

Figures and Reconfiguring: A New Direction in Comparative Theology?

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On December 10th, we remembered the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the popular American writer and Catholic monk. Coincidentally, in an uncanny Trappist fashion, the date marks not only his passing but also the anniversary of his entrance into Trappist life as a postulant in 1948. However, in 2018, shortly on the heels of the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 theses in Wittenberg, we are drawn to a different sort of coincidence. Remembering these two events together, Merton’s passing and Luther’s transformative protest, from the perspective of comparative theology might occasion further inquiry and reflection into how encountering major figures effectively reconfigures our understanding of our tradition, as well as the tradition of the other. Particularly in cultural contexts that are increasingly characterized by religious diversity, comparative theology may serve as a discipline that addresses the various ways that such diversity affects our religiosity. For Thomas Merton, despite spending most of his adult life at the Trappist monastery in Gethsemane, Kentucky, countless fruitful exchanges across religious boundaries both challenged and nourished his sense of being a monk, and a Christian. In addition to his ecumenical interests, notable examples included his dialogues with D. T. Suzuki; his longest letter correspondence with a Pakistani Sufi, Sheikh Abdul Aziz; interactions with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and, of course, his meetings with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1968 shortly before his death. For present purposes, an earlier and more formative instance of interreligious encounter from Merton’s vita claims our attention, specifically an episode with Mahanambrata Brahmachari (1904–1999), whom Merton calls “a little Hindu monk” when recounting the encounter in his best-selling 1948 autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.¹

In June 1938, according to this autobiographical account, Merton joined his Columbia classmate Sy Freedgood at New York’s Grand Central Station in order to pick up “a Hindu in a turban and a white robe and a pair of Keds.”² A reader would not be mistaken in assuming that Brahmachari simply became a long-term fixture in their dormitory, “living in their room, perched on top of a pile of books.” In reality, after earning his PhD from the University of Chicago, Brahmachari was their guest in New York for just a few weeks.³ Writing from Our Lady of Gethsemane a decade later, Merton recalled a mutual fondness between the two, “especially since he sensed that I was trying to feel my way into a settled religious conviction, and into some kind of a life that was centered, as his was, on God.”⁴ For the young Merton, fresh from reading Aldous Huxley’s *Ends and Means* and hungry for Eastern wisdom, Brahmachari represented a possible source for satisfying his curiosity for all things “mystical.” Yet with the

¹ See Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith* (1948; New York: Harvest Book, 1998), esp. 209–17; hereafter, abbreviated to *SSM*. In various writings, as he does in *Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton transliterates the name of Mahanambrata Brahmachari as “Bramachari.” This introduction chooses the standard form of transliteration.

² *Ibid.*, 210.

³ Brahmachari arrived in the United States in order to represent his *guru* at the World’s Parliament of Faiths in 1933 but, by the time he arrived, the Congress was finished; he completed a doctorate instead. See his own memoir, *Lord’s Grace in My Race: Taken from His Diary* (Assam: Mahanam Mela, 1987).

⁴ *SSM*, 214.

stage set for the student to learn from a master, rather than indulge his curiosity, Merton's Brahmachari redirected his attention to Christian wisdom traditions, particularly Augustine's *Confessions* and *Imitation of Christ*. "Yes, you must read those books," Brahmachari said. As Merton confessed in his autobiography, "Now that I look back on those days, it seems to me very probable that one of the reasons why God had brought him all the way from India, was that he might say just that."⁵ For Merton, tracing this to his eventual choice of the monk's habit, the figure of Brahmachari was providential in steering him toward Christian religious life.

By way of commemorating Merton and Brahmachari, as well as Luther, the cohort of Boston College doctoral students and candidates in comparative theology called for proposals under the theme of "Figures and Reconfiguring" for the sixteenth annual Engaging Particularities conference (EP 2018).⁶ Whereas comparative theology typically proceeds through established frameworks of intertextual reading, symbolic engagement, or more recently even ritual participation, this issue thus explores the implications of such encounters as specific sites for interreligious learning. The intellectual obstacles to the comparative endeavor regarding religious figures and a scholar's relation to this object is not our chief concern here, and others have already capably addressed this criticism.⁷ In fact, we might agree that the intellectual concerns have loomed so large that practical concerns such as these have suffered from relative neglect.

For example, take Merton. Most of us who read Merton are familiar with this autobiographical element, namely, the existential quest for wisdom that expresses his own desire to overcome all obstacles and boundaries. Reviewing the corpus, we may find little explicit mention of his old friend: his letters to their mutual friend Robert Lax, an extant correspondence with Brahmachari in 1965, and a report with sparse details of Merton's failed visit to Brahmachari's ashram in 1968 on his fateful Asian voyage. Still, those references are revealing of a deeper impact. Writing to his fellow convert Lax after taking the habit, Merton wrote in passing of his own sense that Brahmachari belonged somehow within the "whole mystical body of Christ." Later in 1965, responding to Brahmachari's interest in another U.S. tour, Merton updated him about becoming a hermit and compared this new phase to *vanaprastha*, the developmental period of detachment that is common in South Asian ashrams. In his homily at Merton's funeral mass, Gethsemane's abbot Flavian Burns shared Merton's state of mind before his fateful Asian voyage: "The possibility of death was not absent from his mind. We spoke of this before he set out—just jokingly, then seriously. He was ready for it. He even saw a certain fittingness in dying over there amidst those Asian monks, who symbolized for him man's ancient

⁵ Ibid., 216–7. See also the authoritative biography, Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (1984; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 113 (113–8), as well as Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), 25, (as "instrumental"); Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 3, 9–10.

⁶ As a graduate and postgraduate conference focused in comparative theology and related areas, such as theology of religions, missiology, and interreligious dialogue, the conference was born as an initiative out of an articulated commitment to dialogue by the Society of Jesus in their General Congregation 32.

⁷ See, e.g., David Clairmont, "Persons as Religious Classics: Comparative Ethics and the Theology of Bridge Concepts," *JAAR* 78, no. 3 (2010): 687–720, and *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics: On the Person as Classic in Contemporary Theological Contexts* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), esp. 17–31. By contrast to an approach with focus on traditional figures, see a comparative theological exploration of foundational figures in Francis X. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and perennial desire for the deep things of God.”⁸ Fifty years later, although we most often associate Merton’s comparative interests with either Buddhism or Taoism, at the very least Brahmachari prefigures this interest.

Emphasizing the practical concerns of interreligious encounters with powerful religious figures, comparative theological inquiry may consider the impact of such events on one’s cultural horizon. Revised from papers presented at EP 2018, this collection of essays offers readers a set of scholarly approaches that probe the meaning of this theme of reconfiguration according to various disciplines, cultural contexts, and religious traditions. Situated as such, the scholar’s own theological interests and concerns shape his or hers hermeneutical lens and also inform the context in which the topic is considered. So contextualized, in turn, readers may consider in these articles how a comparative theologian’s goals and methods shape different answers. Readers may also use this as an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of the significant figures whom they confronted across religious boundaries and the practical lessons to be drawn from such encounters. Alternatively, with interests and concerns similar to those of the contributors to this issue, readers would do well to consider their own analogous examples.

Format

Inasmuch as it is practical, the notion of interreligious encounter entails not only chances but potentially also risk and even “spiritual danger.” As the first contributor to this issue, Joseph Kimmel introduces the concept of spiritual danger in dialogue with recent explorations in comparative theology. Based on a case of evangelical Christians wary about entering into sacred Buddhist space, on the one hand, he shows how it is both a practical, pedagogical concern. On the other, it can be related to the hermeneutical question of comparative theology if the practice is to operate in the mode of mediating interreligious encounter. In dialogue with various approaches, Kimmel suggests that this might be useful in not only pointing out the blind spot of comparative theology but, first and foremost, enhancing the experience of the practitioners.

Secondly, John Sampson examines the prominent twentieth-century Chinese theologian T. C. Chao through Francis X. Clooney’s notion of “intertexting.” In Chao’s attempt to make Christianity more appealing within the Confucian paradigm of Chinese society, he emphasized through the cross the redemptive role of Jesus Christ as a moral exemplar. Beyond the comparison of religious texts, as Sampson argues, Chao himself as an intertexted figure profoundly exemplifies the efficacy of a different, more contextual way of comparative theology.

Relatedly, focusing on figures brings to the forefront the particular power of a master as present in the text. Reflecting on the intratraditional discussion of Hasidic Judaism, David Maayan weighs in on one of the most debated issues in the hermeneutical discourse of comparative theology, namely, whether the theologian must necessarily situate herself as being “insider” or “outsider.” Hasidism is developed around the figure of a tzaddik, or a Hasidic saint, as the direct encounter with the master is essential in elevating the spiritual state of the disciples. However, as pointed out by Maayan, Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira cultivates a unique approach to the rule by emphasizing the writings of a tzaddik as a new mode of encountering a

⁸ Flavian Burns, OCSO, “Epilogue: A Holy,” in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 220.

master, specifically, encountering his presence through the texts. The latter approach is perhaps more beneficial to fostering spiritual development because each disciple would have ample room to construct meaning for her or his own self.

In the final article, Christina Atienza utilizes Dōgen's non-dualistic approach to reconfigure the relationship between reality, language, and thought in Thomas Aquinas's systematic theology. While encountering such figures across religious boundaries may reconfigure our sense of religiosity, interreligious learning may also affect relations to significant figures in our own tradition. Contrary to some who perceive Aquinas's logic as a proponent of a dualist mode of thinking, Atienza argues that both dualism and non-dualism are neither mutually exclusive nor unrelated to one another. Rather, foregrounding Aquinas himself, she displays how both tendencies are evident in his writings. Atienza highlights some significant occasions when his non-dualistic tendency becomes apparent, and thus might shed a new light on understanding Aquinas.

In the end, this issue offers various kinds of hermeneutical engagement with figures as the focus of comparative theological inquiry and reflection. It aims to recognize the basic reality that, sometimes, we enter the religious world of another not through a text, doctrine, symbol, or ritual, but through a compelling figure. Such a figure may radically reshape and reorient a person's sense of self, community, and world. If this might serve as a specific site for doing comparative theology, then it provides an approach suitable for addressing interreligious contexts with its messy cultural factors, and possibly shared ethical concerns. Furthermore, lending a focus in terms of dispositions rather than doctrine, this approach may be especially useful in helping relate comparative theology to the classroom. For a setting increasingly defined by religious diversity and the emergence of the "nones," this might serve as a new point of access that is especially useful in the teaching of introductory theology.

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