

# Pluralism: The Future of Religion

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# Introduction

After a century in which history seemed at first to be opening into a millennium of social and technological progress but then collapsed amid two devastating wars, the catastrophic contradictions of failed and discredited ideologies, and the dehumanizing effects of amoral, runaway technologies, it is no surprise that the notion of progress is now discredited as a naïve, progressivist fantasy. So a book presuming to speak about the future of religion may seem as dated as the hope of many Western Christian theologians and idealist philosophers a century ago that the twentieth century would be a liberal Christian century fulfilling a millennialist vision of cooperating sciences, philosophies, theologies, and religions. Contrary to that fervent hope, the twentieth century closed with stalemated progressive theologies, regression to inclusivist, confessionalist, and constructivist approaches to religion, and the resurgence (except, for the most part, in the academy) of traditionalist and sometimes fundamentalist theologies.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Barth prophetically foretold the logic of this unanticipated antimodernist shift in Christian theology when he turned against his liberal teachers at the onset of the Great War and, in an abrupt return to revelation, created an abrasive, antithetical theological language that became a template for the many antiliberal theological movements that have since undercut liberalism and progressivism with sharp rhetorical language rather than reasoned argument. It may seem anachronistic, then, in this postideological, postliberal, posthistorical, postnarrativist, postmodern, posttheoretical, and postsecular era to speak about pluralism as the future of religion and theology.<sup>2</sup> A claim like this will seem implausibly ambitious to those who remain enthralled by these counterrevolutionary movements. Even more odd to some readers, in an era when the currently dominant particularism in theology and constructivism in the study of mysticism has turned attention to what divides religions rather than unites them, will be my claim in this book that theological and philosophical stances espousing religious pluralism are the only responsible bases for comparative thought about religion. It may appear naïve or arrogant to speak of pluralism as religion's future, but now, when mainstream Christian theologies of religions are dominated by stubbornly parochial expressions of religious particularism, the call to move forward into a more promising, religiously pluralist future is not merely a vain hope but an unavoidable step guaranteed by religious change and the passage of time.

## Pluralism and the overcoming of inclusivism

This historical optimism that sees pluralism as inevitable is grounded not in a progressivist philosophy of history but in the irrevocable law of change. This law applies in our daily lives, in history, in biology, and in the rise and fall of universes. It applies in our neighborhoods and families, and also in the affairs of nations and empires, as well as to the supposedly unchanging truths of philosophy and religion. Nothing remains the same, and the eternal verities of one age are curiosities for another. This is not merely a skeptical, historicistic, and evolutionary view of things, for it is inscribed within the heart of critical religious thought itself, which turns upon the interplay of positive, cataphatic attempts to articulate a vision of life and negative, apophatic criticism of the inadequacies of these visions of life. The inevitable limitations of religious and philosophical visions of life guarantee change and pluralism, since no set of formulas, practices, or teachings devised in the language of one time and place can be expected to retain its significance indefinitely or to attain universal acceptance. The limitations that apophatic criticism reveal guarantee, in turn, a pluralism of ever new attempts to present substantive, cataphatic visions of the world. Thus, the passing from the scene of the currently dominant religions as they fade away or slowly morph into their successors is as certain as any other kind of change. So we need not worry—nor can we hope—that any inclusivist strategy for preserving a particular religious tradition will survive deep into the far human future (if we have one).

The claim that pluralism is the future of religion is also based upon the inability of any particular religious teaching to secure for itself universal assent that it is final and normative for all of humanity. This is the central idea grounding what I call “apophatic pluralism,” which holds that since no verbal formulas, as products of history and specific contexts and communities, can be final or normative, religious pluralism should be the default stance of responsible religious thought. For no matter how internally coherent a body of religious teachings may seem to convinced insiders, it will inevitably fail to persuade those who are not inclined to be persuaded by it, even when it puts forward its best arguments or its most forceful claims (or threats).

If religious teachings were truths on the order of basic scientific facts, interreligious agreement would be less elusive than it is. But because no common, nontradition-specific method of validating specific bodies of religious teachings is available, religious truth, when seen as identical with the doctrines of this or that religion, will remain a local matter, like the mores of different cultures. Consequently, if the central teachings of the world’s religions are taken as making true but contrary and nonnegotiable claims about history and the unfolding of life in the cosmos, then no doctrinal resolution of these conflicting claims will be possible at the level of doctrine. (Other solutions, including seeing these teachings as noncognitive, symbolic, or as expressions of cultural arrangements or biological causes are possible but are not the focus of this book.)

All theologizing conducted as if a specific body of religious doctrine, taken literally, were adequate to reality and thus irreformable inevitably leads to impasses and dead ends. No exit is possible from these impasses through more doctrinal argument, more

open inclusivisms, more refined apologetics, renewed appeals to authority or revelation, or calls for greater faith or deeper commitment. Since none of these doctrinal systems can evade the inevitable dethroning of absolutist pretensions that occurs through what I call “departicularization,”<sup>3</sup> only temporary refuge can be found in inclusivism, as is seen in the increasingly implausible *ex post facto* and *ad hoc* arguments developed to defend the finality of favored bodies of doctrines by leading inclusivist theologians of religions. In the end, no one remains persuaded by these inclusivistic evasions of the truth of pluralism, including later inclusivists in inclusivistic traditions. Consequently, no form of inclusivism can hold out forever against departicularization. It must either retreat into an exclusivism that simply repeats doctrine without discussion (but even this stance stands on shifting ground as the flow of history slowly modifies and replaces one religious tradition with others) or it must go forward into a pluralism based on the above principles.

An inclusivist critic of apophatic pluralism might argue that these claims about language and doctrine are themselves hegemonic and inclusivist, which proves that apophatic pluralism is itself just one more expression of inclusivism or exclusivism (a view that I will examine in more depth in the coming chapters). But this criticism fails to distinguish second-order critiques of language from first-order substantive claims. For example, theologian of religions Kristin Beise Kiblinger claims that Buddhist inclusivists and pluralists “want to treat emptiness as an antidote to all positions rather than [as] itself one position alongside others.”<sup>4</sup> But in response, a Mahāyāna Buddhist teacher would likely quote Nāgārjuna, who pronounced that

“the Victors say that Emptiness is the casting aside of all views. But those who hold emptiness as a view are said to be incurable [*asādhya*].”<sup>5</sup>

The significant point here is that the Mahāyāna notion of *śūnyatā*, like other apophatic critical conceptions, refers to the second-order critical activity of evaluating first-order substantive discourse. As with apophatic criticism in any religious tradition of its first-order doctrinal usage in light of the ultimately ineffable character of reality, the Buddhist teaching about *śūnyatā* is not a doctrinal construction. It is, on the contrary, the application to religious language of the insight that language and reality diverge. Only naïveté or dogmatism would attempt to identify these clearly different uses of language, since they cannot be reduced to each other. To deny the distinction between substantive doctrinal claims and insight into the limits of such claims is to imply the elevation without final negation of a historically conditioned religious language to ultimate status. Such an approach to resolving the inconclusive strife of first-order cataphatic doctrines offers only the prospect of more first-order cataphatic doctrinal strife.

Kiblinger’s claim that emptiness is just another position is an error of this sort, since it attempts to annul the distinction between first-order substantive discourse and second-order critical practice even while paradoxically making use of an implicit second-order principle that seems to be something like this: *Any attempt to evaluate doctrinal expressions is hegemonic* (a position that, of course, is itself also hegemonic).

But the distinction between critical, apophatic insight and specific cataphatic claims and teachings is as old as critical thought itself, as can be seen in Socrates's turning the table on Protagoras by demonstrating that relativism is a self-contradictory view.<sup>6</sup> Even if it remains among the oldest of sophomoric moves in philosophy, pointing out that the rejection of general truths is itself a general truth remains true, and to simply insist that this is only Socrates's opinion would be to fall into Socrates's trap even while trying to avoid it.

Thus, to hold that all things change is not a view on the same level as holding the view that the sun never sets on the British Empire. The truth-value of the latter claim has changed, while the former is as uncontroversial a claim as saying that the set of prime numbers is endless. Like anyone else engaged in critical evaluation of first-order discourses, but in conflict with the logic of her stance, Kiblinger writes from a critical, second-order stance about her chosen domain of first-order objects, theologies of religions and comparative theologies, and she would likely reject any attempt to characterize her criticism of comparative theologies that fail to disclose their underlying theology of religions as just another hegemonic comparative theology. A logical mistake of this sort is like saying that evaluating the various ways of traveling from Berlin to Rome is just another way of traveling from Berlin to Rome.

The apparent truism that pluralists are really inclusivists turns out then to be nothing more than a *tu quoque* fallacy devoid of logical force while remaining rhetorically clever, which accounts for its ability to convince the unwary but not the critical reader. Whether deployed with the awareness that it is fallacious or not, it is the last, futile move of inclusivist theologians who explicitly refuse to generalize about religions or to engage in second-order theorizing and criticism. As a short-term survival strategy, this may make sense, but it will inevitably fail, since the slow process of mutation, or departicularization, that transforms religions into their successors is inevitable and is as unstoppable as change.

Apophatic pluralism, which guarantees that pluralism is the future of religion is, like the Mahāyāna critical practice of śūnyatā or the Christian, Jewish, and Islāmic critical practice of apophatic theology, not itself a substantive, cataphatic position. Apophatic pluralism consists of purely negative, or apophatic, critical observations that deflate inclusivist illusions about the epistemic prowess, normativity, and ultimacy of cataphatic religious doctrines. Apophatic pluralism is thus not a new, cataphatic religious teaching, since its practice is essential to the purification of doctrine and revitalization in the ongoing religious life of humanity. Rather than signaling the negation of religion, apophatic pluralism shows how religions continually renew or replace themselves through the rise of new religious forms and movements. Despite postmodern questioning of general theoretical claims and grand views of history, it is clear that pluralism is the future of religion. Not only is the ongoing succession of ever new religious forms guaranteed by the temporal limits of human languages, but the incapacity of any religious tradition to make a final, universally accepted case for itself guarantees that no ancient, contemporary, or future religion will be able to install itself as the one, true religion for all of humanity. Apophatic pluralism, then, will as surely

be inscribed in the core of all future religions as it has been in the core of each of the religions that the human mind has until now inspired.

The inevitability of apophasic pluralism does not depend upon the goodwill of exclusivists and inclusivists, or upon pluralists' success at getting others to agree with pluralist views, or even upon the correctness of any specific version of pluralism. This is no more a matter or argument than is the reality of aging and death. The transitoriness of religious forms, like all material, biological, and cultural forms, guarantees that no form of religion will long remain in its current form, thus negating any claim to universal normativity. Even if, as is likely, no inclusivists will credit this view so long as they are focused only on the near future or the imagined future of their tradition, it remains the case that pluralism as an invariable principle governing the succession of historical forms is inevitable. As a subjective and communal experience, inclusivism, at least in the short term, may seem to the inclusivist as solid a reality as a mountain, yet the view from outside these traditions supports the claim that pluralism is as inevitable as the erosion over time of the highest ranges of mountains.

## An overview of coming chapters

In the following chapters, I will fill out this argument by first providing an overview of the current antpluralist position in the theology of religions, which has dead-ended in an inclusivist impasse after a bold opening in the 1970s to pluralism. This return to forms of particularism such as exclusivism and inclusivism, as well as the strategy of equating pluralism with particularism, are due, in part, to traditionalism and deference to the limitations of orthodox religion, and in part, to a contrarian opposition to liberal, pluralist theologies that is reminiscent of Barth's antimodernist turn against the liberal theologies of the nineteenth century (and the contrarian, illiberal political and theological mood that prevails as of this writing in parts of the USA, where much of this discussion occurs). Yet, because no orthodoxy can be final given the inevitable changes the passage of time brings and also because of the formal limitations of language, such apparently bold returns to tradition will inevitably involve *ad hoc* and *ex post facto* interpretive strategies (nicknamed "epicycles" by John Hick after the theory-saving devices devised to save Ptolemaic geocentrism<sup>7</sup>). Yet, as I will argue, these flimsy devices can never be anything but unpersuasive to the unpersuaded. Having demonstrated the implausibility of illiberal, antpluralist theologies of religions, I will then present what I think is an indefeasible justification, based on syncretism and departicularization, for the theory of apophasic pluralism. I will then explore the potential of the Upaniṣads and the New Testament as witnesses to apophasic pluralism, with the result that the Upaniṣads are shown to tend toward apophasic pluralism, despite conventional interpretations of them as inclusivistic, and that the New Testament is shown to be essentially an inclusivist text, with a latent pluralism that can serve as the basis of an apophasic pluralist overcoming of its relatively few and contestable exclusivist passages. Finally, I will tease out the logic of apophasic pluralism through a thought experiment that I call the Prisoners' Parable.

In the concluding chapter, I will trace the outlines of an apophatic, pluralist interpretation of the enduring aspects of human religiosity that is both postsecular and postconstructivist. I will suggest that, despite constructivist and reductionist attempts to deny to religion its own independent sphere of competence, religious studies does, in fact, possess its own method for dealing with the intensions<sup>8</sup> that regularly arise in religious traditions. As I develop this claim in light of a glance at the new cognitive science of religion, I will show the inadequacy of the dominant constructivism, which reduces religious traditions to merely local doctrinal formulations devoid of a larger explanatory framework. I will then suggest that the method native to religious studies is both comparative and religious (rather than merely cultural) in that it proposes a religious, or spiritual, interpretation of life that takes its cues from the recurrent ideas that appear ever and again in the world's many religious traditions. Over against a merely secular and cultural view of religion that take scientific explanations as the ultimate arbiter of truth, I will develop the three steps of the method native to religious studies in light of a definition of religion that sees it as pointing to an immaterial realm of beatitude and deathlessness. This method begins with the local, ethnographic studies of religious traditions that are the current staple of the field. It then ranges over these traditions in search of the general features of the sacred upon which a spiritual view of life, as opposed to a merely scientific or cultural understanding of life, can be grounded. Finally, because no such expression, whether local or universal, can evade the limitations placed upon language by finitude, an apophatic negation of these religious teachings will point us toward the ineffable source of the self-generating dynamism that ever and again calls forth new forms of religious life, expression, and practice.

And yet, as I will argue in the concluding pages of this book, authentic spirituality and religion are not merely apophatic, or negative, for the contemporary return of cataphatic, or affirmative, religious views of life, is inevitable after a long period of critical treatment of religion and its subordination to scientific and cultural explanations and interpretations. The dialectical interplay of the apophatic and the cataphatic is as inevitable and inseparable as the interplay of night and day, and just as periods of high, cataphatic theorizing are chastened by succeeding periods of critical, apophatic negation, so this current period of secular and materialistic negation of the spiritual heritage of humanity has necessarily sponsored the rise of new cataphatic quests for ultimate meaning. While the perspective of apophatic pluralism presented in these pages begins from the negative judgment that it is not possible to secure universal assent for any constructed and malleable body of religious teachings, apophatic pluralism is not a mere negativism and skepticism in the service of an antireligious view of life. The ultimate point of origin of apophatic pluralism is a lively sense of the ineffable<sup>9</sup> but vital character of whatever is ultimately real, along with a genuine but not servile openness to its plural expressions in the languages, rituals, laws, and spiritual practices of the world's many religious and philosophical traditions. Rather than spelling the end of religion—a hope that will remain empty as long as human beings remain marked by finitude and deficiency—apophatic pluralism is a sign that, as in the present and the

past, new religious movements will continue to spring up as if miraculously from the ineffable depth of life to guide us on our planetary journey to wholeness.

## An excursus on terminology

Before taking up the argument of this book in the coming chapters, it may be helpful to the reader to clarify at this point some of the technical vocabulary used in this book.

### The cataphatic/apophatic distinction

The basic argument of this book turns on the ancient but always useful device of distinguishing between positive, or cataphatic, and negative, or apophatic, predication. The terms *apophatic* and *cataphatic* are derived from Greek terms that date back at least as far as Aristotle, where they are logical terms that mean “affirmation” and “negation.”<sup>10</sup> These technical terms in Western theological and philosophical studies of mysticism and philosophical theology name the two most basic ways of talking about being or the divine. The affirmative way (*cataphasis*) approaches the divine through analogy, metaphor, and the attribution of predicates to the sacred, while the negative way (*apophasis*) systematically negates these expressions in order to open the way to an encounter with being, or the divine, free from the limited constructs generated by language, the mind, and culture. This distinction has been expressed in numerous ways in the West, such as the positive and the negative ways, positive and negative theology, the *via eminentiae* and the *via remotionis*, the *via negationis* (or *negativa*) and the *via affirmativa* (or *positiva*), *thesis* and *aphairesis*,<sup>11</sup> as well as *cataphasis* and *apophasis*, from which the adjectives *cataphatic* and *apophatic* are derived.

If, in this book, I use words derived from the Greek *apophasis* and *cataphasis* to describe negative and positive predication, this is not out of any sense that Western philosophy and theology are superior on this topic to Indian notions of negative and positive predication, but rather to the circumstance that these terms have a long history in Western studies of mysticism, theology, and the philosophy of religion. Perhaps, the place of these terms could be complemented by a pair of terms from Indian philosophy, *adhyāropa* (or *adhyāsa*) and *apavāda*, which can be translated as “superimposition” or “wrong attribution,” and “de-superimposition” or “the withdrawal of the *adhyāropa* or superimposed attribute.”<sup>12</sup> These terms have similar but not identical functions to *cataphasis* and *apophasis*. (One significant difference is that the Greek terms lack the quasicreative and quasidestructive force of the Sanskrit pair, which involves adding to and removing from *nirguna brahman* the ultimately false but conventionally real attributes of *saguṇa brahman*.<sup>13</sup>) And, at least for now, to speak in English of *adhyasic* and *apavadic* modes of predication, which might be good candidates to replace or complement the Greek and Latin terms, seems unduly neologistic. This can change, of course, and such a change when dealing with Indian texts in Western languages, might be preferable to current usage.

## The tripolar typology: Exclusivism/inclusivism/pluralism

Although the terms of the tripolar typology, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are now widely familiar and virtually canonical,<sup>14</sup> a few words of definition may still be helpful. *Exclusivism* may be defined as taking one of the many available bodies of religious teachings as final to the exclusion and even negation of other bodies of religious teaching; *inclusivism* may be defined as a weaker or minimal expression of exclusivism that takes terminology in the home tradition as the “final vocabulary”<sup>15</sup> to interpret all religious phenomena; and *pluralism* (as a theological and philosophical stance rather than just as the reality of religious diversity or diverse religious views<sup>16</sup>) may be defined as the view that the limitations of language necessarily imply the ceaseless proliferation of religious languages, none of which can be universally plausible.

Against charges that this familiar typology is inadequate, Perry Schmidt-Leukel offers a plausible and logically precise reinterpretation and reaffirmation of the typology.<sup>17</sup> While I agree with his rejections of dubious views like Gavin D’Costa’s claim that “pluralism and inclusivism are subtypes of exclusivism,”<sup>18</sup> I think that the typology can be further refined and simplified in the following ways. First, for the sake of brevity, I often include exclusivism and inclusivism under the term “particularism,”<sup>19</sup> since both can be seen as stronger and weaker versions of the view that one particular body of religious teaching and practice is final and, therefore, exclusively binding on humanity. This leads to a second possible modification: the simplification of the tripolar typology to a binary typology in which particularism is taken as the negation of “nonparticularism” (i.e., pluralism). On this approach, exclusivism and inclusivism can be seen as stronger and weaker expressions of particularism, while nonparticularism (or pluralism) can also be distinguished into a stronger version that tries to construct a universal religious teaching or practice based on the many available religious traditions and a weaker version that holds that no contextually shaped body of religious teachings can justify a claim that it is final, normative, and universally binding.<sup>20</sup>

It is not necessary, however, to completely abandon the tripolar typology, since this last suggested simplification can be achieved by viewing each of the three standard categories as located on a spectrum of positions with weaker and stronger versions of each category that resemble the adjacent categories. Stronger versions of exclusivism may hold militantly to the falsity of all other views than the favored one, a stance that can easily sponsor activities designed to insult, uproot, or replace religious others. Exclusivism can thus move beyond this spectrum of religious views altogether to become a political stance that justifies policies of organized violence against religious others. Weaker versions of exclusivism may look for loopholes such as the mystery of election or degrees of culpability as conditions for the practical waiving of the need for belief in the unquestionable truth of the teaching held to be final and without peer. This kind of exclusivism begins to resemble inclusivism.

Stronger versions of inclusivism may give a provisional value to other bodies of religious teaching by seeing them as deficient or incomplete expressions of the favored teaching. They resemble exclusivism by holding to the finality and normativity of one

body of teaching even while inclusivistically granting provisional value to religious teachings and practices other than the favored one. Weaker versions of inclusivism may allow that sincerity of intention without explicit acceptance of the peerless teaching or practice is acceptable, a view that resembles pluralism. Other versions of weaker inclusivism may withhold judgment on other traditions while learning from them, a view that also moves in the direction of pluralism.<sup>21</sup>

Stronger versions of pluralism may be based upon attempts at constructing a universal religious teaching or practice, a strategy that, positively, can suggest the outlines of a general religious view of life, or that, negatively, resembles inclusivism by suggesting that there is one final religious teaching or practice required for all human beings. Weaker versions of pluralism may see the availability of multiple bodies of internally plausible but malleable religious teachings as negating absolute claims for any of them. These weaker versions of pluralism see the existence of multiple self-consistent and comprehensive bodies of religious teachings as a function of the limitations of language and thus as necessitating modesty about claims that any corpus of religious teachings is final and binding upon the whole of humanity. This version of pluralism may move beyond the spectrum of religious views altogether, since it resembles secular, historical, literary, and social-scientific approaches to the study of religion.

## **Departicularization**

I have coined the neologism “departicularization” to express in a single word the process whereby every religious tradition slowly unravels itself as it adapts to cultural change (this process is also commonly called “syncretism”). As I view departicularization, it has two subprocesses, namely: religious hybridity and departicularization. New religious movements arise as innovative syntheses of previously unrelated religious ideas and practices under the impulse of creative innovators. These creative founders and reformers create new ways of being human religiously that blend formerly unrelated religious elements into new, hybrid expressions. Over time, these hybrid forms of religiosity, should they find a niche and survive, continue to change as they adapt to new circumstances. Ultimately, as they die out or morph into their successor(s), the unique forms that they brought to the overall complement of human religious forms fade from the scene, or are departicularized.<sup>22</sup> This process of departicularization is inevitable for every religious tradition, since it is an unavoidable result of the ongoing movement of time and history and of changes in culture. Against the background of a hundred thousand years or more of prerecorded and recorded human history, to claim that any particular religion is the final religion and essential to the spiritual life of humanity is like saying that one particular society is the final society and essential to the social life of humanity. As influential as Rome was, and as important as the USA, the European Union, the Republic of India, etc., may be to many of us today, none of these societies is final nor essential to human well-being. If human life continues for another 100,000 years or more, will any significant trace of

any of these societies remain? One can only wonder at what the successor religions to today's religions will look like a dozen or so millennia from now—if humans survive that long. Will any significant trace of today's religions persist in those future religions? Viewed against such a broad vista, departicularization can be seen as the future of each religious tradition, whether it creatively embraces it or whether the passage of time forcibly departicularizes it. Given the realities of syncretism, religious hybridity, and departicularization, an apophtic pluralist stance seems, therefore, to be a more ethical and responsible approach to the global diversity of religion than any form of exclusivism or inclusivism.

## **Epicycles**

Likening to epicycles the *ad hoc* and *ex post facto* interpretive devices created by inclusivist theologians to defend the view that this or that religion is final and normative for humanity is a favorite metaphor of pluralist theologians and philosophers of religions. This theological use of the concept of the epicycle can be credited (as noted earlier) to John Hick, who adapted the notion from Ptolemaic astronomers who wanted to “save the appearances” of geocentricity by postulating epicycles, or smaller orbits, centered on the orbits of the planets around the earth to account for irregularities that would later be better explained by the heliocentric theory. Classic examples of epicycles include notions such as the Christian *praeparatio evangelica*, *logos* christologies, Karl Rahner’s concept of anonymous Christians, the Hindu view that the Buddha is the ninth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, and the Jewish notion of a universal Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9.1-17). Each of these makeshift devices stretches the hermeneutical resources of a home tradition to account for religious others within the framework of the home tradition. Epicycles suffer from two defects, however, which make them ultimately unworkable: they are implausible to the members of the target tradition, and they eventually reveal their implausibility even within the home tradition, if that tradition becomes more open to encountering religious others on their own terms.

## **Comparative theology and the theology of religions**

James Fredericks names himself and Francis X. Clooney as the initiators in the late 1980s of “the new comparative theology.”<sup>23</sup> As distinct from the theology of religions, which is concerned with typical patterns of interreligious interactions and their theological significance, comparative theology, in their view,<sup>24</sup> attempts to formulate a common theology through careful comparative and critical reflection on the texts and practices of different religions.<sup>25</sup> In the wake of the neo-Reformation reversion to exclusivism, as expressed in the influential writings of Karl Barth<sup>26</sup> and Hendrick Kraemer,<sup>27</sup> comparative theology fell into disregard in the decades following the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. The christocentric inclusivism of the older comparative theologies, as symbolized by the efforts of J. N. Farquhar and Nicol Macnicol, also made

them suspect both for exclusivists and pluralists. Although Fredericks and Clooney have clearly and correctly distinguished the roles of these two theological disciplines,<sup>28</sup> they slight the fundamental role of the theology of religions as a needed prolegomenon to comparative theology.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Fredericks holds that “comparative theology should be taken up as an alternative to the theology of religions”<sup>30</sup> and Clooney refers to an “allergy to theory.”<sup>31</sup>

In opposition to this novel stance, Kristin Beise Kiblanger cogently argues that “theology of religions is properly prior to comparative theology,”<sup>32</sup> since it is evidently the case that a comparative theology is predicated upon a theology of religions. Kiblanger points out that even when their theologies of religions remain unacknowledged or covert, the programs of recent comparative theologians “clearly point to unadmitted theology of religions inclinations.”<sup>33</sup> Remarkably, Fredericks admits under her challenge to being an inclusivist, while Clooney comes close to admitting the importance of the theology of religions in his evaluation of her position.<sup>34</sup>

By compelling two of the leading contemporary comparative theologians to come to terms with the theology of religions, Kiblanger has demonstrated that it is naïve, as Fredericks allows,<sup>35</sup> to think that comparative theology can proceed without reference to the theology of religions, even if the relationship remains unthematized. Indeed, as the continual interactions with the theology of religions in this volume suggest, it is impossible to separate the two disciplines,<sup>36</sup> leading this writer to suspect that the desire to suppress the theology of religions in favor of comparative theology is the final strategy of the inclusivist before either retreating into an unargued exclusivism or fully embracing pluralism.

## **Defining religion**

There are at least two major problems with using the word *religion*. The first is the notorious and, I think, exaggerated difficulty of defining *religion* as a concept. (Religious studies scholars are familiar with the habit of offering lists of pithy definitions of religion begun by H. J. Leuba in 1912,<sup>37</sup> so I won’t offer my own list of definitions here.) The range of definitions is not so wide as to indicate that religion is an utterly equivocal concept, since some indications of the direction we can look for an adequate definition are given in the very limits imposed upon our attempts at defining religion. These limitations on the concept of religion can be illustrated by visualizing the many definitions of the concept of religion as ranging along a number of spectra. One spectrum ranges from realistic to stipulative,<sup>38</sup> and another ranges from restrictive to expansive. One can also distinguish between religious or naturalistic definitions of religion.<sup>39</sup>

On the realistic–stipulative spectrum, realistic definitions stress a particular aspect of one or more religious traditions and value it at the expense of other aspects. A realistic definition might be that religion is a concern for the sacred. Stipulative definitions, at the other end of the spectrum, see the use of the word *religion* as arising from more or less arbitrary social practices and thus as not grounded on one or more

typical characteristics of a realistic definition of religion. A stipulative definition might take *religion* as a term of art developed by religious studies scholars that can be applied in various ways according to the needs of the scholar,<sup>40</sup> an approach that reflects the lack of consensus about the meaning of religion among scholars of religion. On the restrictive-expansive spectrum, restrictive definitions narrowly limit religion to only some aspects of religion, thereby failing to encompass all of the phenomena generally associated with religion. A restrictive definition might be that religion is worship of God or *iśvara*, which is too narrow a definition, since it fails to include nontheistic religions within the category of religion. Expansive definitions are overly generous in including phenomena as essential to defining religion, thus rendering the concept vague and ineffective. An expansive definition might be that religion incites intense passion or interest, which is too broad a definition, since it fails to distinguish religion from other basic human activities such as politics, sports, business, entertainment, etc. On the naturalistic-religious spectrum, naturalistic definitions explain religion in nonreligious terms, such as theories grounded in the human and natural sciences. A naturalistic definition might be that religion aids adaptation by building community, which is true as far as it goes, but which fails to capture, similarly to other reductionistic theories, everything that religion means for people. Religious definitions see religion as relating primarily to a realm not discernible to the methods of the natural and social sciences. These kinds of definitions imply the reality of a distinctive, or self-generating, religious aspect of life, which make them generally unacceptable to purely secular approaches to the study of religion. A religious definition might be that religion is oriented to dimensions of reality that, at least in part, escape the purview of the sciences and exceed their powers of explanation.

My own view of religion is that stipulative definitions (and their underlying theories) fail to uncover why human beings refer to some phenomena as religions and not as (or only as) sports, professions, businesses, clubs, associations, corporations, or governments, while naïvely realistic definitions fail to capture the diversity of religious intensions that animate religious people as religious people in their different settings. I also want to frame as expansive a definition as possible for religion without allowing it to fade indistinguishably into other human interests like health, wealth, well-being, truth, social justice, and so forth. And, as will become clear in the following pages, I prefer a religious to a naturalistic definition of religion, since I see religion as irreducibly a part of the human experience as music, poetry, science, and philosophy and, like each of them, concerned with its own proper object.

Thus, I propose as my working definition of religion (and so add my own definition to the inevitable lists of definitions offered in introductory texts and courses): *Religion is the human quest to relate to an immaterial dimension of beatitude and deathlessness.* Clearly a religious definition, this approach avoids the lasting temptation of realism to orient religion toward a singular reality or substance, yet it avoids the failing of stipulative definitions by attempting to say what is unique to religions as distinct from other enterprises such as sports, business, entertainment, or the military (all of which involve ceremonies, values, beliefs, and many other kinds of “religious” activities). My

definition avoids restrictiveness by selecting as religious those activities that are oriented to an immaterial order in which beatitude and deathlessness can be discovered (there may or not be such an immaterial order, but the most salient distinction of religions as religions, whether Buddhism, Christianity, Islām, and so on, is that they purport to give us information about an immaterial dimension of beatitude, or blessedness, and to aid us in becoming acquainted with it. This is not done by economics, sports, entertainment, science, etc.). This definition also avoids expansiveness by discovering a characteristic of religions—their concern with beatitude and deathlessness—that is not shared by other activities (with the exception of some aspects of the arts and philosophy, which sometimes orient people to an immaterial order. This points to another topic, one that I will not address here, of the close relationship between art, religion, and philosophy traditionally considered). The focus on the immaterial order of reality, something that necessarily moves beyond the range of any standard definition of modern science, shows that this is a religious and not a naturalistic definition of religion.

I hold this relatively realistic, somewhat restrictive, and forthrightly religious view of religion because I think that, at least at the level of conventional discourse and experience, there is a sortal, that is, a type or category of entities, called “religion”, as Paul J. Griffiths claims.<sup>41</sup> (Even as probing a critic of the European academic concept of religion as Tomoko Masuzawa has allowed that “the stubborn facticity” of the categories associated with the concept of religion is “obviously not of the European academy’s making.”<sup>42</sup>) Against Griffiths, however, I do not think that this sortal is a natural kind, and I reject categorically the privileging by Griffiths of his version of Christianity.<sup>43</sup> Instead, I would hold that all kinds are what he calls “artifactual,” since the patterns of order that we create or discern are not ultimate or written into the fabric of being. Indeed, notions like “fabric” and “being” are conventions that finally dissolve or mutate into successor terms and concepts (that is, they are departiculized in the language of this book). From the standpoint of apophasic pluralism, which sees the finitude of language as guaranteeing religious pluralism, Griffiths’s beliefs as a Catholic Christian theologian are valid *as far as they go*, which, of course, by definition, is not all the way. For when placed within a large enough temporal frame of multiple thousands of years, the idea that any of the current religions in their evolving forms is the final, normative, and binding religion for all of humanity is untenable. In the end, these beliefs are, like all others, subject to the inevitable transformations and dissolution of departiculization. Although no religious tradition can be final, given the incalculable openness of being, religious traditions can open pathways into deathlessness and beatitude, thereby providing human religiosity in all of its diversity with its irrevocable significance.

The second problem associated with the notion of religion is the often-noted difficulty of using the singular word *religion* to refer to the world’s many traditions of spiritual teaching and practice, a criticism that goes back at least as far as W. C. Smith’s call to drop the use of the word altogether.<sup>44</sup> As currently used,<sup>45</sup> *religion* has its origins in Latin authors like Cicero, Varro, and early Christian apologists and theologians (most importantly, Augustine) writing in Latin. From these sources, the word, which

originally referred to the various cults and sects to which the Romans were quite receptive,<sup>46</sup> developed philosophical overtones through its connection by Cicero to justice and its grounding in philosophical methods of argumentation by the Christian apologists and theologians, with the result that Christianity from almost the beginning began to formulate its teachings in quasiphilosophical form as apparently rational and universally valid propositions.<sup>47</sup> Gradually, Christianity came to see itself as the only true religion, understood as the cult of the one true God, as a way of life oriented to wisdom and justice, and as a quasipropositional body of official teachings, over against the false cults and teachings of the other sects of the Roman world.

The notion of religion as divided between a foundational natural religion accessible apart from special revelation to all reasonable people and a grab bag of less contingent historical, or “positive,” expressions of natural religion arose in early modern Europe as it coped with the plurality of Christian sects that arose in the wake of the Reformation and with the deepening encounter with Islām and, later, with the religions and philosophies of China and India. As the distinction between a natural and revealed religion dissolved in the critical acids of later modern thinkers such as Hume, Kant, and Hegel, *religion* becomes, in the words of Peter Henrici, “a catchall term for a great variety of historic phenomena.”<sup>48</sup> This view of religion has become a central feature of modern Western thinking about religion, in which the world’s spiritual traditions are conceived as discrete entities with distinct doctrinal, legal, and ceremonial boundaries (what John Hick calls “bounded entities”<sup>49</sup>). Although this way of thinking has been mostly discredited in academic circles, it remains as a conceptual centerpiece of thinking about religion in popular apologetics, introductory survey texts, and media analyses of the world’s religions.

Numerous Western terminological alternatives to the word *religion* abound, such as the now outmoded *faiths*, the now quasiderogatory *sects* and *cults*, the overused *religious traditions*, and metaphorical expressions like *wisdom traditions*, *paths*, and *ways*. It is also possible to use terms derived from other traditions, a move that has much to recommend it, since they avoid the rigid lines between idealized religious types that form so familiar a part of the Latin Christian West’s religious thought (which includes the Catholic Church, the classic Protestant churches, and their successors and dissidents). Thus, we might speak about *dharmas*, *margas*, *jiaos*, *daos*, and *shasanas*. But these still sound odd to the Western ear, especially in the anglicized forms given here with English plural endings, although *dharmas* has as much right as *religions* to global usage, since it is a Sanskrit term used widely in Indian-based religions, including Buddhism, which has spread Indian modes of thinking far beyond India’s borders for millennia. In any case, these considerations do nothing to alleviate the difficulty of terminology, even as they indicate the nature of the problem. In the following pages, I will bow to custom and use expressions like *religion*, *religions*, and *religious traditions* because they are familiar, but not yet as outmoded as *faith* or *sects*, nor as neologistic as *dharmas* or *taos*.

A final point about religion relates to the academic discipline of the study of religion rather than to terminological differences. Given the crisis of meaning that

the study of religion now experiences because it has renounced the very subject, an immaterial realm of beatitude and deathlessness, that inspired its beginnings, it may be a good time for religious studies to reclaim the idea that, among its many other features, religion is in some degree *sui generis*, or grounded in its own proper awareness of a realm of knowledge and experience that is prior to and more fundamental than the realm of time and space available to the senses. This idea, which was once central to religious studies through the work of Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, and, though seriously limited by his theology, Karl Barth, will be a shockingly religious claim to materialists, naturalists, and others who reduce religion to cultural and biological processes. Without in any way invalidating the role of the social sciences, cultural studies, and the natural sciences in the academic study of religion, it must be said that none of these disciplines can continue to be thought of as capable of exhaustively explaining the immaterial dimension of religion to which all of the traditions, insofar as they are religious traditions, point.<sup>50</sup> As the global return of religion and the rise of the postsecular stance in religious studies indicate, monological explanatory methodologies cannot invalidate the felt sense of people in all religious traditions that in their most profoundly religious activities they encounter a deathless realm that is not exhausted by the historical, cultural, psychological, biological, and material dimensions of life. The proper response to this religious view of religion should not be the doubling down on old hegemonic and reductionistic methodologies such as methodological materialism, but an acknowledgment that materialism is an underdetermined metaphysical view that cannot be made true by fiat. As an account of all of the evidence and insights produced by science, philosophy, and religion, it competes poorly with idealist views of religion, since idealism has the virtue of being able to account not only for the physical world, as shown by the progress of modern physics over the last century, but it can also account in satisfying first-person terms for the mental realms in which our humanity is experienced and actualized.

Only a religious studies that rejects or ignores a sacred dimension of life can argue that religion is merely a product of the scholar's study<sup>51</sup> and that, therefore, religion has no subject matter of its own. This is a *reductio ad absurdum* that is itself absurd if an idealist view of life is true or is at least plausible. If the study of religion can muster the courage to once again range over all of its carefully collected studies of individual traditions to see that, unlike sports or politics, these traditions as religious traditions relate to an immaterial realm of beatitude and deathlessness, it can rediscover the methodology native to religious studies (about which I will have more to say in the concluding chapter to this book). It would be a shame if the study of religion, a discipline whose ethical principles include allowing the world's traditions to speak in their own terms,<sup>52</sup> were to remain dominated by an alien methodological preference for secular, materialist, cultural, and scientific interpretations that are blind to or explain away the ultimate focus of these traditions on dimensions of being that are not limited to biology, culture, history, and the supposedly "real world" of the senses and the unilluminated mind.

## Notes

- 1 This much-abused term has a specific usage in American religious history, as the literature on this topic shows. The use of the word was not originally pejorative, since it arose among the early architects of the religious rejection of modernism and the Enlightenment by conservative Protestants in the USA and the UK. Their theological views were summarized in *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915), a series of volumes that became the basis of a theological movement that shaped the rise of separatistic fundamentalism in the 1920s and the New Evangelicalism of the 1940s and that, in muted form, has become the mainstream religion of the contemporary USA. The study of fundamentalism as a serious category of academic research began with the publication of George M. Marsden's groundbreaking *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). The use of this rubric as a category of research flourished afterward, culminating in the multivolume, *The Fundamentalism Project* (six volumes, University of Chicago, 1994–2003) under the supervision of Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. The use of the word *fundamentalism* as a category of academic research seems to have faded since the events of September 11, 2001, as the term has come to be associated with terrorists and has become an imprecise and too widely applied term of abuse among New Atheists such as Richard Dawkins. Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson replace “fundamentalism” with “maximalism” in an attempt to undercut pejorative usages of this once very useful term. “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (June, 2010): 478. Yet, evangelical Protestants who continue to call themselves fundamentalists and are recognized as such by other, nonfundamentalist evangelicals continue to serve as self-appointed guardians of the boundaries of evangelical faith through their articulation and defense of the principle of “secondary separation,” which holds that evangelical Christians cannot associate theologically with theological liberals, Catholics, and other Christians whom they see as holding beliefs that are beyond the boundary of orthodoxy. See Kevin T. Bauder, “Fundamentalism,” in *The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, edited by Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 19–49.
- 2 As would be the case if what Tomoko Masuzawa sees as pluralistic “world religions discourse” were merely the way in which Eurocentric Christian hegemonism preserved itself over the course of the last century after the decline of the older dogmatic, apologetic, and evangelical discourse about the religious traditions of the world. *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xiv, 13, 22, 28–9, 33, 89–90, 97, 103, 259, 265, 267, 310–28. Sharada Sugirtharajah thinks that John Hick, the leading contemporary theorist of religious pluralism, would have rejected this approach by pointing out that the practice of religious pluralism has long been present in India. “Introduction: Religious Pluralism—Some Issues,” in *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: An Ongoing Engagement with John Hick*, ed. Sharada Sugirtharajah (Hounds Mills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6. Paul F. Knitter also rejects the notion of pluralism as “a cleverly camouflaged but ultimately exploitative Western imposition” on apophatic and mystical grounds similar to those that I argue for in this book. “Is the Pluralist Model a Western

- Imposition? A Response in Five Voices,” in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 28, 33–6.
- 3 This is my term for the process whereby a religious tradition is inevitably surpassed by another and fades from the scene or morphs into a new form altogether. I will discuss this term more fully later in this chapter.
  - 4 Kristin Beise Kiblanger, in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis Xavier Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 35.
  - 5 Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* 13.8, my translation. David J. Kalupahana translates these lines as: “The Victorious Ones have announced that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views. Those who are possessed of the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible.” *Mūlamadhyamakārikā of Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, trans. David J. Kalupahana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 13.8:223. Robert A. F. Thurman translates the second half in this way, “One who adopts emptiness as a view is thereby pronounced incurable.” “Introduction,” in *The Central Philosophy of Tibet: A Study and Translation of Jey Tsong Khapa’s Essence of True Eloquence*, Robert A. F. Thurman, trans. (1991; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 53.
  - 6 Plato, *Theatetus*, trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford and Benjamin Jowett, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 876:171a.
  - 7 The metaphor that likens inclusivistic attempts to universalize old doctrines to the epicycles, or smaller orbits centered on the circle of the main orbit that were employed to make the Ptolemaic geocentric universe conform to emerging data that eventually led to the Copernican heliocentric universe was invented by John Hick. See, e.g., John Hick, “The Copernican Revolution in Theology,” in *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. John Hick (London: Macmillan, 1973), 123–5; *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1982), 32–36; and “Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims,” in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, ed. John Hick (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), 52–3.
  - 8 Intentions are general notions or ideas that are expressed in concepts and words. Intentions cannot be reduced to their individual instances or expressions. For example, the intension of a tree (i.e., the shared idea of a tree) cannot be reduced to any of the conceptualizations, names, or individual vocalizations that occur in any one language. For a more technical definition of intensions, or “intensional entities,” see *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Intensional entities,” by George Bealer, accessed May 5, 2012, [www.rep.routledge.com.read.cnu.edu/article/X019](http://www.rep.routledge.com.read.cnu.edu/article/X019). Intentions must also be distinguished from intentions, as in personal intentions to do something or other, and intentionality, which is a philosophical notion associated with various schools of phenomenology, which see personal intentions as shaping experience. As an example of the use of the latter term, see Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 63.
  - 9 The recognition of the limits of doctrinal language is indicated in Advaita Vedānta by the term *anirvacanīya*, “inexpressible,” an apophatic notion that has a parallel in one of the most apophasic passages in the New Testament, Rom. 11.33–34, where Paul eulogizes his deity’s ways as *anexichniastos*, or “untraceable.”

- 10 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1139a and *Metaphysics* 4.1107b, *The Perseus Digital Library*, accessed September 3, 2010, [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0051:book=4:section=1007b&highlight=kata/fasin,kata/fasis](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0051:book=4:section=1007b&highlight=kata/fasin,kata/fasis) and [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0053](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0053) (). For an English translation of these terms in *Nicomachean Ethics*, see *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 1947), 425.
- 11 “*Aphairesis* is opposed to *thesis* as negation is opposed to affirmation,” according to the *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, s.v. “Negative Theology,” by Ysabel de Andia, vol. 1., ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste, trans. Antony Levi (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1109. These terms, which are traceable back to Aristotle and Plato, are found throughout *The Mystical Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius*.
- 12 *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (2008 online revision), s.vv. “*apavāda*,” “*adhyāropa*,” accessed September 26, 2010, [www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/mnmonier/](http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/mnmonier/); *Vedānta-Sāra (The Essence of Vedānta)* of Sadānanda Yogīndra, 2nd edn, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002; 2nd edn, first published 1974), 2.32; 4.1. The two terms are defined as the “method or theory of prior superimposition and subsequent denial,” according to John Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), s.v. “*Adhyāropapāvāda*.”
- 13 See Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai’i, 1969), 33, 41–2.
- 14 The categories of the now canonical tripolar typology can be traced back to Alan Race’s *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 7. The validity of the typology has recently been compellingly reasserted by Perry Schmidt-Leukel in “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology—Clarified and Reaffirmed,” in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 13–27. Alongside the many criticisms of this typology and occasional attempts either to abandon it or replace it altogether, is the reasonable and useful attempt by Paul Knitter to extend it by adding a type to the traditional three, which he calls the “acceptance model.” Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 171–237. Summarizing this model, Rita M. Gross writes that “value judgments about the validity of various religions should be suspended in favor of learning more deeply what each of the religions is actually claiming.” Rita M. Gross, “Excuse me, But What’s the Question? Isn’t Religious Diversity Normal?” in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 76. Gavin D’Costa has produced what he sees as an unprecedentedly “differentiated typology” of pluralisms. “Pluralist Arguments: Prominent Tendencies and Methods,” in Karl J. Becker, Ilaria Morali, and Gavin D’Costa, (eds), *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 329. In formulating this new typology, which distinguishes pluralism into four categories and multiple subtypes, he draws upon and modifies earlier attempts at schematizing pluralism by Jacques Dupuis, Alan Race, and Paul Knitter. Becker, Morali, and D’Costa, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, 580n1. D’Costa’s typology is valuable in indicating the varieties of theory (Marxism, mysticism, feminism, etc.) that animate much contemporary and theological reflection upon religious diversity, yet, in keeping with his own forthright rejection of pluralism as “an orthodox option for a Catholic” (Becker, Morali, and D’Costa, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, 329), his new

typology does not come to terms with what I see as the reality of religious pluralism, behind which regress is not possible so long as we retain our current awareness of the historicality of all phenomena. In the typology that I offer here, however, pluralism is an essential feature. For orthodox Christian and genuinely pluralistic theologies of religion, which can withstand the rejection of pluralism by D'Costa (and the Vatican's *Dominus Iesus* declaration against Haight's position), see Roger Haight, "Pluralist Christology as Orthodox," and K. P. Aleaz, "Pluralism Calls for Pluralistic Inclusivism," in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 151–61; 162–75. For *Dominus Iesus*, see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Rome, "Declaration ‘Dominus Iesus’ on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," accessed December 26, 2011, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

- 15 An evocative phrase used by Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 68.
- 16 Chad Meister helpfully distinguishes between *religious diversity*, which refers merely to the fact that there are significant religious differences among adherents of different religions, and *religious pluralism*, which refers to views that encourage such diversity, see salvation and liberation in all religions, and rejects the idea that belonging to any particular religion is essential to salvation and liberation. "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, ed. Chad Meister (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–4. As used in this book, the phrase *religious pluralism*, or *pluralism* for short, will refer to views similar to those indicated by Meister in his definition of *religious pluralism* or to my own version of pluralism, which I call apophtic pluralism. (My own use of the phrase *religious diversity* appears to conform to Meister's definition of that phrase.) Diana Eck has concisely clarified the difference between the two expressions: "... the mere presence of wide-ranging religious diversity is not itself pluralism. Religious pluralism requires active positive engagement with the claims of religion and the facts of religious diversity." *Encountering God*, 192.
- 17 Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism," in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 18–23.
- 18 Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 225. Quoted in Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism," in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 19.
- 19 I discuss this usage further in Kenneth Rose, "Doctrine and Tolerance in Theology of Religions: On Avoiding Exclusivist Hegemonism and Pluralist Reductionism," *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 17:2 (Autumn 1996): 119; "Keith Ward's Inclusivist Theology of Revelations," *New Blackfriars* 79 (April 1998): 171.
- 20 A position that I have called "modest pluralism" in "Toward an Apophtic Pluralism: Beyond Confessionalism, Epicyclism, and Inclusivism in Theology of Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46:1 (Winter 2011): 67–75.
- 21 Kiblinger, "Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology," in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 28, where she follows Paul Griffiths in distinguishing between open and closed inclusivisms. See Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001) 57, 59–60. Griffiths often refers to other

- traditions as “alien religions” (e.g., 59, 129) from which religiously significant truth might nevertheless be learned by the home religion, thus showing that this remains an inclusivistic position.
- 22 Kenneth Rose, “Interspirituality and Unsaying: Apophatic Strategies for Departicularizing Christ and the Church in Current Roman Catholic Mystical Movements,” presented at the 2003 American Academy of Religion’s “Mysticism: The Mysticism Group of the American Academy of Religion,” accessed May 10, 2012, [www.aarmysticism.org/documents/Rose03.pdf](http://www.aarmysticism.org/documents/Rose03.pdf). An abridged version appeared as “Interspirituality”: When Interfaith Dialogue Is but a Disguised Monologue,” *Hinduism Today* 29 (October/November/December, 2007): 54. See also Kenneth Rose, “Is Christianity the Most Universal Faith? A Response to Robison B. James’s *Tillich and the World Religions: Encountering Other Faiths Today*” (Mercer University Press, 2003), *The Bulletin of the North American Paul Tillich Society* 30 (Winter 2004): 15–19.
  - 23 James Fredericks, “Introduction,” in *New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), ix. Also see Nicholson and Locklin, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” 477–514, and Nicholson’s “The New Comparative Theology and the Problem of Hegemonism” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 43–62.
  - 24 For a review of the meanings associated with what now, after Clooney and Fredericks, might be called the “old comparative theology,” see *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), s.v. “Theology: Comparative Theology,” by David Tracy, 446–55. The main difference between the new and old approaches is that the newer approach does not divide the concerns of the theology of religions from comparative theology. Although the theology of religions as a distinctive branch of theology had hardly been launched when Tracy’s article was written and the new comparative theology had yet to be suggested, it still remains the case that the linkage of these two differentiated disciplines is indissoluble.
  - 25 Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *New Comparative Theology*, ix.
  - 26 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: the Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. I.2, trans. G. W. Bromiley, G. T. Thomson, and Harold Knight (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2000), 17:81–163.
  - 27 Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 2nd edn (1947; repr., New York and London: International Missionary Council, 1946).
  - 28 Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, xiii–xiv; Clooney, “Response,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 195–6.
  - 29 Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, xiv–xv, and James L. Fredericks, *Buddhist and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), xiii, where he writes that “the time has come to put aside the quest for an adequate theology of religions.” See also Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), 2010), 15. The fallacy of thinking that one can do comparative theology to the exclusion of the theology of religions has been analyzed by Kristin Beise Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 21–42.

- 30 Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, xiv.
- 31 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 42.
- 32 Kiblanger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 29. Earlier than Kiblanger, Peter C. Hodgson described the systematic interrelation of two distinctive tasks in the theology of religions, “one critical and the other constructive.” The first, which corresponds to what is generally thought of as the theology of religions, is the critical task of “exposing idolatries,” that is, of undercutting inadequate views of the fundamental relationship between the religions. The second, which seems to correspond to comparative theology as conceived by Clooney and Fredericks, is directed toward “drawing out converged truths” from the various religions. “The Spirit and Religious Pluralism,” in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 144.
- 33 Kiblanger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 30. Perry Schmidt-Leukel clearly delineates the logic that underlies the various options in the theology of religions and that implies the priority of the theology of religions to comparative theology as a foundational discipline. “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism,” in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 19–21.
- 34 Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, xiv–xv; Clooney, “Response,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 195–6. Clooney affirms a Rahnerian and Dupuisian inclusivism (with perhaps a nod in the direction of the open pluralism of Paul Griffiths) without referencing Kiblanger (Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 16). Clooney does reference Kiblanger in *The New Comparative Theology*, but, perhaps in line with the tentativeness of his method and perhaps due to a protopluralist aversion to the implications of any sort of inclusivism, he defers reaffirming himself as an inclusivist (195–6), despite the avowal of inclusivism noted above in his *Comparative Theology*, 16.
- 35 Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, xvi. Kiblanger points out the unacknowledged theology of religions stances that seem to underlie the comparative work of Fredericks and Clooney. “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 31–2.
- 36 A point cogently argued against Fredericks by Schmidt-Leukel. “Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism,” in Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, 24, 27. Jeffrey Long argues similarly in “(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna,” in Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology*, 152.
- 37 H. J. Leuba presented a well-known list of 48 definitions of religion in *The Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), as Peter Henrici point outs. “The Concept of Religion from Cicero to Schleiermacher,” in Becker, Morali, and D’Costa, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, 1. About this whole enterprise of accumulating lists of definitions, Jonathan Z. Smith has notably complained “that there is no more pathetic spectacle in all of academia than the endless citation of the little list of fifty odd definitions of religion from James Leuba’s *Psychology of Religion* in introductory textbooks as proof that religion is beyond definition, that it is a *mysterium*.” “Religion and Religious Studies: No Difference at All,” in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings*, ed. Carl Olsen (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), 27–8. Previously published in *Soundings* 51:2–3 (1988): 231–44.

- 38 Terry F. Godlove, Jr. distinguishes real and nominal (or explicative) definitions from stipulative ones, “in which we simply make-up or fabricate the meaning of a concept.” “Religion in General, not in Particular: A Kantian Meditation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:4 (2010): 1034. Ann Taves in her AAR Presidential address in 2010 criticized the practice of scholars of religion who only use stipulative, task-related definitions of religion. “Religion’ in the Humanities and the Humanities in the University.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79:2 (June 2011): 291.
- 39 John Hick distinguished between religious but not confessional and naturalistic approaches to religion without intending to negate the naturalistic approaches and without limiting a religious approach to a single religion, sect, or denomination. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 1.
- 40 As in the writings of Jonathan Z. Smith. See, e.g., “Tillich[’s] Remains . . .” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:4 (2010): 1139–70, where he stipulatively reduces religion to the labor of religion scholars who work in the very long shadow of Paul Tillich. Smith famously sees religion as “solely the creation of the scholar’s study.” Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi. On this issue, I tend to side against Smith with Kevin Schilbrack, who, taking a critical-realist tack, cogently argues that though the concept of religion is a European product that is not ideologically pure, “it does not follow that the word is substantively empty or refers to nothing.” “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:4 (2010): 1132, and Terry F. Godlove, Jr., who justifies the methodological use of the concept of religion through a subtle analysis that draws deeply upon Kant to suggest that while concepts do not map out the essence of things, they remain indispensable to thought. Thus, attempts at defining and using the concept of religion do not reflect a supposed real essence of religion, nor are they merely stipulative definitions made up by the scholar or others for some specific purpose. Instead, they can be seen as nominalistic and pragmatic explications of how we use nested sets of more general and more specific concepts to make sense of experience. “Religion in General, not in Particular: A Kantian Meditation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:4 (2010): 1025–47.
- 41 Paul J. Griffiths, “On the Future of the Study of Religion in the Academy.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74:1 (March 2006): 66–74.
- 42 Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, xiv.
- 43 Griffiths, “On the Future of the Study of Religion in the Academy,” 69. This view clearly contradicts antiessentialist views such as that articulated by Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 11, 40–1.
- 44 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 1st pb. edn (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 12, 13, 17–19, 50, 121, 125, 152, 194.
- 45 The history of the term *religion* as it developed from the Romans to the early nineteenth century is comprehensively charted by Peter Henrici in “The Concept of Religion from Cicero to Schleiermacher: Origins, History, and Problems with the Term” in Becker, Morali, and D’Costa, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, 1–22. See also the pioneering study by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 15–79.
- 46 Henrici, The Concept of Religion from Cicero to Schleiermacher,” 2, 4. According to Henrici, “Arnobius calls the Romans *patres novarum religionum* (“fathers of new religions”) because of their assumption of foreign cults, . . .” (4).

- 47 Henrici, “The Concept of Religion from Cicero to Schleiermacher,” 5–6.
- 48 Henrici, “The Concept of Religion from Cicero to Schleiermacher,” 14.
- 49 John Hick, “The Next Step Beyond Dialogue” in *The Myth of Christian Superiority* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 6. He also refers to them as “mutually exclusive groups, each based on its own proprietary gospel.” John Hick, “Foreword by John Hick,” in Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*. 1st edn (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), x.
- 50 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the “Mystic East”* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 44–61, cogently argues for a middle ground between reductionistic etic approaches and “religionist” emic approaches to the study of religion.
- 51 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.
- 52 Ian S. Markham, “A Religious Studies Approach to Questions about Religious Diversity,” in Meister, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, 21, cogently expresses this principle: “A central goal of religious studies is to make sure that we are completely fair to the different traditions of the world.”