will fall short of full integration as a scholar and person. She will be always both this and that, always finding that deference to two traditions means that she in a way belongs to both, without belonging fully to either. Without the straightforward guidance of a particular tradition, she may therefore find the path broader and vaguer than expected, and may fall short as both reader and writer, going astray by too much theory or too much detail, losing sight of the truths at stake and the choices to be made. It is easy to become a religion specialist or a theological generalist; honoring particulars while yet investing them with theological meaning is much harder. This is why comparative theology is not for everyone; only some people, even among those interested in religious diversity, will be able to stick it out as persons who are really interested in both comparison and theology.

The preceding paragraphs arise from reflection on my own study. My emphasis on the unsettling personal implications surely has much to do with the fact that I am a Catholic who is studying Hindu traditions in a certain way, dealing with texts that expect the involvement of their readers. The costs of a Jewish-Muslim comparative theology, for instance, or a Buddhist-Presbyterian

comparative theology, may play out in other terms, pushed and pulled in accord with the energies of those different traditions.

The Comparative Theologian as Marginal Person

All of this matters greatly to the individual theologian, but it is up to their religious communities to decide what to do with the insights that arise in this practice, by accepting, moderating, or intensifying them. Those communities should be able to see in the work of the comparative theologian a concern for the truth that is known and revered within the theologian's faith tradition. Her work must in some meaningful way contribute to a receptive community's effort to understand more deeply the truths of its faith. But the comparative theological apprehension of the truth, even if understood in accord with faith, will not necessarily take a form familiar to non-comparative theologians, regardless of any expectation that the comparativist must address established questions in expected ways.

The comparative theologian's work is of course open to critique, and first ventures may fail in various ways to meet the community's expectations, and fall short of its truth. Adjustments and corrections may have to be made. Indeed, it is the nature of real experiments that they should work better when refined a second or third time, with duly clarified and corrected methods and ideas. No comparative theologian can object to further inquiry, her own work done over, better. I would be delighted if other theologians review my comparative experiments – provided the reconsideration pertains to both sides of the comparisons. Christian theologians who know nothing of the Hindu materials will therefore be at a loss.

I would like to think, for example, that I write a Catholic comparative theology and do the work of a Catholic theologian, regardless of how deeply I am engaged in the study of Hinduism. But I cannot decide on my own, or just with my friends, that I actually am a successful Catholic theologian. It is something the Church has to think about and decide, in the complex ways the Church does such things. Other communities will have other

ways of deciding if the comparative theologian is to be welcomed home or not, and each of us has to decide what fidelity to a tradition means in practice; "being Catholic" is clearer than most options, but even Catholicism is no longer defined by any single group in the Church.

Remaining connected has a price, since communities set up boundaries and in various ways tend to exclude the most interesting alternatives. Often leaders do not even recognize what is interesting. But it is worthwhile to struggle with such constraints; as theological knowledge must find its place, the comparative theologian must find her home. Even powerful religious ideas and insights will not endure unless received into a community appreciative of the idea that there are truths worth seeking, receiving, and living by.

However the comparative theologian explains her work theologically and in relationship to an established tradition, the person who has seriously studied another tradition and taken it to heart will surely have trouble in remaining comfortably in the mainstream of her tradition. This theologian cultivates a particular kind of insight that derives from study that is necessarily particular and partial, improvised, eclectic, and unfinished. Comparative study leaves her, if she is successful, at the border between two worlds, in a space distinguished by a seeming multiplication of loyalties. She exists in between, no longer a sure fit in a theological world defined within one community. While she may not abandon her home tradition, she is likely then to remain a marginal figure, though of a kind valuable to that community and also to the wider religiously diverse society. No tradition has within its store of wisdom all that is needed to make sense of this new mode of theological reflection, and there is no ready practice by which to put in place all the particularities of the comparative theologian's learning. So the comparative theologians will always be saying something unexpected to the community, and the community will need to keep finding ways to make it possible to hear what this theologian is saying.

The comparative theologian may be similarly ill at ease in the world of the academy. Scholarly expertise is usually thought to demand not only linguistic proficiency, historical attunement,

and so on – all unobjectionable – but also a more clinical and detached attitude toward the possible results of comparison and what honest scholarship might imply for religious traditions. Scholars who like to keep areas of research neatly distinct often avoid comparative study itself, precisely because here boundaries are necessarily blurred. So too, the comparative theologian is by definition a person of faith, unwilling to distance herself from her tradition in any definitive way. In chapter 2, we saw some of the complications arising from missionary scholarship and from comparative theology that were from the start wed to specific conclusions. While admitting problems with such endeavors, I deliberately did not disown them, as if to establish my comparative theology apart from such struggles of faith and understanding. Yet, even today, scholars who tolerate other biases may still be uncomfortable with a comparative theology that is energized by faith.

As the comparative theologian does her work with expert care and honesty and then takes it to heart, she ends up knowing too much and believing too much to be received with great ease in either the religious or academic setting. This uncomfortable borderline position not only must be tolerated but is necessary, and it must be intentionally nurtured. For example, in writing *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, mentioned several times in the preceding chapters, I committed myself to a writing project beyond ordinary bounds. I had to cultivate a double identity, as a Christian writer who could learn about the three holy mantras, and as gaining something of the insight and docility of a Srivaisnava. I needed to be confronted with the possibility of making the mantras my own words of prayer, or at least having memory of them intrude upon the scene of familiar Christian prayers:

> Aum, obeisance to Narayana.
> *Abba, Father*.
>
> (Romans 8: 15)

> Having completely given up all dharmas, to Me alone come for refuge …
>
> (Bhagavad Gita 18.66a)

If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor. . .

(Matthew 19: 21)

I approach for refuge the feet of Narayana with Sri; obeisance to Narayana with Sri.

(Dvaya Mantra)

Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit.

(Luke 23: 46)

from all sins I will make you free; do not grieve.

(Bhagavad Gita 18.66b)

and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow Me.

(Matthew 19: 21)[1]

In facing this possibility, my idea was not simply to speculate on what participation might be like, but additionally also to read my way into a difficult new situation, even to the point of praying there. I wanted to do this while still knowing the value of exclusive commitment, balancing the impropriety of praying in another tradition with the cost of trying to understand a tradition, without allowing understanding to open into prayer.

The Comparative Theologian's New Community

When Christians think about whether or not to recite the Hindu mantras that they now find deeply intelligible and religiously powerful, the very possibility of such a choice is important and leaves the theologian in a singular position. In this situation, a theologian making a choice will not be easily or to everyone's satisfaction marked as "entirely Christian" or "entirely Hindu." This will be a kind of cultivated hybridity, a multiple religious belonging accomplished though serious study. We might use the word Hindu-Christian, as does Panikkar, if the *hyphen* is taken not simply to mark a cultural hybrid or a chimera or a free agent,

instead marking a person to whom both *Hindu* and *Christian* are deeply meaningful even if she seeks to remain, in faith, Hindu *or* Christian.

Even if a comparative theologian is determined to adhere faithfully to the tradition into which she has been born and to the academic community in which she is employed, simple loyalties become more difficult after we have actually engaged in the very learning across religious borders that rootedness in a tradition has made possible.

Comparative study itself creates new interconnections for and in us, (re)shaping us as believers, offering us new questions and new ways of responding to them, and then too new answers with their own unsettling implications. New conversations entail a new intellectual and spiritual connectedness that complements and stretches prior commitments in a new, post-comparative community. To put it more starkly: a Christian comparative theologian, or a Buddhist comparative theologian, may, for good reasons that cannot be denied, cease to be exclusively Christian or exclusively Buddhist in her communal loyalties. Indebted to both traditions, in dialogue with both she becomes an "insider-outsider" several times over. Even if this is not a dilution of faith, it is an understanding that may unsettle and purify faith; this is the price to be paid for hoping to believe and think at the same time.

Real theological learning and real disputes will happen back and forth across religious borders, as theologians who know multiple traditions position themselves in an unpredictable variety of ways. Hindus or Muslims will not necessarily be on one side, Christians on the other. Rather, arguments will occur less predictably and more fruitfully, neither fully defined by either "Hindu" or "Christian" nor by any pairing of traditions. This learning needs both an established foundation of one tradition and understanding of other traditions, but is likely to take shape also in accord with new intuitions and images, and through words and ideas that are sometimes drawn from other religious traditions, particularly those that have been studied in some depth.

Comparative theology therefore implies and may call into existence a new conversation that, if taken seriously, has spiritual as well as intellectual implications. It may create a liminal religious

community that seeks to understand faith that is complexified by comparative learning. This new community will have roots in multiple communities even if it usually remains its participants' second community. As the number of persons living this complicated intellectual and spiritual life grows larger, the fixed boundaries separating religions become all the less plausible, not due simply to demographics or social change, but now also because the theological insights arising in comparative study will push the boundaries.

Tasks and Opportunities for the Reader

If life is complicated for the comparative theologian, neither is it simple for the dedicated reader of such work. Most of the virtues outlined in the preceding sections of this chapter are required of the reader too: attention, a willingness to learn, empathy, the ability to engage a variety of ideas expressed in different idioms, the prudent assessment of similarities, patience with differences and, of course, patience with the drawbacks and peculiarities of an author's writing. My assumption is that many readers will in fact already be well practiced in such virtues, whether or not they are experienced in academic study or in the reading of works such as mine. The following comments on what comes next are not meant to deny the larger world of interreligious learning, but only to specify some points pertinent to comparative theology.

First, as I noted in chapter 1, this book itself is not properly speaking a work of comparative theology; it is rather a book about comparative theology, the kind I have for years chosen not to write. It would ill serve the discipline if anyone were to take these pages as offering the definitive theory of this discipline. Rather, it is an invitation to get involved, to do the same. It does not replace the practice of comparative learning that must be enacted in the reader's own study and learning, arising from their own choices about what to study. While this chapter is where I stop, it is ideally a place where the reader takes over and becomes a practitioner of the discipline, now better attuned to the issues at stake and ready to learn wisely from a religious tradition other than her

own. The move forward from here occurs when readers become practitioners, choosing from another tradition an example for careful attention, guided perhaps by a long-standing interest, or perhaps by a simpler desire to learn something new.

Second, there are many ways in which my work is only suggestive of what might be done. I have focused on my work in Hindu-Christian studies to exemplify how comparative theology is done, but it will obviously be important that our array of examples be diversified and extended by moving beyond those I have provided. Comparative theology is best practiced, I have suggested, in the careful reading of texts, and readers will do well to commit themselves to reading more widely in the primary sources of religious traditions, guided by their own instincts. But they may wish to try other media as well, exploring the possibilities offered by image and sound, ritual and moral practice. So, too, this new comparative theological practice need not be thought so demanding that readers feel excluded because of lack of academic credentials. Theology is an academic discipline, but fruitful theological reflection can be carried forward by anyone who seeks, in faith, to understand. There is no value in limiting this discipline to a few elite practitioners, even if there is a necessary role for academic comparative theology. One need not have a PhD to learn interreligiously in a way that is theologically and spiritually meaningful.

Third, if it is necessary and appropriate for the comparative theologian to make choices regarding what is to be studied, and how to write from and about such detailed learning, then the comparative theologian as practitioner always knows more than she puts into writing. Such were the dynamics of my increasingly narrow choices, reviewed in chapters 4 and 5. This narrowing should make sense to the comparativist who makes the choices and appreciates what is left out, but readers may not be in a position to know what is left out and must remember not to mistake what is on the written page for all that the author means to say. They will not have the benefit of that implicit background, or of having to set priorities among a wide range of things that could have been written down but ultimately were not. Insofar as the author is not entirely forthcoming about her choices, readers must find ways of tracing the fissures, fragments, and spaces, and

imagining not only what the wider life of the religions looks like, but also the idiosyncrasies of authors in writing down only some of what could be said. Thus, in this case, there is much more to Hinduism than I have chosen to highlight, and thus also to the Hindu-Christian encounter. So the reader needs to be thinking beyond the text she is reading, even as she is reading it.

Beyond This Book

What I have written should not be taken as the authoritative statement of what is possible when these religions are learned together, and readers must try to detect those absent possibilities and go beyond my work, though ideally after reading it.

From readers like myself who are Christian, I hope for reflection on the nature and practice of comparative theology that draws on other strands of Christian tradition. Other experiments in Christian comparative theology will draw on other religious traditions – perhaps a Jewish or Islamic text, or something from Buddhism or the traditions of China – with the same intention to read that I have argued for in these pages. Or someone may choose to learn theologically from an African or Native American tradition that is transmitted orally and not in writing, of necessity finding a different way to proceed. Differently configured Christian experiments in comparative learning will in turn promote new and fresh insights into Christian faith and practice. Or, some readers, even Catholic readers, may read the same materials I have read and still bring different emphases to the fore. Some may wish to explore differences more vigorously, even points where traditions may be irreconcilable.

From among readers who are not Christian but belong to other religious traditions, I hope for still other variations on comparative theological reflection, generated in ways suited to other ways of religious understanding and inquiry. Comparative theologians coming from different religious and intellectual backgrounds, rooted in other linguistic and cultural dispositions, will organize interreligious inquiry differently, read our interreligious histories with more or less optimism, and write with different interpretations of today's diversity and appropriate responses to it. Ideally,

these comparativists will study Christian theological traditions diligently and in a way appropriate to their own traditions, using Christian insights to new purpose, with conclusions that might at first startle and upset Christian readers. In doing so, they will help all of us to re-imagine "theology," our faith seeking understanding, in ways that I have not been able to imagine.

But I also expect important contributions to comparative theology from readers who are not committed to any formal religious tradition at the present moment, and from those who have never had such commitments. While I do insist that comparative theology will for the most part be rooted in familiar religious traditions, there is no reason not to welcome other voices arising in less familiar contexts. The challenge facing such readers, of course, is to practice faith seeking understanding, in their own ways. They too need to learn, in the face of today's religious diversity, how to be faithful and intelligent, agile in moving from faith to practice and back again. They too need to be able to think differently about themselves and the diverse communities to which they belong, with a sense of accountability to truths and realities not of their own making. In the process, if they speak up, they will also become able to unsettle the conversations about religious diversity that most often have arisen in traditional faith communities.

At the end of all of this, comparative theology may still sound rather complicated for both writer and reader: so much to learn, and so many factors to juggle while doing it. It is fortunate then that we are talking about theology, the patient and long-suffering project of seeking to understand what we believe. Theology can afford to go slowly and without the grand gesture, proceeding by trial and error, experimenting even regarding the things that are most important. If it is theology, deep learning across religious borders, it will always be a journey in faith. It will be from, for, and about God, whose grace keeps making room for all of us as we find our way faithfully in a world of religious diversity. That for me the work of comparative theology finally discloses a still deeper encounter with Jesus Christ only intensifies the commitment to learn from the religious diversity God has given us.

In Christ there need not be any fear of what we might learn; there is only the Truth that sets us free.

Notes

Chapter 2 In Generations Past: Some Ancestors to Today's Comparative Theology

1 In a preface to the 1699 Latin version (*Discursus academicus de theologia comparativa*), the publisher remarked that comparative theology is very rare, and that he had not previously published anything on the topic.
2 Garden (1700), pp. 3–4.
3 Müller (1889), p. 47.
4 Ibid. (1873), pp. 21–2.
5 Ibid. (1889), p. 53.
6 Ibid. (1889), p. 52.
7 Ibid. (1873), p. 219.
8 Louis Henry Jordan, for instance, simply observed that he thought it unlikely that Müller's "comparative theology" would have wide use, given the restriction to doctrinal formulations: "Comparative Theology, in truth, is only a department of Comparative Religion," the "department" considering doctrines next to one another (*Comparative Religion*, 1905, p. 27).
9 For instance, William Warren, president of Boston University in the second half of the nineteenth century, promoted the study of religions at the university. In an 1887 commencement address, *The Quest of the Perfect Religion*, he described his dream of a universal deliberation on religions – a "comparative theology" that would be comprehensive, while yet reaffirming that the Christian religion is indeed the perfect religion.

10 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), pp. 103–4.
11 See, for instance, Raimon Panikkar's *The Vedic Experience* (1977) and *The Experience of God* (2006); Richard de Smet's *The Theological Method of Sankara* (1955); Henri Le Saux's *Saccidananda* (1974); Bede Griffiths's *The Marriage of East and West* (1982).

Chapter 3 Comparative Theology Today

1 See also Clooney (1995a and 2007).
2 David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1986), p. 9126.
3 See also Bartel (2003). One might also look at Ward's more recent *Religion and Human Fulfillment*, published in 2008.
4 Ward (2008), p. 40.
5 In the three edited volumes (*The Human Condition,* 2000a; *Ultimate Realities*, 2000b; *Religious Truth*, 2000c) arising out of the 1995–9 Comparative Religious Ideas Project that he convened at Boston University, Neville expanded the scope of his project and tested it in reflection on the detailed and constructive insights brought into the conversations by scholars who are specialists in particular religious traditions.
6 Robert Neville, *Ritual and Deference* (2008), p. 131.
7 I refer more briefly to other key comparative theologians. John B. Carman's *Majesty and Meekness* (1994) is an excellent example of the exploration of a theme – or better, a tension or polarity – across multiple themes in multiple traditions. In 1985, Thomas Kochumuttom published *Comparative Theology: Christian Thinking and Spirituality in Indian Perspective*, and introduced a potentially interesting appeal to comparative theology, although he does not elaborate on the discipline in the book itself. Similarly, Michael W. Myers does not define "comparative theology" in his *Brahman: A Comparative Theology* (2001), but he does offer a model for how a Christian theologian can learn about God from India's Vedanta.
8 See also Steven Tsoukalas's *Krsna and Christ: Body–Divine Relation in the Thought of Sankara, Ramanuja and Classical Christian Orthodoxy* (2006), and Scott Steinkerchner's *Watching Clouds: Engaging in Dialogue across Disparate World-pictures* (2009), a comparative study (in part drawing on my work) that delves deeply into Tibetan thought.
9 The contributors, with their areas of focus (beyond Christian theology) are: David Clairmont (Buddhism); Daniel Joslyn-Semiatkoski

(Judaism); Kristin Beise Kiblinger (Buddhism); Albertus Bagus Laksana (Islam); Jeffery Long (Hinduism, and from a Hindu perspective); Hugh Nicholson (the history of comparative study); Michelle Voss Roberts (Hinduism); John Sheveland (Hinduism); Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier (Hinduism). James Fredericks introduces the volume, and I am writing the response, as well as editing the whole. Continuum will publish the book in 2010.

Chapter 4 From Theory to Practice

1 Cornille 2006: 4.

Chapter 5 Getting Particular: A Christian Studies Hinduism

1 For instance, Flood, Michaels, Pennington, and Sontheimer and Kulke.
2 Here are just some recent books that come to mind as involving not only the study of Hinduism, but also deeper insights into Hindu thinking as a constructive religious activity: Jeffery Long, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (2007); Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, *Indian Philosophy and the Consequences of Knowledge: Themes in Ethics, Metaphysics, and Soteriology* (2007); Srilata Raman, *Self-surrender* (prapatti) *to God in Srivaisnavism: Tamil Cats and Sanskrit Monkeys*, (2007); Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (2006); Deepak Sarma, *Epistemologies and the Limitations of Philosophical Inquiry: Doctrine in Madhva Vedanta* (2005); Kenneth Valpey, *Attending Krsna's Image: Caitanya Vaisnava Murti-Seva as Devotional Truth* (2006). This list is illustrative, not comprehensive.
3 See, for instance, the 2007 volume of Aditi Banerjee, Antonio de Nicolas, and Krsnan Ramaswamy, eds, *Invading The Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*, which makes very clear the desire to establish Hindu religious thought on its own ground.

Chapter 6 "Learning to See": Comparative Practice and the Widening of Theological Vision

1 On the theology and cult of Laksmi, see P. Pratap Kumar, *The Goddess Laksmi: The Divine Consort in South Indian Vaisnava Tradition*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997).

2 *Sri Guna Ratna Kosa*, verses 38, 41. My translation, as in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*.
3 *Saundarya Lahari*, vs. 1, my translation. For a complete translation, See Clooney (2005), and see *Saundarya Lahari: The Ocean of Beauty of Sri Samkara-Bhagavatpada*, transl. S. Subrahmanya Sastri and T. R. Srinivasa Ayyangar (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1992); for a brief overview, see Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), chapter 6.
4 Verses 9–14. My translation.
5 Sura 19.22–30, as translated by Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
6 Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad have thoroughly explored Muslim perceptions of Mary, as pure, virgin, true believer, and prophet, and in comparison and contrast to Eve and Fatimah. See "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," by Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad (1989), in *The Muslim World* 74/3–4: 161–87. See also John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* (1999), chapter 5.
7 Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (including the "Narrative of Sojourner Truth," her "Book of Life," and "A Memorial Chapter"). Edited and introduced by Nell Irwin Painter. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). For an analysis, see *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth* by Erlene Stetson and Linda David (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994). See also, among many other resources, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, edited by William L. Andrews (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); included is the "Narrative" of Sojourner Truth.
8 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* ("Book of Life"), pp. 107–8.
9 Galatians 3: 27–9, New Revised Standard Version in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
10 Galatians 2: 20.
11 From the poem beginning "As kingfishers catch fire…", poem n. 115 (p. 141), in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

Chapter 7 Theology After Comparison

1 For the published version of the lecture, see my 2008b, "Imago Dei, Parama Samyam."

Chapter 8 "God for Us"

1 K. R. Govindaraja Muthaliyar, "Antal," in *Alvarkal Varalaru*, Part I (Madurai: The South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, 1975 [1948]), pp. 142–68.
2 That is, the "First Set of Verses in the Antati Style"; *antati* indicates a style in which the last word of each verse is the first word of the next.
3 See *Ramayana*, *Yuddha Kanda* 117.8–11.
4 At line 4, commentators ask why the Lord is called "the one with the discus." Are there reasons – other than meter or the need for a filler of some sort – for mentioning this particular detail of popular iconography? Periyavaccanpillai notes that the "discus" – the war discus, a standard item in the assemblage of the divine instruments – stands for all that assemblage, and thus for all the regal and divine splendor and power. But the point is that this splendid Lord graciously takes simple and humble forms for the sake of his people: "The one who was the creator of all and controller of all has become one who is created and controlled."
5 *Srimadrahasyatrayasara* (*Essence of the Three Mysteries*), chapter 15, p. 155, in the translation (Kumbakonam, n.d.) by M. R. Rajagopala Ayyangar. U.T. Viraghavacharya, a modern commentator on Desika, notes in his traditional Tamil commentary that these verses show us how the Lord's gracious action goes well beyond the act of divine descents, accommodating himself to whatever his devotees conjure in their minds.
6 Indeed, we can presume that his connection of these texts at *Tiruvaymoli* 3.6 provides the background for Periyavaccanpillai's similar collocation of verses.
7 *Visnu Purana* V.17–19; adapted slightly from the translation of H. H. Wilson (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1980).
8 On Srivaisnava visualization practice, see "*uruvelippatu*: Notes on a Tamil Practice of Visualization and Its Larger Significance," Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Commemorative Volume*, 8th World Tamil Conference (Tanjore, 1995), pp. (English) 83–8.
9 Adapted from the translation by Anand Amaladass, S.J., in *Tattvatrayavyakhyanam* (Chennai: TR Publications for Satya Nilayam Publications, 1995), p. 208.
10 Govindaraja Muthaliyar ([1948] 1975), pp. 160–1.
11 Most notably, the contemplative use of the Gospels in the *Life of Christ* of Ludolph of Saxony, a massive tome which Ignatius encountered during his famous bedridden recuperation and gradual conversion of

life. See Paul Shore, "The *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony and its Influence on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 30/1 (January, 1998).

12 Nn. 111–12, p. 52. Translations are from *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation* by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1957).

13 Ibid., nn. 114–16, pp. 52–3.

14 Ibid., n. 2, pp. 1–2.

15 Ibid., n. 15, p. 6.

16 Roland Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, transl. Richard Miller (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), p. 62.

17 Ibid., p. 63.

18 Ibid., p. 63.

19 Richard A. Blake, SJ, "Listen with Your Eyes: Interpreting Images in the *Spiritual Exercises*," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 31/2 (March, 2000): 13–14.

20 Ibid.: 14.

21 Ibid.: 17.

22 On the fact that multiple religious belonging is not merely a private phenomenon but rather also formative of new communities, see Clooney (1992).

Chapter 9 Comparative Writer, Comparative Reader

1 For an explanation of the pattern of interwoven prayers suggested here, see my 2008c, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, particularly chapter 5, and also my 2008a, *Beyond Compare*, chapter 4.

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