A Dialogical Theism: Francis X. Clooney's Comparative Theology as a Resource for Interreligious Models of Ultimate Reality, by Richard Hanson

Abstract

Francis X. Clooney is a seminal figure in the emerging approach to religious diversity known as Comparative Theology. Much of his work in this field has been concerned with engaging particular texts from Hindu and Christian traditions in the praxis of context-specific, in-depth comparison. Even though it begins with such particular, limited comparisons, Clooney maintains that comparative theology is still, first and foremost, a means of doing theology:

> As theology, comparative theology consists most basically in faith seeking understanding; its ultimate horizon can be nothing less than knowledge of the divine, the transcendent.[1]

The ultimate aim of comparative theology is thus the same as that of all theologies: understanding ultimate reality. The difference in approach, of engaging particular aspects of different religious traditions, of practical engagement prior to making claims about the nature of an ultimate reality, is one that Clooney holds will ultimately prove far more fruitful in understanding "the transcendent."

Clooney's approach to doing theology does indeed imply a helpful and much needed model of ultimate reality—one that holds the promise of overcoming many of the difficulties associated with theologies of religions, and one that is of tremendous importance for our increasingly diverse and conflict-laden religious situations in the 21st century. In my own development of this model, I will primarily be guided by the four features of a relevant contemporary theology that Clooney identifies in 2001's *Hindu God, Christian God*, that such theologies, and their concomitant models of God must be: interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional.[2]

I will explain his use of each of these features below, and show how each helps to flesh out a model of ultimate reality that I believe to be implicit in their connotations— and also in many of the tenets of Christian faith. The model I construct, due to my own confessional background as a Catholic Christian, will make primary use of the language of Christian theism, but this is not intended to privilege Christian tradition, or even theistic perspectives. I frame my argument in the terms of Christian tradition in order to show Christianity as one example, one partner who can benefit tremendously from engagement with and criticism from perspectives outside its tradition.

What I hope to show is: 1) that the language of Christian theism, as articulated through Clooney's four dimensions, helps to develop a robust concept of ultimate reality that is compatible with the demands of interreligious engagement as well as commitment to Christian faith, 2) that my own articulation of Christian theism as engaged in these four dimensions might serve as an invitation to non-Christians to articulate their own, similarly engaged models, and to dialogue with Christian traditions and/or with others, and 3) to leave open the possibility that these four dimensions of theological inquiry are applicable to other traditions and other contexts. Although I will be using Clooney's dimensions to build a particular model, this model is but one possible example.

The model constructed within this Christian paradigm is intended to be internally consistent with Christian tradition and to show how Christianity can approach its own views of ultimate reality in a more meaningful way through dialogue with non-Christians. This model is not, and cannot be, a complete or absolute guide for understanding ultimate reality (if "understanding" is itself an applicable term). Indeed, one of the basic presuppositions of the model itself is that ultimate reality is the sort of thing that is best articulated in dialogue with the widest and most diverse circle of interlocutors possible. Clooney himself recognizes similar limitations in *Hindu God, Christian God*, a book that limits itself to comparisons between selected works from Hindu and Christian thinkers:

> Later and after numerous interreligious, comparative, and dialogical projects that cross many religious boundaries and draw faithful theologians from diverse traditions into numerous conversations, perhaps someone will be able to write a simpler book, simply entitled 'God.' That such a book cannot be written now but may be written in the future if we all do our work is something about which theologians everywhere should think.[3]

"God," in this case, is something which can only properly be described, argued about, and approached *after* we begin to understand one another's religious contexts in depth and detail, and when multiple perspectives are engaged.

This certainly does not rule out particular approaches, specific models, or even individual theories as to what we think God might be like. A perspective that engages multiplicity needs particular views—as Clooney's work amply demonstrates. It is in this spirit of beginning with the particular that I will begin my construction of a Christian model of ultimate reality which takes full account of the interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional dimensions of theological reflection.

An "Interreligious" God: Christian Theism, Human Reason, and the Interreligious Roots of Christian Traditions

Clooney argues that theology, faith seeking understanding, is first and foremost an "interreligious" undertaking. "…[T]*heology* is now interreligious; in fact, it has always been so, because when humans theologize they continue to think like humans." The ways in which human beings apply reason to our faiths may vary, but once past linguistic and other cultural barriers, such rational processes become recognizable. The endeavor to apply reasoning, "believers…[thinking] through and [explaining] what they believe," is not unique to any particular tradition—even if the beliefs themselves are unique. Beliefs "…remain liable to argument, but arguability indicates some common ground."⁴ Theology is thus "interreligious" in the sense that the methods and arguments used by individual traditions that share a common intellectual culture share commonalities in, at the very least, their reasoning processes.

Clooney applies this "interreligious" means of analyzing theological arguments to various Hindu and Christian concepts of Ultimate Reality. If we examine the history of Christian thought, such efforts are really nothing new: Christians have always engaged the arguments of non-Christian thinkers as resources for our own understanding of God. From the early Church Fathers, through Augustine and Aquinas, Christians have made use of "pagan" Greek thinkers, among others, as primary interlocutors in their efforts to understand ultimate reality.

There is another, much deeper sense in which the Christian understanding of God is interreligious. Christian tradition gets its entire concept of a universal God who is alive and active in human history from the Hebrew Bible, and from the spirituality and religious thought of the ancient Hebrew traditions. Without the revelation of God in the Hebrew Bible, Christianity would have no concept of God at all. Indeed, Christianity would be utterly non-existent without the Hebrew traditions, as Jesus himself comes from these traditions.

Christianity has its origins and initial concept of what God is like in this interreligious context. Christians are directly dependent upon Hebrew traditions for the very existence of their faith. Christianity could not have begun as a distinct faith tradition without its Hebrew origins. The sacred histories of Christian traditions, however much these diverge among themselves and also diverge from those of Judaism, would be incomprehensible without the Hebrew concepts of God's creation, human sin, and God's promise of redemption. Jesus, however he has been received by Rabbinic and later Judaisms, is portrayed in the New Testament and in subsequent Christian belief as fulfilling the promises made to the Hebrew peoples—the promises God makes in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Christian concept of God is thus inherently interreligious. Christians' progress in understanding this God is affirmed and enhanced by acknowledging and

exploring these interreligious roots—as many Christian theologians continue to do. Christians have, additionally, articulated their concepts of God interreligiously from the tradition's inception as a religion independent of Judaism. Christian thinkers have engaged both Jewish theologians and other non-Christians not only polemically, but also in rational argument and reflection.[5] There are the aforementioned examples of the fathers, but think also of Aquinas' use of Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Avveroes)—with whom Christianity has shared belief in the God of Abraham since Islam's beginnings. Even if Muslims and Christians have disagreed confessionally and conceptually, this dialogue, further, is one that has made use of both of Clooney's senses of "interreligious": common human reasoning processes and a common faith in the God of Abraham.

In these senses, then, God is understood interreligiously in Christian traditions. Christians have no concept of God apart from relationships with interlocutors in at least one other tradition. When Christianity becomes established, it continues to articulate its notions of God interreligiously. The ways in which Christians understand God are, in their inception and continued development, interreligious. God is clearly something that Christians have received and articulated from and alongside other traditions. Christian concepts of and relationships to God have developed interreligiously.

The Comparative Dimension of a Model of God

Theology is "comparative" for Clooney in the sense that "…an intelligent interreligious theology is already a comparative theology where similarities and differences are taken into account; ideally it becomes explicitly comparative."[6] An explicitly comparative atmosphere helps to encourage awareness not only of other religious traditions, but also of the intricacies and details of one's own tradition. Comparison helps discern detail, and also to make the kinds of careful distinctions necessary to the enterprise of "faith seeking understanding."

Clooney's earlier (1993) *Theology After Vedanta* exemplifies this comparative approach. Clooney sets up the following dilemma: "We may find ourselves compelled to ask which of the following declarations is true: 1. The historical event of the Passion of Christ is the most fitting, and ultimately the only, source of the salvation for the world; or, 2. Knowledge of Brahman is all that is required for salvation."[7] Clooney argues that when these statements are taken side-by-side, they cannot be compared as contradictory or competing truths; neither can be properly understood apart from its context since "both are rooted in the set of interpretive and communicative acts which constitute the faith lives of their communities, the choice cannot be an immediate, stark either/or."[8]

After working through a careful comparison and witnessing each statement in the full context of its tradition, the Christian, for example, may indeed retain a belief in the unique efficacy of salvation in Christ. But in the process of coming to know the Hindu

context, the Christian "will lose…the capacity to make claims such as 'knowledge of Brahman does not save.'"[9] In coming to know another tradition, theologians are less able to make easy, cut-and-dried statements about other traditions. This lack of ability is a sign and seal of a deeper learning—one that is not comfortable or satisfied with the kinds of assertions, such as "knowledge of Brahman does not save," that can only be made in ignorance of another tradition.

Comparison helps distinguish the unique attributes of the traditions being compared; the particular content of a given article of faith always must be distinguished carefully by its unique features, and in contrast to what it is not. Perhaps the primary model for this in Christian tradition is apophatic theology—where the divine essence itself cannot be defined or described, it can merely be postulated *via negativa*, that is, known by contrasts and distinctions and not positive affirmations.

Christian models of God have always been based upon distinction and comparison, and widening the circle of interlocutors outside of Christian traditions multiplies the possibilities for articulating these distinctions exponentially. Even in the case of apophatic theology, we can more carefully distinguish the divine essence as we know more and more about other religious contexts. As in the example above, the comparison between salvation in Christ and knowledge of Brahman, familiarity with the context leads to a new realm of distinctions—shattering our expectations as the horizons of our conversation widen and deepen.

Comparison helps to open pathways toward richer understandings of ultimate reality—even if these pathways are difficult and, initially at least, do little more than expose what it is we *don't* know about things like "salvation" in other traditions. This kind of comparative activity, if it leads to a clearer recognition of "similarities and differences across religious boundaries," is now open to becoming a dialogical enterprise—Clooney's third dimension.[10]

Dialogical Relationships: Models of God and Mutual Accountability
Clooney characterizes the dialogical dimension as taking what is learned from interreligious and comparative activities and making it actualized in "a richer interactive encounter among the traditions involved…."[11] Comparison is a first step towards the development of theologies which are well and truly formed in a mutually responsible context. Theologians immersed in such contexts become accountable to their peers from other religious traditions for what they write and say by virtue of their interreligious, comparative activities.

If I make a claim concerning a comparison between Hindu and Christian traditions, I am responsible to the people of both traditions for the accuracy and meaning of what I say. In a dialogical atmosphere, if I misrepresent one or the other, the error will have significance for my relationship with my immediate colleagues—if

nothing else than the increased likelihood that I will be corrected and consequently educated about the misrepresented tradition's views. In a monological atmosphere, where I am unaware or otherwise not responsible to people of other religious traditions, no such correction is likely, and my erroneous views may lead to other errors or lead others to error.

In our present times, we cannot afford to perpetuate this kind of ignorance. The recognition of mutual accountability and the development of a dialogical context is a necessary step for living with our neighbors of other faiths (and those of no religion, or no particular religion), and, more positively, it is also is a step towards finer and richer conceptual languages. Theologies emerging out of such contexts require much more careful articulation of their own concepts and are open to critique from a much wider and more diverse set of interlocutors.

"The full meaning of a theology, [in dialogical contexts], is no longer contained entirely within its own religious tradition."[12] It is only properly understood—and its arguments and models of ultimate reality only given their fullest expression—"in the back and forth dynamic" of interreligious dialogue, a dialogue which holds theologians to new and different standards which challenge their appreciations of ultimate reality in ways that simply are not possible in monological contexts.[13]

Christian models of God have always been dialogical in the sense that Christian theologians have, in one way or another, been held responsible to one another and to the Christian community at large for the claims they make. Consider what are now orthodox Christological and Trinitarian languages—these were refined, and continue to be refined–through centuries of back-and-forth dialogue, and often conflict, between interlocutors both Christian and non-Christian. How much have Christians learned from the Greeks, Jews, and Muslims in these endeavors? Clearly, even more stands to be gained from widening our circle of interlocutors here and in learning to engage them in friendship.

By inviting others into the theological conversation or, more appropriately, by explicitly acknowledging the contributions of non-Christians and continuing to expand the possible pool of conversation partners, models of God may be much more difficult to articulate at first. The end result, though, will be much more robust and much more carefully distinguished than if it were delivered in a context free from the tensions associated with negotiating multiple religious perspectives.

Any resulting models of ultimate reality will reflect this refinement and will need to pass through the critical apparatus of many different perspectives before they are deemed adequate. It is only through the encounter with a multiplicity of particular religious perspectives mutually accountable to one another that the kinds of models of God needed both to satisfy theological inquiries and to live together in solidarity with

neighbors of other religions (and those of no religion or no particular religion) can be developed.

Confessing God Interreligiously, Comparatively, and Dialogically
Even if such models are necessarily articulated within the context of interreligious accountability, a comparative theology is, finally for Clooney, confessional. A model of ultimate reality is meaningless if it does not apply to particular people with particular spiritual orientations. Even if it must remain accountable to others, accountable does not always equal agreeable. An important part of maintaining a healthy dialogical relationship means leaving room for difference, and even disagreement—it is the differences between religious traditions, after all, which have established the bases for mutual learning in the first place.

Again, to use the example of comparing means of salvation, it is in the tension between affirming Christ as the only means and the competing claim that knowledge of Brahman is sufficient for salvation that mutual learning occurs. "Even after initial comparisons and during dialogue, theologians should be able to affirm the content of their faith as true...."[14] Even if faith claims are tested, refined, and articulated through interreligious relationships, the truths of each confessional background may still be affirmed by their respective adherents.

It is not in the nature of comparative theologies to deny the truth of any particular faith claim. Rather, its nature is to expand and enrich the understanding of these claims, and to show where they stand and how they relate to one another, even when the final result may be disagreement. Mutual disagreement may lead to a clearer articulation of one's original position, as once again, in the claims of the Christian and Hindu above. Both the Christian and the Hindu now have additional resources to articulate their notions of salvation and additional boundaries against which to do so.

The dynamic tension created in dialogical relationships requires that the mutual identities of the partners remain distinct—or the dialogue itself does not have a place to stand. Identity requires differences between the partners, and difference, in turn, requires some kind of identification, both of one's self and one's interlocutor(s). Reducing all particularities to a bland sameness is as antithetical and counterproductive to the dialogical processes of comparative theology as is the blind and/or hostile insistence that one's own perspective is absolutely correct or is otherwise the only one that matters.[15]

In developing the confessional dimension of this interreligious, comparative, and ultimately dialogical theology, Christian theism appears to have an impetus to dialogue present in one of its central mysteries: the interpersonal nature of the Triune God. In Christian traditions, God is one—one reality, one being—but this one being exists eternally in the relation of three persons, traditionally named the Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit. Many interpretations of what it means to say that God is present in three persons abound in Christian theology, matched only by the number of interpretations of the nature, role(s), and relationships between the three persons.

The basic claim that there is a relational life shared between persons in God is more important for the development of a Christian theism that is consistent with the interreligious, comparative, and dialogical dimensions of theology than the particular roles and relationships between the persons of the Trinity. As Gunton[16] frames it: "...perhaps *the* point of a trinitarian theology is that it enables us to develop an ontology of the personal...an understanding of God as the personal creator and redeemer of the world...." God's personhood, further, consists in *relationality*: "...in what Father, Son, and Holy Spirit give to and receive from each other in the freedom of their unknowable eternity."[17]

To be a person is "to be one whose being consists in relations of mutual constitution with other persons."[18] In Christian theism, humans have our being, our lives, only with respect to our relationship with God. We are human persons only insofar as God has created us "in the image and likeness of God."[19] As persons we reflect God's relational being as it is constituted in relationship to God and to one another. We are called from the very moment, the very act of our creation,[20] to relationship with God and to one another by virtue of our personhood. If being a person means to exist in relation to other persons, as the mystery of the Trinity exemplifies, human beings also exist as persons—and only exist as persons—in relationship to one another.

If God has created persons, and if God is the agent responsible for the world, then God is also responsible, in at least some fashion, for the creation of all of the other persons in the world. All of us exist in relationship to God, and all of us exist as persons because of our relationships to and with others. If all human beings are like this, and if God is our ultimate origin, goal, and destiny, then we are called to relate to all human beings in a respectful, loving manner—just as the relationship of the Trinity is one of mutually dependent, loving persons.

Our identity, as Christians and as human beings in relation to a God who is both personal and Trinitarian, is something that is created, affirmed, and enhanced by encounters with difference. Difference is the seed of relationality—I cannot stand in relation to something that is amorphous, or that is indistinct from myself. Through the Trinity, Christians are called to relationship with those different than ourselves. The interpersonal, Triune God in whose image we are made calls us to this love. Within the context of an interreligious, comparative, and dialogical theology, this ultimate dialogue—between the persons in God—calls us to dialogical, respectful, and ultimately loving relationships with others.

With this Trinitarian dimension in mind, an interreligious, comparative, and dialogical model of God can be articulated on a uniquely Christian, confessional basis.

This fourth and final dimension reveals a doctrine that is uniquely Christian as a resource for engaging others in meaningful relationships. It is a call to loving relationality that pushes us beyond the frontiers of our tradition to seek God in our neighbors of other faiths.

Conclusion

The model described in the preceding pages is designed to be complete in a certain sense: it is intended to show deep-seated bases in the Christian tradition for a concept of God that is developed through interreligious, comparative, and dialogical dimensions while remaining faithful to the confessional elements unique to Christian faith. I have argued that Christianity itself is fundamentally "interreligious" in that it relies upon Hebrew traditions for its inception and even for the revelation of God in Christ. This interreligious nature, further, ought to be interpreted as a call to wider and further investigation. It leaves open the question (surely among others) of whether in fact other religious traditions are perhaps interreligious in analogous ways.[21]

Openness is one of the model's principle strengths. It is the ability to engage new questions, and to recognize that the development of theology necessarily takes place in a context of dialogical relationships, that will allow this model to function as a resource for Christians and for others. What I have presented is a far cry from writing the book titled "God" that Clooney envisions. But it does establish a Christian footing for the dialogue, one whose message is, I hope, an invitation to others to join the conversation.

I have argued that the interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional dimensions of Francis X. Clooney's theology offer a helpful guide for the development of a Christian understanding of ultimate reality that is a resource for engaging non-Christians in meaningful and mutually respectful relationships. The resources are there in the tradition itself: from its origins in ancient Hebrew traditions to the relational life of the Trinity. Clooney's work helps to articulate this background and helps to bring Christian theism into a wider and more meaningful dialogue with other traditions as we move together toward a deeper understanding of one another and of ultimate reality.

Richard Hanson currently teaches philosophy and religious studies for the University of Wisconsin-Colleges. He holds an interdisciplinary PhD in religious studies and philosophy from Marquette University, and is interested in philosophy as a resource for interreligious solidarity. His research is focused on the development of a conceptually robust comparative theology through the philosophical traditions associated with Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

References

Clooney, Francis X. "Christianity and World Religions: Religion, Reason, and Pluralism," [review essay] *Religious Studies Review*, 15, 3 (July, 1989), 197-204.

____"Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)"
in *Theological Studies* Washington: Sept. 1995 Vol. 56, Iss. 3 p.521

____*Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

____ "In Ten Thousand Places, in Every Blade of Grass: Uneventful but
True Conclusions About Finding God in India, and Here Too," in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits*, 28.3 (1996).

____ *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Srivaisnavas of
South India* Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.

____ *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998.

____ *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the
Boundaries Between Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

____ "A Charism for Dialog: Advice from the Early Jesuit Missionaries in
Our World of Religious Pluralism," in *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits*, 34.2 (2002).

____ "Rahner beyond Rahner: A Comparative Theologian's Reflections
on *Theological Investigations 18*," in *Rahner Beyond Rahner: A Great Theologian Encounters the Pacific Rim*, Paul G. Crowley (ed.), Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, 3-22

Fredericks, James L. *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian
Religions* New York: Paulist Press, 1999.

Gunton, Colin E. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Second Edition, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997.

Notes

[1] "Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995)" 1995, 1.

---

[2] Cf. Ibid., 7-11.

[3] Ibid., 183.

[4] Ibid., 8 emphasis in original.

[5] I have chosen to focus on the positive pole of Jewish-Christian relationships here, but my emphasis is in no way intended as a naïve dismissal of the many tragedies and travesties that form so much of the history of Jewish-Christian interaction. Rather, my hope is that in approaching our history together from this positive pole we may find new resources for mutual solidarity.

[6] Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 9.

[7] *Theology After Vedanta*, 190.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 192.

[10] *Hindu God, Christian God*, 9.

[11] Ibid., 10.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] My argument here echoes Clooney's comments concerning pluralist theologies of religions, such as those of John Hick and Jacques Du Puis. See *Hindu God, Christian God* 20-24 for Clooney's criticism of Du Puis' pluralism, as well as James Fredericks' seminal *Faith Among Faiths* (1999) for a robust critique of pluralist theologies.

[16] Gunton, Colin *The Promise of a Trinitarian Theology*, Second Edition, 1997, 195-6.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Cf. Genesis 1:27.

[20] I am not trying to explicate all of the nuances terms like "creation" may have for various Christian interpreters—I am merely pointing out here that God is the source of our existence and life for Christian traditions, and that what personhood we have is owed to God and after the likeness of God.

[21] It is clearly the case that many other traditions are "interreligious," albeit in unique historical and theological ways. Judaism itself is articulated against the background of other ancient near eastern and Hellenistic religions, and Islam shares a common background with Judaism. In the Eastern world, Buddhism owes much of what is distinct about its traditions to the various Brahminical contexts to which the Buddha responded, and Hinduism itself owes its origins, at the very least, to the widely varying traditions placed under the banner of "Hindu."