

## Book Review

***The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ.* Axel M. Oaks Takacs and Joseph L. Kimmel, eds. Chicester, UK, and Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Blackwell, 2024. xxviii+ 526pp. \$195.00 (hardback). ISBN: 9781394160570.**



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In 1993, Francis X. Clooney SJ, at the time professor of theology at Boston College, published *Theology after Vedānta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology*, a work that effectively laid the foundations for a new theological discipline. Clooney’s project in the book was to reflect on the impact that a deep immersion in the study of the Vedānta tradition had had on his understanding of Christian theology. He suggested a strategy of textual engagement that sought to honor the particularity of his own Catholic identity and tradition while also foregrounding the specific character and uniqueness of the religious tradition he had encountered. Thirty years later, comparative theology has grown into one of the most innovative and influential fields of theological research, a discipline whose practitioners bring together commitment to a particular faith tradition, interreligious scholarship, and a growing wealth of methodological approaches, both interdisciplinary and—increasingly—intersectional. While Clooney’s work has primarily focused on the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity and has continued to be primarily textual, today’s practitioners of comparative theology come from a vast number of traditions and often set out to explore non-textual expressions of faith such as the figurative arts, music, or ritual—at the same time continuing to be inspired by the promise of Clooney’s original vision.

This volume, which brings together forty-four essays by scholars from a number of different countries and religious identities, quite clearly attests to the extraordinary development of comparative theology from its relatively circumscribed beginnings. As such, this anthology both honors Francis Clooney’s work as a scholar and mentor both at Boston College and later at Harvard Divinity School, and also simultaneously offers the reader an excellent entrée into the field as it is practiced today in theology and religious studies departments across the world. In a short review essay, it is impossible to do justice to the wealth of material contained in this collection, which will certainly become a reference work for scholars and students alike. As such, this reviewer will only highlight a number of contributions that wrestle with specific methodological questions and conclude with a number of questions for future reflection.

In the first section of the volume, which is devoted to theories and methods in comparative theology, Catherine Cornille acknowledges that as the comparative endeavor engages other religious traditions, “the appropriation and transformation of certain cherished

beliefs and practices” may be experienced as “distortion, loss, abuse or theft” (21). While it is true that some theologians have attempted to develop an understanding of ultimate reality that is not grounded in the sources of any particular set of beliefs—what Cornille calls a “meta-confessional” approach—comparative theology is resolutely tethered to a specific tradition, intentionally eschewing the temptation to assemble a neutral religious standpoint, and at the same time seeking to respect the integrity of the religious other that is being engaged. Caught between the opposite dangers of hegemony and relativism, comparative theology recognizes the inescapable relativity of religious expressions (29), while remaining resolutely theological—a stance that circumvents the opposition between normativity and openness to the particularity of the other. In the same vein, Ruben Habito offers an interesting reflection on the vexed issue of the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions—a conversation that many practitioners of the former would like to end by simply getting rid of the latter, viewed as an unnecessary Procrustean bed that stretches different religions beliefs to meet the requirements of a specific tradition. Habito instead sets out to salvage theology of religions by reconfiguring it as moving towards a “fulfillment model in reverse”—one where instead of viewing “other” religions as fulfilled in Christianity, practitioners of comparative theology ensure that the encounter with non-Christian traditions lead to the “deepening and broadening of the understanding of the Christian Gospel message” (39). In the same section, Bennett DiDente Comerford offers an insightful reflection on the fundamental differences between Clooney’s approach and Robert Neville’s take on the comparative study of religion which “balks at confessional constraints” (50). While the tension between the two methods may indeed be an example of “irreducible difference,” and the recognition of one’s positionality remains one of the greatest strengths of comparative theology (60), Neville’s approach has remained influential and may be regarded as a foundation to recent speculative developments, such as the so-called “Theology without Walls.” DiDente Comerford’s clear allegiance to Clooney’s method does not erase his appreciation for a school of thought that, reversing Anselm of Canterbury, rests on “understanding seeking faith,” and this reminds us of the central role of speculative reflection in laying out the contours of all traditions of belief.

The second section—devoted to the identity of the comparative theologian in its various aspects—opens up with an interesting essay on the spirituality of Clooney’s method. Christopher Conway invites us to ponder Clooney’s attitude of humility towards the mystery, and his embrace of “evocative reticence” (86)—a stance that acknowledges the inability of human speech to capture one’s encounter with the divine. Many students of Clooney’s (including the author of this review) will recall how in a classroom setting the erudite scholar will always qualify his statements and conclusions with a plethora of “mays and mights” or “for-nows and in-the-meantimes.” Perhaps Clooney is here behaving like Ignatius of Loyola, who in his *Exercises* leaves to the exercitants the work to “fill the gaps.” In another essay, where Reid Locklin engages Clooney’s reading of Ramana Maharshi’s take on Vedānta, we are invited to reflect on the centrality of religious experience in the practice of comparative theology, coming to the conclusion that the latter is far from a mere intellectual exercise, but is actually grounded in experiential transformation—in fact, one can become a comparative theologian only through “an experiential process of performance and engagement” (112) across boundaries of religious difference. This is a process that is very much open-ended.

The third section of the volume sets out to position Clooney’s work within the broader tradition of the great Jesuit missionaries of the past. James Fredericks for instance observes that

the confidence in “the universality of human reason” displayed for instance by Roberto De Nobili SJ (1577–1656) is something that clearly colors Clooney’s conversations with the Hindu tradition—and yet in his work Clooney is also ready to acknowledge the limitations of rationality, calling for a kind of interreligious dialogue that is “reasonable” and yet acknowledges that all religious traditions transcend the limitations of the human intellect (143). Christian Krokus similarly notes that Clooney continues to embody the enthusiasm and “improvisational positivity” of the early Jesuits who visited the Indian subcontinent; however, he is more aware than his Jesuit predecessors of the fact that “reason can be misapplied.” The same De Nobili who was full of praise of South Indian culture was unable to appreciate *anything* that was specifically religious in that context. The challenge of the comparative theologian is then to overcome this bias while reserving the right to offer a constructive critique—a position that is difficult, and yet necessary to maintain if one is to honor the non-Christian religious tradition that is being engaged, while at the same time operating from a specific confessional standpoint (154–55). This is why Clooney resists the reconciling of tensions between Hinduism and Christianity in an overarching theology of religions and tends to refrain from definitive judgements about the “irreducible differences” between different traditions. This of course leaves one in a vulnerable position, bereft of the doctrinal safety net of Christian normativity. Yet this kind of stance is not so dissimilar from the readiness of early modern European missionaries to leave behind the security of Europe to venture into the unknown worlds (to them, at least) of Latin America and Asia. Perhaps, this reviewer wonders, Clooney’s recommended suspension of judgement is more suited to an academic rather than a pastoral or ecclesial context—one where the needs of one’s audience may arguably be better served by provisional, endlessly revisable judgements that foreground specific points of tensions between different systems of belief. At the same time, one can view Clooney’s stance as a theological corrective trying to redress the historical injustices of a missionary outreach characterized by such a presumption of superiority to be utterly blind to the realities of the traditions that were encountered.

The fourth section develops certain themes in Clooney’s corpus that draw on his comparative engagement of sacred texts or address other speculative themes traced to both Hinduism and Christianity. Lefebure assesses Clooney’s exegetical strategy in a number of his works, such as *Seeing through Texts*, which brings together the Song of Songs and the Tamil text *Tiruvaymoli*. These two texts share “the yearning of a woman” for her beloved, her anguished search for him and her suffering in his absence—and yet both texts have traditionally been understood as expressions of the soul’s longing for the divine (189). Clooney—in this following the Christian tradition of *lectio divina* that emphasizes the primacy of the spiritual meaning of the text—presents the prolonged engagement with these texts as mapping a trajectory of self-discovery and self-transformation and argues that repeated cross-reading of these two texts will lead to mutual enrichment and a better appreciation of the two traditions. At the same time, as underscored by Kimberley C. Patton’s reflections on *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, Clooney resists all demands “to articulate in a normative way *where* one has arrived in one’s own tradition” (206) at the end of the comparison. It is as if the outcome of this radical hermeneutical openness were covered by a veil of radical apophaticism.

In the same section, articles by Klaus von Stosch and Mara Brecht wrestle with Mariology in conversation with the way other religious traditions view and conceptualize the divine feminine—something Clooney himself did in his volume *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* (2010). Brecht—who introduces herself as a mother and a theologian—claims she “stands as a

Catholic before Mary anew after having explored goddess theologies” (236) and reflects on the ways in which the femininity of the Hindu goddesses weaves together eroticism and motherhood, while Mary’s body is conversely a contested site where eroticism is effectively erased by motherhood. Comparative theology can then lament this absence and work towards the reconfiguration of a new systematic vision.

The fifth section of the volume brings together a number of essays that may not directly engage Clooney’s method, but set out to apply it to a broad variety of topics: to mention just a few, Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier engages in a comparative reflection on the role of women in the era of COVID-19; Ithamar Theodor addresses the significance of emanationism in theistic strands of *Vedānta* and Jewish Kabbalah; and Luis Manuel Girón-Negrón maps the dynamics of desire in the writings of John of Cross and the Medieval Jewish mystic Solomon ibn Gabirol. All these essays attest the fecundity of Clooney’s interreligious striving for engagement with the other in ways that Clooney himself, perhaps, would not have foreseen: we see this in Lucinda Mosher’s intriguing move from “slow reading” to calligraphy as a vehicle for comparative reflection, where we are invited to read *handwritten* scriptures interreligiously, or Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski’s discussion of the liturgical tradition of Good Friday as a case study for comparative theology—a move that, in his words, seeks to “advance the ritual-liturgical turn” in comparative theology. Both articles move beyond the exclusive engagement of ideas to consider more fully “the embodied and enacted dimensions of religious life” (288)—a life that does not just consist in the assimilation of information about God, but will also include the enactment of a liturgical tradition or the loving creation of a scroll, reminding us that religious identity is something that is constantly “performed” and is indeed transmitted to the next generation by way of performance. Jon Paul Sydnor’s more constructive essay, sketching the contours of an “agapic nondualism,” takes Clooney’s vision to a whole new level, as he lays the foundation for a systematic Christian theology that subverts the classical understanding of the creator as ontologically distinct from the natural order (313). Axel M. Oaks Takacs’ surprising engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar in conversation with Islam recovers von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics through a Qur’anic lens to encourage wonder and amazement at the multiple ways in which “the gestalt of God is encountered in the world” (342).

The last two sections of the volume take a step back from the *minutiae* of specific comparisons to reflect on the broader implications of Clooney’s methodology. Jonathan Edelmänn argues that Clooney’s work, while resolutely theological, can nonetheless be considered part of religious studies, because comparative theology does help us gain a better understanding of the history of different religious traditions (383). Edelmänn also suggests that Clooney’s readiness to position himself as a Roman Catholic theologian is particularly important today because of the centrality of intersectionality and the role in which “race, gender, nationality, and socio-economic status” contribute to the construction of the individual.” Michelle Voss Roberts asks whether institutions can learn from interreligious dialogue, given the fact that institutions cannot afford the luxury of sophisticated, nuanced conversations and “tend to revert to broad, accessible messages that make few demands on their audiences” (397). Albertus Bagus Laksana claims that comparative theology—born in a post-secular era when religions and the public are coming to interact in new and different ways—is one of the “creative avenues” for religions “to take a more constructive public role in our global world” (409).

Finally, in the last section of the volume, a number of scholars reflect on future directions of development for the discipline, mapping the critical potential that comparative theology can exert in the study of religion. Marianne Moyaert engages the concept of “religionization,” which is the “social construction of ‘religion’ and its counterparts” or “the act of making something a religion”—a strategy that seeks to draw boundaries and suppress any overlap or hybridity (425). In this perspective, comparative theology serves as a remedial strategy that acknowledges the extent to which scholars of religion are shaped by past beliefs and practices, but also seeks to “interrupt” the tendency towards religionization and create a future of interreligious reconciliation (428). Mark Heim, whose 2001 volume *The Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* was an important milestone in the development of theology of religions, ponders how comparative theology as a discipline has impacted “theology” as a whole. Heim cites Clooney’s statement in *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (2010, 158) that the comparative theologian “ends up knowing too much and believing too much to be received with great ease in either the religious or the academic setting” and observes that in a way the possibly “marginal condition” of the comparative theologian in her community is not unlike a form of “ascetic distancing” (487). Finally, Hugh Nicholson dares ask whether there can be comparative theology *after* Clooney. Nicholson observes that “the kind of careful, reflective reading that Clooney practices depends on certain institutional structures”—such as university departments of theology and religious studies—“that are restrictive” and whose future “cannot simply be taken for granted” (507). It is not impossible that in non-fundamentalist settings all forms of religious studies may evolve into some kind of interreligious theology.

Nicholson’s question about the viability of comparative theology is of course akin to the question all scholars of religion are asking themselves—is there a future for theology or religious studies in an increasingly market-based, hyper-bureaucratized academic system that burdens students with unsustainable levels of debt and often still fails to prepare them for the competitive job market of late capitalism? The growing number of denominational institutions either closing down entirely due to financial pressure or choosing to eliminate theology or religious studies majors or eliminating theology or religion requirements, have led many to wonder whether theological scholarship has a place in academia at all. Some contend that theology will once more be the purview of individuals training for ordained ministry; and even in that case the trend is towards the disappearance of residential seminaries and their replacement with largely online education, which certainly does not leave one with the time or leisure to engage in the study of non-Christian traditions and their languages and systems of philosophy. The necessarily elitist character of comparative theology in the strict sense—as opposed to other forms of interreligious dialogue—makes it difficult to foresee what forms the discipline will take after the academic landscape of North America and Europe are radically reconfigured in the next few decades. Perhaps, in the same way as the Benedictines of the early Middle Ages were able to rescue and transmit the literary legacy of classical antiquity, it will be up to comparative scholars – modern-day ascetics, in Heim’s vision—to continue cultivating the tradition of attentive and careful wrestling with texts that shaped the great religious traditions of the past.

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