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ARTICLE

Models of Convergence in Comparative Theology

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Abstract
As comparative theology focuses primarily on getting a handle of the concrete data of another religion in order to bring them into fruitful comparison with one's own tradition, the ultimate goal of the exercise often remains unspoken or fades from the immediate demands of responsible scholarship. However, implicit in all comparative theology is some notion of the way in which different religious beliefs cohere in the past, the present, or the future. This paper sketches various models of convergence of religions and their implications for the way we do comparative theology.

Keywords
convergence, fulfillment, mysticism, eschatology, Christianity

> Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love. At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.
>
> —Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Omega Point"[1]

1 From chapter 2 of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1938).

The field of comparative theology has evolved rapidly since the late twentieth century. It has spread into multiple directions, engaging a large number of traditions or sub-traditions in a variety of ways. From a primary focus on scriptural traditions, it has emphasized the importance of also considering oral traditions, and from a primary focus on texts, it has emphasized the importance of also looking at ritual practice as a source of comparative theological engagement. From general theological ideas about other religions, it has emphasized the importance of careful and expert study of particular texts or practices of another tradition, bringing them into dialogue with elements in one's own tradition. From the suspicion that it is a distinctly Christian, even Catholic exercise, scholars of other traditions have come to engage in comparative theology from within their own normative framework.[2] There have been debates about the nomenclature of comparative theology and whether comparative theology requires a home tradition.[3]

In all these important debates about comparative theology, we tend to forget the big picture. To what end? What is the ultimate purpose of it all? Where do we see the religions or religion going with the help of comparative theology? These are questions comparative theologians don't often ask, as most of us tend to be bogged down in the study of another religion and in detailed comparative theological exercises. But these bigger questions were raised by early pioneers of comparative theology, many of whom did comparative theology before the modern discipline was established. Consequently, I thought it useful at this twentieth anniversary of Engaging Particularities to look backward in order to look forward, and retrieve some of the ideas of original visionaries to consider whether they may continue to serve as a source of inspiration for why and how we do comparative theology today.

2 See Klaus Von Stosch, "Is Comparative Theology Catholic?" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24 no. 1 (2014): 59–67. See also, Francis Clooney, "Is Comparative Theology Catholic? Expectations Regarding the Comparativist" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (2014): 18–26; and Marianne Moyaert, "Comparative Theology as a Catholic Theological Enterprise," in *Theology Today* 76, no. 1 (2015): 43–64.

3 On the notion of *home* in comparative theology, see the entire issue of *Toronto Journal of Theology* 39 no. 1 (2023). For more general methodological discussions of comparative theology, see Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Chichester: Wiley, 2020); see also, Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Awareness of the reality of religious plurality from the beginning led to visions of the convergence or the unity of religions. This is reflected in Teilhard de Chardin's expression, drawn from the Pauline author of Colossians 3:1-11 and made famous mainly through its use as the title of Flannery O'Connor's story.[4] But it also accords with the natural religious idea of a unified understanding of truth and vision of reality. Any truth that is divided cannot be ultimate or absolute. Some may locate the unity of religions in the past, in present experiences of ultimacy, or in a utopian future. Visions of the convergence of religions are often colored by the religious commitments and presuppositions of the visionary. The examples I use here are drawn mostly from within the Christian tradition and from Christian comparative theologians. But I believe that it is possible to broaden the picture and see their visions as a set of models that may be applicable to any religious tradition and consider how each might affect the way in which comparative theology is done.

While discussing these visions of the convergence of religions, it is also good at the outset to remind ourselves of the hypothetical nature of this exercise and of the unpredictability of the actual form of the possible convergence of religions. Comparative theology involves a process of change and growth through engaging other religions, and this quote by another important pioneer, Raimon Panikkar, offers helpful caution:

> Of course with the passage of time the encounter of religions and cultures will bring about the death of religions as we know them. They will be 'resurrected' in new forms, having perhaps a new life which we would hardly recognize. But if the very nature of life is change, who is to say when, at exactly what point, Hinduism or Christianity has 'died'? Only a sizeable temporal distance permits that kind of judgment, whereas we are caught up now in the ongoing process.[5]

4 Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge: Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965). Colossians 3:1 begins with "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" and ends with "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (3:11).

5 Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman &Todd, 1964), 94.

My reflections may be regarded as a commentary on the above quotes by Teilhard and Panikkar. It is also an homage to my teacher and mentor, Frank De Graeve, S.J. (1926–1993), who passed away more than thirty years ago and whose vision of the ultimate convergence of religions remains compelling.

Convergence into One's Own Religion

Probably the most common way of envisioning the convergence of religions is in terms of all religions coming together and finding their fulfillment in one's own religious tradition. This fulfillment approach to religious diversity is particularly prevalent in universalistic traditions which view their own convictions as the culmination of everything that went before, and view everything that came after as a degeneration or misinterpretation of the truth. It is reflected in Psalm 86:9, which states that "all the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name," and reiterated in the vision of Revelations 15:4 "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All the nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." Many religions anticipate the coming of a messianic figure who will inaugurate the end of time and/or a new age. For some, the fulfillment of all religions has already occurred, at least in part, in time, while others are anticipating a future fulfillment and convergence, largely in terms of their own religious convictions. Some religions may understand the idea of convergence in more individual and gradual terms, as individual souls transmigrate until they realize their highest state in one's own religion. In this vision, all believers and all religions are to ultimately come under the umbrella of one's own tradition.

This vision of the convergence is reflected in the classical inclusivist approach to religious diversity, which is held not only by theologians, but also by some of the early historians of religions. For example, Friedrich Max Muller, the father of the comparative study of religions, and founder of the Sacred Books of the East translation project, believed that the scholarly study of religions would provide evidence of the final and fulfilling truth of Christianity:

> The Science of Religion will for the first time assign to Christianity its right place among the religions of the world; it will show for the first time fully what was meant by the fullness of time; it will restore to the whole history of the

> world, in its unconscious progress toward Christianity, its true and sacred character.[6]

This notion of religious convergence has shaped the way in which comparative theology has been done by its earliest pioneers, and it continues to color the approaches of some comparative theologians. It is reflected in the very book titles of some of the precursors of the discipline, in John Nicol Farquhar's *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913) and in Pierre Johanns' *To Christ through Vedanta* (1930). These are works of comparative theology in that they took other religions, in these cases Hinduism, seriously, studied them, and engaged them in a constructive way from within the horizon of one's own tradition. A recent example of this approach may be found in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's work *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.* Here, he touches on general Christian topics—trinity, creation, atonement, salvation, and so on—exploring how they manifest themselves in other traditions, and what Christianity might learn from them. He acknowledges the importance of "careful attention to the details of investigation, respectful honoring of the otherness of other traditions and their representatives."[7] But he also insists that the enterprise of comparative theology requires "bold but humble arguing for one's deepest convictions."[8]

The way in which comparative theology is done from this vision of convergence may be visualized in terms of a triangle or cone in which the comparative theologian is situated at the peak or summit, certain of the ultimate truth of his or her own tradition. He or she looks down on the religious landscape and assesses the teachings and practices of other religions mainly in terms of their conformity to, or at least resonance with, one's own. This means that the topics selected for comparative work will be determined by their similarity or analogy with one's own set religious convictions. It also means that one's understanding or interpretation of the other will be framed in terms of one's own religious premises. Though all comparative theology involves some degree of reinterpretation or redescription of one tradition in terms of another, it makes a difference, as Hugh Nicholson has pointed out, which traditions does the redescribing:

> If comparison is understood as a way of construing or redescribing one thing in terms of another in order to

6 Friedrich Max Muller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (1967–1975).

7 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 9.

8 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.*

> highlight aspects of the former that are of particular interest to the scholar, then it makes a difference which of the two terms is being redescribed, and conversely, which is providing the redescription. The point of comparative redescription is to transform one's understanding of the former for a particular purpose. The purpose may be either to overcome the incomprehensibility of an unfamiliar phenomenon, or, alternatively, it may be to unsettle a sense of familiarity that has dulled one's perception of a phenomenon.[9]

With comparative theology done from this model of convergence, it is always one's own tradition that does the redescribing, for one's own theological purpose. This does not mean that comparative theologians might not learn from other religious traditions. Even in focusing on certain selective topics and interpreting them in one's own religious and theological terms, new insights may emerge, and traditional ways of understanding and acting enriched. Kärkkäinen also suggests that one's convictions may be "reshaped, sometimes even radically altered."[10] Hence, a fulfillment approach to comparative theology does not always involve a complete domestication of the other, or a flat reduction of the other to one's own preconceived views. But one's own religion will remain the ultimate criterion, both epistemologically and theologically, through which other religions are studied and evaluated.

The strengths of this approach to comparative theology involve clarity and directionality in engaging the other religion. If one of the challenges or problems for comparative theology involves the sheer endless possibility of topics and traditions to engage, this approach at least limits the choice to topics that resonate with or may enhance one's own basic convictions. It also provides clear norms for how to adjudicate the truth of other religious traditions, as well as a community of likeminded thinkers who may support one another. Though one might view the process of redescription of the other as an example of religious hegemony, it may also reflect an attitude of transparency which acknowledges the inevitability of religious and theological prejudice.[11]

9 Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 130.

10 Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology*, 6.

11 At the end of *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, Kärkkäinen admits that theological convictions are "situated and fallible in nature," that they are "always

The weakness of this approach, however, involves an inability or unwillingness to understand the religious other on its own terms and to allow one's own tradition to be challenged and changed in more than cosmetic ways. This idea of the convergence of all religions in one's own may be readily subject to critiques of hegemony and the instrumentalization or domestication of other religious traditions. If other religions are believed implicitly or explicitly to simply culminate in one's own, now or at the end of time, there is little reason to take them seriously on their own terms, or to acknowledge them as viable dialogue partners with their own legitimate questions and theological positions. These critiques may be only partly abated by the fact that most religious traditions approach religious others and comparative theology from within these same presuppositions. It ultimately limits the possibilities or opportunities for genuine learning from the other.

Mystical Convergence

Another way of envisioning the convergence of religions is in terms of a presumed common mystical ground or goal. Here, religions are seen to emerge from similar mystical experiences and/or to culminate in mystical states that are believed to be the same across religious traditions. The differences between religious traditions, beliefs, and practices, are considered to be secondary and ultimately immaterial in light of their deeper or higher mystical unity. This is the view of the so-called perennial philosophy, which is associated with figures such as Aldous Huxley, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Radhakrishnan, and contemporary figures such as Reza Shah-Kazemi and Robert Forman.[12] These thinkers comb through mystical

tentative and suggestive" and that "disagreements and different viewpoints belong as an essential part of the inquiry" (Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, 277).

12 Huxley defines perennial philosophy as "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being" (Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* [New York: Harper, 1945, 2009], vii). Whereas comparative theology is often regarded as a quintessentially Christian enterprise, it is interesting to note that many perennial philosophers were Hindu (Vivekananda, Coomaraswamy, Radhakrishnan) or Muslim (Guenon, Schuon, S.H. Nasr, and Shah-Kazemi). The idea of a mystical convergence of religions is often regarded as a typically Hindu or Vedanta conception of the ultimate ground and goal of religious life. It is often depicted as a mountain in which different religions represent different paths leading to the

texts to find expressions and ideas that resemble or resonate with one another and that would point to a unifying experience which is regarded as the ground or goal of all religious life. The vision is expressed in the title of Schuon's famous book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1984).
The domain of mysticism and mystical experience represents a compelling focus for imagining the convergence of religions. It is undeniable that mystical accounts in different traditions exhibit many similarities, not only with regard to the description of the experience (which is generally said to be ineffable), but also with regard to the various disciplines or paths and practices that are designed to prepare for the experience (asceticism, humility, surrender), as well as the fruits of the experience (equanimity, wisdom, detachment, compassion, etc.) The fact that monastics and mystics of different religious traditions seem so easily to understand one another and pray or practice together reinforces the idea of a possible convergence of religious traditions in a common mystical origin or goal. It has been noted that "the mystics often share more with each other, even though they spring from different religions and religious backgrounds…than do the mystics and 'believers' who belong to the same confession."[13] Though some traditions approach mysticism with some degree of suspicion, mystics are often regarded as having attained the highest level of spiritual or religious realization, and thus represent the ultimate ideal.

It is clear that mystical ideas and texts have had a particular appeal for comparative theologians. Many of the early pioneers of comparative theology were particularly drawn to mystical thinkers and traditions. Louis Massignon (1883–1962), who is often regarded as a precursor of Muslim-Christian comparative theology, focused his major work on the early Sufi mystic al-Hallaj.[14] Early Hindu-Christian comparative theologians such as Henri Le Saux (1910–1973), Raimon Panikkar (1928–2010), and Sara Grant were involved mainly with the Hindu traditions and experiences of non-duality.[15] Christian missionaries and theologians engaging Buddhism were

ultimate realization of the non-duality of Atman and Brahman, as reflected in the writings of Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan. It is also reflected in the image of various religious teachings as derived from so many blind men touching an elephant and describing it from their own limited angle.

13 Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism. The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 38.

14 Louis Massignon, *Hallaj. Mystic and Martyr,* translated, edited and abridged by Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

15 Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux), *Saccidananda. A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (London: ISPCK, 1974. Henri Le Saux, *Souvenirs d'Arunachala* (Paris: Epi, 1978). Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis

inspired primarily by Buddhist mystical teachings and practices. In Japan, William Johnston, SJ (1925–2010), Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, SJ (1989–1990), and Oshida Shigeto (1922–2003) integrated Zen Buddhist teachings and practices into their own spiritual life and discipline.[16] And in his exploration of other religions, the famous Christian monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) was also mainly interested in the Sufi tradition of Islam, the Taoist tradition, and the non-dualist traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.[17] In one of his last sermons, he referred to the deep unity between monastic traditions and experiences in "soft" perennialist terms when he stated that:

> Without asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the "top," the transcendent or mystical level—that they all start from different dogmatic positions to "meet" at this summit—it is certainly true to say that even where there are irreconcilable differences in doctrine and in formulated belief, there may still be great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience.[18]

Comparative theologians continue to be drawn by mystical texts and traditions. Not only does the work of the early pioneers of the discipline who

Books, 1994), *Christophany. The Fullness of Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013). Panikkar's work offers insight into a possible difference between non-dualism and perennialism. Though both are oriented toward a non-dual understanding of ultimate reality, non-dualists like Panikkar still emphasize the need to express this non-dualism from particular religious and philosophical perspectives. Perennialism, on the other hand, seeks to transcend and minimize religious particularities. This difference is also expressed in the disagreement between Abhishiktananda, who emphasized the experience of the absolute "beyond name and form" and Panikkar who "emphasized the cosmic dimension, ultimately integrating it into his cosmotheandric vision" (Bettina Baumer, *Fullness of Life* [Mumbai: Somayiya Publications, 2008], 185–86). See also Sara Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dualist Christian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

16 William Johnston, *Christian Zen: A Way of Meditation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997). Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, *Zen: Way to Enlightenment* (Taplinger, 1968). Oshida Shigeto published only in Japanese, but a good discussion of his life and work may be found in Katrin Amell, "The Dominican Vincent Oshida Shigeto, a Buddhist who has Encountered Christ" in *La Vie Spirituelle* 731 (1999): 355–68.

17 Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961); *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965); *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968); *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1975).

18 *Thomas Merton*, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, 312.

focused on mystical texts (such as Raimon Panikkar or Massignon) continue to inspire younger generations, but many focus on mystical figures and ideas in the various religions. John Keenan and Joseph O'Leary, for example have used Buddhist notions of emptiness and two truths to reinterpret Christian texts and teachings; Michelle Voss Roberts's early work *Dualities* focuses on Hindu mystic Lelleshvari and Christian mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg; Frank Clooney's book *His Hiding Place is Darkness* deals with Hindu and Christian mystical experiences of divine absence; and the notion of non-duality is part of a continuing research project among a new generation of comparative theologians.[19] Works by D.T. Suzuki and Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt have focused on Buddhist-Christian mysticism, mainly lifting up the similarities between mystical texts in the two traditions.[20]

Here, comparative theologians focus mainly on the similarities between mystical texts and traditions, as well as on the distance between experience and expression, which in turn may serve to support the malleability of religious forms and frameworks. Comparative theology focusing on mystical texts and figures may lead to the rediscovery of neglected or marginalized mystics (such as Marguerite Porete or Jean Pierre de Caussade), and/or to the appropriation of certain spiritual practices further developed in another religious tradition.[21] The approach has also led to new attitudes toward doctrinal and metaphysical systems as a whole and to the experimentation with new hermeneutical frameworks. As a result of engagement with mystical texts and traditions, some comparative theologians have come to approach doctrines not as fixed and firm expression of ultimate reality but rather as conventional expressions, as skillful means which, though necessary and important, should not be equated with ultimate reality itself.[22] This in turn has led to attempts to reinterpret religious texts and teachings through the hermeneutical framework of other traditions so as to release or shed new light on their mystical or spiritual contents.

19 Jon Paul Sydnor, Anthony Watson, et al, *Nondualism: An Interreligious Exploration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023).

20 Daizetz T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Buddhist and Christian* (New York: Harper, 1957); Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

21 Comparative theologians such as Won Jae Hur, Matthew Vale, and Greg Mileski are, in particular, looking into what Christianity might learn from Buddhist Dzogchen ideas and practices.

22 Joseph O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

The strength and appeal of this approach to comparative theology lies in the undeniable similarities between elements of mystical texts, teachings, and practices, which offer a ready bridge (or *tertium comparationis*) for further exploration of similarities and differences, and for theological and practical learning from one another. It also allows for considerable theological creativity as the emphasis on the ineffability of ultimate reality and the difference between experience and expression prevents one from "investing too heavily in doctrinal fixation."[23] There is also less concern with the problem of religious hegemony and domestication, as mystical experience tends to function as religious equalizer.

While the idea of a mystical unity of religions may provide a ground and a focus for doing comparative theology, it also presents certain challenges and limitations on the practice. The relativizing of religious doctrines may generate a loss of interest in or commitment to doctrinal development and growth. If all religions are ultimately oriented to a unified and unifying ineffable experience, then the religious differences and particularities may no longer matter very much, and the effort to engage the teachings and practices of another religion in a constructive way may seem superfluous.[24] The idea of a mystical common ground and goal moreover privileges a non-dualist worldview in which distinctions between religions are illusory and meant to be erased or to disappear in the sea of non-duality. Comparative theology requires belief in the importance of proper theological understanding and commitment to advancing it. This presupposes that one takes seriously the historical, ritual, and practical expressions of a tradition as meaningful and possibly constitutive of the experience itself. In the end, the idea of a mystical unity or convergence of religions remains a conjecture, as Thomas Merton, who himself was rather sympathetic to the idea, also admits:

> It must certainly be said that a certain type of concordist thought too easily assumes as a basic dogma that "the mystics" in all religions are experiencing the same thing

23 Joseph O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 251. Also "Skillful Means as a Hermeneutic Concept" in C. Cornille and C. Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 179.

24 This is also the gist of Mark Heim's critique of the attitude of religious pluralism, which itself draws significantly from the idea of a mystical convergence of religions. See Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 145.

> and are all alike united in their liberation from the various doctrines, explanations and creeds of their less fortunate coreligionists…This has never been demonstrated with any kind of rigor, and though it has been persuasively advanced by talented and experienced minds, we must say that a great deal of study and investigation must be done before much can be said on this very complex question…Since the personal experience of the mystic remains inaccessible to us and can only be evaluated indirectly through texts and other testimonials, it is never easy to say with any security whether what a Christian mystic, a Sufi, and a Zen master experience is really the same thing.[25]

Eschatological Convergence

A third way of envisioning the convergence of religions focuses not so much on the convergence of religions in one's own tradition or in a purported universal mystical ground or goal, but rather on a future eschatological reality, which lies beyond any existing system of belief and practice. In sketching this model of convergence, I draw from my own teacher, Frank De Graeve, SJ (1926–1993), who himself was strongly influenced by Teilhard de Chardin and Raimon Panikkar, and who, as was custom in the late twentieth century, developed his views in a set of theses on the relationship of Christianity to other religions.[26] I will first briefly comment on the theses dealing with the convergence of religions and then discuss their implications for comparative theology.

Frank De Graeve was trained in classics, anthropology and theology, and studied with some of the great scholars of his time: Guiseppe Tucci (Buddhism), Mircea Eliade (Comparative Religion), Evans-Pritchard (Anthropology). He was a brilliant theologian, savant, and poet.[27] He chose

25 Thomas Merton, "Introduction: A Christian Looks at Zen" in John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (Yangmingshan, Taipei: National War College, 1967), 9.

26 Frank de Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S.: Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Encounter" in *Louvain Studies* 7 (1979): 314–325. Besides the four theses of Rahner, there are the five theses of Gavin D'Costa, and the ten theses of Jan Van Bragt who rightly points out that "it is good scholastic practice, and, while laying the writer wide open to critique, it is conductive to further discussion"(Jan Van Bragt, *Toward a Theology of Religions* [Tokyo: Oriens Institute, 1984], 5).

27 He wrote hundreds of haikus and published dozens of spiritual poems in Flemish

to devote his life to serving others, more than to publishing.[28] The few scholarly works he published, however, clearly demonstrate his scholarly erudition and theological creativity. Having immersed himself deeply in the study of Buddhism and Hinduism, and having developed great fondness for the richness of other religions, he developed a notion of the eschatological convergence of religions that would engender a sense of unity between religions without abandoning religious diversity and particularity.

Grounded in the Christian tradition, De Graeve naturally drew from its symbolic and religious framework to envision and to name the future convergence: "The fulfillment and consummation of all religions is what could be called 'Christ-ianity,' the integration of the religious intentionality in the growth of the once-for-all redeemed mankind toward the 'full adulthood' of Christ, the 'pleroma of God.'" The term "Christ-ianity" is here borrowed from Colossians 2:8–3:11 and Ephesians 1:9–23, and used as "a theological stenogram for Christ's anonymous presence in all religions, really the 'Christ-ness' of religion."[29] The mention of anonymous presence of Christ is of course immediately reminiscent of Rahner's "anonymous Christian."[30] However, De Graeve's understanding of Christ was less determined by specifically Christian connotations, and more aligned with Raimon Panikkar's notion of a Cosmic Christ who is beyond any particular religious determination, and who represents "the Christian symbol for the whole of reality," and "the symbol of the *mysterium coniunctionis* of divine, human and cosmic reality."[31] In representing an eschatological reality, no single religion, including Christianity, may here claim monopoly over the notion or the understanding of Christ. All religions are thus moving toward the common destiny or convergence in Christ. This may be visualized as a

pastoral publications.

28 During his vacations, he served at Holy Angels parish in Chicago.

29 Frank de Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S.: Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Encounter," 321.

30 De Graeve criticized Rahner's expression on linguistic grounds since an anonymous person knows who he or she is, while others do not, whereas Rahner uses it in reverse.

31 Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 143–84. Panikkar himself, in turn, drew inspiration from Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda (1910–1974) who also came to understand Christ as the symbol of the unity and unicity of ultimate reality itself:
As truly as the unicity of God, the unicity of the symbol of Christ is of a transcendental order and cannot be compared or opposed to any other symbol, equally transcendent in as far as it also attempts to express the totality of Being. Abhishiktananda, *Intériorité et Révélation*, Sisteron: Presence, 1982, p. 202

triangle or a mountain in which all religions are moving toward the peak, without any religion fully grasping or controlling the meaning or reality of the ultimate convergence. This does not mean that all religions need to be regarded as equidistant from the peak. Each religion will naturally regard itself as higher or closer to the ultimate truth, and its own teachings and practices as a fuller reflection of the ultimate truth. This is why many religions regard themselves as the fulfillment of other religions.

In also using the language of fulfillment, De Graeve, however, also recognizes the irreducibility of one religion to the other, and the ultimate fulfillment as an eschatological reality: "The relation of Christ-ianity to the religions (and Christianity), one of fulfillment to previous phases of growth, is characterized by a dialectic of incarnation (i.e. really present in the human sphere) and transcendence (i.e. never exhaustively present in the human sphere, never utterly reducible to it)." Different religions are thus pyramids of different heights within the larger pyramid, all moving together toward ultimate fulfillment. De Graeve refers to this movement as a process of conversion: "The 'conversion' to which all religions, including Christianity, are constantly called, is not so much a 'turning away' from, as a 'turning to'; conversion is convergence." Conversion here involves moving closer to ultimate truth by moving closer to one another. This involves a process of purification in which each religion abandons its negative prejudices toward one another and recognizes the possibility of learning from one another. As the various religions learn from one another, they also move gradually closer together until they all find their culmination in the eschatological fulfilment. This fulfilment, however, does not erase the particularities or distinctions between religions: "The variety of religions, as the variety of existential situations themselves, is a sign of creative abundance that is supposed to enhance unity, and not necessarily a sign of particularism that precludes it." Like Teilhard, De Graeve thus envisioned religions preserving their particularity in the eschatological fullness of time since, as he put it suggestively, "history is not the only cause of plurality." The realization of Christ-ianity thus consists for De Graeve of a celebration of diversity in which each religion might have integrated the best of other religions and made it their own.[32]

This approach to the convergence of religions takes seriously the particularity of religions, their incompleteness and the possibility or necessity of learning from one another. The comparative theologian is here not at

32 Frank de Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S.: Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Encounter," 314–325.

the summit of the mountain but in "medium res," trying to contribute to the development and growth of her own tradition through engaging the wisdom of other religions. As Panikkar put it, we may be "caught up now in the ongoing process" and do not know for sure where this religious change will take us.[33] This is one of the elements which distinguishes this model from the first model of simple convergence into one's own religion. As the future remains unknown, no religion may claim a definitive vision of the final convergence. At the same time, each tradition will inevitably envision the ultimate convergence in familiar terms, and in some degree of continuity with the truth as it is known. Moreover, each religion will place itself highest on the hierarchy of religions, or closest to the state of eschatological fulfillment.[34]

Though comparative theologians rarely speak of the convergence of religions, this model accords well with the way much confessional comparative theology is practiced. It starts from the presumption that there is much to learn from the texts, beliefs, and practices of other religions, which presupposes that they are grounded in certain common questions or concerns, and/or oriented toward the same goal. Most comparative theologians recognize elements of similarity in the conceptions of the ultimate reality in various religions. Though affirming the distinction of Hindu and Christian conceptions of God, Martin Ganeri, for example, explicitly uses the language of convergence when describing various aspects of Christian and Hindu theology.[35]

The possibility of learning from other religions also presumes the humble recognition that one's own religion does not have the fullness of truth, or cannot be simply equated with the final goal, and that other religions have something distinctive to contribute to one's understanding of the truth. Following this model, comparative theologians may nevertheless remain committed to the normative truth of their own tradition, either out of a belief that it is superior, or out of epistemological humility, and engage

33 Raimundo Panikkar, *Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 94.

34 It is this type of equivalency which saves this model from the type of hegemony that may characterize the first model of convergence. While believers cannot but imagine a final convergence in terms borrowed from their religious lexicon, those terms may themselves evolve and change and are thus not to be simply or simplistically associated with notions of hegemony.

35 Martin Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism* (London: Routledge, 2015), 88, 95, 144.

other religions from their own perspective and with their own theological questions. The truth or validity of other religions may still be assessed on the basis of one's own criteria, and elements of truth of other religions interpreted or adjusted to one's own framework. However, as religions adopt elements from one another, they also inevitably change and grow to increasingly resemble one another; and criteria of discernment may themselves shift and change in the process of learning.

The idea of the eschatological convergence of religions provides a strong motivation for engaging in comparative theology. The claim about the unity of truth, as well as the belief or hope that all religions are moving closer to that eschatological oneness, should drive theologians to more actively explore other religions in order to advance one's own religious understanding. Whereas the differences between religions tend to dissolve in the mystical model of convergence, this model may serve to deepen, broaden, and enhance the particularity of each religion, as each maintains its distinctiveness in the state of eschatological convergence. It thus counters any fears of loss of identity or continuity.

This model of convergence takes seriously the grounding of the comparative theologian in a tradition and the openness to other religious traditions. There is also a religious logic and coherence to the idea of religions moving closer together through dialogue and comparative theological engagement. As religions absorb elements from one another, they naturally move closer toward one another, and to the ultimate truth.

Conclusion

In order to engage in constructive theological dialogue with other religions, comparative theology requires some sense of commonality with other religious traditions, whether in shared questions, a shared origin, similar processes of religious reasoning, and/or a shared ultimate destiny and goal. Among these, the idea of the ultimate convergence of religions forms a powerful motivation to constructively explore the teachings of other religions in order to find a common purpose and/or learn from one another. It is true that comparative theologians rarely speculate on the question of the convergence of religions, absorbed as they tend to be with engaging particular texts, teachings, and practices in their own and another tradition. However, in exploring various possible approaches to the convergence of religions, it becomes evident how each might affect the way in which

comparative theology is approached, as well as in which direction of convergence particular approaches might tend.

Each of the approaches to the convergence of religions also roughly coincides with the classical paradigms in theology of religions: convergence in one's own religion with exclusivism (or closed inclusivism), mystical convergence with pluralism, and eschatological convergence with a form of open inclusivism (or what Jacques Dupuis might call inclusivist pluralism). A focus on convergence, however, sharpens the question onto the ultimate purpose of comparative theology, where the respective religions stand in relation to that ultimate purpose, and how one might thus engage other religions.

If the idea of convergence involves all religions coming to their fulfillment in one's own religious tradition, then comparative theology will mainly involve discerning and affirming areas where other religions already largely correspond with one's own—and building on that correspondence. If the focus is on a past or future mystical convergence of religions, comparative theology will mainly focus on mystical texts and practices that already reflect or anticipate that convergence. If the convergence lies in an eschatological future that no tradition owns, but that each tradition may anticipate or hope for based on their own revelations, then comparative theology may be done in a constructive way, using the religious tools of discernment provided by one's own tradition without precluding the possibility of change and growth.

This latter model of convergence has been my own inspiration and motivation for engaging in comparative theology. It was handed down to me by my teacher, Frank De Graeve, who declared himself to be standing on the shoulders of giants—which allowed him to "no longer be dwarfed by their height, but able to look a little beyond their own horizons to the new one that would be mine."[36] I hope this sketch of the various models of convergence also help you to find your own horizon from which to engage in comparative theology.

RR

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36 Frank De Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S. Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue," 316.

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