

# Comparative Theology

*Deep Learning Across Religious  
Borders*

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## *Chapter 1*

# Religious Diversity and Comparative Theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Diversity around Us*

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

### *Diversity within Us*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Distinguishing Comparative Theology from Related Disciplines*

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

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

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

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

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

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

In distinction from the preceding ventures:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Comparative Theology and the Academic Study of Religions*

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

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

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

### *Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue*

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



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

### *Comparative Theology and the Theology of Religions*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Comparative Theology Autobiographically Grounded*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *On the Limits of This Book*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

### *Looking Ahead*

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

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

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

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