***Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity*. By John J. Thatamanil. Fordham University Press, 2020. 320 pages. $105.00 (hardcover), $30.00 (paperback), $29.99 (e-book).**

Book Review Essay

The title of this book is a reference to the parable of the blind men and the elephant, a parable that likely originated in the Indian subcontinent and was retold in the non-modern historical context by Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim writers. The story goes that several blind men, who have never come across an elephant before, are circling one and attempting to learn and imagine what it is like by touching it. They each describe the elephant differently and based on what part they are touching: the one touching the ear said it was like a large fan, the one touching the trunk like a snake, and so on. On a basic level, the moral of the story is that each of us attempt to claim absolute, objective, and universal knowledge from our relative, subjective, and particular experiences. It is often used to describe how various religious traditions experience "the ultimate" in differing ways, but that none experiences it wholly and perfectly.

In this book review essay, I will engage John J. Thatamanil's project with an eye toward questions regarding multiple religious belonging/participation and the distinctions between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology.

In *Circling the Elephant*, Thatamanil writes at the intersection of various disciplines: theologies of religious diversity (also called theology of religion), comparative theology, the critical study of religion (particularly the body of scholarship known as genealogy of religion), and constructive theology. However, it becomes evident as one reads his monograph that these disciplines have always been mutually imbricated—with one influencing or being influenced by the others at any given discursive moment in their histories (even if scholars were unawares). What Thatamanil implicitly demonstrates is that good—and constructive—theological scholarship should not pretend that there are hard boundaries between these disciplines; rather, theologians should employ the best theories, methods, and conclusions from each discipline so that one may obtain a clearer understanding of the allegorical elephant religious thinkers have been circumambulating.

Thatamanil's argument, however, is more than this. He is calling for "interreligious circumnavigation" (11) and is making the case that constructive theology must be comparative theology. Thatamanil employs the critical study of religion generally, and the genealogy of religion specifically, to argue his points, and thus this book is of great interest to scholars of religion and interreligious studies. However, he openly admits that "this book is a *Christian* exercise in pachyderm perambulation" (11). Is it confessional, then? In other words, Thatamanil is writing as a Christian theologian who nonetheless practices multiple religious participation (see xvi-xviii). Thatamanil's journey begins with an overview of the ways in which Christian traditions have thought about, with, and through non-Christian religious traditions (Chapter 1), assesses and critiques some of the major theologies of religious diversity (Chapter 2), previews his conclusion by presenting a theology of relational pluralism (Chapter 3), interpolates the genealogy of religion scholarship to critically problematize how Christian theologians—even the most relationally pluralistic ones—have conceptualized and categorized "religions" (Chapter 4), proposes his own re-definition of "the religious" (Chapter 5), recounts the history of interreligious

learning that occurred between Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chapter 6), and ends by developing "a theology of religious diversity…that builds on and draws from comparative theology and, in turn, contributes to a new constructive theology of the trinity" (213, Chapter 7).

In developing a theology of *the trinity* (a term commonly associated with Christianity), Thatamanil appears to be writing as a confessionally Christian comparative theologian. Though, Thatamanil would remind us, trinitarian reflections on ultimate reality are found in other religious traditions, so perhaps it could be meta-confessional. Notwithstanding, this essay will occasionally indicate in the book moments of border crossing between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology (such as this one), even while Thatamanil himself identifies as a transreligious or meta-confessional comparative theologian.

What makes this book unique and insightful is that Thatamanil is drawing from the critical study of religion to make normative—seemingly Christian, but also meta-confessional — theological claims about the nature of religious diversity. He is not merely describing, *theorizing about*, the historical and contemporary deployment of the term "religion" in social and political contexts of power dynamics (critical study of religion), but also prescribing, *theologizing*, how Christians (and/or/as meta-confessional theologians) should learn from this discursive history and construct a theology of religious diversity aimed at interreligious justice, liberation, and freedom. His is a normative or norming project.

Thatamanil's book is an urgent call—first to constructive theologians to seek out transformative truth in the claims of other religious traditions as they theologize, and second to theologians of religious diversity and comparative theologians—to rethink the deployment of the category "religion" by drawing from the most recent scholarship in the genealogy of religion. It is a more than necessary addition to these disciplines and is sure to shape future scholarship positively. His audience, it seems, are "constructive theologians," and so his call appears directed as anyone who identifies as such—be them Christian, Muslim, Hindu, transreligious, meta-confessional, or otherwise. Yet, we know that this identity, viz., constructive theologian, remains a predominantly Christian one.

In Chapter 1 ("Religious Difference and Christian Theology"), Thatamanil reminds readers of the interreligious matrix within which not only Christian conciliar orthodoxy was constructed in the first four centuries after the early Jewish Jesus movement, but also later Christian theological developments emerged from their encounter with Jews, Muslims, and so-called "pagan" traditions from northern Europe to the "New World" of the Americas. Christian traditions have always been interreligious and the task today is to continue that process by intentional and explicit exercises in comparative theology. The same could be said of any religious tradition, as Thatamanil knows and suggests; yet here he appeals to *Christian* history perhaps because he expects his readers predominantly to be Christian (or because space limitations do not permit the presentation of multiple religious histories). The second half of the chapter overviews more recent Christian theological engagements with religious diversity, such as theologies of religious diversity and comparative theology. Thatamanil rightfully and insightfully notes that the impasse of many theologies of religious diversity is not necessarily a failure of theology, but a failure of theologians to apply insights from the genealogy of religion into their discipline. When theologians of religious diversity continue to treat religions as "bounded,

impermeable, and monolithic realities" (36) or essentialized traditions, they inevitably treat self and other as mutually exclusive and opposing identities and therefore as a *problem to be solved*. Thatamanil does not argue that comparative theology should replace or supersede theologies of religious diversity (in line with James Fredricks' position); rather, "comparative theology must enrich [theologies of religious diversity] and yield comparative theologies of religious diversity" (37). However, this will not be successful until we allow the genealogy of religion to critique essentialized concepts of "religion" that remain prominent in Christian theological discourse. The stated problem Thatamanil poses is a decisively *Christian* one, then, even though other religious traditions and their communities have (since the colonial encounter with Europe) adopted similar monolithic conceptions of "religion" and are in need of critique.

Before attending to the genealogy of religion Thatamanil first assesses the major strands of inclusive and exclusive theologies of religious diversity (TRD) in Chapter 2. He does so through two questions: "(1) Does this particular TRD make interreligious learning possible and desirable, and, (2) When a TRD refuses interreligious learning, what are the operative assumptions behind that refusal? (41). His criteria of discernment are thus not shaped by Christian theological questions alone, but by questions that could be posed of any religious tradition's TRD. He proposes a series of necessary conditions to answer the first question in the affirmative: (a) a TRD "must affirm that traditions are different enough that we have something to learn from them, but not so different as to be incommensurable" (42–43); (b) "a TRD must affirm that at least some of the claims made by traditions much actually be true" (43); (c) a TRD "must offer an account of 'religion' and 'the religions' that does not make interreligious learning impossible," and therefore "counterfactual theories that treat religions as monolithic, impermeable, tightly systematic, and unitary wholes will not suffice" (43); (d) a TRD must emerge from an "intrinsic religious interest" (44). Let me note for readers again that there is nothing formatively Christian about these criteria. For example, none of his questions concerns the place of Jesus Christ in salvation history, the historical and cosmic role of the Incarnation, and so on. While Thatamanil appears to write as a Christian, he begins to be more meta-confessional in his criteria of discernment and stated goal of his project.

Let me return to the last question: a TRD must emerge from an "intrinsic religious interest" (44). This last one is likely the most thought-provoking and contestable, even to many confessional comparative theologians who have developed sincere scholarly and spiritual interest in religious traditions other than their own. An example of extrinsic religious interest is when a Christian is interested in Buddhist traditions of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent co-arising of all things) and practices of *sati* (mindfulness) "only because she believes that such claims and practices might deepen *her own Christian quest for salvation*" (44). Intrinsic religious interest occurs when "a Christian might desire Buddhist enlightenment by coming to understand *pratityasamutpada* through the specific contemplative disciplines which make enlightenment possible" (44). While it is true that extrinsic religious interest often uses the religious other for one's own gain (what Thatamanil calls "instrumental interest"), what if such instrumental interest is to develop a more liberative theology for a community of Christians? Many Christians, in fact, consider their faith journey to be not toward salvation but for liberation. Is it so bad that, say, Christian interest and use of Advaita Vedanta thought is extrinsic and instrumental if, through the constructive comparative theology that follows, a community of Christians become more loving, compassionate, and justice-seeking in the work of communal and social liberation? In other words, not all extrinsic and instrumental uses are created equal.

Furthermore, intrinsic religious interest may also be a hard pill to swallow for even the most open of confessional comparative theologians. Multiple religious belonging and/or participation is not possible for any given pair or set of religious beliefs/practices. One needs to test intrinsic religious interest against intra- and interreligious permutations and not just between a certain strand of the Christian tradition (Thatamanil's) with certain (contemplative and philosophical, even mystical) strands of the dharmic traditions (Thatamanil's primary field of study outside Christian theology). How might a Christian with deep scholarly and spiritual interest in the Islamic or Jewish traditions adjudicate this condition between extrinsic and intrinsic? How does a Christian seek emulation of the Prophet Muhammad—a moral, veridical, liberative, and/or soteriological path for Muslims—as an intrinsic religious interest without thereby becoming Muslim? How might Muslims respond to such a Christian? Can a Muslim have an intrinsic religious interest—i.e., partake—in the Catholic Eucharistic celebration and sacrament without thereby disavowing certain beliefs, practices, and theologies that are central to Islamic traditions? How might Catholics respond? Should a Christian have an intrinsic religious interest in the practices of Rabbinical Judaism and thus follow the commandments of the Torah as interpreted by rabbis and scholars? The case could be made for certain strands of Hindu bhakti traditions—devotions to certain deities certainly *preclude* forms of multiple religious belonging or participation. Thatamanil makes a strong and cogent case for intrinsic religious interest, but it may *preclude* certain permutations of certain strands of religious traditions and the beliefs and practices they entail. However, *preclusion does not imply exclusion*, as discussed below.

With these (all too simplistic) examples, I am not thereby suggesting that Thatamanil's distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic religious interest, and the positive affirmation of the latter, is in vain. Rather, we need to underscore the many beliefs and practices Thatamanil discusses throughout his book, which seem to fall on the so-called "spiritual" or "mystical" side of the spectrum, e.g., yoga, mindfulness, nondual (Advaita) traditions, dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and so on. These may be distinguished from devotional traditions that, if not demand, are at least incoherent without, a commitment that precludes multiple beloveds. However, I suggest that *preclusion does not imply exclusion*. It seems far more possible to regularly practice mindfulness *and* regularly partake in the Holy Eucharist than to follow Muslim devotion to the Prophet Muhammad *and* maintain a Christian devotion to Jesus Christ; the latter pair *mutually precludes* shared devotional practices, though it does not necessarily imply exclusive theologies.[1] However, Thatamanil does not totally suggest that intrinsic religious interest *requires* embracing practices and beliefs of the other traditions. On the one hand, he argues that intrinsic religious interest asks, "Can I desire to know *what* Buddhists know *as* they come to know it?" (44), i.e., "through the specific contemplative disciplines which make enlightenment possible" (44),

[1] Here, one wonders how Thatamanil would respond to one of the most formative comparative theologians of our era, Francis X. Clooney, SJ, when he recounts his visit to a shrine to the Goddess Lakṣmī in a temple at Chennai: "I was face to face with a reality—a kind of real presence—from within a living religious tradition other than my own. I knew that according to the Hindu tradition I was also being seen by Her. I did not have, nor do I have now, some easy words by which to explain this concrete and in some ways very foreign moment of encounter." He continues: "I suppose I might even have worshipped Her, because I was already there, as it were seeing and being seen. But Christians do not worship Goddesses, so I did not. I just stood there, looking" (Francis X. Clooney, S.J. *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010], 88). For Clooney to have intrinsic religious interest in the Hindu Goddess traditions devoted to Lakṣmī, must he have worshipped her, then and there?

which seems to imply *engaging in certain Buddhist practices with certain Buddhist aims as the goal*. On the other hand, he leaves open the possibility that actually practicing and committing oneself to enlightenment is not the *only* way to demonstrate intrinsic religious interest: "Can I be interested in another tradition because I believe that the claims, practices, *and aims* of the other tradition might lead to transformative truth?" (45). This latter question is more malleable than the first. It is far more coherent for a Christian to claim that emulating the Prophet Muhammad leads to transformative truth than it is to demand a Christian profess "and Muhammad is God's messenger" and subsequently emulate the Prophet Muhammad to demonstrate intrinsic religious interest. One solution is to employ a distinction between preclusion and exclusion when it comes to theologies of religious diversity. My commitment to Jesus Christ the Liberator as the Word made flesh, which constitutes my relationship to God, self, others, and the entire created universe, *does not exclude my belief that* devotion to Muhammad and Islamic revelation is transformative with regard to truth, meaning, liberation, and the human experience, but *it very likely precludes my pursuing such a path*. The same need not be said for, say, my partaking in forms of Islamic *dhikr* as a Catholic. This is the spiritual discipline of contemplative mental or vocalized repetition of meaningful words or phrases, such as *Allāh* or a divine name like *al-Raḥmān*, the Merciful, or the first part of the Shahada, *lā ʾilāha ʾillā-llāh*/there is no god but God, alone or in community. This practice is meant to cultivate *taqwā*, or God-awareness, in the individual, and there is arguably nothing that precludes me as a Catholic from practicing *dhikr* (some Muslims and Catholics may disagree, of course).

Thatamanil then turns to assessing versions of pluralism in Chapter 3 as he previews his version of relational pluralism. This is a strong chapter that critically challenges major theologies of religious pluralism, such as John Hick's, Mark Heim's, and the "deep pluralism" of John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, even while agreeing with certain of their aspects that he seeks to sharpen. Thatamanil does not wish to propose multiple ultimate realities or multiple religious ends, which he deems unacceptable and in fact logically incoherent. He also does not aver that there are multiple religious traditions merely because "the transcendent absolute" is filtered through diverse, relative languages and cultures. Rather, Thatamanil affirms "there are many ultimate features of reality…[and that] those features of reality that are recognized as ultimate in the traditions that [he studies] (Christianity, Buddhist [*sic*], and Hinduism) all point to one ultimate reality that is nonetheless a multiplicity" (95). In other words, there is multiplicity permeating the one ultimate *in se* and in its operations *ad extra* (to borrow some Christian scholastic theological terms): unity-in-diversity or diversity-in-unity. At the end of this affirmation, he offers a critical caveat: "my case hinges and rests upon my particular data set: these three [aforementioned] traditions" (94). Thatamanil ends the chapter with a brief presentation and affirmation of the "relational polyphilic pluralism" of Ronald Faber and Catherine Keller, which recognizes "the internal diversities and porosities of traditions…that we have always been multiple, [that] historical or phenomenological consideration of any wisdom tradition reveals ongoing contestation rooted in diverse conceptions of ultimate reality and soteriology…[that there is] a need and desire for the other…[and] that the unfolding of the divine life requires diverse wisdoms in relation" (104–105).

In Chapter 4, Thatamanil performs his critical interventions in comparative theology, theologies of religious diversity, and constructive theology by drawing from the theoretical conclusions of genealogy of religion. The category of religion—as it is normatively used today—is an invention of the 19th- to early 20th-century Western study of religion; the process of

categorizing traditions into "religions" reduced a multiplicity of discursive traditions with internal diversity and external porosity into a set of essentialized and monolithic systems with closed borders: Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and so on. The process began around the same time that "the secular" was being theoretically and politically separated from "the religious" in the European context. Furthermore, the rich and complex traditions emerging and organically living outside the Euro-American context were always "data to be studied by history of religions" and never allowed "to furnish conceptual resources for the normative work of philosophy of religion" (120) or theology. Thatamanil reminds us that the modern category of race was being discursively created and politically deployed around the same time as religion; he thus uses the term "religionization" in a way that parallels "racialization." However, even if we know the problematic (at best) and deleterious (at worst) consequences of these social constructions and imaginaries, the categories of race and religion are here to stay as "social realities". Here, we see Thatamanil implicitly employing critical realism in his argument. Comparative theology cannot occur without difference and without those differences being discursively created and sustained—and even defended—by religious communities. Taking the conclusions of the genealogy of religion too far leads us to a "religion-blind" theology of religious diversity, which would be just as problematic as a colorblind approach to racial differences. And besides, as Thatamanil reminds us, boundaries among traditions (the West) calls religious existed in other parts of the world before the colonial encounter with Europeans (139–44)—they just existed *differently*.

Thatamanil proficiently draws from various critical race theorists who debate whether to keep the category of race to insightfully propose his own view on whether to keep the category religion (147–51). His goal to answer in the affirmative and imperative the following series of questions he poses:

> Can we imagine religion and religions beyond reification, beyond essentialization and totalization, and against rigid and impermeable boundaries? Can we find skillful uses for the category that do not erase particularities within religious traditions thereby lending credence to homogenizing discourses about monolithic Hindu or Christian identity? Can we recognize that religious traditions are more accurately characterized as communities of argumentation rather than as communities of agreement? Can we do all that without appearing to describe away the thick sense of co-belonging generated by the category? (149).

In other words, he seeks "a comparative theology *after the reification and essentialization of religion* and not a comparative theology that discards the category" (149). In my reading, it seems that Thatamanil is not against religious identities that distinguish the Muslim from the Hindu, or the Jewish practice from the Buddhist practice, or the Christian belief from the Jain belief. Rather, he is against the presumption that these identities emerged isolated from other traditions; he is against the assumption that *only* "the World Religions" can be religious and not *other* identities or ideologies, such as neoliberal capitalism, Marxism, nationalism, etc. This is perhaps why Thatamanil himself describes this very book as a "Christian exercise." He is not discarding his own tradition's borders, and while he may not belong to a denomination whose institutional hierarchy tends to defend its borders more agonistically than others, such as the Roman

Catholic, he does not discard borders tout court. If he did, what would he be crossing when he learns from the Hindu or Buddhist traditions?

So what is "the religious" for Thatamanil? He skillfully and constructively addresses this question in Chapter 5 and calls it a "comprehensive qualitative orientation." I find his proposal similar to what Paul Griffiths proposes as a "religious account,"[2] though perhaps a bit more flexible and robust. Thatamanil argues that "all known human societies do engage in a kind of cultural labor that can be called religious" (136) but it is only in modern societies that we separate this labor into "religion" as opposed to "the secular." Therefore, every human society "takes up the project of *comprehensive qualitative orientation*" (136). An orientation, quoting Robert Neville, "is how a self comports itself or takes up stance toward some level or dimension of reality" (158). However, a *comprehensive orientation* "is one that asks about the *nature of reality as such*" (158) and not just a particular subset of reality. I take this to mean that, for example, biology is an orientation that produces data and describes the *quantitative* structure of living organisms—*but only that*. A *comprehensive* orientation makes claims about the *nature of reality as such*: e.g., it is the free creation of an all-loving God. What makes a comprehensive orientation *qualitative*? It shapes habits, conventions, behaviors, relationships, desires, goals, meaning, value, truth, and so on: "Religious life [as comprehensive qualitative orientation] is thus a matter of practice and not just claim-making. Qualitative orientation is both a matter of knowing *and* doing, of truth-seeking interpretation *and performance*" (160). For Thatamanil, religions offer multiple, often contradictory or mutually opposing, interpretive schemes—but what binds them as "the same religion" is "a shared *repertoire* of myths, symbols, founding narratives, motifs, practices, scriptures, and histories" (176).

Let me proffer an example. A Nizari Ismaili Muslim from Canada recognizes a Sunni Muslim from Pakistan *as Muslim*—even as so much of their respective interpretive schemes are mutually exclusive and even agonistically in opposition—because they share in many aspects of the Islamic repertoire.

Thatamanil's theory of comprehensive qualitative orientation enables us to recognize how other dimensions of human life that we do not categorize as religion perform the work of religious life. He uses the example of neoliberal capitalism as a comprehensive qualitative orientation that proposes a repertoire—an anthropology, an axiology, myths, rituals, and so on—that a large swath of the global population deploys in shaping their life decisions, making ethical choices, and cultivating certain therapeutic regimes and behaviors, often in ways that supersede their own professed religious identity, if they have one.

After reading chapters 5 and 6, comparative theologians and theologians of religious diversity are given an adaptable theoretical framework to move the disciplines forward. On the

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[2] Paul Griffiths defines "religious account" as the interpretive framework through which a person makes sense of her phenomenal experience of the world. A religious account is (1) comprehensive in that "it seems to the person who offers it to take as its object strictly everything, and thereby to have universal scope" (Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 8); (2) unsurpassable in that it is "not…capable of being replaced by or subsumed in a better account of what it accounts for" (ibid., 9); and, most importantly—though all three are required for a religious account to be religious—(3) central in that it is "directly relevant to what you take to be the central questions of your life, the questions around which your life is oriented" (ibid., 10).

one hand, as a Catholic comparative theologian myself, I have had to wrestle with how magisterial documents continue to speak about other religions as essentialized monoliths, largely shaped by the World Religions Paradigm. It is problematic at best and harmful at worst. Thatamanil's intervention is helpful and can certainly be applied in my own future work. On the other hand, one wonders if comprehensive qualitative orientation flattens out the distinction between religious and non-religious sources for comparative theological reflection. While I agree, for instance, that neoliberal capitalism is certainly a comprehensive qualitative orientation wreaking havoc in the early 21st century, what about other discursive traditions that are not nefarious but arguably contain some positive insights into the human condition? When a Christian reads, say, Kant or Hegel and their later interpreters for insight into constructive theological questions, are they doing comparative theology, too? Is Hegelian philosophy worthy of interreligious learning and receptivity or hospitality as much as Advaita Vedanta traditions *and in the same way*? These are questions comparative theologians continue to ask and there are likely no simple answers to them.

Chapter 6 is a case study that demonstrates both the theological and political potential for the sort of interreligious learning and receptivity Thatamanil has in mind. He traces and accessibly details how Mohandas Gandhi (Hindu) learned from the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ (found especially in the Gospels), and in turn how Martin Luther King, Jr. (Christian) learned from Gandhi the practices of nonviolence. "It would behoove us to think of [King's] reception of *satyagraha*—Gandhi's name for the power and practice of nonviolent resistance—as an exemplary act of *interreligious learning and receptivity*, indeed one of world historical significance" (196). The most important contribution this chapter makes is to demonstrate how interreligious learning does not remain in the space of spirituality or "the mind" but extends to the political sphere in the embodied work of enacting justice.

In Chapter 7, Thatamanil does the bulk of his constructive and comparative theological work. He proposes a trinitarian approach to a comparative theology of religious diversity that draws from Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu sources. It is an impressive chapter in which Thatamanil demonstrates his intelligence and proficiency in these traditions to posit ultimate reality as ground, singularity, and relation. He draws from the Advaita Vedanta tradition to elaborate ground, from the Christian tradition singularity, and from the Buddhist tradition relation, even as he admits that each of these traditions has resources for the other concepts. Indeed, this is one of the goals of constructive comparative theology: "comparative theology is a necessary discipline for constructive theology precisely because particular traditions tend to settle questions about ultimate reality in a dominant inflection leaving other options inadequately considered" (242). There are Christian resources for God as relation and ground, even if the dominant and institutional forces tended to silence (or execute) those voices (e.g., Marguerite Porete or Meister Eckhart).

I will not rehearse Thatamanil's comparative insights in this chapter. (They are impressive, constructively important, and theologically erudite.) Rather, I will attend to one question nagging at me throughout this critically important volume: is Thatamanil writing as a confessional or meta-confessional comparative theologian and how to we understand these categories? Here I am drawing from Catherine Cornille's distinction in her *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. She defines confessional comparative theology as

> . . . a process of engaging in constructive theological reflection with other religions from within the religious framework of a particular religious tradition. This tradition provides the impetus, the theological questions or problems to be probed, and the guiding norms for discerning truth in other religions. It also represents the ultimate goal and arbiter of the comparative theological work. Theology is here thus understood as reflection on the faith and practice of a particular religious community, and comparative theology is done at the service of that community.[3]

Cornille goes on to suggest that confessional comparative theology is marked by four features: "in the avowedly religious identity of the comparative theologian, in the choice of topics, the criteria of discernment, and the stated goal of the comparative theological exercise."[4] Thatamanil does profess a Christian identity, to be sure, and his choice of topic, viz., theologies of religious diversity, stem in part from Christian questions about the religious other (though other traditions have analogous questions). However, in his criteria for discernment and the stated goal of his exercise, he is less formed by his Christian tradition. I have already underscored this in my critical reading of chapter two above: his assessment of the major strands of inclusive and exclusive theologies of religious diversity is based on criteria of discernment and stated goals that are not necessarily Christian (though they overlap with Christian theological questions and concerns). Additionally, he seeks to construct a comparative theology of religious diversity that refuses the essentialization and formation of hard boundaries within and between religions. He also seeks to construct a method in comparative theology that opens the constructive theologian to being radically shaped and even subverted by the resources from other religious traditions (rather than merely confirm prior conclusions). Thus, it seems that the criteria of discernment and his stated goal is less confessionally Christian and more meta-confessional—there is nothing inherently Christian about them, even if they may not contradict a Christian comprehensive qualitative orientation.

Thatamanil would likely agree in that he more or less identifies with meta-confessional or transreligious theology, which he describes as "the quest for interreligious wisdom" and as "constructive theology done in conversation with and drawing from the resources of more than one tradition."[5] He therefore does not "make a neat and singular point of origin or mode of religious belonging normative for transreligious theology."[6] Yet, the hard-and-fast distinctions between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology are troubled by Thatamanil's *Circling the Elephant* (and I imagine he would be pleased by such troubling of disciplinary boundaries).

For instance, on ultimate reality as ground, singularity, and relation, he writes tellingly, "Although each of these concepts can be correlated with accounts of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, the task at hand is not to defend the orthodoxy of my formulation but to launch an experiment in *formulating Christian doctrine* in conversation with other traditions" (217, *emphasis added*). This gives me the opportunity to interrogate Thatamanil's exercise in comparative theology. He identifies this book as "a Christian exercise" (11) and the constructive portion of his

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[3] Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Wiley Blackwell: Hoboken, NJ, 2020), 18.
[4] Ibid.
[5] John Thatamanil, "Transreligious Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom," *Open Theology 2* (2016): 354.
[6] Ibid., 355.

book as "an experiment in formulating Christian doctrine" (217). He then admits, "This is just one Christian theologian's venture at redescribing the elephant after a series of forays into Buddhist and Hindu traditions" (220). Here, he appears to write as a confessional comparative theologian. But why should other Christians read it and will it make sense to them? The final portion of Cornille's definition of confessional comparative theology is that it "is done at the service of [the theologian's religious] community." We know that Thatamanil is ordained in the Anglican Church, and yet he shies away from strong Christological and Trinitarian formulations in his work, including this one. He eschews speaking of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, preferring broader terms. He rarely speaks devotionally about Jesus Christ, instead focusing on the larger metaphysical and even mystical teachings of the Christian tradition that are ripe for comparison with the dharmic traditions he studies. I am not questioning Thatamanil's Christian identity. God forbid! I am only wondering how to situate a comparative theological work like *Circling the Elephant*. Though, perhaps Thatamanil would want to challenge Cornille's definitional boundaries between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology.

Let me expand on another reviewers' recent comments on meta-confessional comparative theology and Thatamanil's book. Anna Bonta Moreland claims that Thatamanil "[lets] go of an ecclesial framework to engage in Comparative Theology work"[7] and that "once truth-seeking becomes unmoored from ecclesial communities, it still needs an anchor."[8] She goes so far as to suggest that meta-confessional comparative theology has "lost its distinguishing feature as faith seeking understanding, a feature that cannot help but be ecclesial."[9] Indeed, meta-confessional comparative theologian Robert Neville, a mentor of Thatamanil's, flipped the Anselmian phrase to "understanding seeking faith". Moreland claims Thatamanil moors himself in progressive political positions, as if to suggest that his project is "progressive political positions seeking faith" (my words, not hers).

While I see her point—there is in fact a danger for *any* religious practitioner to succumb to worldly ideologies, allowing them to shape their faith, be it right-wing nationalism or the DNC's party platform—I disagree with this assessment for a few reasons. For example, Thatamanil claims earlier in the work that it is possible to be exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist with respect to various aspects of any given religious tradition, including one's own (105). This is where he states that he is shaped by Sankara's Advaita Vedanta but exclusivist "when it comes to the ideology of caste that is part of Sankara's Brahmanical imagination" (105); likewise, he is Christian and even an ordained priest in the Anglican Church but is exclusivist when it comes to strands of Christian fundamentalism that brew right-wing nationalism (105–106). Now, it is unfair of Moreland to judge rejection of the caste system and right-wing Christian fundamentalism as merely "progressive politics of the West"—there are many moderate and right-of-center positions that reject these, too. Even when Thatamanil professes that he is exclusivist towards "anti-immigration, anti-queer, pro-death penalty, anti-science, anti-evolutionary theory, and anti-environmentalist entailments" (106) that follow atonement theories of Christ's Cross (which he also rejects), it is unfair to assume that it is progressive political values of the West that shape Thatamanil's Christian theological positions. It is just as possible that his

[7] Anna Bonta Moreland, "Comparative Theology: A Wellness Checkup," *Modern Theology*, 39: 126. https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12805
[8] Ibid., 128.
[9] Ibid., 124.

Christian-theologically informed political positions *happen to coincide* with what society labels "progressive political values of the West."

In this regard, my critique would be less about political positions and more about how Thatamanil's relational pluralism can also be hospital to, say, an anti-immigrant Christian—not for the sake of agreeing with them, but rather to truly learn their story and understand their reasons for being xenophobic. To what end? So that, in Christian charity and hope, they may realize their hate should not be directed at the immigrant; rather, their righteous anger should be against unjust economic policies that pit the citizen against the foreigner. Thatamanil would likely agree, in which case his exclusivism is regarding ideological positions and not actual persons or communities. Here I employ a hermeneutics of generosity and assume that Thatamanil is not necessarily an exclusivist toward people but toward exclusive ideologies that can very quickly produce harmful political policies.

Nonetheless, the question of ecclesial moorings remains. It may just be that Thatamanil writes for an academic audience in which speaking devotionally about Jesus or connecting his trinitarian approach to a comparative theology of religious diversity to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are both unnecessary. Perhaps his ecclesial moorings are evident in his sermons or other contexts when he speaks as an ordained Anglican priest. Nonetheless, Thatamanil's approach is in sharp contrast to the other well-known priest who is a comparative theologian and scholar of the Hindu traditions. Francis X. Clooney, SJ, is immediately open about his Catholic identity and speaks devotionally about his commitment to the Gospel of Christ in most if not all his books. His conclusions are in a Christian idiom and for Christian readers. This perhaps is what makes Thatamanil a meta-confessional comparative theologian even though he has one leg on the confessional side at times.

In his cleverly titled conclusion, "This Is Not a Conclusion," Thatamanil ends by not claiming an end: "interreligious learning is an endless process because there is always more to be known" (249). Though, of course, this could be said of any good theological project. He summarizes the import of the relational pluralism he proffers: "[What] I say about you and your tradition (theology of religious diversity), my knowledge and appreciation for what you know of ultimate reality (comparative theology), and the work of coming to new intimacy with ultimate reality (constructive theology) cannot and must not be severed. I need you if I am to understand myself. I need you if I am to understand God. Reality seems so structured that these operations are inseparable" (254). To this, a hearty "Hear, hear!" However, we should note that his conclusion, unlike exercises in more explicitly and confessionally Christian exercises in comparative theology (say, works by Francis X. Clooney or Michelle Voss Roberts), does not return to central questions in Christian theology in a Christian idiom and for Christian readers. This, perhaps, is what Moreland is getting at. Though again, this may just not be Thatamanil's project: he is a transreligious theologian, after all, who happens to identify as Christian.

As such, his book can be a resource for other meta-confessional comparative theologians *as well as* confessional comparative theologians. The latter can employ his constructive and critical insights and test them against their own tradition's "criteria of discernment" and use them for their stated goals shaped by their own tradition's theological questions. Overall, this book is exceptional in bringing together the critical study of religion with comparative and constructive theology. It is necessary reading for graduate students who seek to pursue these disciplines and

the questions they entail and for scholars engaging these issues. I am glad he wrote it, and it is a boon for the disciplines of interreligious studies, comparative theology, and interreligious dialogue.

However, the book does more. This book review essay demonstrates how Thatamanil's style and method advances the friendly debate between meta-confessional and confessional comparative theologians. There will surely be more lively conversation to come.

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