A Critique of Comparative Theology

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ABSTRACT. Utilizing a postcolonial lens, I critically examine the method in Francis X. Clooney's New Comparative Theology and argue that it is identical to Max Müller's Old Comparative Theology, which is Eurocentric, hegemonic, and homogenous in nature, as well as guilty of relativizing and universalizing tendencies. The method of juxtaposing texts, images, practices, or doctrines of different traditions lends itself to conflation, the flattening of differences, and the denying of particularity to religions, which does not take into consideration their incommensurability and irreconcilability. Although the various distinguishable elements of religions appear to have a semblance of unity, they are non-translatable especially through the method utilized in Clooney's comparative theology.

Introduction

The future of comparative theology, as a discipline or as a method, rests in its ability to reconstruct itself so as to not reduce, essentialize, or collapse categories between religions but, rather, build on the foundation that religions are incommensurable and irreducible. That is to say, what really needs to be uncovered and unpacked is its uniqueness, its "religious footprint."[1] I argue that the

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[1]Religious footprint is a term that I have coined to indicate the major pathways in

existing methods being used in comparative theology denies particularity to religions, by conflating elements of various traditions, or by juxtaposing texts, images, practices, or doctrines, causing disservice to the "Other" as well as to the home tradition. I argue, that religions have ontological, epistemological, metaphysical, and teleological differences that do not immediately lend themselves to comparison and are irreconcilable. Although the various distinguishable elements have a semblance of unity, they may be further discerned as non-translatable especially through the method utilized in Francis X. Clooney's comparative theology. In this paper, I will critically evaluate Clooney's method in comparative theology using a postcolonial lens and argue that his method parallels that of Max Müller and, unfortunately, replicates problems of Eurocentricity, essentialization, and universalizing tendencies.

Clooney's Comparative Theology Through a Postcolonial Lens

To proceed, I first examine the method used by Max Müller in what Paul Hedges calls old comparative theology and, second, I critically evaluate Clooney's method to find, if at all, it matches the old comparative theology and lastly, I argue that the method itself does not account for the radical differences in the religious footprints by relativizing them, essentializing them, or smashing categorical differences between them.

Francis X. Clooney's method in comparative theology incorporates a "confessional, interreligious, comparative, and dialectical" approach that juxtaposes "texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons," of two or more traditions, with the goal of

history that have shaped religions to be what they are today. These specific major patterns and pathways create a unique composite made of particular histories, socio-cultural, political, and philosophical engagements that have created a unique footprint to each religion, and within that religion to each sect, thus determining its current shape, which again is liable to change. By this term I do not mean variations at the level of praxis, but the skeletal structure of a religion that acquires shape due to engagements.

helping the interlocutor's "faith seek understanding" of its relationship within diverse religious traditions.[2] The fruits, or insights of such a comparison are "indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition."[3] Although Clooney contends that his intellectual, spiritual method is not primarily a matter of evaluation or argumentation for religious superiority but an "intuitive, reflective method that maintains practical, theoretical, and rational engagement of religions, through its texts and commentaries," I find that the method itself as it is being perpetuated maybe interpreted as biased, Eurocentric, and hegemonic in nature.[4]

This hegemonic structure rests in between the nexus of power and knowledge, whereby someone from the dominant culture, through sheer concatenation seeks to assert dominance by placing two disjunctive concepts side by side, claiming intellectual and scientific means, to construct structures that assume homogeneity between religions. By denying particularity to the "religious footprint" that each tradition holds, Clooney's method in comparative theology reflects a colonial mentality that appropriates the religions of the subaltern, and unintentionally does cultural violence by distorting certain realities.

Clooney outlines the history of comparative theology and admittedly identifies Max Müller as its first representative of the nineteenth century.[5] Perhaps Clooney is unaware of Müller's non-altruistic translations of the *Rig Veda* or the *Sacred Books of the East* that were funded by the East India Company in London and backed by royal patronage, with the hidden agenda of justifying the

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[2] Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries Between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7-12.

[3] Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10-11.

[4] Ibid., 11-14.

[5] Ibid., 33.

colonizers political and economic rule. Müller spoke of "the conquest of the world by means of commerce, colonization, education, and conversion"[6] He encouraged British civil servants to study Sanskrit for intellectual conquest since material conquest would not suffice! Müller's translations display the "trope of the child" in that the colonizers held tendencies that perceive their colonies as both subjects and objects; objects to be exploited, dominated, debased, and controlled, and subjects to be nurtured, enlightened, educated, and affirmed.[7] As such Müller's comparative theology presented Hindus as being in need of their European colonial parent to guide them out of their state of barbarism that they had devolved into.

In addition to its colonial patronage and the trope of a child, Müller's translations exhibit yet another characteristic feature of the colonizer: the tendency to classify everything, whether texts, trees, groups, or boundaries, by using its own worldview as a framework for classification. David Spurr labels this an "ideological charged rhetorical strategy," that triumphs in discrediting native knowledge over against the colonizers, thus causing alienation from the native worldview and damaging the native's self-esteem or psyche.[8] Müller's fascination for classification is detected in the way he creates a hierarchy of religions that obviously favored Christian revelation, placing the New Testament on the top while placing the Vedas at the second lowest position and the Zoroastrian Avesta as the lowest.[9] Müller along with, Farquhar, and T. E. Slater used Darwin's *Origin of Species* and unwittingly applied it to religions by creating a linear progression in which religions moved from a lower to higher truth, from natural revelation to moral perfection, finding

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[6] As quoted in Sharada Sugirtharajah, "Max Müller and Textual Management: A Postcolonial Perspective," in *Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought: Toward a Fusion of Horizons,* eds. Rita Sherma and Arvind Sharma (New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2008), 32.

[7] Ibid., 33-35.

[8] Ibid.

[9] As quoted in S. Sugirtharajah, "Max Müller and Textual Management," 36.

ultimate fulfillment in Christianity.[10] This method of referring the religions of the natives back to Christianity resulted in coining terms like *henotheism* or *kathenotheism* in comparison to Biblical monotheism. Arvind Sharma argues that if the Vedas were read on their own, the reader would delight to find within it a range of perspectives including pluralism, skepticism, monotheism, and monism.[11]

There's no doubt that the Christian lens made the natives look like savages of a "retrogressive" kind, the kind that had degraded from a higher state but who still had potential to ascend higher.[12] Although Müller used cutting edge methods like comparative and historical criticism, his Hinduism looks like a "non-ecclesiastical Protestant form of Hinduism."[13] Müller's interpretive stance of the Vedas reflect a 19th century Protestant approach that is overly concerned with finding origins, the "Ur text," like the "true Gospel."[14]

Müller inadvertently projects his Protestant understanding by valuing the written text as a mark of a superior civilization, while the oral text as inferior. His blinkers prevent him from understanding the Hindu position that values the "oral-aural" dimension of the word over the written text, so much so that the word loses its sacredness and gets polluted upon writing![15] Reflecting the trope of a child, we find in Müller's works a language that is both affirmative and negative. As he confesses, "much that is elevated and elevating, and much that is beautiful and sublime is found in the Vedas, but also utter rubbish, utter meaningless and irrational things are found in it."[16] He privileges the Vedas, thus disregarding other textual and

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Arvind Sharma, *Decolonizing* (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2015), 19.
[12] Sugirtharajah, "*Max Müller and Textual Management,*" 34.
[13] Ibid., 36-37.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] As quoted in S. Sugirtharajah, "Max Müller and Textual Management," 36-37.

oral forms of knowledge such as the Gita, the *Mahabharath*, which is also called the fifth Veda.

Even the reification of the concept of the word "religion" reflects a Western understanding of construction that does not reflect realities at the ground level. Arvind Sharma notes Wilfred Cantwell Smith's conclusive observations in *The Meaning and End of Religion* by demonstrating that terms such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism were the product of Western scholars and can be assigned the following earliest dates: "1801 for Boudhism, 1829 for Hinduism, 1839 for Taouism, 1854 for Zoroasterianism, and 1862 for Confucianism."[17] In the medieval times some of these religions were called "sect of" or the "heresy of" or the "philosophy of the Hindus" or "Chinese wisdom," later however, the suffix "-ism" was added to a word to designate members of that religious community.[18]

Sharma argues that Western hermeneutics have uncritically applied the word 'religion' to the Indic context.[19] He critiques the central hermeneutical assumption of the field of the study of religion, that of the definition of "religion" itself. The term "religion" itself is a foreign construct and represents a particular Western worldview that does not apply to the South Asian context. Sharma skillfully argues as follows:

> (a) The hermeneutics of the term religion as developed in the West and in Islam, are alien to the Indic context: (b) it is alien due to its insistence on singular or exclusive religious observance, and its assertion of the idea that religion and culture are wholly distinct; (c) that this alien concept of religion was institutionalized in India during

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[17] Arvind Sharma, "The Hermeneutics of the Word 'Religion' and Its Implications for the World of Indian Religions," in *Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought: Toward a Fusion of Horizons,* ed. Rita Sherma and Arvind Sharma (Springer: Springer Science & Business Media, 2008), 19.

[18] Sharma, "Hermeneutics of the Word Religion," 20.

the colonial era and met both acceptance and resistance; (d) that the category of religion is largely responsible for the emergence of Hindu nationalism particularly in its form as "Hindutva" which arose as a cultural response to the divisiveness engendered by the systematic institutionalization of the category of religion.[20]

Sharma contends that the misapplication of the term 'religion' has not only damaged the relationships between indigenous Indian traditions but also created a distorted image of the religions of South Asia. He quotes Willard G. Oxtoby's observation: "when the Christian world of the West viewed the other traditions, it sought to define them in terms parallel to the way it understood its own Christianity. The Christian historical self-understanding imposed three of its own predilections on what is described."[21] He further quotes Oxtoby's observations in the following three predilections of the Christian self-understanding:

1. Its emphasis on creedal formulation of a religion
2. The secular-sacred dichotomy
3. The notion of exclusive membership[22]

Sharma notes that the first predilection is to emphasize creedal formulations of a religion. He reflects that Christianity expresses itself through creedal formulas, affirmations of faith, or dogmas, which are expressed in and about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. However, not all religions in South Asia have such a systematic understanding of faith. As he writes,

Some of Asia's great traditions, such as Buddhism, do present substantial, sophisticated, and challenging

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 21-22.
[21] Ibid.

doctrines, but in the case of Shinto, for instance, statements of doctrine are more of a collector's item. So religion defined as "belief" is not a descriptive definition of the spectrum of phenomena but a prescriptive restriction to the narrower band within the spectrum that will fit the observer's stipulations.[23]

The second predilection, Sharma notes, is the secular-sacred dichotomy. Although Christianity started off as a minority group even in its rise as a state religion, it clearly maintained the distinction between sacred and secular and that some things belong to God and some things to Caesar. However, not all religions have this dichotomy. For example, Islam fuses not just religion and politics, but also commerce, law, and all of life. Mohammad was not just a religious prophet but also a military leader that consolidated the warring tribes of Arabia.[24]

And finally, Sharma observes that the third predilection consists of the notion of exclusive membership. The idea of an exclusive community, he adds, was part of Judaism and later transferred on to Christianity, and Islam. That God demands loyalty and does not tolerate rivalry is deeply embedded in Judaism but not in South Asian religions where the religious boundaries are fluid and not clearly defined.[25] Sharma notes how God is viewed in the Sikh tradition as transcending all forms and boundaries and the presence of a 35,000 strong Hindu-Muslim community that had mixed religious identities that defies the Western understanding of religion.

Old Comparative Theology (OCT), New Comparative Theology (NCT), and Theology of Religions (TOR)

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

Paul Hedges argues that there is no distinction between the OCT of Muller, and the NCT of Clooney. He argues that one can see a lineage of progression and that continuity exists between the OCT and NCT.[26] He summarizes this progression by using Hugh Nicholson's argument, and states four points in which the NCT *has* progressed beyond the OCT:

1. The NCT *does not make meta-statements* or generalize about other religions rather it deals with the local and particular.
2. One finds in it a particular *resistance to supremacy by relativizing the truth.* Drawing on Kiblinger, Hedges comments that although Clooney distinguishes between NCT and TOR, that any form of comparative theology would necessarily mean engaging a TOR.
3. The NCT *combines interreligious reflection and practice of dialogue* into one principle with correlating poles.
4. Finally, the OCT was *unaware of its own prejudices*, in contrast to the NCT that openly declares its normative commitments and interests.[27]

Reflecting on the differences between the OCT and NCT, Hedges distinguishes the OCT from the NCT by degree rather than kind.[28] He argues that we can see this distinction clearly through the lens of TOR that was used by the OCT and the NCT. The OCT used an exclusivist model while the NCT uses an inclusive model. He notes that in the NCT truth is deferred, and religions are not in tension or competition, with one another, rather there is fair play, and an open bias. Although some proponents of the NCT are convinced that the

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OCT is antithetical from NCT, I argue, that it continues to remain an Orientalist approach because:

1. It does make meta-statements
2. It relativizes the truth of its own tradition as well as others
3. It combines interreligious reflection and practice of dialogue into one principle with correlating poles in an unhealthy fashion
4. It remains unaware of its own prejudices

Clooney's NCT makes metastatements that essentialize and generalize religions. In *Hindu God, Christian God* Clooney distinguishes his work from Keith Ward, in that he seeks to maintain the categories of confessional, interreligious, comparative, and dialogical throughout his work instead of collapsing all of these into two categories, confessional and comparative. However, we see that he ends up doing exactly the same:

> By focused comparisons, I intend to bring the Hindu and Christian views on these topics into dialogue and even argument and thus promote a new, more *integral* theological conversation wherein traditions can remain distinct although their *theologies are no longer separable*. A religion may be unique, but its *theology is not*.[29]

Clooney operates under the assumption that there is a distinction between religion and theology and that a religion maybe unique but not its theology. I think that religion and theology are not mutually exclusive nor do religion and theology exist in watertight compartments without interacting with one another. Constructive theology informs religions and vice versa so that they are

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[29] Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 8. Emphasis mine.

interdependent, cohesive, and conjunctive in nature. Moreover, a theology of a particular religion is part of that religion and, thus, essential to that religion and inseparable from it. The separation of a theology from its religion constitutes deracination. What is necessary is a truly interreligious conversation that resists such conflation and erasure of origins.

There is no doubt that Clooney has taken interreligious engagement to a whole new level. However, he does so at the expense of discouraging unique theological claims. Not only does Clooney generalize that Christian theology is not *entirely separate* from Hindu theology, he advocates a minimization of particular theological claims in order to promote interreligious dialogue and debate.

> The four chapters thus offer examples in support of the thesis that there is *no good reason today to keep theological traditions separate from one another as if Christian theology is something entirely separate from Hindu theology or vice versa.* While there may be some beliefs, practices, and creedal formulations justly recognized as unique to particular traditions, *almost all of what counts as theological thinking is shared across religious boundaries.* It makes sense therefore to *minimize the number of theological claims possible unique to traditions by a Comparativist's Razor*: theological ways of understanding faith, reading, conceptualizing, and arguing are *presumed not to be tradition-specific unless a case for this specificity* is put forward and argued plausibly in the broader interreligious context. While we can and should respect the tendency of theologians to distinguish themselves from others and to discover special and attractive qualities in their own theology, there is *no value in respecting this tendency* to the point where it blocks thinking across religious boundaries.[30]

Commenting on such monolithic interpretations, John Thatamanil, utilizing the work of Paulo Gonçalves, suggests that generating homogeneity "serves the interests of those who aspire to gain control over a tradition."[31] In no way am I suggesting that Clooney seeks to gain control over Hinduism, however, Clooney presupposes homogeneity to the point that he makes some broad universal meta claims on behalf of various religions traditions, if not all. As he writes:

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

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[30] Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 165. Emphasis mine.
[31] As quoted in Paul Hedges, "*The Old and New Comparative Theologies*," 1132.

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.[32]

The collapsing of categories by creating non-separable theologies, the claim that Hindu theology is somehow similar to Christian theology, the discouraging of particular theological claims in favor of interreligious engagements serve as examples of Clooney's generalizing and essentializing tendencies in comparative theology. As I will note later, even the category "God" is not to be considered normative for interreligious engagements.

Clooney's method of NCT relativizes the truth claims of the Other as well as those of the home tradition. This assumed homogeneity or "pretend pluralism," as Stephen Prothero likes to call it, destroys the religious fabric of each tradition by denying uniqueness.[33] Even the word "God" becomes problematic because some religions do not have the notion of God like Jainism or Buddhism. Rita Gross argues that the term theology is an, "oxymoron" when applied to Buddhism which is a non-theistic religion![34] Not only is the word "God" problematic to some religions,

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[32] Clooney, *Comparative Theology,* 115. Emphasis mine.
[33] Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World – and Why their Differences Matter* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 19.

but also the theological, historical-cultural baggage that is associated with the term becomes problematic. When we use the word "God," whose idea of God is being invoked: the Christian God with its Trinitarian concept, or the Islamic concept of *tawhid* which stresses on the indivisible oneness of God, or the Hindu concept of God which indicates both form and formlessness, matter, spirit, and phenomenon? Prothero paradoxically notes:

> No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same. Capitalism and socialism are so obviously at odds that their differences hardly bear mentioning. The same goes for democracy and monarchy. Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same, and this view resounds in the echo chamber of popular culture, not least in Dan Brown's multi-million-dollar *Da Vinci Code* franchise.[35]

Theologians have long moved on from locating a common essence in religions to the recognition that religions although belonging to the same family, possess traits of such varying degrees, so that just on the basis of the presence of these traits one may not assume similarity. Prothero argues that, "there are tall people in short families (none of the men in Michael Jordan's family was over six feet tall"[36] and that "the world's religious rivals are clearly related, but they are more like second cousins than identical twins. They do not teach the same doctrines. They do not perform the same rituals. And they do not share the same goals."[37]

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[34] Rita M. Gross, "Buddhist Theology," in *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, ed. Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 57-59.
[35] Prothero, *God is Not One,* 12.
[36] Ibid., 34.
[37] Ibid.

Aaron W. Hughes critiques the "omnibus" term "Abrahamic religions" and its usage that suggests a common denominator, or a shared ground, between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[38] He traces the origin of this term to a post September 11, 2001 context, to a book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* by journalist and editor Bruce Feiler. Feiler sought to create peace, and ecumenism between these religions by creating a foundation in Abraham that would embody monotheistic ideals and ethical behavior.[39] This category, "Abrahamic religions," soon found its way into the academy forging its way through interreligious dialogue to break barriers. Hughes argues that the category does not account for the differences in the way Abraham is understood in these traditions, and finds its presence in the academy problematic. Hughes contends that his "*problem is not with the data*, but with the *category that functions as the guiding and organizing principle of data*. It is not simply the case that we must replace "Abrahamic religions" with another, less ideologically loaded term. *Nor is it just a matter of words or semantics.* Rather, I suggest that this critique gets to the *very heart of how we organize data.*"[40]

Hughes further argues that,

> Abrahamic religions" here functions as an *exemplum of a larger issue* in the academic study of religion: *how do we create and use terms and categories*? *What do these terms and categories contribute to disciplinary formation*? Unless we are cautious of whence our categories derive, *if we simply import interfaith vocabulary and assume that it then performs analytical work, our attempts then to understand religion as a social and cultural practice become highly problematic.* Within this context, "Abrahamic religions," like so many

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[38] Aaron W. Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.
[39] Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions,* 14.
[40] Ibid., 5.

other categories we employ in the academic study of religion is both, grounded and invested in *quasi-theological and ecumenical desires.*[41]

Hughes makes a strong point in terms of awareness about the categories that we deploy in theological studies. Why do we use what we use, our intentionality in using particular categories, their historical origin, and how they function in our theological endeavor are all important questions that the new comparative theology needs to reflect on.

Purushottama Bilimoria makes a "general claim that comparative philosophy of religion is mistakenly built on two dogmas: (1) comparative religion and (2) natural (or philosophical) theology *per se.*"[42] He argues that,

> There is an *inexorable imperative to compare,* simply because things present themselves as similar, or different, or both. But this enterprise is fraught with difficulties: just *what does one compare, how does one choose* what to compare, or *why*, and through what *methodological and epistemic tools*, and *who* is it that carries out the tasks, arranges the comparative material, and *sets the terms for the judgments to follow*? There are *epistemological question of details, descriptions, analysis, and explanation*, and the *approach or disciplines that inform the processes of religious investigation.* Furthermore, how or *what does one compare if the categories in the typology of beliefs, crucial to understand one side of the symbolic system juxtaposed, are decisively absent in or irrelevant to the other tradition or system.*[43]

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[41] Ibid., 6.

[42] Purushottama Bilimoria, "What is the "Subaltern" of the Philosophy of Religion," in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion,* eds. Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew Irvine (Dordrecht: Springer. 2009), 10.

[43] Ibid. Emphasis mine.

Bilimoria raises some relevant questions that are related to methodology and the project of comparison itself. We need to consider not just the "why" and the "how" of the comparative project, but also the fact that sometimes no comparison is possible at all. For example, what happens when one compares the idea of a savior in Christianity to something similar in Hindu theology, and finds that no such concept exists? Or what happens if one tries to compare the concept of sin to a Hindu concept and finds that such a notion does not exist in Hindu theology? Conversely, what if one tries to compare the understanding of karma to that of Christianity? Not only do we need to consider the absence of certain concepts, but we also need to consider the fact that images, texts, or certain doctrines have a semblance of unity but that outward unity is discerned to be irreducible upon further study.

Bilimoria argues that religions are "organic wholes," and that isolation or removal of parts in the process of comparisons damages and distorts reality. He argues if it would make sense to compare say, "the ritual consuming of animal blood in Australian Aboriginal religion and compare it with the consumption of wine as the 'blood of Christ' in the Christian Eucharist, or with the alleged blood thirsty tendencies of the Hindu Goddess Kali. Again, would it make sense to compare the Aboriginal Serpent rainbow with Vishnu on the serpent in the Hindu pantheon?"[44] I think that each religion is structurally and essentially different and that the parts that make up the whole supplement each other. Plucking out a particular part whether it is text, image, or a doctrine from the 'whole' results in isolation and alienation. Religions are 'organic wholes' that are ontologically, epistemologically, metaphysically, and teleologically different, so much so that they are irreconcilable with other religions. Prothero argues that religions have different problems and therefore different goals. In his book *God is Not One* he uses a "four-part approach to

[44] Bilimoria, "What is the "Subaltern,"19.

religions: a problem, a solution to the problem (goal), technique/techniques to move away from the problem, and exemplars who chart this path."[45] In this pattern we discern an ontology, epistemology, and certain metaphysical claims that support the telos.

Clooney's method in comparative theology relativizes the truth of the religious Other as well as that of the home tradition. The flattening of identities is a form of relativizing in which particular truth claims are always viewed in conjunction with someone else's religion and never on their own. In this kind of method, Christianity can never claim Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, nor can Muhammad be the last prophet. Religions are non-comparable, unless they are denominations within a religion, or have had a clear source of influence with each other. Each religion has its own starting point that does not necessarily equate, or measure up with other religions. By constant comparisons and assumptions of similarities, particular truth claims are reduced to the minimum degree so that they are made palatable and universalized. Clooney argues that comparativists have much to learn from each other and from other traditions by engaging theology on common topics like "the nature of the world, existence of God, etc." He argues that:

> the common features of human reasoning make it possible for believers in many different traditions at least to understand one another *and possibly to agree on topics such as the nature of the world* as a dependent reality, *the existence of God,* the *qualities and activities of God, the possibility that God might become embodied*, and the idea that *God speaks to humans in particular words.* Such points remain liable to argument, but *arguability indicates some common ground.* If faith is articulated in reasonable terms and defended reasonably,

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[45] Prothero, *God is Not One*, 63.

then that *reasoning provides a shared theological ground,* and intelligent disagreements become possible in an interreligious context. Hindu God, Christian God highlights this *shared ground* by demonstrating how much Christian and Hindu theologians share on several important theological issues.[46]

Clooney's methodological approach has created a supranatural, mythopoeic place where people agree with one another and concur with him, "that Jesus is Lord, but I cannot now assert that Siva is not Lord nor that Narayana did not graciously undergo embodiment in order to enable humans to encounter their God." [47]

Clooney's NCT combines interreligious reflection and practice of dialogue into one principle with correlating poles in an unhealthy fashion. Philosopher of religion Ninian Smart has referred to the seven "dimensions" of religion: the ritual, narrative, experiential, institutional, ethical, doctrinal, and material dimensions.[48] These dimensions may make up a tradition in varying degrees so that each of these supplement one another to make up the religious whole. To engage in interreligious dialogue then, would mean to engage the entire religion in its whole and not just its intellectual dimension. It seems to me that Clooney does not really engage in the practice of dialogue but in some kind of quasi-interreligious engagement that exists in its own silo without the presence of the religious Other.

Lastly, Clooney's NCT is unaware of its own prejudice. Clooney's choice of texts over and above rituals, narrative, experience, institution, ethics, and material dimensions, reflect his Christian prejudice.

While dialogical accountability *may be* primarily

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[46] Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 8-9. Emphasis mine.
[47] Ibid., 181.
[48] Prothero, *God is Not One,* 33.

actualized in shared experience, social interaction, and actual theological conversation, it also proceeds fruitfully as a *textual dialogue* in which one reads and ponders the great ideas of other traditions. Dialogue does not end with texts and ideas, but it can begin and flourish by reliance on the written word. As opportunities allow, one can also engage in a living dialogue with believers who belong to those traditions, but for *most of us*, *most of the time*, our theological dialogue will be *primarily textual*.[49]

We have already observed Müller's approach of privileging the written text over the other oral-aural dimensions of the Hindu tradition, Clooney's approach reflects a similar mentality. We also observe Clooney's preferential choice of a theistic tradition over non-theistic, or trans-theistic traditions that exist in India. As Clooney states,

In a theistic tradition, the goals of theology may in the end also be reduced to the simpler aim of knowing a loving God more completely and intelligently. As an intellectual discipline, though, *theology occurs when religious people scrutinize their own faith traditions* with an eye toward understanding (and then living) that faith more adequately. By theological scrutiny, the faith becomes clearer to the community's insiders and, often enough, to outsiders too.[50]

Again, the notion that theology occurs upon scrutiny reflects a Western bias of faith seeking understanding, where theories, concepts, and intellectual reasoning is preferred over the experiential dimension of a religion. In another place Clooney argues,

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[49] Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 10. Emphasis mine.
[50] Ibid., 7.

More broadly, Hindu God, Christian God is meant to
support the possibility that positions such as these four
can be *normative, provided they are tested and
reconceived* in an interreligious, comparative, and
dialogical context. This book is therefore more than
simply a comparative study or set of theories about how a
Christian might go about learning from non-Christians. As
I will show in the following chapters, these themes are
acceptable to most (though not all) Christian theologians
and to many Hindu theologians as well.[51]

Clooney, unaware of the prejudices of comparative theology,
seeks to create a framework that makes Christianity the normative
lens from which all other religions must be viewed. Although he talks
about testing and reconceiving these normative claims, these are not
necessary because each religion has already tested and conceived its
claims for its particular historical cultural setting. As a side note, I
would like to add that we have not even begun to unpack the
western bias of Christianity that maybe summarized perfectly in
Grace Jantzen's words,

The philosophy of religion in the West has largely
assumed a male, "omni-everything" God. As a Bishop
wrote in Church time a few years ago, "God is a relatively
genderless deity." We need only add that he is also white,
and that he favors democracy, the free market economy,
and the USA/UK. It is of course always immediately added
that God does not have a body, and therefore has neither
color and gender; and that God loves all people equally.
But lurking behind the denial is the imaginary: the body
that God does not have is male and white. And probably
he speaks English.[52]

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[51] Ibid.,13.
[52] Bilimoria, "What is the "Subaltern," 3.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically examined the method in Clooney's NCT and argued that it parallels Max Müller's OCT in that it is Eurocentric, hegemonic, and homogenous in nature, guilty of relativizing and universalizing tendencies. Categories like "Abrahamic religions" and "comparative theology" flatten differences and do not account for particular religious footprints and are quasi-theological categories. I further argued that Clooney's NCT make meta-statements that relativizes the truth of its own tradition as well as of the Other, while remaining unaware of its own prejudices. I argued that religions as organic wholes have ontological, epistemological, metaphysical, and teleological differences that do not immediately lend themselves to comparisons that are irreconcilable and incommensurable. Taking into consideration all of the aforementioned critiques, I believe that that the assumptions of the discipline ought to be revised and a new methodology be constructed.

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