

ARTICLE

Reimagining Interfaith Engagement: A Postfoundationalist Comparative Theology Paradigm

David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian

Abstract

This article proposes a postfoundationalist paradigm for comparative theology to reimagine interfaith engagement, addressing the limitations of traditional approaches like exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and postliberalism. These models often fail to adequately balance the particularity of religious traditions with aspirations for universal truth, leading to either exclusion or homogenization. Drawing on critical realism, postfoundationalism offers a mediating epistemology that acknowledges the contextuality of human knowledge while affirming the meaningful pursuit of objective truth. This framework provides a coherent epistemic foundation for comparative theology, enabling deep interreligious learning. It affirms parity among religions, respects each tradition's distinctiveness, and recognizes universal truth claims without diminishing their particularities, fostering more genuine and fruitful dialogue.

Keywords

Comparative Theology, Postfoundationalist Epistemology, Postfoundational Comparative Theology, Interreligious Exchange

Introduction

Engaging in interreligious dialogue is an imperative task for contemporary theologians given the reality of religious plurality and the conflicts that often accompany it. The epistemological foundations upon which such dialogue rests, however, remain hotly debated. Traditional Christian theological approaches to religious diversity—typically categorized as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—each have notable limitations. Exclusivist and inclusivist models tend to overemphasize the particularity and universality of a single religion at the expense of others, while pluralist models often disregard the particularity and universality of all religions by assuming a relativistic equivalence. While these theological frameworks can be seen as reflections of broader epistemological commitments, exclusivism and inclusivism align closely with foundationalist confidence in absolute truths, while pluralism corresponds to nonfoundationalist skepticism toward universal claims. Neither strict foundationalism nor radical nonfoundationalism adequately sustains genuine plurality as the former risks excluding or assimilating religious differences, and the latter risks dissolving meaningful distinctives. There is thus a pressing need for a new epistemological perspective that can maintain the diversity, particularity, and universality of each religious tradition in dialogue. This need is especially acute in contexts such as India, where polarized religious identities and power imbalances heighten the stakes of interfaith engagement.

This article proposes that a postfoundationalist paradigm for comparative theology offers such a framework. In contrast to the rigid certainty of classical foundationalism and the relativistic drift of some postmodern nonfoundationalism, postfoundationalism provides a mediating epistemology.¹ Drawing on insights from critical realism, it acknowledges

1 The term “postmodernism” is used in a variety of ways across academic disciplines, often generating confusion due to its shifting meanings. In theology, it refers less to a specific school than to a posture of skepticism toward universalizing metanarratives, foundationalist epistemologies, and the possibility of absolute truth claims. The influence of postmodernism peaked in the late twentieth century, and while theological engagement with the concept persists, contemporary discussions employ it with more nuanced caveats and awareness of its limitations (Graham Ward, *True Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell Manifestos [Blackwell Publishing, 2003], 23–40; James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* [Baker Academic, 2006]). Ward maintains that the “postmodern” moment is already passing, but its exposure of modern illusions (about neutrality, universality, and pure reason) can aid a recovery of thick, traditioned, and embodied forms of Christian piety. Smith argues that key postmodern claims—“there is nothing outside the text,” “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and

the limits of human knowledge while affirming that an objective truth or reality can be meaningfully sought through interpreted experience. A postfoundationalist approach thus seeks to strike a necessary balance as it rejects the absolutist claim that one religion has a monopoly on universal truth. Yet it also avoids the collapse into relativism that treats all truths as merely local with no cross-contextual validity. Each religious tradition's quest for ultimate truth (for example, the reality of God's self-disclosure) is recognized as a diverse yet valid truth-seeking endeavor. By steering clear of the extremes of exclusion on one hand and homogenization on the other, a postfoundationalist comparative theology can respect the distinct identities and truth-claims of various religions while fostering more genuine and fruitful engagement.

The progression of the paper unfolds in different sections: First, a background overview of major Christian approaches to religious diversity is presented, expanding the typical typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) with a fourth paradigm of postliberal particularism. Second, the article examines key epistemological insights underlying these approaches, tracing a trajectory from foundationalism to nonfoundationalism and onward to postfoundationalism, engaging especially with the notion of critical realism and recent critiques of both modern and postmodern epistemologies. The third section develops the postfoundationalist alternative through Critical Realism and Epistemic Holism, consolidating these epistemic moves into a constructive framework for theological reasoning. Fourth, the contemporary practice of comparative theology is explored, highlighting its differences from the theology of religions approach through the contributions of pioneering thinkers like Francis X. Clooney and James L. Fredericks, as well as its developments in incorporating approaches that go beyond text-based comparisons. The fifth section outlines how contemporary comparative theology conducts deep, confessional learning across traditions and exposes the epistemological limits of earlier theology-of-religions models. The sixth section offers a constructive Christological experiment that holds firm Christian commitment together with genuine openness to transformation through comparative engagement. The seventh synthesizes the argument into a coherent model that affirms parity among religions, honors particularities, and sustains universal truth-seeking for future interfaith work.

the critique of power—can be received as resources for a thicker, confessional, liturgical Christianity rather than as threats to faith. In this essay, my use of “postmodernism” specifically points to the critique of grand theory and the affirmation of particularity and difference that have shaped recent theological approaches.

Extant Approaches to Religious Diversity

Christian theologians have developed various models to understand and engage the reality of religious diversity. Classic typologies typically enumerate three primary approaches—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—while a fourth paradigm, termed postliberalism or particularism, has been explored in recent years. Each approach carries distinct assumptions about truth and salvation in relation to the other religions, as well as particular socio-historical presuppositions. This section will briefly characterize these four approaches, noting their strengths and weaknesses. The next section will explore their epistemological underpinnings.

The differing approaches to religious diversity within Christian theology have historically been organized using Alan Race’s influential threefold schema: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.² This typological framework provided the basis for much of the late twentieth-century debate, serving to categorize theological responses to the presence of other faiths. Subsequent developments, notably the proposal by Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, introduced a fourth category—particularism—further enriching the conversation.³ In recent scholarship, Paul Hedges has offered a substantial rethinking of this typology, rigorously theorizing particularism and synthesizing the fourfold model within his own work.⁴ Hedges’ framework now stands as a widely-acknowledged point of reference, including among figures such as Paul Knitter, whose own reflections have increasingly aligned with Hedges’ expanded paradigm.⁵ By foregrounding the dynamic interplay between particularist and pluralist/universalist perspectives, the revised typology moves beyond earlier exclusivist-inclusivist debates and encourages deeper engagement in contemporary comparative theology and interfaith discourse. Crucially, more nuanced treatments of pluralism—prominently advanced by scholars like Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Abraham Velez de Cea—are attempting to move away from the relativistic tendencies, while

2 See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (SCM Press, 1983), 1–15.

3 Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way?: Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 5–28.

4 Paul Hedges, “The Theology of Religions Typology Redefined: Openness and Tendencies,” in *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Prospects*, ed. Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi (Brill, 2016), 76–92.

5 See Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis, 2002), 35–45 and Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology and the Theology of Religions*, *Controversies in Contextual Theology Series* (SCM Press, 2010), 55–70.

fostering openness to broader understanding and meaningful interreligious relationships.⁶

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism

Exclusivism argues that one’s own religion is the sole source of truth and salvation, exemplified by Christian theology’s assertion of Christ’s unique saving role and dismissal of other faiths as inadequate or false. Hendrik Kraemer’s (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 1938) rejection of truth in other religions is a classic example of this approach.⁷ Historically, colonialism and the consequent power differential strengthened this approach. While exclusivism offers clarity and a strong religious identity, it faces criticism for theological arrogance, the dismissal of other traditions’ wisdom, and marginalization linked to political dominance. Inclusivism holds that while truth and grace exist within other religions, they reach ultimate fulfillment only within one’s own tradition. In Christianity, this perspective suggests non-Christians can attain salvation through Christ, even unknowingly. Karl Rahner’s concept of “anonymous Christians,” identifying non-Christians as implicit recipients of Christian grace, illustrates inclusivism’s intent. Yet his approach is criticized as patronizing for undermining other faiths’ authenticity.⁸ Thus, inclusivism, despite acknowledging spiritual depth elsewhere, maintains a hierarchical view that privileges its own revelation.⁹

Pluralism argues that no single religious tradition has exclusive access to truth or salvation, affirming instead that diverse religions offer valid responses to Ultimate Reality or God. Prominent theologians like John Hick advocated a “Copernican revolution,” shifting focus from Christianity to a theocentric model that sees diverse religions as equally sincere paths

- 6 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (SCM Press, 2009), 88–104; Abraham Velez de Cea, *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* (Routledge, 2007), 40–65.
- 7 See H. C. Goerner, “Christianity and Non-Christian Religions,” *Review and Expositor* 51, no. 2 (1954): 217–229.
- 8 See Karl Rahner, “Christianity and Non-Christian Religions” and “Anonymous Christian,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5: Later Writings (Helicon Press, 1966), 115–134.
- 9 Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 38. Also see Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.

toward the divine.¹⁰ While promoting religious equality and tolerance, pluralism faces substantial criticism for homogenizing religious diversity. Critics argue that pluralism's idea of an abstract divine "Real" relativizes specific traditions, reducing distinct beliefs about Christ, Krishna, Allah, or Dao to culturally conditioned expressions.¹¹ However, careful critics have pointed out that pluralism can inadvertently introduce a new kind of intellectual hegemony or "meta-narrative" that undermines the particularity of each religion.¹² By positing that at some abstract level "all religions are saying the same," certain pluralist theories run the risk of essentializing and homogenizing religious differences.¹³ Thus, pluralism risks imposing a universal, often Western, intellectual framework onto diverse religions.

Postliberalism/Particularism

Beyond the familiar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, a fourth significant paradigm has emerged: the postliberal or particularist approach. Associated especially with the Yale school of postliberal theology (notably George Lindbeck and Hans Frei) and influenced by Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, this approach reacts both to the triumphalism of exclusivism and the abstract universalism of pluralism. In the theological arena, postmodernism's challenge to foundationalism has opened space for particularist theories, which emphasize the unique identities and standpoints of religious traditions. By resisting claims to universal religious truth, postmodern thought has encouraged theologians to revisit and value particularity, thereby addressing the limitations of exclusivist and inclusivist paradigms that dominated earlier discourse.¹⁴

While postmodernism interrogates the possibility of universal foundations, post-liberal theology takes a different route: seeking to reclaim and renew the confessional narratives of specific religious communities. Influenced by critiques of postmodern relativism, post-liberal thinkers such as George Lindbeck promote a "cultural-linguistic" approach that emphasizes tradition, doctrine, and communal practice as the context for

10 John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, Faith Meets Faith Series (Orbis Books, 1994), 22.

11 See John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *More Than One Way*, 43.

12 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 28.

13 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 29.

14 Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Fortress Press, 2007), 54–71.

theological meaning. This distinction is important, as readers may encounter varying uses of these terms within theological literature. Postliberal particularism understands religious traditions as cultural-linguistic systems, each with unique internal grammar, logic, and communal practices.¹⁵ Drawing from Lindbeck, religions resemble languages or cultures, and theological truth is judged by internal coherence rather than external standards.¹⁶ Doctrines function as guidelines shaping community speech and action, validated by their effectiveness in forming faithful lives.¹⁷ Particularists view each religion as distinct, resisting integration into overarching theories and emphasizing their intrinsic uniqueness. Although this approach respects religious particularity and fosters dialogue on traditions' own terms, it risks relativism by treating religions as isolated, self-contained systems.¹⁸ Therefore, meaningful interfaith dialogue and mutual enrichment become challenging, leading potentially to isolated monologues. These extant approaches to interreligious exchanges have specific epistemological underpinnings that shape them, which the next section will explore.

Epistemological Insights: From Foundationalism to Postfoundationalism

Disagreements about religious diversity are often rooted in deeper epistemological viewpoints that offer differing theories about truth and how we know it. The theology of religions models outlined above each draw (sometimes implicitly) on certain epistemological assumptions. Exclusivism and inclusivism typically presume a form of foundationalism, whereas pluralism correlates with a nonfoundationalist or relativist epistemology. The postliberal particularist approach is broadly anti- or non-foundationalist as well, emphasizing the context-dependence of truth. To move beyond the impasses of these approaches, the postfoundationalist epistemology has sought to integrate insights from both sides, viz., affirming that there is an objective truth (resisting pure relativism) while also affirming that all human grasp of truth is conditioned and partial (resisting naïve absolutism). This section will unpack these terms and chart the trajectory from foundationalism to postfoundationalism, engaging especially the concept of critical realism as a mediating lens.

15 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 21.

16 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 40.

17 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 47.

18 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 55.

Foundationalist Epistemology of Exclusivism and Inclusivism

Foundationalism is an epistemological model (with roots in the Enlightenment) that holds that knowledge must be built upon secure, indubitable foundations, i.e., certain basic truths or “givens” which can be known with certainty and upon which other beliefs are justified. In religious terms, a foundationalist approach often treats a particular revelation or set of doctrines as non-negotiable foundations. Within the exclusivist and inclusivist positions, the truth of one’s own faith is taken as the unquestionable starting point, the criterion against which other claims are evaluated.¹⁹ Foundationalism’s appeal is its clarity and firmness, as it gives believers a confident ground for truth. However, it also tends toward epistemic inflexibility and can downplay the role of interpretation, cultural context, and the development of understanding.

In philosophical critiques (from thinkers such as W.V.O. Quine and Ludwig Wittgenstein, inter alia), classical foundationalism has been largely discredited for failing to account for how knowledge actually works, namely, that our beliefs form a holistic network (“web of belief”) rather than a simple linear structure descending from infallible foundations.²⁰ In theology, foundationalism often coincided with claims of absolute certainty in one’s doctrines and a dismissal of others’ viewpoints, which are observed in exclusivist paradigms. The limits of foundationalism became evident as theologians encountered genuine insights from other faiths and from modern science and philosophy, challenging the idea that any one human system could possess the entire and inerrant truth.²¹

Nonfoundationalist Epistemology: Pluralism and Postliberal/Particularism

Reacting against the excesses of foundationalism, many 20th-century philosophers and theologians turned to nonfoundationalism (or antifoundationalism), which denies the existence of universal, context-independent foundations for knowledge. Instead, all knowledge is seen as situated, shaped by language, culture, history, and communal belonging. Within the theology of religions, pluralist and postliberal approaches reflect this epistemology. They reject any single, “objective” standpoint,

19 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 26.

20 See Willard Van Orman Quine and Joseph S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (Random House, 1970).

21 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 63.

emphasizing instead the plurality of perspectives. Pluralism, in particular, aligns with nonfoundationalist thought by asserting that each religion offers a valid interpretation of ultimate reality, without privileging one tradition's claims as normative. From this view arises the idea of a "subjective multiplicity of knowledge," viz., that truth is always mediated through the interpretive lens of individuals and communities.²²

Nonfoundationalism emphasizes the fallibility of human knowing and hence implicitly promotes epistemic humility. Our beliefs, shaped by historical and cultural narratives, are neither absolute nor universally binding. This humility is essential to interreligious dialogue, as it facilitates listening and learning rather than judgment rooted in presumed universal truths. For instance, postliberalism's insistence that truth is intrasystemic exemplifies a nonfoundationalist caution toward universalizing truth claims.

Yet, nonfoundationalism in its stronger forms presents challenges. Carried to its extreme, it risks relativism, viz., the view that truth is confined to context, and there is no meaningful reality beyond local interpretations. In religious pluralism, this manifests as the belief that doctrinal differences are merely cultural variations, effectively trivializing the distinct and sometimes conflicting truth-claims of traditions. Dialogue, under such conditions, becomes an exchange of expressions without the possibility of genuine agreement or disagreement. This results in a superficial engagement that avoids grappling with the deeper claims of truth.

Thus, foundationalism and nonfoundationalism—taken in isolation—both pose limits for theology of religions. The former cannot accommodate plurality; the latter struggles to account for the objectivity of truth. Nicholson persuasively argues that genuine interreligious engagement must grapple with the ineluctable dimension of differences and conflicts within religious identity, rather than concealing these dynamics under aspirations toward pure, unconflicted dialogue.²³ The postfoundationalist paradigm endeavors a mediating epistemological trajectory that affirms context and particularity while preserving a meaningful notion of universality and truth.

22 F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 43.

23 Hugh Nicholson, *The Spirit of Contradiction in Christianity and Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 61–95. Also see Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 50–82.

The Postfoundationalist Alternative: Critical Realism and Epistemic Holism

Postfoundationalism, a term popularized in theology by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, refers to an approach that moves beyond the foundationalism-vs.-nonfoundationalism dichotomy by incorporating the valid concerns of each into a more nuanced framework. The idea is not to return to naïve absolutism, but to critically recover the idea of truth and rational discourse, while fully embracing the contextuality and interpretive nature of all understanding.

The Metaphorical Nature of Foundations

While defining the postfoundationalist alternative, F. LeRon Shults emphasizes the “metaphorical nature” of the term “foundation.”²⁴ He states that we all possess “noetic and hermeneutic foundations” in a general sense on which we “base” our beliefs.²⁵ Even nonfoundationalists require a “basis,” e.g., the belief that “narrative shapes our experience” provides the basis and serves as a “foundation” for them.²⁶ Furthermore, both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist models contain claims about epistemology and hermeneutics. Foundationalists tend to overprivilege epistemology and downplay interpretation, while nonfoundationalists focus on the hermeneutic side and emphasize the unsustainable nature of the modernist approach, which relies on absolute theory or sensory justification.²⁷

Linking Epistemology and Hermeneutics

The postfoundationalist model seeks to integrate epistemology and hermeneutics in a relational unity. As Shults notes, van Huyssteen makes the following observations about postfoundationalism:

First, it fully acknowledges contextuality, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that tradition shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic values that inform our reflection about God and what some of

24 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 30.

25 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 30.

26 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 30.

27 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 28.

us believe to be God's presence in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to point creatively beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a form of interdisciplinary conversation.²⁸

While taking into account factors such as contextuality, the interpreted nature of human experiences, and traditionally shaped knowledge, the postfoundationalist approach seeks to transcend the limitations of a relativistic conception. It fully acknowledges that all our knowing is contextually embedded ("interpreted experience" is central, as Shults notes²⁹) and that our communities and traditions shape our interpretations. At the same time, it is maintained that it is possible to reach beyond the confines of one local community's perspective toward a broader conversation and hence toward truth through rational dialogue and cross-contextual inquiry. Van Huyssteen, for instance, speaks of "transversal" rationality, a kind of interdisciplinary, cross-contextual reasoning that allows different fields (or religions) to collaborate without requiring an absolute universal standpoint, yet also without remaining incommensurable silos.

Critical Realism

A key tool in postfoundationalist theology is critical realism. It was originally developed in the philosophy of science by thinkers like Michael Polanyi and Roy Bhaskar and was later employed by theologians.³⁰ Critical realism asserts that there is a reality independent of our knowledge (hence realism), but our knowledge of it is always indirect, mediated, and subject to revision (hence critical). Van Huyssteen adopts this view in theological epistemology, suggesting that we can speak of an actual truth (for example, God's reality) while admitting that all our doctrines and models are approximations mediated by human language and experience. He writes: "A critical-realist stand is realistic because [...] it enables us to recognize the referential nature of analogical language as a form of indirect speech. It is also critical, however, because the role of metaphoric language in theology teaches us that models should never be absolutized or ideologized, but should remain

28 J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 4, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 26.

29 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44.

30 Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Verso, 1975); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1974).

open and provisional.”³¹ In other words, theology can refer to something real—God, ultimate truth—but it does so using analogies, metaphors, and models drawn from our finite experience. These models genuinely refer (they are not merely self-referential games as extreme postmodernism might imply), yet they never capture the full reality and must be held humbly and conditionally.

John Thatamanil’s *Circling the Elephant* positions comparative theology as a transformative engagement across religious boundaries, emphasizing ongoing dialogue and openness to learning from multiple traditions. Thatamanil highlights the value of critical realism, arguing that theological claims must remain provisional and open to revision through interreligious encounter.³² Paul Hedges, in *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives and Understanding Religion*, systematically explores the interdependence between comparative theology and theology of religions. Hedges demonstrates that comparative theology enriches and deepens prior frameworks, balancing particularity with constructive pluralism.³³ He also engages with critical realism, advocating for a reflexive, postfoundational approach that is attentive to both theological and methodological debates.

Critique and Recent Developments

While my discussion draws from seminal works by van Huyssteen and Shults, it is crucial to acknowledge recent debates critiquing the appropriation of critical realism in theology. For instance, Fabio Gironi offers a stringent critique of what he terms the “theological hijacking of realism.”³⁴ According to Gironi, the adaptation of critical realism by leading figures in science and religion (e.g., Ian G. Barbour, Arthur R. Peacocke, and John C. Polkinghorne³⁵) re-maps a philosophy of science tool intended for

31 J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology*, trans. H.F. Snijders (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 142.

32 John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephants: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (Fordham University Press, 2020).

33 Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Brill, 2017), 12–36; Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press, 2021), 77–101.

34 Fabio Gironi, “The Theological Hijacking of Realism: Critical Realism in ‘Science and Religion,’” *Journal of Critical Realism* 11, no. 1 (2012): 40–75.

35 Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (Harper & Row, 1966); Arthur R. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human*,

epistemic humility and fallibilism into a defense of theology's ontological and methodological primacy. He argues this often occurs "by reinterpreting the stratification of reality in hierarchical terms, in implicit accord with the trope of a *scala naturae* [...] taking as an *a priori* assumption the existence of a God as the reality which is the object of theological enquiry."³⁶

Gironi further cautions that such moves risk instrumentalizing philosophical realism to serve apologetic ends: "This theology-oriented appropriation of critical realism produces a stance that betrays the aims of scientific critical realism," resulting in a "confusion between the epistemic project of the natural sciences and the discipline of theology."³⁷ He specifically notes that these appropriations often assume, rather than critically examine, the ontological priority of a divine reality—potentially undermining genuine interdisciplinary dialogue.³⁸

Gironi's critical perspective raises significant questions about the apologetic appropriation of critical realism within theology, highlighting the risk of presupposing the centrality or priority of a Creator God. However, it is important to recognize that the presence of presuppositional commitments is not unique to theology; scientific inquiry itself is fundamentally shaped by foundational beliefs. Science operates with the tacit assumption of a deterministic and intelligible universe—a belief in the world's orderliness and discoverability—which forms the "faith" context for any empirical investigation or theoretical breakthrough. These philosophical commitments are seldom derived from empirical observation alone and act as the enabling conditions for science's pursuit of knowledge. Thus, while theological discourse may foreground its metaphysical presuppositions, the epistemic foundations of science rest on similarly deep-seated, guiding convictions. This shared reliance on faith-like assumptions in both disciplines invites a more nuanced dialogue between science and theology, as explored in the following section.

rev. ed. (Fortress Press, 1993); John C. Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship Between Science and Theology* (Trinity Press International, 1991).

36 Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism," 41.

37 Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism," 41.

38 Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism," 55–57.

The Epistemic “Faith” Presupposition of Science, Universal Intent, and Provisionality

Contemporary discussions in the philosophy of science recognize that even the empirical enterprise is undergirded by foundational “faith” assumptions. Albert Einstein, for instance, famously insisted upon the necessity to “believe” in a purposeful, unified world—deterministic enough to render scientific discovery possible. Einstein noted, “First, you must have faith in an eternal world independent of you, then you must have faith in your ability to perceive it, and finally, you must try to explain it utilizing concepts or mathematical constructions.”³⁹ He further regarded humanity’s “highest and most sacred duty” as the unification of physical laws, guided by the principle of simplicity. Max Planck similarly affirmed that “the assumption of an absolute determinism is the essential foundation of every scientific inquiry.”⁴⁰ Such statements reveal the implicit “faith” required to pursue science before empiricism can proceed.

The conception of “universal intent” by Michael Polanyi adds further nuance to this epistemological dynamic. Polanyi, himself a scientist-philosopher, argued that scientists claim universal validity for their discoveries—not on the certainty of truth but as an act of “universal intent,” always subject to future falsification.⁴¹ Polanyi observes that “to claim validity for a statement merely declares that it ought to be accepted by all,” though its acceptance and truth remain provisional, continuously open to testing and critique. This provisionality is foundational to the scientific method, closely tied to Popper’s criterion of falsifiability. Thus, while scientific knowledge is ambitious—seeking universal assent—it is also inherently fallible and tentative, shaped by human finitude.

Both scientific and theological epistemologies, therefore, operate with universal intent and foundational “faith” assumptions. Yet, as Polanyi notes, the grounds differ: Scientific universal intent is rooted in empirical validation and the falsifiability principle, whereas theological universal intent rests upon faith convictions, doctrinal interpretation, and revelatory claims. Recognizing these parallels and distinctions invites humility in both science and theology regarding claims to universal truth and openness to critical reflection and ongoing dialogue.

39 William Hermanns, *Einstein and the Poet: In Search of the Cosmic Man* (Branden Press, 1983), 139.

40 Max Planck quoted in L. Heilbron, *The Dilemmas of an Upright Man: Max Planck and the Fortunes of German Science, With a New Afterword* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 66.

41 Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 90–92.

Conceptual Pairs in Postfoundationalism

Shults identifies four conceptual pairs that denote a dialectic relationship between foundationalist and nonfoundationalist priorities:⁴²

- Experience and Beliefs
- Truth and Knowledge
- Individual and Community
- Explanation and Understanding

These pairs represent the privileging of specific aspects within the foundationalist and nonfoundationalist paradigms, respectively. The foundationalist paradigm tends to emphasize the priority of belief, singular truth, the individual, and universal understanding. In contrast, the nonfoundationalist approach privileges the significance of experience, contextual knowledge, community, and contextual explanation. Postfoundationalism seeks to reengage them in their dynamic relational unity. It recognizes the relational unity and interdependence between these seemingly opposing priorities, engaging them in a dialectic relationship. By overcoming the limitations of both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist extremes, while harnessing their strengths, postfoundationalism attempts to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of knowledge, truth, and the complex interplay between the individual and the community. This is particularly relevant within the realm of religious diversity and interreligious dialogue, promoting a balanced and dynamic engagement with different faith traditions.

Shults expounds on the link between these couplets by formulating four postfoundationalist statements. The first, Experience and Beliefs, is defined as: “Interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience.”⁴³ While a nonfoundationalist construal of rationality would argue that experiences are “embedded in networks of belief and that this linguistically shaped ‘web’ limits and mediates all experience,”⁴⁴ foundationalists, on the other hand, tend to “justify beliefs by appealing to their groundedness in experience (whether conceptual or sensual).”⁴⁵ How are we to understand the relation between our beliefs and our experience? Is there a balance

42 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 43–70.

43 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44.

44 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 45.

45 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44.

between the foundationalist stress on the “basis of experience” and the nonfoundationalist emphasis on the “web of belief”? Shults, citing van Huyssteen, contends that because our relation to the world is only through the “mediation of interpreted experience,” we are “always limited in perspective, in focus, and in experiential scope.”⁴⁶ Van Huyssteen further notes: “[B]eliefs are both brought to experience and derived from it, and our interpreted experience thus becomes the matrix within which meaning and knowledge arise.”⁴⁷

Postfoundationalism attempts to locate our epistemic quest in reciprocity between beliefs that are generated within historically and culturally conditioned human experiences and the interpretation of such experiences that is, in turn, informed by the beliefs we hold. This reciprocal relationship between beliefs and experience is at the heart of the postfoundationalist approach, which seeks to navigate the tensions between the foundationalist emphasis on the primacy of experience and the nonfoundationalist emphasis on the influence of our pre-existing beliefs and conceptual frameworks.

Schulz’s second conceptual pair, Truth and Knowledge, is defined as: “The objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.”⁴⁸ The classical foundationalist emphasized the need for certain and objective knowledge of the truth, while the nonfoundationalist perspective highlighted the apparent plurality of knowledge claims that are subjective and contextually bound, seemingly repudiating the possibility of truth independent of the subject.

The postfoundationalist model seeks to hold these tensions in a more nuanced way, recognizing that the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the meaningful and coherent pursuit of knowledge, even as all human knowledge remains provisional and fallible.⁴⁹ The intelligibility and fallibility of knowledge are explicated in light of “critical realism.” Van Huyssteen articulates the postfoundationalist perspective within the matrix of critical realism, saying:

A critical-realist stand is realistic because, in the process of theological theorizing, this concept enables us to recognize

46 van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 20, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44–45.

47 van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 20, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 45.

48 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50.

49 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50–2.

the cognitive and referential nature of analogical language as a form of indirect speech. It is also critical, however, because the role of metaphoric language in theology would teach us those models should never be absolutized or ideologized, but should retain their openness and provisionality throughout the process of theorizing.⁵⁰

The postfoundationalist model rightfully acknowledges the provisionality of all human knowledge through the critical realist conception. However, it emphasizes “intelligibility” in order to accommodate the foundationalist intuitions about truth as an ideal, without which any pursuit of knowledge is possible.⁵¹ The postfoundationalist paradigm seeks to navigate the complex relationship between truth and knowledge, recognizing both the objective unity of truth as a necessary condition for the intelligible pursuit of knowledge and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge claims that reflect the fallibility of human understanding. This approach embraces a critical realist stance, which acknowledges the objective reality of God’s self-disclosure, affirming that God’s self-disclosure corresponds to an objective reality, while also recognizing that human knowledge of this reality is inevitably mediated—through language, culture, and context—and thus remains fallible.

The third conceptual pair that Shulz names, Individual and Community, is defined as follows: “[R]ational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.”⁵² Foundationalism tends to privilege individuals as the sole source of “Reason,” while nonfoundationalism overemphasizes the postmodern critique of individualism and the communal nature of rationality.⁵³ However, the postfoundationalist approach seeks to maintain a balance between these two extremes. It acknowledges that rational judgment is indeed an activity of socially situated individuals, but also affirms that the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.⁵⁴ As articulated by van Huyssteen, rationality involves a dynamic interplay between the individual agent who makes the actual rational judgments and the cultural-historical community that shapes the interpretative frameworks and standards of rationality. The individual is not completely autonomous

50 van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith*, 142, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 51.

51 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50, 56–57.

52 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60.

53 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 59.

54 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60.

or independent, as their rationality is influenced by the communal context. At the same time, the individual is not just a passive product of their community, as they can engage in self-differentiation and critically evaluate the norms and criteria of their group.⁵⁵

Thus, the nonfoundationalist stress on community-inspired interpretation and the foundationalist intuition that it is the individual who really makes a rational judgment are maintained in balance.⁵⁶ This view avoids the absolutism of classical foundationalism, which overstates the role of the individual, as well as the radical relativism of nonfoundationalism, which downplays the importance of the individual rational agent. Instead, the postfoundationalist paradigm sees the individual and the community as mutually conditioning components in the shaping of one's rationality.⁵⁷ The individual's personal voice and agency are recognized and affirmed, even as they are situated within and shaped by the cultural-historical context. This balanced approach allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the complex relationship between the individual and the community in the realm of knowledge, truth, and religious diversity.

Explanation and Understanding, Shulz's fourth conceptual pair, is explained in the following manner: "Explanation aims for universal, transcontextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations."⁵⁸ The philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey initially proposed a clear demarcation between *Erklärung* (explanation) and *Verstehen* (understanding) as distinct modes of inquiry.⁵⁹ The foundationalist approach, following the model of the natural sciences, attempts to offer absolute, universal explanations that are believed to emerge by following definite, context-independent rules. In contrast, the nonfoundationalist perspective holds on to the primacy of *Verstehen* and confines the scope of theology to just understanding, rooted in particular traditions with their own criteria of coherence.⁶⁰ This nonfoundationalist approach conceives understanding as being rooted in particular traditions (contexts) with their own criteria of

55 J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 150, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60.

56 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60–61.

57 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 61.

58 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

59 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 67.

60 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 67–68.

coherence and thus denies the possibility of an all-encompassing explanation that defies any such tradition-specific context.⁶¹

In response, the postfoundationalist paradigm rejects the rigid methodological opposition between “human” and “natural” sciences and instead stresses the mutual conditioning and interplay between the two movements of explanation and understanding in human rationality.⁶² By bringing theology and the natural sciences into a constructive dialogue, the postfoundationalist model sees significant overlaps and resemblances between them. As van Huyssteen observes, in all sciences, including theology, “the subjectivity of interpreting belongs right in the heart of the explanatory task.”⁶³ However, this need not lead to an anxious relativism but rather signals the “ongoing rational reconstruction” of our understanding.⁶⁴

Following van Huyssteen’s lead, Shults elaborates further that theological explanations are an attempt to establish “a link between the inherited beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition and the contemporary experience of its adherents.”⁶⁵ Thus, the task of theology is both to understand the particular contextual horizon and to offer explanations that resonate with and illuminate that horizon. As Calvin Schrag conceives it, Shults asserts that “understanding” and “explanation” are “twin tasks in a discursive event, understanding as we explain and explaining as we understand.”⁶⁶ The postfoundationalist paradigm thus avoids the absolutism of foundationalism and the radical relativism of nonfoundationalism, offering a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community in the realm of knowledge, truth, and religious diversity.

Thus, postfoundationalist epistemology acknowledges the full contextuality of human knowledge, our perspectives being limited by culture, language, and history, while refusing to abandon the transcontextual pursuit of truth. It is an approach of critical openness—open to new information

61 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 68.

62 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 68.

63 van Huyssteen, “Theology and Science: The Quest for a New Apologetics,” in *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 232, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

64 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

65 van Huyssteen, “Theology and Science,” in *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 234, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

66 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 70, in reference to Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 86

and other viewpoints, yet critical in assessing claims against experience and reason. This epistemological stance is especially promising for interreligious dialogue. It provides a framework where one can be committed to a belief in universal truth (realism) without the presumption that an individual alone or one particular community alone possesses it fully (critical humility). Such an attitude is a prerequisite for fruitful comparative theology.

Having explored the epistemological landscape underlying existing models of interreligious engagement—ranging from the absolutist tendencies of foundationalism in exclusivist and inclusivist approaches to the relativistic implications of nonfoundationalism in pluralist and postliberal paradigms—it is clear that each model struggles to adequately balance the particularity of religious traditions with their aspirations for universal truth. The preceding section has introduced postfoundationalism as an epistemic framework capable of navigating these tensions, recognizing both the contextual nature of religious knowledge and the possibility of meaningfully seeking a shared truth. With this groundwork in place, it is fitting now to turn to comparative theology, a contemporary practice that emerges precisely in response to limitations inherent in earlier models. Comparative theology is committed to deep interreligious learning through careful engagement with the particularities of distinct traditions. Yet it has faced challenges due to its ambiguous epistemological foundations. The following section will introduce the methodological developments in comparative theology and argue that integrating a postfoundationalist epistemology offers a coherent framework necessary to address these limitations, thereby proposing a robust new paradigm for interfaith dialogue through postfoundationalist comparative theology.

Comparative Theology in Contemporary Practice

Comparative theology, as a mode of interreligious dialogue, seeks to balance commitment to one's home tradition while celebrating differences and particularities in other religious traditions.⁶⁷ The emergence of comparative theology reflects discontent with the *a priori* judgments common in older models of theology of religions. As James L. Fredericks critiques, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism each function as ways of maintaining theological distance: They construct frameworks about other religions without engaging

67 Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3.

them deeply.⁶⁸ These frameworks often allowed Christians to bypass the hard work of real encounter, reducing other faiths to simplified objects of theological classification. Also, unlike the theology of religions, which aims for general comparisons, comparative theology focuses on specific topics and texts. As Hugh Nicholson observes, it challenges the impulse to formulate theories about religious others prior to genuine engagement with their sources.⁶⁹ It demands that theologians execute a detailed comparison first, and only then reflect theologically. This shift foregrounds actual interreligious learning rather than abstract posturing.

Scholars continue to debate the precise relationship between comparative theology and the theology of religions. While early proponents of comparative theology, such as Francis X. Clooney, sometimes argued that their field transcends established typologies, more recent critiques have highlighted the polemical and strategic dimensions of these claims.⁷⁰ While Paul Hedges suggests that Clooney's tendency to identify as an inclusivist may partly reflect the institutional context of Catholic theology, even as much of his comparative work points toward pluralist or dialogical approaches.⁷¹ It is now widely recognized that comparative theology builds upon insights and frameworks established in the theology of religions, contributing both methodological depth and conceptual richness.⁷² For example, Schmidt-Leukel and Hedges have demonstrated that comparative theology's inquiry is grounded in prior theological reflection on religious diversity.⁷³ Recent scholarship continues to integrate these fields and explore their fruitful intersection.

Faith Seeking Understanding

Clooney defines comparative theology as "faith seeking understanding across religious boundaries."⁷⁴ It affirms that meaningful interfaith engagement requires immersion in the concrete and complex realities of another tradition. The theologian remains firmly rooted in her confessional identity but enters into learning relationships with other religious texts

68 James Lee Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Paulist Press, 1999), 115.

69 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 29.

70 See Clooney, *Comparative Theology*.

71 See Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*.

72 See Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology*.

73 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*.

74 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

and experiences in ways that may enrich, challenge, or even transform her understanding of faith. As a theological approach, comparative theology seeks to understand one's own faith tradition in dialogue with other religious traditions, and it involves focused engagement with specific elements of other traditions—texts, doctrines, rituals, or ethical practices—with the aim of gaining theological insight both from and for one's own tradition. Comparative theology emphasizes the locatedness of the theologian and avoids abstract theorizing about religious truth. It acknowledges the provisionality of all theological conceptions and the particularity of individual perspectives within broader religious communities.

The Task of Comparative Theology

Comparative theology often begins with close textual study. Clooney's comparative reading of Christian and Hindu theological texts—especially in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition—is a model of the method. He reads, for instance, a Hindu commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā alongside Christian theological writings, seeking both thematic resonances and dissonances.⁷⁵ The purpose is not to create a harmonized synthesis, but to allow one tradition's insight to illuminate or question the other. Yet the method extends beyond texts. Comparative theology has increasingly included ritual, aesthetics, embodiment, ethics, and lived religious experiences as sites of theological reflection. Michelle Voss Roberts, for example, explores how Hindu and Christian aesthetics and embodied devotional practices can inform one another.⁷⁶ This broadening of method reflects an underlying theological conviction: that truth is not confined to doctrine but is mediated through experience, practice, and beauty. Thus, comparative theology becomes a multisensory and dialogical pursuit. Methodologically, Nicholson highlights the importance of self-reflexivity and ethical accountability in comparative theological work, insisting that practitioners attend to their own normative positions and the risk of unacknowledged pluralism or exclusion.⁷⁷ Whether through scriptural study, contemplative engagement with ritual, or participation in interfaith relationships and discourse, the comparative theologian seeks to discern God's self-disclosure amid religious difference.

75 See Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Georgetown University Press, 2008).

76 Michelle Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion, Comparative Theology: Thinking Across Traditions* (Fordham University Press, 2014).

77 See Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 50–82.

Commitments: Confession and Openness

Comparative theology is grounded in a commitment to one's own faith tradition while also respecting and affirming the truths and values of other traditions. It responds to the needs of the contemporary world and involves a willingness to engage with the truth claims of the "Other."⁷⁸ It represents an act of "faith seeking understanding" that ventures into learning from multiple faith traditions.⁷⁹ Nicholson describes this confessional openness as one of the hallmarks of comparative theology.⁸⁰ It is a posture of integrity and vulnerability as the theologian brings her full faith commitments into the dialogue, but while being open to surprise, correction, and transformation. The fruit of this learning is theological enrichment. For instance, Christian reflection on divine kenosis might deepen when placed in dialogue with Buddhist teachings on emptiness. Or, encountering Islamic insistence on *tawhīd* may provoke more robust articulations of Christian monotheism and the Trinitarian mystery. The insights gained are not extraneous add-ons but internal developments within the theologian's own confessional framework. As John Thatamanil emphasizes, comparative theology entails learning not just about, but with and from, other religious traditions.⁸¹

Limitations

While comparative theology significantly advances interfaith dialogue by prioritizing deep engagement with the particularities of religious traditions, it has not entirely escaped critique. One major limitation lies in its epistemological ambiguity, risking reduction to anecdotal exchanges without clear criteria for cross-contextual learning or truth evaluation. Critics highlight comparative theology's potential drift toward subtle forms of inclusivism, wherein religious traditions may unintentionally be interpreted primarily through the theologian's own confessional lens, subordinating distinct voices of other faiths. Furthermore, comparative theologians such as Catherine Cornille, Clooney, and others propose "multiple religious belonging," a notion that implicitly conveys a pluralistic

78 Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 52-53.

79 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

80 Nicholson, "The New Comparative Theology," 64.

81 John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation and the Human Predicament* (Fortress Press, 2006), 3.

conception of religions.⁸² This pluralistic inclination introduces structural risks to the particular claims of the theologian's home tradition, especially when attempting to synthesize inassimilable claims from other traditions. Comparative theology's struggle to maintain equilibrium between the particularity and universality of individual faith assertions evolves from the fact that it attempts to synthesize religious differences through such pluralistic tendencies.

Adopting a postfoundationalist epistemology effectively addresses these concerns. By explicitly recognizing the contextual yet universal intent of religious knowledge, postfoundationalism provides comparative theology with necessary epistemic clarity and coherence. It safeguards against both relativism and subtle inclusivism by respecting the autonomy and integrity of each tradition's particular claims, while still affirming the meaningful possibility of truth emerging through comparative reflection. Thus, postfoundationalism significantly strengthens comparative theology's capacity to genuinely honor differences while engaging in transformative, truth-seeking dialogue.

Toward a Theologically Grounded Method

The comparative theology approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing parity among different religious belief systems, valuing the particularity of each tradition and acknowledging the universal claims within each tradition. It recognizes that each religious tradition has unique perspectives, practices, and understandings that should be respected and affirmed rather than subsumed under a single, universal framework. These priorities of comparative theology are grounded in a coherent epistemic framework that sustains the plurality, particularity, and universality of religions. As mentioned earlier, comparative theology lacks a clear epistemological grounding to eschew ambiguities in its engagement. While the method emphasizes humility, contextuality, and openness, it has not always provided a coherent account of how knowledge is possible across traditions. Without such a framework, comparative theology risks being reckoned as anecdotal or uncritical. Also, the balance between the particularities and universalities of religious traditions ought to be maintained within the comparative exchanges.

82 Catherine Cornille, ed. *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Orbis, 2002).

The postfoundationalist epistemological framework underscores the significance of comparative theology as a means of deepening one's understanding of different religious perspectives. As explored in earlier sections, postfoundationalism integrates the insights of both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist models. It affirms the contextual, fallible, and tradition-bound nature of human knowing, yet affirms the objectivity of truth, even if only partially grasped. This framework seeks to establish parity, particularity, and universality in interreligious dialogues. It respects the distinctiveness of each religious tradition, allowing for a more genuine and respectful engagement with their unique truth claims. Through a postfoundationalist lens, comparative theology can engage with the similarities, dissimilarities, and inassimilable differences between religions without attempting to synthesize these differences into a forced unity.

A comparative theological learning across religious boundaries, rooted within a postfoundationalist epistemology, recognizes that each tradition offers valuable insights and perspectives that contribute to the broader understanding of religious truth. By acknowledging both the particularity of individual faiths and their universal aspirations, the postfoundationalist framework fosters a more inclusive and dynamic dialogue. Whereas pluralist models often collapse particularities into abstract commonality and postliberal approaches risk incommensurability, the postfoundationalist approach affirms both particularity and trans-contextual learning. It provides a rational warrant for the comparative theologian's confidence that truth can emerge in the space between traditions, not by erasing difference, but by cultivating a hospitable space for mutual interpretation.

Thus, comparative theology, grounded in postfoundationalist epistemology, becomes a theologically rigorous and dialogically fruitful paradigm for interfaith engagement. It upholds difference without division, embraces learning without domination, and seeks truth without totalizing claims. In the next section, the postfoundationalist insights previously developed will be employed to formulate a postfoundationalist comparative Christology. This theological approach will explore how the central Christian claim of Christ's particularity may be held in dialogue with other religious truth claims, without collapsing into relativism or exclusion. In doing so, it will exemplify the kind of robust, humble, and dialogical theology made possible by the convergence of comparative and postfoundationalist methods.

Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology: The Creative Dialectic Relationship

In my book, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, I develop Shults's four conceptual pairs (discussed above) and reorder them (individual-community, experiences-beliefs, explanation-understanding, and knowledge-truth) in order to propose a postfoundationalist comparative theology.⁸³ Against the backdrop of late-modern challenges—relativism, pluralism, and the erosion of traditional epistemic certainties—I propose a framework that neither succumbs to rigid foundationalism nor drifts into uncritical relativism. By emphasizing the interplay between tradition-constituted belief and critical reflection, I offer a model of dialogue that remains faithful to each faith's internal coherence while opening avenues for genuine cross-tradition learning.

Central to my approach is the conviction that theological inquiry must acknowledge its own mediated, fallible character without abandoning the quest for insight and transformation. Drawing on the critical realist epistemology of thinkers like Michael Polanyi, I contend that our claims about ultimate reality are always provisional and context-bound, yet they carry an “universal intent” grounded in communal practices of reasoned debate, historical memory, and embodied worship.⁸⁴ This perspective allows comparative theologians to hold in tension the particularity of their home traditions and the aspiration toward shared human flourishing. Shults's four postfoundationalist couplets give this model structure and depth.

Step One on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Individual Rational Agent and the Faith Community

The progression begins with the dynamic interplay between the individual and the community. In an individual's quest for truth, the locatedness of an individual within a specific faith community signals the particularity of a theologian as she attempts interreligious interaction. The postfoundationalist paradigm recognizes that one's sense of self, agency, and rationality is shaped by the socio-cultural-historical context of the community one belongs to, even as the individual's personal voice and agency are affirmed

83 David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology: Parity, Particularity, and Universality in Indian Interreligious Dialogues* (Lexington Books and Fortress Academic, 2022).

84 Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

in this process. At the core of this paradigm is the acknowledgment that the individual is not an isolated, autonomous entity but is influenced by, and also influences, the environment in which one exists. This lays the groundwork for the next step, which is the relationship between experience and belief.

Step Two on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Interpreted Experience and Transcendental Beliefs

The postfoundationalist perspective situates one's epistemic journey within the reciprocal dynamic between individual beliefs shaped by historically and culturally situated human experiences and the interpretations of those experiences informed by the transcendental beliefs and practices embedded within a particular community. This mutually reinforcing relationship between personal beliefs and the interpretative frameworks provided by the immediate social context lies at the core of the postfoundationalist approach. It navigates the tensions between the foundationalist emphasis on the primacy of individual experience and the nonfoundationalist emphasis on the inevitability of our pre-existing conceptual frameworks rooted in communal traditions.

Step Three on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Contextual Explanation and Universal Understanding

Building on this, the third pair of explanation and understanding highlights the complementary and mutually conditioning nature of these two modes of inquiry. Theological explanations emerge not from abstract, universal rules but from a hermeneutical engagement with the particular contextual horizon. Theological explanations seek to establish a link between the inherited beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition and the contemporary experiences of its adherents. In this way, the task of theology is both to understand the particular contextual horizon and to offer explanations that resonate with and illuminate that horizon. At the same time, understanding is enhanced through the process of explanation, as it illuminates and resonates with the lived experience of the tradition's adherents.

Step Four on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Objective Unity of Truth and Subjective Multiplicity of Knowledge

Finally, this dynamic interplay culminates in the relationship between knowledge and truth. The postfoundationalist approach avoids the extremes of foundationalist claims to universal, context-transcendent truth, as well as the nonfoundationalist retreat to purely particularistic, tradition-bound knowledge. Instead, it sees knowledge and truth as an ongoing “rational reconstruction” that emerges from the creative tension between the universal and the particular, the individual and the community.

In this framework, truth is not seen as an abstract, immutable entity detached from human experience but rather as something that is continually shaped and reshaped through engagement with diverse perspectives. This dynamic process allows for a richer and more inclusive understanding of truth that respects the particularities of different faith traditions while also seeking common ground. The objective unity of truth provides a foundation for coherence and intelligibility in interreligious dialogues. It affirms that, despite our differing contexts and experiences, there is a shared quest for this objective reality of Truth. Simultaneously, the subjective multiplicity of knowledge acknowledges that our insights are inevitably influenced by our specific cultural, historical, and personal contexts. This multiplicity is not a weakness but a strength, as it brings a diversity of perspectives that enriches each of our individual quests for truth.

Step Five on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Application to Comparative Theology

Situated within the broader discipline of comparative theology—where scholars immerse themselves in another faith’s texts, practices, and beliefs to enrich their own tradition—the postfoundationalist framework offers both a map and a set of trajectories. Traditional comparative theology rightly emphasizes empathy, accurate portrayal of “the other,” and creative reflection back into one’s home tradition. But it can at times drift into relativism (treating all claims as equally valid) or syncretism (fusing disparate doctrines without proper distinction).

By framing the four postfoundationalist couplets into four phases of encounter, postfoundationalist comparative theology structures interreligious dialogue under four categories as listed below that neither collapses differences nor erects impermeable barriers. These four phases thus function

as signposts that guide participants from initial mutual recognition, through disciplined learning across difference, toward deeper transformation and responsible witness, enabling interfaith dialogue that is both theologically serious and genuinely open to the other. The phases I introduce in *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology* are autobiographical, confessional, progressive epistemic quest, and parallel truth quest.⁸⁵

1. *Autobiographical (Individual and Community)*⁸⁶

Comparative theology sometimes treats the theologian as an autonomous “expert” sampling exotic doctrines. The autobiographical phase insists that every theologian is first an individual situated within a community. The meaning-making for the individual arises from shared patterns of worship, doctrine, and practice. Acknowledging this autobiographical locatedness prevents the researcher from “objectifying” other traditions or attempting any universally applicable generalizations.

2. *Confessional (Experience and Beliefs)*⁸⁷

Many comparative projects begin with sacred texts and then infer lived practice. The confessional phase reverses and synthesizes: We enter first into the experience of a tradition—its rituals, narratives, and spiritual practices—and only then articulate the beliefs that make sense of those encounters. This cross-learning into another religious tradition is done through the eyes of an adherent of that faith tradition, and the comparative theologian is expected to authentically maintain such confessional assertions. This honors other religions, recognizing that knowledge is not merely propositional but also embodied, and avoids both a foundationalist appeal to “pure” experience and a nonfoundationalist dismissal of experience as merely “socially constructed.”

85 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 72

86 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 72.

87 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 72.

3. *Progressive Epistemic Quest (Explanation and Understanding)*⁸⁸

Where standard comparative work can veer toward detached analysis or anecdotal empathy, the Progressive Epistemic Quest holds explanation and understanding in dynamic tension. Explanation deploys critical tools—historical, linguistic, systematic—to clarify how a truth claims functions. Understanding emerges when that explanation resonates with both the other tradition and our own, judged by whether it illuminates lived realities. This interplay prevents shallow analogies and fosters genuine dialogical appropriation.

4. *Parallel Truth Quest (Truth and Knowledge)*⁸⁹

Finally, rather than claiming either universal, context-free truth or retreating into isolated, tradition-bound knowledge, the parallel truth quest sees both as mutually conditioning. Each tradition's truth claims press us toward an objective unity—a coherent ground of reality beyond our symbols—while our situated knowledge remains finite, inflected by culture, history, and personal vocation. This creative tension fuels ongoing “rational reconstructions,” where mutual critique and reciprocal learning generate thicker, more robust accounts of ultimate reality without dissolving particularities.

Postfoundationalist Comparative Theology: A New Paradigm for Interfaith Dialogue

Postfoundationalist comparative theology proposes a new paradigm for interfaith dialogue by articulating a coherent epistemological framework that overcomes the limitations of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and strict particularism. Grounded in postfoundationalist epistemology, this paradigm is constituted by three interlocking tenets—epistemic parity, theological particularity, and intentional universality (drawing on Polanyi's notion of “universal intent”)—which together aim to secure both the integrity of each religious tradition and the pursuit of truth that is accountable to all interlocutors in transformative interreligious encounter.⁹⁰

88 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 74.

89 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 76.

90 Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

Epistemic Parity

Epistemic parity insists that every religious tradition is approached respectfully as an autonomous, internally coherent epistemic ecosystem. Traditions are studied according to their internal logic, practices, and contexts, rather than measured against external normative standards. Such parity does not devolve into relativism, however, as dialogue remains critically reflective, including honest evaluations both within and between traditions. Comparative theologians thus maintain openness to discovering genuine insights within other traditions while remaining critically engaged from within their own.

Theological Particularity

The second pillar emphasizes preserving the integrity and distinctiveness of religious truth claims. Comparative theology does not seek artificial syntheses but rather encourages respectful engagement with deeply held differences. Scholars fully inhabit the conceptual frameworks of other traditions, such as Hindu Vedanta's non-dual metaphysics or Islamic conceptions of divine revelation, without diminishing or trivializing them. Recognizing irreconcilable doctrines, like Christian Trinitarianism and Islamic *tawhīd*, comparative theology explores the productive tensions between traditions, using these tensions to foster deeper theological reflection and mutual understanding.

Universality and the Shared Quest for Truth

A carefully articulated universality acknowledges that, despite profound doctrinal differences, all religions orient themselves toward the same ultimate reality. Each tradition's claims carry a universal intent, aspiring to articulate truth that transcends particular cultural or historical contexts. This universality emerges not as a simplistic homogenization but as a shared pursuit of deeper truths. Clooney's concept of "holy envy" illustrates how insights from another tradition can powerfully resonate within one's own, triggering fresh theological insights. Through continuous dialogue characterized by humility and openness, postfoundationalist comparative theology promotes an ongoing mutual quest toward universal truths without collapsing distinct religious particularities.

A Paradigm for Transformative Engagement

ostfoundationalist comparative theology reframes interfaith dialogue as a rigorous and transformative journey, rather than merely an intellectual exchange or debate. By holding epistemic parity, theological particularity, and intentional universality together, this paradigm cultivates genuine transformation. Scholars remain deeply anchored in their home traditions while openly engaging with insights from others, embracing mutual enrichment and growth. In doing so, postfoundationalist comparative theology creates an epistemologically robust space that respects diversity, deepens understanding, and invites theologians toward richer, more holistic apprehensions of ultimate reality.

Conceptualizing Faith Traditions as Epistemic Ecosystems

The postfoundationalist paradigm conceptualizes each faith tradition as a self-contained epistemic ecosystem. This approach upholds epistemic parity by respecting the autonomy and integrity of every tradition, thereby fostering genuine learning across religious boundaries.

Sustaining Epistemic Parity

The individual's quest for truth takes place within the distinct epistemic ecosystem of a particular religious tradition, each with its unique beliefs, universal truth claims, and internal criteria for evaluating these claims. The postfoundationalist paradigm conceptualizes religious traditions as internally coherent systems, each sustained by core doctrinal grammars—for instance, Christianity's doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, Islam's principles of *tawhīd* and prophecy, or Buddhism's teachings on suffering and liberation. By affirming the autonomy and internal coherence of each tradition, this approach maintains epistemic parity among religions, resisting both the privileging and relativization of any single tradition.

Respecting Autonomy and Integrity

Respecting the autonomy and integrity of each tradition, the postfoundationalist perspective refrains from reducing religious particularities to a single universal schema or relativizing distinct truth claims. Instead, it

emphasizes maintaining both the uniqueness and universal aspirations within each tradition. By affirming this dual dimension—acknowledging both situated particularity and universal intent—it offers a balanced framework that avoids extremes of exclusivism or relativism, facilitating genuine interfaith dialogue rooted in mutual respect and critical appreciation.

Learning from Another Religion

For the comparative theologian, genuine learning requires empathetically entering another tradition's epistemic ecosystem through the eyes of its adherents, preserving the integrity of its faith claims. Understanding a religious tradition involves engaging its entire conceptual spectrum rather than isolated doctrines, as seen in Christianity's full narrative arc from incarnation to ascension. By authentically inhabiting these epistemic worlds, theologians gain deeper appreciation and nuanced insight without artificially synthesizing distinct beliefs, thus cultivating a more robust, respectful, and transformative dialogue across religious boundaries.

Conclusion

This essay has advanced a postfoundationalist comparative theology that critically engages the diverse landscape of theology of religions while remaining attentive to recent critiques and methodological developments. By reflecting on the epistemic presuppositions of both science and theology, the nuanced evolution of typological frameworks, and the complex interplay between particularist and pluralist perspectives, I have sought to contribute a dialogically robust and theologically self-critical paradigm for contemporary interreligious engagement.

Going forward, comparative theologians are called to remain reflexive about the tensions and possibilities within their field, drawing upon critical realism and methodological humility to promote genuine dialogue. Only through vigilant attention to irreconcilable differences, potential conflicts, and constructive relationality can comparative theology realize its promise at the forefront of theological reflection in a pluralistic world.

David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian, Ph.D., is working as an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Theology at SALACS, Bangalore, India.



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