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# **Learning from Religious Others**

**the problems and prospects of  
interreligious hermeneutics**

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## **Abstract**

### **Learning from Religious Others: the problems and prospects of interreligious hermeneutics.**

Key terms: theology of religions, interreligious hermeneutics.

In our interconnected, multi-religious world, how should religious people engage with religious others? What and how can theologians learn from religious others, from their traditions and their scriptures? Amongst those who engage in theological reasoning about these issues, two distinct approaches have been identified. The established discipline of theology of religions considers it necessary to examine the sources of one's own tradition to come to some broad assessment about the value of religious diversity – usually identified through some version of the classic typology of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism (Alan Race). Others have criticised theology of religions, seeing it as prescriptive, biased towards pluralism, distorting of religious difference, and as making definitive judgments as to the presence of truth and possibility of salvation through other religions (e.g. Francis Clooney, George Lindbeck and Michael Barnes). These critics, working within the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics, prefer direct engagement with other traditions in their particularities, learning from the religious other, yet often without reflecting on internal sources or arguing theologically for the possibility of finding truth in other religions.

This thesis seeks to make a contribution to this discourse about method in the theological engagement to the religious other. It argues that the work of theology of religions is necessary to support theological learning from the religious other, particularly given that the scriptures of major religions (notably the New Testament, Qur'an and Pali Canon) are generally perceived to discourage this kind of activity. It also responds to criticisms, and works to make theology of religions more attuned to the insights of interreligious hermeneutics, so that it can be seen as capable of attending to the complexity and uncertainty that is inevitable in any realistic attempt to relate religious traditions to one another.

Chapters 1 and 2 survey the development of theology of religions and of the alternative approaches found in the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics. These are examined

and as a result an adapted typology is presented which may be related fruitfully to interreligious hermeneutics. Chapters 3 and 4 explore interreligious hermeneutics further through two of its most prominent practices, scriptural reasoning and comparative theology, as carried out by some of its most notable practitioners. The extent to which these practices can be regarded as theologically ‘truth-seeking’ is analysed, and the usefulness of the adapted typology in reviewing the findings of these practices is assessed. Chapter 5 offers a detailed example of the kind of approach to the religious other present in a particular religious scripture, by focusing on the Buddha’s approach to the Brahmins as recorded in the Pali canon. This is done in order to demonstrate that the ‘plain sense’ of scriptures often does not support the approach to religious others advocated by scholars of interreligious hermeneutics. Finally, Chapter 6 outlines ‘soft pluralism’ as a particular approach within theology of religions which can support interreligious hermeneutics of the deepest, most adventurous ‘truth-seeking’ kind, without succumbing to the problems associated with pluralism in its classic (hard) form. This position can be supported by the work of a growing number of scholars (including Catherine Cornille, Rose Drew and Marianne Moyaert) who, far from seeking to eschew or downplay deep differences between traditions, believe that it is precisely at these points of tension or impasse, where traditions are offering insights that cannot be simply reconciled to one another, that we stand to learn the most from the religious other.

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I began working under the excellent supervision of Perry Schmidt-Leukel in September 2007 with the thesis title “Towards an Interreligious Hermeneutic of Scripture.” I outlined this project in Lambkin 2011 but should perhaps make clear that the specific focus of my thesis, its structure, and some of my own views have since been modified. Nevertheless the basic thrust of the thesis – the questions of how and what we can learn from religious others – remains the same. It was Perry who inspired my interest in these issues with his clarity of thought and passion for truth.

When Perry left Glasgow to take up the post of Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Münster in March 2009, Werner Jeanrond took over as supervisor. He challenged me with questions that had not occurred to me and though it came as something of a shock to the system at the time, I believe that my thesis is stronger as a result. It was during Werner’s supervision that I became pregnant and his cheerful support during that time was just what any student in my position would wish. He recognised before I did the effect that the inevitable shift in my priorities would have on my work and encouraged me to bring my daughter to seminars when she was very small so that I could keep my research brain ticking.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is paid to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature

Printed name

## Text in Chapters

### Introduction

#### *I. Background: What's the problem?*

In our interconnected, multi-religious world, how should religious people engage with religious others? Can we learn from them, from their traditions and scriptures? These questions have become increasingly prominent in Christian theology since the Second World War and are also being more widely considered amongst members of other religious traditions. As I shall discuss, there are divergent approaches in how these questions are handled in theological (predominantly Christian) circles. While unprecedented numbers share a commitment to the importance of engaging in dialogue and mutual learning across traditions (a commitment supported by most of the main schools and denominations of the 'world religions') there are strong disagreements as to how that should best be done, and for what purpose. Some have characterised these disagreements in terms of those who advocate an *a priori* approach and those who advocate an *a posteriori* approach (Stephen Duffy; Michael Barnes). Those who pursue an *a priori* approach proceed by looking into the sources of their own tradition in order to discover what is the correct theological response to religious diversity and what potential there is for salvation and/or truth to be available through other religions, before engaging with religious others. This is necessary, they argue, in order for one's engagement with religious others to be coherent and consistent with one's basic religious commitments. This theoretical approach utilizes the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in order to make sense of the multiplicity of religious truth claims. Reacting against this, those championing an *a posteriori* approach insist that the theoretical approach has reached an "impasse." They argue that we cannot make judgments about other religions and religious others until we first get to know them. Applying theories about the meaning of religious diversity before learning about religious others prevents us from being able to appreciate the real distinctiveness and particularity of other religious traditions. The first approach is often associated with the discipline known as theology of religions, and the second approach

characterises a newer field of study which is increasingly becoming known as interreligious hermeneutics.

Scholars in the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics, particularly those engaged in the practices of comparative theology and scriptural reasoning, tend to claim that they do not need a theology of religions to engage religious others. Instead they dive straight into deep learning about and from religious others and their traditions, leaving the grand narratives and metaframeworks of the theology of religions to a later date, or perhaps jettisoning them altogether.

The main argument of this thesis challenges this prominent view that interreligious hermeneutics is a proper theological approach to religious diversity which has no need for theology of religions. It focuses on showing why interreligious hermeneutics does indeed need theology of religions, but it recognises that theology of religions is equally in need of interreligious hermeneutics. Both approaches have value and are necessary, and these fields of study, with their different areas of expertise and emphases, will be most fruitful when seen as mutually supporting. The emphasis in this study will be to argue that if the learning of interreligious hermeneutics is to be theologically useful, it must be capable of being assimilated into the broader theological framework. This is not a straightforward matter but requires a great deal of what Catherine Cornille has called “hermeneutical effort” (see p. 17). The assimilation of learning from religious others must be supported by a theology of religions which answers questions – with supporting evidence from traditional sources – as to the value of religious diversity and the potential for discovering truth in other religious traditions. Already, a number of theologians, including Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Paul Hedges and Catherine Cornille think in these terms. However most scholars engaged in the *a posteriori* approach common in interreligious hermeneutics remain to be convinced. This thesis aims to speak to that need. It will suggest that the prospects of interreligious hermeneutics are bright if its practitioners see theologians of religions as their allies in addressing the inevitable problems that arise in the complex task of seeking to learn from religious others.

## ***II. Overview of aims and methodology***

This thesis focuses on the issue of learning from religious others as it relates to theological reasoning. It does not, by and large, reflect on the question of religious practice which has played an equally important role in interreligious exchange, and which plays, for many religious people, a more prominent role in their lives than texts. This thesis cannot, therefore, be regarded as giving a rounded picture of what encompasses “religion,” but rather it reflects on a crucial element of contemporary religious life – of how we reason about religious belief and experience (which often emerges through practice) when we find ourselves to be learning deeply from other religions.

I will seek to explore and characterize the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics where such deep learning is taking place. In doing so I focus on two of its foremost practices – comparative theology and scriptural reasoning. As stated above, the practitioners of these methods often steer clear of the kind of theological reflection on issues of truth and salvation that has characterised the theology of religions. But this leaves a troubling theological tension – the traditional teachings to which these scholars apparently conform cannot support the theological and spiritual enrichment they profess to have gained through their engagement with other religions. Calls for the need for theological coherence from theologians of religions like Schmidt-Leukel have been largely unheeded. My contention is that those involved in these practices would be much more amenable to the arguments for the need for theological coherence (relating their approach to religious others to their understanding of their own tradition) if they thought the theology of religions was up to the job. As we shall see, those practicing interreligious hermeneutics have generally found that the classic typology of the theology of religions is either unduly prescriptive or subtly biased and that theologians of religions tend to make definitive claims about matters beyond human knowledge. The discipline is often viewed as being defined by the positions of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism which, as we shall see, are each deemed to be incapable of respecting religious difference.

In seeking to address these concerns of interreligious hermeneutics, I seek to suggest how theology of religions can be understood both more broadly and as capable of attending to the complexity and uncertainty that is inevitable in any realistic attempt to relate religious traditions to one and other. Such a theology of religions can then be related fruitfully to interreligious hermeneutics, as helping to provide a coherent theological framework for these innovative theological practices. In seeking to further this aim I offer four

constructive contributions to the broader discourse of interreligious theology, which build on the work of a number of theologians at the cutting edge of this discourse including Catherine Cornille, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Marianne Moyaert, Paul Hedges, Rose Drew and Keith Ward. These contributions are 1) I will identify the distinguishing characteristics of the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics; 2) I will present an adapted typology which can be fruitfully related to interreligious hermeneutics; 3) I will offer a detailed example of the “hermeneutically closed” approaches to the religious other present in numerous scriptures. Focussing on the Buddha’s dialogues with the Brahmin in the Pāli Canon, I demonstrate the need for “hermeneutical effort” in their interpretation in order to provide theological justification for the practice interreligious hermeneutics. 4). I will demonstrate that the theology of religions, properly understood, provides the necessary framework to support such hermeneutical effort. I will do this by proposing a soft pluralism which can support interreligious hermeneutics of the most adventurous kind.

I begin by surveying the landscape of theology that is engaged with religious diversity — focussing primarily on Western Europe and the USA. In Chapter 1 I outline the developments within the theology of religions from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until the present identifying where the key points of controversy lie. I move to consider the emergence of interreligious hermeneutics in Chapter 2. I help to define the new and emerging discourse of interreligious hermeneutics by identifying four of the key characteristics which distinguish it from other modes of study of diverse religious traditions and texts. I suggest that this field includes practices that are theologically engaged (truth-seeking); “hermeneutically open” (Moyaert); open to learning from the religious other; and open to surprise. At the end of Chapter 2 I offer an adapted version of Schmidt-Leukel’s prescriptive and logical reinterpretation of the classic typology of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism coined by Alan Race in 1983. The adaptation seeks to clarify the typology’s function as heuristic, by offering categories capable of accurately profiling the contemporary discourse of theology of religions, distinguishing. As I will show, this adapted and expanded typology can be applied to critics of the discipline as well as its proponents without distorting their positions. The four distinguishing characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics, along with the adapted typology then provide the foundation upon which the analyses of the remaining chapters build.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I explore interreligious hermeneutics through two of its most prominent practices – scriptural reasoning and comparative theology – as it is carried out



by some of its most notable practitioners. In Chapter 3 I seek to highlight both the promise of scriptural reasoning and its ambiguities in relation to the question of whether it's possible to find religious truth in other traditions. I look most closely at the work of David Ford, Nicholas Adams and Peter Ochs. Applying the adapted typology to scriptural reasoners I seek to show how the questions which remain unbroached in their analyses of the practice draw into doubt the extent to which scriptural reasoning can be regarded as a truth-seeking enterprise. In Chapter 4 I explore the same issues, this time as they relate to the comparative theology of Francis Clooney and John Makransky. Makransky and Clooney reveal comparative theology to be a more adventurous truth-seeking venture, which is open to finding truth in other traditions even where they differ most from their own.

In Chapter 5 I offer a detailed example of the kind of approach to the religious other present in a particular religious scripture –focusing on the Buddha's approach to the Brahmins as recorded in the Pāli canon. This is done in order to demonstrate that the 'plain sense' of scriptures often do not support the approach to religious others advocated by scholars of interreligious hermeneutics. Rather, hermeneutical effort is required to draw out the deeper principles of the scriptures in order to interpret these scriptures, and this hermeneutical effort must be supported by a theology of religions if it is to be theologically coherent. Finally, in Chapter 6 I point to a particular approach within theology of religions (which I label soft pluralism), which can support interreligious hermeneutics of the deepest, most adventurous kind, without succumbing to the problems associated with pluralism in its classic (hard) form. All this is done in order to demonstrate that interreligious hermeneutics and theology of religions are best understood as mutually supporting disciplines and to encourage a collegiality between scholars working in these distinct but intimately connected fields.

### ***III. Presuppositions***

My thesis arises from certain presuppositions. First, I presume that theology is concerned with the pursuit of truth about God or ultimate reality and about the proper relationship between people and that reality, and, following from that, of their relationships with each other and the world around them. Truth with a capital T, like God, always transcends the finite grasp we have of it. 'truths', with a small t indicate true statements about, or less

easily expressed ‘insights’ into God or ultimate reality.<sup>1</sup> Tensions between some truths are to be expected given the mysterious and ineffable nature of the divine and the sheer variety of people who experience that reality. However, statements which openly contradict one and another cannot be held together at the same time.

Second, and following from the first point, I presume that theology should seek to articulate a coherent and integrated world view. All theologies should have in view the coherence of the theology they develop with the different aspects of their faith and practice and vice versa. If new knowledge is found which calls into question previously held beliefs, after considered reflection adjustments should be made and new insights integrated so that one’s framework is both internally consistent and makes sense of the world we live in. This will often be a slow and sometimes painful process, and yet it is one which the theologian – who is, after all, in pursuit of truth – should always remain open to.

I write as someone within the Christian tradition but who sits lightly within both Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. My concern is not to uphold the faith position of any particular church, although a certain Catholic/ Anglican bias will be detected in the theologians I have chosen to focus on and whose work I have found most fruitful. Instead I am led by my conviction that traditional Christian theologies are fundamentally challenged by the reality of our multi-religious world, and that too many Christian theologians have been ad hoc in their responses to the religious other. For a long time, for example, Christian churches gradually, silently decreased or ceased their efforts to convert religious others, but with little or no theological basis for the change. They maintained their stance that Jesus is the unique incarnation of God, belief in whom is the only means of salvation for all humanity. The same can no doubt be said about theologians in other religious traditions, though their views on religious others often don’t have such obvious practical implications. Within Christianity, things have improved with more and more churches producing theological documents seeking to express the proper relationship between Christianity and other religions, but, as they usually acknowledge themselves, there remains much more work to be done. Even amongst those who openly embrace religious others in study, dialogue and encounter, there are often similar – though more subtle – discrepancies at play between what they discover through their encounter and the theologies that they express. This thesis is aimed at challenging all theologians to rethink those discrepancies and to be true to the truth as they find it – whether that leads them to an

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this distinction between Truth and truths see Depoortere & Lambkin 2012a and for a similar dialectic in Buddhism and comparison with Christian thought see Drew 2012b.

exclusivistic rejection of other religions, a pluralistic expression of the equality of religions or something in-between. The constructive contributions offered here should allow theology of religions to be related fruitfully to interreligious hermeneutics by being respectful of religious difference and of the complexity and uncertainty that is inevitable in any realistic attempt to relate religious traditions to one and other

#### ***IV. Key terms***

**Hermeneutical openness:** The conviction to learn about the religious other by listening to their self understandings, in recognition of their irreducible difference. (Marianne Moyaert)

**Epistemological openness:** The willingness to recognise truth in other religions even where their beliefs seem utterly strange and to have no parallels in one's own tradition. (Lambkin)

**The tension between openness and commitment:** The key tension facing all who engage in interreligious dialogue and hermeneutics – a balance must be sought between commitment to one's own religious tradition and openness to learning about and from the tradition of the other. (Catherine Cornille, Marianne Moyaert)

**Hermeneutical effort:** the hard work necessary to reinterpret traditional sources in light of new knowledge, perhaps employing broader principles within the scriptures in order offer justification for moving away from the "plain sense" (Catherine Cornille).

**Plain sense:** The sense of scripture which can be derived either from face value or from a knowledge of the historical and linguistic context through the methods of biblical criticism, but without the application of any creative interpretation (hermeneutical effort).

## Chapter 1: Introducing Theology of Religions

### *Introduction*

This chapter will offer a broad-brush survey, from a Western, Christian scholarly perspective, of how the field of theology of religions developed, with a view to understanding its present state. This limited perspective is further narrowed by a focus on the recent past – looking particularly at the last 50 years or so since the emergence of theology of religions as a distinct theological subject. Of course, the theology of religions would not have emerged at all were it not for the rich and varied engagement with other religions, particularly those in “the East”, that took place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kenneth Cracknell (1995) has described how numerous theologians and missionaries at that time were breaking new ground in their reflections on religious plurality as well as in the depths to which they were learning about other religions. The survey offered here aims only to provide the necessary groundwork for understanding the divisions in the contemporary discourse and therefore the main focus will be on introducing the major voices and highlighting key developments which provide the more immediate background to the current state of the field. The story continues in Chapter 2 where interreligious hermeneutics is introduced as a group of practices emerging from a dissatisfaction with the theology of religions which is criticised as being overly generalised and theoretical, and failing to appreciate the true extent of religious particularity.

The term theology of religions has commonly been understood to refer to a field or discourse within Christian theology which “aims to give some definition and shape to Christian reflection on the theological implications of living in a religiously plural world” (Race 1983: ix). While acknowledging that other religions will likewise develop their own response to the same pluralism, British Anglican theologian Alan Race, has been concerned to define the field from a Christian perspective:

Christian theology of religions is the attempt, on the part of Christian theologians, to account theologically for the diversity of the world’s religious quest and commitment, a diversity which shows all the signs of continuing to exist, in spite of the Christian missions (Race 1983: 2).

According to Race the theology of religions has both profound practical relevance and far-reaching implications for Christian self-understanding. The practical questions of, for example, how Christians should respond to requests for the use of Christian churches for non-Christian worship and what space should be given to other religions in the teaching of Religious Education, imply certain presuppositions about Christianity's relationship to other religions. Moreover, says Race, because this subject has such an influence on Christian self-understanding, theology of religions does not belong as some peripheral specialism within Christian theology. Rather the "the future of Christian theology lies in the encounter between Christianity and the other faiths", placing theology of religions "at the frontiers of the next phase in Christian history" (Race 1983: xi).

The central concern has been to account for and evaluate religious diversity in relation to the central tenets of one's own faith. As Schmidt-Leukel explains in relation to a Christian theology of religions:

The theoretical theology of religions has to correlate Christian doctrines with the awareness of the existence of other religions. Or more precisely, other religions have to be interpreted in relation to Christian beliefs, and Christian beliefs have to be looked at again in the light of the belief of other religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2009: 159).

When referred to as a discipline or using the indefinite article or the possessive, i.e. "a theology of religions" or "Karl Rahner's theology of religions" what is meant in the Christian context is generally the systematic articulation of the belief of Christian faith as it relates to other religions, or an expression of the theological value of other religions in particular or religious diversity in general with a view towards the coherence of Christian teaching. When referred to as a field or discourse, this includes second order commentary and criticism of those constructive theological proposals. A Christian theology of religions will consider questions concerning the nature and uniqueness of the covenant, revelation and the person of Jesus Christ as saviour. It involves pondering the divine mystery to consider the nature of God – is God triune or is that particular doctrine best understood as a myth or symbol? It concerns questioning what is meant by salvation, and whether religious others might achieve it – or their own differing ultimate goals – through their traditions? For Christians one of the questions of greatest practical consequence (the answer to which is dependent on how we respond to the others) is what is the nature of mission? How is the command to "Go make disciples of all nations" to be related to interreligious dialogue and

the widely sought-after goal of creating peaceful, respectful societies in a multi-religious world?<sup>2</sup>

Theologians of religions reach within the resources of the Christian faith, mining the scriptures and tradition for principles and examples upon which to construct such an interpretation. They also draw on knowledge of other religions gained through study and/or dialogue, (although the extent to which they draw on such knowledge and the stage in the process at which they do so has become a key matter of controversy, as we shall see later.) Being concerned with the unity and coherence of Christian teaching, theology of religions in the Christian context is usually understood as belonging within the discipline of systematic theology (Hedges 2010: 15; Kärkkäinen 2003:17) (sometimes called Dogmatics or Christian doctrine), though this is not always the case. The Pontifical Gregorian University, for example, places its Department of Theology of Religions within the Faculty of Missiology<sup>3</sup> while others see the discourse as stretching beyond the boundaries of Christian theology altogether. As we shall see, theology of religions is now considered by many to be a multi-religious discourse concerned with “the self-understanding of one’s own religion in relation to other religions” whatever one’s religion might be, and with “the understanding of these other religions in relation to the self-understanding of one’s own” (Schmidt-Leukel 2008a: 85). I will suggest that it is this broader understanding of theology of religions which is most fruitful for supporting and developing interreligious relations today. For now, however, we will trace the development of this subject from its origins in Christian theological circles.

Religious diversity is of course not a new issue for Christianity, but as a distinct subject the theology of religions emerged gradually in the decades following the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> Christians in Western Europe and the United States had for centuries been living in Christian-majority countries and the challenge of the conflicting claims of other religions did not impinge on the psyche of most. This is in contrast to the experience in Asia where religious diversity has for been a part of daily life for centuries. The theology of religions therefore developed differently in Asia and other parts of the global south, but the focus of this study will be on theology of religions as it developed in the West.<sup>5</sup> This discourse has

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<sup>2</sup> For constructive responses to all these questions and more see for e.g. Dupuis 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Website of the Pontifical Gregorian University: accessed 30/05/13.  
[http://www.unigre.it/struttura\\_didattica/Missiologia/index\\_en.php](http://www.unigre.it/struttura_didattica/Missiologia/index_en.php)

<sup>4</sup> An early antecedent to this discipline can be found in, among others, J.N. Farquhar’s ‘fulfilment theology’. See Farquhar 1913.

<sup>5</sup> Most, if not all, English-language introductions to theology of religions feature this Western focus, although prominent voices include Asian theologians Aloysius Pieris, Raimon Panikkar, Stanley Samartha, and Lynn de Silva. See Aleaz

been driven by scholars with a desire to move away from the time-honoured a-priori judgment of other religions (usually as false and often dangerous), to a greater degree of openness towards other religious traditions. This has involved a search for theological grounds for peaceful encounter with members of other religions, for seeking to understand them (to a greater or lesser extent) in their own terms, and even for learning from them. There have also been theologians who have reacted against this movement, significantly Karl Barth, whose voices have played important and influential roles in the discourse too.

### ***1.1 The Challenge of Religious Diversity***

The very fact of religious diversity is experienced as a challenge within most of the major world religions. Paul Griffiths summarises well how this challenge has most commonly been understood –under two main theoretical problems which emerge when faced with the reality of other religious traditions: the problem of truth and the problem of “salvation”. According to Griffiths, the problem of truth:

consists, above all else, in some members of the same religious community coming to realize that members of some other religious community believe in and propound doctrine expressing sentences that are not obviously or easily compatible with their own, and so realising that some judgment must be made about such alien claims (1990: 7).

This problem “is one that faces all religious communities when they become aware of the fact that their own doctrine-expressing sentences are not the only ones in the field” (Griffiths 1990: 9). By speaking of the problem of salvation, Griffiths does not intend the Christian concept of salvation, but rather he refers “in a purely formal way, to the religious goal that each religious community regards as desirable for its members” intending no judgement as to whether the “something” in question is the same for each and every religious community” (Griffiths 1991: 17) Religious communities, Griffiths explains, “typically have some idea as to what the ultimate goal of the religious life is and how it should be pursued; they typically also think that belonging to them, assenting to their doctrines and engaging in the practices entailed by such assent is relevant to, perhaps even directly productive of, this ultimate goal” (Griffiths 1990: 10).

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2003: 39-44 for a critique of the Western focus of Paul Knitter’s *Introducing Theologies of Religions* and many bibliographical references to theology of religions in the Indian context. See also Felix Wilfred (2005) who describes the distinctive character of Indian theology of religions.

### **1.1.1 The Christian focus on the problem of salvation – for individual non-Christians**

For Christians, the challenge of religious diversity has been experienced most potently as the problem of salvation. This is because if one believes, as Christians by and large have done, that salvation is only available through explicit allegiance to Christ, “then no matter what one thinks about the availability of truth outside the Christian community, one will have difficulty in judging that any non-Christian can be saved” (Griffiths 1990: 10). As prominent Roman Catholic theologian of religions Gavin D’Costa has highlighted, for Christians, the problem of religious diversity points to a problem internal to Christian theology, and is commonly characterised as a tension that lies between two central biblical claims (D’Costa 1986:4-5). On one hand is the affirmation of the necessity of Jesus Christ for salvation, and, for some Christians, his Church. In the Acts of the Apostles, for example, Peter declares “Jesus Christ the Nazarene” to be the only “name under heaven by which man can be saved” (Acts 4:12). On the other hand, the Bible also teaches that God is love and desires the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4). Christians through the centuries have asked versions of this question: If God wills all to be saved and Christ is necessary for salvation, why is it that only a minority of humans through history have been Christian? The tension which exists between these two central Christian claims raises both difficult theoretical questions regarding God’s nature and important existential questions about how Christians are to relate to non-Christians. On God’s nature, Christians have asked would a just and all-powerful God not give all humans equal access to his saving grace? And, if God’s love is universal why does he appear to show preferential love for particular people? On relating to non-Christians, Christians know that they are instructed to “love their neighbour” and from Jesus’ parable of “The Good Samaritan” many deduce that “neighbour” includes the stranger and the religious other. (And even if non-Christians are regarded as enemies, Christians are compelled to love their enemies too.) However, what is not clear is just what constitutes loving one’s non-Christian neighbour? If one believes that the eternal souls of the non-Christians are at stake, then love might compel the use of any means necessary to bring about conversion – for the threats and torture of this life are surely mere trifles when compared to the eternal fires of hell! That indeed was the conclusion drawn in many darker periods in Christian history, particularly during the Crusades when it was often thought that the threat of death was warranted to save souls. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century missions in Asia and Africa, though less violent, were notoriously unethical by today’s standards, utilising an array of coercive and exploitative tactics, and yet these missionaries too understood themselves to be following



Jesus' commandments. They were motivated by love to the extent that they were concerned for the ultimate wellbeing (as they envisaged it) of non-Christians. How Christians envisage the eschatological fate of the non-Christian, therefore, has had powerful implications for the character of Christian missions and the nature of interreligious relations, and continues to do so.

For the early Christians this problem of religious diversity was experienced primarily in terms of the eschatological fate of Jews and Greeks, both before Christ's incarnation and – as a separate but related question – subsequent to it. The early Church Fathers worried about the eternal fate of those who had died before Christ's coming, but a significant number were optimistic in their conclusions, particularly exponents of the so-called *logos* theology – Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria (Dupuis 56-57; 70-77). However, those living subsequent to Jesus' ministry were expected to convert before their death, and so the answer to the problem of religious diversity was mission. Alongside denunciations of non-Christian religions and philosophy as idolatry, some of the early Church Fathers also recognised the “seeds of the Word” (*logos spermatikos*) in Greek philosophy in particular. These “seeds of the Word” functioned as “preparation for the Gospel,” making non-Christians more receptive to the Gospel when they did hear it.<sup>6</sup> The need for conversion therefore remained paramount, but on this view there was no need to consider other religions as demonic perversions in totality – they might have elements of commonality with Christianity which served a positive function in helping non-Christians to understand the Good News of Jesus Christ, and continued to serve this function even after Christ (Dupuis 1997: 74). Clement of Alexandria, for example, wrote that “As the proclamation [of the Gospel] has come now at the fit time, so also at the fit time were the Law and the Prophets given to the barbarians, and philosophy to the Greeks, to fit their ears for the Gospel” (*Strom.* VI, 6 in Dupuis 1997: 67). However, once Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire this nuanced view was overshadowed by the either/or logic of the Church's increasingly rigid interpretation of the famous dictum *Extra ecclesium nulla salus* “Outside the Church no salvation”. The following interpretation of the dictum was formalized at the Council of Florence in 1442:

The council firmly believes, professes and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but Jews, heretics and schismatics, cannot participate in eternal life, but will depart into everlasting fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before the

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<sup>6</sup> See Dupuis 1997: 53-83 for an overview of the main exponents of this “Logos-theology”: Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.

end of life the same have been added to the flock.<sup>7</sup>

With the notable exception of a few early Church Fathers, for the majority of Christian history there has been almost unanimous agreement in viewing other religions as a threat and a problem to be overcome, through mission, polemics and apologetics. Indeed as Paul Knitter relates, even those Church fathers who talked about the *logos spermatikos* “never said that the religions could be the fertile fields for this Word” (2002: 68). The area of debate was then largely confined to the question of the eschatological fate of contemporary non-Christians, particularly those who had not had the opportunity to hear the Good News of the Gospel,<sup>8</sup> and the negative influence of the non-Christian religions taken for granted.<sup>9</sup> Missionary efforts were generally characterised by the presumption that one only needed to make the Gospel message understandable and it would naturally be accepted.

### **1.1.2 The problem of salvation reconsidered: a positive role for non-Christian religions?**

However, as Eastern traditions were encountered more meaningfully, notably through 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist scholarship, other religions began to be viewed with a greater degree of nuance. Chiefly spurred by the recognition of “Christian” qualities and themes in other religions, there was a revival of the idea of “the seeds of the Word” being scattered amongst the non-Christian religions – providing a positive “preparation for the Gospel”. The nineteenth-century Orientalists, for example, assumed that they could separate truth from falsity in the scriptures of others, simply by comparing them to the Bible, which for them was the paradigm of true scripture. The 1885 publication *The Bibles of other Nations* provides an illustrative example. Its introduction explains:

The publishers of the present compilation do not offer the “selections” as samples of the entire body of Ethnic scriptures, but as a ... [sample] of choice extracts, extracts which represent the truest and best of their contents, and which may serve to show that those early nations were not left without, at least, some “foregleams” of that clearer and fuller light of Revealed Truth enjoyed in later times by more highly favoured peoples (Hodgson 1885: vii).

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<sup>7</sup> The Council of Florence (A.D. 1438-1445) From *Cantate Domino* — Papal Bull of Pope Eugene IV, available at *Catholicism.org*, an online journal edited by the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Saint Benedict Center, New Hampshire. <http://catholicism.org/cantate-domino.html>

<sup>8</sup> See Dupuis 1997: 110-129 for an overview of approaches which allowed for the possibility of individual salvation without the Gospel, notably Aquinas’s theory of “implicit faith” and “baptism of desire”.

<sup>9</sup> See Dupuis 1997: 102-109 for some exceptions.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century “comparative theology” (now referred to as “old” or “older comparative theology” (Nicholson 2009, Hedges 2012; Hintersteiner 2007, Clooney 2010), was one term given to a very popular and respected intellectual-spiritual pursuit which aimed to be the objective, scientific study of religion (Hintersteiner 2007: 466). Often following an evolutionary model, these scholars – to varying degrees – exhibited the view that an impartial study of the religions revealed Christianity to be objectively superior. The most famous among these “Orientalist” works is perhaps F. Max Müller’s *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1882). As Hugh Nicholson, a theorist of contemporary (or “new”) comparative theology explains, Müller intended “theology” to be the object of comparison but his pretension to scientific impartiality did not prevent theology from becoming the subject of comparison as well. Somewhat paradoxically Müller favoured Christianity as the only religion which supports the idea of the impartial comparison of the religions of the world – by transcending loyalties to a particular nation or people (Nicholson 2009: 611). Christianity’s supposed superiority is much more in focus in the work of James F. Clarke, who is regarded as exemplary of this “older” comparative theology. His large volumes *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) and *Ten Great Religions Part II: A Comparison of All Religions* (1884) introduce and compare religions in order to “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” (Clooney 2010: 33). Clarke’s writing was characteristic of his time in that he seemed, as contemporary comparative theologian Francis Clooney reflects, “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” (Clooney 2010: 33-34).

In 1913 J.N. Farquhar, a Scottish Protestant missionary in India, published *The Crown of Hinduism* which aimed to introduce Christians to Hinduism, as it relates to Christianity. Farquhar sought to show that Christ is the “Crown of Hinduism” as “Christ provides the fulfilment of each of the highest aspirations and aims of Hinduism” (1913: 457) in a manner analogous to the way in which Christ was regarded by some as the fulfilment of the “religion of Israel” (1913: 51). Farquhar quoted Clement of Alexandria who wrote that “Philosophy tutored the Greeks for Christ as the Law did the Hebrews (*Strom.* i. 28)” to which Farquhar added, “Thus it will be for India” (Farquhar 1913: 53). Although the religion of Israel is accorded a special place in history, “in their general form, the Hindu

Law and the Jewish Law stand on a par” in that they necessarily become “obsolete as civilisation advances”. Christianity constitutes the ultimate advance in civilisation as Jesus, Farquhar tell us, preached no law and so instituted a new truly universal religion “applicable to all races of men, to all countries and in all times” (1913: 59). He drew not only on scholarly material but on “scores of friends, Hindu, Brahma, and Christian, in every part of India” (Farquhar 1913: 4). These ideas were later systematised by exponents of the “fulfilment theory” such as Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs Von Balthasar who did not always have first-hand knowledge of other traditions (Dupuis 1997: 133-43). These theologians believed that, in the words of C. Saldanha, “If it was the Incarnate Word crucified who *set Christianity apart* in its novelty and transcendence, it was the same Incarnate Word crucified who *brought the religions and Christianity together* in a preparation-fulfilment relationship” (Dupuis 1997: 78).

By the end of the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries had had the opportunity through colonisation to extend their reach all around the world, and yet members of the so-called world religions by and large did not convert (Knitter 2002: 6). It was beginning to be acknowledged that other religions would continue to exist (and even grow) in spite of Christian missionary efforts and that the truth of Christianity could not be demonstrated through “objective” scientific arguments.

### **1.1.3 The Neo-Orthodox response (exclusivism)**

For some however, the lack of scientific proof of Christianity’s superiority did not pose a problem. Christians do not need the scientific study of religion to reveal its superiority, it was argued, because Christians are in possession of an authentic record of God’s own self-revelation. Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) was a Dutch missiologist whose approach was prominent at the first two World Missionary Conferences in Edinburgh (1910) and Jerusalem (1928), and dominated the third in Tambaram (1938). Against the fulfilment models which had been gaining ground, Kraemer propounded a dialectical theology which argued for the “radical difference” of all religions and presented Christ as discontinuous with and standing in judgment against other religions, rather than constituting their fulfilment (Strange 2008: 43). A similar view was propounded by the systematic theologian Karl Barth, whose voluminous *Church Dogmatics* (1956) continues to have an enormous influence on Christian theology more broadly. Barth’s approach is a reasoned, internally consistent and nuanced resolution of the basic challenge of religious diversity

from a perspective where the horizon is formed entirely by the Christian revelation. In awareness of the challenges posed to Christianity, from science as well as the various religions of the world, Barth powerfully stresses what he sees as the one distinguishing feature of Christianity which places it apart from the rest of the world's religions – that is the self-Revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Convinced of the inherent sinfulness of human nature, and hopelessness of the human condition without God's grace, Barth sees the religions of the world as merely human and therefore as futile, sinful attempts to "justify" ourselves. Blinding people to the necessity of God's grace which can only be received through Jesus Christ, religion is "unbelief", antagonistically opposed to revelation. On this view there is no ground for the appreciation of other religions and indeed no incentive to learn about other religions at all. This implication of Barth's thought is well illustrated by the story that when asked how he knew that Hinduism is unbelief when he had never met a Hindu, Barth replied simply, "*a priori*" (D'Costa 1986: 54). Barth does however eschew triumphalist claims about the innate superiority of Christianity. He calls on Christians to show tolerance towards non-Christians and their religions, a tolerance based in the humility of knowing that Christianity too is "unbelief" only made true by the grace of God (1956: 299, 325ff).

## ***1.2 The New Global Context of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century***

The Second World War and its aftermath – which included the formation of new global institutions, notably the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund – resulted in a new world order. For many educated Westerners this brought a new perspective on the world and their place in it. Advances in communications, media and transport, the increasing interconnection of political powers, the emergence of the global market and the rise in global migration had made many more Westerners than ever before keenly aware of religious diversity. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries scholars had begun to gain access to information about other religions through the communications of missionaries and Orientalist scholarship which included the translation of many sacred texts. In Britain themes from Hinduism and Buddhism in particular such as karma and reincarnation, had also entered the popular imagination through novels and more scholarly work aimed at the general public in newspapers, journals and at public lectures (Franklin 2008: viii. See also Almond 1986. On the encounter with Buddhism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century US see: Tweed 1992). But during the War and its aftermath, diverse nations and including their diverse religious commitments had been brought into ever closer contact. The "Universal Declaration of

Human Rights” ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 declared that the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.<sup>10</sup>

This vision of common humanity and universal values drew from Enlightenment thinking which emphasised the freedom of the individual and the application of “universal” human reason among the ultimate human values.<sup>11</sup> This notion of universal values took on a new significance when many Westerners began to encounter this global diversity in their own communities, and it shaped the spirit in which many entered into interfaith dialogue.<sup>12</sup> With growing levels of immigration in the US and Western Europe in the 1960s, 70s and 80s the experience of the world’s immense religious diversity came to be increasingly felt as a “lived reality” (Knitter 1987), a reality which was particularly evident in many Western universities. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard Divinity School, and one of the great early proponents of rethinking Christianity’s relationship to other religions, stressed this personal dimension of the new situation in *The Faith of Other Men* (1962). He states:

The religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism...The more alert we are and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they [people of other religious persuasions] are our neighbours, our colleagues, our competitors, our fellows. Confucians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations but down the street. Increasingly, not only is our civilization’s destiny affected by their actions; but we drink coffee with them personally as well (Smith 1962: 11).

### **1.2.1 The emergence of the theology of religions (inclusivism)**

Jacques Dupuis, perhaps the most respected Catholic theologian in the field, traces the emergence of theology of religions as a distinct theological subject in Catholic circles to the years immediately preceding and following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

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<sup>10</sup> “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948) <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/> (accessed 16/05/2013).

<sup>11</sup> For a nuanced perspective on the influence of Enlightenment thought on the declaration see: Morsink 1999: 282-283

<sup>12</sup> Hans Küng’s search for a “Global Ethic” has sought to make explicit the resources supporting such universal values in the religious and moral traditions. Küng drafted the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” which was signed by most of the diverse religious and spiritual leaders present at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, including the Dalai Lama and Vatican and World Council of Churches representatives (see Küng & Schmidt 1998: 69).

At the time of Vatican II, Dupuis distinguishes two basic theories which sought to ascribe some positive significance to other religious traditions, theories which marked a shift from “the prominently ecclesiological question of salvation in or outside the Church” to the Christological question “of salvation in Jesus Christ knowingly or unknowingly” (Dupuis 1997: 133). The first was the “fulfilment theory” of Farquhar and others. The second Dupuis dubs the “theory of the presence of Christ in the religions”, the chief exponent of which was Karl Rahner who wanted to say that other religions did not merely lead to Christ, but rather that Christ’s saving power was active within them, an argument which reached well beyond what had previously been said about non-Christian religions.<sup>13</sup> Paul Knitter, a former pupil of Rahner’s, reflects that in a lecture first given in 1961, Rahner “laid out a carefully crafted theological case in which he took standard Catholic doctrines and used them as building blocks for a truly revolutionary theology of religions” (Knitter 2002: 68). Rahner’s method provided the classic template for a Christian theology of religions while his “anonymous Christians” theory is regarded as the classic statement of an inclusivist theology of religions. While few accept his theory today without modification, his writings remain highly influential because of his creative mastery of the systematic approach. Building on the Christian affirmation that “God is Love,” Rahner developed a distinctive anthropology. He argued that if God is Love, God must give saving grace to all people, that in fact human nature is graced. This is in stark contrast with Barth’s starting point of radical human sinfulness, allowing Rahner to draw very different conclusions. Building on the Catholic Church’s insight that human beings are embodied and social beings, Rahner concludes that this grace must be embodied, and that it is likely to be most effectively embodied in the world’s religious traditions, for it is through these traditions that humans reach beyond the mundane to search for greater meaning. It is likely, Rahner argues, that these religious traditions offer a “means of gaining the right relationship with God and thus for the attaining of salvation, a means which is therefore positively included in God’s plan of salvation” (Rahner 1966: 125). He later summarised this view referring to other religions as potential “ways of salvation” (1984: 295). Rahner never studied other religions nor talked much to other religious believers. He developed his theology of religions from his sense that “God’s world was much bigger than the Christian world” (Knitter 2002: 68), and through creative reflection on standard Roman Catholic doctrines. This model of reflecting about non-Christian religions without actually engaging with them became increasingly untenable. It is usually Rahner’s approach which scholars have in mind when they criticise theology of religions as being an aprioristic “Christian

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<sup>13</sup> This summary is indebted to that provided by Knitter 2002: 68-75.

reflection on Christian sources” (Clooney 2007: 666).

### 1.2.2 Reconsidering Relations with the Jews: Vatican II

Following World War II, humanity’s religious diversity became increasingly apparent. The war had given Christians a powerful reason to reconsider their relationship with Judaism in particular. The shocking treatment of the Jews by Nazi Germany, culminating in the systematic murder of approximately 6 million Jews in death camps in the heart of “Christian Europe”, had compelled many Christians to critically re-assess Christianity’s theological anti-Judaism. At the beginning of the 1960s Pope John XXIII called for a statement on the Church’s relation with the Jewish people to be made at the Second Vatican Council as part of its Decree on Ecumenism (Dupuis 1997: 159). This was met with a call by Bishops from non-Christian majority countries that this statement be extended to include other religions. What emerged was a single separate document *Nostra Aetate*, “Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions.” Reflecting the post-war mood, the document opens with the words:

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions.

The crucial passage for theologies of religions, a passage which has borne a broad spectrum of interpretations, reads:

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 (4).

The gradual broadening of the Church’s perspective from a concern with intra-Christian diversity (ecumenism), to a consideration of Judaism, to then consider Islam and finally other religions has been a common dynamic leading some theologians to the theology of religions. Other traditions are treated in a hierarchical ordering according to their



“orientation to the Church” (*Lumen Gentium* 15, 16) The World Council of Churches mirrored this movement from ecumenism to a consideration of interreligious relations, led by Stanley Samartha, Wesley Ariarajah and Hans Ucko. Prominent theologian of religions Leonard Swidler similarly widened his ecumenical vision to Judaism and then to other religions.

Although *Nostra Aetate* broke new ground in assigning positive value to elements of other religious traditions, the Second Vatican Council did not deal with the systematic theological questions of how this squared with Christian teachings about the necessity of Jesus for salvation, or how religious diversity fits with God’s purposes for the world. The document left many questions unanswered and in so doing created a theological space ripe for debate. An extraordinary degree of theological effort has since gone into debating whether this recognition of “rays of truth” in other religions might mean that Christ’s saving grace is operative (or partially so) in and through the traditions themselves, that they might function as “ways of salvation”. Karl Rahner was correct in saying that, as far as the Vatican II documents go, the “theological quality of non-Christian religions remains undefined” (Rahner 1984 quoted in Knitter 2002: 77). Although there have been a number of official Catholic documents published since which touch on the issue, there remains enough ambiguity for scholars to draw opposing conclusions. Paul Knitter insists that in various Catholic documents since Vatican II, particularly “Dialogue and Proclamation” (1991), other religions have been recognised as “ways of salvation” while at the same time maintaining Jesus as the only saviour of all humanity (2002: 81-86). D’Costa insists the opposite – that other traditions are not to be recognised as “ways of salvation” though individual non-Christians may attain salvation (2000: 103-109). Many noted that, in the words of philosopher and Catholic theologian Heinz Robert Schlette:

the new relationship which is aimed at can only be convincingly achieved on all levels of human and social life if a new theological interpretation of the non-Christian religions and of the mission is worked out in harmony with it. Fundamentally this means a renewed understanding by the Church of its own nature (Schlette 1975: 1398).

Increasing numbers began to argue that there was a theological imperative to account for religious diversity from a Christian point of view asking: Does God will the diversity of religions? Do other religions play any role in God’s plan for Salvation? Wilfred Cantwell Smith articulated this theological imperative in terms of the need for a “doctrine of other faiths” alongside the other major Christian doctrines. He posed a question in 1962 which

has been oft quoted as striking at the heart of the issue: “We explain the fact that the Milky Way is there by the doctrine of creation, but how do we explain the fact that the Bhagavad Gita is there?” (Smith 1962: 132-33)<sup>14</sup>

For Smith and others, a satisfactory “doctrine of other faiths” could not be developed within the inclusivist approach which they regarded as inseparable from the problematic fulfilment model. Scholars like Alan Race noted the determinative role the Christian-Jewish relationship played in shaping Christian attitudes to other religions (Race 2001: 43). Instead of considering other religions in their own terms and as all-encompassing systems, those elements which seemed to echo Christian teachings were treated much like the “Old Testament” – important and valuable “forgleams” of the truth that is brought to its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. According to British Presbyterian theologian John Hick, the claim of Christian inclusivism – that all truth is fulfilled in Christianity or Christ – continues to harbour the intention to convert and dominate the religious other. Following from Hans Küng’s famous statement that “there will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions” (Küng 1989: xv), Hick argued that “there will be no real peace among the world religions so long as each thinks of itself as uniquely superior to all the others” (Hick 2005: 12). Race has similarly argued that Christians must stop viewing their relationship with other religions through the “Jewish-Christian filter” (Race 2001: 61) which renders other religions as precursors or imperfect instantiations of the one true religion of Christ. The alternatives they presented are known collectively as “pluralism.”

### **1.2.3 A new option in the theology of religions: Pluralism**

A dynamic and experimental period followed the Second Vatican Council. In the early 1970s a thoroughly new option for the theology of religions emerged and gained considerable attention. In 1973 John Hick called for a “Copernican revolution” in Christian theological thinking, involving a “paradigm shift from a Christian-centred or Jesus-centred to a God-centred model of the universe of faiths” (Hick 1973: 131). In the late 1980s, Hick, with an American colleague Paul Knitter, brought together a mix of Christian theologians – “Protestant and Catholic, female and male, East and West, First and Third World” - who were each exploring “a *pluralist* position” (Knitter 1987: viii), which

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<sup>14</sup> Smith’s question is often quoted in explanations of the need for the theology of religions, see for example, Race 2008: 4 and Knitter 2002: 13.

resulted in the influential volume *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Hick & Knitter eds. 1987). Knitter explained the title saying:

We are calling ‘Christian uniqueness’ a ‘myth’ not because we think that all talk of the uniqueness of Christianity is purely and simply false, and so to be discarded. Rather...its ‘truth’ lies not on its literal surface but within its ever-changing historical and personal meaning... (Knitter 1987: vii).

Knitter defined this new approach against what he described as:

the two general models that have dominated Christian attitudes toward other religions up to the present: the ‘conservative’ *exclusivist* approach, which finds salvation only in Christ and little, if any, value elsewhere; and the ‘liberal’ *inclusivist* attitude which recognises the salvific richness of other faiths but then views this richness as the result of Christ’s redemptive work and as having to be fulfilled in Christ. The pluralist position then constitutes a move away from the insistence on the superiority or finality of Christ and Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways. (Knitter 1987: viii)

Although the contributors to the volume were united in their perception of the necessity to abandon Christianity’s superiority claims, the theologies they developed to support this view differed from one another considerably. In his preface, Knitter refers to the three “bridges” employed by the contributors to the volume to make the crossing to religious pluralism – the “historico-cultural bridge”, the “theologico-mystical bridge” and the “ethico-practical bridge”.<sup>15</sup> Knitter acknowledges that the metaphor is imperfect because many make use of more than one “bridge” in their argumentation: the bridges therefore represent the main motivation of the theologians concerned which to a large degree shape their distinctive pluralist theologies. The “historico-cultural bridge” is employed by John Hick among others. The historical and cultural limitation of all knowledge and religious beliefs is stressed, to which Hick adds that any claim to religious superiority will need to be supported by empirical or experiential data available to all. Linking truth and ethics, Hick argues that this data would consist in evidence as to the moral superiority of a religious tradition, but he concludes that as “vast complex totalities, the world religions seem to be more or less on a par with each other” (Hick 1987: 30). The “theologico-mystical bridge” is made use of by W.C. Smith, Raimundo Panikkar and Stanley Samartha. Like Hick they recognise that “our means of religious perception are historically relative”

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<sup>15</sup> Knitter uses basically the same categories to describe different pluralist theories in Knitter 2002 with only slight changes in their names to the “philosophical-historical bridge”; the “religious-mystical bridge” and the “ethical-practice bridge” (2002: 112).

but more crucial for them is the concept of divine Mystery (which is also important for Hick). They stress that “the object or content of authentic religious experience is infinite—Mystery beyond all forms, exceeding our every grasp of it”, a Mystery which therefore “forbids any one religion from having the ‘only’ or ‘final’ word” (Knitter 1987: x). The “ethico-practical bridge” constitutes Paul Knitter’s own motivation toward a pluralist approach:

the confrontation with the sufferings of humanity the need...to promote justice becomes, from this perspective, the need for a new Christian attitude toward other faiths. This approach draws heavily on liberation theology, and indeed works toward a “liberation theology of religions” with a focus on the need for a “*shared* liberative praxis for the poor and suffering as well as a *shared* reflection on how that praxis relates to their religious beliefs (Knitter 1987: xi-xii).

Of the numerous pluralist theologians it has been Hick’s “pluralist hypothesis” which has had the greatest influence on the theology of religions discourse, and indeed for many is synonymous with “pluralism.” While pluralist approaches vary substantially, it is Hick’s proposal which forms the benchmark against which others are usually measured and against which most criticisms of pluralism are directed.<sup>16</sup> Hick begins from a Kantian-style distinction between the Real (ultimate reality) as it is in itself (noumenal)—which is ineffable—and the Real as it is experienced by us (phenomenal). The various truth claims of the religions refer not to the noumenal Real, he argues, but rather to our experiences of the Real which are shaped by our particular “perceptual machinery” and “particular system of interpretive concepts” (Hick 1989:14). Hick postulates this “noumenal Real” seeing it as reflecting what the so-called ‘post-axial’<sup>17</sup> traditions themselves have said about the ineffability of ultimate reality. The core of his theory suggests that “the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (Hick 1989: 235-36). Transcending all (substantial) concepts, the noumenal Real “cannot be said to be one

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<sup>16</sup> For a sympathetic introduction to the variety of pluralist approaches see Schmidt-Leukel 2008a. For a critical review of how pluralists have adapted their approaches over time see Fredericks 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Hick makes use of Karl Jaspers’ concept of the “axial period” saying that “from very approximately 800 to very approximately 200 BCE, significant individuals appeared through whose insights ... human awareness was immensely enlarged and developed, and a movement began from archaic religion to the religions of salvation or liberation” (Hick 1989: 29). These individuals include Confucius, Lao Tzu, Gautama the Buddha, the ‘seers’ of the Upanishads, Zoroaster, the great Hebrew prophets and the great Greek philosophers (1989: 29-30) and their insights led to the “great post-axial traditions” which include at minimum Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (1989: 33).

or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive” (Hick 1989: 246). On this basis Hick argues that contradictory conceptions of ultimate reality or the Real, for example both personal and impersonal, can authentically point towards the same objective reality.

Hick’s pluralism is philosophically driven, grounded in a Kantian-style distinction between God or “the Real” as it is in itself, and the Real as human’s diversely experience it. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as a professor of Comparative History of Religion, took a different approach. He based his arguments in reflection on the religious history of humankind. Smith was convinced that by examining the religious history of diverse peoples we can see that the human race is engaged in one common religious quest: “Those who believe in the unity of humankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover the unity of humankind’s religious history” (1981:4). What is discernible amongst religious people the world over, Smith claimed, is something called “faith”, by which he meant the “engagement” with “transcendence” (1979: 5):

it is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one’s neighbour, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension (1979: 12).

Faith, he argued, is a universal “human quality” to be distinguished from belief. Belief refers to the particular expressions of faith which vary so widely between (and within) the religions. Smith recognised that faith cannot in practice be isolated and separated from belief. It has no concrete existence apart from its expressions in belief, and he sees the influence as to some extent mutual. Faith, he says, “has been elicited, nurtured and shaped by, the religious traditions of the world” (1979: 6). Nevertheless Smith stresses the primary nature of faith, a point that places him at odds with many contemporary thinkers in the postliberal tradition of George Lindbeck (to be discussed in chapter 2). Smith claims that “It is faith that generates the tradition in the first place, and it continues to be its *raison d’être*” (1979: 5). Some critics of Smith have read his proposal for a world theology as entailing that Christians cease to speak from within a Christian perspective (Fredericks 1999: 85). However this is not what Smith had in mind. What he advocated was an expansion of Christian horizons. A world theology would not cease to be Christian, but would be “Christianity plus” (Smith 1989: 124-5). Hick expressed a similar, but perhaps more radical, vision of the future where religious traditions develop on “gradually converging courses”. Given the diversity of human cultures and psychological types Hick

felt that religious differences will inevitably and happily remain, but religions will “increasingly influence one another’s development” so that they might eventually be thought of similarly to the way Christians today view denominational differences (1993: 146-147). Schmidt-Leukel is now perhaps the strongest contemporary advocate for such a world theology, seeing it as the next logical step after the acceptance of a pluralist view (2009: 103).

#### **1.2.4 The threefold typology: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism**

The systematisation of options within the theology of religions to a three-fold categorisation of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (utilised by Knitter above) was introduced in 1983 by Alan Race, who himself came out in favour of the pluralist option. In his book *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, Race noted that because the Christian theology of religions was new and its explorations wide-ranging, the territory was “somewhat haphazardly mapped out as yet”. He felt however that a spectrum of theories could be identified amongst theologians “attempting to deal with religious pluralism as a theological issue”. The stated purpose of his book was to “survey this spectrum, and group them under family headings” in order to “bring order out of what is potential chaos” (Race 1983: x). Although now talked about as a “typology” or “paradigm”, Race did not use these terms and did not develop the categories in any methodological detail. Indeed his ultimate aim in the book was to make a case for Christian pluralism – and not to simply offer a heuristic tool through which students and scholars could make sense of the debate. Rather than presenting the different categories in a purely descriptive, dispassionate way, the book’s structure reflects his argument: he begins with a presentation of exclusivism and an explanation of its inadequacies, moves to do the same for inclusivism, and then ends by offering an explanation and defence of pluralism. Rather than providing precise definitions, Race described these terms by presenting the thought of a few individuals as “representatives” of each position, allowing the differences between them to show the variations within each broad type. Exclusivism is represented chiefly by Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer; inclusivism by the shift in Catholic theology at the Second Vatican Council, Karl Rahner, and Hans Küng; and pluralism is represented by John Hick, Paul Tillich, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Nevertheless it was clear that the question of salvation lay at the centre of Race’s typology. He explained that in the encounter with other religions, many of the early theologians of religions discovered that these religions also contain claims to

transformative power and to offer a path leading to the highest goal for human life. These claims were felt to be comparable to the Christian claims and were experienced as a challenge to the message of salvation through Christ only. According to Race, it was those claims that compelled these theological pioneers to be interested in religious others (Race 2008: 5), and so naturally the question of salvation formed the centre of their enquiry. But we might add that the question of salvation also formed the centre of their enquiry because of its impact on a crucial existential question – that of Christian mission. Jesus commanded his followers to go make disciples of all nations – but just what did that mean in an age of multiculturalism and co-existence? Are Christians compelled to seek to convert members of other religious traditions? With this in mind, Christians needed to know: what is the appropriate response to the religious other?

Within a few years, this threefold designation was taken up and developed by Gavin D’Costa a British, Roman Catholic theologian of Indian decent. D’Costa has since rejected the typology, for reasons discussed below. In 1986 he produced a book with a very similar theme and structure to Race’s called *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, this time laying out what he called a “threefold paradigm” of pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism, in that order. Like Race, D’Costa used the structure of his book to build a case for his preferred model – in his case inclusivism. D’Costa did however provide more details on the methodology underlying his categorisation. He drew on philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn’s proposal of the meaning of ‘paradigm’ as “a whole set of methods and procedures dictated by a central problem-solving model.” According to D’Costa, in the case of the theology of religions the central problem to be tackled is the relation of Christianity to other religions. Pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism each contain a range of approaches which share a number of basic presuppositions or theological tenets which dictate their approach towards an answer (D’Costa 1986: 6). D’Costa identifies the paradigms as emerging from the recent history of theological reflection (since 1900). They are, he contends, each generated from an emphasis on either one or both of two axioms central to Christian tradition: “*the universal salvific will of God* and the claim that it is *only in Christ (or his Church) that men and women can be saved.*” (1986: 18). An emphasis on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as saviour of humankind produces exclusivism and an emphasis on God’s universal salvific will produces pluralism while inclusivism places emphasis on both these claims (D’Costa 1986:18). With a more detailed methodology for the paradigm, D’Costa is able to provide more succinct explanations of each which turn on the question of the salvation of non-

Christians:

*The pluralist paradigm* “maintains that other religions are equally salvific paths to the one God, and Christianity’s claims that it is the only path (exclusivism), or the fulfilment of other paths (inclusivism), should be rejected for good theological and phenomenological reasons” (D’Costa 1986: 22).

*The exclusivist paradigm* maintains “that other religions are marked by humankind’s fundamental sinfulness and are therefore erroneous, and that Christ (or Christianity) offers the only valid path to salvation.” (D’Costa 1986: 52).

*The inclusivist paradigm* “affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God” (D’Costa 1986: 80).

This focus on salvation in Christian reflection on how to engage with other religions has since come under increasing scrutiny, as will be discussed below.

### **1.2.5 Theology of religions: from Christian sub-discipline to interreligious discourse**

Jacques Dupuis attributes the development of theology of religions as a distinct theological subject to a large extent to the work of systematic theologians H. R. Schlette and Karl Rahner, who developed comprehensive concepts which could be elaborated into a theology of religions – Schlette’s “salvation history” (1966) and Rahner’s “transcendental anthropology” (1966a; 1969a; 1978 in Dupuis 1997: 2). Today many, including D’Costa, still regard theology of religions as part of the broader project of systematic theology (D’Costa 1992). This is probably the narrowest definition of theology of religions, which sees its aim as to produce and reflect on overarching, internally consistent theories about other religions and/or of religious diversity which conform to the strictures of the discipline of systematic theology. Systematic theology is traditionally regarded as the attempt to present and relate central Christian doctrines, a list of which usually includes God, creation, sin, Christ, the Spirit, grace and salvation, the Church and the last things. Systematic expositions, D’Costa explains, are based on the scriptures and/or tradition



and/or magisterial authority but seek to speak to the context of the modern world (D'Costa 1992: 329). This corresponds well to what we have heard about theology of religions so far, where Christians have sought to respond to the interreligious context of the world they inhabit by drawing on the sources of Christian faith. Typically, theologies of religions tend to offer an explanation and evaluation of religious diversity which emphasises two or more of these dogmatic areas, but in a manner that is conscious of the need for internal coherence between these interrelated dimensions of Christian belief. For example, early attempts often focused primarily on the incarnation of Jesus (e.g. Race 1983) but more recently there has been a move to Trinitarian and Pneumatological theology (e.g. Dupuis 1997, D'Costa 2000, Yong 2003).

However, although this emphasis on coherence and comprehensiveness certainly speaks to the concerns of systematic theology, those who have espoused a theology of religions have not been limited to this discipline. Moreover, many have made contributions to the discourse without ever having produced a complete systematic theology of religions. For some their contributions to theology of religions have evolved from their theoretical theological work in mission theology (Hendrik Kraemer), apologetics (Paul Griffiths), ecumenical theology (Leonard Swidler, George Lindbeck) and liberation theology (Paul Knitter), from a variety of perspectives including from the feminist (Rita Gross), the ecological (Knitter, Gross) and the postliberal (DiNoia). Still others have contributed to the theology of religions drawing deeply from the secular disciplines of philosophy of religion (John Hick), history of religion (Wilfred Cantwell Smith) and comparative religion (Ninian Smart). Furthermore, many of these scholars move fluidly between these various disciplines (Hick and Smith being good examples). The discourse has also evolved in distinctive ways depending on the particular concerns of differing geographical locations, and is particularly strong in Asia where the experience of religious diversity has a much longer history than in the West. There is therefore no single method for the theology of religions. The methods adopted vary depending on a host of factors including the scholars' academic backgrounds and their personal experience of religious diversity (or lack thereof). However, the general pattern has been described by Knitter as follows:

...pastors such as bishops and popes, as well as theologians, study the Christian Scriptures and tradition to ascertain the responses of their forbears in Christianity. They go on to study the insights of scholars known as "historians of religion" and "comparative religionists." They read the fundamental texts and enter into dialogue with the followers of other religions

in order to understand them better. And then pastors and theologians or religions return to their fellow Christians to explain what they have learned. Often they suggest ways in which Christian teachings on other religious traditions should be changed (Knitter 2002: 2).

Crucially the kind of theology of religions one develops or subscribes to is dependent upon what one sees as the appropriate sources and norms for theology. A theological source is anything that one makes use of in doing theology. Within Christianity, sources will include the Bible, and, depending on what kind of Christian one is, the tradition of one's church and possibly the experience of particular people or groups of people. Theological norms are the criteria which are used to interpret those sources and to structure the arguments made. These norms can be viewed as statements regarding the fundamentals of one's faith e.g. Jesus died on the cross to redeem the sins of all humanity. How the challenge of religious diversity is perceived, what one's motivations are for entering the debate and one's initial philosophical presuppositions and beliefs regarding where the authority in the tradition lies, as well as the appropriate limits of innovation and speculation, all play important roles in determining one's contribution to theology of religions. Therefore, Daniel Strange is correct when he states that "the theology of religions is a parasitic discipline dependent on other *a priori* theological commitments." (Strange 2008: 37) However, for many theologians of religions, that is not the full story. Jacques Dupuis has spoken against this "aprioristic" method which proceeds only from principles derived from Scripture (and tradition), as it is in danger of "remaining abstract, of not really encountering the concrete reality of other religious traditions" (1997: 17). Dupuis agrees with Paul Knitter that what is required is a method which ensures the "encounter between the datum of faith and the living reality of religious pluralism" (1997: 17). Writing in 1985, Knitter gave priority to the sources of Christian tradition (meaning "scripture and its living interpretation through history") in the sense that they will be consulted first, but, he says "no final conclusions as to the value and the truth of other traditions can be reached until our Christian "data" is brought into relationship with a concrete knowledge (theory) and experience (praxis) of other religions" (Knitter 1985: 91-92 cited in Dupuis 1997: 17). Citing Knitter, Jacques Dupuis developed his case for theology of religions as "theological reflection *on* and *within* dialogue" where one maintains "a dialogical attitude at every stage of reflection" (1997: 19). Many emphasise the constructive role interreligious dialogue has in the theology of religions. Indeed many have entered the discourse as a result of their practical experience of interreligious dialogue or Christian mission which has changed how

they think about their theological commitments. Schmidt-Leukel, for example, refers to the case of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who entered into interreligious dialogue as an exclusivist, but developed his pluralist approach in and through dialogue and encounter (Schmidt-Leukel 2008a: 99).

While a narrow definition of theology of religions places it as a sub-discipline of systematic theology, and a broader definition sets it more loosely as a discourse within Christian theology to which other, secular disciplines such as history, anthropology and sociology make important contributions, still others view theology of religions even more broadly as a discourse that potentially includes any religious tradition. Pluralist systematic theologian and scholar of Buddhism Perry Schmidt-Leukel describes theology of religions in this wider sense as dealing “with the self-understanding of one’s own religion in relation to other religions, and with the understanding of these other religions in relation to the self-understanding of one’s own” (Schmidt-Leukel 2008a: 85). He argues that something analogous to Christian theology of religions “is becoming more and more prominent in every major religious tradition” (Ridgeon & Schmidt-Leukel 2007: 1).<sup>18</sup> One example of this trend can be found in a special edition of *Theological Studies* edited by comparative theologian Francis Clooney, where “theologians” from diverse traditions were asked to “reflect collaboratively on how theologians from several major religious traditions view and evaluate other religions and the people who practice them” (Clooney 2003: 217). This approach is based on the presupposition that:

It is no longer possible to imagine that only Christians are alert enough to ponder the theological significance of other religious traditions or to seek a middle path between total rejection and bland tolerance of everything. While certain perspectives and concerns may be specifically Christian, the general problem of self-identity and judgments on the identities of others are common to multiple traditions.

Clooney goes on to relate that:

As authors of these articles, we are by no means bold pioneers in our venture, since major work has already been undertaken regarding how people view pluralism, other religions...These books reveal the common concerns of religious traditions, their common methodologies, and the differences by which traditions deal with pluralism and their religious others (Clooney 2003:

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<sup>18</sup> Schmidt-Leukel refers for overviews to Coward (2000), *Pluralism in the World Religions: A Short Introduction* and Gort, Jansen and Vroom (eds.), (2006), *Religions View Religions: Explorations in the Pursuit of Understanding*, Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi.

217).<sup>19</sup>

That these scholars find it productive to work collaboratively in this area, many explicitly identifying their work as theology of religions and employing the three-fold typology,<sup>20</sup> shows the value in recognising theology of religions as a multi-religious discourse. Yet while some scholars from other religious traditions have been happy to adopt the three-fold typology and apply it to the attitudes of their own traditions to religious diversity, the typology came to be increasingly criticised by many Christian scholars, particularly from the early 1990s and up until the present day. We will now turn to consider some of the main critics of the typology in turn: Gavin D’Costa; George Lindbeck; Joseph DiNoia and Mark Heim. We will then consider ways in which the typology has been reconsidered in response to some of these criticisms with a view to reflecting on whether these adjustments have been successful and whether the typology remains a useful tool for categorising approaches to religious diversity.

### ***1.3 Criticisms of the typology: the rise of “Particularism”***

#### **1.3.1 Gavin D’Costa**

In the influential volume *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Hick & Knitter eds. 1987) already discussed, various pluralist voices were drawn together to present pluralism against exclusivism and inclusivism as a legitimate theological move “towards a recognition of the independent validity of other ways” by viewing the religions’ diverse truth claims as “mythic” in character (Knitter 1987: viii). Within a few years, criticisms began to mount against not only pluralism but the entire typology within which these arguments were couched.<sup>21</sup> It might be said that these criticisms gained significant momentum when Gavin D’Costa, former developer and defender of the typology,<sup>22</sup> added his voice to those calling for its abandonment. D’Costa presents himself as a Roman Catholic seeking to maintain an

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<sup>19</sup> Clooney lists: *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (ed. David Sanmel, Westview Press); *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (ed. Harold Coward, SUNY Press); *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (ed. Paul J. Griffiths, Orbis Books); *Buddhists Talk about Jesus and Christians Talk about Buddha* (ed. Rita Gross and Terry Muck, Continuum Press); *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (ed. Lloyd Ridgeon, Curzon Press). Monographs include Wilhelm Halbfass’s *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (SUNY) in which Christian attitudes toward India are placed within a broader set of attitudes typical of how the West has viewed the East and vice versa, and John B. Henderson’s *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish, and Early Christian Patterns* (SUNY).

<sup>20</sup> See for example Aydin (2001), See also contributions to edited volumes by Hick & Knitter: 2005, Schmidt-Leukel (2008); Schmidt-Leukel & Ridgeon (2007).

<sup>21</sup> An overview and discussion of the criticisms can also be found in Schmidt-Leukel 2005 and Hedges 2008b.

<sup>22</sup> See D’Costa 1986 and D’Costa 1993. D’Costa came out against the typology in D’Costa 1996. See also D’Costa 2000: 19-52.

orthodox Christian view based firmly in the authoritative ecclesial documents of Vatican II (2000: 12). As such he has always viewed pluralism as an illegitimate innovation. He later reached the conclusion that the typology is biased towards pluralism and further that the pluralist position is, in fact, logically impossible. He argues that the terms pluralist, inclusivist and exclusivist are rhetorically and polemically charged – “as if the first were generous with God’s salvation, the second more grudgingly so, and the last plain mean” (2009:36. Cf Barnes 2002). More than this, the opposition of the terms “pluralist” and “exclusivist” disguise the fact that so-called pluralists operate with an exclusive understanding of truth just as exclusivists do. Rather than being grounded in the revealed truths of a particular tradition, pluralism is based on the “truths” of liberal modernity: pluralists are really “Enlightenment exclusivists” in disguise (2000: 22). The pluralist position is in fact a logical impossibility, as, far from recognising the “independent validity of other ways”, pluralism can only recognise truth in other religions once they have been recast according to this Enlightenment criterion of truth and falsity. D’Costa takes his critical view of liberal modernity from Alasdair MacIntyre’s characterisation of the “Enlightenment project” as the failed attempt to provide a conception of rationality which was independent of historical and social context and any specific belief system (D’Costa 2000: 3). D’Costa’s criticism is chiefly directed at Hick who argued that the terms pluralist, inclusivism and exclusivism are the most “natural” descriptors for these positions and that pluralism as a “hypothesis” offers “the best available explanation ... of the data of the history of religions” (Hick 1997: 163). In fact, counters D’Costa, “his Kantian presuppositions do not generate a neutral hypothesis ... but are in fact ‘first-order’ creedal statements of a philosophical faith with many epistemological, ontological, and ethical presuppositions undergirding it” (2000: 46). Rather than occupying the moral high ground by being able to honour the beliefs of others, in fact the pluralist is only able to ascribe value to other religious traditions by negating the way those traditions are actually understood by their adherents. Religious adherents consider their truth claims to contain literal statements about the nature of reality – not some mere mythical truth (2009: 36). For D’Costa, the inclusivist position too fails in its aspirations to promote dialogue and good relations between religions. D’Costa denies that it is possible for the inclusivist to affirm other religions as true or as means to salvation because:

If religious traditions are properly considered in their unity of practice and theory, and in their organic interrelatedness, then such “totalities” cannot simply be dismembered into parts (be they doctrines, practices, images, or music) which are then taken up and “affirmed” by inclusivists, for the parts will

always relate to the whole and will only take their meaning in this organic context. Hence what is thus included from a religion being engaged with, is not really that religion *per se*, but a reinterpretation of that tradition in so much as that which is included is now included within a different paradigm, such that its meaning and utilization within that new paradigm can only perhaps bear some analogical resemblance to its meaning and utilization within its original paradigm (2000: 22-23).

Therefore both inclusivism and pluralism fail in their attempts to respect what is different in other traditions because in order to affirm those traditions or aspects of them they must render them unrecognizable to their adherents: “This cannot be said really to affirm... because what is being affirmed is not that tradition as it understands itself, but what the alien theologian chooses to prioritise and select” (2000: 23).

This insistence on viewing religions as integrated wholes whose integrity must be respected is a common perspective amongst a new wave of approaches to religious diversity which began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This group of perspectives is referred to as “particularism” (Fletcher 2005, Moyaert 2012), or “particularities” (Hedges 2008a, 2008b, 2010) or “the acceptance model” (Knitter 2002), and is included in the new four-fold typology discussed below. This group is largely defined by the influence of the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck,<sup>23</sup> who published the slim but groundbreaking work *The Nature of Doctrine* in 1984.

### 1.3.2 George Lindbeck

Lindbeck offered his own three-fold typology – not to do with the question of salvation in other religions, but with categorising the various ways of conceiving of religion in the first place. Although Lindbeck’s primary concern was not the theology of religions but ecumenism (2009: 126), it is within the interreligious context that his proposal has had its greatest influence. Lindbeck first identifies the *propositional-cognitive* model as having been the approach of traditional orthodoxies. It “emphasizes the cognitive aspects of

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<sup>23</sup> For Hedges the postliberal influence constitutes the category of “particularities” while Knitter’s “acceptance model” is broader. Knitter lists three expressions of the acceptance model of which “postliberal foundations” is one – albeit the main one. The others are “many religious = many salvations” (of which the main exponent is Mark Heim) and “comparative theology” (Knitter 2002: 177). Moyaert follows Knitter’s description but names the model “particularism” seeing comparative theology as an expression of particularism (2012: 49 fn 58). Like Hedges, Gavin D’Costa treats comparative theology separately from what he calls “postmodern postliberalism” (2009: 37-53).

religion and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities” (1984: 16). The mistake of this approach is that it treats religion as though it were constituted “in purely intellectual terms by axioms, definitions and corollaries”, overlooking the constitutive role of its “set of stories used in specifiable ways to interpret and live in the world”. This makes religion more comparable to a “natural language than a formally organized set of explicit statements” (1984: 64). The second model, *experiential expressivism*, Lindbeck identifies with “liberal theologies influenced by the Continental developments that began with Schleiermacher” (1984: 16). Thinkers of this tradition, says Lindbeck:

all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e. nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience (2009:7).

The problem with this model according to Lindbeck, is that “Because this core experience is said to be common to a wide diversity of religions, it is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous.” (2009:18) By contrast, according to Lindbeck’s *cultural-linguistic* account which is inspired by anthropological (Geertz) sociological and philosophical (Wittgenstein) studies:

religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths of narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world (2009: 18).

On this view religious traditions are self-contained, self-sufficient “idioms for construing reality,” where the ability to make meaningful (i.e. either true or false) statements rests in the “adequacy of their categories” (1984: 47-48). Religious statements cannot be expected to be meaningful across religious boundaries because religious experience cannot be differentiated from the idiom in which it is conceived. Contrary to the affirmation by Race and the early theologians of religions of a comparable religious aspiration, Lindbeck explains that the cultural linguistic approach is:

... open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and therefore also of what it would mean for something to be most important (i.e., “God”) (1984: 55).

On this rationale, the theology of religions, typified by the threefold paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, proceeds from the false premise of the comparable

nature of religious claims. According to Lindbeck, the truth of a particular scripture emerges only within the bounds of the interpreting community for whom that scripture shapes “the entirety of life and thought” (Lindbeck 1984: 32, 33). It is this insistence that we can only speak from and for our particular traditions that gives “particularism” its name.

Although Lindbeck acknowledges the disadvantage of the cultural-linguistic model in that it does not “issue a blanket endorsement of the enthusiasm and warm fellow-feelings that can be easily promoted in an experiential-expressive context”, he argues that it has the advantage that dialogue partners are “not forced into the dilemma of thinking of themselves as representing a superior (or an inferior) articulation of a common experience of which the other religions are inferior (or superior) expressions. They can regard themselves as simply different and can proceed to explore their agreements and disagreements without necessarily engaging in the invidious comparisons that the assumption of a common experiential core make so tempting.” (2009: 41)

As to the question of salvation, Lindbeck suggests that “one must learn the language of faith” and explicitly accept its message before one can be saved. Something like “anonymous Christianity” on this view is impossible. However Lindbeck also suggests that “there is no damnation - just as there is no salvation - outside the church”, and raises the possibility of “a prospective *fides ex auditu* explanation of the salvation of non-Christians”, whereby “dying itself [is] pictured as the point at which every human being is ultimately and expressly confronted by the gospel, by the crucified and risen Lord” (1984: 57, 59). Having considered Lindbeck and D’Costa’s criticisms of the typology, there remains Joseph DiNoia to consider before we complete this brief overview of key voices contributing to the rise of “particularism”.

### 1.3.3 Joseph DiNoia

The implications of a cultural-linguistic perspective for interpreting other religions were elaborated by Catholic theologian Joseph DiNoia, who had already inspired Lindbeck with his idea of the “providential diversity of religions.”<sup>24</sup> DiNoia seeks to develop a theology of religions with a double-aim to “affirm the [universal] availability of salvation and support participation in interreligious dialogue.” (1992: x) While the dominant approaches

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<sup>24</sup> see Joseph DiNoia, “The Universality of Salvation and the Diversity of Religious Aims,” *Worldmission* 32 (Winter 1981-81), pp. 4-15, cited in Lindbeck 2009: 57.



of inclusivism and pluralism have been concerned to promote the first – by affirming the availability of salvation “outside the ambit of Christianity” (1992: ix), they have fallen foul of the second – by failing to “take the distinctive doctrines of other religious communities seriously” (1992: x). The primary problem is the dominance of what DiNoia calls the soteriocentric principle (check below) whereby pluralists and inclusivists assume that other religions are, like Christianity, seeking salvation as their ultimate aim. Countering this DiNoia states his objective plainly:

Major religious communities commend a variety of ultimate aims of life that coincide neither with one another nor with what Christians mean by salvation. It would be desirable for Christian theology of religions to affirm Christian confidence in the universality of salvation in a way that gave full value to the diversity of aims of life and consequent patterns of life commended by other religious communities (1992: x).

Christian theology of religions in its classic form, DiNoia argues, “seems bound to equalize or absorb in ineffaceably particular soteriological programs of other religious communities” (DiNoia 1990: 253). As such, he is described by one commentator as leading a shift away from the “tired trio of essentially parochial responses” (Matthewes 1998: 86). DiNoia stresses the “inextricable connection between the particular aims of life commended by religious communities and the specific sets of dispositions they foster to promote the attainment and enjoyment of those aims.” (1990: 257). Like D’Costa he argues that pluralists and inclusivists fail to recognise this link, so that though they aim to affirm other religions (either fully or in part) what they affirm is only an alien interpretation of those traditions and the result is a blurring of “the distinctive features of the religious landscape” (1992: x). A “more appropriate strategy” he suggests, “might be to try to determine whether the different modes of expression do not in fact signal importantly different aims” (1990: 254). DiNoia points to the limits of what can be said about the status of other religions prior to gaining in-depth knowledge about them, and so modalizes the claims which, as Griffiths explains, theologians of religions have usually cast in the indicative mood (Griffiths 1993: 382). By modalising the claims, Griffiths means distinguishing between whether a claim is made “in the mode of necessity or of possibility” (Griffiths 2001: 57). Unlike classic forms of inclusivism, DiNoia does not wish to say that other religions contain truth, but only insofar as they hold beliefs/practices in common with Christianity. Instead DiNoia states that it is *possible* that non-Christian religions have significant material commonality with Christianity, in which case these are fulfilled in Christianity. However it is also possible that non-Christian religions have

material content that has no significant commonality with Christianity, in which case Christians should not deny that these communities bring their members to the goal they recommend, but they clearly cannot bring them to the Christian goal of salvation (Griffiths 1993: 387). In these cases, God may still bring members of the non-Christian community to salvation after death, but this will be a result of the transformation possible in purgatory and not due to their particular non-Christian tradition (DiNoia 1992: 104-107 cited in Griffiths 1993: 387).

DiNoia doubts “the appropriateness of blanket assumptions” about other religions aiming for “what Christians understand salvation to involve”. DiNoia stresses the “fact” that “at least initially, the self-description of most other religious communities involve distinctive and possibly opposed conceptions of the true aim of life” (1992: 161). DiNoia proposes “an alternative approach to Christian theology of religions that systematically admits the relevance of such self-descriptions but does not preclude the fielding of counter-descriptions framed in Christian terms.” (1992: 161)

DiNoia argues that theology of religions cannot progress “unless the soteriocentric framework is qualified or displaced as a way of conceiving the issues” (1992: 165). He refers to the “soteriocentric principle” which dominates theology of religions and according to which “all religious communities aim for salvation either as Christians understand it (inclusivism) or in the various forms in which it comes to be expressed (pluralism)” (1992: 163). Contrary to this assumption “religious communities actually propose distinctive aims for human life, in which soteriological doctrines have varying degrees of significance and varying sorts of affinities with Christian doctrines about salvation ... such issues can be sorted out only on the basis of a case by case analysis of the doctrines of other religious communities” (1992: 165). DiNoia describes his notion of “prospective salvation” as a form of inclusivism. However, he insists that it is a “modest” one which “allows for the operation of divine grace in all human hearts”, whilst upholding the “fundamental conviction of the Christian faith that wherever salvation occurs – wherever the true aim of life is attained – it is always through the grace of Jesus Christ”, and not “through the exercise of their own religions” (1992: 166). This kind of inclusivism has the advantage over the standard variety, he argues, in that it supports the urgent and “vigorous Christian mission” entailed by “traditional Christian doctrines” (1992: 168). DiNoia talks of the “impasse” in theology of religions as between pluralists and inclusivists, who are each to varying extents pursuing a “flight from exclusivism” in order

to “allow for the possibility of salvation outside the confines of the Christian community” (163). Their disagreements to a large extent arise from the divergent theological and philosophical strategies they employ, and far from breaking new ground, theology of religions is, says DiNoia “fast becoming a largely reiterative conversation about familiar proposals” (1992: 164. Cf. Clooney 2003). In order to move forward it must be open to adaptation through contact with other traditions and the generalities of “other religions” substituted for specific referents (1992: 160).

### 1.3.4 Mark Heim

Like other critics of the typology, Mark Heim insisted that the typology could not do justice to the radical diversity of religious traditions. Like DiNoia he is of the view that the very different religious paths proposed by the religions cannot possibly lead to the same spiritual end. The typology errs by encouraging Christians to think of other religions according to a Christian conception of salvation. Instead, Buddhist practices, for example, should not be viewed as leading to the beatific vision of Catholic teaching, but rather as leading to the experience of liberation described in Buddhist teaching. Heim’s approach is unique in that in his monograph *Salvations* (1995) he argued that the various religious ends postulated by the major religions do in fact exist. Unsurprisingly, his novel approach gained significant theological attention. By emphasising the diversity within the Christian concept of God – i.e. the Trinity, Heim argued that the different aspects of God could engender a diversity of ends in the world to come. The ultimate ends of other religions can then be seen to represent “an intensified realization of one dimension of God’s offered relation to us” (2001: 179). The Christian end remains superior as it is the only one which involves a realization of the fullness of God’s offered relation to us. In fact, he states, “insofar as alternate religious ends lack or rule out real dimensions of communion with the triune God, they embody some measure of what the Christian tradition regards as loss or damnation” (2001: 162). Therefore although Heim is critical of the typology, he also recognises that his stance is basically inclusivist towards other religions (1995: 160). Heim’s criticisms of pluralism as failing to do justice to the radical diversity of religious traditions are also shared by process theologians John Cobb and David Ray Griffin. Griffin has proposed a “deep pluralism” which he contrasts with the “identist pluralism” of Hick and others who see religions as different paths leading to the same ultimate reality. Deep pluralists share Heim’s recognition of the ontological reality of diverse religious ends but, for Griffin and Cobb this is based on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead,

rather than on a Trinitarian theology. Unlike Heim, they assert the soteriological equality of various religious traditions on this basis (Griffin 2005), but they face the charge of slipping into polytheism as a result (see Drew 2011: 48-53).

In the face of the critique of the three-fold typology by scholars like D’Costa, Lindbeck, DiNoia, and Heim and the alternatives models they proposed for approaching religious diversity, several scholars have re-interpreted Race’s original typology. They have done so in order to demonstrate the enduring relevance and indeed necessity of the theology of religions for any serious theological engagement with religious others. We will now consider four such re-interpretations, by Schmidt-Leukel, Hedges, Knitter and finally D’Costa’s own alternative typology.

## ***1.4 The typology re-interpreted***

### **1.4.1 Perry Schmidt-Leukel**

As discussed above, the ways in which the terms exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism have been employed have varied considerably. Often, commentators are not clear as to whether they mean to refer to the presence of truth in the religions, or the possibility of salvation for members of other religions, or whether they are referring more specifically to the salvific potential of other religious traditions. The result has been a good deal of confusion. In an article where he seeks to “re-interpret” and “re-affirm” the typology, Schmidt-Leukel (2005: 14-17) presents eight key criticisms of the typology which I list below:

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1. The typology has an inconsistent structure “because the positions are not of the same genre and do not address the same questions” (Tilley 1999).
2. The typology is misleading, because it obscures or misses the real issues of a theology of religions (DiNoia 1992, Tilley 1999, D’Costa 1996).
3. The typology is too narrow. There are more than three options (Markham 1993, Ogden 1992, Knitter 2002).
4. The typology is too broad. There are not really three options but only one. (D’Costa 1996).
5. The typology is too coarse or abstract. It does not do justice to the more

complex and nuanced reality of real theologies (Ariarajah 1997).

6. The typology is misleading because it does not do justice to the radical diversity of religions (Heim 1995).
7. The typology is offensive: the terms serve as polemical instruments in the hands of pluralists (Neuhaus 1999).
8. The typology is pointless, because we are not in a position to choose any of these options and therefore have to refrain from all of them (Fredericks 1999, Clooney 1993).

Schmidt-Leukel answers each of these criticisms, arguing that they are either unwarranted or they do not apply to his reinterpreted typology. The criticism which Schmidt-Leukel's typology most directly addresses is that concerning the lack of consistency in how the classic typology is employed and how the terms are defined. A variety of definitions of the terms have been put forward within which there is no consistency as to whether the terms refer to the salvific potential of traditions or to the eschatological fate of non-Christians, irrespective of the tradition to which they belong (see for example D'Costa 2005: 627). He reasserts the issue of salvation as the critical question for a theology of religions, and insists that the focus should be on the status of religions in "mediating salvific knowledge", and not on the eschatological fate of individuals. While Race's original typology was phenomenological and fluid, Schmidt-Leukel's is prescriptive and logically comprehensive (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 18). Race's typology sought to be descriptive of actual positions taken within the theology of religions, and the categories produced were "largely a matter of emphasis on the part of the particular writers" (Race 1983: 7), rather than being mutually exclusive. Schmidt-Leukel's re-interpretation is prescriptive in the sense that it distils the discourse to a single question about the validity of religious traditions which, he argues, should constitute its focus. In doing so, he narrowed the focus of the typology but he also broadened its scope, by using language designed to make the typology usable by any religious tradition, not just Christianity. Schmidt-Leukel's typology is focused on the single question of whether the religions mediate "salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality". Schmidt-Leukel sees this as "typical for religious claims" provided we follow his broad definitions of "salvation" and "transcendent reality" (2005: 23). "Transcendent reality" is, following William Christian, "something that is more important than anything else in the world", that is "not one of the finite realities of this world" (Christian 1964: 60). Religions claim to have some form of knowledge of this transcendent reality and "instruct people to live their lives in such a way that they truly reflect this utmost importance of

ultimate reality.” “Salvation” designates “such a proper orientation of life and the hopes connected with it” (2005:18). The typology asks whether the “mediation of salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality” – referred to as property *P* – is given among the religions. Consequently, Schmidt-Leukel presents the three positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as the *only* theological options in a fully disjunctive, logically comprehensive schema: “Either *P* is given or not. If *P* is given, it is given only once or more than once. And if *P* is given more than once, it is either with or without a singular maximum form” (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 19). And so Schmidt-Leukel gives precise definitions of the positions as follows:

(0) *Atheism/Naturalism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by none of the religions (because a transcendent reality does not exist).

(1) *Exclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by only one religion (which naturally will be one’s own).

(2) *Inclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), but only one of these mediates it in a uniquely superior way (which again will naturally be one’s own).

(3) *Pluralism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them whose mediation of that knowledge is superior to all the rest. (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 19-20)

Although Schmidt-Leukel’s schema certainly brought clarity to the debate, it has not been broadly adopted. This is perhaps because, even more so than Race’s original typology, Schmidt Leukel’s classification involves a distillation of a highly complex issue, “forcing diverse materials into easily controlled locations” (D’Costa: 637). For some there is a sense that a logical “yes or no” approach to the issue will, as Michael Barnes has argued, result in “decidedly flat abstractions” and simply cannot do justice to the “diffuse and emotionally freighted practices of engagement between the people who walk the streets of our multi-faith inner cities” (Barnes 2002: 8). However, when we remember that the typology aims to provide a useful shorthand for referring to various theological theories (and not the emotional responses of ordinary people to religious diversity), and when we remember that its use is not a substitute for engaging with the complexities of their arguments, this objection loses some of its force. More problematic for Schmidt-Leukel’s

classification is that it is only applicable to the extent that theologians answer the question which forms its focus. Some, like Schubert Ogden, have argued that the question of whether religious others can be saved through their tradition cannot be (definitively) answered, and Schmidt-Leukel's typology does not give a distinct place for the view of indeterminacy. Furthermore, still others feel that salvation should not form the focus of our inquiry, because it is not clear that all the different religious traditions place something akin to salvation at their centre. For Lindbeck, DiNoia and D'Costa it is not possible to speak of salvation in general. The salvation for which Christians hope is so rooted in the complex of Christian beliefs, so intimately related to Christ, that it simply does not make sense to ask whether another tradition could aid a person in achieving this end: it is like asking if one can win a game of snooker by serving an ace. On this view, placing salvation as *the* question in the theology of religions precludes the results of interreligious dialogue and prevents real learning about the distinctive goals proclaimed by the various religious traditions.

#### **1.4.2 Paul Hedges**

In the textbook *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (2008), Paul Hedges has responded differently to the various criticisms of the typology. Against Schmidt-Leukel's narrowing of the focus to a single question, he has advocated a broader, more fluid, and purely descriptive typology, more in line with Race's original proposal (Hedges 2008a: 27; 2010: 19), seeing this as more capable of attending to the diverse voices and nuances in the field. In this regard, Hedges presents the categories in the plural to highlight their multivalent nature, and he adds that "people may express ideas that spill over several of the categories" (Hedges 2008a: 27). Unlike Schmidt-Leukel's typology, which in utilising general language seeks to be applicable within multiple religious traditions, Hedges uses Christian categories. There is no key question or precise definition in Hedges' typology. Rather he offers long and quite loose explanations of "exclusivisms" ("only Christianity leads to salvation...") "inclusivisms" ("...other religions are 'fulfilled'...in Christianity"), and "pluralisms" ("...there is more than one legitimate way to what can broadly be termed 'salvation...'"), which revolve around the issue of salvation but without distinguishing between the salvific potency of traditions and the fate of individuals. Hedges' typology adds a fourth category of "particularities" to take account of a growing number of contributors (discussed above) who do not identify with any of the three classic positions (Hedges 2008b: 17-18; 2010: 20-29). This final option, Hedges says, "can be spoken of as

indeterminacy in relation to other religions, alongside a commitment to speaking from, for and of one tradition” (2010: 27). Hedges provides a description of this new category, based on six points which are “fundamental to most, if not all, particularist positions” (Hedges 2010: 27-29), which, for the sake of brevity, I have paraphrased as follows:

- 1.) Against Hick’s pluralism, it is denied that there can be a common core to religions. Each religion is unique and differences are stressed over similarities - which are deemed superficial only.
- 2.) Theology can only be tradition-specific: the different religions represent closed and incommensurate cultural islands.
- 3.) God may be at work in other religions but (against inclusivists) whether, where and how the Spirit operates within them is said to be unknown.
- 4.) No ‘salvific potency’ resides in other religions, but they are to be respected in their integrity, avoiding (definitive) claims as to their fulfilment in Christianity: they may hold value in God’s plans.
- 5.) Following George Lindbeck’s approach and postliberal theology, pluralism (and to some extent inclusivism) is dismissed as being based in the faulty modernist Enlightenment worldview which delights in metanarratives. Metanarratives are to be abandoned in favour of “local stories” from within one’s tradition.
- 6.) Seeking to be theologically orthodox, this approach is Christ- and Trinity-centred. In this it claims to allow both greater fidelity to tradition and greater openness and respect for others.

Hedges lists Gavin D’Costa, George Lindbeck, Rowan Williams, Kevin Vanhoozer, Lesslie Newbigin, Joseph DiNoia, John Milbank, and Alistair McGrath as diverse voices that each express forms of ‘particularism’ and that, he says, can be “broadly termed as ‘conservative’, ‘postliberal’ and/or ‘postmodern’” (Hedges 2008a: 112). Hedges category of ‘particularisms’ therefore differs substantially from his other categories of exclusivisms, inclusivisms and pluralisms in that it describes the philosophical underpinnings of the approach.

### **1.4.3 Paul Knitter**

Knitter presented a similar typology to that developed by Hedges in his *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (2002). Knitter’s approach does not in fact engage in the debate about typologies to present arguments in favour of the use of his categories over others. He simply uses the categories to order the various approaches to religious diversity into



chapters which, although missing this debate on typologies, feature a balance and empathy which is uncharacteristic of much work in the field and is to be highly valued. The virtue of empathy is often highly regarded when it comes to the consideration of the beliefs of religious others, but forgotten when considering the proposals of colleagues in the field. Knitter's categories reflect the same four basic categories used by Hedges, though instead of exclusivisms, inclusivisms, pluralisms and particularities he prefers to speak of "the replacement model"; "the fulfilment model"; "the mutuality model" and "the acceptance model". The major difference lies in how they set out the fourth model. Knitter describes "the acceptance model" first and foremost at the surface level as "the religious traditions of the world are really different, and we have to *accept* those differences" (Knitter 2002: 173). Only then does Knitter distinguish three "different but very much related expressions" of the acceptance model. The first has "postliberal foundations" based on the work of George Lindbeck. This corresponds to Hedges' explication of "particularities". The second is characterised as "many religions = many salvations", the main proponent of which is Mark Heim. (Hedges too relates Heim's theology to the fourth model in his paradigm but in the end feels that Heim does not quite fit because he is not "post-modern enough". That is, he offers his own metanarrative of salvation through the religions and in fact is comfortable in naming himself an inclusivist.) The third expression of Knitter's acceptance model is *comparative theology* (Knitter 2002: 177), a practice which will be introduced in the following chapter and reviewed in more detail in chapter 4.

As we have seen, Hedges and Knitter both add one more category to Race's original typology, Knitter renames them all, and Schmidt-Leukel transforms the typology from a loose, descriptive one into a logically comprehensive schema. Nevertheless, they are all heavily indebted to Race's proposal and to a large extent (though in different ways) maintain his basic categories. Before moving towards a conclusion for this chapter in the history of the theology of religions, we will briefly consider D'Costa's alternative typology which abandons Race's categories altogether. This should not be surprising given his critique of the categories as biased towards pluralism.

#### **1.4.4 Gavin D'Costa**

Gavin D'Costa has taken the opposite approach to Paul Hedges' loose and fluid typology. He feels that a main problem with the three-fold typology is that it "fails to deliver on the question of the salvation of the unbeliever in a precise enough sense". So in 2009 he

presented a “seven graded classification on the precise question of how a person is saved.” These are:

through the Trinity (Trinity-centred); through Christ (Christ-centred), through the Spirit (Spirit-centred), through the church (church-centred), through God not conceived of in a Trinitarian fashion, but in a theistic fashion (theocentric), through the Real that is beyond all classification (reality-centred), through good works (ethics-centred) (D’Costa 2009:34-35).

These are not mutually exclusive positions but rather, the first four are required for Catholic orthodoxy, and the first three are required for Protestant/Reformed orthodoxy. If the last three are used normatively at the expense of the first four, the result is heterodoxy, as is the case with Hick and the later Knitter (2009: 36). D’Costa’s typology has not been widely adopted however, presumably because of the broad move away from a consideration of the question of salvation in relation to religious others. While many Christian scholars like DiNoia argue that we can not possibly make judgements about to whom and how God extends his saving grace, D’Costa has devised a typology which asks us to make these judgments with even greater precision!

### ***1.5 Theology of religions at an impasse?***

From the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of commentators have reflected that the theology of religions discourse is at an “impasse” or “deadlock”. It has been noted that theologians in this field have ably demonstrated the flaws in each others’ approaches without being able to identify a viable route forward. In 1999 James Fredericks insisted that “none of the three basic options for a theology of religions is fully adequate to the needs of Christians in this religiously diverse age” (Fredericks 1999: 9). Fredericks described the battle lines as lying between pluralist and inclusivist theologians. The theology of religions is in “crisis” because, while pluralists have successfully highlighted the problems with exclusivist and inclusivist approaches, they in fact fall victim to the same critique: they cannot respect religious otherness (Fredericks 1999: 8). Fredericks argued that Hick’s “pluralistic hypothesis” is not a hypothesis at all, because there are no observable facts which could falsify its claims. Like D’Costa, he insists that pluralism is a “religious assertion”, the implications of which lead it to fail the tests for an adequate theology of religions. Fredericks argues that their position has the unintended consequence of “domesticating” differences, making them significantly less interesting to Christians (1999: 113,115). He notes that Pluralists accuse inclusivists of seeing religious others

purely in terms of Christianity (as “anonymous Christians”, for example) and therefore not as genuinely other. Yet Pluralists, he says, by asserting that all religions are responses to or expressions of a transcendent Absolute, claim to know more about other religions than their adherents.<sup>25</sup> As such they are said to be unlikely to hear, or even be incapable of really hearing, the religious other, and therefore offer no viable alternative to the inclusivist approaches they criticise. Michael Barnes similarly described the “deadlock” as one enforced by the “threefold paradigm” which “far from opening up theology to fresh insights... settles it into a safe and predictable agenda” (Barnes 2002: 13). Concerned to engage more deeply with the meaning of other religions for their adherents, Barnes and Fredericks encouraged others to leave aside theology of religions which they identified with Christians reflecting on religious others by talking amongst themselves about Christian sources and teachings. Theologians of religions “treat people of other faiths as a ‘problem’ on the fringes of a still largely Christian world” and, in doing so, fail to “exercise their theological imagination creatively and responsibly.” He explains:

I am more concerned with a theology which arises from the various forms of dialogue with other religions, not with an exercise in preparing for such an engagement... I want to develop a ‘theology of dialogue’ rather than a ‘theology for dialogue’ (Barnes 2002: x).

The alternative presented by Barnes and Fredericks is to leave the theology of religions aside and to turn to dialogue with, and deep study of, the religions themselves – the “process or practice” of comparative theology as an alternative to the theoretical theology of religions, and as providing a way out of this “impasse” (Fredericks 1999: 8-9).

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has traced the development of the discipline of theology of religions, from its origins in the mid-twentieth century and gaining traction in the optimistic years following the end of the Second World War with increasing economic, political and social globalisation, and especially following the Second Vatican Council. In 1983, Alan Race proposed the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism to describe the different positions taken regarding the presence of truth and salvation beyond Christianity. This typology became very widely used to the extent that it tends to be seen as defining the

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<sup>25</sup> Fredericks, like most critics of pluralism, mistakenly characterises pluralism as making claims about “all religions”. However, Hick referred to the ‘post-axial’ religions only, whilst Schmidt-Leukel’s definition only requires that at least two traditions are considered equally valid in this regard.

discipline of theology of religions. However, the ‘battle lines’ began to be drawn by some commentators who objected that it does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. Following the “postmodern turn” and Lindbeck’s highly influential *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), increasing numbers began to voice criticisms of the theology of religions’ “totalising” tendencies, its drive for meta-narratives, and an apparent inability to respect religious particularity and the “otherness of the other”. The discipline was described as being at an “impasse.” (Fredericks 1999). As we will see in the following chapter, this has led many theologians interested in religious diversity to embark on a different kind of scholarship. These theologians remain convinced that theology must speak to the reality of our multi-religious world, but rather than theorise about that diversity they have sought to delve straight into deep study and dialogue with members of other religions. The work of these scholars is now recognised as part of an emerging field of study named interreligious hermeneutics.— We have seen that Hedges and Schmidt-Leukel have engaged critics of theology of religions and have attempted to re-craft the typology so that it can meet the new challenges posed and encourage a collegiality between scholars practicing theology of religions and those engaging in these ‘new’ ventures of interreligious hermeneutics. However, their efforts to bring theologians of religions and interreligious hermeneutics together have not been broadly successful. The following chapter will describe this new field of interreligious hermeneutics and will suggest that the division from theology of religions inhibits its ability to meet its aims. Finally I will propose an adapted typology and clarified understanding of the theology of religions so that they can be more successfully related to interreligious hermeneutics. This will then provide the foundation for the analysis of each of the subsequent chapters, as we explore what it means to learn from the religious other.

## **Chapter 2: Introducing Interreligious Hermeneutics**

### ***Introduction***

Chapter 1 traced the development of the theology of religions from its origins, through several stages, to the point where an “impasse” seemed to have been reached in the 1990s. This chapter continues the story, surveying the most important developments of the last twenty years. It will introduce the work of scholars who have responded differently to the same challenge of a religious diversity that thrives and continues to grow in a world where people of different religions and cultures are increasingly interconnected. Despite broad agreement about the need for Christian theologians to engage positively and creatively with religious diversity, these scholars have forged a distinctive path to the theologians of religions. This path has been characterised by the “turn to the “other” and to the field of hermeneutics. New practices have emerged which seek to engage the religious other deeply and directly, without recourse to overarching theories about religious diversity. These practices have come to be termed “interreligious hermeneutics”. This chapter will introduce this newly emerging field, some of its key protagonists and two of its most prominent practices – namely comparative theology and scriptural reasoning. The question of whether these practices can effectively be divorced from a theology of religions will be explored. Finally an adapted typology will be introduced, aimed at making it applicable to scholars practicing interreligious hermeneutics, many of whom sought to distance themselves from the typology and the discipline of theology of religions altogether.

### ***2.1 The turn to the “other”***

For Rahner to feel motivated to construct his theology of religions, all he needed to know about other religions was the fact that they exist and that they appear to have a positive impact on people’s lives. He did not concern himself with the particulars of other traditions and the result was a proposal which did not necessarily encourage Christians to learn more about their non-Christian neighbours. Since Rahner (1984), there has been a significant

shift in emphasis – from speaking about “non-Christians” almost as though they are defined by the fact that they are not Christian, to speaking about the religious “other” (sometimes capitalised). For Christians, the referent remains the same and indeed some people use the terms interchangeably, as I have done. In theory, however, the term “other” functions as a way of referring to people belonging to different religious traditions which demonstrates an awareness of their irreducible particularity. That is, rather than viewing them as a reflection of one’s self – as in “non-Christian” – it is recognised that their beliefs and practices are different in important and enduring ways. So we often hear theologians talking about “the need to recognize the religious other as other, not as a mere outsider to, reflection of, extension of, or unwitting member of one’s own tradition (e.g. ‘non-Christian’)” (Tilley 1999: 323).

The term “other” is sometimes directly attributed to postmodern Jewish philosophers Emanuel Levinas and Franz Rosenzweig, especially when capitalised (i.e. “the Other”). Levinas and Rosenzweig used the term to designate a radical otherness – where differences are so great they defy comprehension. Mervyn Bendle explains that for them “an awareness of the Other” was “an awareness which ‘exceeds’ thought, an awareness of the Other as that which in itself is a measure of the limitations of conceptual thought” (Bendle 1999: 9). Many Christian theologians have found the term to resonate with what they see as the centre of the Gospel message. For Michael Barnes, who has been greatly influenced by Levinas, “the other” is “at once a post-modern term of mind-bending obscurity and the heart of the Gospel reality: stranger, neighbour, potential friend, with whom so much is shared yet who often represents a difference which can only be comprehended in the silence of faith” (Barnes 2002: x-xi). The terms “other” and “otherness” are now widely used in the theology of religions discourse and not only by those who would describe themselves as “postmodern” or who adhere to the idea of others being necessarily beyond our understanding. For Hedges, who acknowledges himself to be broadly within the liberal tradition (2010: 3), the term ‘religious Other’ functions simply “as a term of respect and recognition of their difference, which is necessitated by Christian hospitality” (2010: 5), and this is how the term will be used here. It is now commonly agreed that religious others must be allowed to define themselves, and getting to know them means learning what is central to them, and not simply asking what beliefs they have which correspond to what is central in Christianity. Increasingly, since the turn of the century, when theorists talk about the ideal purpose of a theology of religions, it is not so much to provide a resolution to a tension internal to Christian theology highlighted by the increasingly apparent fact of

religious diversity (as in Rahner's case), but so as to provide strategies for engaging effectively with religious others (e.g. Fletcher 2005: 53; Fredericks 1999: 21 and Barnes 2002). As we have seen, Fredericks, Barnes and other scholars of other religions see the theology of religions discipline as incapable of attending to this task, and many have turned to the field of hermeneutics as a more fertile ground for developing such strategies.

### 2.1.1 The turn to hermeneutics in interreligious study and dialogue

David Tracy has been a key figure in proposing hermeneutical theory as a fertile ground for interreligious dialogue. In 1990 Tracy argued that viewed from the perspective of hermeneutics, participation in interreligious dialogue demands at least the recognition of "the other as other" (Tracy 1990: 41). Adopting Hans Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics which gives primacy to the moment of conversation, Tracy argued that hermeneutics shows how dialogue –and not a-priori theorising– “remains the central hope for recognizing the ‘possibilities’ (and, therefore, the live options) which any serious conversation with the 'other' and the 'different' can yield” (1990: 41). More recently Tracy has offered a helpful summary of “four shared characteristics of modern Western hermeneutics” (including by Gadamer, Heidegger, Derrida, Ricoeur, Habermas, Levinas, and Blanchot), which shows where he sees the insights of hermeneutical theory to impinge on interreligious dialogue:

- (1) a strong acknowledgment of the finitude and historicity [sic] of all human understanding;
- (2) the all-important fact that the *focus* of hermeneutical philosophy must be on the other as an alterity, not as a projected other of the self;
- (3) The hermeneutical self experiences an excess to its ordinary self-understanding that it cannot control through conscious intentionality or through desire for the same. Therefore each self must ‘let go’ to the dialogue itself;
- (4) The dialogue works as a dialogue (and not an exercise in self-aggrandizement) only if the other is allowed–through the dynamic of the to-and-fro movement of questioning–to become in the dialogue itself a genuine *other* not a projected other. A projected other is an unreal “other” projected upon some real other by the ego's needs or desires to define itself (2010: 3).

What Andreas Grunschloss refers to as “*abstaining from hermeneutically harming others: i.e., from doing violence to their own understanding and self-perception*” (Grunschloss

2008: 263) is now recognised as a basic requirement in interreligious dialogue and is fundamental to the practice of interreligious hermeneutics. Similarly, it is regarded as essential that scholars and dialogue partners acknowledge that they are not in control of what learning emerges from their practice. As Tracy says, they must “let go” to the dialogue itself, an openness which many describe as an openness to “surprise” (Quash 2006: 60), the “unexpected” (Clooney 2010: 127), and the “luck of the moment” (Adams 2006: 46).

### **2.1.2 From the problem of salvation to the problem of meaning: the call for “hermeneutical openness”**

If theology of religions was, in its first twenty to thirty years preoccupied by the *soteriological challenge* of whether and how members of other religious traditions could be saved, there has, as Marianne Moyaert has argued, been a large-scale shift since the 1990s to the consideration of the *hermeneutical challenge* – of how and to what extent we can properly understand the religious other (Moyaert 2012a). According to Moyaert, the rise of “particularism” (discussed above) heralds a new approach to religious diversity characterised by the turn to hermeneutics. Within the theology of religions discourse there is broad agreement regarding the need to be ‘open’ towards members of other religious traditions, and a key challenge for dialoguers is that of striking a proper balance between commitment to one’s tradition and openness to the religious other (Cornille 2008: 84). However, as Moyaert explains, particularists have set out to “alter the terms of the discussion” on this “dialogical tension between openness and commitment” (Moyaert 2012a: 26). For pluralists, openness is about being open to recognising the (mythic) truth of other traditions and the potential for religious others to achieve salvation through their traditions – Moyaert calls this “soteriological openness”. By contrast, particularists insist that openness means really listening to what the religious other is saying about their religious commitments – Moyaert calls this “hermeneutical openness”. Particularists then claim that “hermeneutical openness should precede soteriological appreciation” (Moyaert 2012a: 26). Moyaert explains the requirements as follows:

Dialogue first and foremost entails the willingness to understand the other in his or her otherness and to avoid reading one’s own presuppositions into the religious world of the other...Hermeneutical openness begins with the acknowledgement of the “intractable otherness of other religions” [DiNoia]. The religious other expects his or her dialogue partner to be willing to be



addressed and interrupted by “an unfamiliarity that does not meet patterns of expectation” [Bart Van Leeuwen]. Not meeting this request for hermeneutical openness is an expression of misrecognition. Put more forcefully, a lack of willingness to take the other seriously in his or her otherness is a form of closedness. Before judging, before assessing, before appreciating—either positively or negatively—the religious other deserves to be heard and understood (2012a: 38).

Particularists criticise what they see as the ‘a priori’ nature of theology of religions in its classic forms, expressing dissatisfaction with it being considered as “the *prolegomena* of interreligious dialogue” (Moyaert 2012a: 26). They oppose the view that we first need to settle on a particular stance regarding the soteriological effectiveness of other traditions *before* we can fruitfully engage in theological dialogue with other religions (see Moyaert 2012a: 46). We can now turn to see how these developments have contributed to new forms of study by reviewing the current state of the field of interreligious hermeneutics.

## ***2.2 Interreligious hermeneutics: the current state of the field***

Alongside the critique of theology of religions in its classic forms, new methodologies for engagement have emerged which have begun to be termed collectively as “interreligious hermeneutics.” It is still a relatively new term – there are as far as I am aware no university departments or courses dedicated to it and a Google search for academic books and papers containing the term reveals 124 results, of which 70 were published since 2010, indicating a growing trend.<sup>26</sup> In 2005 Martha Frederiks, professor of Missiology at Utrecht University, offered a broad definition of interreligious hermeneutics as “the theory and method of interpretation and understanding across religious boundaries” (Frederiks 2005:103-104). She identifies two distinct streams consisting in “those who see hermeneutics as a way of interpreting the texts and those who see hermeneutics as a way of interpreting the encounter with the other” (Frederiks 2005: 104). More recently, two English language edited collections have sought to establish the term, one from the United States and one from Europe. *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (2010) edited by Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway of Boston College and *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe* (2011) edited by David Cheetham *et al.*

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<sup>26</sup> Search for “interreligious hermeneutics” using [www.scholar.google.com](http://www.scholar.google.com) on 5/07/13. This is admittedly a very rough way of gauging scholarly activity and is offered as an indication only.

In her introduction to the edited volume *Interreligious Hermeneutics* Catherine Cornille reflects that interreligious hermeneutics has become a “convenient category in so far as it may be used to refer both to the theory and to the practice of interreligious understanding, and from any religious, cultural, or philosophical perspective” (Cornille 2010: ix). She indicates the diversity of practices covered by the term when she outlines four major approaches to interreligious hermeneutics as:

1. the hermeneutical retrieval of resources for dialogue within one’s own tradition
2. the pursuit of proper understanding of the other
3. the appropriation and reinterpretation of the other within one’s own religious framework; and
4. the borrowing of hermeneutical principles of another tradition.

(Cornille 2010: x)

Cornille acknowledges, however, that the first meaning listed is not the usual understanding of interreligious hermeneutics and that few of the contributors focus on internal religious bases for dialogue – these are rather “generally implied” (2010: xi, xiii). Here we see a distinction from theology of religions, a key focus of which has been establishing the foundations for interreligious relations from internal sources. Cornille acknowledges too that the fourth mode is more unusual. In her introduction to *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita*, Cornille defines interreligious hermeneutics more succinctly along the lines of No. 3 above: “whereby the sacred texts of one religious tradition may be understood – consciously or unconsciously – from within the philosophical and religious framework of an entirely different religious tradition.” However, it is clear that this must be preceded by no. 2 – “the pursuit of the proper understanding of the other” – as “Every sacred text, while often claiming universal truth and validity, is always embedded in a particular religious context which occupies an inevitable priority in the process of interpretation” (Cornille 2006: 4).

This understanding of interreligious hermeneutics is also found in the second volume under consideration: *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe* (Cheetham, Winkler et al.). It identifies comparative theology and scriptural reasoning as two major approaches of interreligious hermeneutics, both of which are concerned to give priority to the voice of the “other” within their hermeneutical procedures. According to the editors, both seek “to pay

close attention and listen to the self-descriptions and understandings of other traditions and their texts before offering some sort of theological appropriation of them” (Cheetham & Winkler 2011: ix). *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe* is an edited collection of papers emerging from a conference of The European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS). The editors see interreligious hermeneutics as a vital subject which emerges directly from the lived experience of religious plurality in Europe, and the volume is more public facing in its aspirations than its American counterpart. Interreligious hermeneutics is presented as the fertile ground in their search for “new methodologies for the meeting of traditions” which respond to contemporary realities, including “the multicultural character of European societies, the changing patterns of religious observance, the shifts in religious allegiance, the impact of immigrant populations and an awareness of new “global contexts...”. The editors suggest that interreligious hermeneutics is not only of theoretical interest but might “have a part to play in healing discord and conflict in the public square” (2011: ix). Discussions centred on “the ways in which hermeneutics (textual or otherwise) can take place in the context of the rich exchange and encounter between the different cultures and religious traditions in Europe” (Cheetham & Winkler 2011: vii). The editors’ perspective chimes with the postmodern sensibilities expressed by the “particularist” model discussed above. They state that the “optimistic” models of the past, which were confident about the possibilities of understanding the other through a “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer), or through observation from a “neutral” standpoint, are rejected as “superseded or outdated”. They insist that religious traditions are “resistant to the levelling off of differences, and their mysteries are too deep-rooted to be observed from a periscopic viewpoint” (Cheetham & Winkler 2011: x). A similar mood is evident in the volume edited by Cornille and Conway. In the first paper David Tracy employs the Gadamerian concept of hermeneutics but is careful to relegate its concept of a “fusion of horizons” to that of “admirable ideal” which is neither necessary nor helpful as a goal for dialogue (Tracy 2010: p?). Although convinced of the richness of the field of hermeneutics for interreligious discourse, both texts recognise certain limitations or problems associated with applying Western concepts of hermeneutics in the interreligious realm. Cornille notes the discourse awaits the contributions of those not versed in Western hermeneutics (2010: p?), while Cheetham and Winkler *et al* comment that “the postcolonial deconstruction of religion questions the suppositions of hermeneutics and exposes the power-shaped shares of hermeneutical theories” (Cheetham & Winkler 2011: x). The European volume does not attempt a definition of interreligious hermeneutics, instead commenting that “the varieties in interpretation, the diverse contexts

and histories [of the religions]...mean that the future of interreligious hermeneutics is going to be complex” (Cheetham & Winkler 2011: x). What emerges from both volumes however is that interreligious hermeneutics is primarily understood as being to do with texts, and scriptural texts at that – but the texts are always engaged through the interpretations of religious others who regard them as scriptures.<sup>27</sup>

If the term “interreligious hermeneutics” is yet to gain widespread use, articles referring to “scriptural reasoning” and “comparative theology” – two of its major expressions – now outstrip scholarly references to “theology of religions”, albeit narrowly so.<sup>28</sup> These scholars, impatient with theorising about religious traditions, have instead concentrated their energies on exploring some particular aspect of another tradition in depth, usually focussed on scripture. Given the growing popularity of these methods I will concentrate on comparative theology and scriptural reasoning as a way of exploring interreligious hermeneutics and the role it does and can play in the pursuit of fruitful, creative engagement with other religious traditions. I will suggest that these practices hold in common the following features:

- a.) *Theologically engaged*: the practice is understood as making a contribution to the broader project of theology.
- b.) *“Hermeneutically open”*: the tradition/ scriptures are to be understood first through the religious other with respect for their irreducible otherness (Moyaert).
- c.) *Open to learning from the religious other*: There is expectation that something of positive theological and/or spiritual significance can be learned through this encounter, learning which is often spoken of in terms of “truth”
- d.) *Open to surprise*: this learning cannot be anticipated prior to actual engagement but comes as a “surprise”.

In the following two chapters I will demonstrate these points, exploring the various ways in which these features are fleshed out in the work of some of their key exponents. For now, however, I will briefly introduce them, concentrating on their relation to theology of religions. As a scholarly discipline practised by individuals comparative theology is much closer to, and has been defined in relation to, the theology of religions. Scriptural

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<sup>27</sup> This point is reinforced by Maraldo’s complaint about the text-centred nature of most understandings of interreligious hermeneutics: see Maraldo in Cornille 2010.

<sup>28</sup> This is again based on a google scholar search on 5/07/13. Since 2010 there have been 773 books and articles containing “theology of religions”, 746 containing “comparative theology” and 235 containing “scriptural reasoning”.

reasoning, by contrast, is primarily a method of interreligious dialogue though it also involves the production of scholarly articles which provide focus for the dialogue and many scriptural reasoners have produced academic reflections on the process. Practitioners of scriptural reasoning make only passing reference to the theology of religions, if they refer to it at all. What is markedly similar about comparative theology and scriptural reasoning is that both are focussed on the reading of scriptures across religious boundaries and are open to and are practised by members of diverse religious traditions. Practising members of religious traditions other than Christianity call themselves “comparative theologians” and “scriptural reasoners” and indeed, scriptural reasoning finds its origins in a Jewish practice as we shall see. In the final section of this chapter I will present an adapted typology which I propose can be fruitfully related to comparative theology and interreligious hermeneutics more broadly. For now the focus is on exploring in more detail what is involved in scriptural reasoning.

### ***2.3 Scriptural Reasoning<sup>29</sup>***

D’Costa sees scriptural reasoning as “allied to the comparative-theology movement” (D’Costa 2009: 39), and indeed there are a number of similarities in approach, but scriptural reasoning has its own distinctive story and it is not generally the case that comparative theologians are involved in scriptural reasoning and vice versa. Scriptural reasoning -which is a practice of interreligious dialogue involving the joint study of scriptures amongst Jews, Christians, and Muslims -has been presented as an alternative to the approach to religious diversity found in the theology of religions (Kepnes 2006: 29), but scriptural reasoners only make passing reference to that discourse, if at all. The practice was first developed at meetings of the American Academy of Religion in the 1990s by Anglican scholars David Ford and Daniel Hardy and Jewish scholar Peter Ochs, who shared an appreciation of the postliberal hermeneutics of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei (Ford 2006: 3). Later, Muslim scholars were invited to join the dialogue (Ford 2006: 4). By focusing on the reading of scripture together, this practice is claimed to bring the “core identities” of the Abrahamic religions into conversation, creating not consensus but better quality disagreements (Ford 2006: 1-4; Quash 2006).

Practitioners of scriptural reasoning claim to find value in engaging with other traditions in all their particularity without requiring the affirmation of pluralism or even inclusivism. It

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<sup>29</sup> This section is adapted from Lambkin 2012: 199-201

is said to be a theological practice in which “conservative” believers may keep their religious commitments in their entirety and through which they can engage both seriously and fruitfully with the religious commitments of others (Winter 2006: 109). Scriptural reasoners tend to do so without the sense that they must evaluate the truth claims of others or that these have any bearing on their own beliefs and practices. This is not because practitioners of scriptural reasoning declare no interest in truth, but rather they take issue with “how the pursuit of truth is justified and practiced in the modern West” (Quash 2006: 74). Similar to those within the “particularist” category of the theology of religions, they consider Enlightenment theories of rationality to be deeply misguided and even dangerous, and many subscribe to a postliberal view along the lines of George Lindbeck (Kepnes 2006: 36). According to Stephen Kepnes:

scriptural reasoning assumes that the individual traditions constitute, in George Lindbeck’s terms, unique “cultural-linguistic” religious systems that maintain internal principles and mechanisms of coherence. (Kepnes 2006: 28-29)

In Lindbeck’s view, traditions are self-contained, self-sufficient ‘idioms for construing reality’ where the ability to make meaningful (i.e. either true or false) statements rests in the ‘adequacy of their categories’ (1984: 47-48). The differences between religions may be analogous to the ‘mathematical and the non-mathematical’ and hence be incommensurable (1984: 48). Religious experience cannot be differentiated from the idiom in which it is conceived and so religions may produce ‘fundamentally divergent depth experiences of what it is to be human.’ (1984: 41)

Scriptural reasoning is presented by Kepnes as a form of dialogue “intended to move inter-faith discussion away from conceptual and doctrinal categories of analysis” that are deemed incapable of properly attending to religious particularity. Discussion that begins with conceptual and doctrinal categories tends to distort and “dilute the complexity and specificity” of religious traditions, and favours Christianity due to its highly developed tradition of theology, forcing other traditions to speak in its terms (Kepnes 2006: 29). Scriptural reasoning, in contrast, does not ground itself in any common foundation of belief. Participants need not come to the table acknowledging that they all worship the same God (Hardy 2006:186). Scriptural reasoning aims instead to “articulate and preserve the separate identities of each of the three religions” (Kepnes 2006: 28), and has even been described by one practitioner as a “community of separation” (Elkins 2002). This language of preservation stands in deliberate contrast with that of prominent figures in interfaith

dialogue such as John Hick and Hans Küng who insist that traditional theologies must be transformed in the face of interreligious encounter. Anglican scriptural reasoner Ben Quash claims scriptural reasoning as a ‘new paradigm of interfaith encounter’ against ‘liberal’ modes of interfaith dialogue which search for commonalities in either the ethical or metaphysical realms (Quash 2006: 74), presumably such as Kung’s Global Ethic project and Hick’s pluralist hypothesis. These modes are seen as inevitably distorting and diluting the distinctive elements of each faith involved as they attempt to force diverse religions into an artificial meta-framework (Kepnes 2006: 29). Kepnes claims that scriptural reasoning dispenses with meta-narratives and instead places the three distinct scriptures at the centre of the dialogue, so that a ‘new/old philosophical idiom that is better attuned to religious particularity’ can be found which will lead to a ‘richer, more complex and sensitive inter-faith dialogue’ (Kepnes 2006: 29). Along postliberal lines, Jewish and Christian Scriptural Reasoners reject the notion that religions share a common core (Quash 2006: 74). Scriptural reasoning will be discussed further in chapter three, but now we will explore the practice of comparative theology.

## ***2.4 Comparative Theology***

As a relatively new discipline practised by a relatively few number of scholars, comparative theology is often introduced by reference to the names of those engaged in it. Norbert Hintersteiner lists David Tracy, Keith Ward, Frances Clooney, David Burrell, James Fredericks, John Renard and Robert C. Neville, and describes it as emerging from the “Anglo-American world” (Hintersteiner 2007: 474). Gavin D’Costa similarly lists Francis Clooney, James Fredericks and Robert C Neville, who he notes are tightly clustered around Boston. Coming from “elsewhere” he lists David Burrell, Leo Lefubre, Pim Valkenberg, Michael Barnes and John Keenan, as being from Western backgrounds; and Sebastian Painadath, Joseph Pathrapankal, and Francis Veneeth as from Asia. Both limit their lists to Christian theologians, and from there proceed to describe the venture as though it were limited to Christian theology (cf. Tracy 1987). However, there are a few scholars from other religions, such as Buddhist scholar John Makransky, who describe themselves as comparative theologians or teach comparative theology, and a number of prominent theorists of comparative theology describe the practice as being ideally a multi-religious venture (e.g. Clooney 2007: 664; Ward 1994: 46). Nevertheless, it will be helpful to start with D’Costa’s useful summary of the practice before adding some adjustments to the picture. According to D’Costa, comparative theology emerged in the late 1980s and he

deems these diverse scholars to be largely united on seven points. First, D’Costa says they are agreed on Frederick’s point that the theology of religions discourse has been fixated on the salvation of the non-Christian to the detriment of taking proper interest in the religions as such, and the focus must now be on instances of real engagement. Second, dialogue must precede theology of religions – in Fredericks words we must “first learn *about* non-Christians” ‘from’ them, before theorizing ‘about’ them (Fredericks 1999: 9). Third, focussing as they do on a specific religion in a particular context, comparative theologians tend to be specialists in a religion: Clooney, Veneeth and Painadath in Hinduism; Fredericks, Lefubre and Keenan in Buddhism, Valkenberg in Islam, and Burrell in Islam and Judaism. Fourth, the grand theories of theologies of religions are eschewed and the study involves close readings pursued in the (cultural-linguistic) assumption that “religions become known only through close engagements with their texts and practices and historical contexts” (D’Costa 2009: 38). Fifth, this process differs from comparative religions through a theological engagement with the other and a theological self-transformation in light of this engagement. Sixth, “All the comparativists want to uphold strong doctrinal claims and represent Christianity in its orthodox form.” The goal is to be transformed by the “novelty and power” (Fredericks 1999) of another tradition while being deeply faithful to one’s own. Seventh, “comparative theology is a call for multiple theologies in engagement, not a singular theology of religions.” By this I take D’Costa to mean that given that religions are only to be known through in-depth studies of their particulars, a bigger (but still limited) picture can only be gained through engagement between comparative theologians and theologies. In this they share much with scholars described as ‘particularist’ above. Indeed, the practice is seen as a “fertile expression of particularism” (Moyaert 2012a: 26), and Knitter too has it as a form of his corresponding “acceptance model”, although he differentiates it from the form of the acceptance model, built on Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic understanding of religion. Following Hedges’ tighter description of particularism,<sup>30</sup> which is based on a cultural linguistic approach, I see comparative theology as a separate development. Though the scholars share many of the same concerns there are important differences. Indeed, particularists place such an emphasis on the radical difference of traditions that the practice of comparative theology becomes most unlikely if not impossible (Hedges 2010: 20 fn 18. Cf Fredericks 1995: 80-82). As we shall see, although prominent comparative theologian Francis Clooney does draw on the work of Lindbeck, he does not adopt his theory wholesale, and does not present it as the sole basis of his work. Another comparative theologian James Fredericks

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<sup>30</sup> Hedges names his model “particularities” rather than “particularism.”



has criticised Lindbeck's cultural linguistic approach just as strongly as he has criticised classic inclusivist and pluralist approaches (Fredericks 1995: 80-82).

Many of the commentators we have met so far are actively supportive of comparative theology, spanning particularist and pluralist theologians, postliberals and liberals. Gavin D'Costa, Perry Schmidt-Luekel, Paul Hedges, and Paul Knitter all speak favourably of the practice. David Tracy, Marianne Moyaert and Catherine Cornille might be described as theorists of comparative theology (among other things), while Michael Barnes and James Fredericks themselves practise comparative theology. There are, as one might expect, differences of opinion as to what is the proper scope of comparative theology, chiefly around the extent to which comparative theologians should engage in the questions of the theology of religions – that is the questions of whether one can acknowledge truth and salvific potency in other religions, and if so on what grounds?

As we have heard in chapter 1, comparative theology was originally one among a number of terms used to describe the new “scientific” (as opposed to confessional) study of religion. The term comparative theology was quite prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain and Europe more widely. Works like James F. Clarke's *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) sought to demonstrate the objective superiority of Christianity by means of “impartial” comparison with other religions of the world. Contemporary practitioners and theorists of comparative theology see the current practice as distinct in important ways from their 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century forbears. Hugh Nicholson refers to Old Comparative Theology and New Comparative Theology to make clear both the lineage and the distinction. Current comparative theologians are keen to distance themselves from the “Orientalist” flavour of old comparative theology. Frances Clooney is one of its chief proponents and he has, in recent years, been most prominent in describing the discipline. Clooney admits that he began his work in comparative theology without much awareness of its 19<sup>th</sup> century namesake and has only latterly attempted to come to terms with that mixed legacy (2010: 19). In his recent introduction to comparative theology (2010), Clooney gives a critical yet sympathetic account of the antecedents to contemporary comparative theology in the work of Jesuit missionaries in India and “older comparative theology” in the tradition of Clarke. He is careful to safeguard the contemporary discipline from the pitfalls of assumed neutrality and undisclosed Christian bias. Contemporary comparative theologians are instead self-consciously situated in their tradition. At the same time though, they seek to understand the texts of another tradition as

they are interpreted and function within the context of that tradition. Clooney recognises that modern-day comparative theologians remain vulnerable to the same tensions between faith and scholarship evident in older comparative theology. In fact, he sees comparative theologians as defined by this essential conflict. In reference to the Jesuit missionaries he states that:

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 (2010: 30).

The main distinction from old comparative theology is that contemporary comparative theology has no pretensions to scientific neutrality. It is self-consciously theological and situated within the particular tradition of the comparative theologian. Second, its emphasis is on in-depth studies in the particular. No contemporary comparative theologian would attempt a study that covered ten religions as James F. Clarke did. Comparisons are usually between the home tradition and just one other.<sup>31</sup> Comparisons are also focussed on some particular aspect of the traditions concerned, usually as they arise within specific texts. In developing a distinctive disciplinary identity, comparative theology is viewed by some as a serious alternative to the theology of religions.

#### **2.4.1 Comparative Theology as an Alternative to Theology of Religions**

Comparative theologians vary in their position toward theology of religions from complete rejection to the endorsing of qualified forms of inclusivism and pluralism. Although all are critical of the classic exponents of theology of religions, particularly John Hick, comparative theologian Keith Ward espouses a “soft pluralism” while Catherine Cornille and John Makransky identify with an “open inclusivism.” Nevertheless, the positions they

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<sup>31</sup> Keith Ward is a major exception with his series in comparative theology covering four non-Christian traditions: Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism; and he is not a specialist in any one of them, but a Christian theologian and philosopher. See Ward 1994.

adopt are concerned with recognising truth in other traditions and less so with making claims about the salvific status of those traditions – exemplifying the move from away from “soteriological openness” towards “hermeneutical openness”, as characterised by Moyaert above. Two figures who have been foremost in defining the field of comparative theology have sought to distance the practice from theology of religions altogether. James Fredericks and Francis Clooney have been reluctant to endorse any particular stance within theology of religions as a presupposition for their comparative work, seeing it as unnecessary and potentially damaging to the task of understanding the religious other (cf Kiblinger 2010: 21).

### ***James Fredericks***

As we heard earlier, Fredericks, a Roman Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, has declared theology of religions to be at an “impasse” and called for both a moratorium on its practice and a turn to comparative theology as “the best candidate for dealing responsibly and creatively with the plurality of religions” (Fredericks 1995: 67). Fredericks does, however, have a rather narrow understanding of theology of religions as “a Christian interpretation of the role of non-Christian religions in the drama of salvation” (Fredericks 1999: 6).

Knitter has offered a helpful insight into comparative theology which is perhaps most strongly evident in Fredericks’ approach. Knitter suggests that comparative theologians view the challenge of religious diversity differently than that characterised in the discussion of theology of religions above. Rather than seeing religious diversity as challenging theologians to come up with new ways of viewing religious others, other religious traditions are perceived as challenging theologians to view their own religion differently. Knitter relates that “for comparative theologians, therefore, the other religions are not just the new “data” to be placed under the Christian microscope, they are also materials with which we can build new microscopes, The other religions become the microscopes with which Christians look at the “data” of Christianity” (Knitter 2002: 205. Cf. Cornille 2012a: 139).

Fredericks presents comparative theology as a way of deepening and strengthening his own commitment to and understanding of Christianity. Contrasting comparative theology with theology of religions Fredericks presents the former as:

the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in light

of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding *of their own tradition* [emphasis added]. Doing Christian theology comparatively means that Christians look upon the truths of non-Christian traditions as resources for understanding their own faith. In this respect, I believe that comparative theology is a better way for Christians to respond creatively to the fact of religious diversity today. (1999: 139-40)

Fredericks explains that questions such as “Are Christians and Hindus talking about the same God?” which arise in theology of religions are “put aside” within comparative theology. Instead it is asked “how Hinduism can teach Christians to understand their religion in new ways.” (1999: 145). This approach, he argues, has the advantage of finding “the differences between Christianity and Hinduism...as instructive as the similarities”, unlike theology of religions approaches (particularly pluralism) which “domesticate differences” rendering them “theologically insignificant” and thereby “making non-Christian religious believers significantly less interesting to Christians” (1999: 113, 115). By “theologically insignificant” Fredericks means that “the strangeness of another religious tradition never really succeeds in requiring Christians to rethink the meaning of their own faith in Christ ... religious differences do not require us to return to our own religious traditions with new questions.” (1999: 113,115) Fredericks presents two short exercises in comparative theology to illustrate his approach. The first “uses” the popular Hindu story of Krishna dancing with the *gopis* or milkmaids as “a useful tool for opening up the familiar story of the Prodigal Son for Christians to read in new ways”, with particular emphasis on the meaning of divine love. The second employs the Zen Buddhist concept of *shôji* meaning the “not-two-ness” of life and death, as presented by founder Dogen Zenshi in the *Shôbôgenzô*, as a “resource” from which to reflect on Christianity’s understanding of death and resurrection through a re-reading of various excerpts from the New Testament on resurrection (1999: 160). Fredericks explains how this approach differs from theology of religions:

neither of these two attempts to do theology comparatively started with the presumption that all religions are attempts to name the same transcendent reality, as with pluralist theologies of religion, or that non-Christian religions all reveal the mystery of Christ in their depths, as with Rahner’s inclusivist theology of religion, or that non-Christian religions are merely human creations, as with Barth’s exclusivist theology. Instead, the two experiments

in comparative theology began with what non-Christians actually believe and then went on to reflect on these beliefs in a way that proved helpful for Christians trying to understand themselves in relationship to their non-Christian neighbours. (1999: 160)

The next advocate of comparative theology to be considered takes a similar approach in refusing to base his studies on a particular theology of religions.

### ***Francis Clooney***

Francis Clooney is Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard Divinity School in Boston, and is both a trained Indologist and a Jesuit theologian. He has specialised in Sanskrit and Tamil theological literature and has been developing his method of comparative theology for over twenty years. Like Fredericks, Francis Clooney defines comparative theology in part by contrasting it with theology of religions. Where theology of religions is “broadly general” to its detriment, he says that comparative theology “flourishes in the particular”. 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 (Clooney 2010: 10).

By contrast comparative theology involves *deep* learning about and from another religious tradition:

Comparative theology ... 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 (Clooney 2010: 10).

Despite his emphasis on the truth-seeking nature of comparative theology, Clooney argues that treatment of the question of the truth of the tradition being engaged should be deferred. He insists that we should begin by reading “without worrying issues of religious or doctrinal commitment” (Clooney 2006: 204), so that “each text of each tradition becomes a locus in which the question of revelation can be meaningfully asked and answered” (Clooney 1992: 214). While sympathetic to Frederick’s call for a moratorium on the theology of religions, Clooney states that he does not entirely disown the discipline (2010:

16). He has suggested that there is “a path from *comparative theology* to the *theology of religions*”, although stressing the importance of the sequence: “the theology of religions comes only *later*, out of the experience of reading other’s texts first” (Clooney 1990: 72, 66). More recently, Clooney has commented that he sees his work as being in harmony with inclusivist theologies in the “great tradition” of Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis, in their attempt to “balance claims to Christian uniqueness with a necessary openness to learning from other religions.” However, he also implicitly distances himself from them, presenting his approach as an “including theology” and deliberately “not a theory about religions” (2010: 16). Clooney’s comparative theology and its relation to theology of religions will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4. The differing approaches to truth in comparative theology are now considered in more detail with reference to prominent theoretician of interreligious dialogue, Catherine Cornille.

#### **2.4.2 Two approaches to truth in comparative theology**

As the above introduction to the comparative theology of Clooney and Fredericks suggests, comparative theologians generally eschew the question of salvation which has preoccupied those engaged in the classic theology of religions. Yet they remain deeply concerned with truth, seeing comparative theology as making important contributions to the broader project of theology and not some mere side-interest. Catherine Cornille characterises comparative theology as being driven by the “pursuit of truth”. In this, she suggests, it may be seen as the systematic expression of interreligious dialogue, explaining that “the ultimate motivating force for engaging in a prolonged and in-depth dialogue with other religions is a thirst for truth” (Cornille 2012a: 138). While seeing the pursuit of truth as forming the heart of all comparative theology, Cornille notes that there is a division amongst comparative theologians in how they view the status of the truth gleaned and its relationship to their own tradition.

Some view truth as a reality to be “discovered” in the process of dialogue, while others regard comparative theology as a means to “elucidate” the truth of one’s own tradition. The difference between the two attitudes toward the truth coincides largely with pluralist versus inclusivist attitudes toward religious plurality (Cornille 2012a: 139).

She identifies Keith Ward and John Thatamanil with the first attitude where “dialogue becomes an open-ended conversation in which all participants attempt to grow towards the truth that lies beyond all religions” (2012a: 139). Dialogue and comparative theology are

seen by these practitioners as “a means to discover new truth” (2012a: 140), meaning the other tradition is seen as a potential source of truth. These comparative theologians are also concerned with hermeneutical openness, but we might say then that they go beyond hermeneutical openness, to epistemological openness. Cornille identifies Frank Clooney and David Burrell with the second attitude – for them “dialogue is not so much a means to discover new truth, in the sense of new revelation or doctrines, but rather a s a means to come to a deeper understanding of revealed or established truth” (Cornille 2012a: 140). For David Burrell, it seems, the other traditions do not function as sources of truth, rather he feels that “dialogue, like any probing conversation, attends to *meaning* rather than *truth*” (Burrell 2009: 89-90). It is in the process of trying to understand what the other tradition means, and the valuable contrasts that throws up against one’s own tradition, that one comes to think about one’s own tradition more deeply, to ask more probing questions and to understand the truth of one’s own tradition in a new light. Burrell made this clear in a subsequent work of comparative theology, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (2011) where he informs the reader that his “inquiry will not attempt to assess which (if any) of these traditions is true, but it should assist believers in each to find their way to assessing – as best they can, and must – the truth of their tradition.” (Burrell 2011: 7). This statement is reminiscent of Lindbeck’s proposal that the goal of dialogue is to make Jews better Jews and Christians better Christians. Cornille points out that like Burrell, Clooney emphasizes the hermeneutical dimension of comparative theology – it is a matter of gaining deeper understanding of “familiar truths” – i.e. he expects “new insights” not “new truth”. She quotes Clooney:

Comparative theology’s contribution will not occur merely in the repetition of claims already familiar to non-comparativists. It does not disrespect doctrinal expressions of truth, neither does it merely repeat doctrinal statements as if nothing is learned from the comparative reflection. Rarely, if ever, will comparative theology produce new truths, but it can make possible new insights into familiar and even revered truths, and new ways of receiving those truths (Clooney 2010: 112. Quoted in Cornille 2012a: 140-141).

This is what Clooney says when reflecting on comparative theology as a practice and describing it for others – but he repeatedly points us to the practice itself if we want to really understand what is going on. In Chapter 4 we will attend to just that. Exploring a number of examples of Clooney’s comparative work we will find that insights gained from Hindu traditions often disturb truths familiar to Christians, rather than innocuously shedding “new light” on them. Furthermore, Clooney clearly finds certain Hindu teachings

and practices – which cannot be easily related to Christian ones – both spiritually moving and deeply compelling. The relationship between theology of religions and comparative remains problematic but there are indications of how it may be satisfactorily resolved in the work of Kristen Kiblinger.

### 2.4.3 Relating theology of religions and comparative theology

#### ***Kristen Kiblinger***

In the recent volume *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, edited by Clooney (2010b), Kristen Kiblinger makes the argument that comparative theology cannot be fruitfully separated from theology of religions:

It seems impossible to deeply engage others on theological matters without having some preliminary presuppositions about those others. Recognizing and disclosing these theology of religions leanings upfront, stipulating them clearly, is preferable to leaving them implicit...” (Kiblinger 2010: 22).

As Kiblinger points out, this argument has been made by numerous respondents to Fredericks and Clooney, who counter that comparative theology cannot be effectively separated from theology of religions, and she adds her voice to theirs. She lists David Cheetham, Paul Knitter, Catherine Cornille, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Stephen Duffy, Paul Ingram and Gavin D’Costa as each having made this point (Kiblinger 2010: 24). D’Costa, for example, makes the point that “practice and theory cannot be rent asunder”, and indeed that one must make the case for being open to the “power and novelty” of other religions (as Fredericks puts it) theologically:

If an exclusivist held that other religions are of no interest except in terms of mission, one would have to challenge the theological axioms that generate this attitude, not simply rule out this starting point as invalid (D’Costa 2009: 41).

Kiblinger challenges comparative theologians to be transparent concerning their presuppositions about other religions, which inevitably influence the process of their comparative work (Kiblinger 2010: 42). Kiblinger also makes the case that that when Fredericks and Clooney dismiss or critique theology of religions they have old forms in mind. In drawing distinctions between models of theology of religions, Kiblinger adopts Lindbeck’s typology of different conceptions of religion (see Chapter 6 for a critical evaluation of this distinction). She argues that the forms of theology of religions with which Fredericks takes issue are based on the experiential-expressivist model and that these critiques do not apply when considering newer forms of theology of religions based



on a Lindbeckian cultural linguistic model, which was introduced in Chapter 1 (Kiblinger 2010: 27-29). While Fredericks levels his complaints at theology of religions as a whole, Kiblinger points out that the work which represents theology of religions for Fredericks is limited to such figures as Karl Rahner, John Paul II, Jacques Dupuis and Roger Haight. Kiblinger identifies what she calls “preferred” forms of inclusivism and pluralism – which she equates with Knitter’s “acceptance model” – listing open inclusivism (Paul Griffiths), deep pluralism (David Ray Griffin), and Mark Heim’s multiple ends as theologies of religions which avoid the pitfalls identified by Fredericks. Although Kiblinger is sympathetic to the desire of the comparative theologians like Clooney to get on with the actual learning about and from other traditions rather than being “bogged down at the theology of religions theoretical set-up stage”, she nevertheless insists that:

we cannot skip over getting clarity on our theological presuppositions about the other and just jump into the practice of reading, because so much hangs on *how* we read, which is determined by our theology of religions in the first place (2010: 29).

The comparative theologians’ principles of selection, guiding structures and the categories they employ will always be biased towards their own interests and backgrounds. Clooney gives information on his own faith and academic background for precisely this reason, but, points out Kiblinger, his theology of religions presuppositions are just as formative for his reading practices. Kiblinger notes that, for example, in *Beyond Compare St. Francis de Sales and Srī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (2008), Clooney speaks of surrendering to Deśika’s words “without plans and strategies”, and “without knowing where it will lead.” Nevertheless– she argues– “he *does* know that he is looking for ways to better understand and practice loving surrender and he *does* surmise that Deśika will teach him something about those things (2010: 32). Kiblinger suggests

if one admits one’s theological biases about the other in advance...and holds them tentatively, not dogmatically, then one is in a better position to catch and correct cases where one’s lens could be skewing the interpretation (2010:31).

Such a disclosure would also be more respectful to those belonging to the tradition being studied, and more likely to foster a spirit of co-operation. Though her arguments are forceful, Clooney remains largely unmoved. In a short response to Kiblinger’s article Clooney states that:

in the end it is not clear how my own work, such as my current exploration of the presence and absence of God in the traditions of the Song [of Songs] and

Tiruvāymoḷi, would be improved by constructing for it an explicit Christian theology of religions that might then be applied to Śrivaishnava Hinduism (Clooney 2010b: 196).

Responding to Kiblinger's challenge to own his theological presuppositions clearly, Clooney states "I think that it is in practice that such implicit influences are exposed" (Clooney 2010b: 196). In Chapter 4 we will examine some of Clooney's comparative theological works and attempt to draw out these presuppositions.

Fredericks cites the ability to abide in the tension between openness and commitment (without resorting to a theory about religions to explain or diffuse it) as marking comparative theology's superiority over theology of religions (1999: 170-1). Hugh Nicholson – whom Clooney has identified as "perhaps the leading theorist of comparative theology in the younger generation" (2010: 51) – agrees, seeing this patience with ambiguities and uncertainties as "a mark of intellectual and spiritual maturity" (2010:62). These scholars – Clooney, Fredericks and Nicholson – share a view of theology of religions as a discipline which makes definitive claims, one incapable of embracing ambiguity. Cornille takes a different approach which, rather than offering polarizing descriptions of theology of religions and comparative theology, offers a complimentary understanding of their roles suggesting that scholar's in these fields should inform and enrich each other's work. Such an integrating approach will merit further reflection and development. It is to this task that the remainder of this chapter attends, providing a foundation for the main contribution of this thesis – a movement towards a strong understanding of the potential for interreligious hermeneutics to bring about religious transformation when it is supported by a coherent theology of religions.

### ***Catherine Cornille***

Although sympathising with the concerns of Clooney, Fredericks, and Nicholson, Catherine Cornille takes a more constructive approach to theology of religions which I will draw on in my own characterization of the discipline and the typology at the end of this chapter, and again in the final chapter. Rather than dismiss the theology of religions or hold it at arm's length she works to redefine it so as to respond to the issues raised by comparative theologians. She recognizes that the very notion that we can learn from another tradition in our pursuit of truth presupposes a certain theology of religions.

In her provocatively titled monograph *The im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*,

Cornille highlights the fact that although interreligious dialogue has become broadly recognised as “an essential feature of peaceful coexistence and as a promise for religious growth”, religious traditions themselves are not naturally predisposed to it. Most religions, she reminds us, “tend to self-sufficiency rather than mutual dependency and to something approaching inner complacency rather than to active interest in the other”. As a result, relations between individuals belonging to different religions have been marked by mutual fear and aversion and by feelings of superiority and attraction (Cornille 2008: 3). Cornille is concerned with the kind of interreligious dialogue which includes:

the possibility of learning from the other religion. Here dialogue becomes part of a continuous religious pursuit of truth. It consists of an open and constructive exchange between individuals belonging to different religious traditions, oriented to the possibility of change and growth (Cornille 2008: 3).

Cornille presents five conditions for the possibility of such a dialogue which she frames in terms of the “virtues” of humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. Each of these conditions relate to the internal self-understandings of traditions, i.e. they are not external conditions such as the need for freedom of religion and expression. Humility refers to the recognition of “the finite and limited ways in which the ultimate truth has been grasped and expressed within one’s own religious teachings, practices and/or institutional forms.” Commitment refers to a commitment to the truth of a particular religious tradition and a sense of care for – and enduring rootedness in – that tradition. Interconnection refers to the “belief that the teachings and practices of the other religion are in some way related to or relevant for one’s own religious tradition”. Empathy points to Cornille’s claim that “it is only to the degree that one is able to resonate with the religious meaning of particular teachings and practices of the other religion that they may have an impact upon one’s own religious tradition.” Finally and most crucially, hospitality refers to the need to recognise other religions as “potential sources of genuine and distinctive truth” (Cornille 2008: 4-6). Although some religions may be more attuned to certain conditions than others, most religions in their traditional forms will not be able fulfill all these conditions. This is not to say that fulfilling the conditions is an impossibility. Cornille refers to the field of modern hermeneutics as having taught us that “the meaning of religious texts is multivalent and polysemic, and therefore subject to a continuous process of interpretation.” The possibility of interreligious dialogue is therefore “less a matter of the hard and fast teachings of a particular religion than of the hermeneutical principles that may be brought to bear on its self-understanding. Within the bounds of a tradition’s rules of interpretation, these conditions may be met through a degree of “hermeneutical effort”. By this Cornille means

the creative “reinterpretation of traditional teachings or a mobilization of latent resources hidden within one’s own religious texts and teachings” (2008: 6). We will return frequently to this concept of hermeneutical effort as it is essential in the development of theologies of religions which depart from the traditional stances of exclusivism and closed inclusivism towards the more progressive stances of open inclusivism and pluralism.

In a more recent paper, Cornille summarises her stance, underscoring the key point of the need for comparative theology to be in relation with theology of religions:

Insofar as understanding the other requires at least openness to the possibility of finding some truth in the other religion, all interreligious hermeneutics presupposes some critical reflection on one’s own exclusive claims to truth and the retrieval of resources that might indeed allow for the presence of truth in other religions. If there is truth to be found in other religious traditions, this will need to be grounded within one’s own religious or theological conception of truth. But since religions are not, on the whole, inclined to acknowledge distinctive truth in other religions, such openness to other religions often involves considerable hermeneutical creativity and effort (2012a: 138).

These tasks – the critical reflection on the truth claims of one’s own tradition; the retrieval of resources to that may allow for the presence of truth in other religions; the reconfiguration of one’s conception of truth, and indeed of the central claims of one’s tradition, to cohere with that possibility – together form the primary work of any progressive theology of religions. Against Burrell’s argument that comparative theology attends to meaning rather than truth, Cornille shows that:

in the dialogue between religions, questions of meaning and truth are continuously intertwined, from the attempt to justify dialogue to the process of understanding the other, and from the discernment of elements of truth in the other religion, to critical reflection on the attempts to integrate elements of the other religion into one’s own religious tradition (Cornille 2012a: 153).

However, agreeing in part with Clooney and Fredericks, she presents a conception of theology of religions that can accommodate uncertainty and ambiguity. Her idea of the appropriate epistemological reach of the theology of religions is much more modest than those proposed by Rahner and Hick, for example. According to Cornille, it is the focus on the problem of salvation that has led to various kinds of impasses within the theology of religions and she has called for a “soteriological agnosticism” (2012b). She suggests that the purview of theology of religions is limited to the “theological preconception about the

possible presence of truth in the other religion” (Cornille 2012a: 139). She upholds the paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and particularism but suggests that they no longer be regarded as referring to the possibility of salvation through other religions but only to “the questions of the presence and status of truth in other religions” (Cornille 2012b: 52). Cornille supports her soteriological agnosticism with theological arguments. She refers to the belief in the possibility of salvation for all people as one firmly established in the Christian scriptures from the Old Testament, through the teachings and example of Jesus to the Acts and letters of Paul. However, she notes, there is no such biblical evidence for the idea that religious others can be saved *through* their religious traditions. Having presented what each of the positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and particularism say about salvation through the traditions, she argues that “they all overreach what can be meaningfully and logically stated from within a particular religious tradition” (2012b: 59) Noting the silence of Vatican documents as to the issue of whether other religions can offer a means to salvation, Cornille feels that this vagueness is fitting “since as a Christian one cannot affirm or deny the presence of salvation in other religions.” This follows from her view of “religion and religious commitment as a reality and a commitment which can only be fully grasped or comprehended from within” (2012b: 59). She proposes placing a moratorium – not on the entire theology of religions enterprise as Fredericks suggested – but on the question of salvation through other religions. However we might wonder whether there can ever be an end to this proposed moratorium given that she insists that there is a “fundamental and inescapable ignorance on the question of the salvific power of other religions.” She explains:

Not only is it impossible to know whether the ultimate ends of different religions are the same or different, but it is also impossible to assess whether and to which extent the teachings and practices of another religion might inadvertently lead to the salvation promised within one’s own tradition. All I can know and attest to as a Christian is the belief and experience that salvation is offered through faith in Jesus Christ and through the sacraments of the Church (in addition, of course, to its ethical teachings). But I cannot judge whether a Buddhist or a Shinto may be saved through or in spite of their respective religious traditions (2012b: 61).

Cornille acknowledges that on this issue her position is close to that of particularism. However, unlike particularism, Cornille insists that “the attitude of soteriological agnosticism remains based on a belief in the unity and universality of truth and the

possibility of communicating that truth across religious traditions.” Cornille sees this soteriological agnosticism as an “expression of humility, in so far as one can only state what one has experienced and what one knows, leaving assessment about the salvific status of other religions to divine judgment.” (2012b: 62). While advocating a moratorium on the question of salvation, Cornille argues that the question of truth in other religions remains paramount. She argues that the door to recognising truth in other religions was opened for Catholics at Vatican II and comparative theologians are putting this into practice. Yet the success of their work, she suggests, is dependent on the adequacy of their theologies of religions.

Just as religions have continuously and implicitly borrowed from one another in the course of history, so comparative theology offers an opportunity for religions to engage one another more intentionally and openly in order to explore what different religions might learn from one another. The possibility and limits of such learning, however, depends on the understanding and the status of truth granted to other religions. And this is precisely the purview of the discipline of Theology of Religions (2012b: 66).

We will return later to the question of whether Cornille is right to limit theology of religions to the question of truth. For now however, let’s take a closer look at her proposal for a theology of religions which could support comparative theology.

### ***Cornille’s “open inclusivism”***

A theology of religions which could be supportive of comparative theology will, says Cornille, draw on the internal sources of a tradition presenting interpretations that suggest the required “attitude of doctrinal humility with regard to the truth of one’s own religion and generosity or hospitality toward the truth of the other religion.” These sources may be found in the Christian apophatic tradition, the eschatological orientation of Christianity that locates the fullness of the understanding of truth at the end of time and the idea of the continuing revelation of God in history through the Holy Spirit (2012a: 148). Cornille draws on these sources to support what she calls an “open inclusivism” which she distinguishes from “closed inclusivism.” Closed inclusivism features a maximal conception of the normativity and truth of one’s own tradition, so that truth is recognised “only in so far as it corresponds with teachings or practices which are already part of the deposit of truth of one’s own religion” (2012b: 68). Cornille does not favour this option because it “tends to lead to a domestication of the truth of the other religion, thus limiting the possibility of growth through dialogue with the truth of other religions” (2012b: 68).

Open inclusivism, on the other hand, operates with a minimal conception of the normativity of one's own tradition. It allows for the recognition of truth "not only in teachings which are similar to or the same as one's own, but also in new and different teachings." This is Cornille's favoured position, as one which supports comparative theology and one which she believes is sanctioned by *Nostra Aetate*. While silent on the issue of salvation through other traditions, *Nostra Aetate*, she says, supports the discovery of truth in that which is different in other religions when it states that there may be truth even in "teachings which, though different in many respects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (art. 2) (Cornille 2012b: 69). The text may be less supportive than Cornille suggests however. D'Costa has argued that *Nostra Aetate* is not nearly as ambiguous as many liberal scholars claim. All becomes clear when understood in the context of the documents of the Second Vatican Council as a whole. The "guiding hermeneutical principle" of *Nostra Aetate* is that of a focus on what the Church shares "in common" with the religions (2010: 493). It is no surprise therefore, that this particular document does not declare that the religions cannot mediate salvation. Following from this, it could be argued that *Nostra Aetate's* statement about there being truth in "teachings which, though different in many respects from the ones she holds and sets forth", corresponds with a closed inclusivism. In this case the differences within beliefs recognised as true are limited to differences of expression and context rather than substance. For example, a closed inclusivist might recognize Buddhist teachings about compassion for all beings as true, despite the fact that within Buddhism these teachings are framed in the context of the doctrine of *no-self*, which the Catholic Church does not recognise as true.

As we have seen comparative theologians Clooney and Fredericks wish to engage in comparative theology without reference to the theology of religions, yet Kiblinger has argued convincingly that the two must be related. She shows that comparative theology proceeds on certain presuppositions about the possibility of truth in other religions and that the practice would benefit if these presuppositions were clearly recognised and worked out systematically through the application of a particular theology of religions. Cornille has suggested an approach to theology of religions which looks only at the question of truth and leaves to one side the question of whether religious others can be saved through their religious traditions. This would make theology of religions applicable to comparative theology and help in allaying the concerns of comparative theologians that theology of religions makes definitive claims that reach well beyond what humans can reasonably

know. Cornille's proposal may be successful in relating comparative theology to theology of religions by limiting its focus to truth. However, in doing so she excludes contemporary theologians of religions, such as Schmidt-Leukel, who still insist that the potential salvation of the religious other is the fundamental question facing any theology of religions. Therefore, on Cornille's model, the discourse remains divided. How might this situation be resolved? In the following section I will introduce an adapted typology for the theology of religions which seeks to do justice to all these voices. This is done in the conviction that the broader interreligious theological discourse will be most fruitful when such rich and divergent contributions can be accurately profiled and related to one and other.

## ***2.5 A typology capable of clearly profiling the current discourse***

If, as Cornille and Kiblinger have suggested, comparative theology – and, by extension, scriptural reasoning – are to be related to and grounded within a theology of religions, we need an understanding of theology of religions which is open to the nuances and sensitivities brought forward by these scholars. If we are to profile the discourse using a typology, this typology will be most useful if it is able to both highlight their main sensitivities (rather than effacing them) and to leave space for the various nuances. From the previous discussion it emerges that a theology of religions typology should be capable of recognizing:

- a. the distinction between discerning truth in another tradition and discerning salvation as mediated through another tradition
- b. the fact that many scholars remain agnostic on issues of truth and/or salvation whilst making important contributions to the field.
- c. the distinct nature of modalized or “soft” claims which talk of truth in other traditions in terms of “hope” and “possibility” rather than actuality. These modalized claims can only be concretized in specific contexts of in-depth study/experience.
- d. distinctions within each main position such as “open” and “closed” pluralism.

In this section I set out a version of Schmidt-Leukel's typology, adapted to attend to these needs which have been highlighted by particularists, scriptural reasoners and comparative theologians. So varied are the different approaches discussed in the last two chapters that the distinctions between them can be difficult to hold in relation to each other. This new



typology offers to accommodate all within a relatively simple framework. It might be thought that the last thing the theology of religions needs is a reworking of classic paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Indeed it has been remarked that the diversity of viewpoints and models in the theology of religions may be more bewildering for some than the many religions (Aleaz 2003: 34). Some have argued that usage of the typology is hampering the advancement of the theology of religions (e.g. Tilley 1999) but insofar as such conceptual tools are needed to classify material and communicate to others, it seems that a typology of some form is a necessary device. The following is not proposed as a fixed typology, which is built around what is deemed to be *the* central question relating to the meeting between religions. Rather, to be of most use in helping scholars and students understand the contemporary discourse and where the main points of disagreement are, I suggest that any typology should be adapted to suit the shifts in a discourse over time. Alan Race recognised this need to be open to future developments when he initially coined the threefold typology in 1983 (ref). Ideally, the typology should be able to delineate the main points of division in a debate without skewing or effacing the positions being spoken about.

While in 1999 Fredericks identified the “impasse” in theology of religions as being between pluralists and inclusivists, it is clear that the debate has moved on and the main point of controversy is no longer to be found within the classic three-fold typology (cf Hedges 2010). Various adaptations have been offered some of which are described above, but I suggest that they each have their short-comings in providing a heuristic tool capable of clearly profiling the contemporary discourse. D’Costa and Schmidt-Leukel both offer precision in their typologies but the questions upon which they base their typologies are, I suggest, too narrowly prescriptive. They each offer up for general consumption a typology which is designed to categorise theories according to what they see as the crucial point in the debate, rather than according to a more objective reflection on the field as a whole. Schmidt-Leukel seeks to organise theologians according to what they say about the presence of “salvific knowledge” in other religions, while D’Costa wants to do so according to what they say about the precise means of the salvation of the non-Christian. As we have seen however, amongst a large body of theologians there has been a move away from these particular questions – Schmidt-Leukel and D’Costa’s typologies cannot therefore be applied to them without distorting the basic thrust of their theories. Responding to this problem, Hedges presents a “fluid” typology where the categories are descriptive, heuristic, multivalent and permeable where “people may express ideas that

spill over several of the categories” (Hedges 2008: 27). I share Hedges’ aspiration of providing a tool that helps those engaging with the theology of religions discourse to understand what scholars are really saying instead of applying a sort of conceptual straight-jacket. However in proposing such a fluid model Hedges, loses, I suggest, too much of the benefit of applying a typology in the first place – of creating some sense of order that can be clearly grasped and communicated. Hedges’ typology is advantageous in that it adds a fourth category “particularities” to take account of a growing number of contributors (discussed above) who do not identify with any of the three classic positions (Hedges 2008b: 17-18; 2010: 20-29). But the categories do not each respond to the same question neither are they of the same genre. Hedges’ category of “particularities”, for example, goes much further in describing the philosophical foundations of the scholars described than do the other categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. And if, as Hedges suggests, someone can be a particularist-pluralist (2008: 30), the categories appear to be too loose to function as a useful shorthand.

I agree with Moyaert and Cornille that the key line of division in the field is no longer inclusivists vs pluralists arguing over what can be said about salvation through other traditions. Now the biggest division appears to be between pluralists and some inclusivists on the one hand, who continue to make arguments recognising salvation through other religions, and, on the other hand, those who insist that we cannot possibly make such claims about salvation. As Moyaert has suggested there has been a shift from a central concern with the soteriological question to a concern with the hermeneutical question – but it has not been a comprehensive shift. While Cornille argues that we change the terms of reference of the typology so that it only refers to the presence of truth in other religions, I believe this would, just as with Schmidt-Leukel’s typology, skew the discussion to the exclusion of some major contributors – this time excluding those who still do wish to talk about salvation. Instead, I suggest that we follow Paul Griffiths in distinguishing between the questions of truth and salvation. Although related, they are, as he says, “at least theoretically separable” and, given the number of scholars who respond to the two issues differently, it is of great heuristic value to distinguish them (1990: 9-10).

The following adaptation of Schmidt-Leukel’s typology seeks to maintain its key strength of facilitating clarity whilst meeting its limitations. As stated previously, Schmidt-Leukel’s typology is only useful insofar as theologians answer the question which forms its focus: i.e. whether religious traditions mediate salvific knowledge. The contemporary discourse

has to a large extent shifted away from this emphasis on salvation. In order to apply Schmidt-Leukel's typology to many particularist scholars, for example, the student of theology of religions must to some degree infer their position from theological arguments whose focus is in fact elsewhere. The result is somewhat unequal. I adopt the basic logical structure of Schmidt-Leukel's proposal but adapt its content with the intention of clearly profiling the contemporary discourse (i.e. what theologians are actually saying) rather than identifying theological positions according to my own view of what is important. I disagree with Schmidt-Leukel when he claims that his typology covers all the options. Drawing on arguments made by Cornille, I suggest that a separate place should be given to the view of agnosticism. In what follows I will argue for a typology that is, following Schmidt-Leukel's model: 1.) logical in structure; 2.) tradition-neutral; 3.) referring to the status of religions and not individuals. Diverging from Schmidt-Leukel's model, I then propose the following adaptations: 4.) truth and not salvation as its primary question; 5.) a distinct place to the position of "agnosticism" – that we do not/cannot know about the truth of and/or salvation through other religions. A final point brings to the fore an idea implicit in Schmidt-Leukel's proposal: 6.) the categories are multivalent and can be further subdivided – for example into "open" and "closed" inclusivism (Cornille) ; "hard" and "soft" pluralism (Ward y?; Drew y?). I will now offer explanations for each of these points in turn.

### ***1. A logical structure***

The main characteristic of Schmidt-Leukel's typology is its logical structure. As has been noted by a number of commentators, one of the primary problems with the typology in its classic form is lack of precision (e.g. Tilley 1999: 324; Markham 1993: 34; D'Costa 2009: 34), Schmidt-Leukel noted that Tilley and Markham pointed to the typology as having "an inconsistent structure because the positions are not of the same genre and do not address the same questions" (2005: 23). Schmidt-Leukel meets this problem by focussing the typology on a single question to which he argues there are logically only three possible *theological* answers to. Although I will argue that Schmidt-Leukel narrows the focus too far, to the extent that his typology doesn't do justice to a number of important positions, I think that the basic structure of his proposal is helpful and brings clarity to the debate. We can avoid common situations of scholars speaking past each other and failing to engage with each other's arguments if we can be clear in the first instance about what our terms mean.

## ***2. Referring to the status of religious traditions rather than individuals***

Schmidt-Leukel is able to focus his typology on a single question by being clear that what is at stake is the status of religious traditions and not the eschatological fate of individuals irrespective of those traditions. I agree that in terms of the typology, this is where the focus should lie. Within Christian theology at least, the view that it is possible that non-Christians can be saved is an uncontroversial one, well grounded in numerous biblical texts and espoused by most mainline Christian Churches (Cornille 2012b: 59). The central question facing Christians today concerns how to engage religious others *as members of particular religious traditions* – and not merely as non-Christians. It is the enduring and rich traditions that today form the challenge of religious diversity – the recognition of the vitality of other religious traditions in shaping the lives of others and of providing intelligent, internally coherent, irrefutable means of interpreting the world and our place in it. The question of whether individual non-Christians can be saved irrespective of their religious tradition is of course an important and related question, but it can be treated separately and neither requires nor encourages engagement with other religious traditions or with the other as members of a particular tradition – which is the focus for the theology of religions in its contemporary form.

## ***3. Tradition-neutral***

Schmidt-Leukel's proposal features the advantage of being of use to multiple religious traditions – not just to Christian theologians. This reflects a view of theology of religions as ideally a multi-religious discourse. Following Tracy I agree that, “to speak of ‘theology’ is a ... useful way to indicate the more strictly intellectual interpretations of any tradition, whether that tradition is theistic or not” (Tracy 1987: 447). A typology which can facilitate clarity in dialogue between traditions is particularly important if the typology is to be useful in the arena of interreligious hermeneutics where scholars come from diverse traditions. Evidence of its worth is to be found in the work of Cornille (discussed above) and John Makransky (see chapter 4) who both use a tradition-neutral version of the typology. This enables Makransky to adopt and adapt Cornille's “open inclusivism” despite being from a different religious tradition, as will be discussed in chapter 4.<sup>32</sup> Critics of classic theology of religions such as DiNoia and Fredericks present the discipline as one where Christian theologians talk to themselves (Fredericks 2004: 15). DiNoia argues that if a theology of religions is formulated solely through internal Christian theological

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<sup>32</sup> Admittedly, it probably helps that Makransky is, like Cornille, western-born and educated (in fact they teach at the same university). While the typology is neutral as regards religious tradition it cannot be entirely neutral.

reflection, it can only serve internal purposes and cannot be supportive of dialogue (1992: 160). Part of what can be instructive for Christians developing their theologies of religions is reflecting on how Christianity is perceived by other traditions, a point made by Schmidt-Leukel (2001: 9). In considering how religions view each other theologically, scholars have found the use of a tradition-neutral typology productive as it allows for comprehension and comparison across traditions.<sup>33</sup> However, while the typology is tradition-neutral, it should be noted that individual theologies of religions will necessarily be grounded in a particular tradition.<sup>34</sup>

#### ***4. Giving priority to the question of truth over the question of salvation***

In presenting his reinterpretation of the typology, Schmidt-Leukel explains that the single focus is on the religions' "*claim to mediate salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality*", which "combines a soteriological (salvific) and an epistemological (knowledge) element" (2005: 23). Schmidt-Leukel presents "salvation" very broadly as a "proper orientation of life and the hopes connected with it" (2005:18). When this is connected with an equally broad concept of transcendent reality as (following William Christian) "something that is more important than anything else in the world" that is "not one of the finite realities of this world", Schmidt-Leukel sees this as "typical for religious claims" (2005: 23). He "agrees entirely" with Hick's view that "in fact the truth-claim and the salvation-claim cohere closely together and should be treated as a single package" (2005: 23, citing Hick 1985:46). For Schmidt-Leukel the truth and salvation claims of other religions must be taken seriously together, carefully considered, understood in their own terms and then evaluated. Although it makes sense for a pluralist who has acknowledged a certain equality between traditions to consider truth and salvation as a single package, this does not, I suggest, do justice to inclusivist positions. On Schmidt-Leukel's model we are steered to say that acknowledging truth in other religions implies or implicates the presence of "salvific knowledge" in other religions. But the position of most mainline Christian churches towards other religions, though generally labelled "inclusivist", is to say that yes there may be truth in other religions but that salvation is through Christ only and – the Catholic Church adds – the Church is the instrument of that salvation (CDF<sup>35</sup>2000: # 22): . Not only is it *the* major position of Christian churches today to acknowledge potential truth but not salvation in other religions, but this distinction is as old as Christianity itself.

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<sup>33</sup> For example, Paul Griffiths presents a version of the typology as instructive for readers of *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, a collection of essays offering interpretations of Christianity from a range of non-Christian religious perspectives (Griffiths 1990: 10).

<sup>34</sup> or possibly traditions – the issue of so-called "dual" or "double-belonging" will be discussed in chapter 6.

<sup>35</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Christianity eventually emerged as a separate religion from Judaism, precisely for the reason that it was considered that holding some true beliefs was not enough for salvation. Jews were in possession of divine revelation and sought to live in accordance with its guidelines but it was held that for salvation something extra was required – belief in Jesus Christ *as* Saviour. It is not necessarily the case that those recognising truth in other traditions will insist that salvation is definitely not available through their tradition. Some like Cornille will believe that agnosticism on this issue is the properly humble response to the ultimate transcendence of God and the limits of human knowledge. This distinction between truth and salvation is also evident in Buddhism, as we shall see in chapter 5. Kristen Kiblinger presents a number of Buddhist scholars/theologians who represent inclusivist positions, and find limited truth and value in other traditions, but none hold that anything other than the Buddhist path can bring one to final liberation or enlightenment (Kiblinger 2010: p?). This position is based on the words of the Buddha who said that only a path which exhibited the essential features of the noble eight-fold path could lead a practitioner to enlightenment.

Whether one agrees with Cornille or Schmidt-Leukel as to whether salvation and truth claims should be treated distinctly or as a package, it seems that if the typology is to have heuristic value in profiling positions in a reasonably neutral fashion, it should be capable of recognising that this is a line of division in the contemporary discourse. As we have seen, there has been a move away from the question of salvation amongst a large portion of those practising theology at the interface with other religions. Comparative theologians and particularist thinkers tend to differentiate strongly between recognising other religions as vehicles or ways of salvation and seeing them as sources of truth. Nevertheless, as Cornille says, the question of whether there is truth in other religions remains at the forefront of the theological encounter with other traditions. It is what motivates theological interest in other religions, as evidenced in practices like comparative theology. It seems that a typology which is centred on the question of truth is likely to better serve as a heuristic model for differentiating broadly between positions in the theology of religions. The question of salvation can then be considered as supplementary to the primary question of truth. Following Schmidt-Leukel, “salvation” refers to the proper orientation of life towards the highest reality and the hopes connected with it (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 18). This will correspond to salvation according to the questioners understanding of it. The typology assumes that each will judge the other traditions according to the norms of their own tradition. Therefore when it is asked: “*Do other religious traditions mediate salvation?*”

salvation is taken to refer to that which the questioner regards as the ultimate and ideal destiny for humans. Mark Heim's limited recognition of the goals of other religions as objective realities does not count as 'salvation' on this definition. This is because, according to Heim, these goals do not constitute 'ultimates' – a signifier which he reserves for the Christian end. This distinction is made clear by Heim himself in his monograph *The Depth of the Riches* where he drops the use of the term "salvations" in the plural, instead using "salvation" to refer to the Christian end only (2001). According to this model, Heim in fact emerges as an exclusivist as regards salvation, as he reserves the ultimate, ideal goal for humans for those with the proper conception of ultimate reality – i.e. for Christians (Schmidt-Leukel 2011: 30-31).

### ***5. Giving a distinct place to the position of "agnosticism"***

Schmidt-Leukel's stated intention for the typology is that it will "help in clarifying and profiling the available options for a theology of religions – whether Christian or non-Christian" (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 17). However what Schmidt-Leukel regards as the "available options" is highly disputed. Schmidt-Leukel claims to have delineated all theological options in his presentation of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. I disagree on both logical and phenomenological grounds. It must be the case that to any closed yes/no question, the answer "I don't know" is a logically available option. Moreover, as we have seen, numerous scholars have deliberately remained agnostic on the issue of salvation through other traditions, and have good theological arguments to support their case. Particularist theologians further remain agnostic on the issue of whether other traditions contain truth, grounded in theological and philosophical arguments widely considered compelling. Building on Cornille's call for soteriological agnosticism, I suggest agnosticism be treated as a position in its own right within the typology.

### ***6. Multivalent and open to further sub-divisions and modalized forms***

As Hedges has emphasised in his typology, the positions should be seen as each forming a spectrum of related approaches (2008: 27). Cornille distinguishes between "open" and "closed" inclusivism while Schubert Ogden presents a modalised version of pluralism: where the equality between traditions is affirmed as a possibility rather than a known reality. While Schmidt-Leukel's typology was open to such further delineations of the categories, he himself was somewhat dismissive of Ogden's position, suggesting that his inclusivistic-pluralism did not offer anything substantially different to classic pluralism (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: p?). By contrast, I think this is an important difference that merits

being highlighted – though like Schmidt-Leukel it is highlighted within the pluralist category rather than being treated as a separate category altogether, as Ogden would have it.

A re-worked version of Schmidt-Leukel's typology which takes into account these six points would then look like this: It would be primarily based on the question

*“Do other religious traditions contain important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life?”*

This question reflects the crucial epistemological (i.e. truth-driven<sup>36</sup>) question regarding engagement with other religions – is it worth getting to know them and trying to learn from them? Additionally the words in square brackets in each option beginning “it is probable that” indicate soft or modalized versions of these positions. (They could of course be made even softer by prefixing “it is possible that ...” – here the boundaries become blurred somewhat with agnosticism, but they do indicate a leaning towards pluralism.

(0) *Atheism/Naturalism* [It is probable that] none of the religions contain important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life (because a transcendent reality does not exist).

(1) *Exclusivism*: [It is probable that] only one religion contains important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life (which naturally will be one's own).

(2) *Inclusivism*: [It is probable that] more than one religion (not necessarily all of them), contains important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life but only one is uniquely superior (which again will naturally be one's own).

(3) *Pluralism*: [It is probable that] important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life are contained in more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them which is [known to be] superior to all the rest.

(c.f. Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 19-20)

(4) *Agnosticism*: [At this time] we/I cannot know whether other religions contain important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life.

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<sup>36</sup> There can be many non-theological reasons for getting to know them – i.e. just so that we know our neighbours and what motivates them etc. For utilitarian or practical reasons (to encourage others to make contributions to civil society, for example, to engage in voluntary work) or sociological/psychological reasons – to understand human behaviour.



Once we have considered the approach to truth in any particular theology of religions, we can ask about the approach to the possibility of salvation through other traditions. This second part of the typology follows closely Schmidt-Leukel's typology, with the important addition of agnosticism as a distinct position. Because this adapted typology has separated the epistemological and salvific elements which Schmidt-Leukel's typology combined, the second question becomes not whether religions mediate "salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality" (Schmidt-Leukel 2005) but simply:

***"Do other religious traditions mediate salvation?"***

Following Schmidt-Leukel use of the term, "salvation" does not imply the belief that religions point to a single ultimate end, but rather it indicates a "proper orientation of life and the hopes connected with it" (2005:18). Use of this term as a multi-religious category intends no judgement as to whether the "something" in question is the same for each and every religious community (Griffiths 1991: 17). This question makes it clear that what is of importance is the role of the religious tradition in the salvation of the adherent. Therefore, while Farquhar is generally regarded as an inclusivist because of the positive contribution he sees Hinduism as making in the spiritual advancement of his adherents, on this model he can be distinguished from Rahner. Farquhar is inclusive regarding truth but exclusive regarding salvation (while Rahner is inclusive in both regards). Again each of the positions is prefixed with a phrase in parenthesis to indicate its soft form.

- (0) *Atheism/Naturalism*: (It is probable that) none of the religions mediate salvation.
- (1) *Exclusivism*: (It is probable that) only one religion mediates salvation(which will naturally be one's own).
- (2) *Inclusivism*: (It is probable that) more than one religion mediates salvation, (not necessarily all of them), but only one of these contributes in a uniquely superior way (which again will naturally be one's own).
- (3) *Pluralism*: (It is probable that) more than one religion mediates salvation (not necessarily all of them), and there is none among them whose contribution is superior to all the rest.
- (4) *Agnosticism*: (At this time at least) we cannot know whether other religions mediate salvation.

This typology has the advantage of allowing us to differentiate between the positions discussed so far as marking the broad divisions within the theology of religions discourse. For example, we can say that the Catholic Church is inclusivist as regards truth and agnostic as regards salvation through traditions, while Gavin D’Costa is inclusivist as regards truth and exclusivist as regards salvation. D’Costa holds that individual non-Christians can be saved, but that this does not occur through their religious tradition. Francis Clooney is, I will suggest, in keeping with official Catholic thought in being inclusivist as regards truth and agnostic as regards salvation. George Lindbeck, on the other hand, may be regarded as agnostic in both respects. Indeed, on the matter of truth, Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic view may be regarded as a “hard agnosticism” in that he believes that it is impossible to judge whether there be truth in another religion as we cannot gain the necessary understanding. As regards salvation he may be regarded as inhabiting the boundary space between agnosticism and exclusivism: he regards it as impossible that a non-Christian religion might bring its adherents to the Christian goal of salvation but nevertheless he does not deny that the religions may play some positive role in God’s plan of salvation. Regarding the question of truth, agnosticism is inclusive of the position of “particularism” in more recent typologies. On this model particularism does not form a separate category in the typology. This is because, following Hedges description, it is a position which has been defined along different lines – it is not an answer to specific questions but a broad philosophical-theological approach – in a similar manner to “liberalism” or “feminism”. For a proper use of the adapted typology presented here, it is important to remember that the terms inclusivism, pluralism, exclusivism and agnosticism in themselves only refer to the generic affirmations stated above. The further content of and rationale for these positions should not be assumed but require further elaboration. There are many different kinds of each position and so if these categories are to be adequately commented on, critiqued, or endorsed, this should be done in terms of these particular formulations.

## ***Conclusion***

Now that the primary discourses to which this thesis contributes have been introduced, I can review these labels of “theology of religions” and “interreligious hermeneutics” (which includes comparative theology and scriptural reasoning), clarifying how they will be

applied in the remainder of the text.

### ***Theology of religions:***

Theology of religions should no longer be regarded as an ‘a-prioristic’ Christian sub-discipline concerned with the eschatological fate of the non-Christian. Instead, in this thesis at least, it is viewed as a multi-religious discourse with two inter-related components. First, it is concerned with providing the theological grounding for a particular kind of relationship with members of other religions traditions – as members of a particular tradition. As such it involves critical internal reflection on the sources of one’s own tradition and “hermeneutical effort” in their interpretation to support a certain level of openness to the possibility of salvation and/or truth in other traditions. Second, following engagement with other traditions it can involve the evaluation of particular traditions concerning either one or both of: a.) whether religious traditions contain important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life; b.) whether that tradition can mediate salvation. As a discipline supporting a particular kind of engagement with religious others (be that mission, apologetics, dialogue or comparative theology) it will necessarily be influenced by that engagement.

### ***Interreligious hermeneutics:***

Although not discounting other forms listed by Cornille above, this thesis will primarily be concerned with interreligious hermeneutics as evidenced through the practices of comparative theology and scriptural reasoning which are concerned with the reading and interpretation of sacred texts from other religions. I will therefore be following a definition adapted from of Cornille’s definition in *Song Divine* quoted above – the adaptation indicating a focus on theologically conscious acts of interreligious reading. According to Cornille, Interreligious hermeneutics, indicates practices whereby:

the texts of one religious tradition may be understood from within the philosophical and religious framework of an entirely different religious tradition, with the understanding that the text is always embedded within a particular religious context which occupies an inevitable priority in the process of interpretation (Cornille 2006: 4).

Interreligious hermeneutics is distinguished from other forms of interreligious reading by the following features: They are theologically engaged; hermeneutically open; open to

learning from the other; and open to surprise.

- a.) *Theologically engaged*: the practice is understood as making a contribution to the broader project of theology.
- b.) *Hermeneutically open*: Following Moyaert (2011) I use this phrase to indicate that the tradition/ scriptures are to be understood first through the religious other according to the self understanding of the other..
- c.) *Open to learning from the other*: There is expectation that something of positive theological and/or spiritual significance can be learned through this encounter, learning which is often spoken of in terms of “truth”
- d.) *Open to surprise*: This learning cannot be anticipated prior to actual engagement but comes as a “surprise”.

As Cornille says, such openness to other religions often requires “considerable hermeneutical creativity and effort” (2012a: 138). This necessity will be demonstrated in the next three chapters. Let us turn to consider how these features emerge in the practice of scriptural reasoning, before moving on to consider the contrasting case of comparative theology in Chapter 4. Throughout Chapters 4 and 5 it will emerge that the models of engagement with the religious other which scriptural reasoned and comparative theologians propose are substantially different from the examples we find in some of the scriptures of the major religious traditions. We will turn to that issue in Chapter 5 before bringing the various strains of the argument together in the final chapter.

## Chapter 3: Scriptural Reasoning

At the end of Chapter 2, I suggested that interreligious hermeneutics is an emerging field where other religions – usually their scriptures and other classic religious texts – are read in ways that display certain characteristics which distinguish them from other forms of study, such as old style comparative theology, and practices within religious studies and mission studies. In the following two chapters I will be exploring interreligious hermeneutics through the two prominent practices introduced in chapter 2 – scriptural reasoning and comparative theology. I will seek to demonstrate that this field features practices of reading which are:

- a.) *Theologically engaged*: the practice is understood as making a contribution to the broader project of theology.
- b.) *Hermeneutically open*: the tradition/ scriptures are to be understood first through the religious other according to the self understanding of the other.
- c.) *Open to learning from the other*: There is expectation that something of positive theological and/or spiritual significance can be learned through this encounter, learning which is often spoken of in terms of “truth”
- d.) *Open to surprise*: This learning cannot be anticipated prior to actual engagement but comes as a “surprise”.

This chapter will explore scriptural reasoning in more detail through a few of its founders and leading protagonists as they reflect on their practice. In particular I will draw on the writings of David Ford and Peter Ochs who, along with Daniel Hardy, developed the practice and founded the Society for Scriptural Reasoning. David Ford is an Anglican theologian and Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge since 1991. He is the founding director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme and a co-founder of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning. Peter W. Ochs is a Jewish postmodern philosopher and Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia. He is a co-founder of the societies of Textual Reasoning, Scriptural Reasoning and of the Children of Abraham Institute, which promotes interfaith study and dialogue among members of the Abrahamic religions.

I will also draw on the writings of Anglican scholars Nicholas Adams and Ben Quash, Jewish scholar Steven Kepnes and Muslim scholar Tim Winter. Each of these scholars belong to the Scriptural Reasoning Theory Group an international group of about 35 scholars who meet bi-annually at the University of Cambridge and the American Academy of Religion and generate “hermeneutical and philosophic-theological accounts and theories of the practice”.<sup>37</sup> As we have heard, scriptural reasoning is a dialogical practice. While there are some collaborative publications which to an extent replicate its dialogical structure (e.g. Highton & Muers 2012),<sup>38</sup> I will be focusing on the individual scholarly reflections of those named above. In order to demonstrate the extent to which the practice exhibits the four distinguishing characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics which I have proposed, my concern will be to engage critically with these reflections to see how these scriptural reasoners present the purpose and results of their practice and how they see it as fitting within their theological framework. A key source will be the *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (2006) edited by David Ford and C. C. Pecknold, which contains essays by each of the scriptural reasoners named above and which was the first publication where participants of many years collectively reflected on the practice.

In order to explore the ways in which scriptural reasoning exhibits the characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics listed above, I will be examining these writings under the following headings:

1. Scriptural reasoning and hermeneutical openness
2. Is scriptural reasoning a form of theology?
3. Scriptural reasoning as truth-seeking and open to surprise?
4. Resolving the tension? The philosophical framework provided by Peter Ochs

## ***Introduction***

Scriptural reasoning has its roots in Textual Reasoning, a practice founded by Peter Ochs and two other postmodern thinkers from the Academy of Jewish Philosophy, Stephen Kepnes and Robert Gibbs. Textual Reasoning consists in a group of Jewish scholars of sacred texts and philosophers who have been meeting at the American Academy of

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<sup>37</sup> This and further information can be found at the website of the Journal for Scriptural Reasoning Forum: <http://jsrforum.lib.virginia.edu/participating.html>

<sup>38</sup> Chapter 9 contains a fictionalized transcription of a real scriptural Reasoning meeting with two Jews, two Muslims and three Christians (one as convenor) discussing a short text from the Qur'an.

Religion since the start of the nineteen nineties to read together the classic sources of Judaism and to explore the multiple possible meanings of a given text for contemporary life. As Ochs explains, that group was “moved by a rabbinic model of study” wherein:

The text is revered and sacred, but even though its words are authoritative, its meaning has to emerge out of the give and take of dialogue. Meaning is up for grabs. This means that debate is not hierarchically ordered: readers do not debate in order to recapture the one true meaning of the text, but to recommend meanings that seem more fruitful than other meanings. In this way, participants are democratized not in relation to each other, but in relationship to the text (Ochs quoted in: Geddes 2004: 94).

David Ford and his colleague Daniel Hardy were invited along to the textual reasoning group in the early 1990s. Ford relates that they “discovered strong analogies between Textual Reasoning and what they were about as Anglican theologians” (Ford 2013a: 150). The elements Ford particularly appreciated were “the jazz-like improvisatory liveliness of the conversation, the concern to repair one’s own tradition by drawing on the resources within it, the willingness to read beyond the ‘plain sense’ of Scripture and to keep multiple readings in play...” (2013a: 150-1). By “plain sense” Ford refers to the meaning(s) that can be gauged through knowledge of the text’s original language and context using the techniques of biblical criticism and without the addition of any creative input on the part of the interpreter (see Ford 2006: 15). Above all, says Ford, what makes the practice fruitful is its strong social dimension. In the *chevruta* – the small Rabbinic study group – “reading and reasoning are intrinsically communicational and social, and so is the wisdom that is sought and found.” (2013a: 150-1). All these elements made their way into scriptural reasoning where the development of friendships between people who disagree profoundly is seen as the marker of its success (Adams 2006b; Ford 2006: 6). Ford tells us that one of the conclusions drawn by the Textual Reasoning group had been that Jews would benefit from deeper engagement with Christians and Muslims (Ford 2006: 3). Some of the group, particularly Peter Ochs, had also found congenial the postliberal hermeneutics of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. As we heard in chapter 2, many scriptural reasoners see the practice as postliberal in nature. Kepnes particularly regards scriptural reasoning as “assuming” that the “individual traditions constitute, in George Lindbeck’s terms, unique “cultural-linguistic” religious systems that maintain internal principles and mechanisms of coherence” (2006: 28-29). In deliberate contrast with “liberal” modes of interfaith dialogue that “dilute the complexity and specificity” of religious traditions by focusing on “conceptual and doctrinal categories of analysis”, scriptural reasoning does not ground

itself in any common foundation of belief (Kepnes 2006: 29). As scriptural reasoners repeatedly point out “Scriptural reasoning is a practice which can be theorized, not a theory which can be put into practice” (Adams 2006: 44). Adams explains further:

More accurately, it is a variety of practices whose interrelations can be theorized to an extent, but not in any strong sense of fully explanatory theory ... It is possible to describe scriptural reasoning in a way that is content to acknowledge that there must be a “unity of reason” or a “ground of being” or “condition of understanding” without requiring the further step of specifying that unity, ground or condition ... however sophisticated ... theoretical description becomes it will never amount to the “grounding” of scriptural reasoning (Adams 2006: 44-5).

Just as there is no common grounding for scriptural reasoning, common ground is not pursued in its practice, but rather friendship is valued over consensus (Adams 2006a: 53) and the aim is to “improve the quality of disagreement” (Quash 2006: 68) to the extent that disagreements can be seen as “a gift to be treasured” (Adams 2006a: 54). According to Ford, scriptural reasoning brings together four key strands; Jewish Textual Reasoning; Christian postliberal text interpretation; a range of less text-centred Christian philosophies and theologies, both Catholic and Protestant; and Muslim concern simultaneously for the Qur’an and for Islam in relation to Western modernity (Ford 2006: 4). However the postliberal and Textual Reasoning strands seem to play a much more prominent role, at least among the Anglican and Jewish founders of the practice. Muslims were subsequently invited to join the dialogue in the mid-1990s, the foundations of which had already been laid. According to Ford, Catholics have also taken part in scriptural reasoning since the mid-nineteen-nineties (2013a: 1), but the fact that the *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, a volume with twelve articles, contains one article by a Catholic and two by Muslims is suggestive of the theory of scriptural reasoning being, at least initially, mostly constructed by Anglicans and Jews.<sup>39</sup> However, given that the practice of scriptural reasoning is given priority over the theory, the significance of this should not be overestimated. There has since been a special edition of *Modern Theology* entitled *Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II: Their Mutual Engagement and Significance* (Ford ed. 2013) which has a number of Catholic contributors including the Jesuit scholar Michael Barnes and Francis Clooney. Ford’s article there (2013b) refers to the contributions of many Catholics at four “seminal [scriptural reasoning] events” since 2003.

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<sup>39</sup> Ford 2013c: 156. Ford relates that in the 2006 volume there were also six Anglican contributors, three Jewish and one Orthodox Christian.



The different presuppositions and starting points of Muslim scriptural reasoners are highlighted by Muslim scholar Tim Winter. He relates that Muslims do not share the postliberal presuppositions of his Christian and Jewish counterparts, but nevertheless they do share criticisms of the “reductionist Enlightenment ... project” (2006: 110). Winter too shares their distaste for “liberal” interreligious dialogue. Scriptural reasoning, he says approvingly, “may turn out to be particularly hospitable to conservative thinkers who find that little is communicated in academic or popular “dialogue” sessions driven by liberal presuppositions” (Winter 2006: 109) Muslims can, Winter suggests, relate to the emphasis on both plain sense and “midrashic” interpretations of scripture by Jewish and Christian scriptural reasoners. Winter presents the different levels of meaning present in the Qur’ān through the Hadith of the Prophet which says that the Qur’ān “has an outward and an inward aspect, a limit and a place of rising [*maṭla’*].” He notes the “evident parallel” with the “Talmudist’s four levels of meaning: *pesht* (plain sense), *remez* (allusive meaning), *derash* (solicited meaning), and *sod* (secret meaning)” (Winter 2006: 116n). Winter equates the “outward aspect” with the “plain sense.” as understood in Muslim tradition, through the explanation of Anatolian theologian Dāūd al-Qayṣarī (d.1350):

The “outward” aspect or “back” (*ẓahr*) of the scripture is “what is immediately apparent to the mind”, and is the first-order exegetic sense accessible to ordinary Muslims as well as to specialists (Winter 2006: 105).

Here we see a contrast with Ford’s view of “plain sense”. While Ford sees it as the meaning that can be established through the techniques of biblical criticism, Winter, like the great majority of Muslims, thinks such techniques inappropriate for interpretation of the Qur’ān. This points to important differences in how the status of the different scriptures is understood and what kind of interpretive practices are considered acceptable. However, most writings on scriptural reasoning seem not to see this as a problem. Reflecting the explanation of plain sense given by Winter above, Christian scriptural reasoners Muers and Highton explain that “the plain sense is the most obvious sense it has for the hosts” (2012: 110). Winter explains that although all meaning has to “answer to” the plain meaning, Muslims can relate deeply to the notion of the “superabundance” of meaning in the scriptures emphasized by the Jewish and Christian scholars discussed here. He quotes Levinas’ articulation of the “inexhaustible surplus of meaning” in the scriptures to which Talmudic tradition is attuned, saying that his reflections are “hard to distinguish from the deepest insight of *i’jāz* theory: that the Qur’ān is a literary, aesthetic argument for itself ...” (Winter 2006: 114). The reflection quoted is likely to resonate with all scriptural reasoners:

The statement commented upon exceeds what it originally wants to say; that what it is capable of saying goes beyond what it wants to say; that it contains more than it contains; that perhaps an inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence, in its word-groups, phonemes and letters, in all this materiality of the saying which is potentially signifying all the time. Exegesis would come to see, in these signs, a bewitched significance that smoulders beneath the characters or coils up in all this literature of letters (Levinas 1994: 109, quoted in Winter 2006: 114).

Ford places an emphasis on “midrash” for understanding how scriptural reasoning “copes” with the “superabundant meaning” of the scriptures. Midrash, he explains, “is the discovery of a sense for the time and place of the interpreter” (Ford 2006: 15).

This is the central way in which scriptural reasoning copes with the abundance of meaning: by trying to take as much of it as possible into account, by always giving priority (as Judaism, Christianity and Islam traditionally do) to the plain sense, and by risking a contemporary extended, midrashic sense that has emerged out of wisdom-seeking conversation across traditions and disciplines. (Ford 2006: 15).

We can now consider how this plays out in the structure of a scriptural reasoning meeting. Adams describes the typical process: Texts are selected from each of Bible, Tanakh and Qur’an along a particular theme such as hospitality, debt, leadership or prophecy, for example (Adams 2006: 47). The meeting will be attended by at least one person from each of the traditions. Rather than a one-by-one procession of speakers, the group will choose to focus on one of the texts and together engage in its interpretation (Adams 2006: 51). It is usually the case that the text is introduced by a member from that tradition, but according to Adams this is not necessary. The group interpret the text generally beginning with the “plain sense”, usually with an expert in the original language clarifying points of translation (Adams offers no further explanation of “plain sense” here). Once the plain sense has been satisfactorily identified and/or the obscurities of the text identified, the discussion moves to questions concerning how the text might be interpreted to address particular situations, whether in the past or in the present. In a discussion of texts on the topic of debt, questions might include:

the relation between misfortune, slavery and God’s will for God’s people.

How one interprets prohibitions on charging interest, the status of strangers

vis-à-vis family members, the permissible levels of destitution one may tolerate before taking remedial action and so forth (Adams 2006: 51).

One of the attractive qualities of the practice is the different areas of expertise brought to the text. Adams explains that some scriptural reasoners “may have a deep knowledge of how a text has been interpreted, others may have a thorough grounding in the range of meanings associated with particular words and concepts, and others may have a wide-ranging grasp of comparative economics” (Adams 2006: 51). Key to the success of the method, say its practitioners, is its regard for the particularities of the traditions concerned, which we have heard described in Chapter 2 as a key component of “hermeneutical openness”.

### ***3.1 Scriptural reasoning and hermeneutical openness***

As we heard in Chapter 2, scriptural reasoners see the practice as being “attuned to religious particularity” and as leading to a “complex and sensitive inter-faith dialogue” (Kepnes 2006: 29). We might quite rightly expect that it would exhibit hermeneutical openness – the quality of seeking to understand the other in their own terms by giving hermeneutical priority to their self-descriptions. This prioritising of the other’s self-descriptions is exhibited to an extent in what Ford calls the “usual pattern” of a scriptural reasoning meeting where members are “especially proficient in their own tradition and ... [are] able to ‘host’ discussion of their scripture” (Ford 2006: 12). This “hosting” of the discussion does not amount to the host retaining an authority over the text: “they need to acknowledge that they do not exclusively own their scriptures – they are not *experts in its final meaning*” (Ford 2006: 5). Rather, “hosts are to be questioned and listened to attentively as the *court of first (but not last) appeal*” (Ford 2006: 5). Ochs explains further that the host’s “hospitality” is such that once they have introduced the text from their tradition, everyone is seen as having an “equal voice” to interpret the text from their own faith perspective:

the rule of the game is that once members of the group agree that they have been introduced to a given text, then members of that text tradition relinquish their authority over the discussion. Nobody rules. Two Muslim readers may therefore debate over the biblical text and believe that they have the better reading; a Christian reader may enter in with another interpretation, but everyone has equal voice. If the introductions are sufficient and the hospitality

deep, then this unusual interplay of textual authority and readerly collusion generates scriptural reasoning as a form of social and inter-relationship as well as a form of thinking together about issues of shared concern (quoted in: Geddes 2004: 94-5).

Rather than being written into the practice, a deep understanding of the other is dependent on the individual dialoguer's capacity to listen during an exchange to which they will also contribute their own responses to the text. Scriptural reasoning does feature "hermeneutical openness" to the extent that in engaging with scriptures it seeks first to understand the scriptures of another tradition as they are understood within the context of the tradition that reveres them. But most of the meeting is spent in discussion where the interpretations of those from a different tradition are given equal hearing to those from the "home" tradition. For example, in a two hour meeting where three texts are discussed, the text of one tradition will usually be introduced by a "host" for ten minutes before discussion is opened to the other members (Taylor 2008 :12). It should be noted that the meetings of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning frequently last two or three days (Geddes 2004: 95), allowing for more in-depth introductions to the texts, but most time remains devoted to a "democratic" dialogue. In contrast to comparative theology, scriptural reasoning explicitly does not encourage members to become expert in each other's traditions "as if it were possible to know all three scriptures and their traditions of interpretation in a specialist mode" (Ford 2006: 13). In-depth learning about the other traditions is helpful, says Ford, but it is not necessary:

It is an advantage to try and learn each other's languages both literally (especially Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic) and metaphorically (customs, history, traditions of thought and practice, and so on), and it is helpful if some members of one house have made a special study of another house; but none of this is essential for scripture reasoning (Ford 2006: 13).

Adams perhaps places more emphasis on the value of "learning the languages" of the other scriptural reasoners. This, he says, is necessary if we wish to be able to "understand each other's histories of wisdom" and deepen "relations between persons with respect to texts" (Adams 2006: 49-50). Like Ford, by languages he means both the original languages of scripture (and commentaries) and "the patterns of usage, shapes of thinking, ways of describing and judging" (Adams 2006: 49). With deeper understanding comes the opportunity for deeper friendships, and it is these friendships that drive the success of scriptural reasoning. Even so, Adams is careful to distinguish this "language learning" from the kind empathetic learning championed by Clooney, for example he writes:

One learns the languages of other traditions not with the goal of inhabiting them but in order to hear the deep reasonings in what other are saying. These deep reasonings concern things like kinship rules, eating practices, poetry, folk songs and languages of elusive desire (Adams 2006: 50).

Note that Adams does not list doctrinal issues which, as we shall see in the following chapter, are covered by Clooney, e.g. arguments for the existence of God and the qualities and activities of God (Clooney 2001). Distinguishing it from comparative theology, the “understanding” sought by scriptural reasoners does not include an empathetic recognition of the “power” of the other traditions. Rather the “deepest grade of engagement” envisioned by Adams “is reached when a member of one tradition is able to identify and rehearse the obscurities that mark another tradition” (Adams 2013: 169). By obscurities Adams means “those areas of expression where language is stretched to breaking point, zones of experimentation, paradox and willful self-contradiction.” Examples being: mystical traditions; negative theology; the more speculative regions of philosophy; and “theological debates over political forms, sexual practices and medical interventions”, which are often “marked by conflicts between deep grammars and new words ...” (Adams 2013: 169) Ford agrees that this third grade of engagement is the ideal, but it is also currently a “largely untapped potential” of scriptural reasoning. These comments from Ford and Adams appear in a recent special edition of *Modern Theology* entitled *Interreligious Reading After Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism* (D.F. Ford & F. Clem eds. 2013) Surprisingly, Ford identifies comparative theology as leading the way in tapping the potential of the “third grade of engagement” described by Adams. This is surprising because Clooney, in his engagement with Hindu traditions, goes much deeper than being able to “identify and rehearse” their complex particularities. As we shall see in the following chapter, the understanding Clooney seeks and finds is not one of being able to accurately re-describe observed elements of Hindu traditions. He seeks not merely to identify particularities but to *identify with* those beliefs, to imaginatively enter the world of the other tradition and feel its power. He goes so far as to reduce the extent to which the other tradition is felt to be really “other” at all. In Clooney’s contribution to this special journal edition he describes the “interreligious openness central to ... [his] writing”, where he seeks to:

inscribe the religious other inside my thinking as a Christian theologian, during a project and not just as a passing moment or at the end, after refined reflection on Christian tradition. For this, I need to cross the seemingly stark, even closed borders between religions, by also studying another tradition as I

would study my own tradition. From early on in my career I have found it best to enter upon the careful reading of Hindu religious traditions, with an openness, reverence, and critical attention analogous to how I treat the treasures of my own tradition. (2013b: 173).

Clooney's talk of the "analogous" treatment of traditions stands in contrast to scriptural reasoners who tend to emphasize the treatment of traditions as "asymmetrical," an asymmetry that is regarded as necessary to uphold the "integrity" of each participant. According to Ochs, for example:

The rule of the game is that dialogue members revere one of the sacred texts, but also extend a relationship of respectful reverence or generosity to the other two. These relationships are therefore asymmetrical. Participants from each text tradition must indeed have greater love for their own Scriptures—this love marks their distinct identities and integrity. But these participants also offer hospitality to the others by inviting them to share in their scriptural study (Geddes 2004: 94-5).

To what extent then does scriptural reasoning correspond to the description of the four distinguishing characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics given above? It is clear from the practice of scriptural reasoning and from Adam's description of the "third grade of engagement" that scriptural reasoners aim for hermeneutical openness – i.e. understanding the other in their own terms. However, this does not extend to seeking an empathetic understanding of religious others, which is a further, deeper step taken by comparative theologians. But to what extent is the practice considered to be theological or as making a contribution to theology?

### ***3.2 Is scriptural reasoning a form of theology?***

Kepnes relates that:

Scripture is about God and God's healing interactions with humans; and thus scriptural reasoning is a form of theology. SR is about faith, providence, hope, judgment, mercy, salvation and redemption. And it is about these theological notions as they are taken up in scripture (Kepnes 2006: 3).

However, Scriptural reasoning might best be described as theology in a peripheral sense. When we turn to comparative theology again in the following chapter we will find that it is viewed by Clooney as theology proper – i.e. it is a particular means of doing theology –

not a side interest or adjunct to theology. Michael Barnes, a commentator on comparative theology, and more recently on scriptural reasoning, suggests that scriptural reasoning is “every bit a theological exercise” as comparative theology pointing to Ford’s statement that:

Within scriptural reasoning perhaps nothing has been theologically more fundamental than the threefold sense that study and interpretation are happening in the presence of God and for the sake of God, in the midst of the contingencies and complexities of a purposeful history, and in openness to God’s future and for the sake of God’s purposes (Ford 2006: 18. Quoted in: Barnes 2011: 398).

Although Barnes is correct that the topics for conversation in scriptural reasoning are all theological questions, there are I suggest, important differences in its status as theology from comparative theology. While comparative theology can be innovative, constructive theology, scriptural reasoning more often involves the rehearsal and deeper exploration of traditional theologies. To the extent that innovative approaches arise in scriptural reasoning meetings, it is not, as we shall see, generally expected that they will make their way back to the institutions of each tradition.

Although Ford’s understanding of scriptural reasoning is certainly God-centred, he also presents it as a kind a “leisure” activity, which takes place in its own “space”, distinct from the tradition-specific institutions where the main work of theology takes place. Ford carefully distinguishes scriptural reasoning from the belief and practice of each of the traditions, developing categories of ‘house’, ‘campus’ and ‘tent’ as a means to delineate the space where the practice can take place. Kepnes, who takes up Ford’s metaphor explains that participants are both deeply committed ‘representatives’ of ‘houses’ of worship (churches, mosques, synagogues), and academic institutions (‘campus’) (Kepnes 2006: 26). The ‘tent’ refers not to any particular venue but to wherever scriptural reasoning happens (although St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London have had an actual Bedouin-style tent constructed in their premises for the practice to take place in - see Taylor 2008: 7). The image of tent has a number of resonances for the practice, which are described by Ford. It has scriptural resonances of hospitality (cf. Genesis 18) and divine presence (cf. Exodus 40) and the nomadic culture in which the Abrahamic scriptures are rooted. It makes clear that the practice is of a “different order” to what goes on in the places of worship and in the university, the “lightly structured setting” suggesting the “fragility” of the network of Jews, Christians and Muslims, in contrast to the “well-

established structures” of their permanent homes (Ford 2006: 12). The tent, a place one stays when travelling, evokes an “in-betweenness” which is significant due to scriptural reasoning’s concern with:

what happens in the interpretive space between the three scriptures; in the social space between mosque, church and synagogue; in the intellectual space between ‘houses’ and ‘campuses’, and between disciplines on the campuses; in the religious and secular space between the houses and the various spheres and institutions of society; and in the spiritual space between interpreters of scripture and God. These are spaces inviting movement in different directions and discouraging permanent resting places, and are suited to the tent’s lightness, mobility and even vulnerability. .. (Ford 2006: 12)

The tent also indicates scriptural reasoning as very much a secondary, even a ‘leisure’ activity, which takes place regularly but infrequently and is ‘non-focal’ particularly within one’s own scriptural study (Ford 2006: 12-13).

For scriptural reasoning to be a properly theological activity, we might imagine then that insights discovered in the “tent” would be communicated back to each “house” and integrated within the theological framework of those who accept the findings as valuable. Hardy, whose description of scriptural reasoning is more theological than the more philosophical descriptions provided by Adams or Kepnes for example, believed that the “impact of the practice of SR on the Abrahamic traditions is very great” (2006: 189). For the meantime however, he remarked that this impact is largely “confined to those who directly participate” and even in them is “fragile”. In his own summary reflections in, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, Hardy notes that this volume has been addressed “from ‘tent’ to ‘campus’” (Hardy 2006: 187). There has been less communication from “tent” to “house.” Speaking with reference to the experiences of the Scriptural Reasoning Theory Group, Hardy explained that this is because scriptural reasoners have:

found it difficult to “debrief” afterward, or to discuss how to identify, “hold”, “agree” or “transfer” the insights generated. It is clear enough that *for those present* the “interactive particularity” of Jews, Christians and Muslims interpreting their Scriptures together *is* highly generative of probing insight into both texts and their constitutive importance to today’s world, both severally and together. But *how* are these results to be communicated? It is clearly illuminating, even transformative for *these* Jews, Christians and Muslims ... (Hardy 2006: 188).



For this reason, Hardy urged that ways are found to “*identify, hold and transfer what is found, ways which promise to carry us further and not limit us from doing so*” (2006: 189 author’s emphasis). Hardy refrained from making concrete suggestions, but it seems clear that such ways will vary depending on the scriptural reasoner concerned, as they will need to be drawn from the internal resources of their tradition. As Ford says, each scriptural reasoner will “justify [the practice] ... in tradition-specific ways” (Ford 2006: 7). Hardy’s comment indicates, however, that scriptural reasoners had not at that point invested much energy in developing theological arguments in favour of scriptural reasoning. Steps have since been taken in that direction by Ford and by Hardy himself. In 2007 Ford published a monograph on *Christian Wisdom* where scriptural reasoning featured as a natural extension of his presentation of “theology as wisdom” where, he says, “theology is for all who desire to think about God and reality in relation to God” (2007: 9, 4). In 2008 the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns published a document entitled *Generous Love: The truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue: An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (2008), which provides theological support in asserting the positive value of engaging in theological dialogue with members of other religions and specifically refers to the benefits of scriptural reasoning. In a recent article for the *Journal of Anglican studies*, Ford has presented a call for more Anglicans to get involved in scriptural reasoning. He describes the practice as one with a firm grounding in Anglican theology, referring to the above document and to Hardy who, he says, offers “an utterly theocentric understanding of scriptural reasoning.” Ford quotes from Hardy’s reflections on scriptural reasoning as an “articulation” of Hardy’s “theocentric, worship-led Anglican theology” (Ford 2013c: 156):

If – at least in my view – we stop to think carefully about what the Scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions are, and why they are so important to these traditions, we are driven to conclude that they are the *public form of primary discourse of God*; they are that discourse made public in these texts ... [This] discourse is established as primary discourse of God when we *find* how it leads us deeply into the infinity of the identity of the Divine, as this in turn enriches and integrates the traditions, and fructifies their interaction (Hardy 2006: 185 author’s emphasis, quoted in Ford 2013c: 156).

Ford cites Hardy’s belief that the benefits of scriptural reasoning lay not only in developing “interpersonal friendship and trust” but also in its “intra-faith potential for transforming the Church” (Ford 2013c: 159). The experience of scriptural reasoning, says Ford, “suggests that the dynamics of engagement across faiths has something essential to contribute to each faith ...” (Ford 2013c). Hardy’s call for “enrichment” and “integration” of the traditions

through scriptural reasoning (Hardy 2006: 185) appears to stand in marked tension with Kepnes' presentation of scriptural reasoning as 'preserving' traditions in all their particularity (Kepnes 2006: 28). If scriptural reasoners see the practice as having significance for the development of their tradition, this takes them back to the territory of theology of religions, which Kepnes was so keen to avoid. This is because insights gained from scriptural reasoning will have to be integrated with the pre-existing theological framework, raising questions about the relative truth of the traditions concerned. Indeed Hardy's "Anglican approach to the complexities of multi-faith and secular settings", as described by Ford, is suggestive of the beginnings of a theology of religions. Hardy speaks of:

'walking together' as Jesus did in the Holy Land ... mutual support and compassion, reparative action, forms of organising, a conception of Church mission as one 'of opening and embrace rather than of conquest and triumph', engagement with the Bible, and above all the Eucharist as an 'ultimate measure' (Ford 2013c: 160).

Developing theological explanations of the meaning of mission in a multi-religious world has been one of the key concerns of the theology of religions since its early years. Theological arguments have been developed that could support Adam's assertion that we should live patiently with deep differences. One might, for example, point to the work of inclusivist scholar Mark Heim and his view of multiple religious ends (see Chapter 2). It seems that scriptural reasoning is not so far from the theology of religions as some of its practitioners have claimed, a point also made by Moyaert (2013).

To discover whether tension between Kepnes' presentation of the practice as preserving the separate identities of each tradition and Hardy's view of the enrichment of these traditions through the practice through the intergration of insights is a problematic one, we will have to consider what kind of "insights" it is that scriptural reasoners say they gain from their practice. Do they discover "truth" in these other traditions? And if so, what do they mean by truth?

### ***3.3 Scriptural reasoning as truth-seeking and open to surprise?***

All scriptural reasoners will assert that the outcomes of the practice are not predetermined, and indeed a key feature of the practice is its "openness to surprise" (Adams 2006a: 49; cf. Quash 2006: 61-62). Ford has also described scriptural reasoning as "truth-seeking":

What happens at best in such sessions is close engagement with each other's texts in a spirit simultaneously of academic study, of being true to one's own convictions and community, and of *truth-seeking* and peace-seeking conversation *wherever that might lead* (Ford 2005: 12. emphasis added).

However, in Ford's more prominent description of scriptural reasoning in the volume *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (2006), he describes the practice as "wisdom-seeking", which suggests an important difference in focus to the term "truth-seeking". Wisdom is of course is a kind of truth, but its focus is existential rather than metaphysical. According to the volume edited by Ford *The Modern Theologians*, "wisdom theology" is "concerned with meaning, interpretation, and truth in relation to life and community ..." Wisdom is about knowing how to live in this world "in conformity with the identity and purposes of God." (Ford & Muers 2005: 793). Of course that involves having some knowledge of the "identity and purposes of God." But in the context of scriptural reasoning it seems this aspect of wisdom is not expected to be affected by the other traditions – except to the extent that the interaction encourages one to look deeper in to one's own tradition (Ford 2006). It seems that it is expected that scriptural reasoning will allow participants to gain new insights about "meaning, interpretation, and truth in relation to life and community" in conformity with their largely pre-existing and tradition-bound understandings of the identity and purposes of God.

In relation to scriptural reasoning Ford explains that "wisdom-seeking" refers to relating the "discourses of theory and scriptural interpretation (plain sense and midrash) to their practical implications in various spheres of life." These discourses are "mutually informing", allowing Ford to speak of a "wise Abrahamic practicality" where "each tradition allows itself to have its own wisdom questioned and transformed in engagement with the others." (2006: 16-17). The potentially transformative wisdom that is sought is practical in nature. Doctrinal disagreements are not avoided, but the focus is on understanding and learning from each others' "wisdom of dispute" (Ford 2006: 17). According to Kepnes, what Ford describes simply as "wisdom" indicates "a practical moral reasoning" (Kepnes 2006: 29). In a similar vein, Adams explains that when discussing each other's truth claims (which he calls "takings-as-true") the goal is to "learn from each other's chains of reasoning that follow from these takings-as-true" (Adams 2006a: 46), rather than the truth-claims themselves. Adams recommends that scriptural reasoners acknowledge that their truth-claims are not self-evident. The status of the other's metaphysics should be regarded as a "basic assumption", "fundamental narrative", or

better still a “hypothesis” that is open to testing for coherence, comprehensiveness and in terms of what kinds of practices it elicits (2006a: 45). What then follows if one finds that the other scores highly in terms of coherence, comprehensiveness and practice? Adams does not say. In a comparable fashion, Winter refers to beauty as an indicator of truth – both in Islamic tradition and in hermeneutical theory (Winter 2006: 113). But this does not for him translate into the possibility of evaluating the truth of the other texts. Instead, he explains that “the three traditions, in their irreducibly distinct ways, experience Truth in the fullness of the text: not the text as meaning, but as reading” (Winter 2006: 114). For Adams the recognition of sacredness in the other tradition entails “a ‘religious’ disassociation of sacredness and authority”:

members of tradition A read texts that are authoritative for members of tradition B in a way that acknowledges the sacredness of the text without necessarily acknowledging its authority for members of tradition A. (2006b: 243)

Adam’s does not explain the basis for this disassociation and in fact he admits that ‘it is hard to know what Scriptural Reasoners make of this approach to sacredness’ (2006b: 244).

Given the postliberal leaning of many scriptural reasoners, we might expect them to fall back on a cultural-linguistic system as a means of protecting their tradition from outside influence. If religions are speaking different languages and, moreover, talking about different things, then they are not to be considered in competition with one another, and the claims of each pertain only to their particular framework and therefore have no impact on the others. Lindbeck held that various notions of “God” may be incommensurable and indeed, scriptural reasoners do not believe that one acknowledges one’s dialogue partners as sharing a belief in one God. While scriptural reasoners recognise certain commonalities between the traditions, they tend not wish to *base* the practice on any common ground (see Adams 2006: 41-44). When answering the question ‘Why Monotheisms?’ (i.e. why not include practitioners of other religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism), Kepnes’ response is purely pragmatic – “because some of the most grave problems that plague today’s world are generated by tensions between Jews and Muslims and Christians” (2006: 25). Hardy has refuted the perception of scriptural reasoning that members must come to the table with a prior acknowledgement that they all worship the same God (2006: 186). Indeed, Ochs has even claimed religious practitioners are welcome to enter the dialogue with the express intention of converting the others involved, provided they ‘respect

discussion' (Ochs 2007).<sup>40</sup> What participants have found through continued interaction, however, is that attempts to convert inevitably fail. "No one wins", says Ochs, "because the other text and its proponent can answer questions" (2007).

What practitioners experience in their interaction, however, is not the radical particularity of the three traditions concerned. Contrary to Lindbeck's suggestion that various notions of "God" may be incommensurable, many scriptural reasoners refer to a shared belief in the one God in their reflections on the practice. Adams has noted that among the "interesting features" of scriptural reasoning are the "surprising convergences and divergences" that appear both between and within traditions – "they do not invariably go their separate ways." Adams acknowledges that this "throws into doubt certain kinds of talk about incommensurability", an issue that "may merit further research" (2006: 46). Adams states rather that 'because understanding between members of different cultures actually happens, there must be something that grounds this understanding' (2006a: 43). He explains further:

Scriptural reasoning ... makes no attempt to prejudge the actual points of coincidence and divergence between the different traditions. Instead it remains content with the fact that understanding is possible, and submits to the luck of the moment (Adams 2006a: 57).

Adams goes further when he suggests that one of these convergences – the shared belief in the One God – is not merely interesting but drives the success of the practice:

... the recognition that each worships the one true God moves scriptural reasoning beyond an interaction determined by conventions for showing strangers hospitality ... There is an "other" to the three traditions, and that seems in an obscure way to make friendships possible. (Adams 2006b: 243)

Nevertheless, Adams seems to have a very circumscribed understanding about what might be possible within the "luck of the moment". He claims that "participants engage in scriptural reasoning only as members of a particular tradition [and] only speak from out of this tradition" (Adams 2006b: 244) as though the continued practice of scriptural reasoning has no impact on the religious imagination of those involved. Such a standpoint is surely unrealistic, and is certainly not reflected in the experience of Muslim Scriptural Reasoner Aref Ali Nayed, who recognises multiple inputs to his reading of the Qur'an, including those from outside the Muslim tradition (Nayed 2005). For many, however, the integration of sources external to one's tradition is presumably too closely associated with the

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<sup>40</sup> Proselytising is however, expressly prohibited within the context of scriptural reasoning meetings when it comes to its civic practice. See [www.scripturalreasoning.org](http://www.scripturalreasoning.org)

perceived dangers of syncretism, identified by Perry Schmidt-Leukel as the corruption of truth, superficiality and inconsistency in belief and practice, and the loss of identity (2009: 67-89).

Yet despite the emphasis on the separateness and irreducible difference of the traditions concerned, the presence of the divine “other” is deeply felt by many during scriptural reasoning meetings and it seems to be an experience that is shared. Ochs relates that:

After practicing this kind of study for a couple of years (two or three times a year, two to three days of study each time), we discovered ... a new form of religious activity. Traditional, orthodox folks discovered that shared scriptural study served as a kind of inter-religious ritual with a sanctity of its own. While they did not share any liturgy, they felt they had *experienced together* some manner of divine presence. (Geddes 2004: 95, emphasis added).

Similarly, in reference to the “tent of meeting” of scriptural reasoning, Daniel Hardy remarks that “there, like Abraham and Sarah, we find ourselves visited by the Divine” (Hardy 2006: 186). Others speak of the “liturgical” (Kepnes 2006: 37) or “semi-liturgical” (Ford 2006: 7) quality of the meetings, which, for Kepnes, consists not merely in adopting a “reverential attitude toward the scriptures they study.” He reflects that “in the spontaneous moment of insight into and across scriptures, participants are overtaken by the movement of the spirit that many recognize as a disclosure of truth” (Kepnes 2006: 30). Although Kepnes does not elaborate on what such a “disclosure of truth” might entail, this statement does suggest that God is made known through the very engagement with the scriptures and practitioners of another faith. If we relate this to the distinction Cornille draws between the two kinds of truth found in comparative theology, the use of the term “disclosure” is suggestive of “new truths”, rather than merely “new light” on familiar truths. This characterisation could be supported by the claims that scriptural reasoning is a *generative* (Adams 2006a: 47), “truth-seeking” endeavour (Ford 2005: 12, cf. Kepnes 2006: 30), which is “open to surprise” (Adams 2006a: 49; cf. Quash 2006: 61-62). But as we have seen, limits are placed on each of these by the scholars concerned. Adams presents the generative aspect of scriptural reasoning as being limited to yielding ‘further insights into the text and its possible range of uses to address practical problems’ (2006a: 47). Similarly the “openness” in scriptural reasoning to which Muslim scholar Winter refers is an openness to “method”, not metaphysical truths: “Scriptural Reasoning (SR) is not a method, but rather a promiscuous openness to methods of a kind unfamiliar to Islamic conventions of readings.” (Winter 2006: 109). In the end, the use of terms such as “divine disclosure” go quite unexplained. This experiential aspect has been central to the

success of the practice and yet scriptural reasoners seem unwilling to evaluate its impact and meaning. According to Hardy, there is an ‘understandable reticence’ in declaring that Scriptural Reasoners often feel themselves in meetings to be “visited by the Divine” (2006: 187).

In an article entitled “A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning” Kepnes offers what could be regarded as an explanation for the experience:

scriptural reasoning regards these books not only as texts but as scripture and this means that they are regarded as living sources of divine interaction with humanity. Scriptural reasoning members believe that the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain central vehicles through which the presence of God is known and experienced (Kepnes 2006: 26).

This sounds like the kind of statement we might expect from an inclusivist or even pluralist theologian of religions, the difference being that the theologian of religions would offer supporting evidence for such a claim. The view of the scriptures as “living sources of divine interaction with humanity” is not necessarily problematic from a Jewish perspective and so there are sources that Kepnes could call on (see Coward 1988: 33). However he does not do this, and the statement does seem to diverge considerably from the claim to dispense with metanarratives. It is also troubling that this statement is made in what is presented as a general guide to scriptural reasoning. But this statement could not be accepted by Muslims without some theological negotiation around the Qur’anic charge of *tahrif* or corruption of the Torah and Gospel. Given that their scriptures are deemed to be corrupted, it is not at all clear that Christianity and Judaism can be considered to *remain* central vehicles through which the presence of God is known and experienced. In contrast to Kepnes’ reflection, Muslim scriptural reasoner Aref Ali Nayed has called for a shared hermeneutical method for the practice which ‘respects the sacred *origin* and nature of scripture’ (Nayed 2005, emphasis added). Yet, as been said, this could not be endorsed by Christians in relation to the Qur’an without considerable theological revision. Accordingly, it is difficult to see how conservative Christians could apply Hardy’s sentiment that the scriptures encountered “embody the elemental speech by–and of–God” to the Qur’ān, even with the acknowledgment that ‘this does not imply that all of the Scriptures have equal standing as such’ (Hardy 2006: 185). It must be questioned in what sense Christians can affirm the Qur’an as being “by–and of–God”, when the Qur’ān itself explicitly rejects what Christians believe to be the essence of revelation, i.e. the divinity of Christ. Of course we must remember that scriptural reasoners insist that a single overarching explanation of

scriptural reasoning cannot be made – there must always be at least three such explanations. Also, the practice is to be justified internally by each tradition and not all justifications will be compatible (Ford 2006: 7). It is therefore not Kepnes’ responsibility to justify scriptural reasoning in a manner that would be acceptable to Christians and Muslims. However it is troubling that none of these problematic dynamics between the scriptures and traditions are referred to when such irenic statements are made. Perhaps his article may have more appropriately titled “A Jewish Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning” to make clear that it does not seek to make claims about how religious others feel about the scriptures involved. But then we still would have expected to see some Jewish theological support for his claim that “the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain central vehicles through which the presence of God is known and experienced” (Kepnes 2006: 26).

Scriptural reasoners occasionally acknowledge that the practice is not encouraged in any of the traditions (Adams 2006b: 244, Ford 2006: 7), but they do not deal directly with the fact that their traditions and indeed in some cases their scriptures in fact *discourage* such an activity. Kepnes, for example, refers to the “mutual respect for scripture in the three Monotheistic traditions” (2006: 25). But far from this respect being mutual, each tradition has prized its own scripture as sacred and regarded the others as either false or deficient and requiring the interpretation of their tradition.<sup>41</sup> Although Scriptural Reasoners often make reference to the common heritage of the “Abrahamic” traditions, nevertheless they have at times reflected on their practice in a manner which suggests there are three completely separate traditions and scriptures involved, but clearly there is a complex interrelation at play. The most problematic relation in terms of discouraging the practice of “truth-seeking” interscriptural reading is that of the Christian views toward the Qur’an, as the very existence of this later scripture calls into question the ongoing validity of the Christian tradition. As scholar of Christian-Muslim relations, Martin Bauschke has shown, historically Christianity’s main response to the Qur’an was to view it as “a book full of lies, blasphemies and pseudo revelations” (2007: 138). In order to accept the Qur’an, as Bauschke does, as “an authentic word of God”, the recognition of the prophethood of Muhammad is required which in turn necessitates considerable revision of traditional Christologies (2007, pp.150-152).

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<sup>41</sup> For more on this, see Lambkin 2010 and 2011.



As a later scripture, the Qur'an is by contrast able to attribute some limited value to the Jewish and Christian texts. The Qur'an claims to confirm and protect (Q 5:48) the "Torah" (*Tawrat*) and "Gospel" (*Injil*) which it presents as "Books" "sent down" by God to the prophets Moses and Jesus respectively (Q 3:84). Indeed, Muslims are instructed to "believe in" them (Q 4: 136), perhaps suggesting a clear warrant for a practice such as scriptural reasoning. As suggested above however, historically Muslims by and large have not engaged with the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, believing that they have been corrupted and that everything they need to know is already contained in the Qur'an (Marshall 2001: 19). This is because the Qur'an itself, by way of explanation as to why the Jews and Christians rejected the prophethood of Muhammad, declares that the Christian and Jewish Scriptures have been corrupted (*tahrif*) (Q 3:24; 2:79), and are in need of the correction of the Qur'an (Q 5:15). The Qur'an moreover is interpreted to be God's complete (Q 85:21-22), incorruptible (Q 41:42) and final (Q 33:40) revelation to humankind. Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims have therefore often regarded Christians and Jews as guilty of the wilful distortion of God's word and their Scriptures as abrogated (Aasi 1999: xv). This fact is conspicuously absent from Muslim scholar Tim Winter's reflections on scriptural reasoning, who refers to the Qur'an's call on Jews and Christians to uphold their scriptures (2006: 111), but neglects its references to their corruption (*tahrif*). When seen in this light, it seems that the aims of scriptural reasoners to engage in truth-seeking, open-ended dialogue and their experience of being "visited by the Divine" through their shared study is in serious tension with their desire to "preserve" the particularities of the traditions. A "disclosure of truth" that occurs through engaging with the religious other as they relate to their scripture may well indicate some level of validity in the other's faith and scripture, but this possibility is not probed by scriptural reasoners. They provide no theological assessment of the status of the scriptures with which they engage. While some appeal to Lindbeck's postliberal cultural linguistic schema, Lindbeck's account of truth cannot make sense of such a disclosure. According to Lindbeck, the truth of a particular scripture emerges only within the bounds of the interpreting community for whom that scripture shapes "the entirety of life and thought" (Lindbeck 1984: 32, 33).

This postliberal affirmation of particularity has a number theoretical and empirical problems which have been summarised by Paul Hedges, two of which are particularly pertinent here. First, Hedges calls on the findings of modern anthropology to highlight the "reality of cross-faith interpenetration." Modern anthropological research undermines the viability of the "isolated societies" theory and points to "a number of recurrent themes and

concepts [that] can be found in very different cultural environments” (Hedges 2008: 123). Second, as Hedges argues, “otherness” is not a virtue in itself (Hedges 2008: 127; c.f. Schdmidt-Luekel 2009: 31). This is a basic point and yet one which is not evident in, for example, Adams statement that “in a context which values friendship, disagreement is a gift to be treasured” (Adams 2006a: 54). For those whose priority is truth-seeking disagreement may indeed be a gift, but its value surely lies in the creative thought which wrestling with the issues at stake elicits. If points of disagreement are merely admired for their interest or practical use, we are in danger of losing sight of the truth-seeking enterprise of theology. Hedges points to Terry Eagleton’s critique that distinguishing oneself from the other can be a way of ignoring criticism (Hedges 2008: 127). To the extent that it does this, scriptural reasoning is losing out on one of the major benefits of interreligious dialogue – its potential to function as a mutually corrective mechanism. This point has also been made by Jeanrond (2012) who has been a foreful critic of postliberalism. Jeanrond, rejects Lindbeck’s restrictive view of reading which sees it as ‘intratextual’ i.e. operating only within a particular cultural-linguistic system. Jeanrond’s portrayal of the possibilities of reading shows clearly the extent to which Scriptural Reasoners are limiting the potential of their practice to the extent that they proceed on postliberal presuppositions:

Reading can also develop into an experience of overcoming such intratextuality. It includes the potential of a transformational activity in which attitudes towards the world, towards one’s own linguistic socialisation and competence, and towards one’s own culture and religious preunderstandings may be (at times radically) altered. Thus by offering such new intellectual experiences, the act of reading ancient and foreign texts may lead to all kinds of conversions of world-views. (Jeanrond 1991: 161-162)

Rather than being open to such “conversions” scriptural reasoners declare a positive acceptance and even celebration of their differences. However, it may well seem disingenuous to celebrate that another person holds a position about that which is most important, i.e. ‘God’, which you hold to be “incompatible with your own belief” (Adams 2006a: 53). While Adams criticises “liberal” approaches to dialogue for skewing the outcomes with their drive for consensus, such “treasuring” of disagreement may well skew the dialogue in the opposite direction. Furthermore, even within these circumscribed limits, the results of scriptural reasoning seem to demonstrate not the separateness of the religious traditions but rather their difference in interrelation. Ochs speaks about how in studying the Torah and Qur’an together with a Muslim student and colleague, he “discovered that we were brethren and that our texts called one to the other” (Ochs 2005: 5). The depth of

common ground, interpenetration and mutual commentary between the Abrahamic faiths means that it simply cannot be regarded in postliberal fashion that the claims of one do not relate to the others. Given the influence Ochs has had in providing a philosophical framework for scriptural reasoning it might therefore be helpful to consider his approach in more detail to see how this tension between the separateness and convergence of the traditions is handled and explained.<sup>42</sup>

### ***3.4 Resolving the tension? The philosophical framework provided by Peter Ochs***

Like other scriptural reasoners Peter Ochs finds that the practice often results in a “renewed disclosure of the divine presence” (Ochs 2002: section 6C). But he provides a philosophical grounding, drawn on by other scriptural reasoners, that in effect shields practitioners from the notion that this might necessitate any transformation in their traditional theologies. Ochs builds on Lindbeckian and Peircian models of truth to explain the practice in terms that circumvent the question of truth as formulated by scholars like Schmidt-Leukel and Ward. He does this in three ways. First, he dismisses the legitimacy of the question through his critique of modern rationality and its reliance on “binarisms”. When viewing religions at the general comparative level, the opposing categories of true and false are dismissed as belonging to the failed modern dialectic and replaced by the concept of “vagueness.” Second, even at the particular level of each religious tradition, truth is not seen as universal but as contextual and pragmatic, and is characterised by what Ochs has called “thirdness.” Third, Ochs presents his conviction that the question of the truth and validity of other religions cannot be answered until the end times. I will first briefly expand on the first two points as they are closely connected. I will then outline some objections to these aspects of Och’s philosophical schema before moving on to the third point and some concluding remarks.

#### ***“Vagueness”: Och’s Critique of Modern Reasoning and Binarisms***

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<sup>42</sup> According to Ford, Och’s theoretical contribution was the most influential for scriptural reasoning in the beginning and continues to be a fruitful resource. See Ford 2006: 17-18 for references to other theoretical contributions – none of which seem to have become dominant.

Ochs characterises scriptural reasoning as postliberal and pragmatic (Ochs 2006:121), and its practitioners as sharing a deep sense of the destructiveness of modern critical scholarship rooted in Enlightenment thinking and its underlying “confusion about truth” (Ochs 2002: section 5). For Ochs, the modern dialectic, i.e. the process of reasoning through which knowledge and truth are obtained, wrongly assumes that there is one kind of logic - that of standard propositional logic whereby statements can be identified as being independently true or false. Rather, he says, indigenous cultures have their own logics that are non-propositional, and the meaning and truth of statements is dependent on the context in which they arise (Ochs 2008: 491). Therefore, Ochs argues, it makes no sense to ask in a general context – such as that of interreligious dialogue – if statements of belief are true or false. This would be to commit the modern fallacy of “binarism”, which consists in either presenting things as binaries when they are not, or in generalising a binary distinction beyond its proper domain (Ochs 2008: 489). When religious claims are considered on a general level, interpretation through the binary categories of true and false is not only irrelevant but distorting. They should instead be regarded as indeterminate or “vague” (Ochs 2006: 126), as they can only be clarified to the extent that they are taken up by a particular community of interpreters (Adams 2009: 168).

### ***“Thirdness”: Truth as Contextual, Non-Universal and Pragmatic***

Ochs asserts that, even on the particular level of each tradition, “the claims of scriptural truth” are regarded as “non-foundationalist truth-claims which are non-discrete, non-universal, non-necessary and non-impossible” (Ochs 2006: 134). Ochs holds any claim suspect that is designated universal. Only if such a claim is found to be true in all interpretations “with respect to any given system of beliefs” may it be restated as universal. But it is only to be regarded as universal for the adherents to the given system and as of “*indeterminate quantification and modality for all others*” (2006: 123, author’s emphasis). This is what Ochs calls “thirdness” whereby “[w]hat is taken in one tradition to be axiomatic can be taken in another tradition to be hypothetical” and vice versa (Adams 2008: 450). Drawing on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ochs insists that the only reliable criterion for truth is a practical one, and he offers the following maxim as a pragmatic ground for scriptural reasoning: “any modern assertion that claims truth for itself can be judged only with respect to its success or failure in resolving the problem that originally gave rise to it” (Ochs 2002: section 5).<sup>43</sup> This does not mean that all beliefs that

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<sup>43</sup> Ochs’ reference to “any *modern* assertion” here is presumably intended to exclude scripture from this criterion. Ochs’ notion of scripture as a special category and as containing “God’s word” is discussed critically below.

cannot be judged in this respect are false, but rather that they must be “evaluated by some other criterion than truth versus falsity”, such as coherence, beauty, strength, and expressiveness (Ochs 2002: section 5). We can infer from Ochs that someone approaching a scripture from outside its community of adherents may regard it as coherent and beautiful and may even find that it inspires Divine insight, but cannot determine it to be either true or false. These ideas have important implications for the way scripture is read. Ochs explains that: “we come to the text always already related to it and offering hypotheses about its meaning from out of this relationship. For this reason, the text cannot display its meaning directly” (Ochs 2002: section 6E), and interpretations are only meaningful “with respect to the specific conditions of reading” (Ochs 2006: 127).

### **3.4.1 Problems with Ochs’ Position**

I will now outline three problems with Ochs’ philosophical schema. I will argue first that his concepts of vagueness and thirdness do not correspond with the self-understandings of the traditions whose universal claims are essential to their nature. I will then argue that Ochs’ concept of thirdness is dependent on the cultural linguistic model of truth that itself has a number of problems. Third, I will make the case that, in seeking to avoid the relativism that could result from his concept of thirdness, Ochs ends up essentialising scripture - a move that is both deeply problematic in itself and inconsistent with his own arguments.

#### ***Universal Claims Are Essential to Religious Traditions***

Ochs’ view, that a claim may be universal only “within some finite domain of reference” (Ochs 2006: 136), might well be regarded as oxymoronic and amounting to a rejection of universals altogether. It is surprising that a group of conservative religious scholars engaging in a practice they see as confessional as well as academic would reject the validity of universal truth claims. Ochs’ position is explained approvingly by Adams as follows:

the person who makes a universal claim has forgotten that he or she has learned a particular language with particular signs, and erroneously believes that the signs he or she utters, and the rules for interpreting them, are “out there” in the world rather than expressing the habits of particular communities (Adams 2009: 167).

But one who makes a universal claim, understood as a claim that is *universally* applicable, does not necessarily believe that the signs she utters are “out there” in the world but, rather, that the object to which her signs refer, however inadequately, is “out there” in reality. The claim that God is the creator of all there is must be understood to have a referent that - if true - is true irrespective of one’s domain of reference. Otherwise, the statement is rendered meaningless. If there is a reality that exists independently of our apprehension of it - which belief in God requires that there must be - then it must be possible to make claims about it that, if true, are true whether or not one believes it or understands it correctly. This objection is voiced by Winter who, as we have heard, notes that Muslims will not share the postliberal presuppositions of other scriptural reasoners:

If SR tends to exclude the search for precision, and to celebrate an “irremediable vagueness” (Ochs), Muslims may demur: God need not choose to disclose himself only in playful obscurity, however successful that disclosure may be. First-order exegesis has the right to be true, rather than merely illuminating (Winter 2006: 111).

Moreover, as has been noted, the belief in the creator God has been acknowledged to be a shared belief by scriptural reasoners, and therefore its meaning cannot be said to be wholly dependent on the religious context in which it is uttered, but must be translatable across traditions.<sup>44</sup> This leads us to consider problems with the position Ochs takes in relation to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model which denies translatability between religions.

### ***Problems with the Lindbeckian Cultural-Linguistic Model***

Since Ochs believes that truth cannot be determined on a general or universal level, he is bound to say, following Lindbeck, that correct belief is determined by the rules of interpretation of the community to which one belongs. His position is explained by Adams as follows:

For any case of disagreement between persons, Ochs considers the possibility that a particular claim is mistaken; but he also considers the possibility that the claim may be vague. A Christian who denies that Jesus is fully God and fully human is mistaken, because he or she does not grasp the community’s rules for interpreting this claim; a Jew or a Muslim who denies the same claim correctly applies a different community’s rules for interpreting the claim, and thus is not mistaken (Adams 2009: 168-69).

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<sup>44</sup> See Moyaert 2012b for a critical response to Lindbeck’s notion of untranslatability.

This argument assumes that each religious tradition has an internally coherent set of “rules” and functions as unified system of interdependent beliefs, a picture that is far from being the case. There have been many people throughout Christian history (and today) who have identified themselves as Christian and yet deny that Jesus is fully God and fully human. On what grounds can we regard them as mistaken? The process through which Chalcedon Christology came to be dominant was a slow and messy one, and like so many Christian beliefs it has no easy basis in scripture. The issue of how to define religious identity is notoriously sticky and the problem certainly cannot be resolved through an appeal to scripture, given that scriptural authority is understood disparately and that these texts are open to extraordinarily diverse interpretations.

Contrary to the picture painted by Adams above, diversity, development, and innovation have characterised each of the traditions engaged by scriptural reasoners from their very beginnings. Furthermore, the idea that intrasystemic coherence and pragmatism are the only criteria for truth assumes that religious traditions do not relate to or comment on one another. And yet of course they do. Ochs himself speaks about how, in studying the Torah and Qur’an together with Muslims, he “discovered that we were brethren and that our texts called one to the other” (Ochs 2005: 5). But the ways in which these scriptures call to one another are often far from mutually supporting. The Qur’an, for example, contains many criticisms of Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices and suggests that the Christian and Jewish scriptures have been corrupted (3:24; 2:79), and require the correction provided by the Qur’an (5:15). Moreover, Ochs pays no attention to the different ways in which scriptures function between and within traditions. In fact, scriptural reasoner Garrett Green has noted that the practice tends to only draw people who place a very central importance on scripture and that they speak to one another in a way that may not have relevance to other members of their own traditions (Green 2002). In Catholic terms, it might be said that, for scriptural reasoners, scripture tends to sit at the top of the hierarchy of truth, but this is certainly not the case for all believers of these traditions. Particularly when coupled with the attempt to falsely isolate the traditions from one another, there is a danger here that scriptural reasoning is about creating a safe space where practitioners can avoid difficult challenges from others. If we only accept critique from those who share our methods and starting point we can all feel much more secure, but I would argue that we miss one of the main benefits of interreligious dialogue - that of mutual critical reflection.<sup>45</sup> A further problem with Ochs’ theoretical support for scriptural reasoning is that in

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<sup>45</sup> On the importance of “critical and self-critical” engagement in interreligious dialogue, see Jeanrond 2012.

attempting to avoid the “foundationalism” and “essentialising” thrust of modern liberal scholarship, Ochs’ seemingly ends up ‘essentialising’ scripture.

### ***Ochs’ Essentialising of Scripture***

It is easy to see how Ochs’ notion of thirdness could slip into a postmodern relativism where we might affirm anything at all as “true for me.” With no certainties or common basis of rationality from which to make basic evaluative judgments we have no reason to prefer some ideas to others, except that they are ours. Ochs asks that we “turn ... discussions away from the presentation of universal claims ... toward the on-going study of the meaning and force of God’s Word for the specific context of our lives” (Ochs 2006: 138, n. 25). Ochs heavily criticises the “foundationalist” claims of modern liberals, by which he means “the effort to locate some truth claim(s), independent of inherited traditions of practice, on the basis of which to construct reliable systems of belief and practice” (2006: 122). But Ochs makes just such a claim himself – that we have direct access to “God’s Word” in the canons of scripture, as is clear from the following statement:

universals may be universal only within some finite domain of reference: such as all folks in this school, “universally”; or all claims made in this denomination. But no human can make claims, even on behalf of his/her religion, about its powers relative to some other belief or religion that has not been specifically examined. *Only the Creator makes such claims, and scripture ... sets the rules for how to read them* (Ochs 2006: 136 fn.5; emphasis added).

Ochs implies that God’s Word is readily available in scripture, and that scripture alone contains the sources of reasoning required to understand it. Having suggested that “our several scriptural traditions converge on this single command: we are to care for those who suffer”, which is another example of common ground found through scriptural reasoning, Ochs concludes that:

For SR, in short, God alone is the source of our hope that suffering and oppression can be repaired in this world, and God’s Word alone is the source of our knowledge of where to turn for guidance in the pathways of repair (Ochs 2006: 125, 135).

Ochs has described his approach to scriptural interpretation as “postcritical” meaning that he employs “modern methods of critical enquiry to clarify language, the historical contexts



and the didactic messages of the biblical traditions of religious and moral instruction”, but he does not find these sufficient (1993: 1). Moving “beyond” the methods of biblical criticism – or back to pre-modern interpretation depending on your point of view – he argues that “the biblical traditions communicate to their practitioners some rules of action that cannot be deciphered within the terms set by the canons of critical reason that emerged in the European renaissance and Enlightenment” (1993: 1). His presentation of the divine encounter through the reading of scripture is certainly suggestive of a pre-modern understanding of the divine author. He speaks of scriptural reasoning as a process of “theophany” where practitioners “come to the text of scripture as the face of our Redeemer” (Ochs 2002: section 6E), and encounter “the God whose word is Scripture” (2006: 135). Ochs differentiates scriptures from other texts, not just because of the ways in which communities interact with them but, because of some quality inherent in scripture itself that he at times identifies, somewhat abstrusely, as “the pattern of the logic of repair” (Adams 2008: 448). He refers to scripture in this general way without any indication of which scripture he has in mind, as though the nature of each was understood in the same way by their adherents. Adams suggests that Ochs simply uses “Scripture” as a shorthand to refer to the Jewish scripture for Jews, the Christian scripture for Christians, and so on (Adams 2008: 454), but this is not explained by Ochs and we are left with the sense that he has somehow recognised the divine in each of the scriptures concerned.

Ochs places a great deal of emphasis on the fact that the encounter with scripture will be shaped by the particular context of the individual concerned, yet no such processes are acknowledged in the production of the texts themselves. He at least acknowledges that scripture is “written in the language of this world,” but otherwise he considers it to be a resource from “*out of this world*” (Ochs 1998: 319; cited in Adams 2008: 457). For Ochs, pragmatism entails that “the warrants of both prophecy and rational inquiry” cannot be found in “self-legitimising institutions, including those attributed to encounters with God” (Ochs 2006: 136 n. 10). Yet scriptures are not subjected to the same criteria and are not recognised as products of the very traditions and institutions that Ochs criticises as self-legitimising.

### ***Leaving the Answers to the Eschaton?***

Finally, let us consider what could be Ochs’s most compelling argument against asking questions regarding the truth of other traditions – namely that God’s truth is not available to any of us and is therefore to be patiently and humbly awaited until the end times. In

terms of the typology outlined at the end of Chapter 2 this might be regarded as a position of hard agnosticism, i.e. not only are we not currently in possession of enough knowledge to make judgments regarding the truth of other religions, but we will never be. This point is not made consistently by Ochs however, as he does not remain silent on the issue of what the end times will entail. Instead, he speaks emphatically of his eschatological vision of a “millennial day when Judaism will feel loved by - and will love! - the Church and the Mosque” (Ochs 2005: 9). It is through such a vision that Ochs feels Judaism could fulfill its role as a light to the nations (Ochs 2005: 5). Moreover it is through his experience of scriptural reasoning that Ochs has formed this vision, leading him to argue that the practice is both a “sign of what is to come” and one that itself actively contributes to the realisation of that goal (Ochs 2005: 4). Ochs states that in their practice scriptural reasoners “mark out” and “co-inhabit ... special times for bringing a part of the eschatological future into the present” (Ochs 2005: 5). But he closes down the potential such a vision has for the transformation of these traditions in the here and now, insisting that it is only within the “special times” of scriptural reasoning that we can respond to the problem of religious diversity.

Ochs’ attempt to limit the “fruits” of scriptural reasoning to the context of scriptural reasoning implies that the knowledge cannot be used for the benefit of each “house” (as Ford and Hardy have suggested), and therefore raises the question of its worth. Ochs’ notion of the contextual nature of this knowledge also seems to conflict with his own commitment to the superabundance of scripture. After all, the scriptural texts themselves arose in response to questions whose contexts have long since passed. As we have heard, Ochs views scripture as an entirely different category to any “modern assertion” such as might be found through scriptural reasoning (2002: section 5, see quotation above), but this understanding is dependent on a notion of a “pure” scripture which neither holds up to academic scrutiny, nor does it correspond to many religious notions of scripture (including Catholic and reformed Jewish.) Moreover, if Ochs really were to contain what he has learnt through scriptural reasoning within the context of the practice, he would not allow it to influence his eschatological vision nor his understanding of Judaism as a light for all nations. And having arrived at such an eschatological vision, a pragmatic approach should surely insist that this is facilitated rather than impeded by our theologies. Traditional theologies, however, at least in the case of Christianity and Islam, have proclaimed themselves to be *the* true religion, replacing or fulfilling all others. In contrast, the eschatological vision professed by Ochs indicates a *hope* that each tradition will continue to

exist, and more, that they will exist in some kind of positive, creative relationship. The hope that they will continue to exist implies genuine appreciation of these traditions and, indeed, a certain parity (cf. Schmidt-Leukel 2009: 31). A theology that could be supportive of this vision would clearly require the transformation of traditional exclusive and inclusive theologies, and discussion as to whether and how this might be possible brings us back to the territory of the theology of religions that scriptural reasoners are so keen to avoid.

Ochs objects to being forced to “choose” between the exclusivist and pluralist options and so brackets the question. Yet what Ochs terms the “unhappy dialectic of the old millennium,” the choice between “either our House alone or the identity of all houses, either revealed truth or some universal humanity” (Ochs 2005: 9), is but a crude caricature of the complex range of possible approaches to religious diversity discussed by (so-called) “liberal” scholars in the theology of religions. He presents extremes of exclusivism/fundamentalism and pluralism/relativism without any reference to the many possible inclusivisms, or the range within these positions. Scriptural reasoners have developed a valuable practice that is perhaps more fruitful because they have not begun with the question of the truth of the other traditions. The results of their practice, however – in spite of their postliberal affirmations – of a shared belief in God, of traditions that call to one another, and of experiencing the engagement with scriptures across religious divides as itself revelatory, show that in matters of interreligious dialogue the question of the relative truth of traditions will emerge sooner or later.

### ***3.5 Evaluating the other? A double agnosticism***

The emphasis of Scriptural Reasoners on respecting and preserving each tradition in all its particularity, even, or perhaps especially, where truth-claims are conflicting, suggests that they are not taking sufficiently seriously the universality of the claims their traditions make. From a Christian perspective, Christ’s saving message is not for Christians only but for the whole of humanity. Does love of neighbour not require that we should wish them to recognise the truth so that they can participate in the saving knowledge of Christ? In what sense can a ‘truth-seeking’ practice ‘treasure’ contradictory truth claims? There seems to be a kind of suspension of belief that occurs in scriptural reasoning meetings which practitioners do not attempt to resolve. The ‘tent of meeting’ is felt to be ‘a marginal and transitional sacred space where institutional restraints are temporarily relaxed’ (Kepnes

2006, pp.27-28). For most Scriptural Reasoners however, it seems that once they return to their 'houses', these institutional restraints remain unchallenged. One might well ask, what is the point of the riches acquired in the tent if they must always be left behind

What occurs within the tent is described, if at all, in eschatological terms, and remains largely a mystery. Kepnes states that scriptural reasoning enables participants to 're-imagine' an end-time 'in which universal peace is won through preserving the particularity of the other instead of obliterating it' (Kepnes 2006: 37). Ochs similarly speaks of his desire for an end-time where Judaism will be 'loved by Church and Mosque' (Ochs 2005: 5). He expresses the belief that that in scriptural reasoning:

we taste such an end time for that moment of study. And I believe that it is only within that moment that we know how respond to the question, "Is there only one House?" without replaying the unhappy dialectic of the old millennium, in which we are forced to choose: either our House alone or the identity of all houses, either revealed truth or some universal humanity (Ochs 2005: 9).

Ochs here suggests that we can gain an insight into how religious diversity should be regarded theologically, but only within the practice of scriptural reasoning. But how can what is known within a scriptural reasoning meeting, suddenly become unknown on leaving? While Ochs seeks to avoid what he calls the either-or 'binarisms' regarding the truth or falsity of other religions (2006), in doing so he avoids explaining with any clarity what it is that is discovered about the other in scriptural reasoning. This is no minor issue but has major implications for both the theoretical and the practical workings of each 'house', such as the nature of Christian mission for example. Scriptural Reasoners appear to have no tools with which they can make sense of their discovery of truth and sacredness in other traditions and allow it to influence their house of worship, except to the extent of challenging "some of the exclusivist and triumphalist aspects" of the traditions eschatologies (Kepnes 2006: 37). They cannot help in understanding how religions relate to one another in the here and now.

Ford rightly says that the practice of scriptural reasoning must be warranted by each member from within their traditions and there is no need or expectation that there should be agreement regarding its theological rationale (2006: 7). However there is little evidence amongst Scriptural Reasoners' theoretical reflections of an exploration of the sources within their tradition to ensure that this new practice and the theologies they express are

indeed consistent with one another. Perhaps Scriptural Reasoners are reluctant to include these inner theological discussions in the broader, public scriptural reasoning discourse. Inevitably the issue of what status is to be accorded to the other scriptures and traditions would be raised, which may compromise the ‘reverential attitude towards the scriptures’ which the meetings require (Kepnes 2006: 37). If it is clear, for example, that a Christian Scriptural Reasoner assumes the Qur’an to be a forgery drawn from Christian and Jewish sources, her dialogue partners may well consider it disingenuous for her to engage with the text in a setting which is in some sense ‘ritual and liturgical’ (Kepnes 2006: 37). Moreover, it is not only the feelings of the dialogue partners that are at stake here, but the integrity of the practice. To seek to engage seriously with a text claimed to contain revealed truth together with its adherents without evaluating those claims to truth – and one’s own tradition’s rejection of them – is to fall short of a coherent theological approach.

If we relate scriptural reasoners to the adapted typology presented at the end of Chapter 2 we find that we must conclude that scriptural reasoners generally hold a double agnosticism, i.e. they are agnostic in relation to the possibility of truth being present in the other tradition, and with respect to the possibility of salvation being mediated through the other tradition. No clear claims are made about the potential truth of the other traditions. Neither are there any clear claims made about the actual discovery of truth in the other traditions. Although the experiences of divine encounter and “disclosure of truth” in the practice are suggestive of this, it is not clear whether the other traditions could be regarded as “sources” of truth, or if the presence of the Divine in a practice where the three traditions come together is indicative of the presence of the divine in the three traditions separately. No claims are made as to what might happen to their friends in other traditions eschatologically. However a double agnosticism doesn’t seem reflective of what they actually discover through their practice. Scriptural reasoners are somehow happy to leave calls to convert the other to one side and instead live patiently with their differences. Ochs suggests that the experience of scriptural reasoning is reflective of an eschatological peaceful age, when the three traditions will somehow continue to exist. Practitioners feel themselves to have been “visited by the divine.” Scriptural reasoners are impressed by the “faith” of their dialogue partners. Given that they display a double agnosticism, it seems that more work needs to be done to explain, from the perspective of each faith, why they should read their scriptures together in a manner that is both prayerful and truth-seeking. I would suggest that one must at least positively recognize the potential for discovering truth in other religions if one is to engage with them in this way, i.e. one must be minimally a

soft inclusivist with regards to truth. Following the definition given in Chapter 2 this would involve subscribing to the view that: “it is possible that more than one religion (not necessarily all of them), contains important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life but only one is uniquely superior (which again will naturally be one’s own).”

## ***Conclusion***

The aims of scriptural reasoning to constitute truth-seeking and open-ended dialogue on the one hand and on the other to ‘preserve’ and ‘treasure’ the particularities of the traditions are found to be in tension, if not open conflict with one another. This point is also made by Moyaert who argues that “Scriptural reasoning seems to be much more dynamic than the postliberalism with which it claims affinity.” She, like Cornille, argues that postliberalism offers “few incentives for an interreligious dialogue that also recognises the possibility of mutual enrichment” (Moyaert 2013: 80. Cf. Moyaert 2012; Cornille 2008: 187). The root of the problem seems to lie in scriptural reasoning’s postliberal tendency to view religions as separate, closed and self-sustaining cultural-linguistic systems, a view which both distorts the historic and on-going reality of traditions that have always been interconnected, and the traditional self-understandings of the traditions concerned. The dialogue cannot be viewed as open-ended if limitations are placed around the possibilities of growth and mutual enrichment. Coherence requires that the recognition of sacredness outside one’s own tradition is somehow integrated with one’s prior religious convictions. However, in most cases this cannot be done without transformation given that the traditional theological stances of Christianity and Islam either deny the validity of other scriptures or insist that their value can only be properly understood from within their tradition. This means that scriptural reasoning cannot ‘preserve’ the particular traditional theologies of the religions, while at the time recognising the sacredness of other scriptures and the autonomy of the traditions which hold them dear. The laudable goals of scriptural reasoning will not be realised unless the historical legacies of these traditions are grappled with. These legacies include exclusivism, supersessionism, rejection and denigration of each other’s traditions and scriptures, as well as interaction, mutual fecundation and syncretism. Scriptural Reasoners must develop strategies for responding to the complex theological issues which this practice raises if they hope to feed their learning back into their communities and convince a broader public of the theological viability and value of this otherwise promising form of interreligious dialogue. I suggest then that scriptural

reasoning does not present an alternative to the theology of religions but that its findings can helpfully contribute to this ongoing discussion.<sup>46</sup>

We have established that scriptural reasoning is a peripheral form of theology in that its practitioners treat it as occurring in a separate and distinct space with limited scope for the transferral of learning to the institutions and theologies of the various traditions involved. It is hermeneutically open to the extent that scriptural reasoners listen to the self descriptions of others in their efforts to understand them, and are mindful of their beliefs functioning within an all encompassing framework. However the extent to which deep understanding of the other actually occurs depends on the listening abilities of each scriptural reasoner, as the majority of time in meetings is spent in a “democratic” dialogue where each member is invited to interpret a particular text on an equal footing. Neither are practitioners expected to engage in the deep study of the other traditions, though this is recognised as helpful. Although scriptural reasoning is regarded as “truth-seeking” the kind of truth discovered is a practical “wisdom” rather than any metaphysical truth. It is said to be “open to surprise” and indeed an aspect of this surprise is the extent to which scriptural reasoners feel the divine presence and even “divine disclosure” amongst them as they interpret eachothers’ scriptures. However scriptural reasoners do not infer from this presence any clear conclusions regarding even the possible truth of those scriptures, still less the possibility of salvation through their traditions. Scriptural reasoning can be seen to display each of the four characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics identified, but certain limitations are evident in each – limitations which relate to their double agnosticism on the matters of truth and salvation in other religions. We will now turn to consider these same issues in the related but distinct practice of comparative theology.

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<sup>46</sup> The same point is made by a number of theologians of religions in relation to comparative theology. See Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Comparative Theology

### *Introduction*

Chapter 2 described interreligious hermeneutics as an emerging field of study in which other religions— usually their scriptures and other religious texts— are read in ways that display certain characteristics which distinguish them from other forms of study, such as old style comparative theology and practices within religious studies. This chapter develops the work of the previous chapter in exploring interreligious hermeneutics as a field made up of practices with certain distinguishing characteristics. They are: theologically engaged; hermeneutically open; open to learning from the other and open to surprise (see end of Chapter 2).

Whereas the focus of the previous chapter was on those characteristics in relation to scriptural reasoning, the focus of this chapter turns to the same characteristics in relation to the work of two notable comparative theologians— the Roman Catholic scholar Francis Clooney and Mahayana Buddhist scholar John Makransky. I will spend more time discussing Francis Clooney as he has focused his research in comparative theology for over twenty years, while for Makransky it is more of a subsidiary interest. These scholars differ from each other— and from other comparative theologians— in their approach, demonstrating that comparative theology is far from a homogeneous enterprise. Clooney and Makransky both display the above characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics, but the manner in which they are played out varies, and these often subtle variances will be drawn out in this chapter. After presenting the practitioners' understanding of the practice of comparative theology, I consider a series of questions, including: what kind of understanding of the other religious tradition does the practitioner seek?; what follows after such understanding is achieved?; on what basis is it expected that truth can be found in the other tradition?, and in practice, what kind of truth is found?; how does this relate to the practitioner's views about theology of religions?; and how is theology defined and what sort of contribution to the broader project of theology is envisaged? In each case we will see whether the typology outlined at the end of chapter 2 can be applied, and whether any tensions emerge in relation to three aspects: their presuppositions for comparative theology; the fruits of their practice; and their attitude towards theology of religions.



## 4.1 *Francis Clooney*

As we saw in the previous chapter, scriptural reasoning is usually characterised as making some kind of contribution to theology, but nevertheless as separate from and subsidiary to the internal and distinct practice of theology within each of the traditions concerned. For scriptural reasoning to occur, a “third space” or temporary “tent” is created specifically for that purpose, while the main work of theology occurs within the separate “houses” of Judaism, Islam and Christianity (Ford 2006). Francis Clooney, by contrast, presents comparative theology as a crucial part of the wider project of theology, and indeed argues that theology is (or should be) essentially interreligious, comparative and dialogical as well as confessional (2001: 164-177).<sup>47</sup> He defines comparative theology according to the traditional Anselmian formulation of theology as “faith seeking understanding” (2010a: 9). Distinct from comparative religion, comparative theology is concerned with questions of truth, and with the ultimate goal of knowledge of the transcendent (1995: 521). Rooted within a particular tradition, the comparative theologian engages with the texts of another tradition, precisely because they are seen as relevant in this search for religious knowledge. It is “the doing of constructive theology from and after comparison,” proceeding from an in-depth and concerted effort to understand the other tradition (Clooney 1995: 522).

Clooney can therefore be seen as displaying the first three characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics to a deeper extent than do scriptural reasoners, such as Ford, Adams and Ochs discussed in Chapter 3. The same can be said for the second characteristic of hermeneutical openness. As we saw in Chapter 2, those engaged in interreligious hermeneutics tend to insist that openness toward the religious other should mean really listening to what the religious other is saying about their religious commitments. Hermeneutical openness is viewed as a mark of respect – it means seeking to understand the other as they really are without prejudging whether their beliefs will be appreciated or negated. “Before judging, before assessing, before appreciating— either positively or negatively”, explains Moyaert, “the religious other deserves to be heard and understood” (2012: 38). In scriptural reasoning we saw this characteristic of “hermeneutical openness” – of giving priority to the religious other’s self-understanding in the pursuit of meaning— mainly involved listening deeply to religious others in dialogue, as they explained a particular text from their tradition selected for the purpose. In the structure of the meeting,

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<sup>47</sup> See Clooney 2013a; 2013b and 2008: 28-30 for his own comparisons between comparative theology and scriptural reasoning.

when it comes to discussing the text from a particular tradition, the scriptural reasoner(s) from that tradition will always speak first, and only then will their dialogue partners offer any thoughts, always respectful of the tradition to which the text “belongs” and always deferring to the individuals from that tradition for points of clarification. Clooney enacts this deference to the “home” tradition to a much greater and more personal extent. He not only listens to religious others, but has invested years in deep study of Hindu traditions, learning Sanskrit and Tamil so as to read the texts in their original languages, spending time in India and Nepal learning from religious others and participating in religious festivals (e.g. 2001: v). And though he can read the texts in their original languages, Clooney will not study a particular text comparatively unless there is a respected Hindu commentary available. Of his comparative work, he relates that “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...” (2010a: 118).

Clooney believes that learning is best done in detail and that comparative theologians themselves form part of the detail that needs to be understood. Comparative theology is therefore to be “autobiographically grounded” (2010a: 16). He relates: “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” (2010a: 16). He sees himself as part of the generation of Catholics that matured in the decade after Vatican II, and he cites *Nostra Aetate* as having been formative in directing the path of his studies. *Nostra Aetate*, which declared that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions...” (Second Vatican Council 1965), grounded his hope that the study of Hinduism could be “an act of religious learning leading to fruitful interreligious understanding and to deeper knowledge of God” (2010a: 17). Alongside this, he conveys a driving conviction that “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” (2010a: 17). This conviction underlies his optimistic sense of the extent to which we can understand other religions. He shares the modernist view that human reason is universal and that forms of reasoning are shared across religious traditions making both agreements and disagreements possible. He differs though from the modernist practitioners of “old comparative theology” who thought they could view other religions from an objective vantage point. Instead he seeks to gain an empathetic, “insider” understanding of the texts and traditions he engages (2004: 101). While, as we shall see, he shares some of George Lindbeck’s cultural linguistic understanding of religion – to the extent that he

views the Bible as constituting the Christian's interpretive world which is "able to absorb the whole universe" (Clooney 1990: 67) – his belief that it is possible to some extent to gain an insider perspective of another faith sets him apart from Lindbeck's notion of the incommensurability of religious traditions.

Having engaged deeply with particular Hindu sources and commentaries, he returns to the Christian text(s) selected for that project and reads it again with his new knowledge in mind. Clooney believes that comparative theology contributes importantly to the overall truth-seeking goal of theology, but – demonstrating the fourth characteristic of interreligious hermeneutics, of openness to surprise – he insists that the process must be open to surprise and its fruits cannot be anticipated. Following a free flow of creative, spiritual and intellectual intuitions, Clooney moves back and forth between the texts: "weav[ing] old and new insights into a robustly theological and faithful reflection that is spiritually and theologically fruitful" (2010a: 118). Clooney's stated intention is to "inscribe within the Christian theological tradition theological texts from outside it, and to (begin to) write Christian theology only out of that newly composed context" (Clooney 1993: 7). While this may sound like a radical move, Clooney doesn't openly challenge contemporary Roman Catholic teaching. He believes his work can be done without recourse to arguments made within the theology of religions discourse. As we shall see, he even claims that theology which includes a comparative dimension is something that exclusivists could (and should) engage in without giving up their exclusive claims.

I will now explore in more depth the four characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics outlined above as they feature in Clooney's pioneering comparative theology, under the following headings:

1. Comparative theology as theology/ theology as comparative
2. Beyond hermeneutical openness: seeking a deep empathetic understanding of the other
3. Searching for truth: negotiating openness and commitment
4. Comparative theology as open to surprise: bypassing the theology of religions

#### **4.1.1 Comparative theology as theology/ theology as comparative**

Clooney argues that theology should involve:

well-articulated beliefs; intelligent reasoning on matters of faith; the maintenance of a close interconnection among religion, revelation and

reason; and the willingness to treat religious claims as compelling for all and not just for insiders. (2001: 8).

This “rejuvenated theology”, he says “is distinguished by interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional (or apologetic) dimensions” (2001: 8). I will explore these dimensions briefly, concentrating on the interreligious dimension as it is essential to Clooney’s argument for the importance of comparative theology. I will also discuss the confessional dimension as it distinguishes Clooney’s distinct and wilfully “conflicted” style of comparative theology.

### ***Theology as interreligious***

Theology occurs, says Clooney:

when believers begin to think through, probe and explain what they believe. This more extended and intellectual project is not unique to any particular religious tradition. Rather, it is composed of intellectual practices, which will be widely familiar to intelligent believers in all traditions. Very little of importance in content or method belongs solely to any one theological tradition or even one religion, even if such concepts and themes, as one conceives them in actual circumstances, remain deeply rooted in the particularities of specific faith traditions (2001: 8).

Clooney’s 2001 monograph *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason helps break down the boundaries between religions* functions as an extended argument for the interreligious nature of theology. He states that his goal is “to unsettle the religious and theological boundaries that have neatly divided theologians according to their religions.” Hindu and Christian theologians should recognise one another as colleagues and realise that they are “at least intellectually accountable to one another” (2001: 27). In presenting the reflections of major Hindu and Christian theologians on the issues of the existence of God, debating God’s identity and making sense of divine embodiment, Clooney argues that differences notwithstanding, there are “important common features that cross religious boundaries” (2001: 129). Through focussed comparisons, Clooney seeks to show that while traditions are distinct, the act of theology is shared such that “their theologies are no longer separable” (2001: 8). The key to Clooney’s view of theology as essentially interreligious is in the subtitle of his book: “How reason helps break down the boundaries between religions.” Human reason is shared, or at least has many common features, making it

possible for believers of many different religions to understand one another. Far from being incommensurable due to their differing grammars, as in Lindbeck's view, Clooney insists that each religious language shares something universal, which makes them mutually comprehensible: "Theological reasoning about God" is a "crucial interreligious tool" (2001: 177), and members of different traditions can agree on topics such as the existence of God, the qualities and activities of God, the possibility that God may become embodied, even as they disagree on the particulars (2001: 8). Indeed, 'arguability' indicates some common ground. "If faith is articulated in reasonable terms and defended reasonably," says Clooney, "then that reasoning provides a shared theological ground, and intelligent disagreements become possible in an interreligious context" (2001: 9). Unlike Lindbeck's cultural linguistic schema of religion, then, Clooney's conviction in shared human reason gives real impetus to the project of interreligious dialogue and learning.

In each chapter Clooney first considers a twentieth-century Christian theologian's position regarding one of his selected themes (covering Richard Swinburne, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Karl Rahner and Karl Barth) and investigates the kind of theological reasoning involved, the steps in the argument, the logical conclusions, limits and compromises made. He then turns to some Hindu theologians to consider the same (2001: 13-14), before returning to re-read the Christian theologian in light of the Hindu materials (2001: 27). Therefore unlike many of Clooney's other works, this book is concerned primarily with the writings of theologians, rather than with religious texts. Clooney presents the thought of major theologians from the Nyāya, Mīmāṃsa and Vedānta traditions, as well as a few South Indian Tamil-language texts (2001: 18-20). Yet even with this breadth he necessarily leaves much out. His selections are, he acknowledges, "largely brahmanical, male-authored prose compositions, God- and not Goddess-oriented, highly conceptual and only occasionally indicative of the rich narrative and dramatic traditions of India." But these choices make sense given his desire to "appreciate, right from the start, how rational Hindu thought can be" (2001: 17). These examples are then called on to argue that:

there is sufficient common ground in terms of themes and method to warrant concluding that they are all fellow intellectuals engaged in the discipline that Christians have called theology... Once theologians recognize the common ground shared across religious boundaries, regular comparative practice becomes necessary (2001: 165).

Clooney's argument for comparative theology comes not then from a theology of religions that confidently declares the likelihood of truth in other religions. As we shall see, his

argument is more “modestly” based on the recognition of a shared intellectual and spiritual pursuit – regardless of whether the fruits of that pursuit can be regarded as “true”.

### *Theology as confessional*

Prominent British comparative theologian Keith Ward differentiates between comparative theology and confessional theology. Confessional theology, he says, “expounds and defends one set of revelatory claims.” (1994: 340). By contrast comparative theology:

enquires into the whole range of such claims in human history, without any methodological commitment as to their truth. Proper method in comparative theology will be pluralist, dialectical, and self-critical. It will accept the existence of many competing alleged revelations, none of which is uniquely privileged (1994: 340).

Clooney shares with comparative theologian Keith Ward his view of theology as a discipline that crosses religious boundaries. But whereas Ward draws a distinction between his own comparative theology and confessional theology, Clooney’s comparative theology is self-consciously confessional. Clooney notes that while this may appear to place him at odds with Ward, in fact the difference turns out to be more in emphasis than substance. Clooney notes that at the end of the final book in his comparative theology series, Ward speaks of how the practice of confessional theology is transformed through the work of comparison (Clooney 2001: 26-7, citing Ward 2000: 339). Ward, I think, distinguishes the two in order to emphasise the need for hermeneutical openness in the comparative theologian. Clooney integrates this openness into his understanding of a confessional comparative theology which is a “single though complex theological practice”:

My model of theology as interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional reintegrates Ward’s confessional and comparative theologies into a single though complex theological practice, which might be described more dynamically as moving from a confessional base through intervening intellectual inquiries to a renewed and transformed reappropriation of confessional views. Neither theological comparison nor confession can flourish in separation from the other, and each constantly transforms the other (2001: 26).

While Clooney describes a process moving from confessional faith to “intervening intellectual inquiries” into another religion, and back to confession again, these moments are not altogether separate. While the other religion is approached with openness and

academic rigour, faith is not left to one side. Rather “comparison retains a confessional dimension, while confession is disciplined by comparative practice” (2001: 26). As we heard in Chapter 2, Clooney does not pretend that achieving both is a simple task. Instead he explains that:

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 (Clooney 2010a: 30).

This internal conflict, which Clooney sees as essential to comparative theology done well, becomes all the more apparent when we consider the extent to which Clooney attempts to achieve a deep empathetic understanding of the religious other.

#### **4.1.2 Beyond hermeneutical openness: seeking a deep empathetic understanding of the other**

Clooney is clear on the need for hermeneutical openness, which he has sometimes expressed in terms of “humility.”

Intentional discourse on God and our relationship to God can be fruitful once reason is honest, disciplined, attentive to particulars, and, in all of this, humble – cognizant of the fact that no reader, however expert, can make credible judgments about a tradition merely from outside it, without the corrective influence of ongoing dialogue with members of that tradition (2008: 205).

Yet the understanding Clooney seeks goes beyond trying to understand the other in their own terms – it involves becoming a “conflicted theologian” by taking the claims of the other tradition “to heart”. Rather than wishing to “domesticate” the tradition of other (as was the critique made of some theologians of religion) Clooney wishes, as it were, to be “domesticated by it”, or to “feel at home” in it. He wishes to gain an empathetic, almost insider perspective on the other tradition – a position that he described as “neither here nor there” (Clooney 2004). He allows himself to be deeply affected by the claims of the other tradition, even to the extent of being “won over” by the truth of the other tradition. But in doing so he does not attempt to bracket his own beliefs; he insists that he never leaves aside his Christian commitments (2008: 5). This is a tension which Clooney positively embraces in his work. Comparative theology is a balancing act “between a necessary

vulnerability to the truth as one may find it...and loyalty to truth as one has already found it” (1993: 4. Cf. Fredericks 1995: 169-71).

Clooney sometimes states that his reasons for selecting a particular work for comparative study was a result of the finding it particularly powerful or spiritually moving. Reflecting on *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrivaishnavas of South India* (1996) before its publication, Clooney described how reading the “intensely emotional” devotional poetry of the saints of South India posed a personal challenge for Clooney because of their “poetic, imaginative, local, affective” nature. He explained that in studying this poetry and its reception among South Indian Hindus:

the “virtues” of impartiality and distance became problematic, and the possibilities of transformation and conversion become more real, as research and identity became more closely intertwined (Clooney 1995).

In attempting to enter the “Śrivaishnava world” Clooney describes himself as trying to “think, imagine, even pray as would an insider” and being at least partially successful. He considers this experience to have both deepened and complicated his religious identity causing him to feel “neither here nor there, though in a way both.” (Clooney 2004: 103).

In *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Srī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (2008), Clooney returns to the “intellectual and religious commitment” of loving surrender to God, which he had explored in *Seeing Through Texts*. Reflecting on that book, Clooney relates that “I have continued asking what it means when a reader comes to understand and then be attracted to an ideal and exemplar of loving surrender – either inside one’s own tradition or outside it ...” (2008: 5). He has over the years, he says, sought to find a way to remain religiously committed to his own Roman Catholic tradition, whilst at the same time being open to being “won over by the words of a new religious tradition” (2008: 5). In *Beyond Compare* Clooney describes himself as “circling back to probe more directly the potent imaginative and affective dimension of intellectual work ...” (2008: 5). Clooney has spoken of a necessary vulnerability in comparative work, and in *Beyond Compare* he seeks to put this vulnerability in the spotlight, exploring “whether the profile of this reader can be more adequately refined, accounting for this affective power and yet too shedding more light on how to study religions with a ‘post-objective’ empathy and engagement” (2008: 5). Systematic comparison is therefore left to one side as Clooney attempts to move “beyond comparison” to take a “further step” that occurs when he “takes the texts of two traditions to heart, reading them together with a vulnerability to their



power and purpose precisely so as to be doubly open to the transformations their authors intended to instigate in readers” (2008: 27). Loving surrender to God is not treated as an object of comparison, rather it is “a key that unlocks our reading”. Clooney is on a spiritual quest to better internalise and intensify the “goal that is loving surrender” (2008: 31). He experiences both texts as propelling him towards that single goal so that the boundaries between them become blurred: “my intention is not ultimately to read Hindu scriptures through Christian eyes nor to listen to Hindus speak of their scriptural and interpretive traditions.” He reflects on “now being unable to submit entirely to either [tradition]” (Clooney 2008: 209). For Clooney, this is not a problem but the ideal space occupied by the comparative reader, who is “neither here nor there, though in a way both” (Clooney 2004: 103):

In my project, boundaries are ideally blurred, references doubles, lineages interwoven. Beyond comparison, in a respectful sense is also beyond dialogue as ordinarily understood, since there are no longer settled groups of interlocutors religiously identified, who come and constitute the expected sides of the dialogue (2008: 30).

Clooney stands out amongst comparative theologians studied here because of the extent to which he has immersed himself into Hindu traditions— primarily through texts. For Fredericks the boundaries between traditions are seemingly maintained. He “uses” Buddhist and Hindu traditions as “resources” for shedding new light on his own Christian tradition. The traditions concerned play distinctive roles – the encountered tradition sheds new light on the home tradition which remains solely normative. For Clooney however, this distinction is not so clear. Clooney contrasts his work with that of Keith Ward who, he says, does not draw very much on the materials from the other religions which he “diligently describes” when he is developing his own position (2001: 26). Clooney, however, seeks to “engage and incorporate materials from the Hindu and Christian traditions throughout the entirety of my investigations and to root conclusions in my reflection on the materials of both traditions” (2001: 26). While for Ward and Fredericks comparative theology appears as a distinct aspect of their work which they engage in intentionally, for Clooney it seems that Hindu texts have entered his psyche permanently and irreversibly and are now part of who he is and how he thinks. He relates that the reading of Hindu texts has:

gradually worked its way into my theological worldview, and into my set of theological sources and the apparatus of my theological writing. Even before my relatively recent efforts to formulate positions *about* Hinduism, Hindu

texts ... had already become part of the context in which I do my thinking (1990: 66).

An example of this is evident in Clooney's use of the Hindu term *prapanna* (someone who surrenders completely) to describe the ideal comparative reader. Clooney takes his inspiration from the medieval Hindu devotional classic *Tiruvāymoḷi*, which evokes the "bold act" of taking refuge with Lord Nārāyaṇa and the Goddess Śrī in a moment of complete loving surrender (*prapatti*). The comparative reader, must in a similar fashion, surrender completely to the text: "somewhat desperately, having run out of strategies and plans: surrendering to the text and its meaning after attempting and abandoning every skilful strategy by which to make something certain and safe of it" (2008: 1, citing Clooney 1996). In comparing the "surrender" of the comparative theologian to the text from another tradition to the spiritual goal of complete surrender to God, one can scarcely imagine a stronger commitment to being open to surprise in the act of comparative reading. This stands in marked contrast to scriptural reasoner Adams, who, as we heard in the previous chapter, advocates "surrender to the luck of the moment" (Adams 2006a: 57), but for whom what is possible in that moment nevertheless has definite limits and participants are regarded as strictly confined to their own tradition (Adams 2006b: 244). By talking of being "open to the transformations their authors intended" (2008: 31), Clooney goes beyond hermeneutical openness, opening himself further to being deeply affected by the truth of the other tradition in all its difference. We will now consider how Clooney negotiates potential confessional difficulties in relation to such truth.

#### **4.1.3 Searching for truth: negotiating openness and commitment**

There is no doubt that Clooney's comparative theology is concerned with truth, believing as he does that it contributes vitally to the overall task of theology. Moreover, referring to the "basic" Christian truth claim "of the uniqueness of Christ and universality of salvation in Christ", Clooney reflects that:

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

(2010a: 15).

We have seen that Clooney seeks to make himself open to the truth of Hindu traditions. But does this translate into the recognition of specific teachings or claims as true? As was discussed in chapter 2, Catherine Cornille has presented Clooney as displaying a particular approach to truth in his comparative theology that she sees as typical of inclusivism. Comparative theology will, according to Clooney, shed “new light” on the truths of Christianity, but he does not expect that new truths will be revealed, saying: “rarely, if ever, will comparative theology produce new truths, but it can make possible new insights into familiar and even revered truths, and new ways of receiving those truths” (Clooney 2010a: 112). However, given Clooney’s presentation of himself as an ideally “conflicted” theologian who finds himself unable to submit fully to either tradition, his position on truth is, I think, more complicated than Cornille’s presentation would suggest. True, at times Clooney presents the reading of the Bible together with Hindu scriptures, “with a minimum of theological fireworks” (1993: 70), as being akin to reading the Bible alongside any great work whether religious or not (1993: 69). However, at other points, he goes beyond simply talking about the new light shed on Christian truths, and appears to give recognition to certain truths *within* Hinduism. He writes as though these Hindu scriptures *contain* important theological truths rather than merely throwing new light on Christian truths by virtue of having a contrasting view. For example he writes of “remembering how God has worked in our Christian and Hindu traditions” (2001: 171), and refers to “the particular details of traditions wherein key truths dwell” (Clooney 2010a: 15). Moreover, although he clearly does not expect the comparative theologian to convert to the religion being studied, he does think that it is in surrendering oneself to that possibility that the most valuable comparative theology is done. Offering a commentary on a verse from the *Bhagavad Gītā* for a volume of Christian commentaries on that text he says:

But perhaps too, we may start reshaping our understanding of God and adjusting the boundaries within which God speaks to us. For some at least, we may no longer be able to hear the voice of Jesus without an echo of *Gītā* 18.66. In extreme cases we may understand the text directly enough so as to feel a call to surrender to Krishna. While it seems impossible for Christians to do this, nonetheless it may be profitable to find ourselves in so difficult a situation, for a time bereft of even the fundamental certainties of our tradition. At this point, a Christian commentary on *Gītā* 18.66 may contain religious value, not just valuable ideas about someone else’s holy text (2006: 207).

Clooney is apparently comfortable with the ambiguities entailed by his comparative theology. For Clooney Hinduism and Christianity are really different: Hinduism is a real source of truth, but the truth that is gained through his practice of comparative theology is not other than the truth already known through Christ. This may sound like a contradiction, but Clooney prefers to speak of it as a tension which is embraced by comparative theology. Clooney presents Hindu teachings and practices – which cannot be easily related to Christian ones – as both spiritually moving and deeply compelling. Clooney’s engagement with Hindu texts is a spiritual exercise, a “sacred reading” as well as an academic one, and he clearly expects to find truth there that will contribute to his theological quest to “know God more fully” (2006: 203). The ideal reader must be “open to the full powers of the text, vulnerable to being changed in reading and determined to write in accord with truths discovered in the reading, and with new purpose after this radical shift in perspective” (2008: 2). Such interreligious learning, says Clooney, “cannot help but take shape in accord with new norms, new images, and new words that are more easily recognizable in some other tradition” (2008: 3). This statement sounds bold, and indeed Clooney notes that “neither [tradition] will be pleased by the intrusion”, and even refers to comparative theology as a “double reading that sins by taking *both* ... [texts] seriously” (2008: 3). Clooney’s reference to “new norms” emerging from comparative study complicates Cornille’s impression of Clooney’s comparative theology as only shedding new light on familiar truths. In a number of places Clooney reveals the great ambiguity raised by comparative theology regarding the truth claims of the respective traditions. For example, towards the end of *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (2001), which explores key theological themes which recur in both the Hindu and Christian traditions, Clooney reflects on the questions of the relative truth of the two traditions which his study inevitably raises. He imagines a probing reader asking him:

Is God the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, or Nārāyaṇa, whose spouse is Lakṣmī, or Śiva, Lord of the Pāśupatas? Is it a fact that God has become embodied in Jesus Christ but not in Rāma and Kṛṣṇa? Is the Word of God expressed fully in the Bible but only in some vaguer fashion in the words of the Veda and the Śaiva Traditional Texts? And do you not know God well enough by now and the theologies involved to decide whether it is 'Christian God' or 'Hindu God'? (2001: 180).

Clooney responds that the answer is both simple and complicated. He says that as a Christian believer he willingly professes his faith, aware of the implication that:

faith in the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born as the child of Mary, who died on the cross for our sins, rose into glory, and sent forth the Spirit upon us. By direct implication this faith claim, which is not intended to be true just for some people, excludes other such faith claims (2001: 180).

But this statement, says Clooney, does not lead us to a conclusion but instead “leaves us exactly where we started”. The only conclusion he can draw at this point is that:

I confess that Jesus is Lord, but I cannot now assert that Śiva is not Lord nor that Nārāyaṇa did not graciously undergo embodiment in order to enable humans to encounter their God (Clooney 2001: 181).

This suggests that from his research so far he is unable to conclude that these claims— that Śiva is Lord and that Nārāyaṇa graciously underwent embodiment in order to enable humans to encounter their God – are in conflict with his central Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, he does seem to regard these claims as different, and he does not wish to state definitively that it is the same God revealing Himself in each tradition. And perhaps he thinks such a conclusion can never be reached. Towards the end of *Theology after Vedānta* he similarly states that “A Christian comparativist may begin and end with a belief in the efficacy of the Passion, they will not be likely to proclaim alongside or even instead that “knowledge of Brahman saves.” But, Clooney suggests, they will in the process of comparison lose the capacity to make claims such as “knowledge of Brahman does not save.” Clooney holds that while this result may seem minimal, it is nevertheless progress that is “significant, and irreversible” (1993: 192). In *Beyond Compare* (2008), Clooney edges closer to an affirmation of the Hindu tradition engaged. In exploring the theme of loving surrender he reads closely *The Essence of the Three Auspicious Mysteries* by Śrī Vedānta Deśika (1268-1369) with the *Treatise on the Love of God* by St Francis de Sales (1567-1623). The *Essence* is first of all an exegesis on three holy mantras central to Śrīvaiṣṇavism – an ancient South Indian tradition devoted to the worship of Nārāyaṇa as the sole God, along with his consort, Śrī. The Dvaya Mantra translates as: “I approach for refuge the feet of Nārāyaṇa with Śrī; obeisance to Nārāyaṇa with Śrī. In the end Clooney finds that there is no reason:

that a Catholic cannot find herself deeply appreciative of the image of Nārāyaṇa and Śrī as refuge and goal, even to the extent that she utters the Dvaya Mantra as her own spiritual utterance, closely consonant with, if not identical to, the Śrīvaiṣṇava appropriation of the mantra.

Despite their very different views on God’s One-ness and the very different traditions to which they belong, Clooney finds that both Deśika and deSales speak of God as a loving

divine person – a “refuge with most of the same characteristic features, including compassion, proximity and the willingness and intention to protect”. This leads to his tentative conclusion that: “Who Deśika and de Sales are speaking about may in many ways seem to be the same person understood in accord with the same ideas and affective states and in evocation of the same goals” (2008: 187). Christians may object to this view that Lord Nārāyaṇa with his consort Śrī may be “God known by...[an]other name and form” but the decisions as to “where loving surrender really belongs”, Clooney suggests, can only be made “from within” the “the readings and double readings” of the texts (2008: 187).

Clooney’s openness to discovering truth in Hinduism is not limited, so it seems, to just those elements which reflect or correspond to Christian teaching. Indeed he relates of Deśika’s *Essence* and de Sales *Treatise* that “what these powerful texts tell us of God and loving surrender lies, I suggest, partly in their resistance to each other, the interplay of their forces, intensified through the fact of double reading” (2008: 27). In an article titled “Extending the Canon: Some Implications of a Hindu Argument about Scripture” (1992), Clooney raises the possibility of Christians extending their canon to include non-Christian texts which they have experienced to be revelatory. As a source for this enquiry he draws not on Christian texts (for this he refers readers to Jacques Dupuis 1997) but on arguments developed by the Śrivaishnava theologian Nañjīhar (1182-1287 CE). Nañjīhar presented reasoning for the incorporation of the Tamil songs of Nammālvār – an eighth century singer-saint believed to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu – into the hitherto closed canon of the Vedas, which are the ancient scriptures revealed in the sacred language of Sanskrit (1992: 199). Clooney relates the various reasons why, according to Nañjīyar, “the reader can extend the original canon to include the new texts even if because of vocabulary, themes and images they remain very different” (1992: 213). One of these arguments relates to the existence of a devoted audience who experience the texts as revelatory. Drawing on this, Clooney presents the bold suggestion that:

Arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, Nañjīyar's criterion of a devoted audience that draws on more than one tradition might enable Christians to invest the phenomenon of Christians using texts from other religious traditions with theological significance. Furthermore, Nañjīyar's criterion might ultimately ground an understanding of how the Bible and other resources of the Christian tradition could be understood as parts of a carefully extended canon.

Within this possibility, Clooney does not assume that members of this imagined Christian community would all limit themselves to finding value in texts that chimed with their Christian beliefs. Clooney introduces two different texts from the *Tiruvāymoli*, one about the consolation to be found in a God who takes on human form which would have resonances for Christians (*Tiruvaymoli* 3.10.6), and the other which is quite strikingly different— relating the illicit love between a woman and her God (*Tiruvaymoli* 10.3.6). Clooney reasons:

One can imagine reasons why some Christians might appreciate *Tiruvāymoli* 3.10.6 more easily than *Tiruvāymoli* 10.3.6, because the former is richly consonant with Christian religious discourse. For some readers, however, *Tiruvaymoli* 10.3.6 might be the more powerful text simply because of its fresh, rich, and provocative themes and imagery; it might therefore be a richer and more necessary complement to the Christian canon. In either case, we could ponder whether differences in the accessibility of content does or should mean that the Christian community should esteem either or both *Tiruvāymoli* 3.10.6 and *Tiruvāymoli* 10.3.6 as revelatory (1992: 214).

Clooney prefers that, unlike “old” comparative theology, contemporary readers assume that these songs “are not secret allegories hinting at Christian meanings, nor merely the re-expression in another form of what the Bible says.” (1992: 213) He argues that ‘if’ there is an ‘empirical component’ in ‘the general question of non-Christian revelation’ (i.e. ‘if...content does matter’), which given the content of his essay and comparative theological work as a whole he clearly thinks there is, we can’t judge whether texts can be considered revelatory until we read them (1992: 214). Clooney, of course, *has* read them, but still he draws no conclusions as to their revelatory status, and suggests that regardless of this *Tiruvāymoli* 10.3.6 “may fruitfully challenge Christian readers to reflect on divine eroticism and possible infidelity” (1992: 213). It remains to consider in more detail the extent to which the great effort which Clooney has invested in this approach has been rewarded by fruitful ‘surprises’.

#### **4.1.4 Comparative theology as open to surprise: bypassing theology of religions**

As we heard in chapter 2, Clooney is strongly critical of what he characterises as the “a-priori” nature of theology of religions, holding like Fredericks that theology of religions can “inoculate Christians against the power and novelty of other religious traditions”

(Fredericks 1999: 67). “If comparison really does enrich our knowledge of God”, suggests Clooney, “this increase will occur only gradually ... We cannot tell at a glance what the other tradition will teach us of God” (1993: 196-7). Although Clooney acknowledges that questions of the respective truth claims of the texts being engaged “become increasingly compelling the more one reads,” judgements about truth should come “truly after comparison, and not merely as the restatement of an earlier position, after a brief detour into comparison” (1993: 187). As we have heard, Clooney believes there is still a great deal more comparison to be done before such judgements can be made.

Clooney does not go so far as Fredericks to claim theology of religions as defunct, but has been strongly critical of its practice. Like Fredericks, Clooney is concerned that having a theology of religions in place before engaging in comparative theology limits the learning that can take place. In particular it discourages learning in depth, and limits one’s openness to being surprised. There is a danger that theologians engaged in the theology of religions do not feel the need to learn about other religions *in depth* because they have already found a ‘solution’ to the problem of religious diversity in advocating a particular position within the three-fold typology (cf. Clooney 1993: 194). Clooney insists that theology of religions is not necessary for comparative theology, and moreover that theology of religions should only take place after adequate comparative work has been carried out:

I wish to emphasize that the sequence is important, and that for some of us, at least, the theology of religions comes only *later*, out of the experience of reading other’s texts first. *Then* after comparative reading, a transition from textual/comparative theology to a theology of religions is made. Moreover: I wish to argue that if the sequence is preserved, this dramatically changed context for theology does not invite a pluralist position (1990: 66).

Arguing that we do not need theology of religions to provide a foundation for engaging in comparative theology but rather that comparative theology provides the foundation for theology of religions, Clooney states that there are already more modest reasons for engaging in comparative theology.

This circular act of reading occurs prior to, and independently of, the (often confusing) claim that other religions’ texts deserve to be read because they are revelatory. I do not wish to argue here for or against this claim, nor even to conjecture what it might mean. Rather, I suggest simply that we do not need to make so dramatic a claim in order to be able to insist that these other



texts are the Bible's broadened context, and therefore able to change the way the Bible itself is read (1990: 68- 69).

These reasons include the fact that other religions and their scriptures have already irreversibly influenced the Christian tradition and that other scriptures are "classics" in David Tracy's sense of the term – worthy of being read because they are "assumed to disclose permanent possibilities of meaning and truth" (Clooney 1990: 69). Moreover, once we read we will stumble upon reasons for continued reading (Clooney 1990: 68-9). However, Clooney's main argument in this article draws on Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of understanding religion, wherein the Bible constitutes a scriptural world which is "able to absorb the whole universe" (Clooney 1990: 67). Following this Clooney suggests that the bible "encompasses other religions, alters their references, and inscribes them within the Christian context, and thereby affects all their particular meanings" (Clooney 1990: 67). Comparative theology becomes not only possible but necessary "if one accepts the view that there is nothing outside the biblically constituted 'world'" (1990: 72). As such "these texts are the Bible's broadened context, and therefore [are] able to change the way the Bible itself is read" (Clooney 1990: 69). If Clooney's talk of the Bible "encompassing" other religions sounds like old fashioned fulfilment theology which effaces the differences of other traditions, this is not at all his intention. On the contrary, as we have seen, Clooney takes the traditions studied extremely seriously in all their complexity and difference, and he seeks to signify this by describing his approach as an "including theology".

### ***Clooney's "including theology"***

In an article entitled "Reading the World in Christ: From Comparison to Inclusivism" (1990), Clooney argued that the most fruitful position for a comparative theologian, emerging *from* the process of comparison (not as prelude to), was that of a revised form of inclusivism. He has elaborated on this on a number of occasions since. Referring to the "three standard theologies of religions" of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, Clooney complains that "they are almost always essentially abstract designs, developed without references to any particular religious tradition other than the Christian" (1993: 194). Each position will need to be "rewritten" after comparison, "with a far greater commitment to detail and examples" (1993: 194).

While the inclusivist position shares this fundamental flaw along with the others, it nevertheless stands out as the most “useful” of the three. Clooney defines the inclusivist theology of religions as holding that “salvation occurs through Christ alone, but also that people of other religious traditions may nevertheless be saved in their own traditions, even if they do not explicitly recognise Christ.” He continues:

With its distinctive tension between adherence to the universal claim of one’s own religions and an acknowledgement of the working of the truth of the Christian religion outside its boundaries, inclusivism best replicates the tensions and revisions which accrue to the reading process as I have described it ... (1993: 194-5).

The “creative tension” generated by this “perplexing double claim” gives the comparative reading process “part of its vitality”. Clooney is not however relaxing his view that theology of religions comes only *after* comparison. The inclusivist position that could be “allied” with comparative theology is a revised position – it becomes not a “theoretical enterprise” but “the practice of including”. Clooney states:

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 (Clooney 2010a: 16).

By the “practice of inclusion” he means a “set of strategies of practical and reflective engagement in a religious tradition other than one’s own, particularly by way of reading.” Clooney does not elaborate further but states that the “required rewriting of inclusivism and its alternatives” is an important task awaiting the comparative theologians of the next generation (1993: 196).

Clooney urges that the questions asked by theologians of religions, simply cannot be answered at the general level, including: 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? Neither are these questions 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” (2010a: 14, 15). Only then, after comparison, can they be answered. Clooney suggests that “the patient deferral of issues of truth”, coupled with in-depth study of other traditions in their particularity, may “be viewed as a hard-headed acknowledgement of the embodied, textured nature of the claims [i.e. Christian and Hindu], and as a contribution to the necessary foundation for whatever progress one is going to make in evaluating theological truths in a comparative context” (1993: 187, 193). He envisions this progress to be very limited however. Even if specific questions are asked regarding the truth of other traditions in particular cases, the answers will remain intimately related to the specific contexts of their asking. Clooney explains:

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. (2010a: 15-16)

In *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001) Clooney briefly compares and contrasts his work with the works of three “distinguished theologians of religions: Jacques Dupuis, S. Mark Heim, and Keith Ward” (2001: 21). Clooney is strongly critical of Dupuis’ theology of religions because, while he claims to “verify” and “substantiate” his interreligious inquiry by appeals to the specifics of religions, “his actual attention to those other traditions is minimal, well short of the verification or substantiation he desires” (2001: 22, citing Dupuis 1997:18, 20). “However generous Dupuis’s Christian theological judgments may be”, concludes Clooney, “in practice he extends the usual dynamic that has characterized Christian reflection on religions: a priori reflection, which treats numerous religions in the same way and attends to details only in fragmentary fashion” (2001: 23).

In contrast, Clooney aligns his comparative theology with the “practical openness” of Mark Heim’s position whereby “one must learn to think through faith’s truth claims with respect for the theological terms that frame the discussion in those particular traditions and likewise realize that we who interpret are also interpreted” (2001: 24). Yet, Clooney does so without actually affirming the theological foundation which Heim develops to support this openness. Clooney maintains his approach of “comparative theology first”, by suggesting that *Hindu God, Christian God* could subsequently be tested to see whether it exemplifies Heim’s perspective (2001: 24). His own work is certainly not, thinks Clooney, dependent

on such a perspective.

Clooney finds himself most closely aligned with the comparative theology of Keith Ward, which although differing from his own understanding of the practice, nevertheless shares the same basic thrust – where theology is viewed as a discipline that crosses religious boundaries. Ward “advances the work of a seriously interreligious theology because he engages in considerable reflection on the various religious traditions and their theological positions *before* presenting a contemporary Christian position cognizant of those other religious positions ...” (2001: 24-5, emphasis added.) According to Clooney, Ward gets the order of his theologising right – other religions are explored in some depth first and only then does he develop his own Christian reflections on the subject. This leads us to consider how, according to Clooney, judgments between religions may be made.

### ***The empirical component in judging religions***

Clooney speaks of the need to “justify practically” the practice of comparative theology before a “reconsideration of theologies about religions”:

Whatever theological judgments we might draw regarding the validity of religious traditions, we can in fact read and compare, we do understand in part, misunderstand in part; we are in fact changed in the process, and we do in fact reread our traditions differently while yet remaining members of our original communities. All of this occurs regardless of our judgments about religions, and it precedes whatever might be achieved in the theology of religions. The priority of the engagement in comparison over our theories about it needs to be noted and preserved (1993: 193).

The accomplished comparativist, says Clooney, is “able to renounce comfortable presuppositions and convenient shortcuts to truth” (1993: 167). But no scholar can renounce presuppositions altogether, as Clooney is well aware. While consistently mindful that his Christian commitments cannot be put to one side while conducting comparative study, Clooney does not show the same recognition of the impact on his reading made by his presuppositions about theology of religions, a point made by Kiblinger (2010). Clooney’s openness to the potential “power” of the Hindu texts he engages with is based on certain presuppositions about the availability of God’s revelation outwith the person of Jesus Christ. These presuppositions are not shared by all. Clooney’s contention is surely incorrect that in comparative theology the comparativist is changed in the process and

rereads their tradition differently as a result “regardless of our judgements about religions”. Were a Barthian to engage in comparative theology, it seems highly likely that he/she would remain unchanged. Their prior judgment about religions would dictate that there is no empirical knowledge to be gained that could contest the point that religions are “unbelief” – opposed to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ who alone constitutes truth.

Elsewhere, Clooney suggests that “if” there is an “empirical component in the general question of non-Christian revelation”, i.e. “if...content does matter”, then “each text of each tradition becomes a locus in which the question of revelation can be meaningfully asked and answered” (1992: 214). However, Clooney also subscribes to a view of the privileged position of the Bible for Christians as constituting the interpretive schema within which they understand the world (1993:115-117). It is this Biblical world into which non-Christian texts are “included”, and so it would stand to reason that the comparative theologian would be able to provide some Biblical rationale for the view that revelation is to be found outside its confines. The view that there is an “empirical component” to the question of non-Christian revelation is one, I suggest, which needs to be supported theologically. Indeed we have seen that for most Christians throughout the ages, it is a question that has been largely answered a-priori. Theologians of religions have specialised in producing such arguments from the Bible and other theological sources, but Clooney has distanced himself from their work. If there is to be an empirical component to the question of revelation in other traditions, we might expect Clooney to establish the grounds for it through an appeal to the Bible – particularly since Clooney claims that the Bible constitutes his interpretive world.

Clooney does consider the issue of revelation in the penultimate chapter of *Hindu God, Christian God*, recognising that “the tendency to simplify and clarify religious matters by appeals to what is reasonable and common is slowed and constrained by the persistence of revelation as a – or better, *the* – defining measure of truth and identity” (2001: 129-130). Communities “often define themselves and others in terms of revelation” and “prior commitments to revelation afford to a priori evaluations of ‘the other’ a certain respectability and force” (2001: 129, 130).

I will explore now how Clooney develops this chapter to ask whether he can be seen as justifying the value (identified as characteristic of interreligious hermeneutics) of abandoning “a priori” judgments of the other in favour of letting them speak for

themselves, and even abandoning the presupposition that Christian arguments are superior to Hindu ones (2001: 28). Clooney makes the somewhat surprising choice of Karl Barth's theology of revelation to consider alongside Hindu views. Barth, as we saw in Chapter One, is famous for defending the "a priori" judgment of religions, a position which we have seen Clooney dismiss in his critique of theology of religions. Clooney selects Barth in order to "draw our attention to particularly difficult aspects of a conversation that crosses religious boundaries." Barth sharply rejects Hindu, Buddhist and other theological traditions, since they "do not derive entirely from God's Word uttered in the revelation of Christ." But, says Clooney, even in this "unfavourable environment" one can find parallels between Barth and various Hindu theologians, since Barth "thinks like a Hindu", and Clooney presents us with several "Hindu Barthians" (2001: 17). That there are exclusivist thinkers in both Hindu and Christian traditions is of course no new discovery. What is unusual in Clooney's approach is his attempt to show that even exclusivist thinkers from different traditions can be brought into fruitful conversation with one another. Clooney is, in his own understated way, challenging the assumption that the interreligious realm in general – and comparative theology in particular – is only for the liberal thinkers of each tradition and for those leaning towards an inclusivist or pluralist view. But, how successful is Clooney in this regard?

Clooney examines how Barth "identified the core of revelation and then used it as the measure for assessing other people's religions" (2001: 131). Clooney limits his inquiry largely to chapter 2 of *Church Dogmatics* where Barth explores religion and revelation as related themes, ultimately identifying them as, in Clooney's words, "irreconcilably at odds with one another" (2001: 133). As Clooney explains, Barth identified the core of revelation in the self-manifestation of God in the person of Jesus Christ (not primarily his words or scriptural accounts about him). Nevertheless, the self-authenticating Word of God is accurately revealed to us in the Bible – which affords the indisputable, a priori perspective from which *everything* is to be judged. Therefore, when considering other religions in the light of revelation:

the contest is not among religions nor between the Bible and the texts of other religions. Rather, Barth is asking his readers to understand the Bible in the context of God's self-manifestation and to give primacy to nothing but that manifestation: God on the one side, everything else on the other, including (of course) religions (2001: 132-3).

As Clooney notes, for Barth there is no empirical element in judging the religions: "no

aspect of the judgment can be affected by actual knowledge of religions” (2001: 134). Though Clooney does not raise the matter here, we have seen that he himself believes the opposite, that there must be an empirical component to judging religions, and that it is this view which undergirds his commitment to the priority of comparative theology over theology of religions. At some point, therefore, we might reasonably expect Clooney to directly take issue with Barth’s arguments, and to show why it is that his own view can be supported by the Christian sources. But Clooney evidently does not feel this to be necessary. Instead he continues with his sympathetic presentation of Barth: Barth, is an “exemplary theologian, reasonable and consistent.” Had he strictly maintained his a priori judgment of other religions by resolutely ignoring their particularities, his position might have been respected as “a spiritual and faith testimony beyond criticism ...” - except perhaps by “other Evangelical Protestant Christians, who could look at the same Christian sources as Barth and disagree with him about what those sources tell the theologian” (2001: 135). However, says Clooney, Barth “cannot resist” pointing to some specific examples (of seeming similarities with Christian theology) in other religions, a move which, Clooney hints, opens him to critique. Clooney notes that Barth’s examples do not consist in “good Buddhology nor respectable Indology”. As Clooney knows, for Barth’s purposes the quality of his examples does not matter, since his is a “specifically theological critique ... There is nothing a Hindu or Buddhist theologian could say that would make a difference” (2001: 137). However, Clooney indicates that for contemporary theologians, sub-standard studies of other religions are no longer acceptable.

As a Roman Catholic, it is clear that Clooney does not share Barth’s “sola scriptura” starting point, or his dialectical view of the opposition of religion and revelation, but Clooney has purposefully “resisted the temptation to read this theology as ... a dead end precluding comparative and dialogical reflection” (2001: 157). Instead he prefers to respect Barth’s “articulate theology” as telling us “something about how theologians – Christian or Hindu –think” and as “invit[ing] us to think about what and how we believe” (2001: 157). Clooney’s reference to “we” and “us” is not merely a rhetorical convention, he includes the reader in this invitation from Barth, and his aim of encouraging the reader to develop and draw their own conclusions is perhaps one reason why Clooney refuses to spell out his own. So far this seems a reasonable and indeed a refreshingly dialogical approach. But in the end Clooney does not only want to say that exclusivist theologies offer an opportunity to comparative theologians to think more deeply. Actually, he wants exclusivist theologians to engage in comparative theology too – or engage rather in Clooney’s understanding of

theology as “interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional”. Yet why should they do so, knowing that, on Barth’s view, the particulars of other religions have absolutely no bearing on the judgment he makes of them? Clooney says:

if I make a claim about other traditions, I am then reasonably obliged to speak with articulate believers in those traditions ... Heirs of Kumābila Bhaṭṭa and Barth who wish to be theologians and not simply custodians of other people’s ideas cannot escape this dialogical responsibility with its comparative and apologetic context (2001: 160).

He explains further that if theologians are going to criticise other traditions, they should do so in an “informed and professional manner”, being “knowledgeable about the understanding of revelation and religion held by the traditions they criticise” (2001: 161). Clooney does not expect exclusivists to cease being exclusivists, saying that doctrines drawn from revelation, and stated after a comparative and dialogical theology, need not be any “more uncertain or tentative than they might have been when enunciated first and in ignorance of other traditions’ theologies” (2001: 160). But this will not be enough to convince exclusivists that comparative theology is both safe and desirable.

When Clooney states that: “There can be no single judgement by which one theology is entirely affirmed and other theologies are entirely negated” (2001: 176) he is clearly in opposition with Barth’s view, but he does not make this argument expressly with Barth. Rather he argues that Barth’s heirs have more of a responsibility to construct their theologies in conversation/comparison with theologians from other religions than did Barth himself. Clooney presents the contemporary moment as offering interreligious opportunities not available to the exclusivist theologians studied – Barth, Kumābila Bhaṭṭa, Aruḷ Nandī Naṇḍīyar:

Today we form our opinions about what others believe in a world where there is available to us a vast array of published and translated texts from other theological traditions, where travel is easy, and where living representatives of those other traditions are nearby (2001: 160).

While this is certainly a very different state of affairs from that known by Kumābila Bhaṭṭa in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, there is arguably no qualitative difference from the world as Barth knew it. Opportunities for access have increased certainly, but they were nonetheless available to Barth who died in 1968, and one can well imagine that he would staunchly maintain his position were he alive today. Clooney observes that Barth noted some similarities with Buddhism and Hinduism but then “disposed of them”, returning to his “pristine Christian



project” unaffected by the brief foray into other traditions. “But”, says Clooney, “it now makes no sense to theologize that way; comparison must be conceded its theological significance” (2001: 166). Nevertheless we may ask: why should the heirs of Barth and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa be convinced of the theological significance of comparison? Clooney notes that:

Karl Barth and Kumārila Bhaṭṭa agree that the world is to be assessed by strict standards of revelation and that all kinds of religious efforts are misguided, but they certainly disagree on what actually counts religiously and how the Vedic and Biblical religions are actually to be evaluated theologically. They agree on much, but each marginalizes the other. If the heirs of both theologians notice this, they can begin to discuss their respective theological strategies of marginalization (2001: 168).

After all this Clooney leaves us wondering why should they *want* to discuss their respective strategies of marginalization, or even view their approaches as strategies of marginalization? Clooney speaks of “the emerging need and capacity to account for one’s positions in a way that is accessible and intelligible as possible to theologians in other religious traditions.” But the only motivation offered is the “slender and strong thread of shared theological reasoning [that] makes us accountable to one another”. “What is interreligiously intelligible and inherently comparable”, he claims, “is also dialogically accountable” (2001:168-9). Members of different religions are obliged to dialogue with one another and explain their beliefs because they are “inherently comparable.” Barth’s attitude to other religions is based on his view that the Christian revelation and other religions are diametrically opposed, and he would therefore be completely unconvinced of the “inherent comparability” of Christian beliefs and those of other faiths. Therefore, Clooney’s argument must be taken up with Barth’s opposition of religion and revelation. As D’Costa (2009) says in response to Fredericks:

Practice and theory cannot be rent asunder. Indeed, if one is going to argue with a particular type of pluralist, inclusivist, or exclusivist that they should be open to the “power and novelty” of other religions, one has to do it theologically. If an exclusivist held that other religions are of no interest except in terms of mission, one would have to challenge the theological axioms that generate this attitude, not simply rule out this starting point as invalid (D’Costa 2009: 40-41).

It may be possible to find a way through these difficulties by examining more closely the impact of Clooney’s often unstated presuppositions on his argument in favour of a

comparative theology.

### ***Clooney's presuppositions***

As we have seen, Clooney highlights the fact that his comparative theology proceeds intuitively – yet what for Clooney is intuition, some theologians of religions observe to be a lack of acknowledgment of his inevitable presuppositions (see Kiblinger 2010). Perhaps in response to the critique outlined by Kiblinger, in his more recent introduction *Comparative Theology* (2010a) Clooney has softened his view about the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions, stating that “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” (Clooney 2010a: 14). He allows that comparative theology and theology of religions may even play mutually supportive roles:

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 (2010a: 14).

Clooney also included a list of the major presuppositions of his comparative work. He says that “a comparative theologian can have solid theological grounds for thinking that comparative work will be fruitful” (2010a: 115) He offers “several rather general (theistic) insights which many comparative theologians in many (though not all) traditions might well presuppose, and find vindicated in their research”. These offer the clearest insight into the theological basis of his comparative work and are therefore worth quoting in full:

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. (2010a: 115).

These presuppositions amount to what I have described in Chapter 2 as a theology of religions position that is inclusive as regards truth. I have described inclusivism as a position indicating that more than one religion (not necessarily all of them), contains important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life but only one is uniquely superior (which again will naturally be one's own).

Clooney makes no mention of salvation in his presuppositions. Given his conclusion mentioned earlier that a Christian comparativist will not be likely to affirm that "knowledge of Brahman saves", but neither will they claim that "knowledge of Brahman does not save," we can consider him, like Cornille, to be agnostic in this regard. That Clooney lists his presuppositions regarding the potential truth of Hinduism is to be welcomed, but they are still not supported by any theological argument. While it is relatively uncontroversial to say that God chooses to be known in "fragile human ideas and words, images and actions", the particular ideas, words, images and actions through which he does this are highly disputed. There are sources which the Christian theologian can draw on to suggest that these occur outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but it has by no means been the dominant view in the history of Christianity. Without disagreeing with Clooney that "commitment to one tradition is compatible with still recognizing God at work outside that tradition's language, imagination, and doctrine", it must be recognised that this is not undisputed, even within the Roman Catholic Church. The document *Dominus Iesus*,

similar to Barth's dialectical theology, differentiates between faith (which exists only within Christianity) and belief which refers to the human striving in evidence in all other religions (CDF 2000: #7). Were the Church to unequivocally recognise the possibility that God is at work in the scriptures and traditions of others, it would be impossible to maintain such a stark differentiation. It is also noteworthy that Clooney does not make reference to the extent to which traditions conflict with one another and offer negative assessments of each other. Instead Clooney claims, without substantiation, that "our own traditions teach us to know God as one who can well be at work in other traditions, even in their theological doctrines" (2010a: 115). What Clooney presents here as a generally accepted teaching of traditions is at odds with a plain reading of many traditional texts. Clooney comes close to Cornille's "open inclusivism" when he states that faith does not "compel us to presume that what we know is always superior to what they know." As we saw in Chapter 2, open inclusivism operates with a minimal conception of the normativity of one's own tradition, allowing for the recognition of truth "not only in teachings which are similar to or the same as one's own, but also in new and different teachings" (Cornille 2012b: 68-69). It could be argued, as Cornille does, that comparative theology which discovers truth in other traditions *in their difference*, can be supported by *Nostra Aetate* (see chapter 2). However, Clooney himself has not made such an argument and Cornille's reading of *Nostra Aetate* will be disputed by many, as suggested in Chapter 2 (see, for example D'Costa 2009). It is not at all clear that the Roman Catholic Church advocates the discovery of truth in difference or the kind of immersion into another tradition which Clooney champions, (though Clooney's nuanced and careful writing has ensured he has steered clear of any "correction" by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.) There is a wealth of material within the theology of religions discourse which debates these points to which Clooney could connect. Engaging in this kind of discussion would not require making general judgements about truth in other traditions. Engaging in theology of religions does not mean that Clooney would suddenly have to answer such impossibly broad questions as "Is Hinduism true?", or even "Is God revealed in the *Tirumayvoli*?" But it would give support to his presuppositions about the value of looking for truth in other religions. As has been discussed, the need for such theological grounding has been recognised by Cornille. She argues for the need for "hermeneutical effort" in interpreting traditions to support the kind of interreligious learning that takes place in comparative theology. This need is also recognised by comparative theologian John Makransky and so we will now turn to consider his work to see how he negotiates the tension between openness to the other and commitment to the truth of his own tradition, a tension brought to

the fore by the practice of comparative theology.

## **4.2 John Makransky**

John Makransky is a professor of Buddhism and comparative theology at Boston College and a Lama, a spiritual teacher within the natural ease tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (*dzogchen*). In contrast to Clooney who has devoted the last twenty years exclusively to the study and writing of comparative theology, Makransky's main focus is in "Buddhist theology" (2000), also termed "Buddhist critical-constructive reflection" (2008b: 114). Although he teaches comparative theology and has written about it, it does not form the main focus of his research, nor have other religious traditions featured strongly in his academic training. His areas of expertise are Indian Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, including practices, doctrines of Buddhahood, meditation theories and Tantric Buddhism. Makransky combines the use of historical-critical tools of analysis, not traditionally valued in Buddhist cultures, with a religious commitment to which Western Buddhist studies does not give voice. In doing so, he sees this discipline of Buddhist theology as analogous to Christian theology and recognises similar developments amongst some Muslim and Hindu academics. As with Clooney, I will show the ways in which Makransky demonstrates the characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics. Given the different content and focus of Makransky's writings these will be explored under the headings of:

1. Comparative theology as contributing to Buddhist theology
2. Moving beyond hermeneutical openness: supported by an inclusivist theology of religions
3. Theology of religions: the necessary foundation for comparative theology
4. Recognising truth: evaluating other traditions

### **4.2.1 Comparative theology as contributing to Buddhist theology**

According to Makransky, Buddhist theology has two purposes:

The first is to explore how academic religious studies may newly inform Buddhist understanding of their own traditions, and thereby serve as a resource for Buddhist communities in their adaptations to the modern world. The second is to explore how Buddhist modes of understanding may help

address pressing needs of modern societies and inform current issues (2008b: 114).

For the most part, Makransky engages in these tasks through reflection on Buddhist sources. He has not placed the same emphasis as Clooney on comparative theology as an integral part of the task of Buddhist theology. However, he does insist that that Buddhist theology can be positively enriched through engagement with other religious traditions, and he has found his own personal engagement with Christianity to be particularly fruitful. He has number of articles contributing to the field of comparative theology. For example, he reflects on “Buddhist Analogues of Sin and Grace: A dialogue with Augustine”, which argues that “by bringing Augustine into dialogue with Buddhism, each dialogue partner poses new questions for the other, focusing our attention on aspects of each that would otherwise not be highlighted” (2005c: 5). Recognising the value of engaging in such a discipline in dialogue with theologians from other religions, Makransky sits comfortably in his position within the theology department of a Catholic University, Boston College. There comparative theology is not only studied by Christians engaging with other religions but is also open to students from different religions “to explore how Christian intellectual traditions might inform ... [their] own tradition” (2008b: 147).

Makransky considers comparative theology as developed by Clooney and Fredericks to be a particularly “productive approach for interreligious theological learning” (2011: 119). His definition of comparative theology is particularly close to that of Fredericks:

The purpose of comparative theology is to learn from a different religious tradition in enough depth and specificity to shine significant new light on your own. By paying careful attention to elements of another religious tradition in their own context of doctrine and practice, your perspective on corresponding elements of your own faith may be shifted in ways that permit new insights to emerge. This does not merely involve learning at a distance *about* other religious beliefs and cultures that leaves your own religious self-understanding unaffected. Rather, comparative theological analysis provides a method to learn *from* religious others in specific ways that newly inform your understanding of your own faith and may also energize and deepen your practice of it (2011: 119-120).

Makransky describes some of the dispositions necessary in the comparativist for such learning to occur; drawing on the dispositions presented by Cornille as necessary for interreligious dialogue in her monograph *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. These include (1) “doctrinal humility” whereby one acknowledges that the doctrines of

one's own tradition never perfectly capture the whole truth; (2) knowledgeable commitment to one's own tradition; and (3) a recognition of enough common ground between the traditions concerned that it is "possible to hear things" that make a positive difference for one's own understanding and development (2011: 120). Clooney and Fredericks would no doubt agree. However, Makransky differs from Fredericks and Clooney in his understanding of the relationship between theology of religions discourse and comparative theology. For Makransky, these dispositions – essential to comparative theology – must be "motivated and informed by an adequate theology of religions." (2011: 120) His view is that before engaging in comparative theology:

First the question of *why* must be addressed: a Buddhist comparative theology must be motivated and informed by a theology of religions that convincingly articulates for Buddhists *why* they can learn things from religious others that can make a positive difference for their own understanding and practice of awakening (2011: 119).

This difference between Makransky and Clooney is significant, as becomes apparent when we turn to consider his attitude to learning from the religious other.

#### **4.2.2 Moving beyond hermeneutical openness: supported by an inclusivist theology of religions**

Although sharing many of Clooney's and Frederick's concerns about pluralism and inclusivism in its classic Rahnerian form, Makransky has engaged in the theology of religions discourse, making use of the three-fold typology and putting forward substantial suggestions towards a contemporary Buddhist theology of religions which is inclusive (2005a, 2008a, 2011). Moreover, he sees a theology of religions as necessary in providing a "framework" to support the kind of learning that occurs in comparative theology. Makransky's positive embrace of theology of religions, in contrast to his colleagues in comparative theology, can be explained in part by his slightly differing conception of the discipline. While Clooney and Fredericks talk about theology of religions almost exclusively in terms of *evaluating* other religions, Makransky recognises the important and primary role of theology of religions in finding internal resources that can support reaching out to other religions and discovering truth through that practice.

A theology of religions is an understanding of other religious systems that explores their potential truth from within the theological framework of your own religious tradition. You can, as an individual, learn many things from other religions. But for your learning to inform not only yourself but also your

religious community and tradition, it must make sense to your tradition in its own framework of understanding (2011: 120).

Citing Kiblinger (2010), Makransky argues that “behind *any* interest (or disinterest) in learning from other religions lies a theology of religions that is either conscious or unconscious”. This theology of religions then determines what we are able to *hear* when we encounter another tradition.

To support learning *for* my religious tradition *from* a religious other that permits something really significant and fresh to be heard, my theology of religions, while rooted in my own tradition, would have to see religious others as potential sources of profound truth, without reducing them just to what I thought I knew before engaging them (2011: 120).

This is not to say he does not engage in evaluation. He does make certain judgments about how Christian teachings and practices can be viewed from a Buddhist perspective, as will be discussed shortly. But these evaluations come after reflective engagement with Christian sources and practices. The primary role of theology of religions, according to Makransky, is to examine Buddhist sources in order to discover whether there is a basis for engaging other religions in the first place – can Buddhist teaching support the view that religious others are a *potentially* a source of truth. The question of whether they actually do contain truth awaits comparative theological study.

Makransky’s article “Buddha and Christ as Mediators of the Transcendent: A Buddhist Perspective” (2005a) can be viewed as an exercise in comparative theology supported by a theology of religions. There Makransky reflects on his regular experiences of Christian communion since he began teaching at Boston College, a Jesuit Catholic university. He relates:

I have deeply appreciated elements of the Christian rite in their fundamental structure and power, not in spite of my Mahāyāna Buddhist training but apparently *because of that training* – seemingly sensitized to Christian liturgy by decades of daily practice of Buddhist liturgies that invoke the liberating power of Buddhahood.

Makransky was struck by “a sense of vivid recognition and appreciation of analogous patterns” in the Christian rite. While he does not describe achieving or even striving for a deep, empathetic “insider” perspective as does Clooney, he does portray the patterns of the Mass in language that indicates a strong sense of affinity with what he encounters:



prayer, repentance, blessing, listening receptively to revealed truths, opening to receive the purifying and transforming power of divine life, being offered into deep communion with transcendent reality ('God') through its perfect embodiment ('Christ') in utmost receptivity and trust, the inwardly liberating power of which ('Spirit') links one's heart to many others (like 'one body') in unconditional love ('agape') (2005a: 178).

But he also describes a feeling of "wonder at so much difference", particularly at the Christian narrative within which the Christian rite is embedded, and which is "radically different from the Buddhist" (2005a: 179-80). "It was as if", he explains, "my formation in Tibetan Buddhism conformed me *both* to recognise a real liberating power within Christian communion *and* to be challenged by its radically different understanding of the sources and implications of that power" (2005a: 180). In both similarities and differences, Makransky "receive[d] light" from "the Christian rite and its trinitarian power" back on his own tradition in "unexpected ways." From here, Makransky ventures where Clooney does not (at least not yet) – to evaluate the truth of the Christian tradition in relation to the truth of his own. Reflecting on his experiences of the mass, Makransky relates that they seemed to "confirm, at least anecdotally, that the Christ of the Christian communion indeed functions somehow as a mediation of ultimate reality as I, a Buddhist, understand that reality" (2005a: 181).

That this occurs cannot, for Makransky, be explained through the pluralist paradigm, mainly given "the difficulty it has in acknowledging how specific differences in belief and practice may make a real difference in the religious end attained" (2005a: 192). As Makransky explains further in a later article, this is a key part of the Buddha's teaching – only the correct practice can bring you to the ultimate end:

The Buddhist understanding that different modes of practice lead to different soteriological results, and that the fullest result can only be attained by methods appropriate to it, establishes the main purpose for communicating the Buddha's teaching in the world (2008: 49).

Makransky also stresses that within Buddhist schools there is a "penetrating kind of investigation into the results of religious practice" of a student by their teacher. Given this, the criterion of discerning truth in other religions offered by Hick and others – by observing the similar saintly qualities of their practitioners – is "too rough a criterion from this perspective" (2008: 52). Makransky believes that different religions are relating to the same ultimate reality, but this does not entail that people engaging in different modes of

practice and understanding will reach the same religious end (2008: 52, 66). The view of different religions directing their adherents to the same religious end makes sense from within a Christian perspective of “an omnipotent God who brings all people to the same religious end no matter how differently they practice”, but it does not make sense from an Indo-Tibetan Buddhist perspective where proper practice is required for liberation to be attained (2008: 52). This insistence on ‘proper practice’ leads Makransky to find a particular foundation for comparative theology.

#### **4.2.3 Theology of religions: the necessary foundation for comparative theology**

Makransky recognises that for a theology of religions to be taken seriously by Buddhists it “must be based in fundamental Buddhist understanding of core teachings” (2011: 121). However these teachings have been “employed traditionally in ways that orient Buddhists away from the possibility of religiously important learning from non-Buddhists” (2011: 121). He suggests that despite great divergences amongst Buddhist traditions across history and cultures, all Buddhists relate, and must relate, their views on “salvific truth” to the Buddha Gautama’s fundamental teaching of the four noble truths, which establish (1) the truth of suffering, (2) the conditioned arising of suffering, (3) ultimate freedom from suffering and (4) the path to ultimate freedom. The Four Holy Truths explain that:

the core problem of persons is their subconscious tendency to absolutize their own representations of self, other, and religious objects, mistaking the representations for the realities and thus painfully misreacting to them through entrenched habits of clinging and aversion (2003: 335).

Makransky identifies two basic paradigms for the response to non-Buddhists, which were established by the Buddha through his treatment of religious others, recorded in the Pāli Canon. These basic paradigms of critique and inclusion are still drawn on by contemporary Buddhist scholars who reflect on other religions. First, Non-Buddhist traditions are critiqued by the Buddha “insofar as they might contribute to the very problem he diagnosed, by absolutising their religious objects and conceptions of self as objects of clinging or aversion.” This paradigm was developed by Buddha’s followers into Scholastic critiques of non-Buddhist religious systems. Second, the Buddha was inclusive of religious others insofar as he was skilled at communicating his truths through the modes of thought of those with whom he was in dialogue. This second, inclusive paradigm inspired a tendency to explore how the symbols and modes of thought of other religions could be

viewed as communicating, in their own way, “the very truths the Buddha had taught”, and this paradigm became formalized in the doctrine of skilful means. As Makransky remarks, contemporary Buddhist scholars who have been foremost in commenting on Buddhist truth in relation to other religions such as Gunapala Dharmasiri, Buddhadasa and the Dalai Lama “still draw upon those two basic paradigms: scholastic critique of the other, or inclusion through skilful means” (2003: 335).

Makransky insists on the need for what Cornille calls “hermeneutical effort”, drawing on current work in theologies of religions and experiences of interreligious learning to offer interpretations of these same Buddhist teachings that could support the kind of learning that takes place in comparative theology. In an article titled “Buddhist inclusivism: Reflections Toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions” (2008), Makransky presents four “constructive reflections” to support a Buddhist theological inclusivism. These constructive reflections are quite similar in content to the presuppositions which Clooney presents for his comparative work. The major difference is that each of Makransky’s reflections is explicitly grounded in a particular Buddhist source or teaching. First he reflects on quotations from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* which “imply that it is the dharmakāya, the infinite Buddha awareness, pervading all time and space, that is the one source of spiritual knowledge in all religions and cultures” (2008: 59). He finds his own experience of interreligious dialogue and encounter with, for example, Christians whose spiritual insights he has found profoundly illuminating, to confirm the *Avatamsaka*’s view of one ultimate source underlying all religions. Second, Makransky reiterates his point referred to earlier, that, based on the teachings of the Buddha, a Buddhist must conclude that differences in practice will issue in differences in spiritual attainments. Third, Makransky again quotes from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*:

In this world there are four quadrillion ... names to express the Four [Noble] Truths in accord with the mentalities of beings to cause them all to be harmonised and pacified ... [And] just as in this world ... so in all the worlds to the east ... and just as this is so of the worlds to the east, so it is with all the infinite worlds in the ten directions (Makransky 2011: 63).

For Makransky this means that “the one ultimate reality that underlies all traditions takes expression in countless ways that are never exhausted by familiar forms.” Given that the Four Noble Truths can be expressed in an infinite number of ways, Buddhists “need to listen to others for further expressions that no Buddhist culture ever exhausts” (2008: 63-4). Makransky adds nuance to the traditional interpretation of the doctrine of skilful means

whereby other religious traditions might be regarded as “lower levels of preparation on the ladder to Buddhist enlightenment.” Rather, he argues, what is to be discovered in other religious traditions is “*more* of the truth that frees” which is sometimes revealed in “surprising and unexpected ways”. Makransky indicates that the discovery of truth in that which is strange, other, and surprising has a basis in Buddhist tradition, as with the story of the disciple of a Zen master who is “surprised into further awakening” by the uncharacteristic, violent behavior of his master (2008: 64). Makransky’s fourth constructive reflection comes from an historical critical examination of the emergence of Buddhism’s diverse traditions. Buddhist traditions have, he says, “recurrently absorbed many non-Buddhist religious and cultural understandings to re-articulate the Dharma in ways that meet those cultures.” As a result, “religious others are not just ‘other’ but also part of us”, and vital for the continued development of Buddhist teachings as they take “fresh expression in *this* place, *this* time” (2008: 65).

In this way, Makransky begins to build a theology of religions that is uniquely Buddhist. It does not ignore those aspects of Buddhist tradition that have been interpreted in such ways as to discourage interreligious learning, but instead offers new ways of interpreting those elements that are consistent with core Buddhist teachings. Not only this, he develops a rationale for finding other traditions inspiring in their differences as well as their similarities that is rooted in Buddhist sources.

#### **4.2.4 Recognising truth: Evaluating other traditions**

As well as looking to Buddhist sources for the foundations of a theology of religions, Makransky looks for inspiration to contemporary scholars in the discourse and to his own experience of dialogue and comparative theology. Makransky is attracted to Mark Heim’s theory of “multiple religious ends,” seeing it as overcoming this problem with the pluralist approach. Makransky shares Heim’s worry that the pluralist position forecloses opportunities to learn and grow through theological discussion by deciding beforehand that multiple paths can bring practitioners to the same ultimate destination. Makransky reinterprets Heim’s Christian, Trinitarian theology of religions from a Mahāyāna perspective so as to provide an explanation of how Christ might be understood as a mediation of ultimate reality from a Mahāyāna Buddhist viewpoint (2005a: 189-199). He begins with an insightful summary of Heim’s theology of religions. Because exclusivists and pluralists have assumed ultimate reality to be uncomplex, they have been unable to find value in religious differences. Exclusivists assume religions to be in conflict with one

another, while pluralists deny the ultimate significance of differences in order to argue that the religions each reflect the same simple ultimate reality. Drawing on the Christian doctrine of the trinity, Heim argues that God is complex with varied dimensions for human encounter:

[God's] complexity is mirrored in the diversity of means in which it is encountered, which results in different kinds of realization of its qualities, the attainment of different religions ends, by persons of different traditions. Since persons of different traditions are genuinely encountering God, and opening to or realizing qualities of God, they have much to learn from each other about the same God (2005a: 191).

Crucially for Makransky, differences do matter because they affect the religious fulfilments attained. Therefore there is a genuine basis for people to both argue with and learn from one another in their differences. Makransky is well aware that for Heim the doctrine of the trinity is the correct and fullest expression of ultimate reality. He reworks this theology to make sense for a Mahāyāna consideration of religious diversity, placing Mahāyāna Buddhist practices, as opposed to the trinity, at the centre. These practices, he says, “provide means to release the mind from ... shackles, to open persons to the empty, radiant ground of being through three basic kinds of practice: practices of wisdom, love and devotional communion” (2005a: 194). Christian traditions “tend to focus intensively on the love and communion aspects of participation in the ultimate reality”, while they do not contain the “wisdom” which, from a Mahayānā perspective, involves the “non-dual encounter with the empty nature of reality” (2005a: 195).

Christian practice can “enter Christians into communion with the unconditioned reality and its liberating powers in faith through what they cherish as its perfect embodiment (‘Christ’), so as to deeply relax their patterns of self-grasping and be opened to qualities of Buddhahood ... of unconditional love, compassion and liberating power that radiate out to many others.” However, to “deeply relax” patterns of self-grasping is not equivalent to achieving ultimate release. The different understanding of ultimate reality in Christianity has produced a different diagnosis of the human condition and a different path in response to that. Christian practices which can produce unconditional love and compassion can be regarded as “skilful means”. These Christian practices Makransky explains, can assist those belonging to “cultures where the Buddha’s teaching of emptiness is little known or too challenging yet for many to accept” (2005a: 194). On this view, Christians may engage “deeply” in practices of unconditional love and devotional communion, but they will still

be regarded as missing the essential practice of wisdom. They may be seen as “grasping to duality without realizing how their own minds have reified it, holding themselves back from a fuller realization of the empty nature of reality” (2005a: 197). But while Christians cannot attain the same ultimate fulfilments as achieved through Mahayānā Buddhism, Buddhists can nevertheless learn from Christians. Makransky critiques the Christian dualistic “theocentric vision”, but he recognises it as having produced some valuable results, such an emphasis on social justice, not so readily present in Buddhist traditions. “Christian ecclesiological understanding of spiritual community as God’s very body, communally active in the world as God’s own loving response to human need”, he says, translates much more directly into “effective communal social service” than does the early Buddhist rhetoric of spiritual path as individual endeavour. “Light” gained from Christian teaching and practice can send Buddhists back to resources in their own tradition with “fresh eyes” (2005a: 198). Such a theology of religions therefore can motivate and support a comparative theology which engages in both “discussion and argument” and “take[s] note of both analogues and differences between Buddhist and Christian understandings” (2005a: 199).

Based on a Buddhist inclusivist theology of religions supported by Buddhist sources and combined with his own experience of the “power” of the Christian communion rite over many years, Makransky feels able to determine that “the ultimate reality that Christians engage in practice as ‘God’ is what Buddhists engage in practice as ‘*dharmakāya*’, differently understood” (2005a: 195). Furthermore a Buddhist:

may indeed recognize Christ as a remarkable *rūpakāya* manifestation of Buddhahood itself, a powerful means through which followers of Christ have indeed communed with and learned to embody liberating qualities of *dharmakāya* (2005a: 199).

Makransky relates his theology of religions to what Cornille calls “open inclusivism” (Makransky 2011: 131; refs Cornille 2008: 197-204), where the norms of one’s own tradition are conceived in a minimal way, when he comments on his “learning as a Buddhist from Christians”:

Such learning has reinforced for me the Buddhist understanding that Buddhahood as a source of limitless skilful means can communicate through non-Buddhist modes of teaching in ways that transcend accustomed frames of references, including my conditioned Buddhist expectations ... It is as if Buddhahood is speaking in and through the Christian mode of expression to

empower a deeper engagement with Buddhist principles, in ways I had not expected, do not control, and do not fully understand (Makranksy 2011: 123-4, 126).

This openness to surprise is similar to that displayed by Clooney, though he does not go to lengths of seeking to “submit” to the text of the other (Clooney 2008: 209).

In considering the kind of inclusivism Makranksy espouses it is helpful to consider a differentiation indicated by Kiblinger. In reviewing Buddhist responses to other religions Kiblinger differentiates between two kinds of inclusivism (sub-types which she says can also be found within pluralism):

In a nutshell, the rough distinction that I will describe is about the degree of acceptance of real difference, and how deep the differences among religions are thought to go. The first type does recognise differences but downplays them by somehow recasting those differences as similarities, equivalences or peripheral components; in contrast, the second type finds the real point and value of dialogue in the stimulation for growth provided by genuine differences left to stand (2008: 28).

Relating this to my explanation of inclusivism at the end of chapter 2, we can see that Makranksy does display an open inclusivism with regard to truth. He differs from Cornille, however, in that he does not insist on a soteriological agnosticism. Rather he does make judgments in this regard. He is able to recognize that Christianity is displaying some of the components of the path the Buddha described but must be regarded as incomplete in this regard. Therefore he determines that Christianity cannot lead to the full enlightenment described by the Buddha but may nevertheless lead to alternative (inferior) soteriological results. Because of his insistence that the highest goal can only be reached by a path that corresponds to that described by the Buddha, Makranksy might be described as a closed inclusivist with regard to soteriology. This is because, corresponding to Cornille’s description of closed inclusivism, the truth of other soteriological paths is recognised “only in so far as it corresponds with teachings or practices which are already part of the deposit of truth of one’s own religion” (Cornille 2012b: 68).

Kiblinger underscores the difference between interpreting and evaluating. Reflecting Moyaert’s concept of hermeneutical openness, she relates that we must all evaluate others in our home system’s terms, but “the argument is that we should evaluate only after accurately understanding, which means understanding the other well first in terms of their

own systems, not through the lens of ours” (2008: 39). Kiblinger refers to Makransky as an example of a Buddhist scholar exhibiting a “preferred” form of inclusivism. She contrasts him with Thich Nhat Hanh who commits offence by claiming to value the Eucharist, for example, but in doing so reinterpreting the practice beyond recognition and seeking to tell Christians “what it ‘really’ is” (2008: 39). Makransky by contrast:

representing Heim’s type of inclusivism (the preferred subtype), leaves alone the embeddedness of the ritual in the Christian system, articulates a solid understanding of Christian narratives, but nevertheless sees the Eucharist as having value for him as a Buddhist by triggering reflection back upon Buddhism’s analogous forms. It is precisely because Makransky leaves the difference undisturbed that he finds the ritual illuminating, whereas Nhat Hanh proceeds by seeing the ritual as how they do in their way what we already do in ours (2008: 39).

However, examining the theologies of religions espoused by some Buddhists well known in the theology of religions discourse, including the Dalai Lama, Bhikku Buddhadasa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Masao Abe, Kiblinger implicitly demonstrates that the position of “hermeneutical openness” is by no means the natural or default Buddhist approach. She shows how they each exhibit what she calls the “anonymous other move” (2010a: 33-34), using various strategies including the two truths doctrine, the three-body doctrine, and the doctrine of emptiness to show the other as expressing the same truths as are present in Buddhism, though in inferior form. She asks rhetorically: “will the above Buddhists be ideal or productive comparative readers, given the problematic nature of their theology of religions, which causes them to refuse to hear self-descriptions, impose their own norms, see their own notions in others notions, etc.?” (2010a: 34).

In the following chapter I will illustrate how the example of the Buddha’s discourse with the Brahmin in the Pāli Canon – which as Makransky notes is an important source for any Buddhist theology of religions – most easily supports these “anonymous other” moves and not a position of hermeneutical openness where differences are respected and held as differences. Still less so does it naturally imply the open inclusivism espoused by Makransky. I will argue that it is a closed inclusivism (with respect to truth) which most naturally follows from the example of the Buddha, underscoring the need for Makransky’s “hermeneutical effort” in reinterpreting the sources.



## **Conclusion**

What then are we to make of the similarities and differences in the approaches of Clooney and Makransky? In this chapter we have seen that in their comparative theologies they both display, each of the four characteristics which I have highlighted as indicating the distinctive approach of the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics.

- a.) *Theologically engaged*: the practice is understood as making a contribution to the broader project of theology.
- b.) *Hermeneutically open*: the tradition/ scriptures are to be understood first through the religious other according to the self understanding of the other (Moyaert 2011).
- c.) *Open to learning from the other*: There is expectation that something of positive theological and/or spiritual significance can be learned through this encounter, learning which is often spoken of in terms of “truth.”
- d.) *Open to surprise*: This learning cannot be anticipated prior to actual engagement but comes as a “surprise”.

Clooney and Makransky display similar ideas about the interreligious nature of theology and the important contribution that comparative theology has to make to the internal theologies of their respective religious traditions. They share a commitment to “hermeneutical openness”, to understanding other traditions in their own terms without looking for echoes of their own tradition. However, Clooney takes this commitment to a greater depth, seeking to gain an empathetic understanding of Hindu traditions that brings him right to the boundary of his own tradition. This leaves him with a complex religious identity, feeling a certain loyalty to both traditions whilst somehow never letting go of his orthodox Christian commitments. Both have found truth in the other tradition, though while Clooney is the most reticent to acknowledge the theological significance of this in terms of developing an open theology of religions, he comes across as having been more deeply affected by the Hindu traditions to which he devotes so much of his time and spiritual and intellectual energies. Both feel that the hermeneutical openness with which they approach other traditions, and their belief in a single ultimate reality that can be operative everywhere, warrants an openness to being surprised by what they discover in the other tradition(s). Makransky spells out his willingness to view this in terms of “open inclusivism” viewing the norms of his own tradition minimally, allowing for the recognition of truth new and different teachings, so long as they do not overtly conflict with the truths of Buddhism. Clooney usually suggests that he expects truths discovered to be in harmony with Christian beliefs and he has acknowledged that he selects most texts for

comparative study with complementarity in mind. However he does make references which suggest the possibility of finding value in real difference and even to developing “new norms” in the process of comparative theology, but he does not elaborate on this, nor does he draw any conclusions. It is only raised as a tantalising possibility, to be tested through yet further comparative study. But Clooney’s view that there is an important empirical component to the question of revelation outside the Christian tradition is one that needs to be supported by Christian sources. As Makransky, Kiblinger, D’Costa and others have argued, if the benefits of comparative theology are going to be compelling to others, presuppositions about discovering truth outside the boundaries of one’s tradition need to be grounded within one’s own tradition and argued as such. Clooney acknowledges that the primary goal of theology is not dialogue or better theology but “to know God more fully” (2001: 173, 177), and therefore sociological arguments as to the proximity of other religions and the discovery of clever modes of reasoning in other religions cannot suffice to convince anyone who needs convincing why theology should be interreligious and comparative. Rather, we need to hear arguments supporting his underlying intuition that God is at work in both the Christian and Hindu traditions.

There is, as Makransky has commented, a traditional “allergy” to such openness which is not limited to Buddhism. As we will explore in the following chapter this allergy often results from or is fuelled by encounters with religious others that have been recorded in scripture. This underscores Cornille’s point that religious traditions are not naturally inclined to either hermeneutical openness in understanding the other or openness to truth in difference. Both require a certain hermeneutical effort in the interpretation of scripture (and tradition) if they are to have a solid foundation. This is where the theology of religions can help, as will be argued in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 5: Hermeneutics of the Other in Scriptures

### *Introduction*

As we have seen, many comparative theologians and scriptural reasoners shun the theology of religions discipline which seeks to establish a theological basis for engaging with other religions through an examination of internal resources. They prefer instead to delve straight into the study of the scriptures of other religions. Clooney has insisted that a theology of religions could only come after numerous and in-depth explorations in comparative theology; but what of the theological barriers to comparative theology? As Gavin Flood has articulated well, the “Christian theological reading of a non-Christian sacred text is fraught with difficulty...” The dominant mode of Christian readings of another tradition’s sacred literature has been that of “reading Christian ideas and structures into the text of the other” (2006: 10). This is “most obviously exemplified in the reading the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament pointing to the revelation of Christ witnessed in the New.” He refers to this as a “process of textual colonisation.” This process, as Flood notes, is by no means restricted to Christianity: “many or most traditions will offer their own readings of other texts and claim those reading to have a higher validity than rival readings” (Flood 2006: 10). In this thesis our sights have been limited to what are commonly referred to as the major world religions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Amongst these five, the scriptures of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism each refer to the scriptures of other traditions present at the time of their emergence and now still existant. These scriptural legacies continue to influence relations between these traditions today.

In this chapter we will explore how several of the major traditions engaged by comparative theologians and scriptural reasoners are resistant to the hermeneutical openness called for by comparative theologians, and even more resistant to the epistemological openness called for by open inclusivists such as Cornille and Makransky. The New Testament, Qur’ān and Pāli Canon each contain examples of engaging the religious other that amount to a hermeneutical “closedness.” Marianne Moyaert has described such closedness as “a lack of willingness to take the other seriously in his or her otherness” (Moyaert 2011: 262).

These scriptures already contain their own hermeneutics for engaging with scriptures of the dominant religion(s) of the times in which their canons were formed, whereby the interpreted tradition can only be properly understood through the interpreting tradition. I will argue that comparative theologians must come to terms with these hermeneutical models embedded in the scriptures in order to make a theological case for hermeneutical openness, and still more so for finding truth in otherness. I will then suggest that it is in the field of theology of religions that they can find the most appropriate tools and examples to make such a case. After giving a brief overview of the hermeneutic of the religious other contained in the New Testament and the Qur'ān scriptures, I will give a more detailed consideration to the hermeneutic of the other present in the Pāli Canon. From the point of view of the Abrahamic religions, this move extends the scope of this study to include a maximally 'other' religious tradition. It will be of interest, to those considering broadening the practice of scriptural reasoning to include other religions, to be aware that the problems of fulfilment and supersessionist hermeneutics are by no means confined to the Abrahamic faiths. This selection will also give further support to the arguments of John Makransky, who has been presented in the previous chapter as a scholar who exemplifies theology of religions and interreligious hermeneutics functioning as mutually supportive disciplines.

In the cases of the New Testament, the Qur'ān and the Pāli Canon we find that, to the extent that other scriptures have been utilised at all, it has been assumed that the 'other' can only be properly understood through the home tradition. We find not a hermeneutical openness but a distinctly closed hermeneutic present within these scriptures. Being embedded in scripture, this hermeneutical model cannot simply be dismissed as belonging to a bygone era. It might be suggested that if the authoritative status of scriptures were relativised, we need no longer concern ourselves with problematic examples they contain. However the scriptural reasoners and comparative theologians we have encountered seek to learn from scriptures precisely because they are not regarded as "merely" human texts. The practice of interreligious hermeneutics presumes that scriptures retain a special place within religious traditions, and therefore the plain sense of these scriptures must be grappled with. The work of comparative theologians and Scriptural Reasoners points to the mutually enriching potential of interreligious scriptural engagement. However, few will accept this as an acceptable framework for spiritual and theological development unless it can be shown to be compatible with the scriptures. Resources will also need to be found within the religious traditions that allow for – or even encourage – the search for religious truth beyond the boundaries of their particular tradition. All this, as we shall see, requires

considerable hermeneutical effort, working against the historical grain of each of the religious traditions, but not necessarily against the principles of their scriptures. That hermeneutical effort might be seen as separating the specific examples of closedness towards the religious other from what the scriptures in principle can be found to say about the potential for openness to the other. I will offer very brief summaries of the legacies of hermeneutical closedness present in the New Testament and Qur'ān before considering the case of the Pāli Canon in more detail. In each case I will seek to point to places where such hermeneutical effort is being made, but just how this is developed is up to scholars from within the traditions concerned to figure out.

## ***5.1 Hermeneutical “closedness” in Abrahamic Scriptures***

### **5.1.1 Hermeneutical “closedness” in the New Testament**

David Tracy has remarked that the history of Christian supersessionist reading of Jews and Judaism constitutes the opposite of what modern hermeneutics calls for in “recognising the other as other”. This was, says Tracy, “an example of non-dialogue”, referring to the New Testament Christian conscious or unconscious use of the religious Jew “to define what the Christian is not, *viz.*, a Jew whom the Christian supersedes” (Tracy 2010: 3). The Anglican document *Generous Love: The truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue: An Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (2008) referred to by scriptural reasoner David Ford (discussed in Chapter 3) provides a good illustration of the problem which this thesis has been seeking. It suggests the following discussion question:

In Acts 17, Paul quotes from the poem *Phainomena* by Aratus as his starting point in explaining the Christian understanding of God. How can we use other people’s scriptures and worldviews in our discussions in a way that takes them seriously and doesn’t abuse their meaning?

(Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns 2011:  
<http://www.aco.org/books/#page3>)

The desire to “take them seriously” and not “abuse their meaning” well reflects what we have been calling (following Moyaert) “hermeneutical openness”. However, is this really reflected in the example given of St Paul (Acts 17)? The desire for “hermeneutical

openness” is commended by many theologians and even religious institutions today, but considerable hermeneutical effort is required if Paul is to be read as supporting such openness. As we shall see this is a task some scholars have taken on, but first I will offer a necessarily brief overview of how the Hebrew scriptures and the Jews have been viewed by Christians, with particular reference to the letters of Paul.<sup>48</sup>

For the earliest (proto-) Christians the Hebrew Scriptures were the only scriptures. However, with the formation of the Christian canon, these came to be regarded as the “Old Testament” – that is, as partial, incomplete and unclear revelation that required the fulfilment and elucidation provided by the New Testament affirmations about Christ. In a somewhat parallel move, these Hebrew texts, deemed incomplete by Christians, were codified to form the complete Jewish canon. Each community claimed authority of interpretation, yet the emerging dominance of Christianity gave a force to the Christian claim that proved disastrous.

While recent scholarship has shown the great diversity of the early Church, particularly in its attitudes to the continuing validity of Jewish practice, it is Paul’s writings on Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures that have been particularly foundational for the subsequent development of Christianity. In narrowing the focus to Paul, however, we are still met with a diversity of potential approaches to Jews and Judaism. Paul grounded his Gospel message in the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). However, what was the central part of those scriptures for Jews and the focus of Jewish life – the Torah containing the Mosaic law – had, according to Paul, been rendered redundant by the coming of Christ. Paul further cast doubt on the positive spiritual value of the law even *before* Christ, at various points declaring the law to be a “ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3) that had been given to the Jews because of their “transgressions” (Galatians 3:19). However, Paul’s approach was not systematic and, responding to differing circumstances in his Letter to the Romans, his attitude to the continuing validity of Judaism is much more ambiguous. Alongside statements on the failure of the Jewish people (11:7), Paul’s community in Rome is told that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (7:12) and, crucially, in reference to the election of the Israelites, that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29). Unfortunately this ambiguity was obscured by those Church Fathers, including Justin Martyr and John Chrysostom, who concerned themselves with the vehement denunciation of Judaizing Christians. Proceeding from a very negative reading of Paul’s assessment of Judaism, they claimed the Hebrew scriptures

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<sup>48</sup> These subjects have filled hundreds of books. These remarks will necessarily miss much of the nuance, but nevertheless it is useful to offer a general overview here so as to illustrate the problems facing interreligious hermeneuts.

as solely Christian texts that the Jews, due to their treachery and stubbornness, were incapable of understanding.<sup>49</sup> As Rosemary Radford Ruether demonstrated in her 1974 book *Faith and Fratricide*, these Church fathers applied a hermeneutic of antithesis to the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jewish “letter” versus the Christian “spirit,” of “law” versus “Gospel,” and of the “judgement” of the Jews versus the “promise” of new life in Christ (Ruether 1974: 228-45). In doing so, they both dislocated the scriptures from their Jewish context and read them as proof texts as to the intrinsically malign nature of the Jews (Ruether 1974: 164).

Historically, Christianity’s approach to the Hebrew Scriptures often translated into an *anti-Jewish* theology (Ruether 1974: 164). It was only following the Holocaust – that many saw as the culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism fuelled by Christian anti-Judaism – that large numbers of Christians began to critique this theology. Through reflections on Christianity’s origins in Judaism; the reality that Jesus himself lived and died a Jew; and the implications of their faith in a scripture that declares God’s eternal covenant with the Israelites, (implications that Paul seems to recognise in Romans 9-11), some Christian theologians came to acknowledge the continuing validity of Judaism. And if Judaism remains a valid path before God, then it follows that Christians can and should learn from Jewish interpretations of these shared texts. The Roman Catholic Church has in fact called on its members to do just that, although it is careful to say that Jewish interpretations can only be affirmed as true to the extent that they coincide with Christian understandings (PBC 2001: #22). The degree to which it is “Jewish” truths that are being affirmed is therefore questionable within this scenario (Levenson 2005-2006; esp. 176). However, some theologians have gone further, arguing that if Judaism remains a valid path to God, Christians need to revise their understanding of the Old Testament as requiring the definitive fulfilment of the New (Pawlikowski 2004: 291-92). This move creates greater theological room for Jewish self-understandings, such as the belief that the Messiah is still to come (Pawlikowski 2007). It does require, however, considerable hermeneutical effort when interpreting the numerous New Testament texts with strong fulfilment and supersessionist overtones. And as many Christian theologians have found, the implications of such a recognition of the continuing validity of Judaism has far reaching consequences for fundamental aspects of Christian theology. Thus we may say that Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament has changed dramatically in the twentieth century, with many Christian theologians now recognising that these scriptures have enormously rich

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49 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 29:2; 38

traditions of interpretation within Judaism that Christians can and indeed must learn from. However, the degree to which Christians can learn from those aspects of Jewish interpretation that seem to conflict with Christian doctrine (i.e. the degree of epistemological difference) remains a matter of controversy.

### 5.1.2 Hermeneutical “closedness” in the Qur’ān

There is a tension in the claims of the Qur’ān to confirm and protect (Q 5:48) and yet also to correct (Q 5:15) the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The Qur’ān reveals that it has been provided to confirm “Torah” (*Tawrat*) and “Gospel” (*Injil*), which it presents as “Books sent down by God” to the prophets Moses and Jesus respectively (3:84). Muslims are required to believe in them (4:136), and, in the early *suras*, it is assumed that Jews and Christians will naturally recognise the Qur’ān as divine revelation (20:133) (Marshall 2001: 7). There is, however, considerable debate regarding the extent to which these references can be held to refer to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament as they exist in their current forms. The Qur’ān, presumably by way of explanation as to why the Jews and Christians rejected the prophethood of Muhammad, suggests that the Christian and Jewish scriptures have been corrupted (3:24; 2:79; Marshall 2001: 19). These scriptures are therefore seen to be in need of the correction provided in the Qur’ān, which is interpreted to be God’s complete (85:21-22), incorruptible (41:42) and final (33:40) revelation to humankind. The rejection of the prophethood of Muhammad was seen as fitting into the prophetic mode – the “Children of Israel” were always disobedient to their prophets, calling some imposters and killing others (5:70) (Fernhout 1989:70). Throughout the history of Islam, Muslims have often regarded Christians and Jews as guilty of the wilful distortion of God’s word and their scriptures as abrogated (see, e.g., Aasi 1999: xv). As such Muslims have had little or no inclination to read their scriptures, except in order to demonstrate the reprobation of the Jews and Christians or to search for references to the prophet Muhammad – whose coming the Qur’ān says these scriptures proclaim (7:157).

However, there is a significant minority opinion within classical Islamic scholarship that holds that the corruption to which the Qur’ān referred was not of the texts themselves but rather the manner in which they were interpreted by Jews and Christians (Tarakci and Sayar 2005). There is a good deal of ambiguity amongst the relevant Qur’ānic passages, some of which call on Jews and Christians to “observe” the Torah and the Gospel (5:66;



68), implying the validity of those scriptures in their existing form (Marshall 2001: 20). The application of the principle of abrogation to these scriptures has likewise been disputed (Sachedina 2001: 31-32). Reza Shah Kazemi has drawn on these views to argue that Muslims are in fact compelled by the Qur'ān to read the Jewish and Christian scriptures because of its central claim to be a confirmer and protector of the previous revelations. Kazemi has suggested that the relationship between the scriptures should be considered one of "reciprocal confirmation and mutual illumination" (Kazemi 2010: 116).

The majority of Muslims hold to the belief that the Qur'ān is God's full and final revelation – a physical embodiment of the heavenly "Mother of the Book" (13:38-39). This helps explain why they have not generally felt challenged to reconsider the hermeneutical closedness encouraged by the claim of the Qur'ān to complete the "corrupted" Torah and Gospel. However, there are further resources within Qur'ān which could be utilised in support of such a reconsideration. That the Qur'ān, as a bounded text in human language, cannot contain the fullness of God's revelation to humankind is an idea supported by the Qur'anic verse which declares:

And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted (in the writing): for Allah is Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom. (31:27).

That the Qur'ān cannot be regarded as complete also seems evident from the frequent passing references to prophets of the previous scriptures – prophets whose stories are affirmed but often not rehearsed in the Qur'ān. For example, the Qur'ān demands that believers "commemorate" the prophet Jacob (38:45-47), yet little is revealed about him. How then could Muslims commemorate prophets such as Jacob except by looking to the Jewish and Christian traditions? In light of the theological and historical critical issues associated with this view, a few Muslim scholars have begun to reconsider the nature of the Qur'ān (e.g. Abu-Zayd 2003). Turkish scholar Mahmut Aydin has sought to identify a Muslim path to pluralism along the lines of Paul Knitter. Mirroring Knitter's reassessment of the nature of Christ, Aydin has offered a reinterpretation of the nature of the Qur'ān, suggesting it be understood not as "full, definitive and unsurpassable" but rather as "universal, decisive and indispensable" (Aydin 2001: 350). Thus, Aydin provides an "attempt to relativise the status of the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad with regard to the religious figures of the world religions" and, we might add, their scriptures, "while maintaining the centrality of the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims" (Aydin

2001: 350). The hermeneutical effort involved here should not be underestimated however. Aydin has bypassed the Hadith which are traditionally called on to help interpret the Qur'ān, and such a move will only be acceptable to a very few Muslims. While such a relativising of the Qur'ān is considered wholly unacceptable to most Muslims, there has been a major advance in Muslim approaches to Christianity amongst a broad range of Muslim mainstream scholars, in particular in the form of a document known as *A Common Word*. Therefore we may say that, as with Christianity, some Muslim scholars are showing signs of increasing openness to the scriptures of the others.

## ***5.2 Engagement with the scriptures of religious others in Buddhism***

Turning now to Buddhism we will consider the legacy of engagement with the religious other recorded in the Pāli Canon. Buddhism arose between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE as part of the ascetical Sramana movement which was highly critical of various aspects of the established Brahmanical religion of the time (Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 147). Though the Buddha is recorded as having engaged with a number of religious others, including the Jains and the Sramanas, I will focus here on the Buddha's recorded interactions with the Brahmins. These passages are particularly relevant to modern day Buddhist-Hindu relations, which, as Schmidt-Leukel has noted, are amongst the least advanced of the various bi-lateral relations among the major world religions (Schmidt-Leukel 2008b). Buddhist-Hindu relations are fraught with difficulties both in India where Buddhists are a very small minority and in Sri Lanka where Hindus are the minority. The Pāli Canon records episodes of direct engagement with Brahmins and contains references to the Vedas which most Buddhist commentators consider to be relevant to a contemporary Buddhist understanding of Hinduism. The Pāli-Canon also contains a strong critique of ideas reminiscent of the great Upanisadic insight of the equivalence of Brahman and Atman, but due to limitations of space this will not be considered here (see Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 149). As we shall see, the Pāli-Canon features elements of continuity with Brahmanical religion, but this continuity does not include the ascription of any spiritual value to the Vedas, which are uniformly dismissed as 'empty', and at one point even described as 'dangerous.' The Pāli Canon then, contrary to the popular perception of Buddhism's innately harmonious nature, offers a very –though not completely– negative assessment of contemporary religious forms.

My concern here is with the plain sense of certain relevant suttas in the Pāli Canon which refer to the Brahmins and the Vedas. Following the lead of Makransky, I will explore these suttas through the work of scholars who have applied the tools of historical criticism to these texts, to try as best as is possible to set them within the contemporary context. Due to space limitations I will not be considering Buddhist commentaries on these Suttas. Knowledge of this historical period remains limited by the lack of textual evidence, nevertheless contemporary scholarship has been able to shed light on the Indian religious scene contemporary to the emergence of Buddhism — knowledge which was not available to the later Buddhist commentators on the Pāli Canon (Gombrich 1992: 161). I refer the reader to Kristen Kiblinger's study, *Buddhist Inclusivism*, which engages with the thought of a number of important Buddhist thinkers and which shows that the negative assessment of Brahminism found in the Pāli Canon was not softened by later interpretations. As Kiblinger found, the dialogues with the Brahmins which I will discuss below have helped to support a closed inclusivism within Buddhism, whereby limited truth can be acknowledged in another tradition, but it is always included and greatly surpassed by the Buddha's teaching of the dharma (Kiblinger 2005: 52). The focus of this study will be on the dialogues of the Sutta-piṭaka, where the Buddha is presented as engaging with Brahmins who are often specified as Brahmins 'learned in the three Vedas'.

### **5.2.1. The Vedas and the Pāli-Canon: Some explanatory notes**

The Pāli-Canon refers frequently to 'the three Vedas', a phrase presumably indicating the earliest parts, i.e. the Samhitas, of the Ṛg, Sāma and Yajur Veda, and therefore not reflecting the full body of texts which Hindus today consider to be Veda. The Vedas, held to be *śruti*, that is eternal divine words without author and 'heard' by the ancient ṛsis or 'seers', were preserved orally in the custodianship of the Brahmins. The Brahmins attained their status as the only authoritative ritual practitioners and teachers of the dharma through their knowledge and preservation of the Vedas. At the same time the authority of the words of the Vedas, and the power believed to be latent in its sounds, was dependent "on their use in the performance and on the authority of those who utter them" (Killingley 2008: 944).

According to the Pāli chronicles of Sri Lanka, the Canon as a whole was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka in the first century. There are no complete surviving manuscripts of the Pāli-Canon dating earlier than the fifteenth century, but the commentaries can be dated

to the fifth century AD, and their content appears to have been fixed a few centuries before that. This suggests, says Rupert Gethin, that the Pāli Canon took on something like the form in which we have it today in the third and second centuries BCE (Gethin 2008: xxii-xxiii). Whether we view the Pāli-Canon as an accurate record of early Buddhist teachings is dependent then on our view of the accuracy of the oral transmission of the material up to that point. Alexander Wynne has, using internal evidence from the Pāli-Canon itself, shown that the early Saṅga were very concerned with the accurate verbatim transmission of the texts (Wynne 2004: 117-118). In the absence of any conclusive evidence to the contrary, it is assumed for the purposes of this investigation, that the Pāli-Canon reflects more or less accurately the teachings of early Buddhism (*pace* Collins 1990:89).<sup>50</sup>

### ***5.3. Understanding the early Buddhist-Brahmin relationship***

#### **5.3.1 David Seyfort Ruegg and Richard Gombrich**

According to David Seyfort Ruegg, the ‘precise modalities’ of the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism have never been comprehensively investigated (Seyfort Ruegg 2008: 5). No claim to such comprehensiveness is made here but I do hope to contribute to the understanding of the complexity of the relationship. Such complexity is in evidence in the following summary of the Buddha’s heuristic method by the pioneering scholar of Buddhism T. W. Rhys Davids in 1899:

[The Buddha] accepts as the starting-point of his own exposition the desirability of the act or condition prized by his opponent – of the union with God...or of sacrifice ... or of social rank ...or of seeing heavenly sights, etc. ... or of the soul theory ... He even adopts the very phraseology of the questioner. And then, partly by putting a new and (from the Buddhist point of view) a higher meaning into the words; partly by an appeal to such ethical conceptions as are common ground between them; he gradually leads his opponent up to his conclusion. This is, of course, always Arahatsip... (Rhys Davids 1899: 206).

Seyfort Ruegg may nevertheless be right that scholars have generally glossed over the full complexity of the relationship, seeing it quite straight forwardly according to one of two

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<sup>50</sup> Steven Collins has protested against this equation stating that the Pāli Canon should be seen as a product of Theravada Buddhism rather than as predating it. It is however beyond the scope of this study to consider this matter further.

models – both of which view Buddhism and Brahmanism as quite separate. According to the first model, the relationship is seen as one of animosity, of “Buddhism vs Hinduism”. A second model, more conscious of the commonalities, explains the presence of elements in Buddhism common to Brahmanism in terms of ‘borrowing’, and in doing so, argues Seyfort Ruegg, assumes Buddhism and Brahmanism as ‘separate religious systems alien to each other’ (Seyfort Ruegg 2008: v ). In the context of India the divergence of models is much more stark, and their argumentation is highly politically charged. Buddhist scholars tend to claim that the Buddha’s teaching constituted an absolute break with the religious teachings of his day. Today the majority of India’s 8 million Buddhists belong to the Neo-Buddhist movement founded by Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), conversion to which involves an explicit and detailed pledge to “discard...the Hindu religion.” (Ambedkar 1989: 75).<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile Hindu scholars often present Buddhism as just another form of Hinduism (Vyas 2006: 222-223).<sup>52</sup> Such inclusivism is capable of producing perhaps as much animosity as Ambedkarite Buddhist exclusivism. Buddhist scholar Krishna B. Bhattachan, has stated that a precondition for any future “religious tolerance and harmony” between Buddhists and Hindus in Nepal is that Hindus “give up their mistaken belief that Buddhism is a branch of Hinduism, [and] that Buddha is the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu...” (Bhattachan 2006: 238).

Richard Gombrich is a British Pāli scholar who presents himself as taking “a middle way between the view that Buddhism is just a form of Hinduism and the view that it owes nothing to its Indian background” (Gombrich 2006: 14). He recognises a number of points where the early Buddhists were in agreement with Upaniṣadic thinking (Gombrich 2006: 31-34), but he places greater emphasis on the points of difference. Primary to his thesis is his presentation of the Buddha as a satirist, whose criticisms, although sometimes direct, are often oblique and so have been missed by the majority who failed to recognise the Buddha’s sense of irony (Gombrich 2009: 180-192). Part of the Buddha’s skill as a teacher was his ‘tactic of accepting the opponents’ terms...and then turning them round to mean

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<sup>51</sup> Eight of the twenty-two vows to be made focus on the denunciation of Hindu Gods and practices, including the pledge to “discard... the Hindu religion which is detrimental to the emancipation of human beings.” (quoted in Elst 2002: 279). Ambedkar, convinced that the Hindu scriptures allow no place for morality and reason, and provide justification for the highly unjust caste system, argued that there was no choice but to “apply dynamite to the Vedas and the Shastras” and to destroy the “Religion of the *Shrutis* and the *Smritis*” (Ambedkar 1989: 75) Buddhism was to be favoured as it had arisen in opposition to the entrenched inequalities of Brahmanism. ‘The history of India’ Ambedkar insisted, “is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism” (Ambedkar 1987: 267).

<sup>52</sup> Vyas is more moderate in recognising the independence of Buddhism from Hinduism, but he does claim, like many Hindus, that the Buddha’s teaching did not differ significantly from that found in the Hindu Upaniṣads.

something quite different’ (Gombrich 2009: 187), all ‘under the guise of...recalling [the Brahmins] to their ancient ideas’ (Gombrich 2009: 192).

Seyfort Ruegg does not consider such tactics to be a “guise” at all. Instead he proposes a “substratum model” which hypothesises a “common heritage and religio-cultural (back)ground” (Seyfort Ruegg 2008: 113) shared by Buddhism and the other ‘ambient religions’ of India. The substratum model assumes that the groups in question are related communities which ‘in their SYMBIOSIS, remain open to the processes of INTERCHANGE and OSMOSIS [sic]’ (Seyfort Ruegg 2008: 109). Seyfort Ruegg is helpful in presenting a model which recognises the complex mixture of continuity and discontinuity at play within the Buddhist relationship to Brahmanism (Seyfort Ruegg 2008: 5), and his proposition of symbiosis and a common well of religious ideas merits further research. However, whatever the reality of the historical situation, it is clear that the Pāli Canon presents the Buddhists as significantly ‘other’ from the Brahmins. Moreover the religious elements which Seyfort Ruegg attributes to a common substratum – such as the cosmology of gods and the rituals, are in the Pāli Canon clearly associated with the Brahmins.

I have not adopted Seyfort Ruegg’s term ‘symbiosis’ to express the continuity between Buddhism and Brahmanical religion as this suggests, I think, an equal and mutually beneficial relationship. Although there are, as Seyfort Ruegg has shown, plenty of instances throughout history where Buddhism and Hinduism have drawn from each other, the situation regarding the Buddhist treatment of the Vedas and Brahmanical religion in the Pāli-Canon is, by and large, uni-directional<sup>53</sup> and often supersessionist. Nevertheless the blanket term “supersessionism” does not do justice to the complexity as, when beliefs and practices are adopted, some elements are re-interpreted by being given a modified or a completely new meaning, some re-interpreted through a change in status, some elements rejected altogether, and some treated in different ways in different places.

### 5.3.2 Kristen Kiblinger and terminology

In an attempt to place some structure around this complex approach I have made use of terminology suggested by Kristen Kiblinger. In *Buddhist Inclusivism* Kiblinger provided a

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<sup>53</sup> One might counter here that there are instances where Brahmins accept the Buddha dharma but do not convert and return to their previous lives enriched. This will be discussed later.

short discussion of the Pāli-Canonical approach to Vedic Religion as an example of ‘inclusivistic strategies’ where an inclusivist view is defined as one which ‘self consciously recognizes a provisional, subordinate, or supplementary place within the home religious system for some element(s) from one or more alien traditions’ (Kiblinger 2005: 9). She has identified these strategies as subordination, reinterpretation and new application (Kiblinger 2005: 40). She presents the Buddhist preservation of the Vedic gods as a clear example of subordination, while the attitude towards Vedic sacrifice provides an example of ‘significant reinterpretation and new application rather than subordination’ (Kiblinger 2005: 41). Utilising this structure, I will examine elements of continuity with Brahmanical religion, looking first at the strategy of subordination and then of new application. I will begin however with a discussion of discontinuity and rejection of elements of Brahmanical religion, a discourse which, as Gombrich has shown, features both strong direct criticism and humorous parody. This differentiation of strategies is far from an exact science and it should become clear that those instances of rejection also suggest some element of continuity, while continuity is only ever achieved through an implicit or explicit rejection of the traditional Brahmanical interpretation of the belief or practice in question. The following analysis is based on my own reading of the following texts in translation, except where I refer to other scholars. I will refer to the texts using the following abbreviations.

*Abbreviations of Pāli Texts*

A	<i>Anguttara Nikaya</i>
D	<i>Digha Nikaya</i>
M	<i>Majjhima Nikaya</i>
S	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
Sn	<i>Sutta Nipata</i>

#### ***5.4. Discontinuity and rejection: Brahmanism and the Vedas***

The many narratives in the Sutta Piṭaka featuring the Buddha in dialogue with Brahmins tend to follow a set formula, which serves the purpose of establishing the unparalleled authority of the Buddha by placing the affirmation of this in the mouths of Brahmins, the recognised spiritual authorities of the day. The basic narrative form begins with one or more Brahmins going to seek the advice of the Buddha, whose reputation for greatness had preceded him e.g. (*Sonadanda Sutta*, D 4:2). Following a number of leading questions from the Buddha, they acknowledge the various failings of the Brahminhood and the beauty of the dharma as taught by the Buddha. The narrative ends with the Brahmins taking the three refuges (although not always becoming monks) and rejoicing in the

superior teachings of the Buddha. This method of bolstering the Buddha's standing relies on the accepted authority of the Brahmins, although the same narratives also undermine the Brahmins on multiple levels. Given that there are such strong commonalities across the dialogues with the Brahmins, I have opted to discuss them thematically rather than focusing on one sutta at a time. In the discussion that follows I will demonstrate how the Brahmins' authority is undermined with regard to their claims to (1.) privileged birth and (2.) possession of authoritative scriptures. A third element (3.) of personal slander against the character, integrity and competence of the Brahmins is often added to this. This very negative picture will then be balanced to some extent by a discussion of those elements of continuity with Brahmanical religion in section 5.5.

#### 5.4.1 The rejection of the Brahmin claim to privilege of birth

The historical context of the Pāli-Canon was one in which Brahmanism was the dominant religion, and where, in accordance with the *Puruṣa* myth of the origins of the universe in the Ṛg Veda, society was divided into four *varnas* or castes with the Brahmins residing at the top. The Brahmins, according to their self understanding, were born of the mouth of the *Puruṣa*, the cosmic man (Rg Veda 10:90 verse 12, in: Griffith 1892: 291), giving them alone the authority to interpret the divine word (the Vedas) and to teach the *dharma* (c.f. *Manusmṛti* X, 1). The pure lineage of the Brahmins is denied in the *Digha Nikaya* (*Ambattha Sutta*, D 3:16f), and in the *Madhura Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* scorn is heaped upon the supposed Brahmin claim to be “own sons of Brahmā, born from his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs to Brahmā” (M 84:4ff), presumably a reference to the *Puruṣa* myth.<sup>54</sup> Brahmins, we are told, are born of women like everyone else and have no superior spiritual status by virtue of their birth (*Assalayana Sutta*, M 93:5). However, rather than completely reject the teaching, the Buddha explains in the *Agganna Sutta* that the true meaning of “The Body of Brahmā” is the *Tathāgata* (the Buddha) as the ‘The Body of Dhamma’ (D 27:9), and the arahants are “born from his mouth, Dhamma born, Dhamma created, an heir to the Dhamma” (S 16:11; Masefield 1986: 156). In support of this view, many suttas state that what is decisive in making a Brahmin is not birth, but character and performance, and it is claimed that it is the Buddhist arahants who are the true Brahmins, as will be discussed later. A less prominent, and indeed contradictory, strategy of undermining the Brahmin claims to authority is found

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<sup>54</sup> *Brahmān* is identified as the interior life-principle of the *puruṣa* in some vedic texts. See Atharva-Veda 1:2



in the accounts in the Pāli-Canon's which insist on the purity of the kṣatriya lineage in contrast to that of the Brahmins, and the placing of the kṣatriya class first in the hierarchical listing of the classes (*Ambattha Sutta*, D 3:26).

#### **5.4.2 The rejection of the Brahmin claim to authoritative scriptures: the Vedas**

The Buddha was clear that his teachings did not come from the Vedas and nor were they received in the manner of the Vedas, but had been perceived by him as a result of his own efforts. In what tradition considers to be his first sermon, where he expounds the Four Noble Truths, he says:

That this was the noble truth concerning sorrow, was not, O Bhikkus, among the doctrines handed down [i.e. the Vedas], but there arose within me the eye (to perceive it), there arose the knowledge (of its nature), there arose the understanding (of its cause), there arose wisdom (to guide in the path of tranquillity), there arose the (light to dispel darkness from it)” (Rhys Davids 1969: 150. Square brackets his.)

This passage is repeated twelve times in order to emphasize the discontinuity of the Buddha dharma with the Vedas (Coward 2000: 140). Going beyond mere discontinuity, in other suttas the status of the Vedas is directly attacked on a number of levels, the cumulative effect of which emphasises their complete worthlessness. On the level of practice, the effectiveness of repeating and chanting Vedic verses for spiritual progress is denied. In the Buddha's words:

though you can say: ‘I, and my teacher, know by heart these verses’, that you should on that account be Ṛṣi, or have attained the state of a Ṛṣi – such a condition does not exist! (D 3:2.8)

Likewise, in the famous *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha rejects the authority of the Brahmins resting in the Vedas, saying ‘Do not be misled by report or tradition or hearsay... [or] by proficiency in the collections...’ (A 3: 65.3). Furthermore, the efficacy of a number of Vedic rituals is denied (*Vatthapama Sutta*, M 7), the sacrifice of animals meeting with particular censure (*Kutadanta Sutta*, D 5; *Brahmanadhammika Sutta*, Sn 284-315). On the level of belief, the Brahmins are chastised for accepting the Vedas as the only repositories

of truth because of faith and the supposed authenticity of their oral transmission. The Buddha tells the Brahmins:

Now something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow and false...Again, something may be fully approved of, well transmitted, well cogitated, well reflected on, yet it may be empty, hollow and false...under these conditions: it is not proper for a wise man who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: ‘only this is true, anything else is wrong’ (*Canki Sutta*, M 95:14).

In the end, the inefficacy of Vedic practice and belief is shown to be inevitable, as the Brahmin claims to have access to the truth are revealed to be ‘groundless’ (M 95:13) and the origins of the Vedas are ridiculed. In the *Tevijja* sutta, the claim of the Brahmins to be able to point to the ‘direct path to union with Brahṃā’ is undermined by presenting the Buddha’s Brahmin questioners as admitting that none of their Brahmin teachers, nor their teachers’ teachers, nor any of their ancestors back seven generations, have “seen Brahṃā face to face” (D 13:12) The Buddha explains:

Just as a file of blind men go on, clinging to each other, and the first one sees nothing, the middle one sees nothing, and the last one sees nothing – so it is with the talk of these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas...[which] turns out to be laughable, mere words, empty and vain (D 13:15 c.f. MN 95:13).

In a very similar narrative we are told that ‘this file of blind men’ goes all the way back to the ‘ancient Brahmin seers’, the original receivers of the Vedas (M 95:12). Given that they are known as Ṛṣis or “seers” on account of their ability to perceive the divine word, it is difficult to think of a more crushing critique than to characterise them as blind.

The *Aggañña Sutta* uses parody and pun to present contemporary Brahminism as a deterioration of the original religious ideal, and the Vedas as the fruit or embodiment of that deterioration (Gombrich 1992: esp 169; Collins 1993: esp 373- 374). We are told that the first Brahmins were ascetics who practised meditation in their forest dwellings and who, according to the original meaning of ‘Brahmin’, “Put Aside Evil and Unwholesome Things” (D 27:22). However, through a pun on the contemporary word for a Vedic scholar *Ajjhāyaka*, it is revealed that those who currently call themselves Brahmins originate from those Brahmins who were unsuccessful in meditation, and so instead composed texts, i.e.

the Vedas (D 27:23; Walshe 1995: note 846, 605). This text provides the foundation for the Buddhist claim that they are the ‘true Brahmins’, suggesting that the Buddhist *arahants* follow that path from which the contemporary Brahmins had strayed, fulfilling the original meaning of ‘Brahmin’ by setting aside evil, and leading an ascetical life of meditation and renunciation. This sentiment is made explicit and repeated frequently elsewhere in the Pāli-Canon, as we shall see later. At the end of the *Tevijja Sutta* we find perhaps the strongest statement against the Vedas in the Pāli-Canon, where the Buddha concludes of the Brahmins learned in the three Vedas: “their threefold knowledge is called the threefold desert, the threefold wilderness, the threefold destruction” (D 13:36). The repeated reference to the ‘threefold’ structure of the Vedas here seems to be aimed at underscoring the *complete* emptiness of the Vedas – that they are devoid of spiritual knowledge and that their content is not only dangerous in parts but dangerous in its entirety. This sentiment is repeated in the post-canonical *Milindapañha* which states “Empty, indeed, are these Vedas, like chaff. There is in them neither reality, nor worth, nor truth” (*Milindapañha* I, 18, trans in Klostermaier 1999: 75).

### 5.4.3 Personal slander against the Brahmins

The Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas are accused of hypocrisy in failing to live up to their teachings, and of being guilty of pride, greed and every kind of excess (*Brahmanadhammika Sutta*, Sn 284-306). Not only do they fail to meet the standards they set for themselves, but we are told that these qualities are more readily found in dogs than they are in Brahmins (*Kalama Sutta*, A 3:221). The *Tevijja sutta* relates that they “persistently neglect what a Brahmin should do”, that they “are enslaved by the... five strands of sense-desire” and know “no way out” (D 13:28). The ultimate spiritual goal of Brahmins is presented as union with Brahmā, the personal god. Yet we are told that while the Brahmins recognise Brahmā to be “unencumbered” with wives or wealth, without hate, without ill-will, pure and disciplined, they are themselves encumbered with both wives and wealth, are full of hate and ill-will, are impure and undisciplined (D 13:31-32). In the end, the two Brahmins seeking the Buddha's advice are obliged to admit that there is nothing in common between “these encumbered Brahmins and the unencumbered Brahmā”. (D 13:33). In this way the Brahmins are presented as being incapable of advancing towards the spiritual goal which they themselves proclaim.

The Pāli-Canon's presentation of the Brahmins has strong implications for its view of the Vedas, as the authority of the Brahmanical scriptures and priesthood are, as has been stated, inextricably linked. Any rejection or criticism of one would necessarily implicate the other, at least in part (c.f. Gombrich 1988: 34). This link is evident in the Pāli-Canon which, displaying its preoccupation with the issue of spiritual authority, refers often to the Brahmin claim that only they have access to spiritual insight whilst confirming Vedic erudition as the distinguishing feature of the Brahmins (Tsuchida 1991: 65). Therefore, when in the Pāli-Canon we find polemical diatribes against the Brahmins, this suggests, by implication, the low worth of the Vedas. Conversely, positive statements about the Brahmins should not be construed as affirming the Vedas in some way, for as we shall see, these Pāli-Canonical discourses re-interpret what constitutes a true Brahmin to the complete exclusion of the Vedas.

### ***5.5 Continuity with Brahmanical religion in the Pāli-Canon***

Klaus Klostermaier has suggested that the Pāli-Canon “leaves the impression that the Buddhists considered their path as essentially the same as that for which the Brahmanical tradition had been searching” (Klostermaier 1979: 61). As has been made clear however, the Pāli-Canon makes the point that Brahmins had largely failed in this search; they neither understood nor could they adequately express this path. The Vedas which the Brahmins held to be a repository of divine truth, illuminating the dharma, were dismissed as empty and dangerous. However, the Buddhist relationship with Brahmanical tradition was not merely one of rejection. The Buddha saw himself as an interpreter of the *sanātana dharma* not as its destroyer (S 8,5,7), and saw himself as preaching ancient teachings, not as initiating new ones. The very fact that the Buddhist path was defined in relation to the Brahmanical tradition – as that path for which the Brahmins had been searching – reveals a degree of continuity. Nevertheless, as Kiblinger has argued, such continuity is marked by either subordination of the particular belief within the schema, or by the reinterpretation and application of new meaning to that belief or teaching. Examples of those strategies will now be explored in turn before we move to consider how this legacy will impact on current and future Buddhist engagement in interreligious hermeneutics.

### 5.4.1 Continuity through subordination

According to the legend of the life of the Buddha, it was a Brahmin who identified that the baby Siddharta Gautama would become either a Buddha or a Cakravatin. This prediction was made based on the presence of the physical thirty-two marks of a great man, on his body. Although I have found no evidence of the thirty two marks in Hindu sources, they are presented in the Pāli Canon as a recurring feature of the Buddha's commonality with Brahmins of high repute (*Brahmayu Sutta*, M 91; *Lakkhana Sutta*, D 30), the tradition of which the Brahmin Bramāyu, 'a master in the three Vedas', says 'have been handed down in our hymns [i.e. the Vedas]' (M 91:2-5). The Buddha is carefully shown to possess all thirty-two marks, but this supposedly Brahmin notion of a Great Man is ultimately surpassed, as these physical marks are trumped by an account of the innumerable ethical qualities of the Buddha (M 91:22; c.f. S 2:164-177). The impression given is that the Brahmin notion of a great man is superficial relative to the greatness of the Buddha, as though the thirty-two marks were understood by Brahmins to be purely physical marks and not signs of inner qualities. This presentation of Brahmanical religion as superficial supports the presentation of the Buddha as being in possession of the only proper understanding of their beliefs.

#### ***Buddhist adoption of 'Vedic' gods***

The Pāli-Canon features many gods which are also to be found in the Vedas. As Seyfort Rugg has argued, this may well be due to a common substratum rather than the adoption of specifically Vedic gods. However, the Pāli-Canon seeks to refute the position given to these gods in Brahmanical religion, presenting them as having no soteriological significance and being themselves in need of the saving knowledge taught by the Buddha (DN 20). The Brahmanical practice of appealing to the gods for a heavenly rebirth after death is said to be as futile as praying that a rock would emerge from a deep pond into which it had sunk (S 42:6; Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 148). Furthermore, the belief in the power of creator-god to affect our experiences is met with sharp disapproval, because it would entail a denial of human freedom and responsibility and thus undermine any motivation to strive for liberation (A 3:61; Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 148).

According to the Pāli-Canonical cosmology, the Vedic god Brahmā is not unique but there are said to exist entire heavenly realms of Brahmās. Nevertheless, the Brāhma of Vedic

fame (designated Brāhma Sahampati) still receives special attention. He is presented in two different ways, both of which maintain his existence but in a markedly subordinated role. As Greg Bailey explains of Brahmā: “either he is bitterly attacked or he is portrayed as a zealous devotee of the Buddha” (Bailey 1983: 14). In the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka we are told that Brahmā Sahampati “bowed down before the Blessed One” soon after the Buddha had achieved enlightenment, imploring him three times to teach his doctrine before the Buddha finally agreed (*Vin* I, 5, 12). Without the Buddha’s doctrine, Brahmā Sahampati says, people will be unable to attain salvation, as the Dhamma which has been manifested in the country has been contaminated, made impure by men (i.e. by the Brahmins who are charged with maintaining it). A later Pāli text (included in the Pāli-Canon in Burma but otherwise considered extra-canonical) gives us a clue as to why the Buddha is said to have taught the Dhamma at the request of Brahmā:

At that time all these people – ascetics and wanderers, recluses and Brahmāns – were worshippers of Brahmā and they took Brahmā as their mainstay. Therefore at the thought that the world with the devas will bow down (to Dhamma), they feel confidence and faith in it because that one who is so powerful, famed, well known, renowned, high and lofty bows down to it – it is for this reason, sire, that Tathagatas teach the Dhamma at the request of Brahmās (*Milinda Panho*, I. B. Horner trans.: 1969:, vol. 2, 36-37, cited in Bailey 1983: 17).

This text offers clear support for the case that Brahmanical religion was called on to authenticate the Buddha’s teachings and at the same time to demonstrate their superiority.

### ***Union with Brahmā***

As we have seen the Buddha, in the *Tevijja sutta* and elsewhere, declares the Brahmin claims to have access to the truth to be empty (D 13:15). However, he does not explicitly deny the legitimacy of the supposed spiritual goal of the Brahmins – that of union or fellowship with Brahmā (*brahma-sahavyatā*; Walshe 1995: 43).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the Buddha appears to share an understanding with the Brahmins of Brahmā as “unencumbered, without hate, without ill-will, pure, disciplined” (D 13:31-32). The Buddha tells the Brahmins, “I know Brahmā and the world of Brahmā, and the way to the world of Brahmā, and the path of practice whereby the world of Brahmā may be gained” (D 13:38). The

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<sup>55</sup> Some have accused T. W. Rhys Davids of mistranslating *sahavyatā* as union in this context as this suggests mystical union, but Maurice Walshe believes both meanings to be possible.

Buddha proceeds to give the standard Pāli-Canonical account of how someone, on hearing the teachings of the Buddha, renounces household life and keeps all the rules of conduct and morality. Then through meditation and “liberation of the heart through loving kindness... through compassion... through sympathetic joy... through equanimity, he leaves nothing untouched in the sensuous sphere” (D 13:75-79 c.f. *Canki Sutta*, M 95: 21-35). By this path, known in other texts as the *brahma-vihāra* (divine abidings), it is possible that “an unencumbered monk, after death, at the breaking up of the body, should attain to union with the unencumbered Brahmā” (D 13: 81). The text strongly suggests that union with Brahmā is only attainable by following the teachings of the Buddha. What is not clear, however, is just what the Pāli-Canon means by ‘union with Brahmā’ in this context.

Gombrich sees it as an example of new application rather than subordination, stating that the Buddha's seeming acceptance of the Brahmins' spiritual goal is merely a rhetorical tactic employed by the Buddha, an example of ‘skill in means’ (Gombrich 2006: 17). He argues that the *Tevijja Sutta* borrows the Vedāntic language of ‘joining Brahmā at death’, employing it as a direct “metaphor for the nirvana which follows the death of an *arahant*” (Gombrich 2006: 61). The text, says Gombrich, clearly describes kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity as *ceto-vimutti* meaning “release of the mind” which, based on its usage in other early texts, is “simply a term for enlightenment” (Gombrich 2006: 60). He concludes that “to deny that here the Buddha is saying that infinite kindness, compassion, etc. bring Enlightenment is to do violence to the text” (Gombrich 2006: 61). Gombrich is well aware that Theravadin tradition has denied precisely this, insisting on the necessity of *paññā* (insight/ wisdom) for the achievement of enlightenment. Bhikku Bodhi has criticised Gombrich for dismissing too easily the many texts in the Pāli-Canon where “the Buddha declares the divine abodes to be inadequate for attaining Nibbāna” (e.g. *Mahasudassana Sutta*, D 17; *Makhadeva Sutta*, M 83; *Dhananjani Sutta*, M 97, etc.; Bhikku Bodhi 1997). Gombrich attributes this stance to the compilers of other *suttas* (Gombrich 2006: 61).

However, while it is certainly possible that different *suttas* could contain different teachings on the same matter it does not seem likely in this case. The *Tevijja Sutta* itself refers the Brahmās as residing in “this world” – along with the world’s “devas, māras...its princes and people” (D 13:75). Accordingly, union with the deity Brahmā would not entail escape from *samsāra*. While supporting Gombrich's approach to the Pāli-Canon which does not assume a univocal meaning throughout, and with the caveat that his theory

requires closer scrutiny by scholars who are not reliant on translations, it does seem more likely that the *Tevijja Sutta* aimed to subordinate the Brahmin goal of ‘union with Brahmā’ within the Buddhist schema, rather than using it as a metaphor for enlightenment. It is certainly this interpretation which, as Gombrich acknowledges, the compilers of other suttas in the Pāli-Canon and later commentators went with, assuming that the ‘kind monk’ to whom the Buddha refers in the *Tevijja Sutta* would be “reborn at a specific level in the universe, that inhabited by Brahmās” (Gombrich 2006: 62). As Makransky notes in relation to this sutta, “the Buddha’s interlocutors are moved to adopt practices taught by the Buddha as the very way to fulfil their own traditions’ deepest intent for virtue, salvific truth, and freedom” (2003: 344). While this traditional interpretation ascribed value, albeit of an inferior nature, to the ‘Brahmin goal’, Gombrich’s interpretation implies an exclusivistic replacement theology. Even so, it may well be the case that overall the Pāli-Canon’s utilisation of apparently Brahmin concepts includes both inclusivistic and exclusivistic approaches.

Pertinent to Buddhist-Hindu relations is the reality that the supposed Brahmin goal of ‘union with Brahmā’ no longer corresponds with Hindu belief, and in fact may be an inaccurate representation of Brahmānical religion at any stage. Although the Vedas contain the aspiration of going to the world of the gods, this is not expressed in reference to Brahmā who plays a minor role in relation to other Vedic gods (Bailey 1983: 14). Neither does ‘union with Brahmā’ chime with Upaniṣadic beliefs, as in the pre-Buddhist Upaniṣad, the *Chāndogya*, the deities are, as in the Pāli-Canon, presented as being as much in need of saving knowledge as people (*Chāndogya*, 8, 7f in: Müller 1879: 145, cited in Coomaraswamy 1916: 201). It is possible that the authors of the Pāli-Canon misunderstood the stated spiritual goal of the Upaniṣads – of experiencing the unity of the neuter *Brahmān* with the divine reality present in every one and every thing known as the *ātman*, presenting it instead as union/ fellowship with the masculine Brahmā. Alternatively, K. R. Norman has suggested that the Buddha understood that the Brahmins were referring to neuter *Brahman*, the all encompassing reality described in the Upaniṣads,<sup>56</sup> but jokingly interpreted this to mean union with the creator god Brahmā (Norman 2006: 28). Conversely, Gombrich has argued that the Pāli-Canon, in its references to ‘union with Brahmā’, was responding to a genuine, though ‘less sophisticated’ Brahmin spiritual goal of residing with the god Brahmā in the highest heaven (Gombrich 2006: 58-9). The lack of

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<sup>56</sup> The word *Brahma* in an uncompound neuter form does not seem to appear in the Pāli-Canon (Norman 2006: 28). However, the authors of the Pāli-Canon appear to have been partially aware of the Upaniṣadic belief in the unity of Brahmān-atman, evident in the denunciation of the view that “I and the world are One” as a completely foolish teaching (M 22) but this criticism is not explicitly directed at the Brahmins.



evidence regarding the beliefs of the Buddha's contemporaries suggests that Hindu scholar Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy overstates his case when he says that regarding the stated goal of union with Brahmā, the Buddha either "spoke without knowledge" or was "guilty of deliberate dishonesty" (Coomaraswamy 1916: 205). Even so, it is clear that the knowledge displayed by the Pāli-Canon is both incomplete and unsophisticated, and that its discourses on 'union with Brahmā' should not be considered as reliable evidence of early Hindu beliefs.

### ***R̥ṣis of old***

In contrast to the *suttas* referred to earlier, where the *r̥ṣis* (Vedic seers) are characterised as blind failures in meditation, the *r̥ṣis* are in other places revered, and their exemplary lifestyle is contrasted with the ill behaviour of contemporary Brahmins. This fits well with the Buddha's claim that he was simply re-instituting an ancient teaching from which the Brahmins had long since strayed (*Lohicca Sutta*, S 35:132; Masfield 1986: 154). In line with traditional Buddhist thought, Buddhist scholar Joshi insists that the Buddha re-instituted teachings of his enlightened predecessors, in continuity with "the ancient religious tradition of non-Aryan and non-Vedic *munis* and *sramanas*" and not that of the Brahmins (Joshi 1983: 47). However there are various passages where the Buddha speaks positively about an "ancient tradition" which the Brahmins have "forgotten" (D 27:4). In the *Sutta Nipāta*, the greed and craving of the Buddha's Brahmin contemporaries is contrasted with the "Rishis of old, austere, restrained-of-self, quit of five pleasures" (Sn 284-306; Masfield 1986: 152-153). Moreover, in keeping with traditional Brahmanical language, we are told that "Brahmān was the hidden treasure that they guarded" (Sn 284-306; Masfield 1986: 152-153). According to Gombrich, this seemingly positive assessment of the "Rishis of old" is just a "guise" (Gombrich 2009: 192). The opposite view is expressed by Peter Masfield who has suggested that this presentation of the "R̥ṣi of few wants" is an old Vedic ideal which Brahmins could surely recognise and identify with, and one which the Buddha clearly approved of. In fact, he approved of it so much that he proclaimed his arahants to be the "true Brahmins" (*Kassapa Sihanada Sutta*, D 8:15; c.f. Masfield 1986: 154). I am not fully persuaded by either case and think that a middle view is more likely. This presentation of the "Rishis of old" does indeed correspond with many of the Buddha's ideals, and so it seems unlikely that the Buddha was being less than genuine in expressing some agreement. Yet it must be noted, within this positive presentation of the *R̥ṣis*, that it is only their mendicant, ascetic lifestyle and

morals that are praised. No mention is made of their spiritual insight, which in other places is flatly denied, as we have seen.

### 5.5.2 Continuity through New Application

#### ***Brahmanical ritual and sacrifice***

We have seen that the Buddha rejected the efficacy of the Vedic rituals and sacrifices, but, as James Egge has shown, the Brahmanical sacrificial discourse was employed, reinterpreted and given a new application in the Pāli Canon. One example of this sees the application of Vedic ritual discourse to Buddhist almsgiving to create a “distinctively Buddhist sacrificial discourse” (Egge 2002: 15). Egge explains how certain suttas present *dāna*, or giving to monastics, as a kind of sacrifice (*yañña*) in order to attribute meaning to it and to show how it produces meritorious effects (Egge 2002: 15, 19). The motivation behind this move was, Egge says, at least in part the fact that the first generation of Buddhists and potential converts would have found the sacrificial discourse “both intelligible and persuasive”, as Brahmanism was the most prestigious religious tradition in north India at the time (Egge 2002: 32). Presenting almsgiving as sacrifice did not involve the radical re-interpretation that appears necessary at first glance. Egge has shown how the Brahmanical texts themselves equate sacrifice with *dakṣiṇā*, the gift, often of food, given to the officiating priests (Egge 2002: 18). As the Pāli-Canon claims the Buddhist *arahant* to be the true Brahmin, it is not hard to see how this notion of *dakṣiṇā* could be re-applied to the act of providing the Buddhist *arahant* with alms. Sometimes, as in this case, beliefs and practices are reinterpreted in such a way that reflects relatively positively on the original brahmanical meaning of the term as with this example. At other times however, the re-interpretation reflects negatively on the Brahmanical belief. Sue Hamilton has described how the three sacrificial fires of the Brahmin householder, which for the a Brahmin symbolises his “very identity and continuity throughout his entire life”, are reinterpreted by the Buddha as representing the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion and indicating instead the continuity of suffering (*dukkha*) (Hamilton 2000: 100-101).

#### ***The true Brahmin***

As we have heard, a number of the suttas declare that it is the Buddhist *arahant* who is the true Brahmin. The Buddhist re-interpretation of what makes a true Brahmin involved

emphasising and enhancing the ethical elements of the role which already constituted part of the Brahmanical self understanding, whilst disconnecting it from *varṇa* (caste) and the Vedas. At the beginning of the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the Buddha, having just achieved enlightenment, repeatedly refers to himself as a Brahmin (Vin I, 2) despite having been born a *kṣatriya*. According to Coomaraswamy, the drawing of a distinction between a true Brahmin and a Brahmin merely by birth was nothing new in the Buddha's time (Coomaraswamy 1943: 45). Even so, the Pāli-Canon's presentation of what constitutes a true Brahmin involved a radical re-interpretation and break with Brahmanical tradition. As has been stated, the traditional self-understanding of the Brahmins was that their status was rooted in their connection with the Vedas. The Pāli-Canon, however, reforms the notion of a true Brahmin to the complete exclusion of the Vedas. As part of the claim that it is the *arahant* who is the true Brahmin, the Brahmin designation of *Tevijja*, 'three knowledges', is appropriated and the three knowledges of the Vedas are replaced with the knowledge of:

previous births...the prior births and deaths of beings, (seeing) heaven and hell, and ....terminating birth and death by attaining Arhantship, by these three acts he is a Brahmān who knows the three Vijjā. Him I call a Brahmān who knows the three Vijjā, and not one who simply goes by that name (*Tikanna Sutta*, A 3:58).

I concur with Gombrich that, "there is no reason why this particular set of attainments...should be called 'three knowledges' if they were not intended to parallel and trump the 'three knowledges' of the Brahmins" (Gombrich 2006: 29). This point is underscored at the end of the sutta when the Buddha's Brahmin questioner, jokingly named 'Three Ears' (*Tikañña*) (Gombrich 2006: 30), admits that the one with the traditional three-fold lore "is not worth one sixteenth part" of him who has the three-fold knowledge as outlined by the Buddha (*Tikanna Sutta*, A 3:58).

The *Sonadanda Sutta* makes it even more apparent that the Buddha's reinterpretation of what characterises the 'true Brahmin' accords no place to the Vedas. The Buddha asks the Brahmin Sonadanda what, from his expert Vedic knowledge, are the qualities that make a true Brahmin (D 4:11). The Buddha then teaches that, contrary to Brahmanical belief, being a scholar of the Vedas is not a necessary requirement of the true Brahmin. Immediately Sonadanda agrees with the Buddha, saying "we could leave out the mantras, for what do they matter?" (D 4:15). Neither is it necessary, we are told, to be well born and of pure descent or to be handsome, as the Brahmins say. The Buddha's explanation of the true Brahmin retains from Brahmanical tradition the qualities of virtue and wisdom (D

4:13), yet the Brahmins are presented as being unable to explain these qualities, here illustrated by Sonadanda's feeble admission: “we only know this much Gotama”. Virtue and wisdom are then ably explained by the Buddha as relating directly to his elucidation of the *dharma*, and so we are led to the conclusion that the true Brahmin is the one who is a follower of the teachings of the Buddha. In Sonadanda's weak representation of Brahmanical religion we see a strong case supporting Coomaraswamy's contention that either the Buddha was only acquainted with popular Brahmanism, or he chose to ignore its higher aspects (Tsuchida 1991: 66).<sup>57</sup> Sonadanda is, Coomaraswamy argues, a “mere puppet” and, as he says, in none of the narratives does the Buddha encounter “a capable exponent of the highest Vedantic idealism”. His opponents are defeated all too easily and so, Coomaraswamy states, “the greater part of Buddhist polemic is unavoidably occupied in beating the air” (Coomaraswamy 1916: 200). What emerges is a strong example of what interreligious hermeneutics have warned against – of understanding the other as a “negative other” against which one's own identity is bolstered (see Tracy 2010).

### ***5.6 What was the motivation for exhibiting continuity with Brahmanism?***

Although Brahmanism is undermined through the weakness of the supposedly great Brahmin Sonadanda, his story does not make clear that being a ‘true Brahmin’ need involve a rejection of Brahmanism. In some cases in the narratives of the *Sutta-piṭaka*, Brahmins appear to return to their former lives and duties even after taking the three refuges, and Sonadanda does so without any objection from the Buddha (D 4:26; c.f. Tsuchida 1991: 76; Makranksy 2003: 341). According to Klostermaier, “Brahmins in great numbers saw in Buddha's teaching an exposition of their own tradition and becoming a Buddhist probably did not mean a change of religion in the dogmatic or the sociological sense” (Klostermaier 1979: 61). Similarly, Ryūtarō Tsuchida, who has conducted a detailed study of narratives in the Pāli-Canon where Brahmins figure prominently, has argued that modern scholars need to review their supposition that Buddhism was, in its inception, an anti-Brahmanical religion. He suggests that the relationship between the Buddha and the Brahmins was one of competition but not complete revolt. There is respect for the Brahmins evident in the way the Buddha is shown to have much in common with the Brahmins of high standing (Tsuchida 1991: 64), yet he trumps their status with his

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<sup>57</sup> Tsuchida supports the idea that the authors of Pāli-Canon probably had no inside information about Brahmanism.

enlightened state. Tsuchida is right to point out that, if the Brahmins were deemed to be without authority or qualities at all, then their recognition of the superiority of the Buddha would have much less of an impact. Bailey and Mabbett have supported this view referring to the “rejection and attraction the Buddha felt towards the Brahmins and their social success” (Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 123). Similarly James Egge has referred to the Buddhist adoption of Vedic sacrificial language as well as non-sacrificial Vedic expressions such as *brāhmaṇa* and *tevijja* as evidence of the ‘power and prestige’ of Vedic tradition for early Buddhists (Egge 2002: 32-33). One could speculate that the Buddha’s ‘true’ attitude towards the Brahmins is recorded in the measured verse of the *Dīgha Nikāya* below, while the polemical discourse discussed above emerges from the rivalries that naturally occur when a group seeks to establish its authority in a sceptical if not hostile environment:

there are some ascetics and Brahmins who are wise, skilled, practised in  
disputation, splitters of hairs, acute, who walk cleverly along the paths of  
views. Sometimes their views accord with mine, sometimes they do not  
(*Kassapa Sinanada Sutta*, D 8:4).

Indeed, had the early Buddhists not recognised any positive elements in Brahminical religion, it seems unlikely that they would have identified themselves with it by claiming to be the ‘true Brahmins’. With Tsuchida I would argue that the early Buddhists were largely not concerned with the complete rejection of the Brahminical tradition, but rather ensured that the tradition was given a distinctly lower position in the hierarchy of spiritual teaching. Without the Buddha’s *dharma*, the Brahminical tradition would amount to nothing, but it had at least been pointing in the right direction.

Tsuchida's reconsideration of the Buddha's relationship with the Brahmins does not, however, produce positive results for the Pāli-Canon's presentation of the Vedas. In Tsuchida's division between ascetic (*jatila*) Brahmins and those who were wealthy Vedic masters (Tsuchida 1991: 53), it is clear that it is those Brahmins learned in the Vedas who bear the brunt of the criticism while “mutual respect and a peaceful atmosphere prevail” in certain key dialogues between the Buddha and the *jatila*-Brahmin (Tsuchida 1991: 86). The most positive sentiment towards the Vedas that can be found is that most of the Brahmins learned in the Vedas whom the Buddha encounters do not become monks, but are given tacit consent to the continuation of their lifestyle, which would presumably include Vedic learning (Tsuchida 1991: 90-91). While this may diminish the claim of the *Tevijja Sutta*

that the Vedas are dangerous, there is no suggestion that the Vedas contain any worth whatsoever in aiding a person to advance spiritually. The Vedas seem to be considered as at best innocuous by the authors of the Pāli Canon. For Hindus the rejection of the Vedas was seen to be the defining feature of the Buddhist teachings, which caused the Buddha to be viewed as an avatar of Viṣṇu who, appearing gentle, calm and sweet, destroyed the enemies the Vaiṣṇavas by luring them into false beliefs that would lead to the abandonment of the Vedas (*Viṣṇupurāṇa* III, 18, 15-21, cited in Klostermaier 1979: 65).

Unlike Gombrich, who by and large interprets the Buddhist use of Brahmanical terminology as a clever utilisation of language familiar to the people of the time (an example of ‘skill in means’) Peter Masefield suggests that, in claiming to be the true Brahmins, the Buddhists were “adopting, and adapting” not merely the language but the “institution” of Brahmanism (Masefield 1986: 161). However, as we have seen, the Buddhist reformulation of the concept of a Brahmin to the exclusion of the Vedas amounts to much more than adaptation. Masefield dedicated a chapter to the Pāli-Canonical claim that the Buddhist *arahant* is the ‘true brahmin’ in his *Divine Revelation in Pāli Buddhism* (1986). Although he provides a well-researched synopsis of the material, his analysis is, I think, somewhat imbalanced, emanating from his rather isolated view that the Buddha originally taught a religion of grace rather than of self-improvement. This view causes him to see Buddhism as much more closely related to Brahmanism than is generally held by western scholars, arguing that “if the Buddhists were reformists or innovators this was only in the sense that they advocated a return to what they saw as the former conservatism of Vedic India” (Masefield 1986: xix). I find it much more likely that the motivation behind the anti-Brahmanical polemic lay in the need of the early Buddhists to disassociate spiritual authority from *varṇa* and the Vedas. As we have heard, the historical context of the Pāli-Canon was one in which Brahmanism was the dominant religion, and where, in accordance with the *Puruṣa* myth of the origins of the universe in the Ṛig Veda, society was divided into four *varnas* or castes or classes: with the Brahmins residing at the top. The Brahmins, according to their self-understanding, were born of the mouth of the *Puruṣa*, the cosmic man (Rg Veda 10:90 verse 12, in Griffith 1892: 291), giving them alone the authority to interpret the divine word (the Vedas) and to teach the *dharma* (c.f. *Manusmṛti* X, 1). The Buddha, however, was not a Brahmin but a member of the *kṣatriya* or warrior class. As such he would not have been authorised to teach the *dharma*, and would therefore have been disregarded as a spiritual teacher, by the Brahmins at least (see Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 151). The authors of the Pāli-Canon therefore sought to undermine comprehensively the privileged position of the Brahmins. It might be said,

then, that the polemic against the Brahmins along with the claim to be the true Brahmins emanated, at least in part, from the need to reject the correlation between *varṇa*, Vedas and spiritual authority, so that the Buddha could be recognised as an authoritative spiritual teacher (c.f. Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 151).

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that the Pāli-Canon presents the Buddha and his teachings as being in some degree of continuity with the Brahmanical tradition while at the same time being highly critical of the Brahmins (See Schmidt-Leukel 2008b: 149).<sup>58</sup> The presentation of Brahmanical beliefs and practices is therefore complex. At some points elements are clearly rejected, at others they are accepted yet re-interpreted and subordinated in the Buddhist schema. Some Brahmanical terminology is utilised but given a new application. The claim that only the Buddhist *arahant* is the ‘true Brahmin’ suggests that any value to be found in Brahmanical religion has been included in and indeed surpassed by the superior teachings of the Buddha. There is no suggestion of value lying in that which is *different* from what the Buddha taught. The implication is clear that any value in Brahmanical thought lies only in its interpretation through the teachings of the Buddha. Therefore the example of the Buddha’s dialogues with the Brahmins is directly opposed to the model of interreligious hermeneutics presented by comparative theologians and scriptural reasoners, where value is discovered in that which is truly different.

While many Brahmanical terms and beliefs are appropriated in various ways, the Vedas are deliberately left out of this syncretistic formation of the new religion. They are presented as expendable, worthless and even damaging, an evaluation devastatingly summed up in the Vedic master Sonadanda's feeble acceptance that “We could leave out the mantras, for what do they matter?” (D 4:15). Although Tsuchida (1991) appears to have shown that many Brahmin returned to their previous lifestyles, including the study of the Vedas, after accepting the Buddha’s teaching of the dharma, this does not contain any suggestion that the Vedas are of spiritual worth. The Pāli-Canon attests to many dialogues which took place between the Buddha and the Brahmins of renowned Vedic learning, and yet it is clear that the Vedas are dismissed by the early Buddhists without having sought to understand them, or their significance in Brahmanical religion. For example, it is simply assumed *a*

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<sup>58</sup> As Schmidt-Leukel has noted, it is unclear whether these criticisms are connected or not.

*priori* that the recitation of the Vedas is vacuous. Those concepts which are invested with some value only achieve their position by being re-interpreted within the Buddhist schema. As has been suggested, the frequent reference of the Pāli-Canon to ‘union with Brahmā’ is a likely distortion of the Upanisadic expression of the ultimate unity of *Brahmān* and *ātman*. Furthermore, as Gombrich has shown, the Pāli-Canon presents various parodies of Vedic and Upanisadic myths, highlighting the authors’ interest in undermining Brahmanical ideas rather than engaging with them seriously and representing them accurately. According to the Pāli-Canonical record, the early Buddhists, relying on a superficial knowledge of their rivals’ beliefs, applied a kind of logical *a priori* deduction and concluded that the Brahmins’ claims to authority based on the Vedas were “laughable, mere words, empty and vain” (D 13:15).

Given the Pāli Canon’s status as ‘word of the Buddha’, and the serious political tensions between Buddhists and Hindus in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, there are not many Buddhist thinkers who have reconsidered this presentation of the Brahmins and the Vedas. However, if such hermeneutical effort were deemed worthwhile, there are resources within the Pāli Canon itself, and Buddhist tradition more broadly that can be called on to support hermeneutical openness towards the religious other. John Makransky has, as we saw in Chapter 4, even employed Buddhist resources to argue for an epistemological openness, where Buddhists can learn from religious others *in their otherness* (Makransky 2008a).

We have seen that the same set of problems emerge between Buddhists and Hindus, in the way they view one another’s scriptures, as between members of the Abrahamic religions. If anything the problems are more severe because the Pāli- canon accords no respect to the Vedas, making it much more ‘closed’ by comparison with the Qur’ān’s claim to both confirm and correct the Torah and Gospel. Accordingly much greater hermeneutical effort may be required in order to get Buddhist Hindu interreligious dialogue going along the same sort of lines as scriptural reasoning and theology of religions. Relatively speaking, much greater hermeneutical effort has been put in by scholars working on Abrahamic interreligious dialogue. So far Makransky is by comparison a relatively lone voice. However the tools which he has developed may offer a reasonably good prospect of success.

If more Buddhist scholars were to follow the lead of scholar-practitioners in the West such as Makransky, who are applying historical critical consciousness to Buddhist traditions and



scriptures (Makransky 2000: esp. 127), this would open the door to a reconsideration of the Buddhist view of the Vedas. As we have seen through Makransky's example in the previous chapter, this involves considerable hermeneutical effort in the interpretation of the scriptures and the development of a theology of religions, so that any new approach to the religious other can be justified and coherently related to one's religious framework as an integrated whole. Seyfort Ruegg's notion of symbiosis may also be explored as a rich example of the hermeneutical effort required in the interpretation of these scriptures to support healthy interreligious relationships between Buddhists and Hindus (Seyfort Ruegg 2008, see also Harris 2010).<sup>59</sup> These leads and others must be explored further by practitioners and specialists in the field, for they will need to be deemed acceptable and convincing by Buddhists if they are to have any impact in interreligious relations.

In this chapter we have seen how the scriptures of the New Testament, Qur'ān and, in more detail, the Pali Canon each contain examples of "hermeneutical closedness" towards the religious other. Rather than seeking to understand the other in their own terms we saw that the beliefs of the other are reinterpreted and/or subordinated within the schema of the interpreting tradition. Far from recognising truth in otherness, it is claimed that only the Buddha properly understands that for which the Brahmins are blindly grasping, only Jesus fulfils the promises of the prophets, only the Qur'ān provides the uncorrupted version of God's revelation. Such a legacy means that it will be necessary to engage in hermeneutical effort, perhaps discovering deeper principles of openness within the scriptures in order to provide a theological justification for hermeneutical openness. Still more effort will be required if we seek to be open to finding truth in the other tradition in those places where it differs significantly from our own. It is to such tasks that theology of religions has addressed itself for over fifty years. Let us turn then to the final chapter, where we will reflect again on the typological approaches to religious diversity to consider what kind of theology of religions might best support interreligious hermeneutics.

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<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Harris has found this term fruitful in considering the potential theological benefits of scriptural reasoning.

## Chapter 6: Towards a Soft Pluralism

### *Introduction*

I have been arguing that interreligious hermeneutics needs to be supported by a theology of religions. In this final chapter I will seek to explore what kind of theology of religions might support interreligious hermeneutics of the most adventurous kind. I have suggested that all interreligious hermeneutics is intended to be hermeneutically open – attuned to understand the religious other as they understand themselves. But there are some practitioners like Cornille, Clooney and Makransky who seek also to be epistemologically open. These scholars are open to learning from the religious other even, and perhaps particularly, at those points where the tradition is at greatest variance with their own. I will suggest soft pluralism as the model which is most capable of supporting such openness whilst steering clear of the problems associated with a hard Hickian-style pluralism which makes claims about the equality of traditions from a supposedly supra-traditional perspective. Before doing so I will review the arguments made in the thesis so far so as a reminder of how we have got to this point.

### *6.1 Where we have got to?*

In Chapter 2 I discussed arguments made in favour of leaving aside the abstract theoretical reflections on religious diversity associated with theology of religions. Chief among the criticisms of the theology of religions is that it actually prevents the religious other from being properly understood. If this is the case then theology of religions can be said to thwart the drive for hermeneutical openness, which as we have seen is a basic requirement of any adequate interreligious hermeneutics. In this chapter I will seek to show that it is possible for a theology of religions to promote hermeneutical openness, and that it is essential if the theological gains of interreligious hermeneutics are to be systematically coherent. That is, if interreligious hermeneutics is to contribute to Christian theology, for example, what is learned through the practice will have to be related to Christian doctrines. I will begin by reviewing the main arguments made in the thesis so far, before moving on to consider what kind of theology of religions is most appropriate for interreligious hermeneutics. I will review Cornille and Makransky's position of open inclusivism before

revisiting Hick's pluralist hypothesis and finally proposing a soft pluralism which, I suggest, can support that elusive balance between openness and commitment for which all engaged in interreligious dialogue and hermeneutics must strive.

Theology of religions is said to prevent hermeneutical openness for two main reasons. First it is claimed that subscribing to a particular theology of religions might give one the impression that one knows all one needs to know about religious diversity without ever engaging deeply with religious others and their traditions (Clooney 1993: 187). And second, expressing a theology of religions prior to dialogue will shape our thinking to such an extent that when we are engaged in study or dialogue, we will be incapable of really hearing what the religious other is saying (Barnes 2002). This is because the meta-framework established by our theology of religions leads us to expect, if not overtly seek out, certain "common" traits based on concepts that may not really be shared – such as God, salvation and love. As we heard, these arguments were made by "particularist" thinkers including Joseph DiNoia and George Lindbeck who insist that we must not gloss over the particularity of religious traditions by focusing on what seems to be shared, but begin our encounter with the religious other in full recognition of their irreducible difference. We saw how similar critiques are also evident in the approaches taken by those involved in scriptural reasoning and comparative theology. Such criticisms have prompted clarified explanations of the nature and role of theology of religions often through renewals of the classic typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, a movement to which this thesis makes its own contribution discussed below.

Following the lead of certain scholars who offer broad reflections on the interreligious theological discourse, such as David Cheetham, Catherine Cornille and Michael Barnes, I have considered the practices of comparative theology and scriptural reasoning as forming part of an emerging field known as interreligious hermeneutics. Distinct from the abstract theorizing involved in theology of religions, these scholars are focused on *practice*, delving straight in to study and dialogue with the religious other in a spirit of "hermeneutical openness". Comparative theologians and scriptural reasoners share a resistance to abstract theorizing. Practice comes first, they insist, and the difficult questions which arise from their practice – which they have no wish to deny – can only be worked out on the basis of reflecting on the practice. According to Clooney, the "standard theologies of religions" are "almost always essentially abstract designs, developed without references to any particular religious tradition other than the Christian" (1993: 194). Each position will need to be

“rewritten”, after comparison, “with a far greater commitment to detail and examples” (1993: 194). Similarly we saw that Steven Kepnes presents scriptural reasoning as an alternative to what he sees as the dominant liberal approach in interreligious dialogue, which, fueled by the theology of religions, distorts the religious other in its search for common ground between the religions. Scriptural reasoners Rachel Muers and Mark Higon are typical in their insistence that theory is always subsequent to – and of lesser importance than – the practice of scriptural reasoning (Higon & Muers 2012: 114).

We saw that comparative theologian James Fredericks called for a moratorium on the theology of religions, while scriptural reasoners generally display no interest in the subject. The most common criticisms of theology of religions feature: 1.) A disapproval of the generation of abstract meta-frameworks to describe the relationship between religions; 2.) A resistance to its *a-priori* focus – seeking to make judgements about religious diversity by looking internally at Christian sources; 3.) An objection to the focus on the question of salvation. Later in this chapter I will begin to develop the basic outline of a theology of religions that responds to each of these critiques.

According to comparative theologian David Burrell, interreligious dialogue pertains to meaning and not truth (Burrell 2009: 89-90; 2011: 6). This view corresponds well in some respects with scriptural reasoning which is concerned primarily with gaining a practical understanding of the different traditions’ techniques of reasoning with the scriptures. It is emphatically not about evaluating the truth claims of all the traditions against each other. Instead truth is to be gained by looking more deeply into one’s own tradition, a process which is motivated and supported by both scriptural reasoning and comparative study. However, as we saw, the reality of scriptural reasoning entailed a move beyond the purely practical learning about each other’s “chains of reasoning” (Adams). Rather it is said to often involve a spiritual dimension, described variously as a “liturgical” quality (Ford), an encounter with the divine (Hardy), a recognition of the other tradition as an expression of God’s truth (Kepnes), or even as a crossing of religious boundaries which is “revelatory” (Ochs). While scriptural reasoners tend to see their practice as “truth-seeking” only in the limited sense of “wisdom-seeking” (Ford), most comparative theologians seem to follow Clooney in seeing their practice as “truth-seeking” in the full theological sense of “seeking to know God more fully” (Clooney).

Scriptural reasoners place a high value on the plain sense of scripture in their practice. Though they also engage in creative interpretation which goes beyond the plain sense, they do so only within the confines of an orthodox interpretation of the central beliefs of their tradition. However, the divine presence experienced through the interpretation of scriptures across religious boundaries appears to call traditional beliefs about the unique status of their own scripture as authentic revelation into question. One simply cannot find support for their practice in the “plain sense” of scripture. In chapter 5 we saw how the plain sense of scriptures in fact often suggests a hermeneutically closed model when it comes to the interpretation of the religious other. Truth is to be recognised in the scripture of the other only to the extent that it reflects what is found more perfectly within the home tradition. The four distinctive characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics – of being theologically engaged; hermeneutically open; open to learning from the other; and open to surprise, – reveal it to be an innovative approach and as such theological justification is required if its practice is to be broadly accepted. Therefore interreligious hermeneutics must be supported by significant hermeneutical effort in the interpretation of one's own scripture and tradition. Such hermeneutical effort cannot function in a vacuum but must be fitted within and justified by a coherent overarching theological framework. Therefore, as we have heard Cornille argue, systematic theological reflection and *creativity* is required in order to support the innovative approach represented by interreligious hermeneutics.

## ***6.2 The necessity of theology of religions for interreligious hermeneutics***

If it is true that scriptural reasoning, which intends to be theological in a peripheral sense, should be supported by a theology of religions, the need is all the greater when it comes to the kind of comparative theology practised by Clooney. For Clooney comparative theology is a method for doing the primary task of theology. It must therefore attend to the systematic requirements of theology.

As Cornille has recognised, the greater the openness to truth in difference (what I have called epistemological openness), the more “theological creativity and hermeneutical effort” will be required to find “resources for affirming truth in dialogue.” As we heard in chapter 2, Cornille defines “hermeneutical effort” as involving the creative “reinterpretation of traditional teachings or a mobilization of latent resources hidden within

one's own religious texts and teachings" (2008: 6). This is essential because, as we saw illustrated in Chapter 5, religious traditions do not generally orientate believers towards the recognition of truth in other religions – and, when they do so, this truth is deemed to be present in superior form in the home tradition. For example, as was shown in Chapter 5, the majority of references to the Brahmins and Vedic religion in the Pāli Canon are extremely critical. Though at times the Brahmins are positively acknowledged as pursuing worthy ideals, these ideals can only be properly understood as they are exemplified and taught by the Buddha himself. Furthermore, the Brahmins ideals are regarded as insufficient and must be supplemented by the Buddha's teaching of the dharma which alone is capable of leading one to enlightenment. As Cornille observes most traditions are characterized by an "attitude of self-sufficiency and epistemic security", and this is called into question when, in study and dialogue, insights are discovered in another tradition which have no clear presence in one's own. The questions then must be asked "Is this truth to be regarded as autonomous or as somehow dependent on one's own religion? And how is one to discern the presence of truth in difference?" (Cornille 2008: 197). These questions must be answered through reference to one's own tradition, and it is only if resources supporting truth in difference can be found that dialogue will lead to "genuine change and growth" (Cornille 2008: 197-8). One must find ways for one's own religious tradition to accommodate truth in difference if one is going to be able to integrate such 'surprising' insights gained through interreligious engagement. Theology of religions attends precisely to such a task. As Makransky explains, "a Buddhist comparative theology must be motivated and informed by a theology of religions that convincingly articulates for Buddhists *why* they can learn things from religious others that can make a positive difference for their own understanding and practice of awakening" (Makransky 2011: 119). We will return to the question of what kind of theology of religions can achieve this below.

Theology of religions was introduced in Chapter 1. We heard how it emerged within Christian theological circles but is now often considered to be a multi-religious discourse, concerned, as Schmidt-Leukel has described it, with "the self-understanding of one's own religion in relation to other religions" whatever one's religion might be, and with "the understanding of these other religions in relation to the self-understanding of one's own" (Schmidt-Leukel 2008a: 85). Some scholars, such as Stephen Duffy have distinguished two separate kinds of approach: theology of religions which is *a priori* and comparative theology which is *a posteriori* (Duffy 1999). According to Michael Barnes, "an *a posteriori* approach to the vexed question of religious pluralism is gaining gradual

acceptance in theological circles” (2006: 93). But can theological reflection on religious diversity really be postponed until after an encounter? And how would one decide that one has encountered enough and the theological reflection can begin?

At the end of Chapter 2 I suggested that theology of religions should no longer be regarded as an ‘a-prioristic’ Christian sub-discipline concerned with the eschatological fate of the non-Christian. The most fruitful responses to religious diversity are able to attend to both the demands of one’s own tradition and to the knowledge gained from other traditions. I therefore suggested that theology of religions be viewed as a multi-religious discourse with two inter-related components. First, it is concerned with providing the theological grounding for a particular view on the potential value of religious diversity. This is in recognition that any engagement with other religions will be based on certain presuppositions. Rather than proceeding without self-critical reflection, these presuppositions should be openly explored, tested, refined and supported. As such it involves critical internal reflection on the sources of one’s own tradition and “hermeneutical effort” (Cornille) in their interpretation to support a certain level of openness to the possibility of truth in other traditions, and, perhaps, salvation. I suggested that to the extent that this reflection involves only the study of one’s own sources, it cannot make any concrete claims about other traditions. This study accounts only for what is *possible* relative to one’s religious commitments: i.e. it will consider to what extent is it possible, within a Christian framework, for truth and possibly salvation to be mediated through other religions. Mindful of the concerns raised by particularists and those involved in interreligious hermeneutics, it will not seek “to determine *a priori* the limits of God’s activity” (Moyaert 2012: 44). From such reflection a particular kind of response to religious others will emerge – be it hostility or friendship, mission and apologetics or dialogue and comparative theology, or a combination of these. Second, following engagement with other traditions, or alongside continued engagement, it can involve the evaluation of particular traditions or elements of traditions concerning either one or both of the questions of: a.) whether religious traditions contain important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life; b.) whether that tradition can mediate salvation – meaning the ultimate transcendent goal for human life. As a discipline supporting a particular kind of engagement with religious others it will necessarily be influenced by that engagement and so these two elements will remain in critical correlation with one and other. Each will be open to the influence and correction of the other. This process is evident in the numerous scholars who have adapted their theology of religions as

a result of engaging in interreligious dialogue over many years. D’Costa, for example, shifted from inclusivism to being a “universal access exclusivist” (D’Costa 2009: 41) and Knitter has offered several refinements of his pluralist theology as a direct result of continued dialogue.<sup>60</sup>

In Chapter 2 I offered a reworking of Schmidt-Leukel’s typology so that it would distinguish between the questions of truth and salvation, which, as we have seen, many treat differently. A prominent example is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church which, although recognizing the presence of elements of truth in other religions (*Nostra Aetate*), has made no such recognition of the saving power of other religions. The primary question of the proposed typology is: “*Do other religious traditions contain important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life?*” I suggested that this should be the primary question because its answer will determine how we approach the fundamental challenge facing theologians reflecting on our multi-religious world. This challenge was posed at the beginning of the thesis – Can we, as theologians, learn from religious others? As we have seen it is generally and rightly agreed that we must be hermeneutically open in our encounter with religious others – i.e. determined to understand them first and foremost according to their own self-descriptions. But how we answer the primary question of the renewed typology – of whether other religious traditions contain important truths – will determine the much more controversial question of how *epistemologically open* we are in our encounter. I have defined epistemological openness as the willingness to learn *from* religious others *in* their difference. When considering theologies of religions according to the renewed typology, the question of whether religious traditions can be said to mediate salvation can be contemplated subsequently. In the case of both truth and salvation, I have made clear that agnosticism is a logically distinct and theologically respectable position to hold, adding it as a fourth category to the original typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. When analyzing a particular thinker against the typology, we first ask the question of truth and then we can proceed to ask whether they believe salvation can be mediated by other religions.

Throughout this thesis I have been making the case for the practice of reading the scriptures and religious classics of other religions in a manner that is both truth-seeking and hermeneutically open to be supported by a theology of religions. This is not to suggest

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<sup>60</sup> See Knitter 2009 for a personal account of his attempt to re-interpret central Christian doctrines in light of the truth he discovered in Buddhism.



that comparative theologians and scriptural reasoners should start doing the work of theologians of religions along with everything else they do. Rather I suggest that they make reference to and, ideally, engage creatively with that discourse in order to support their work. As we have observed, the kind of truth that is sought through the practice of interreligious hermeneutics varies. Scriptural reasoner David Ford is seeking wisdom – knowledge in order to engage with scriptures and the world in a way that glorifies God. The practice leads him to connect with God more deeply, but that is primarily because it leads him more deeply into his own scripture and faith as he seeks to answer the questions of his dialogue partners. The knowledge gained through scriptural reasoning is therefore mostly of a practical kind. Nicolas Adams is more explicit about this practical, methodological learning – scriptural reasoning for him is about learning from the others’ chains of reasoning. Experiences of God’s presence at these meetings across religious borders are to be cherished but not overly analysed, and certainly not to be considered a challenge to traditional theologies. Comparative theologians, by contrast, are usually seeking a deeper kind of truth. Clooney’s quest is to “know God more fully.” The goal of comparative theology is, according to Clooney, identical with the goal of all theology and therefore the challenge of the divergent claims of religious traditions cannot be avoided. Clooney, as we saw, would agree, but would add that even when a question is not avoided, it still may not be possible to answer it simply or immediately. Clooney has insisted on not providing a theory to support his presuppositions about the likelihood of finding truth in other religions. And neither will he then engage in evaluation of the insights gained. As he acknowledged, his discovery of the power of Hindu texts has rendered him a “conflicted theologian” who is “neither here nor there...” Clooney has positively embraced this life “on the boundary,” and has pushed the work of evaluation and integration off to some distant future point. While such an in-between state is, I imagine, an inevitable point in a journey such as that which Clooney has embarked on, I suggested that Clooney has travelled so far into the Srī Vaiṣṇava faith, and has been nourished so deeply by it, that the call for integration must surely soon be met (see Drew 2011). Let us now consider the types of theologies of religions which could potentially facilitate such a move to integration.

### ***6.3 Open inclusivism: the best model to support interreligious hermeneutics?***

With the differing kinds of truth sought and discovered through the practices of scriptural reasoning and comparative theology, these scholars will require different theologies of religions to support their work. Is there a model to be preferred? Makransky and Cornille are agreed on the necessity of theology of religions for comparative theology and both have presented an open inclusivism as the ideal theological foundation for this practice. This is because open inclusivism combines a deep commitment to one's own religion – including a belief in its ultimate superiority – with a willingness to be open to discovering truth in other religions, even where those truths cannot be found expressed within one's own faith. It therefore seeks to ensure as much openness towards the religious other as is deemed possible whilst remaining firmly rooted in one's own tradition.

According to Schmidt-Leukel, however, such accommodation of truth in difference does not amount to a genuine appreciation of religious diversity. Schmidt-Leukel does not engage with the particular claims of open inclusivists to have discovered value in what is truly different in another religion. Instead he makes the argument that the inclusivist, like the exclusivist, cannot in principle truly appreciate religious diversity, because, if they wish the best for their neighbour, they should wish that all would convert to the uniquely superior religion – thus ideally doing away with religious diversity all together.

If one is honestly convinced that one's own religion is in an objective sense uniquely true or uniquely superior, and if one honestly wishes one's neighbour only the best, one will inevitably harbour the wish that ideally all people in the world should embrace this uniquely true or uniquely superior religion. In fact it would be immoral to wish that other remain satisfied with having a false or inferior religion, thereby losing or reducing their chance of salvation. But if ideally all people should join the one and only true or superior faith, all other religions would disappear. For someone who is a convinced exclusivist or inclusivist, religious uniformity – a global religious monoculture – will thus quite naturally be the religious ideal. In contrast, a religious pluralist can and does appreciate, within limits, the value of religious diversity. (Schmidt-Leukel 2008a: 102)

Schmidt-Leukel's argument is very persuasive within a Christian paradigm. It bears the sense of urgency prominent amongst missionaries so convinced of the necessity of a personal acceptance of the truth of the Gospel for salvation. The same urgency is also evident in the declaration issued by the Catholic Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, which states that: "If it is true that the followers of other religions

can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation...” (CDF 2000: #22). Quoting the Catechism of the Church, *Dominus Iesus* further states that:

Indeed, God ‘desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim 2:4); that is, God wills the salvation of everyone through the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is found in the truth. Those who obey the promptings of the Spirit of truth are already on the way of salvation. But the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. Because she believes in God’s universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary (CDF 2000: # 22).

If we consider that we have just one lifetime of unknown duration within which to accept the “knowledge of the Truth” that is necessary for salvation, it does seem that the most moral response is to ensure that this option is immediately available to others not fortunate enough to be born within that tradition. However, when we consider things from a Buddhist paradigm where life stretches out in continual rounds of rebirth, we do not find the same moral imperative. As we have heard from Makransky, Mahayana Buddhism in particular has taught the importance of various levels of “conventional truths”. Humans are necessarily at different stages in their spiritual advancement and so different teachings are appropriate depending on the individual’s particular stage. Given that it is readily accepted, even by advanced practitioners like Makransky, that their attainment of Nirvana may take multiple lifetimes, it is clear that on this view lesser expressions of truth will continue to have their relevance and value for as long as human life and the cycle of *samsāra* endures. Makransky need not desire, and in fact does not desire, that all other religions should ideally disappear.

Cornille’s approach does not produce an urgent moral imperative for the conversion of others either. As we heard in Chapter 2, Cornille has called for a “soteriological agnosticism” as an “expression of humility, in so far as one can only state what one has experienced and what one knows, leaving assessment about the salvific status of other religions to divine judgement” (Cornille 2012b: 62). Nevertheless she upholds an inclusivism in relation to the truth of Christianity. She argues that inclusivism is “based on an essentially religious notion of truth as revealed and anterior to or beyond purely personal judgement” (2012b: 68). Despite this, it seems that it is her philosophical or psychological understanding of the way faith functions that is more crucial to her argument

than any appeal to revealed truth. She states that the belief in the superiority of one's own religious truth claims "reflects an *a priori* epistemic confidence which is necessary to bring about total surrender and commitment in followers" (Cornille 2012b: 68). Yet she does not have the same confidence expressed in *Dominus Iesus* that the 'revealed truth' of her tradition demonstrates the *objective* superiority of Christian truth claims. She asks rhetorically, "on what ground does one argue the superiority of one's own truth in relation to those other religions?" (Cornille 2012b: 68). The authors of *Dominus Iesus* would no doubt answer – "on the grounds of the Gospel!" Schmidt-Leukel assumes that, like the authors of *Dominus Iesus*, the inclusivist is "convinced that one's own religion is in an objective sense... uniquely superior" (Schmidt-Leukel 2008a: 102). According to Cornille however, the belief in the superiority of Christian truth claims "becomes fragile or vulnerable when confronted with the fact of religious plurality and the reality of competing truth claims" (2012b: 68). Having given up the claim to Christianity's superior mediation of salvation and expressed the "vulnerability" of Christian superiority in terms of truth claims, Cornille comes extremely close to a soft pluralism. As I described in my adapted typology in Chapter 2 soft pluralism indicates the giving up of claims to the superiority of one's own tradition.

Nevertheless Cornille's position must still be regarded as inclusivist as she has not given up her belief in the superiority of Christian truth claims (although admitting their fragility in the face of competing claims). Cornille, as with the Catechism of the Catholic Church quoted above, believes that the Church must be missionary, and indeed that mission and dialogue belong together. However her understanding of mission is not one of an attempt to persuade others to convert but rather a "witnessing" to the truth of the Gospel. The urgency of mission is expressed by Cornille not in a desire for other religions to disappear but in an understanding of the necessity of dialogue as an act of "mutual witnessing" (Cornille 2012b: 63). For Cornille the crucial fact determining her inclusivism is that the Christian truth claims remain normative. This, she argues, is a necessity given the philosophical/psychological nature of faith: "one cannot approach the truth of other religions but from one's own faith in the truth of one's own tradition" (2012b: 68). For Cornille, authentic faith is not a free-floating matter determined – as with New Age spirituality – by "personal taste and inclination" (Cornille 2003: 44). Faith implies submission to something beyond oneself – something that is greater than can be personally experienced or rationally understood and justified. Submission or surrender to God, therefore, cannot be achieved except *through* the particular beliefs of one's religious

tradition: “Surrender is thus not to the ultimate as such, but through – and in the end – to the teachings and practices embedded in a concrete religious tradition” (Cornille 2003: 44). As such faith must be nourished by belonging to a particular community and tradition. Indeed, faith is not possible without the surrender to one’s tradition that constitutes religious belonging.

But is Cornille correct that faith must function in this way? As we saw in Chapter 4, Clooney has described how his practice of comparative theology has resulted in the complication of his religious identity. He feels he has progressed spiritually in a manner that is indebted to Hinduism, particularly the Śrī Vaisnava tradition, as well as his own Catholic tradition. He no longer feels able to refute Hindu truth claims, which seem to conflict with, if not contradict, his own Christian truth claims: “I confess that Jesus is Lord, but I cannot now assert that Śiva is not Lord...” (Clooney 2001: 181). In studying Hindu texts he has made himself “open to the transformations their authors intended to instigate in readers” (2008: 27) and after these deep immersions has been changed for good. He feels unable to “submit entirely” to either tradition, yet feels a certain sense of commitment to both – though not equally so (2008: 209). Clooney does not expect that comparative theologians will be able to affirm the truths of another religion to the extent that one affirms one’s own and he himself has found that his Christian commitments remain strong, deep and normative. Nevertheless he does speak of his identity and commitments being complicated. For Clooney however, he is clear that this is as far as he can go whilst maintaining fidelity to his own deeply held Catholic faith. He has “reached the boundary” and can go no further, but neither does he wish to turn back. However while scriptural reasoners talk about a spiritual deepening taking place as a result of their practice (Ford, Hardy. Ford 2013c), comparative theologians talk about “spiritual transformation” being their “deepest aspiration” (Fredericks 1999: 171). For Clooney this means openness to conversion (2004). He does not consider the possibility of belonging equally to two traditions at the same time.

There are many people today who claim a complex religious identity having drawn on more than one tradition for inspiration in their spiritual life. Elizabeth Harris is by no means alone, when as a committed Christian she acknowledges the deep debt she owes to Buddhism, having lived, attended and studied in Sri Lanka (Drew 2011:5). She has not taken on the fullness of Buddhist identity, and there are a few Christians who have that claim to remain fully Christian. Nevertheless, they have gone so deeply into another

tradition that they have come to feel equally at home in both and have found that their religious commitments have become doubled. Such a position seems to rely on a pluralist world-view – but has pluralism not been shown to prevent hermeneutical openness, the basic foundation for any adequate interreligious hermeneutics? And are such multi-religious identities to be regarded as authentic? The answers to these questions will help us determine whether open inclusivism is indeed the best model for interreligious hermeneutics, or whether pluralism might also be regarded as an appropriate model in certain circumstances. Let us now consider these questions in turn.

## ***6.4 Reconsidering Pluralism***

The first question is whether the critique of pluralism discussed in chapters 1 and 2 has done terminal damage to the position of pluralism. I will argue that a ‘soft’ pluralist approach introduced in my adapted typology in chapter 2 can accord an even greater openness to difference than open inclusivism, whilst meeting the valid criticisms made of the classic pluralist approach of John Hick. Before saying more about soft pluralism, I will first return to Hick, the classic exponent of pluralism, to consider some key elements of the critique against him in some detail in order to be clear how a soft pluralism is both different from and indebted to Hick’s basic insights.

### **6.4.1 Hick’s Pluralism<sup>61</sup>**

The core of Hick’s theory suggests that the major world religions or “the great post-axial faiths”<sup>62</sup> constitute “different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (Hick 1989: 235-36). Many have found and will continue to find such a vision both morally appealing and eminently sensible given the great diversity of humanity and the fact that ultimate reality must be beyond the grasp of finite beings. Keith Ward explains the appeal stating that according to Hick’s core theory:

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<sup>61</sup> An earlier version of parts of this section appear in Depoortere and Lambkin 2012b.

<sup>62</sup> Hick makes use of Karl Jaspers’ concept of the “axial period” saying that “from very approximately 800 to very approximately 200 BCE, significant individuals appeared through whose insights ... human awareness was immensely enlarged and developed, and a movement began from archaic religion to the religions of salvation or liberation” (Hick 1989: 29). These individuals include Confucius, Lao Tzu, Gautama the Buddha, the ‘seers’ of the Upanishads, Zoroaster, the great Hebrew prophets and the great Greek philosophers (1989: 29-30) and their insights led to the “great post-axial traditions” which include at minimum Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (1989: 33).

no one tradition possesses a set of absolute and exclusive truths, while all others are delusory and ineffective for salvation. All will, or at least can be, saved by adhering to their own traditions, which purvey differing, but authentic, responses to the ultimately real. All can know the truth and attain salvation in their own traditions; so believers no longer have to condemn all others as mistaken, and no longer have to wonder why their God leaves the majority of creatures in mortal error. Here is an elegant and morally attractive solution of the problem of error in religion (Ward 1990: 2).

Yet Ward also finds serious problems in the way in which Hick constructs his theory, so let us consider the way in which Hick arrives at his hypothesis.

Hick's 'pluralist hypothesis' begins from a radical distinction between the Real (ultimate reality) as it is in itself (noumenal) – which is ineffable – and the Real as it is experienced by us (phenomenal). The various truth claims of the religions refer not to the noumenal Real, but rather to our experiences of the Real which are shaped by our particular "perceptual machinery" and "particular system of interpretive concepts" (Hick 1989:14). Although this distinction is based on a Kantian philosophy, Hick argues that the "noumenal Real" reflects what the so-called 'post-axial' traditions themselves have said about the ineffability of ultimate reality. Transcending all (substantial) concepts, the noumenal Real "cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive" (Hick 1989: 246). On this basis Hick argues that apparently contradictory conceptions of ultimate reality or the Real, for example both personal and impersonal, can authentically point towards the same objective reality.

Hick describes his approach as religious in the sense that it presumes the veracity of religious experience. Nevertheless, he presents his theory as non-confessional, developing an ethical criterion for explaining and assessing religious traditions which, he says, is not located within any specific tradition (Hick 1989: 2). It is for this claim that he attracts the ire of particularists. With Hick's theory in mind, Michael Barnes, for example, accuses pluralists of postulating an impossibly objective "view from nowhere" (Barnes 2002: 12). Hick is clear that he does not present his ethical criterion on the basis of some "cosmic vision" (Hick 1985: 37). Rather, he claims that the support can be found in each of the major religious traditions and therefore does not belong to any one of them in particular but to them all. But from what vantage point does he assess the traditions to discover their support for an ethical criterion? Hick presents his pluralism as a scientific-style hypothesis

that is arrived at inductively through analysis of the data of religions, from a religious point of view (Hick 1989: 2). He begins by arguing that it is rational to accept religious experience as veridical (within certain boundaries), and adds that it would be arbitrary not to extend this principle to members of other traditions. However, the conception of religious truth which emerges is revisionist and limited in scope, as many critics have pointed out. Entire religious systems (“historical totalities”) are seemingly affirmed as true, but this is not, generally speaking, truth as it is understood within these traditions. Religious truth is stripped of any ontological function in favour of a solely “practical”, transformative function (Hick 1989: 375). The pluralist conception of truth, as expounded by Hick, is comprised of two key elements. First, as already indicated, is the radical distinction between the Real as it is in itself (noumenal) and the Real as diversely humanly experienced (phenomenal). Second, having insisted that concepts in no way apply to the noumenal Real, there is no space for an understanding of religious truth claims as somehow describing the way the Real is, in however limited a fashion. Rather, their truth, consists in their effectiveness in bringing about what Hick sees as the goal of all the post-axial religions – orientating the believer away from egoism and towards that which is most important – the Real. Truth claims do not describe the noumenal Real but gesture towards it, and as such can be understood as mythic in nature. A true myth is one which succeeds in bringing about this transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. As with his postulation of the ineffable noumenal Real, Hick sees this understanding of religious truth as also coming from within the religious traditions. He feels justified in equating religious truth with salvific efficacy because, he says, disputes within and between the religions – be they metaphysical, theological, or moral – have all been motivated by a “soteriological concern” (Hick 1989: 300). While Hick may be correct that the ultimate motivation of these debates has been a soteriological concern (in his loose definition of the term), this does not negate the fact that most religions also believed themselves to be in possession of accurate knowledge about ultimate reality. Furthermore, for Christianity at least, one’s soteriological fate has usually been thought to be linked in one’s ability to make ontologically correct statements of belief.

Hick’s notion of truth claims serving a purely practical function cannot be arrived at through a balanced scientific analysis of the data of the major religions. Rather, it is to a large extent inspired by Buddhism. Hick refers to the Buddhist doctrine of the *avyākata* or unanswered questions. Here the Buddha sets aside metaphysical and cosmological issues on the basis that such knowledge is not necessary for the attainment of enlightenment



(Hick 1989: 344). The same problem is evident in Hick's postulation of the noumenal real as being based on teachings of ineffability within the religions. Hick does not sufficiently attend to the fact that ineffability is variously understood both between and within the traditions. He notes only in passing the "varying degrees of emphasis" with which the distinction is drawn between "the Real (thought of as God, Brahman, the Dharmakāya ...) in itself and the Real as manifested within the intellectual and experiential purview of that tradition" (1989: 236). While Hick's insistence on a radical distinction between the noumenal Real and the truth claims of the religions sits well with the Buddhist notion of religious teachings constituting mere conventional truth, or 'fingers pointing to the moon', it does not correspond with mainline Christianity which has held that we do have partial knowledge of God. Hick takes our partial expressions to refer to our *experience* of the Real, and presents Aquinas' concept of analogical predication as though it were consonant with this. However, as Ward points out, although Aquinas saw characterisations of God as good, powerful, and wise as functioning analogically and whereby we cannot know in what sense the concepts apply, he nevertheless believed that, as concepts contained in divine revelation, we can be sure that they do in fact apply literally to God (Ward 1990: 7). Furthermore, Aquinas believed that we have some definite knowledge about God – namely that (as Hick himself quotes) "God ... as considered in Himself, is altogether one and simple" (Hick 1989: 247). While particular strands, primarily the Apophatic tradition, can be emphasised to support a strong ineffability, it must be acknowledged that this is not representative of the majority of Christian teaching which has balanced these views with an even stronger Cataphatic tradition.

Hick is arguably engaged in a kind of comparative theology, reinterpreting Christian ideas about the nature of truth claims in the light of Buddhist teachings. I am not suggesting that this is illegitimate, but merely that Hick's concept of the mythic / practical nature of truth claims cannot be considered to be derived from a balanced scientific analysis of the data of the religions. They cannot be deemed to be reflective of Christianity or any other tradition as a whole and therefore his theory cannot support judgements made about religions as wholes – this is not the way religions function anyway. Although Hick neither claims an objective vantage point nor dogmatically asserts pluralism as correct, what remains important in the particularist critique is the question of whether it is reasonable to even propose a non-confessional meta-theory which seeks to both explain and evaluate religious phenomena in general.

It is indeed the case that many traditions distinguish between ultimate Truth and their particular truth claims. However, Hick's radicalisation of this distinction to the effect that no concepts can be applied to the Real does not reflect many traditional concepts of religious truth. A second problem emerges when Hick seeks to develop a criterion for assessing the salvific efficacy of religions from his idea of salvation / liberation as "the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness" (Hick 1989: 303). From a study of the major religions, Hick argues, one can see that this transformation is commonly thought to be manifested in a life lived according to the 'Golden Rule' of love / compassion (Hick 1989: 313-14, 324). We can then, according to Hick, develop an ethical criterion for judging the soteriological efficacy of traditions. Hick expects that there should be "a strong correlation between the authenticity of the forms of religious experience and their spiritual and moral fruits", and that if this is the case it would "follow from the inclusivist position that there should be a far higher incidence and quality of saintliness in one tradition" (Hick 1985: 38). Instead, says Hick, we find that when judged over the course of their history none of the post-axial traditions appear as superior in this regard, but in fact appear to be more or less equal. This leads him to suggest that "as far as we are able to judge" these traditions mediate the Real "to about the same extent" (Hick 1989: 375). Hick supposes that it is possible to make this judgment based on a cold look at the data – that we might be able to assert that Buddhism is soteriologically effective because of the clear transformation (from self-centredness to Reality-centredness) that is exhibited by many of its adherents. It is doubtful, however, that saintly behaviour is indicative of true beliefs in a straightforward way. As Keith Ward points out, "[s]ome of the most obviously deluded, restrictive and exclusive belief-systems produce astonishing commitment, assurance, love and self-sacrifice" (Ward 1990: 14). Indeed an argument could be made that the very exclusivism of the exclusivist faith which Hick presents as unreasonable, is highly conducive to producing the kind of saintly behaviour which he presents in his criteria for authenticity, in that it encourages the level of commitment and self-assuredness that may be necessary for self-sacrifice, for example. If this were true, the Hickian pluralist would be in the curious position of having to acknowledge the authenticity of beliefs they consider to be unreasonable.

The absence of a tradition which is clearly superior to others in terms of ethical 'results' may give us cause to be suspicious of claims to superiority, but Hick's arguments fall short of providing supporting evidence for the positive assertion that certain traditions are soteriologically effective, let alone equally so. This suggests then that Hick's pluralist

‘hypothesis’ which affirms salvific validity in diverse traditions cannot function in the way Hick hopes – as an interpretation of religion in general which is religious in its starting point but proceeds by a broadly scientific analysis of the data of religions. In summary I would suggest that the warranted objections to Hick’s pluralism relate to 1.) the impossibility of generating a non-tradition specific meta-framework for judging religions. 2.) Hick’s tendency to emphasise certain aspects of traditions and obscure others, whilst claiming to make judgements about the tradition as a whole, 3.) An assertion, unwarranted by religious traditions, of the equivalence of truth and salvific efficacy. Nevertheless, the core of Hick’s theory remains persuasive, and he has pointed to important strands within the traditions that give internal support for the potential of finding equal truth in other traditions. Might pluralism then be expressed in a way which retains Hick’s basic insight whilst avoiding the problems highlighted?

### **6.5 *Soft pluralism***

There are many different articulations of a pluralist theology of religions, but as Schmidt-Leukel has observed they generally focus on the idea of “theological parity” between religions (2010: 55). The reworked typology I presented at the end of Chapter 2 explicitly included the possibilities of soft versions of the four main positions of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and agnosticism. Rather than expressing “theological parity”, soft pluralism indicates the claim that:

It is probable that important truths concerning a transcendent reality and goal for human life are contained in more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them which can be said to be superior to all the rest.

As discussed in Chapter 2 “soft pluralism” indicates a distinction already implied by Schmidt-Leukel and entails no positive claim about the equality of religions but only the “abandoning the claim to the unique superiority of one’s own tradition” (Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 23).<sup>63</sup> In so far as pluralism is propounded as a supra-confessional meta-theory which can explain and adjudicate religious diversity in a quasi-scientific fashion, it remains on dubious ground. But pluralism need not be asserted in these terms. To make the jump

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<sup>63</sup> The distinction between hard and soft pluralism is explicitly drawn by Drew where soft pluralism is defined slightly more narrowly as the “negative epistemic claim that it is not possible to know whether hard pluralism is true or false” (Drew 2011: 133). Ward defines soft pluralism differently again as “the view that the Real can manifest in many traditions, and humans can respond to it appropriately in them” (Ward 1990: 16). I have opted for Schmidt-Leukel’s formulation as it is able to include both Drew and Ward’s offerings as sub-types.

from acknowledging religious claims as justified and rational to asserting their truth requires something more than realising that they often (but by no means always) encourage lives which embody the highest ethical ideals. But what if somebody has personally experienced insights from another religion as true and spiritually transformative such that the person in question no longer feels able to proclaim the unique superiority of his or her tradition? In such a case the pluralist proposal can be re-articulated not as a religious-slash-scientific interpretation of the data of religions but instead as an expansion of one's faith beyond the bounds of a particular tradition and an attempt to make sense of one's religious experience. How might this look in practice and can it succeed in avoiding the problems associated with a Hickian pluralism highlighted above? Both Keith Ward and Rose Drew describe positions of soft pluralism which are self-consciously confessional. They do not present abstract theories arrived at through scientific analysis but expressions of faith. Yet these expressions have nevertheless have been enriched and informed by Hick's pluralism. Let us consider their suggestions in turn before concluding by suggesting how a soft pluralism can fruitfully support the practice of interreligious hermeneutics.

### **6.5.1 Keith Ward: Soft pluralism and "convergent spirituality"**

Keith Ward is a systematic theologian who has also authored a four volume study in comparative theology (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000). Although offering a critique of Hick similar to that articulated above (see Ward 1990), Ward takes on board the core of Hick's theory. Ward tells us that he strongly agrees with Hick's assessment that "the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human" (Hick 1989: 376, cited in Ward 1994: 310-311). He agrees with Hick that "being set on the way to salvation does not depend on holding Christian beliefs" (1994: 317). Given God's desire to save everyone, Ward asserts that "it is implausible to suppose that the Real inspires prophets in only one tradition, and that it does so in a wholly inerrant manner" (1994: 318). One may argue on an internal scriptural basis for the unique authenticity of one's own revelation, but these claims can be and are replicated by other traditions and therefore cannot be accepted as valid. "Hick is right," says Ward, "in suggesting that one must see Divine inspirational activity at work in many cultures, where people seek to meditate on the ultimate nature of things in relation to a suprasensory realm" (1994: 318). Like Hick he rejects the notion of

truth as correspondence in statements referring to the divine, stressing that “the Supreme Reality is beyond human imagination and thought” (1991: 171):

Different metaphors might be necessary to present a view of Supreme Reality, even though they seem to contradict, taken literally. Such truths would not be exclusive, but represent partial attempts to express the ineffable (Ward 1990: 171).

But Ward parts company with Hick where he affirms an equality of this inspirational activity across numerous traditions. Ward considers such equality to be not only unlikely, but illogical (1991: 173-4). Ward proposes a “soft pluralism” which indicates “the view that the Real can manifest in many traditions, and humans can respond to it appropriately in them” (Ward 1990: 16). He agrees with Karl Rahner who argues that humanity’s attempt to know God “is only partially successful, it always exists within a still unfinished history, it is intermixed with error, sinful delusions and their objectifications” (Rahner 1982: 173). Given this, Ward finds it highly improbable that the “views of the Real” expressed by the major religions could be equally authentic, and so “ways must be found of distinguishing between them” (1994: 318). Departing further from Hick, Ward rejects Hick’s affirmation of the radical ineffability of ultimate reality, so that no concepts can apply:

There must be some exclusive truth-claims about Supreme Reality. Not every statement about God can be metaphorical. At the very least, one must assert exclusively that there is a reality of unlimited value or perfection; that it can be apprehended; that it is a reality to hope to apprehend it fully sometime and that it stands in certain relations to the world of finite things and causes. (Ward 1991: 172).

He underlines the generality of Hick’s presentation of the “core” of religious aspirations (that the self must be transcended in relation to an absolute intrinsic value), as being of limited use to religious people who will “want to know just what that value is and how we should relate to it” (1991: 173).

Ward’s monograph *A Vision to Pursue* (1991) sets the stage for his future comparative work. Indeed *A Vision to Pursue* can be read as the development of a modified pluralist theology of religions which naturally leads to comparative theology. Here he uses a more descriptive term, “convergent pluralism,” to designate his position – according to Ward none of the religions are in possession of the fullness of truth but they may each gradually converge on that truth by “trying to include as many insights as possible in a widening

vision” (1991: 132). Unlike Hick’s non-confessional pluralist hypothesis as found in *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989), Ward’s proposal is most definitely a *Christian* theology of religions. Ward reflects on the current state of “the Christian faith” as a faith “in crisis”, yet suggests that this very crisis “opens up the possibility of a new era, beyond exclusivist restrictions, wherein one can live in one tradition without being confined within its boundaries” (1991: vii). He suggests that since the rise of the natural sciences, the growth of historical understanding and the acceptance of critical thinking ushered in by the Enlightenment, Christianity’s traditional claims have been successively undermined. Christianity’s crisis relates to the failure of many to respond effectively. Some theologians, “traditionalists,” try to “pretend the Enlightenment has never happened” while some accept the findings of biblical scholarship “without fully appreciating the difference that this must make to the formulation of Christian doctrines”. Some make such doctrinal moves yet without fully appreciating that this “must break down Christian exclusivity and open the way to a convergent spirituality of religions.” Some accept the findings of modern science, history and philosophy, but “take them to destroy any idea of an objective God, of revelation or of objectivity in religion; so they no longer see the quest for truth as an essential part of religion” (1991: vii). In contrast, for Ward religion is about “the pursuit of the true, the good and the beautiful” (1991: ix). It is clear that Ward’s concerns are systematic – he wants to see an expression of Christian faith that is integrated, coherent and outward looking, seeing the developments of modern scholarship and of the reality of our multi-religious world as an “opportunity” to be embraced. Similar to Clooney, he speaks of being “called to live ... on the boundary” and of such a life supplying a “positive enrichment of faith and understanding” (1991: vii-viii).

Ward presents a reinterpretation of the doctrine of the incarnation which he sees as necessary once one accepts of the findings of biblical scholarship. Critical study of the Bible has shown that the books of the Bible, including the Gospels, do not record an objectively verifiable history. According to Ward, the classical Christian doctrine of the incarnation which asserts that “Jesus simply *is* God” is dependent on rather literalist interpretations of the Gospels which have now become implausible (1991: viii). The narratives about Jesus must be seen as “partly an expression of the living religious experiences of early Christian communities” who wrote their “experience of life in the Spirit” into their reflections on the life of Jesus. Ward presents a careful and sustained argument for an understanding of the incarnation which sees Jesus as the “manifestation and expression of the love of God”, and which leaves the door open for recognising “other

models of divine disclosure in different contexts” (1991: viii-ix). Ward modifies his Christology in his first comparative volume *Religion and Revelation* to give it a “much more pronounced incarnational emphasis” (1994: 240). He argues with great subtlety for the uniqueness of Jesus’ incarnation whilst always being open to the view that God “does indeed reveal something of the Divine nature in many communities, each with its own canonical matrix, though the content is always affected by its historical and cultural context” (1994: 278).

Ward makes no affirmation regarding the equality or otherwise of these various “models of divine disclosure.” Instead, displaying a soft pluralism, Ward relinquishes the superiority claims of his Christian tradition stating that problems arise “when one tradition claims to have the only or the best (adequate or most adequate) way to salvation, or set of truths.” (1991: 176) He describes a “convergent pluralism” where it is held that “most, and probably all, traditions will need to be revised to approximate more nearly to a fuller unitary truth which none of them yet fully encapsulates.” (1991: 175). This leads us then, to the need for comparative theology, which will be necessary to achieve Wards vision of religions, which, “by a process of dialectical interpenetration, in which understanding can develop in each tradition... may converge on a more adequate understanding of the ultimate goal” (1991: 176). Although for Ward ultimate truth must be understood to be unitary he does not have a vision of a single unitary religion. He explains that “such convergence cannot be foreseen in any detail” – it must be open to surprise, but “it is unlikely to destroy the diversity of traditions”, given that they are “rooted in diverse histories, cultures and temperaments” (1991: 176). Ward describes his convergent pluralism as a “tentative, experimental style of religious faith” (1991: 176). “A truly convergent spirituality,” he says, “will seek to work within and between traditions, bringing them closer together while transforming them through that interaction” (1991: 204-5). Ward’s pluralism which sees traditions as in need of each other in order to gain closer approximations to the Supreme Reality, requires some criteria of discernment of truth in other traditions. Does Ward avoid the problems identified in Hick’s pluralism, when Hick posits a supposedly “tradition-neutral” criterion which all traditions could nevertheless support? I think he does.

Similar to Clooney, Ward argues that there are some basic criteria for rationality, common to humanity in general, which allow statements of truth to be comprehensible and relevant to one another across languages and cultures. Ward identifies these criteria as “consistency,

coherence with other knowledge, integrating power, and adequacy to experience” (1994: 323). This is because to be “capable of collecting and ordering information, deducing and inferring, and relating information to the attainment of formulated goals” is “necessary to any form of intelligently ordered social life”, and therefore “cannot be culturally relative” (1994: 319). It is in this line of thought that Ward has suggested “tests of authenticity” for beliefs and practices. These depend on what he identifies as basic human values, defining human “in the normal case” as a “rational conscious agent”. Ward identifies five basic human values as 1.) the “attainment of satisfying conscious states” ; 2.) rationality understood as “wisdom” meaning “the capacity to discern the true natures of things and the deepest patterns of intelligibility in the world”; 3.) knowledge; 4.) freedom to make choices; and finally, 5.) justice, meaning a recognition that our basic values are values for all and a “concern for all relevantly similar agents in a common world” (1991: 183-186). Ward convincingly argues that these basic values “flow from the very idea of what a value is” which is “essentially connected to the idea of preference and choice.” (1991: 186, 182).

The tests of authenticity will be of moral sensitivity, experiential depth and capacity to effect personal integration, as well as upon coherence with other well-attested knowledge, internal consistency, capacity to suggest a highly integrated general world-view and fruitfulness in suggesting further questions of understanding. (199: 176).

These rational criteria for discerning truth common to all humanity are not confined to discerning truth in religion and neither are they sufficient in themselves. Ward is clear in stating that “It is no part of my case that one can stand on neutral ground and choose between all world-views ... agreement in rational criteria does not eliminate all differences in basic value-judgements. It may in fact make differences sharper as one is forced to make a choice consistent with one’s own more general attitudes” (1994: 322, 323). When Ward speaks of the need for “coherence with other well-attested knowledge” this will necessarily begin from the truth claims of one’s own tradition. Moreover, Ward argues, religious belief does not come down to theoretical or intellectual assent: “one cannot decide to believe something” because what seems true will to a large extent be determined by the “cultural forms which have their own impact on human minds, and by which particular minds will have been shaped” (1994: 323). Far from operating outside of a particular tradition, Ward assumes that we must remain grounded within a tradition, believing that this is also a rational course of action to commit ourselves to that tradition:

The rational criteria operate as methodological principles for critical reflection, not as rules for producing correct answers. The rational course is to



commit oneself to a tradition of revelation, which delivers one from the pretence that one can work out truth entirely for oneself. Such commitment should, however, involve an acceptance that the Supreme Reality has not been silent in the other religions of the world, which delivers one from a myopia which confines God to one small sector of human history (1994: 324).

Ward presents us with a form of pluralism that avoids each of the criticisms of Hick highlighted above. Traditions are not to be judged from a non-tradition specific meta-framework. Certain criteria for are identified for judging religions which are common to all humanity and therefore make judgements across religions possible. However, they are insufficient in themselves and will necessarily be supplemented by further criteria specific to the tradition of the person making the adjudication. Unlike Hick, Ward regards the prospect of judging religions as wholes as impossible, arguing that it is much more likely that religions contain elements of truth and falsity to varying degrees. No straightforward claims such that this or that religion “is true” can be made. Rather, Ward’s concept of “convergent spirituality” emphasizes the point that all religions are in need of further development and this development can be achieved through dialogical engagement with one and other. Ward maintains an ontological dimension to religious truth claims and so, unlike Hick does not equate truth with salvific efficacy. The questions of whether a tradition contains truth and whether they mediate salvation can therefore be treated separately and with greater regard for the traditions self understandings of their truth claims.

In all this Ward assumes that one’s commitment to a religious tradition will remain singular. But is that necessarily the case? We will now turn to consider the case of dual belonging as an example of soft pluralism in action, focusing on the research of Rose Drew who argues that it is possible to be authentically and fully Buddhist whilst also being authentically and fully Christian.

### **6.5.2 Rose Drew: Soft Pluralism and dual belonging**

In her study *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (2011), Drew discusses individuals who, although starting life as Christians, have come to identify with a particular Buddhist tradition or traditions to such an extent that they consider themselves to be Christian *and* Buddhist. Her study draws on her own extensive interviews with the late Roger Corless, Sr Ruth Furneaux, Ruben Habito, John Keenan, Sallie King, and Maria

Reis Habito.<sup>64</sup> All but Furneaux, who is an Anglican eremitic nun and Buddhist teacher, are internationally recognised scholars in the field of Buddhist Christian dialogue. All but John Keenan, who adopts only the philosophical scheme of Mahayana Buddhism, self identify as both Buddhist and Christian.<sup>65</sup> They have each taken the challenge of holding these two traditions together with utmost seriousness; they are what Drew calls “reflective dual believers”. Like Cornille, Drew is concerned with the issue of “authenticity.” “Is it possible to be a faithful Buddhist *and* a faithful Christian?” she asks (2011b: 60). She defines “authenticity” as continuity with tradition (2011: 18). Rather than proceeding with a specific set of norms which constitute such continuity for each tradition she treats this as a matter of investigation in each of the four areas of focus in her study: God; Jesus and the Buddha; salvation or liberation; and practice. Drew assesses the self-understandings of her interviewees as belonging to both traditions, considering them to be justified if “they reflect the self understanding of these traditions more generally” (2011: 20). As Drew explains “In the most unequivocal cases of Buddhist Christian dual belonging, people practise within both traditions, belong to a Buddhist and a Christian community, identify themselves as being Buddhist and Christian, and have made a formal commitment to both traditions (usually through baptism and the taking of the three refuges)” (2011b: 60). Recognising the vast diversity of each tradition, Drew is satisfied to treat a particular belief as continuous with tradition if an “orthodox” source can be found in support of that belief – beliefs to the contrary notwithstanding (Drew 2011: 207). Full or authentic dual belonging is recognised where the “dual-belonger’s thought and practice can be seen to be, in important respects, continuous with both traditions” (2011: 20). In the course of her study she finds the crucial elements required to meet these demands include 1). Belief that ultimate reality is one and that both traditions are orientated towards that same reality and 2). A refusal to subordinate one tradition to the other, but to allow an ongoing and creative dialogue to exist between the two, within oneself (2011: 215).

These findings result from Drew’s systematic concerns. She is concerned with the potential of the dual believer to form a coherent world view whilst drawing equally on two traditions. She describes the challenge faced by the “reflective dual believer” as two-fold:

First, one must find satisfactory ways of integrating the Christian way of thinking and being with the Buddhist way of thinking and being, such that dual belonging does not involve turning a blind eye to apparently outright

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<sup>64</sup> Drew provides bibliographical details for each (2011: 21-38).

<sup>65</sup> Keenan describes himself as a “Mahāyāna Christian”. He sees himself as philosophically Buddhist, and he interprets the Gospels and Christian theology through the lens of Mahāyāna philosophy.

contradictions nor entail being pulled in opposite directions by one's religious commitments. Second, one must at the same time ensure the unique character, insight and integrity of each tradition is preserved and that what is special and attractive about each is not lost. In order to do justice to these traditions and allow them to interact at the centre of their spiritual lives in a way that is sustainable, dual believers must find a balance between the integration of Buddhist and Christian thought and practice, and the preservation of the distinctiveness of the thought and practice of each (Drew 2011: 8).

According to Drew this balance must be dictated by the traditions themselves: "where they can agree, the Buddhist Christian should allow them to agree; where they cannot agree, the Buddhist Christian should allow them to disagree" (Drew 2011: 215).

This challenge facing the dual believer – of the need to respect and preserve distinctions between traditions yet at the same time integrate knowledge gained within a single coherent world-view represents, in a heightened form, the challenge facing all who discover truth in another religious tradition. Theologians of religions have classically been concerned with the call to integrate. However they have been accused of obscuring differences in the process. Those involved in interreligious hermeneutics have been concerned with hermeneutical openness towards the differences of the other tradition and preservation of their own commitments, but in doing so often sideline the important need for integration. Might the dual believer, who has actively chosen a path which involves *both* integration *and* preservation of difference point the way toward a theology of religions that can support an interreligious hermeneutics in achieving the necessary balance between commitment and openness? Let us consider how this balance is achieved by looking at one of Drew's interviewees who best corresponds to her definition of an authentic dual believer: Sallie King (Maria Reis Habito and Ruben Habito also seem to correspond well). We will see that the internal rationalisation of the dual believer's spiritual life involves continuous theological reflection and hermeneutical effort.

Sallie King is Professor of Philosophy of Religion at James Madison University in Virginia, and has for over twenty years claimed a "double religious identity" being both a Quaker and practising Buddhism within the Vipassana tradition. In an article titled "A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism" Sallie King presents her understanding of "a pluralistic view that sees many religions as potentially usable vehicles to Truth" (King 2005: 89). King explains that the potential for her double identity as both Buddhist and

Christian comes from within the particular traditions to which she belongs (King 2005). She is a Quaker and a Mahayana Buddhist, and both these traditions view themselves as tools or methods for reaching Truth rather than being expressions or embodiments of Truth. She draws on Buddhism's famous "Parable of the Raft"<sup>66</sup> wherein the Buddha equates his own teachings to a raft that enables one to get to the far shore (nirvana). A raft won't get you to your destination without considerable effort of your own, the Buddha explains, and once you get there it is no longer of use. So too the Buddha's teachings, the *Dhamma*, are like a vehicle – a means to an end. Although Quakerism does not generally explicitly describe itself as a "method", it has no creed or particular theology, but is instead "defined by certain core practices". The most important of these practices is "the unprogrammed Meeting for Worship in which Friends gather in silence, still their thoughts, and open themselves to the leadings of the divine Spirit" (2005: 89-90). In both the Buddhist and Quaker cases these teachings do not necessitate the view that other religions should also be regarded as effective methods, but they do "leave the door open" to it (2005: 90). She also points to teachings within both which help her to understand them as pointing towards the same reality: she finds striking similarities between the Quaker belief that God "endows each human being with a measure of Divine Spirit" known by Quakers as the Light Within and the Mahayana Buddhist teaching that "all sentient beings possess the Buddha Nature" (2005: 90). Both teachings entail that "what is needed for enlightenment is within and therefore not the exclusive possession of a religious tradition" and therefore they "leave the door open" for religious pluralism (2005: 92). King relates that both traditions teach primacy of experience in matters of authority explaining that: "if Truth is experiential...language that attempts to express religious Truth can never be fixed but is, on the contrary, in principle open to ongoing efforts to express the inexpressible" (2005: 95). This is an idea which, King tells us, Quakers call continuing revelation and which Thich Nhat Hanh has described as the capacity which each person has for "opening new Dharma doors" (2005: 96).

Drew notes that King employs a version of Hick's ethical criterion in judging religions: each of the major religions have produced "saintly behaviour" which King finds extremely "impressive". King explains that this is "the only evidence that I have access to so that's what I go by" but she does not feel that this observation justifies the conclusions that they lead to the same end or that they are soteriologically equal (Drew 2011: 131-32). She only feels able to say that within Buddhism and Christianity there are "encouragements and

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<sup>66</sup> *Algaddupama Sutta*, M 22.

incitements and concretely helpful structures and practices which are both efficacious for me” (Drew 2011: 132) and so she cannot designate either of them as superior. Drew notes that a number of her interviewees were uncomfortable with the term pluralism associating it with a certainty which they lacked. Reis Habito, for example, says “I have ... a little bit of difficulty with the term “pluralism” because I feel it’s not up to me to say that Buddhism and Christianity are equally efficacious. How can I judge that?” (Drew 2011: 132) Nevertheless, Like Hick, most of Drew’s interviewees tend to assume that both traditions are orientated towards the same ultimate reality and emphasise the ineffability of that reality. The core of Hick’s theory, that various religious traditions “constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (Hick 1989: 235-36), corresponds well with their views. Drew explains that her interviewees “do not *deny* the salvific / liberative equality of Buddhism and Christianity; they just do not feel they have sufficient evidence to positively *affirm* it.” (Drew 2011: 132) Drew therefore draws the helpful distinction between ‘hard pluralism’ and ‘soft pluralism’ which describes the position of most of her interviewees (with the possible exceptions of Corless and Furneaux):

‘hard pluralism’ would be the claim about the efficacy of the traditions, i.e. that Buddhism and Christianity are equally effective with respect to final salvation/liberation; ‘soft pluralism’ is the negative epistemic claim that it is not possible to know whether hard pluralism is true or false (hence it is neither affirmed nor denied)...This position leaves open both the possibility that Buddhism and Christianity are equally efficacious and the possibility that one will turn out to be superior.

This presentation of soft pluralism differs only slightly from my own – in that my definition also leaves open the possibility that, with deeper knowledge, one may in time come to make an affirmation of equality. At that point, however one would cease to be a soft pluralist and could be described as a hard pluralist. I have left this open in the definition of soft pluralism not because I think an eventual affirmation of equality is important or even likely. Rather I have designed a broad category that can include these various subtypes in order to keep with the heuristic function of the typology.

Hickian pluralism has often been criticised for being too eager to present a “solution” to the “problem” of religious diversity (see Moyaert 2012).<sup>67</sup> It does not sufficiently

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<sup>67</sup> This criticism is often unnecessarily harsh given that Hick stressed “not how easy it is, but on the contrary how difficult it is, to make responsible judgments” about the efficacy of traditions. He argued that

recognise the necessarily “tensive relationship” between openness to other traditions and commitment to one’s own. The soft pluralism espoused by King and Drew’s other interviewees, however, fully embraces this tension. We will remember that the challenge of the dual believer includes not only integration of the traditions where possible, but also preservation of their unique particularities. King identifies as a Quaker and a Buddhist but she is firm that these traditions “do not say the same thing.” Because of their core beliefs about religious experience and religious language, she feels they do not contradict each other in any formal way, but nevertheless they are not interchangeable. Similar to Lindbeck she likens religions to languages which constitute “different life-worlds” (2005: 99). Unlike Lindbeck, she obviously feels that translation is possible, but “something is always lost in translation”:

Living in the Quaker life-world, one is immersed in a world with a strong flavour of divine and human love; a world of biblical characters, hymns and symbols; a world in which one lives a kind of secular monastic life very much in the world; a world in which one is challenged to live up to the example of one’s Quaker antecedents, who spoke truth to power and played major roles in shaping the social and political life in England and America. As soon as one says, “Christ Within” or “Inner Light,” all this is implicit (King 2005: 99)

Far from displaying the “pick and mix mentality” towards her spirituality of which dual believers are often accused, King is acutely aware of the all encompassing nature of the Quaker Christian hermeneutical framework. The same goes for Buddhist tradition:

Living within the Buddhist world, one lives in the world of the serenely smiling Buddha; a world whose vista embraces lifetime after lifetime of countless rebirths held in tension with an invitation to complete selflessness; a world in which one strives to remove all “thought coverings,” to erase everything and plunge again and again into vast emptiness; a world in which one feels one’s connectedness with all things and has compassion for all beings, the insect as well as the human, Say “Buddha Nature” and all this is implicit (2005: 99-100).

These “life-worlds” are different but to a certain extent they overlap: “On some points they can understand each other deeply; on other points they elude each other. This is exactly why they can learn from each other” (2005: 100). This was a conclusion drawn by all Drew’s interviewees – that it is those areas where there is greatest tension between the perspectives of the two traditions which are most spiritual fruitful. It is a “creative tension”. It is here

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because of this “the onus of proof lies upon anyone who wishes to claim that one particular tradition (presumably their own) stands out as uniquely superior” (1993: 139).

that I think that interreligious hermeneuts and theologians of religions have most to learn from dual believers. I am by no means suggesting that we all become dual believers – dual believers themselves do not wish to see this as then the distinctiveness of the traditions that they find so valuable would likely be lost. Not everyone can be called to it, but it seems to me that dual belonging represents the furthest point of what I have called epistemological openness, to the extent that dual believers live and practice in both traditions and find great learning in those areas where the teachings stand in greatest tension with one and other. Let me offer an example, again from King's experience, and one which Drew has highlighted – among many other areas of tension between Buddhist and Christian teaching. This is a tension which King alludes to when describing the different life-worlds of Buddhism and Christianity quoted above – that is the tension between the Christian value of loving involvement in the world, and the Buddhist value of non-attachment. After some discussion Drew suggests that these teachings can to an extent be reconciled in the sense that Christianity teaches a selfless love and Buddhist teachings of non-attachment are accompanied by an emphasis on compassion and sympathy towards all beings. Differences might be interpreted more as a matter of emphasis and therefore as mutually enriching rather than conflicting (see Drew 2011: 136-145). However, as Drew makes clear, what presented the greatest challenge for King (and indeed for Reis Habito) was the preferential love which she naturally felt for her children, and which indeed she felt that her children needed (Drew 2011: 142). While this maternal love was supported and valued within her Quaker tradition, King struggled to reconcile it with her Buddhist beliefs about the necessity of non-attachment. Attachment, Buddhism taught her, "is a mistake, because whatever we attach ourselves to will inevitably change and slip through our fingers" (King 2003: 162). Yet her personal experience of motherhood led her to believe that "It is true that nothing in this world lasts...And yet we love. And it is the best thing about us that we love; love is the only setting in which we ordinary people are able to put ourselves aside and think of the other first" (2003: 165). In the end King found that she needed both the Quaker and the Buddhist teachings to help her in her spiritual journey through motherhood. She relates that "Love of a child is indeed attachment, but that attachment is not delusion!", but nevertheless the Buddhist insight keeps her mindful of the fact that "preferential love can easily slide into clinging in a destructive way" (Drew 2011: 142). As Drew explains, there is a certain degree of complementarity between the teachings of loving involvement and wise non-attachment but "it does not seem that these two perspectives converge in an entirely unified focus. In certain respects a kind of 'double-vision' persists" (Drew 2011: 144). Yet this is a double vision which King has found extremely beneficial, even

necessary:

I cannot sit in complete comfort with either tradition, and yet I need both. For me there is profound truth in both. I no longer see them as so nearly reconcilable, but more as two languages, each of which speaks with great profundity of the spiritual life, yet neither of which (like any language) is really translatable into the other. In the end, all truth must be reconcilable. But I am well aware of my distance from that point (King 2003: 170).

King's experience speaks to the great potential for finding truth in that which is really different and to the necessity of recognising the place of agnosticism in theology of religions and exercising humility about those things which we do not know. Her experience of the tension between two traditions is reminiscent of Clooney's life "on the boundary". Clooney has also suggested that the greatest learning can occur at the points of greatest tension between traditions. In relation to his comparison of Deśika's *Essence* and de Sales *Treatise* he reflects that "What these powerful texts tell us of God and loving surrender lies, I suggest, partly in their resistance to each other, the interplay of their forces, intensified through the fact of double reading" (2008: 27).

### 6.5.3 Questioning dual-belonging

Drew's study makes clear that dual-belonging is no easy option, but one which can be enormously fruitful for those willing to live with the continuous hermeneutical effort involved. There are of course numerous objections that can and are raised against this form of religious belonging and practice. I will highlight only two here in the hope that the reader will at least be convinced that dual belonging is a matter worthy of further reflection.

First, and very briefly, we can consider that some will not be convinced by the conviction that such divergent beliefs can be held together in a creative tension. To this I would say that this is a dynamic already present within single traditions, and one which has been demonstrably fruitful. Jesus' ethical commands are sometimes so demanding as to be near impossible for anyone to abide by at all times, and there is no major call to make them the law of the land as they frequently just do not make practical sense. Turning the other cheek to aggressors in many cases will do more harm than good, as with the victim of domestic abuse whose acceptance of the situation will do damage not only to themselves but to their



children and to their aggressor who will likely also remain locked in this cycle of destruction. And yet Jesus' command is nevertheless of enduring and limitless value in constantly challenging the selfish motivations of our actions. Jesus' command must not be discarded as unworkable but held in a creative tension with the seemingly incompatible, yet equally Christian demand for justice.

Still many will not be convinced that dual belonging can be regarded as authentic faith. Does it not amount to, as Cornille has suggested, a kind of spiritual infidelity? According to Cornille, one cannot move beyond the position of inclusivism where the truth claims of one's own tradition are regarded as normative, if one wishes to express an authentic faith: "a truly religious attitude presupposes a norm beyond oneself from which, in the final account, the truth of the other religion is assessed." (Cornille 2003: 48) Although Cornille sees an empathetic understanding of another tradition as both possible and desirable, she sees definite limits as to the level of understanding that can be attained because one will always "lack by definition the element of faith necessary to attain the deepest experience of the other" (Cornille 2012a: 144). Drew queries this presumption. She notes that Clooney sees his study of Hinduism as "an act of religious learning leading to ... deeper knowledge of God" (Clooney 2010a: 17), and proceeds to ask "as someone who knows God though both Christianity and Hinduism, can he not now claim some measure of Hindu faith?" (Drew 2012a: 1046).

Who has the correct understanding of faith? Cornille follows Joachim Wach in defining religious belonging as involving a "total response of the total being (feeling, will and intellect) to Ultimate Reality." She takes this to mean "abandonment to a transcendent reality mediated through the concrete symbols and rituals of a particular religion." (Cornille 2003: 44). However, this understanding of faith is called in to question by Clooney's research. Clooney is committed to his tradition but the ultimate submission he talks about is not to the tradition but to God. And in seeking to delve deeper into "loving surrender to God" Clooney has drawn from – and even learned "to submit to both traditions and be instructed by them..." (2008: 207). Clooney calls for a necessarily small but "needed community" of attentive, empathetic comparative readers: "the Catholic who remains Catholic through reading the *Essence*, the Śrīvaiṣṇava who retrieves Śrīvaiṣṇava identity by listening to what the *Treatise* tells us about loving God." They remain Catholic and Śrīvaiṣṇava but nevertheless Clooney speaks of their reading as flourishing in the "doubly complex loyalties that grow" out of their practice. (2008: 211).

Cornille is convinced that “a shift to subjective religiosity would mean the end of religious communities” (Cornille 2010b: 189). But, as Drew argues, picking and choosing is something that every religious person does anyway, and indeed must do. Traditions simply contain too many teachings and possible interpretations (some of them contrary) for a single person to hold them all at the same time. Schmidt-Leukel argues similarly, and states that such an individual conception of faith is in fact warranted by a number of traditions. He quotes former Pope, Joseph Ratzinger who responded to the question “How many ways to God are there?” Though affirming the traditional teaching that “everybody who is on the way to God is thereby somehow also on the way of Jesus Christ” he nevertheless states that there are “As many [ways] as there are human beings. For even within the same faith tradition the way of each human being is a wholly personal one” (Schmidt-Leukel 2009: 57).

Critics of a Hickian-style pluralism have objected to the use of the Indian metaphor where the religions are likened to many paths leading up the same mountain (Kaplan 2002). This image does not adequately recognise religious difference it is said. It also encourages the thought that one must choose one religion, just as one must settle on a particular route in order to reach one’s destination. However Drew refers us to an alternative metaphor proposed by Schmidt-Leukel which more accurately describes the function of religion for soft pluralists like Sallie King. Religions should not be likened to paths up the mountain, because each individual must tread their own path. Instead religions can be compared to different maps or hill-walking guides.<sup>68</sup> As Drew explains:

The fact that maps can be drawn from different perspectives, with different considerations in mind, to different scales and using different points of reference and different keys – such that one cannot be simply ‘mapped’ onto the other – recognises both the fact that the language of one tradition cannot be easily translated into the language of another, and the possibility that having two very different kinds of map could be useful to someone who has learnt to read both and who is undertaking a difficult journey (Drew 2011: 162-3).

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<sup>68</sup> Drew references an unpublished paper by Schmidt-Leukel, “The Impact of Inter-Faith Dialogue on Religious Identity,” delivered in Leicester, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2005. Schmidt-Leukel similarly suggests religions be “compared to signposts or better to travel guides” in 2009: 53-54.

This view of the necessarily individual path of faith taken by each person is supported by Clooney. In a volume on the subject of “multiple religious belonging and Christian identity (Cornille ed. 2002), Clooney presented his reflections on a verse from a Hindu devotional text which begins “whichever form pleases his people, that is his form ...”, brought into dialogue with Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. As well as differences, Clooney found striking similarities in their presentations of divine accommodation whereby both suggest that “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” (2002: 58). Ignatius’ imaginative exercises which are designed to achieve a direct contact with God, prompt Clooney to reflect that “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” (Clooney 2002: 54). This brings Clooney to a striking “hypothesis” that calls into question Cornille’s presumption that “surrender is thus not to the ultimate as such, but through – and in the end – to the teachings and practices embedded in a concrete religious tradition” (Cornille 2003: 44).

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 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 (Clooney 2002: 45).

Dual-belonging might be seen as one actualization of what Ward has described as “convergent spirituality”, though it is not one which he anticipated. Ward argues that as we look deeper into differing religious beliefs, we often find that what at first view look like contradictory statements are not necessarily contradictory. For example, he says, it may look like the Christian belief in Jesus as “the only savior of the world, and the incarnation of a God who will raise our bodies to life again at some future time, is totally opposed to the Hindu belief that there are many avatars of the Lord, who will help us never to be born again” by escaping the cycle of rebirth (1991: 195). However when we look at the many various ways in which these teachings are interpreted within each tradition, it will be possible to find a Hindu interpretation of rebirth and a Christian interpretation of the resurrection which are not contradictory. When we think of the vast diversity of interpretations of basic doctrines within traditions we “stop thinking of religious people as divided into great monolithic blocks holding essentially different doctrines”. Instead we

begin to see them as “living with different scriptures and with different paradigm symbols of faith; but as then taking a whole range of different attitudes to those symbols which are paralleled within each tradition in various ways”. In the case of Christianity and Hinduism, it is therefore not a matter of comparing “two clear, rigidly defined sets of beliefs” but rather of comparing “two very complex patterns which have different central designs, but parts of which are almost identical and parts which look very different” (Ward 1991: 195-6). It is therefore only in the in depth study of traditions through practices like comparative theology that we have hope to answer questions as to the relation between particular Christian beliefs and the beliefs of other religions. In this sense a soft pluralism which makes claims about the truth of particular teachings of other religions can only be an “*a posteriori* pluralism” (Drew 2012a).

### ***Conclusion:***

#### ***Relating soft pluralism to interreligious hermeneutics***

A soft pluralism can account for a genuine appreciation<sup>69</sup> of religious diversity whilst avoiding the problems associated with a hard pluralism which makes definitive claims about which religions are equal. A soft pluralist will likely find aspects of Hick’s pluralism persuasive, and indeed the need for personal integrity and coherence within their faith perspective requires that they come up with a theology of religions which allows them to integrate insights from diverse traditions. They might affirm the core of Hickian pluralism that various religious traditions “constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to a transcendent divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it” (Hick 1989: 235-36). But the soft pluralist will not claim that the religions’ soteriological efficacy can be assessed in a quasi-scientific fashion. They will only affirm what they personally have experienced or recognised as true, but will allow space for the potential truth of what they have not experienced. Freed from the aspiration of providing a religious / scientific, comprehensive interpretation of religious phenomena, the soft pluralist is not bound to affirm the ultimate reality as *radically* ineffable, nor to assume a common ground across the major religious traditions, nor treat ‘the religions’ as coherent wholes, nor make claims about the salvific efficacy of the religions, though they may choose to do so. However, if through engagement with another tradition (and this will

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<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of what appreciation entails in this regard, see Schmidt-Leukel 2009: 30-45.

inevitably be with a specific branch or expression of that tradition) common ground and transformative power is experienced, the soft pluralist can make sense of that experience through an appeal to the core of the pluralist proposal. This will then be fleshed out with reference to sources relevant to the particular tradition(s) they belong to.

D'Costa makes the point that according to documents of the Second Vatican Council *Ad Gentes* and *Lumen Gentium* other religions “are a complex mixture of both truth and error, and rarely are they likely to be simply one or the other” (D'Costa 2000: 105). One of the key criticisms of pluralism has been that it involves the blanket approval of other religions, as is suggested in Hick's proposal. However Schmidt-Leukel's definition of pluralism only entails the recognition of two religions as equally salvific, a pluralist stance does not exclude discerning other religions as containing a “complex mixture of both truth and error.” Indeed a pluralist may well regard their own tradition as such a complex mixture. According to Schmidt-Leukel, “the pluralist enjoys the flexibility to assess some forms of religious otherness as false, some as inferior and some, despite and in their otherness, as equally salvific” (2005: 26). Soft pluralism allows a greater flexibility in this regard. It does not require one to make such a grand statement as “Buddhism is true.” It only requires giving up the superiority claims of one's tradition.

There are perhaps two main expressions of soft pluralism. One might either, as with Drew's Buddhist Christians, affirm the radical ineffability of ultimate reality, and see the divergent beliefs as being authentically orientated towards that same reality. They affirm this based on their religious experiences within both traditions. Unlike Hick's pluralism, this is a self-consciously confessional stance. In this case soft pluralism entails the “negative epistemic claim that it is not possible to know whether hard pluralism (which involves claims about salvific efficacy) is true or false” (Drew 2011: 133). Or, as in the case of Keith Ward, they may hold that certain things *can* be said about ultimate reality (perhaps as a result of divine revelation), and affirm that “there may indeed be experiences which give equally authentic knowledge of it”, to the extent that they complement that conception (Ward 1990: 16-17). This too is a confessional stance.

The route exemplified by Drew's Buddhist Christians may only be open to those who prioritise personal experience over the constraints of traditional teachings, or as in the case of Sallie King perhaps, those who identify with a denomination which is relatively unconstrained doctrinally, like Quakerism. Ward's route, on the other hand, may be more

compatible with an “open orthodoxy”, which while open to “fruitful interaction” with other religions is concerned to remain “true to the main orthodox Christian position” (Ward 1994: 1-2).

Soft pluralism is not prone to the common criticisms of theology of religions in general and pluralism in particular, which I stated at the outset as 1.) A disapproval of the generation of abstract meta-frameworks to describe the relationship between religions. 2.) A resistance to its *a-priori* focus – seeking to make judgements about religious diversity by looking internally at Christian sources. 3.) An objection to the focus on the question of salvation. In the case of soft pluralism, the pluralist proposal can be seen not as the simplest explanation of the data of religions but as the systematic expression of someone whose religious experience and beliefs can no longer be said to be confined to a single tradition. It is an *a posteriori* pluralism based on experience and encounter with other religions. It may not make any claims at all about salvation through one’s own tradition or through others. And if it does make such claims, they will likewise only be made on the basis of experience. A ‘soft’ pluralism is advocated not as *the* correct position within the theology of religions, but rather as one which can be upheld authentically based on the encounter with other religions rather than, as in Hickian pluralism, being based on the analysis of the data of religions.

Soft pluralism as presented here supports each of the four distinctive characteristics of interreligious hermeneutics – of being theologically engaged; hermeneutically open; open to learning from the other; and open to surprise. Soft pluralism offers a framework that is hermeneutically open; epistemologically open; theologically engaged but also epistemologically humble, as an option for those who find themselves transformed in engagement with another religious tradition. It is *hermeneutically open* in aiming for an insider understanding of the other religion as much as is possible. It is open to learning from the other and goes beyond this to be truly *epistemologically open*: that is it recognises the possibility of encountering truths in another religion that have not been encountered before and may be experienced as a surprise or an interruption to one’s presuppositions. It is also epistemologically *humble* in that it recognises that questions of soteriological efficacy and truth can only be answered from a confessional standpoint which is necessarily limited and fallible. Finally it is *theologically engaged* in that it actively seeks to make sense of religious experiences beyond the boundaries of a single tradition, by developing a coherent theology of religions or connecting with an existing theology of

religions. I agree with Schmidt-Leukel who suggests that interreligious hermeneutics<sup>70</sup> is vital to theology of religions in “preventing us from aprioristic and apodictic judgements so that we arrive at our positions cautiously and tentatively, always open to critical objections and potential revision.” (2005: 27). Interreligious hermeneutics can, I suggest, be well supported by a pluralism that is understood as a “tentative, experimental style of religious faith” (Ward 1991: 176). From the example of dual believers we can see that on such a model it is possible to both integrate points of complementarity within a single (though complex) framework and to preserve important distinctions, finding that in such places of tension, or apparent “impasse”, creativity can flow and spiritualities can deepen.

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<sup>70</sup> Schmidt-Leukel makes this point in reference to comparative theology but it can be applied more broadly to interreligious hermeneutics as a whole.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Interreligious Hermeneutics and Theology of Religions as Mutually Supporting Disciplines**

The main argument of this thesis has been to challenge the prominent view that interreligious hermeneutics in the form of either comparative theology or scriptural reasoning is a proper theological approach to religious diversity which has no need for theology of religions. It has focused on showing why interreligious hermeneutics does indeed need theology of religions. However, theology of religions is equally in need of interreligious hermeneutics. A theology of religions without in-depth study and engagement with other traditions will fall by its superficial knowledge of other religions or remain as an empty shell: an expression of the possibility of truth outside one's own tradition, but still empty without the hermeneutical effort required to explore other religions and discover whether or not that potential might be realized.

In order to facilitate an understanding of these disciplines as mutually supporting and indeed mutually dependent, I have sought to speak to the concerns raised about the nature of theology of religions by critics such as Clooney, Barnes and Lindbeck. They have considered theology of religions prescriptive, biased towards pluralism, distorting of religious difference, and unable to recognize the ambiguity that often lies at the heart of interreligious exchange and encounter. I have proposed an adapted version of Schmidt-Leukel's typology which separates the questions of whether there is truth in other religions and whether they mediate salvation, so as to better reflect the actual positions taken by theologians, offering a clearer means of discriminating between them. The adapted typology aims to be descriptive of actual positions, rather than prescriptive about what I think they should be, but keeps the descriptions short and logically ordered so they can be applied with clarity.

Sometimes scholars have conversed about theology of religions as though all that is entailed is the declaration of one's position, as an inclusivist, exclusivist or pluralist. But these are of course just markers for what should be a systematic expression of one's faith



in relation to religious others. For Christians this will involve asking questions about how traditions relate to one another, seeking suitable answers, and, ideally, being open to adaptation when new knowledge is encountered. The questions to be asked include: If truth is to be found in other religions, what does that say about the uniqueness and universality of Christ? What does it mean for our understanding of mission? How does it impact on how we interpret the significance of Baptism? How should we respond to the increasing demand for inter-faith marriages? How can we educate our children so that they can grow in faith but at the same time live harmoniously and fruitfully in multi-faith societies? The list goes on.

According to Perry Schmidt-Leukel, interreligious hermeneutics must involve both interpretation of the religious other *and* evaluation of their religious traditions against the truth claims of one's own (2009). His logically deductive typology is designed to show that there are only certain basic answers to the question of whether other traditions "mediate salvific value" and to insist that if we are to take the truth claims of other traditions seriously we must choose one. To never consider whether the claims of Buddhism are true and whether its practices are efficacious, is to fail to take seriously that Buddhists are claiming to be in possession of universally true insights into ultimate reality and our proper orientation to that reality.

However, as we have seen, a large number of theologians (such as Clooney, Ford and Ochs), who are deeply interested in other religious traditions and already learning from them a great deal, do not wish to make such evaluative judgments. They have shunned the theology of religions discourse as making definitive claims about matters which are simply beyond our knowledge. There are, I have suggested, perfectly respectable theological reasons for remaining agnostic on the issue of whether religious others can be saved through their traditions. By shunning the theology of religions, these scholars are missing a valuable resource that could provide them with the theological framework that they need in order to support their innovative practices. They seek to be hermeneutically open in learning about the religious other as they understand themselves, and they seek to learn theologically from the religious other. Some such as Cornille and Makranksy seek to stretch to epistemological openness, whereby they learn from religious others even and perhaps especially where they are most different from their own tradition. However, we also observed a very small part of the ways in which religions have evolved so as to be hermeneutically closed towards the religious other. Within the scriptures of Christianity,

Islam and Buddhism we find that the other was presented as a negative foil from which to project the identity of the new tradition. If truth was recognised, it was always incorporated into the home traditions schema, often reinterpreted in the process, or subordinated to the higher truth of the home tradition. All this shows that, if we are to continue to value our scriptures as more than mere human texts, and if at the same time we wish to adopt a hermeneutical model other than the one that a surface reading would appear to recommend, some serious hermeneutical effort is required. For those who hold their scriptures to be authoritative, the degree of effort required will depend on that gap between what Moyaert calls the “closedness” in evidence in their scriptures and the “openness” they wish to show towards the religious other. The effort will be less for scriptural reasoners, given that they do not seek to be ‘epistemologically open’ to truth in difference. Nevertheless hermeneutical effort and theological arguments are required to explain why they seem to view religious diversity positively, while at the same time adapting none of the traditional claims of their tradition to unique superiority. Some may be inclined to think that these problems are confined to the Abrahamic traditions, which are well known for their critique of one and other. However, I found that the Buddhist Pāli canon is in some ways even more hermeneutically “closed” than the New Testament and the Qur’ān – not least with regard to the Buddha’s dialogues with the Brahmin. It should be an encouragement to find that there are resources – broader principles also rooted in scripture – that the interreligious hermeneut can call on to support their work, as John Makransky has shown.

I suggest that if interreligious hermeneuts prefer to stay silent on whether there is in fact salvation through other religions, and if they (as with scriptural reasoners) also prefer to stay silent on whether there is truth in other religions, they should have good theological reasons for doing so. I am inclined to think that while there are good theological reasons for preferring to be agnostic on the issue of salvation, evaluation of truth remains important. This is particularly the case if (as with Clooney’s presentation of comparative theology) interreligious hermeneutics is to be regarded as a truth-seeking exercise, carried out in the hope of “knowing God more fully”. In either case, whether evaluative statements are made or not, theological justification for engaging with the religious other in order to learn about God or the Ultimate is required. But as we have seen through the presentation of soft pluralism, such a framework need not be definitive.

But, it might be protested, will not pluralism, soft or not, extinguish much of the motivation for interreligious hermeneutics by being unable to give a place to the revelation

in the discernment of religious truth? Clooney has criticised “the pluralist ambivalence about the value of language, and consequently, about the function of texts in general and the Bible in particular” (1990: 75). He questions what motive the pluralist would have to actually engage with other sacred texts (1990: 78). The question of what kind of concepts of scripture and revelation can be contained within a soft pluralist paradigm have not been explored here and will require considerable hermeneutical effort by those who adopt this approach, drawing on their own tradition and what truth they have discovered in others to think what status we can accord these texts that have offered spiritual nourishment over many centuries and continue to surprise, delight, and confound millions of truth-seekers today. As we saw, King holds to an instrumentalist understanding of religions and religious truth which makes sense to the particular traditions (Christian and Buddhist) in which she experiences “dual belonging”. Neither the Quakers nor Zen Buddhists hold scripture to be a repository of revelation. However, not all soft pluralists need hold to this path. Keith Ward espouses a realist understanding of religious truth and has forwarded a re-interpretation of the nature of revelation to fit with his soft pluralism, making space for further revelations in other traditions (1994). Ward engaged in a comparative study of revelation in Judaism, Islam, Vedanta and Buddhism and then revisited Christian understandings, offering a reinterpretation of revelation on the basis of his comparative work. Contrary to Clooney’s fear, Ward places a high value on Divine revelation and the scriptures which attest to it. He suggests that the Divine purposefully reveals truths “beyond normal human cognitive capacity.” Yet in keeping with Hick’s basic pluralist insight, he acknowledges the *active* role that humans play in receiving or experiencing that revelation. “The point of revelation” says Ward “is perhaps not to give theoretical certainty about some rather improbable facts, but, as Thomas Aquinas put it so well, to orient human lives to their supernatural destiny, to eternal happiness in God.” (1994: 274). Such an exploration of the nature of scripture and revelation will be essential to the soft pluralist who holds scripture to be in some way authoritative and yet finds truth in more than one tradition.

In 1999 comparative theologian James Fredericks declared the theology of religions to be at an “impasse.” He argued that exclusivists, inclusivists and pluralists had demonstrated the flaws in each other’s approaches without being able to identify a viable route forward. None, he suggested, are capable of appreciating religious difference. Inclusivism, he said, includes and in so doing distorts the other. But, he added, the pluralist supra-confessional validation of diverse traditions as “true” renders their distinct beliefs and practices as ultimately insignificant and therefore as ultimately uninteresting! Faced with the seemingly

impassable, incomprehensible boundaries between the divergent truth claims of religious traditions, Fredericks' answer was to retreat back into the safety of what can be understood. Fredericks, similar to scriptural reasoners like David Ford, has sought to learn about the religious other in order to understand *Christian* truths more deeply, leaving the question of whether truth is also to be found in the other tradition not broached (Fredericks 1999).

I hope however to have made clear that theology of religions is by no means limited to the expression of the positions of the classic typology. Theology of religions would indeed be at an impasse if, as Frederick's suggests, it were a theoretical enterprise disinterested in the many deep and irreducible differences between religious traditions. However, I have attempted to show that, far from being disinterested in such deep and lasting differences, there is an emerging consensus of voices – including those of Cornille, Clooney, Moyaert, Hedges, Makransky, Drew, King and Schmidt-Leukel – who are saying that it is precisely at these points of tension or impasse, where traditions are offering insights that cannot be simply reconciled to one and other, that we stand to learn the most from the religious other. By finding ways to live and learn creatively in the tension between divergent religious insights, these scholars have found and opened up clear cracks in the “impasse” identified by Fredericks. By working together theologians of religions and interreligious hermeneuts may open these cracks further to create viable passageways to the surprises that may await those who risk being not only hermeneutically open but also epistemologically open to discovering truth in difference.

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