COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY: TOWARD A SEMIOTIC THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

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**ABSTRACT**

The recent proposals in the field of comparative theology distinguish themselves from the previous forms of the so-called “old comparative theology” in the following ways: they choose intentionally to deal with particularity, and primarily with religious texts, instead of reasoning about general religious world-views. This development did not simply happen by chance. Rather, it is the natural outcome of a long process of self-correcting and reformulation of the presuppositions of the discipline of comparative theology.

This process is brought about by both centrifugal and centripetal forces. On the one hand, comparative theology has had to face the challenge of the most traditional theologians who see in this new development the risk of betraying the *depositum fidei*. On the other hand, comparative theology has had to defend itself against the accusation of cultural narcissism (because it searched different belief systems, as though they were mirrors, for the features and traces of the truth glimpsed in Christ); and religious hegemonism (because it imposed the religious categories proper to Christianity on all other spiritual paths).

Despite the fact that these accusations may have some merit, I will defend comparative theology as a discipline that can help today’s Christians deepen the understanding of their own faith even while recognizing truth in other religions. However, the present situation of conflict among the various contemporary positions in comparative theology is due to a lack of a solid
dogmatic anchoring. Christian theologians need to find in their own faith reasons for pursuing theological comparison as something not simply advisable, but necessary. Accordingly, I will submit Christian theological language of revelation and conception of scripture to a thorough semiotic analysis. I argue that Christian faith per se demands a comparative approach especially in relation to the Bible which, in its complex narrative structure, presents elements that are clearly drawn from the repertoire of other religious traditions. Some of its accounts even seem to have inspired further narratives in other religious worlds, but the Bible must be privileged over any other religious text in all theological enterprises that intend to be consistently comparative and Christian at the same time.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to my father.

Pietro Lorenzo Maggioni
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INTRODUCTION

Magic and fantasy are two fundamental aspects of the folklore of all peoples in any time. Whether they are an effective way of escaping the oppression of the powerful and the alienation of day-to-day life, or a means of projecting one’s own fears and desires and being reconciled with them, or a door through which the supernatural and the spiritual take revenge on materialism, whatever the case, they are real driving forces for the production of fairy tales and narrative in general. Magic, in particular, is more pervasive and persuasive than one could imagine. It casts its shadow over fields of thought that the modern mind has difficulty acknowledging. Jonathan Z. Smith, on the basis of Frazer’s and Tylor’s typological studies, finds an unsettling analogy between the procedures of magic and those of the comparative sciences. As a matter of fact, as magic is somehow founded on “the association of ideas by similarity,… comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity.” Moreover, “the chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity.”¹ Hence, we should conclude with Smith that “in comparison a magic dwells.”² If the methodological affinity between magic and the comparative sciences cannot be entirely confuted, Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray warn us that, nonetheless, the word “magic” should be somehow rehabilitated and with it the analogical comparative approach on which, in particular, the comparative sciences of religion are fundamentally based.

Like magic, comparative religion can be an efficacious act of conjuring, of delineating and evoking homologous relationships while simultaneously holding in view, and thus in fruitful tension, undisputed differentials. In the act of comparison, the two original components juxtaposed in scholarly discourse have the potential to produce a third thing, a magical thing, that is different from its parents. Not only is it “different,” but it can illumine truths about both of them in ways that would have been impossible through the

exclusive contemplation of either of them alone.\textsuperscript{3}

It seems that all the comparative sciences are in some sense caught between the idle and superstitious process of the mere association of ideas, and the powerful and efficacious enhancing of our knowledge of reality in all its multifaceted aspects that comparativism can eventually favor. Comparative theology does not escape this dilemma. What already in the nineteenth century was considered “a very popular, highly regarded, and respectable intellectual-spiritual pursuit”\textsuperscript{4}—contiguous with but distinct enough from other contemporary academic approaches to the matter of religion—after a long season of decadence and oblivion is presently experiencing a renaissance, especially in the Anglo-American world:

Scholars have produced an increasing number of studies that either the authors or others have identified explicitly as “comparative theology,” new groups and academic affiliations have been formed under this name, and professorships for this field are getting established at high and low ranking universities.\textsuperscript{5}

Unlike its close relatives theology of religions, comparative religion, and history of religions, however, comparative theology is, according to Norbert Hintersteiner, “a constructive and reflective theological discipline that is mature in neither its theoretical nor its practical dimensions.”\textsuperscript{6} This substantial weakness makes comparative theology particularly vulnerable and more exposed to various criticisms, from inconsistency and impressionism to naïveté and subjectivism, all of which the modern Western mind could easily associate with a kind of magic more than a science. Hence, it is my intention, first, to reexamine comparative theology by


\textsuperscript{5} Hintersteiner, “Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)Translatability and the Comparative Theology Project,” 467.

\textsuperscript{6} Hintersteiner, “Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)Translatability and the Comparative Theology Project,” 467.
reconsidering the pivotal questions of its nature, methods, and aims. After recounting the phases of formation of what presently sees itself as a new discipline in current Christian theological debate, I will take into account the more recent proposals in the field. They distinguish themselves from the previous forms of the so-called “old comparative theology” in the following ways: they choose intentionally to deal with particularity, and primarily with religious texts, instead of reasoning about macro-systems of thought and general religious worldviews.

This process is brought about by both centrifugal and centripetal forces. On the one hand, comparative theology has had to face challenges from the most traditional interpreters of Christian dogmatics, who see in this new development the risk of betraying the *depositum fidei*; this wariness arose in essentially all the different Christian confessions. On the other hand, comparative theology, together with other comparative disciplines, has had to defend itself from the accusation of cultural narcissism—because it searched different belief systems, as though they were mirrors, for the features and traces of the truth glimpsed in Christ—and of religious hegemonism—because it imposed the religious categories proper to Christianity on all other spiritual paths. More generally, comparative theology found itself caught in the midst of a furious struggle that saw religious studies and theology come into confrontation with each other. Despite the fact that these accusations may have some merit, I will defend comparative theology as a theological discipline that can help today’s Christians deepen and broaden the understanding of their own faith even while recognizing truth in other religions, which are approached and studied for their own value, status, and distinctiveness. In particular, the choice to deal with religious texts is a development which did not simply happen by chance. Rather, it is the natural—if not the necessary—outcome of a long process of self-correcting and reformulation of the presuppositions of the discipline of comparative theology.
However, as Hintersteiner maintains, comparative theology in order to become mature, needs to rethink is theoretical premises. I am convinced that the present situation of conflict among the various contemporary positions in comparative theology is due to a lack of a solid dogmatic anchoring. Christian theologians need to find in the Christian faith itself reasons for pursuing theological comparison as something not simply possible or advisable, but necessary. After engaging with the thought of several comparative thinkers, in particular with that of Francis X. Clooney, I will draw some insight from both the merits and the limitations of those proposals in search of a more consistent theological foundation. Then, after showing that a serious risk of subjectivism remains in many of these recent proposals, I will try to illuminate comparative theology through a semiotic analysis of the specifically Christian understanding of the following paramount issues: the language of the sacred and revelation; the conception of scripture; and, more deeply, the possibility of truth claims.

Any endeavor that intends to be thoroughly comparative and theological at the same time must carefully consider its theological premises. Indeed, if this kind of reflection is neglected, this risks invalidating comparative theology and ultimately proving its implausibility. This concern arose naturally as a necessary development of my previous comparative projects in which I dealt with some specific subjects, but also in consideration of the various, and occasionally incompatible proposals of comparative theology that surface in the present academic arena. Accordingly, I will identify those theological premises that make certain comparisons more or less suitable and, ultimately, tenable. In short, my major concern is to offer some reasons for comparison that can be seen as faithfully (sometimes more in spirit than in letter) in line with the depositum fidei.

In this specific regard, I argue that Christian faith per se demands a comparative approach especially with relation to its Scriptures. The Bible, in its complex narrative structure, witnesses
well the recurrence of this phenomenon: not only are some of its parts clearly drawn from the repertoires of other religious traditions, but some of its more original accounts also seem to have inspired further religious narratives and subsequent reinterpretations in other religious worlds. Thus, the Bible appears to be at the crossroads, so to speak, among various religious worldviews, and it is only from this perspective that the Bible can be read and understood adequately.

Analogously, in the history of religions we find the recurrence of a similar phenomenon. Even though marked by a specific spirituality, a story can be accepted in other religious contexts because of its moral teachings, the analogy of the religious visions it discloses, or simply for its narrative qualities. Consequently, a sort of osmosis occurs. When the story is welcomed, at the same time, it receives some variations to adapt it to its new environment. Equally, the context itself is significantly changed by the acceptance of these borrowed motives. However, the Bible must be privileged over any other text as the parameter in all theological enterprises that intend to be consistently comparative and Christian at the same time.

I promote a perspective that at once is semiotic, narrative, and theological: the comparison of religious texts, which, despite having developed in different religious contexts and ages, seem to share the same sources or at least betray significant analogies, becomes the occasion to travel a theological journey through time and space, within the history of cultures and religions. What happens when, a religious story in general enters another context with different religious understandings? What are the theological insights that these new visions could bring about? And more specifically, what will be the theological outcomes in the consideration of the Christian image of God, or in terms of the Christian conception of the human person? These are some of the questions that drive my inquiry.
Over the course of three chapters, I will strive to accomplish, respectively, three important tasks. In Chapter 1, I will try to map the spectrum of positions in comparative theology in the present debate by identifying the most representative trends and reflecting on the profound reasons for disagreement among the several perspectives. Moreover, while presenting the eminent authorities in the field, I will look at some major issues, such as the relation and the difference between religious studies and comparative theology, on the one hand, and theology of religions and comparative theology, on the other; the question of the nature and the limits of the discipline; and the necessity of dialogue with other philosophical and scientific approaches.

Since conciliation between the current different approaches in comparative theology is hard to achieve, in Chapter 2 I will investigate the origins of the discipline, especially focusing on the historical circumstances that gave birth to comparative theology as a modern autonomous discipline, with the intention of searching in history for the necessary resources for disentangling the present complex discussion. Thus, I will retrace the various phases of formation and development of comparative theology in the evolution of Christian thought, giving attention to the major contributions from various denominations in what is at the same time an ecumenical and interreligious effort.

In Chapter 3, I will present my own proposal for a semiotic narrative comparative theology as a way to valorize the contribution of the other perspectives in the discipline and, concurrently, to avoid the pitfalls. Although some of the general principles of both religious studies and comparativism will be assumed in my approach as the necessary preconditions for a rigorous comparison, in this constructive part I will try to adhere to a point of view that is markedly Christian, in an effort to build a new theological foundation for comparative theology. Further, I dare to consider my proposal authentically Catholic, intending with this term not only a Roman,
apostolic identity but, as the word “catholic” indicates etymologically, an all-encompassing position in which the ecumenical spirit of intra-Christian exchange can meld with interreligious concern. Finally, I will explain the reasons for which a Christian comparative theologian must privilege the Bible over any other text as the driver, the measuring stick, the rule of interpretation and the final criterion of evaluation in any of his or her comparative enterprises.

In conclusion, stories are something perilous and terribly serious because they touch on and represent the core of our existence and the question of its meaning. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, we are essentially story-telling animals who are in the persistent condition of addressing this fundamental question: “Of what story or stories do I find myself part?” Dealing with stories is especially important for Christians who see in the words and the actions of Jesus, the traces of not just a story like any other, but the story par excellence: the story of salvation. Hence, if comparative theology is able adequately to contemplate and revive not just the crucial interrogative which MacIntyre echoed but also to make justice of the uniqueness of the story of salvation definitively accomplished in Jesus Christ, then it can provide itself with a more consistent, plausible foundation. What is more, in doing this, it will also inherit the transformational power of the same story it accepted as the fundamental criterion in its analyses. Otherwise, it will eventually prove to be just magic and fantasy.

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Chapter I
THE SPECTRUM OF CONTEMPORARY POSITIONS

Defining “comparative theology” is an arduous enterprise. While the number of books and academic journals dedicated to the comparative study of two or more religious traditions has lately been increasing, the authors of those contributions that generally claim to be both comparative and theological are delineating a picture of their own discipline that is far from homogeneous. Their philosophical reference points often diverge, and the aim of their intended projects and the methods they apply are manifestly distinct. Therefore, if it is unfair to contend that those perspectives are absolutely incompatible, it is equally improbable to speak of comparative theology as a clearly established and autonomous discipline. Moreover, because comparative theology positions itself somewhere between theology (and theology of religions in particular) and religious studies, it leaves itself open to charges of inconsistency and hybridism from both sides.

In the following pages, I will try to give voice to some representative contributors in the current debate in order to present the major positions on the role and the identity of comparative theology. Given the complexity of this matter, I do not claim to be exhaustive in presenting the full spectrum of possible positions. However, in the plethora of proposals, it is possible to single

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out some major trends. To be consistent and methodical in my presentation, I will divide the various thinkers and their projects into four major groups: those Christian theologians who challenge the tenability of both theology of religions and comparative theology or even question their orthodoxy; those scholars both in religious studies and theology who emphasize the aspect of the contraposition between comparative theology and other philosophical and theological disciplines; those who, for different reasons, tend to minimize or negate these antitheses; and, finally, those who want to avoid dichotomies and strive to bridge those oppositions.

First Group

I begin by briefly presenting the first group of scholars—those theologians, from all the Christian confessions, who are manifestly suspicious of comparative theology and who sometimes even denounce its presuppositions as problematic or at least unclear. In their view, comparative theology is too close to the pluralist paradigm in theology of religions and somehow mirrors its doctrinal flaws. In general, they are convinced that accepting that a faith orientation different from one’s own has something to offer to theological reflection leads to relativism. They insist that there is a substantial difference between treating other religious traditions and their adherents with respect and accepting their claims as in any way theologically normative or even relevant. To paraphrase Friedemann Eißler,9 in a faithful and authentic Christian faith it is not acceptable to conceive of the normativity of other religious truths. Consequently, they see the risk of departing from orthodoxy not only in theology of religions but sometimes also in comparative theology—if

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its presuppositions are not adequately grounded at the dogmatic level. Although in his *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Joseph Ratzinger does not deal primarily with comparative theology, the following sardonic passage is particularly illustrative of the position that I have presented above:

The dominant impression of most people today is that all religions, with a varied multiplicity of forms and manifestations, in the end are and mean one and the same thing; which is something everyone can see, except for them. The man of today will for the most part scarcely respond with an abrupt No to a particular religion’s claim to be true; he will simply relativize that claim by saying “There are many religions.” And behind his response will probably be the opinion, in some form or other, that beneath varying forms they are in essence all the same; each person has his own.  

Ratzinger’s view on theology of religions and interreligious dialogue expanded during the years of his Pontificate as Benedict XVI. It would be interesting to study whether his approach to these matters remained unchanged in substance or evolved. To my knowledge, there is so far no scholarly work that undertakes such a wide and interesting project. Rather, there are multiple contributions that try either to deepen only some aspects of Ratzinger’s teaching in this regard or, inspired by some of his statements, to hypostatize his view into a well-developed theological paradigm. Particularly after the speech in Regensburg, Ratzinger’s thoughts on the value of other religions has obviously had an enormous impact on recent Catholic theological production.

Among the texts that draw inspiration from Pope Benedict XVI’s magisterium without restricting the limits of research to a mere paraphrase of the Pope’s words, *Catholic Engagement with World Religions* must be recalled here as one of the most complete attempts. Edited by Karl Joseph Becker, S.J. and Ilaria Morali from the Gregorian University in Rome with the

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collaboration of several scholars, this volume offers a broad presentation of Catholic thought on the destiny of non-Christians from the early church to contemporary Catholicism. After discussing the concept of religion, and framing the theological consideration of different religious belonging in light of the Christian creed from the specific point of view of Catholicism, it introduces the major religious traditions both in their own particularity and in relation to Catholic faith.

This significant work presents the Catholic faith as a whole and attempts to compare it with the foundational standpoints of other religious traditions. However, the comparative aspect that is certainly part of this enterprise seems to be intended as an apologetic strategy for illustrating and supporting the uniqueness of the Christian faith. Becker’s final words, which appear to promote the comparative endeavor, are the basis of this main apologetic intention:

This theological vision avoids repeating the radical critique of Christian faith made by various forms of radicalism, which is revived in the pluralism of our age. It holds firm to the Christian meaning and sees also a meaning in the other religions within the order of Christian salvation. On the basis of this solution a Catholic comparative study of religion can be built.  

One of the refrains that the editors repeat in the introduction as well as the conclusion is that the recent attempts at developing a theology of religions ignore essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Obviously, their primary targets here are the pluralist theologians. But their intention also is to criticize Catholic theologians who advocate inclusivism—particularly those inspired by Rahner’s theory of the “anonymous Christians”—for distorting the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the matter of the Church’s evaluation of other religions:

… one of the most powerful temptations for the Catholic world at present is that of taking “Catholicism” to mean “cosmopolitanism with a religious tint” duly purged of all those elements and aspects that make the Christian proposition, the Christian message, entirely singular and unique. Having closely studied conciliar thought on the great questions inherent in Christianity’s relation to other religions, from both the doctrinal and the

practical-pastoral points of view, and having compared conciliar thought with what today in theology is said about the Second Vatican Council, we often had the impression of stark contrast.\(^{13}\)

Regarding early Christian attempts to solve the problem of the salvation of different believers, the contributions of Joseph Carola and Ilaria Morali (though clearly tied to the conservative perspective of the main editor) are well informed. However, the final assessment by Becker of the long, rich, and multifaceted history of the Church’s reflection on this matter seems rather hasty:

Antiquity and the early Middle Ages are agreed in a clear rejection of other religions and therefore do not offer a basis for our contemporary discussion. Later centuries saw more and more concern given to the matter of the salvation of nonbelievers. Catholic thought is today confronted increasingly with the opinions of Christians who regard other religions in a positive way. This is the past about which we today must be aware, so that we can prepare adequately for the future. The Second Vatican Council speaks respectfully about other religions, but leaves to the theologians the research of a more detailed answer to all the questions this respect entails.\(^{14}\)

Similar views occur in other Christian confessions, particularly the evangelical Churches.\(^{15}\) For instance, in *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*,\(^ {16}\) Harold A. Netland expresses his discontent with the pluralist project and especially the idea of interreligious dialogue itself. Evangelical dissatisfaction with dialogue, he contends, fundamentally derives from certain assumptions, such as the following: “God has revealed himself in and through all major religious traditions. There is nothing in principle about God’s revelation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which makes it definitive or normative. There is thus an inescapable relativity of all

\(^{13}\) Becker and Morali, “Preface,” in *Catholic Engagement With World Religions*, xxxi.

\(^{14}\) Becker and Morali, “Preface,” in *Catholic Engagement With World Religions*, xxxiii.


It is not superfluous to recall here that Netland studied under John Hick, who together with Paul Knitter is universally acknowledged to be the spokesperson of the pluralist paradigm in theology of religions. Due to Hick’s influence, the problems of conflicting truth claims and of religious epistemology in general became quite crucial for Netland. As he himself informs his readers, “Professor Hick and I disagree sharply on some fundamental issues.” As a result, he devoted all his scholarly efforts to championing a new-exclusivist proposal with the main intention of responding to the proposal of his adviser. In his view, the only possible religion with which dialogue is possible is Judaism, which shares with Christianity numerous religious ideas and a common cultural background:

And on the interreligious level we should note the significant dialogues between evangelicals and Jews that have been held between 1975 and 1984. Leading evangelical and Jewish scholars met on the three occasions and frankly discussed such controversial subjects as the Messiah, the meaning of Israel, interpretation of Scripture, current evangelical-Jewish relations, and the question of proselytism. Whether such dialogue will expand in the future to include Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims remains to be seen.

It is interesting to note in this passage that Muslims are listed last, as if the author intended to challenge the common theological assumption that the Judeo-Christian dialogue might extend also to Muslims because of the monotheistic character of the religion of Muhammad and its

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20 Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, ix.
22 Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 295.
connection with the Abrahamic heritage.\textsuperscript{23}

Unlike Netland and those who openly promote only the Christian-Jewish dialogue, some other theologians, though reluctant to apply the concept of “theology” to other religious domains apart from Christianity, consent to use it—but only by analogy—in relation to Islam.\textsuperscript{24} However, all these thinkers generally agree to discourage this application to other religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which contain none of the ideas of the history of salvation, revelation, election, prophethood, or the unity and uniqueness of God.

It is curious to observe an unexpected convergence here between on the one hand the most conservative Christian approaches to comparative theology and theology of religions and on the other the critique made by some experts in Eastern religious traditions: both regard the application of Christian terminology across traditions as inappropriate. Moreover, the latter contend that it could be considered a neo-colonial form of imposition of Christianity over other spiritualities. For instance, John Milbank, in criticizing the pluralist project that the renowned book \textit{The Myth of Christian Uniqueness} tries to delineate in its various contributions, affirms that

the implication of this paradox is evident: the moment of contemporary recognition of other cultures and religions optimistically celebrated by this volume, is itself—as the rhetoric of its celebration makes apparent—none other than the moment of total obliteration of other cultures by Western norms and categories, with their freight of Christian influence.\textsuperscript{25}

But it is at least bizarre that a similar complaint occurs in Panikkar who, beyond being an expert in the philosophical Eastern traditions and those of India in particular, takes part in the same theological project of which Milbank disapproves. Speaking of the value and the distinctiveness of mentalities other than that of Western Christians, Panikkar argues,
Christian theology does not make much sense to those mentalities. Not only the Bible, but most Christian presuppositions and ways of thinking are foreign, if not simply bewildering, to the non-Abrahamic traditions. I must insist on this. Although hardly 10 percent of the world speaks fluent English, and although Christians are a minority on the planet, English-speaking people are prone to assume that what they want and think represents universal patterns. A number of cultures are caught in such a universalizing syndrome.  

Second Group

After presenting those Christian theologians who question the orthodoxy of theology of religion and, derivatively, that of comparative theology, I will now consider the second group: a number of thinkers, in the domains of both religious studies and theology, who, though opposed in their views, from the specificity of their own perspectives are in agreement in defending the necessity of keeping a clear distinction between their respective areas. According to them, without some notable boundaries between these two disciplines, any successful outcome of their research would be impossible.

After all, this kind of division between comparative theology and religious studies to which several thinkers appeal—particularly in the German-speaking countries and in the United States—recalls and somehow mirrors the age-old dichotomy which, starting from the Enlightenment subsequently expanded during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the renewal of academic interest in the study of religion. From the side of religious studies, I must at least mention here the figure of Joachim Wach (1898–1955). Although Wach promoted an all-embracing approach to religion (from the study of religious experience to the study of roles and structures within religious communities) still at the same time he demanded that *Religionswissenschaft* have

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a strongly sociological perspective founded on a clear differentiation not only from theology but also from philosophy of religion. After moving to Chicago, he was appointed to the chair of the History of Religions and became the founder of the renowned Chicago School. Wach is truly a key figure, not only because of his profound scientific contribution, but also because of the crucial role that he could play—as a German working in an American institution—in bridging the trans-Atlantic gap in academic discussions of religion.

Since Wach’s time, collaboration among American and European universities has gradually improved. The results of this fruitful dialogue are there for all to see. However, recently this has taken the form of what to me seems a bewildering reversal of perspectives: in the American academy a certain philosophical trend that traces back to some themes of European positivism is asserting itself. At the same time, in Europe, some thinkers are looking to the American example in their attempts to harmonize the religious and the political in their increasingly pluralistic societies. In the United States, multiple voices call for the unmasking of supposed theological agendas behind even the most apparently detached approaches to religion, and they propose a reform of the divinity schools in which the theological field is radically distinguished from religious studies (even questioning sometimes if it would be better to avoid teaching religion at all). Yet in Europe, leading scholars such as Jürgen Habermas endorse American civil religion as a valid model for Europe in building a more homogeneous society in which various religious affiliations can find mutual recognition and be acknowledged by the state.

Hence, the emphasis on the separation between the confessional study of religion—

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perceived as unscientific and sometimes contrary to a kind of reason based on incontrovertible truths—and the sociological, psychological, and political approaches characteristic of the French, German, and British positivist views is now taking over in the American academy. As early as 1962 Ninian Smart thundered:

But a much more radical view of the place of theology and religious studies is needed. The concept of a Department of Religion, rather than that of a Department of Theology, is the best answer.... Why is religion intellectually important? For two separate reasons: first, because it is a widespread and highly significant human phenomenon; and second, because its claims about the nature of reality. In regard to both these sides of religion, conventional Departments of Theology display serious deficiencies. Part of the trouble is that theology lives on sufferance. True, the cunning manipulation and reinterpretation of charters have allowed it a place in universities which once would never have admitted it. But there is great sensitivity about it all round, and this has led to sad results. To be respectable, it has had to go in for tough and “scientific” pursuits. Biblical studies are just right for this—plenty of Hebrew and Greek, textual criticism, minute historical enquires. Church history too, being a branch of history, in undoubtedly all right. But the formulation of Christian doctrine, apologetics and the like are doubly suspect.30

Smart, a committed Christian, in 1967, after chairing the department of theology at the University of Birmingham, founded for the first time in the United Kingdom a department of religious studies at the University of Lancaster. His precise intention was that of emancipating the study of religion from the narrowness and the parochialism of confessional approaches, and valorizing the synergic contribution of the secular disciplines for the recognition and the analysis of religions in what he identified as being their seven fundamental dimensions: “the ritual or practical dimension,” “the doctrinal and philosophical dimension,” “the mythic or narrative dimension,” “the experiential or emotional dimension,” “the ethical or legal dimensions,” “the organizational or social component,” and “the material or artistic dimension.”31

contribution to the study of religion was truly paramount. However, his opposition to the theological study of religion and his concrete choice to open a department of religious studies in Lancaster created many controversies, particularly when he announced that the holder of the chair might have been of “any faith or none.”

The representative voices of those authors who contrast the confessional approaches to religion would be too many to be listed here. I prefer to concentrate my attention on only one author, Russell T. McCutcheon, who, though quite polemical and sometimes repetitive in his various interventions, has merited the attention of experts in the field of religion with regard to an often underestimated problem: the political implications of the discourse on “sui generis” religion.

As we read in Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia, the unexamined assumption that religion is sui generis “can be understood as one of a number of potent strategies for domination.” This is because “not only theological and philosophical but political and social factors lie behind some scholars’ reluctance to explain religion as a product of human desires, actions, and associations.” Consequently, McCutcheon invokes the adoption of the naturalistic approach to the study of religions through which the related phenomena can finally be studied more accurately with the help of the human sciences, sociology in particular. Here McCutcheon is not saying that religion, being mainly based on non-falsifiable principles, should be withdrawn from academic interests. Rather, he thinks that the term “religion” covers a combination of elements that deserve a great deal of scholarly attention. But to set up truly scientific research by “applying tools from literary critical studies, ideology critique, and the

32 John J. Shepherd, ed., Religious Experience and Philosophical Analysis, vol. 1 of Ninian Smart On World Religion (Farnham: Ashgate 2009), xiii.
34 McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion, 23–24.
35 McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion, 73.
sociology of knowledge to the modern academic study of religion,” it is necessary first to unmask the “manufactured” nature of the concept of “religion” enshrined in the common approaches to both religious studies and theology. Religion in itself is not an object that can be somehow grasped or dissected but just a taxon that scholars use to classify and “distinguish certain sorts of beliefs, behaviors, and social systems we find curious.”

The main target of his criticism is Mircea Eliade as well as those scholars who he claims pursue another often political and theological agenda under the cover of a detached study of religions. McCutcheon has also promoted a heated dispute against the American Academy of Religion. In *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*, he harshly critiqued the highly heterogeneous character of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and the kind of broad discussions that the Academy promoted, from philosophy and history of religions and religious studies to theology, ecumenical theology, theology of religions, and comparative theology. He sardonically calls the varied and quite inconsistent method of selection of the articles in the Academy’s journal “the dog’s breakfast.” He claims that such an all-embracing perspective is, in reality, “an understanding that betrays the general bankruptcy of critical intelligence that has now come to comprise the dominant manner in which religion is studied in a public setting.”

McCutcheon is especially severe in criticizing theologians who generally think that a confessional point of view does not invalidate the scientific nature of research on a given religious datum. But for McCutcheon, “theological methods of interpretation and commentary are part of the myth making carried out by elite members of the social formations we study. Accordingly,
theology is data—not method—for scholars of religion." To conclude, by paraphrasing the title of one of his last contributions, one could say that in his view, the sacred is always profane. Therefore, for McCutcheon, religion, though relevant, should not be studied differently than all other psychological, social, and political dimensions.

The more specific difference, not so much between theology and religious studies but rather between comparative theology and secular approaches to religions, is the subject of Jürgen Mohn’s analysis. Mohn is a professor of religious studies at the University of Basel, and he focuses primarily on comparative religious studies, history of religions, and the reception of Buddhism in the West. In his contribution entitled “Komparatistik als Position und Gegenstand der Religionswissenschaft,” after recounting and commenting on the stages of formation of the comparative sciences of religion, he affirms that comparisons always entail a perspective, and no scientific comparison can be performed without a specific interest. He focuses on the dialogue between and comparison of Buddhism and Christianity—which, in his view, are illustrative of his argument. In particular, he deals with the concepts of time in both Augustine (for Christianity) and Dōgen (for Japanese Zen Buddhism). He argues that comparativists can pursue different interests and implement them with different methods. Just as theology is rooted in a specific and interested perspective, so is religious studies. Although Mohn defends the distinction between the two fields, he does not believe in the absolute objectivity of the so-called naturalistic approaches.

In response to James L. Fredericks’s comparison of the concepts of “person” in Trinitarian

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40 McCutcheon, The Discipline of Religion, 93.
theology and Buddhism. Mohn identifies some fundamental problems that can be applied to other cases in comparative theology. If they are not sufficiently considered, such naivety can invalidate any comparative theological endeavors. He remarks that sometimes dialogue does not necessarily correspond to true comparison. Rather, as in Fredericks’s case, it is more common to apply categories of one tradition to another without realizing that this is nothing more than a cultural transfer or a self-reflection of one cultural and religious “self” to another cultural realm. This “self-comparison” functions as a mirror that only apparently or deceivably reveals similarities and distinguishes among differences.

From the side of theology, among those thinkers who stress the absolute necessity of the separation between theology and religious studies, Karl Barth and the enduring legacy of his idea of the contraposition between faith and religion are important. In his *Kirliche Dogmatik I/2*, Barth introduces one of the main principles of his dialectic theology: with the intention of contrasting the liberal theology of his era, which used to portray Christianity in an apologetic manner as the fulfillment of fundamental human needs and as the apex of any religious experience, he speaks of God’s revelation as the abolition of religion. Following a dialectical way of proceeding, he organizes his demonstration into three moments: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The thesis replicates the common idea that sees Christianity as the “true religion” in a way that is perhaps not quite faithful to the Augustinian concept of *vera religio*. In the view of liberal theology, Christianity is preeminent because it is the most excellent example of the phenomenon of “religion,” and though it might outstrip its counterparts, it nonetheless shares with them the same fundamental elements. However, in Barth’s view—and this is the antithesis—any religion is

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ultimately nothing other than disbelief because it corresponds to a human attempt to anticipate
God’s work in revelation and to replace it with other surrogates:

Because it is a grasping, religion is the contradiction of revelation, the concentrated
expression of human belief, i.e., an attitude and activity which is directly opposed to faith.
It is a feeble but defiant, an arrogant but hopeless, attempt to create something which man
could do, but now cannot do, or can do only because and if God Himself creates it for him:
the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of God. We cannot, therefore, interpret the
attempt as a harmonious co-operating of man with the revelation of God, as though religion
were a kind of outstretched hand which is filled by God in His revelation. Again, we cannot
say of the evident religious capacity of man that it is, so to speak, the general form of
human knowledge, which acquires its true and proper content in the shape of revelation.
On the contrary, we have here an exclusive contradiction. In religion man bolts and bars
himself against revelation by providing a substitute, by taking away in advance the very
thing which has to be given by God.\(^{44}\)

Only by virtue of God’s intervention in His revelation, then and only then, can Christianity
possibly be described as the true religion: this is the synthesis. In \textit{Dogmatik I/2} and IV/3—where
he tackles the problem of the truths outside the Church—and particularly in the lecture that he
delivered at the meeting of the Swiss Reformed Ministers’ Association in Aarau in 1956 and
collected under the name \textit{Die Menschlichkeit Gottes},\(^{45}\) Barth, after criticizing the concept of
religion harshly, in some way ends up rehabilitating it. Nevertheless, his marked preference for the
term “faith” to describe Christianity and to distinguish it from other forms of spirituality sealed
the second moment of his demonstration, the antithesis, as the distinctive trait of his theology, both
in the collective imagination and in academic discussions. The contraposition faith-religion,
therefore, became a sort of unquestionable axiom in the eyes of many theologians, not only in the

\(^{44}\) Karl Barth, \textit{The Doctrine of the Word of God}, vol. I/2 of \textit{Church Dogmatics}, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley

Evangelical (e.g., E. Brunner)\textsuperscript{46} and Calvinist (e.g., H. Kraemer)\textsuperscript{47} spheres but, less radically, also in the Catholic Church (R. Guardini).\textsuperscript{48} Even in the Orthodox Church, the indirect influence of Barth has made its appearance: the recent contribution by the Greek theologian Christos Yannaras, \textit{Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event},\textsuperscript{49} is the clear sign that the legacy of dialectical theology is far from blowing over.

It is my firm conviction that the ascendency of the faith-religion contraposition in Catholic theology can be detected in two of the main proposals of fundamental theology,\textsuperscript{50} which, though not recent, still have a certain relevance in the current debate: the \textit{Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie} by Walter Kern, Hermann Joseph Pottmeyer, and Max Seckler\textsuperscript{51} and the works of Rino Fisichella and René Latourelle at the Gregorian University in Rome, Italy.\textsuperscript{52} These two projects differ from each other in various aspects, which I will not discuss here. However, one characteristic seems to me present in both of them and in particular in the second of the two. They generally bring into relief the significance of the question of religious pluralism in accepting and applying the demands of the Second Vatican Council—particularly in \textit{Nostra Aetate}, which focuses on the necessity for the Catholic Church to open the whole of its reality to a fruitful

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encounter with other religions as part of the enterprise of reading and integrating the signs of the times. However, in these proposals, the question of the status and the theological value of other religions remains somehow marginal. This is not mainly due these authors’ lack of a specialized knowledge of the great religious traditions other than Christianity. Rather, it derives from a general tendency which has characterized the readjustment of theology after its clash with modernity, a readjustment whose merits and limitations are easily perceivable in post-conciliar Catholic theology. The idea of distinguishing fundamental theology from dogmatics, which makes its appearance in this period, is a response to the necessity of reorganizing the theological field after the collapse of manualistic theology with its preference for arranging the single articles of the creed and the main theological questions in several autonomous treatises. However, this distinction could also be the result of an unconscious need. There is a necessity, and perhaps an urgency, to confine the puzzling and challenging discussion of the contrast between Christian truth claims and other religious views in a sort of “safety area.” In this case, fundamental theology is such an area, and the intention is to separate the theological dialogue with other religions (which is treated as derivative and not foundational) from the core of the Christian message. Such a separation will keep the premises of dogmatics immune to contact with other religious worldviews.

In his *Kontextuelle Fundamentaltheologie*,53 Hans Waldenfels assigns great relevance to other religions and considers the pluralistic dimension to be an essential aspect of his theological enterprise. In comparison to the proposals presented above, Waldenfels’s idea of fundamental theology is a step in the direction of a less dichotomous view in which faith and religion can be integrated rather than presented as antagonists. However, in conceiving the plausibility of the autonomous discipline of fundamental theology, Waldenfels ends up promoting a certain dualism.

Though indirectly broadening the range of what should be considered “fundamental” in theology, his proposal does not realize more ambitious goal, which according to some theologians is indispensable in today’s world: a systematic theology which is willing, *habitually* and *deeply*, to consider the bases of the Christian faith truly in light of other religious worldviews.

Other authors aim to define clearer boundaries for comparative theology to enable it to develop autonomously, distinct from other branches theology that might appear to be concerned with the same problems. Therefore, they invoke a sharp demarcation from both history of religions and religious studies. The contrast between theology and religious studies clearly affected both theology of religions and comparative theology in their efforts to find recognition as distinct and autonomous fields, despite the multiple accusations from both academic fields. However, the struggles did not cease at this level but in some way spilled over into the domain of theology itself. Therefore, further conflicts emerged from the strong criticism of Hick’s proposal (and, to some extent, that of Knitter) which is charged with inadvertently promoting forms of apriorism and hegemonism in the study of other spiritual paths, and with abstractly conceiving of religion as a universal phenomenon without sufficient empirical consideration of the multiple variants. In the meantime, during the last decades of the past century a new discipline was born as an alternative theological response to the question of religious pluralism: the so-called new comparative theology.

Francis X. Clooney and James L. Fredericks are considered two of the major advocates of the revival of comparative theology. They envision their discipline as distinct from its ancestors, though in some ways they are in continuity with the comparative theological projects that characterized the nineteenth-century discovery of the Eastern and Far-Eastern religious traditions. They intend to prevent any form of hegemonism by strictly applying an empirical method of
reading other religious texts; engaging with them deeply on literal, theological, and spiritual levels; dealing with particularities; delving into differences; and avoiding making general and stereotypical assumptions. Moreover, by openly declaring their commitment of faith at the outset of their projects and by striving to interpret another religious tradition in its own terms, they acknowledge that they intend to return to their own spiritual path with some new, deeper, and refreshed insights.

Therefore, both Clooney and Fredericks are particularly restrictive in demanding that comparative theology be sharply distinguished from theology of religions. In *Comparative Theology*, Francis X. Clooney explains his position as follows: “Comparative theology thus combines tradition-rooted theological concerns with actual study of another tradition. It is not an exercise in the study of religion or religions for the sake of clarifying the phenomenon. It reduces neither to a theology about religions, nor to the practice of dialogue.”\(^{54}\) In this recent contribution, Clooney somehow reviewed his original position by mitigating some excesses. As a matter of fact, in comparison to what he held in his previous interventions, he seems now more open to accepting theology of religions as that discipline that “can usefully make explicit the grounds for comparative study, uncovering and clarifying the framework within which comparative study takes place.”\(^{55}\) However, though softened in comparison to the past, Clooney’s position remains convinced of the principle that a clear demarcation must be drawn between theology of religions and comparative theology: theology of religions at least “can help correct some biases that may distort or impede comparative works,” but it is never “necessary for the actual work of comparative study to proceed.”\(^{56}\) On the other hand, Fredericks maintains an intransigent position by explaining that

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\(^{55}\) Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 14.

\(^{56}\) Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 14.
No theology of religions is adequate in opening up Christians to the teachings of other religions. For this reason, I believe that, after fifty years of creative development, the theology of religions should be put aside, at least temporarily, in favor of doing Christian theology in dialogue with the other religious traditions. In this sense comparative theology can be seen as an alternative to a theology of religions.57

In Fredericks’s opinion, the inadequacy of theology of religions is due to the following reasons. First, current Christian models of theology of religions are not generally based on a “careful and detailed study of other religious traditions.” Second, “none of the candidates for a Christian theology of religions is adequate to the hermeneutical requirements of doing theology comparatively.” In particular, Fredericks sees in those projects a systematic distortion in domesticating the differences in the study of the others. The third objection is more sophisticated: “The apriorism of theologies of religion can function ideologically by protecting Christians from the necessity of changing their minds, at least about theologically significant matters, in response to the encounter with the Other.” Then, the last motive of inadequacy can be summarized as follows: “In the past, Christian theologies of religions have not been sufficiently attentive to the hegemony of their discourses.”58

This idea that comparative theology is an alternative and not simply a correlative discipline of the theology of religions is also sponsored by the German school of Paderborn and his main representative, Klaus von Stosch.59 Like Clooney and Fredericks, comparative theology is for them a “restriction of theological attention to the individual case,” which “allows the appreciation of diversity without the need for relinquishing one’s own religious perspective.”60 On the basis of the

58 See James L. Fredericks, introduction to The New Comparative Theology, ed. Francis X. Clooney (London: T & T Clark, 2010), xiv–xv.
later Wittgenstein’s speculation, von Stosch rejects Schmidt-Leukel’s convictions that, on the one hand, “there is neither a way out of the theology of religions nor any theological alternative to the three basic options of an exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist approach” because “the theology of religions is not at an impasse at all,” and that, on the other hand, comparative theology “will not lead out of the impasse of theology of religions but straight ahead into it.”

Von Stosch instead believes that the theology of religions is philosophically problematic because it is unreasonable to think about comparing the general truth claims of different religious traditions. Propositional affirmations respond to some specific “language-game-practice” and can be investigated only within some particular linguistic and cultural frameworks. Accordingly, he affirms:

As perspectival beings, we cannot compare world-pictures as comprehensive; we can only compare specific elements of our world-pictures without ever being able to finalize our evaluations of their relationship to the question of truth. What we can do is widen our horizons through interreligious dialogue and comparative practice. Yet we will never establish a rationally based theory that is capable of evaluating different religions or the diversity of religions in general.

While they think a general rational theory is not feasible, the school of Paderborn is distinguished from its American counterparts due to its emphasis on reason more than on scriptures and textual exegesis.

However, even if one’s faith commitment were to be declared at the beginning of the theological work, this would not be sufficient to avert the risk of hegemonism, which is hardly escapable. This is true not only for theology of religions, where “the debate between pluralists and inclusivists… has reached an impasse as each of these camps has exposed the unacknowledged partiality of the other’s universalistic claims,” but also for the new comparative theology, which

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62 Klaus von Stosch, “Comparative Theology As an Alternative to the Theology of Religions,” 512.
“promises a way out of the current theology of religions impasse” and “implicitly advertises itself as a non hegemonic form of theological discourse and thus as a solution to the problem of the political in theology.”\textsuperscript{63} By resorting to Chantal Mouffe’s attempt at reevaluating the highly disparaged critique of liberalism by the Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt,\textsuperscript{64} and by directly drawing on the latter’s idea of the inescapability of the political,\textsuperscript{65} Hugh Nicholson has striven to demonstrate this in his recent work, in which he also offers an insightful reassessment of Rudolf Otto’s \\textit{Mysticism East and West}\textsuperscript{66} and a model comparison between Meister Eckhart and Śaṅkara.

Despite his sharp criticism of some aspects of liberalism and some representative thinkers such as George Lindbeck, nonetheless, Nicholson does not come to the apparently unavoidable conclusion that “the Enlightenment project of liberating religious commitment from attitudes of chauvinism and intolerance is ultimately a self-defeating one.”\textsuperscript{67} On the contrary, he endorses the ideal of religious tolerance and the possibility of contrasting religious intolerance with respect for differences. However, at the same time he strives to reconcile this with an acknowledgment of the political involvement that any theological enterprise inevitably implies. These are the two bases on which he endeavors to build his proposal for comparative theology. In order to do so, he proposes a reformulation of the idea of Christian religious identity that shifts from an essentialist view to a relational and contingent one—that is, from the idea that conservative-leaning theologians have as they seek “to adhere to an understanding of the identity-sustaining doctrines of the Christian faith as ontological truth claims” to the view of the liberal theologians who


\textsuperscript{64} Chantal Mouffe, \\textit{The Return of the Political} (New York: Verso, 1993).


\textsuperscript{67} Nicholson, \\textit{Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry}, 79.
envision identity as “essentially relational, constructed, and contingent.”68 Through this specific perspective, then, he can present some substantial criticisms of the new forms of comparative theology, such as the work of James L. Fredericks and Francis X. Clooney. In Nicholson’s opinion, they still risk, even though not consciously, supporting a hegemonic agenda and repeating the same mistakes that characterized the Orientalist projects and the comparative theology of the nineteenth century:

For contemporary comparative theologians to imagine that the problem of unacknowledged exclusion or theological hegemonism can be solved simply by adopting an empirical method is to repeat the self-deception of their nineteenth-century forebears, who naively believed that a “scientific” comparative method could inoculate comparative theology against the exclusionary, political element in religion.69

Before coming to these important conclusions, Nicholson addresses the same matters in his previous interventions but from a slightly different perspective. I am convinced that it is possible to see in Nicholson a clear evolution of thought, and a progressive distancing of himself from his initial adherence to his adviser’s position; as a matter of fact, Nicholson received his PhD from Boston College, studying under Francis X. Clooney. Tracing this evolution will permit me not only to have deeper insight into Nicholson’s position but also to introduce the third group of thinkers: those who believe that the longstanding problem of the separation of comparative theology from religious studies, and more generally the rivalry between theology and secular approaches to religion, is sensationalistic and ultimately without basis. Moreover, this group of thinkers generally are so little concerned with boundaries between the different fields of religion that they easily transgress them by adopting different methods and perspectives at the same time and by combining them in quite a creative and syncretic form.

68 Nicholson, Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry, 82.
69 Nicholson, Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry, 14.
Nicholson addresses the question of the contrast between religious studies approaches and theological ones in various interesting articles. I will consider four of them. While in “A Correlational Model of Comparative Theology,” Nicholson still seems wholly to support Francis X. Clooney’s and David Tracy’s projects of comparative theology, in two more recent articles for the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, his attitude appears quite different. In the first contribution, in fact, he explains the concept of comparative theology as “the rereading of one’s own tradition in light of other traditions,” resorting to Francis X. Clooney’s ideas in Theology after Vedanta. Then, he defines Tracy’s correlational model of theology: “Theology consists in the establishment of mutually critical correlations between the claims of the Christian tradition and those of the historical situation.” Next, he affirms, “I can only interpret the religious other by allowing the religious other to interpret me” and he thinks that such an idea still remains “vaguely understood… within theological studies.” Here, Nicholson’s endorsement of his mentor’s theories seems total, and in the end the novelty of his contribution consists merely in combining Clooney’s perspective with that of Tracy and Tillich.

However, in 2007, in “Comparative Theology after Liberalism,” Nicholson introduces the standpoint that will distinguish his further contributions:

Liberal universalism—certainly in the universalist fulfillment theology of the nineteenth century and arguably also in the putatively universal but residually Christian concept of religious experience that in many ways was its twentieth-century successor—is now
recognized as an expression of Christian and/or Western hegemony.\textsuperscript{76}

Then, after criticizing some representatives of nineteenth-century comparative theology and some proponents of universal liberalism, such as Lindbeck, he challenges the substantialist conception of Christian identity through the adoption of Kathryn Tanner’s perspective in \textit{Theories of Culture}.\textsuperscript{77} Finally, he exerts much effort in trying to reconcile his new position with that of his adviser by referring to some of Clooney’s books but daring to use his master’s thought against itself, in clear contrast to the latter’s declared intentions: “One can reasonably ask, therefore, whether Clooney’s project implies a revisionist project of establishing Christian identity purely on substantial differences, that is, of eliminating, to the extent possible, the purely formal, differential, and \textit{ideological} dimension of Christian identity.”\textsuperscript{78} This is, I think, the watershed in Nicholson’s differentiation from Clooney.

As a matter of fact, in 2009, in the first of the two articles for the \textit{Journal of the American Academy of Religion}, Nicholson’s attitude towards comparative theology had definitively changed. After recalling the history of the formation of comparative theology, its primitive alliance with exclusivist classical apologetics, and its relationship with the theology of religions, he introduces some criticisms of the new comparative theology—mainly represented by Clooney—and introduces the following central idea that he will fully tackle only in \textit{Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry}: “Upon closer examination, however, the new comparative theology exhibits parallels with its older namesake that temper any expectation that the problem of theological hegemonism will magically disappear simply by adopting an empirical method and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[76] Nicholson, “Comparative Theology after Liberalism,” 230.
\item[77] Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).
\item[78] Nicholson, “Comparative Theology after Liberalism,” 250–51, n. 87.
\end{footnotes}
refraining from excessive generalization.”

For Clooney, comparative theology is able to avoid supporting ideological ways of domination, because it is a “form of praxis or reflective practice” that “emerges in the context of a practical engagement with specific examples of comparison.” This, for Nicholson, is not sufficient to escape the risks of a kind of neocolonialism and of the use of religion to expand political influence. Therefore, according to Nicholson, “the new comparative theology, in other words, can be seen as the latest strategy on the part of Christian liberalism to retreat and regroup in the face of the ineluctable advance of the political.” However, Nicholson then raises the obvious question: after admitting that there is an intrinsic political interest also in interreligious comparisons, how is it possible to continue to support the project of the new comparative theology? The answer he gives to this crucial question—one that will later involve all his theological efforts—is not yet exhaustive at this stage of his reflection, as the following quotation well illustrates: “My aim in pushing this line of critique is simply to call attention to the areas of vulnerability, the potential blind spots, of a new discipline still in the process of formation.”

However, in “The Return of Comparative Theology,” not only does Nicholson rehabilitate the project of the new comparative theology, he goes far beyond this. He holds that since a normative commitment is inherent in any scientific enterprise, comparative theology has the potential to become a new model of religious studies. In fact, the use of categories for research is necessary, but it is one thing “to purport to discover universal comparative patterns or categories in the traditions” one studies and quite another merely to use “such categories as tools to facilitate

further discovery about the traditions themselves, particularly attentive to the ways an apt conceptual pattern can disclose previously unseen, culturally specific differences as well as similarities.\textsuperscript{83} Such a \textit{heuristic} perspective on the use of categories, which John H. Berthrong\textsuperscript{84} and William E. Paden\textsuperscript{85} had already endorsed, can possibly allow one to avoid the risk of an unconscious hegemonism. In fact, patterns are no longer ontological dimensions that we can discover in traditions that are other, but rather, are simply instruments which permit us really to discern the differences.

This renewed evaluation of comparative theology, according to Nicholson, can have crucial consequences for the wider field of religious studies:

This involves more than folding religious studies into the ‘warm embrace’ of theology… or—much less—begrudgingly conceding theologians a marginal place at the religious studies table. It involves a sharpened reflexive awareness of the normative theoretic and political agendas that already shape study in these disciplines, particularly comparative study, along with a willingness to exhibit these normative foundations and render them accountable to the vigorous criticism of those whose theoretic and political agendas may differ profoundly from one’s own.\textsuperscript{86}

With this rehabilitation of the comparative theology project even with some lingering doubts about Fredericks’s and Clooney’s proposals, the matter comes full circle. With the wisdom of the hindsight, one can realize how Nicholson’s criticism, was quite substantial and potentially subversive of the project of his own adviser at the first stages of his intellectual production. Clooney, in his turn, as he expresses his gratitude and his appreciation for the work of his former student in the forward of \textit{Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry}, does not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” 492.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” 501–2.
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seem willing to admit that the considerable shift in Nicholson’s opinion is not merely the effort to adapt one’s own idea to the taste and the expectations of different audiences or simply the attempt of a disciple to distinguish his own intellectual path from that of his master; rather, it is a remarkable evolution of thought:

In all this, Hugh charts his own path, attuned to the issues of current urgency, particularly regarding comparative theology as a discipline he agrees is important and even urgent. As far as I can see, his approach does not so much correct mine, as indicate how interesting it is when relatively likeminded scholars take up related issues differently.  

It is particularly interesting to see in the evolution of Nicholson’s thought a continuing shift from theological premises to sociological views, such that, in the last of the articles, he comes to envision comparative theology as a new form of religious studies. Nicholson is convinced that comparative theology, if properly cleansed of any sort of naïveté and contradiction, can become for secular approaches to religion a safe haven from the present crisis they are experiencing. However, one critic sees in Nicholson’s view a risk of forgetting the theological commitment in favor of a less distinct position. This shift in perspectives has been the subject of Leo Lefebure’s criticism:

There is a major difference between Nicholson’s reductionist approach to doctrines as simply human constructions and those theologies of religion and comparative theologies that continue to view Christian doctrines as human responses to divine initiative. Thus, Nicholson’s own use of the term “theology” for his own proposal remains somewhat ambiguous, involving a major shift in meaning from many of his interlocutors; many would see his proposal as belonging more to the sociology of religion than to theology.  

Given the still evolving nature of Nicholson’s position, it is probably premature to classify him. However, it is precisely those developments that I have identified taking place in his thought.

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which make his work worthy of particular attention. The kind of ambiguity that Lefebure sees in Nicholson’s perspective is symptomatic not only of his approach, but also of a long series of both religious studies scholars and theologians who tend to minimize or negate the plausibility of any boundary between the different fields of religion. For instance, it is curious to note that in order to substantiate his position, Nicholson relies on and refers his readers to Tomoko Masuzawa and her highly controversial book, *The Invention of World Religions*.\(^9^9\) This book was imagined by the author to be subversive not only of comparative theology, but of all the fields of religion, and I presume that Nicholson’s work could be included. As a matter of fact, in her analysis of the comparative theology of the second half of the nineteenth century and in its persisting legacy in the new forms of comparativism of both theology and religious studies, Masuzawa’s main intention can be briefly described as an attempt at overturning all the approaches that mainly characterize both modern and contemporary academic discussions on religion.

Incidentally, Masuzawa also underwent a major shift of position. In her previous work, *In Search of Dreamtime*,\(^9^0\) she masterfully reflects on the questions of time and the quest for origins, which characterize all the main religious worldviews, and she points out an interesting contradiction that marks the great majority of modern researches on religion: while religions and religious peoples are “origin oriented or origin obsessed,” there is a persisting “scholarly renunciation of origin quests.”\(^9^1\) But while adopting a meta-theoretical perspective and even questioning some of the main assumptions of Western philosophical approaches to religion, she never comes to radically question the plausibility of the concepts she discusses. On the contrary, in *The Invention of World Religions* she radically changes her attitude to the point where she ends

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\(^9^1\) Masuzawa, *In Search of Dreamtime*, 4.
up undermining the tenability not only of the basic category of “world religions” but of the
category “religion” itself. She sees these concepts as intrinsically Christian and just superimposed
on some other distinct cultural domains. Consequently, she laments that the invention of the
modern taxonomy (particularly the habit of distinguishing religions as either universal or ethnic-
local-national) and its application to religious studies are ultimately naïve. She then strongly
opposes and labels as amateur both the recent comparative and pluralist projects and their collusion
with the cause of the World Parliament of Religion. Her criticism, evidently directed to all experts
in the field of religion, both from the side of religious studies and from theology, is especially
corrosive toward comparative theology, as the following passage well illustrates:

The project of comparative theology has been deemed not scientific on the grounds that it
either presupposed or invariably drew the self-same conclusion as Christian theology, that
Christianity was fundamentally different from all other religions, thus, in the last analysis,
beyond compare. This singularity of Christianity was often expressed in a vaguely
oxymoronic phrase: “uniquely universal.”

The litmus test for detecting Masuzawa’s change of attitude is to look at her evaluation of
Mircea Eliade’s thought. While in her previous contribution, Eliade is one of her main references,
in her last book this famous scholar and what he represents in religious studies have become the
main targets of Masuzawa’s criticism. This dramatic change of thought is even more disorienting
if one considers that finding a solution to the present impasse that she herself identifies is not part
of her goal. Masuzawa’s critique stops with the pars denstruens; she does not endeavor at any
reconstruction or rehabilitation of the academic discussion of religion and, at least so far, she does
not seem interested in such a project at all, as one can easily divine from the conclusion of her
book:

Can a science of religion worthy of its name really be founded on the basis of the world
religions discourse as the latter has unfolded hitherto, that is, on the basis of its pluralist

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92 Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religion, 23.
ethos, on its doctrine of parliamentary comparativism?
It has not been my express purpose in the present study to furnish an answer to this question one way or another. It has been my hopeful expectation, nonetheless, that some of the deliberations herein may interrupt, or momentarily snag, the overwhelming current of thought that has rushed to answer in the affirmative for the last hundred years. A brief pause may allow us to think refreshed, and perhaps even to imagine differently.93

The denial of any substantial distinction between comparative theology and secular approaches to religion is consequential to the fact that religious studies, being a by-product of Western scholarship, has always been intrinsically theological and, moreover, Christian. This is basically the gist of Masuzawa’s *J’accuse*. However, it is surprising to note that other authors are on the same page with Masuzawa but for opposite reasons; they insist that the intrinsic confessional aspect of any research on religion is unavoidable and that credal commitment is almost necessary in religious studies. They promote this perspective over against an aseptic, detached, and objective view that is typical of naturalistic approaches. Denys Turner’s ironic characterization of this radical contraposition of positions is striking. In the following quote, it is entertaining to see how he facetiously admits and tolerates that idea that there is a difference between the theological approach, which would necessarily be “interested,” and the more scientific approach that it would be proper to “disinterested” religious studies:

So we ‘study’ theology, do we? Strangely, in English, ‘study’ has become a word denoting a suitable academic and dispassionate mentality, though etymologically it derives from the Latin *studium* which would, on the contrary, be well translated by the word ‘passion.’ The Latin *studium* forms a family with desiderium and other words of engagement and attachment. But in English study is ‘brown,’ what you study you disengage your passions from, and whereas it makes sense to speak of someone’s ‘studying’ a religion dispassionately, I am not sure that I much like the idea of, in that sense, ‘studying’ theology.94

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93 Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religion*, 325.
But since from the incipit of his intervention, he informs his readers bluntly: “Let me be bold for the sake of brevity: I do not think there is any such discipline as ‘Religious Studies.’ Nor do I think that we ought to go on pretending that there is.”95 Ultimately, in Turner’s opinion, this depends on two correlated facts: that religious studies originated as “theology” and, more radically, that religion is neither a concrete object of study nor a sui generi set of phenomena, but rather the result of an intellectual abstraction: “Religion is a theorized object of study: we should not forget that, in any of its modern senses, the word ‘religion’ is a term of art, belonging within an explanatory hypothesis, explanatory of certain practices indeed, but not as being itself a practice.”96 He then becomes almost irreverent and snobbish when, from the “insular” point of view of distinguished British scholar and, moreover, a fellow from Cambridge, he sardonically laments the pitiable and convoluted status, both in Germany and in the United States, of the present academic discussions on the limits and boundaries between the fields of religion:

… we gain much advantage academically from the unresolved character of these present ambiguities—that is to say, from their being, precisely, unresolved. At any rate, one is tempted to think so when one contemplates the excessively ‘resolved’ fates equally of our German colleagues confined within the narrowness of their denominational faculties, and of our North American colleagues, whose need (it would seem) endlessly to retheorise ‘religious studies’ appears to be driven more by a puritanical fear of theological taint than by anything in the nature of a coherent positive intellectual project. Learning how not to do theology seems to me an inadequate prescription for an academic methodology, let alone for a half-interesting intellectual tradition.97

Interestingly enough, Turner finds in Paul J. Griffiths a sure ally, precisely from within the American academia (perhaps because Griffiths himself was born in England and somehow inherited, so to speak, a similar “insular” way of thinking?). About the age-old problem of the contrast between religious studies and theology and the position that comparative theology should

95 Turner, “Doing Theology in the University,” 25.
97 Turner, “Doing Theology in the University,” 27 [italics in the original].

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take, Paul Griffiths has strong and clear ideas. First of all, similarly to Tuner, he maintains that, since in any intellectual enterprise some normative understanding is always implied, consequently it is unreasonable to envision the plausibility not only of a detached study of religion but more radically of not doing theology while approaching academically some religious phenomenon. If religious studies does not realize soon what to Griffiths seems self-evident, the destiny of the non-theological study of religion is desolate:

Historically, too, attempts to construct nontheological natural-kind construals of “religion” have almost always (perhaps always; I am not aware of any exceptions) proceeded by way of abstraction from explicitly theological (and usually Christian-theological and even more usually Protestant-Christian-theological) such understandings. Such abstraction, it appears to have been thought, would yield construals whose implied understanding of the order of things would be less disputable because more scientific than those implied by explicitly theological accounts. But neither the goal of leaving disputability behind nor that of providing a construal that could order a Geisteswissenschaft has been realized. It should not take more than five minutes’ thought to see why these goals have not been realized and are unlikely to be so in the future.  

Secondly, he strongly contrasts the idea that religion individuates a genus of which there are multiple species. He provides some evidence from the history of theology that both in the Bible and the early Church there are almost no traces of the use of the term “religion” without Christian confessional connotations: “And so Christianity was rarely, if ever, thought of by Christians as one religion among many: the idea that there is a genus called ‘religion’ of which there are many species did not gain much currency until the seventeenth century. It is, by and large, a modern invention.”

This kind of language, strangely and unexpectedly perhaps, follows closely McCutcheon’s opposition to the sui generi discourse on religion and his anathemas against those who, while

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pursuing some theological interests, more or less consciously, are guilty of hypostatizing a made-up term which was casted by scholars to be used as a scale for evaluating sets of complex and interconnected phenomena. Interestingly enough, both Griffiths and McCutcheon, in order to support their respective views, rely on the same authority, Jonathan Z. Smith, according to whom religion “is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.”

As a matter of fact, both Griffiths and McCutcheon are on the same page, first in showing the incongruity of the sui generi discourse on religion, but then eventually in admitting that it is still plausible to adopt the concept of religion heuristically in order to pursue their own agenda. After all, in both these scholars’ proposals, the term “religion” functions as a “Troy horse,” so to speak, for facilitating in McCutcheon’s case the naturalistic reduction of religious phenomena to “talk of mind, economies, societies, classes, gender, etc.” and in Griffiths’ case for serving “a particular theological tradition, that of Catholic Christianity” besides contrasting any naturalistic standpoint. It is at the same time very entertaining and sad—at least so it appears to me—to observe them fighting from a distance over the same toy. In answer to the debated McCutcheon article, “A Default of Critical Intelligence? The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual,” Griffiths roughly contends:

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But the question of who’s right isn’t the problem. The problem is that McCutcheon doesn’t see the incoherence in recommending that scholars of religion abjure the search for the essential make-up of things (to use his phrase) in the name of the assumptions about the essential make-up of things. Intellectuals (like me) whose central concern is to work within the bounds of a particular religious tradition of intellectual practice clearly do not merit the title “scholars of religion” as McCutcheon understand it. But since that title, if we follow him, belongs to those whose intellectual practice is incoherent and who cannot (or will not) see their own incoherence, this is hardly something to regret. I, after all, recognize that what I do does have metaphysical and axiological implications and assumptions, and to the best of my ability I’m prepared to tell you what they are. McCutcheon does not acknowledge his own philosophical assumptions, nor does he conceive their metaphysical and axiological implications.

It would be sad, though, if the name of scholarship in religion were to become identified with the sort of silliness proposed by McCutcheon. That really would be a prescription for the early and deserved death of a discipline.¹⁰⁵

Third, it appears clear, also from the very Griffiths’ words, that it is not denigratory to single out his approach as apologetic. On the contrary, as he does in one of his most renowned books, An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue,¹⁰⁶ Griffiths promotes apologetics as the mean and one of the main goals of doing theology. In his opinion, since theology is offering reasons for one’s faith, apologetics should be intrinsic to any theological endeavor. Therefore, he criticizes the widespread attitude of those both in theology and in interreligious dialogues, who, in order to please their interlocutors easily overlook that among the requirements of their own faith commitment there is also a clear witness and giving of reasons for one’s belief. In the preface of his book he affirms as follows:

This book is directed against an underlying scholarly orthodoxy on the goals and functions of interreligious dialogue. This orthodoxy suggests that understanding is the only legitimate goal; that judgment and criticism of religious beliefs or practices other than those of one’s community is always inappropriate; and that an active defense of the truth of those beliefs and practices to which one’s community appears committed is always to be shunned…. I try to show that such an orthodoxy (which tends to include the view that the very idea of orthodoxy has no sense) produces a discourse that is pallid, platitudeous, and

degutted. Its products are intellectual pacifiers for the immature: pleasant to suck on but not very nourishing.\textsuperscript{107}

On the other hand, Griffiths endorses comparative theology and focuses in particular on the Christian-Buddhist dialogue, since this field is particularly suitable for explaining and defending the tenets of the Christian faith. We could say, then, that for Griffiths, apologetics is a good reason for doing comparative theology and comparative theology is more than welcomed for supporting apologetical intensions of his theological enterprise. In the last chapter of his book, entitled “Apologetics in Action,” he presents and discusses a specific case: a Christian-Buddhist discussion on selves and persons. His comparative approach here is wholly at the service of demonstrating the uniqueness and the preeminence of the Christian creed against other alternative philosophical and religious presuppositions, a superiority which, however, the comparison is better able to highlight. Moreover, and here Griffiths is positively and sincerely open to the providential aspects of otherness and dialogue, the encounter with other religious traditions can truly enhance the understanding of one’s own faith:

I hope it is evident, from this brief discussion, that my expectations in undertaking this sketch for an apologetic are not simply of victory and vindication. Naturally, I think that I and my community are right to believe what we believe. I must also therefore necessarily think that when it appears to me that Buddhists assert something that stands in direct contradiction to what I hold, they must be wrong. But… I can also see possibilities for a broader Buddhist enrichment of my Christian understanding of the processes by which the experienced facts of self-identity come to occur. Appropriation and creative borrowing are just as important as engagement in positive and negative apologetics; neither need exclude the other, just as long as both are taken with intellectual seriousness and argumentative passion.\textsuperscript{108}

If both Turner’s and Griffiths’ tendency is that of not simply absorbing but rather dissolving religious studies into theology, there are other authors who manage to overcome the

\textsuperscript{107} Griffiths, An Apology for Apologetics, xi–xii.
\textsuperscript{108} Griffiths, An Apology for Apologetics, 107–8.
distinctions between these two disciplines by basing their intellectual efforts on the opposite disposition: they are prone to adopt such an all-embracing view and a hybrid methodology that, in order to conciliate the standpoints and the *modi operandi* of the so-called secular approaches to religion—on which they mainly rely—with their confessional perspectives that they still profess, they are ready to lessen the weight and relativize the normativeness of their respective faiths. Numerous are the scholars of this kind, but, on the following pages, I will consider only three of them: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Keith Ward, and Robert Cummings Neville, as they are major figures who are currently a point of reference and a source of inspiration for many experts both in religious studies and in theology. Actually, their contributions are truly systems of thought that imply so many subtle theoretical issues that they would deserve to be treated individually. Hence, for the economy of my presentation, I will focus merely on those aspects of their proposals that are directly linked to what I am discussing in the present pages.

**Third Group**

Suzanne Smith identifies, in Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s entire production, a recurring “theme song” whose recognition would not only shed more light on the contribution of this famous theologian and historian of religions, but, in her view, could also promote further development in scholarship of religion. The theme she singles out is the primacy of the role of interpersonal exchange and friendship in approaching the religious other, given that love is constitutive of rationality itself. Hence, from the beginning of his long and remarkable career, right up to the final moments of his life, Smith reaffirms his conviction that the study of religion is nothing other than the study of persons. Already in 1959, in one of his first contributions, he affirms:

It has long been recognized that a faith cannot be adequately expressed in words, not even by a man who holds it devoutly. To understand what is in his heart, therefore, the student must not merely listen to or read what a believer affirms, but must come to know those qualities of the believer’s life that can become known only in that personal two-way relationship known as friendship. This is peculiarly true of religious faith, but applies in some measure to all human discourse. It is to misunderstand man not to recognize that the knowledge of a person available to another person depends quite basically on the personal relationship between them. I cannot know my neighbor more than superficially unless I love him.\textsuperscript{110}

I agree with Suzanne Smith that the connection between personal love and knowledge is a paramount theme in Smith. The latter’s repeated insistence that it is only possible to come to understand another religious tradition from the perspective of an outsider if one acquires the necessary humility, is truly a distinctive mark of his approach. It reveals that in his thought the perspectives of historical criticism and anthropology have found a unique combination. Even more, one can see how in his literary production the anthropological and theological concerns eventually got the upper hand over the historical one, although Smith never put aside the tools of the historian or rejected the methods of the secular study of religion. He never lost interest in history; on the contrary, because from the beginning he was looking at human history through the lens of love as a key for a deeper and more accurate understanding, he eventually began to catch a glimpse of the traces of transcendence in history. Consequently, he pushed himself beyond the limits of his direct specialization—Islam in modern Asia—for further enquiry into the \textit{maremagnum} of religious studies and theology, in order to sift through them in search of the divine marks mirrored in human beings and their religious traditions. Hence, his main intention can be briefly described as to give voice to the fecundity of the human condition and the meaningfulness of religious worldviews in their astonishing and irreducible variety.

If this is Smith’s frame of reference, it is not surprising to discover that in the same essay of 1959, he expresses his future wishes in a programmatic statement which is consequential to the issue of the connection between love and knowledge in scholarship: “The student of comparative religion begins with the postulate that it is possible to understand a religion other than one’s own. In our day, this postulate is being tested—urgently, severely, by our concrete human situation.... To meet this challenge demands that we rethink our purposes, recast our basic concepts.”

To paraphrase, we could say that because he understands love to be a source and method of knowledge and he senses that this insight has not found enough room in scholarship, for Smith it is necessary to look back at the all of modern academic reflection on religion in order to deconstruct its main assumptions. Only in this way can doors be opened to a new perspective that would better harmonize the three dimensions of the historical, the anthropological, and the theological. “Deconstruction” is precisely the word that John Hick uses to describe the way Smith criticizes the erroneous modern, Western conception of religion as “a bounded socio-religious entity over against other such entities.” In fact, Smith reflects on the polysemy of the term “religion” and points out the inconsistencies of its multiple uses, both in common speech and in academic discussions. In doing so he intends to unveil the incoherence of the modern essentialist attitude which reifies complex cultural systems and cumulative traditions in very simplistic ways as, for example, “Buddh-ism,” “Hindu-ism,” “Zoroastrian-ism,” or “Confucian-ism.” These are categories that actually exist only in the minds of Western scholars of religion and do not reflect to any corresponding reality.

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113 See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and the End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 51–79; see also Talal Asad’s engagement with this classic in the field of
In my opinion, the same word “deconstruction” also typifies well Smith’s attempt to rethink some other foundational categories such as faith, revelation, scripture, mission, and salvation history. It is quite interesting to note that, after his earliest research on Indian Muslims, Islam and modernity, and his first entrance into the debate on comparative religion, he dedicates his efforts first of all to reconsidering the category of faith. The radical distinction between faith and belief is a major subject that comes full circle, since it appears both in the middle and at the very end of his literary production. Faith is a generic and foundational quality; it is the ontological human opening to transcendence. Belief, on the other hand, is the tendency to give primacy to particularistic views and absoluteness to some doctrines, and thus it could actually be a barrier to true faith.

On the basis of this rethinking of key terms, Smith then starts reviewing the related concepts of revelation and salvation history. If faith is a fundamental connectedness with the divine, then it is an irruption of the transcendent into the immanent; therefore faith itself is a kind of revelation. Consequently, God’s revelation is available with just the same liberality and plenitude to anyone in any time and any place. I believe that this is the main assumption for which Smith opposes any “big-bang theory of revelation,” namely the idea that there is a moment in the history of humanity in which a certain divine manifestation can be maintained as being fully and exclusively normative for all generations to come. Evidently, in this new understanding of revelation, Smith distinguishes himself from all of the various exclusivist theological positions which seem to him to be arrogant and morally un-Christian. 114 In this regard, it is interesting to read his assessment on the dialectical theology of both Barth and Kraemer and to notice how he is

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particularly relentless (and probably out-of-bounds) in evaluating the former thinker’s contribution:

Karl Barth was simply ignorant about the world’s other religious traditions, just as earlier Christian thinkers once thought, as did most everyone else, that the earth was flat. Barth’s disciple Kraemer, on the other hand, was not ignorant. An undiscerning reader might say that he was stubborn, clinging to inherited doctrine formulated in earlier, ignorant days, and deeming it important so to cling. Personally, I feel that Kraemer was not holding on so much as being held; he never succeeded in bringing together what his heart felt, and half his brilliant head knew, with what the other half had been taught, and from which he never managed constructively to struggle—as if God had revealed traditional Christian theology, rather than as the best Christians have always known that he revealed himself (to us and to others).115

In rejecting the concept of revelation as past event, Smith of course rejects the idea of revelation as being fully contained in Christ’s Incarnation, death, and Resurrection, and in the events of the first-century Church. However, in stressing the necessity of relativizing the impact of Christ and the Church in human history, he has distanced himself not only from the exclusivist positions but more radically, as he openly boasts, from basic Christian dogmatic standpoints:

I would accordingly suggest that theology abandon the use of concepts that give rise to statements such as “God is fully revealed,” or “God was revealed in Christ.” The good news is not that God did something centuries ago in Palestine, however big that bang; but that He can and may do something, and something salvific, however small our capacity, for you and me today. The locus of revelation is always the present, and always the person. The channel of revelation in the Christian case, Christ, is a figure in history. But history, I have insisted, moves forward, and is the process by which He comes to us; is not something to be studied backwards, as the process by which we try to recapture Him.116

It is curious to note in Smith’s position the concurrence of two opposite viewpoints: while he is drawing on a sort of mystic idea of history in which it is always possible to catch sight of the transcendence in human agency, he steadfastly relies on the historical critical perspective and its

demythologizing approach when he comes to address Christian truth claims: “an historian of religion—one that takes the history of man’s religion with true seriousness—might go so far as to suggest that Christian motifs of the Incarnation and the Resurrection should be interpreted historically.”117 At the same time that he is theorizing a universal approachability to the same source of truth and revelation, he is also prone to emphasize the differences among those approaches as irreducible in order to valorize the particularity of every religious tradition. The outcome of this process is the purest form of the pluralistic view: to different paths correspond different spiritual goals.

The term “channel” that we find employed above with reference to Christ occurs often in Smith’s writings as one of the key words he also uses to understand what scripture is. If Smith aims at redefining revelation, it follows that the intimately linked concept of scripture should also be deconstructed and reshaped in accordance with his new premises. Therefore, Smith undertakes a systematic analysis, phenomenological and comparative at the same time, of the major religious texts in order to illustrate that the term “scripture” does not univocally describe the same object. On the contrary, there are very different religious texts that, in their variety, mirror the multiplicity of their respective religious communities. Correspondingly, Smith prefers the term “scripture” to the term “text” since the definition of the former is loaded with symbolic references that the latter does not sufficiently imply: while “scriptures” generally function as references of cosmological significance, generators of worldviews, and shapers of societies in accordance with the intuition of the divine presence which has been entrusted to a given human community, “texts” are usually consulted more for their objective meaning rather than for their opening to continued interpretation. In addition, text immediately suggests the idea of the materiality of the written

117 Smith, Towards a World Theology, 176.
pages, and scripture can better comprise the oral aspect of transmission with its social effects, the complex process through which a given religious message took form and was transcribed. Therefore, Smith pertinently draws attention to the multiple forms in which scriptures feature in the history of religions and treats them in their singularity as embodiments of distinct divine aspects and sacramental dimensions which generate and nurture their respective religious communities. However, his elaborate comparative approach is at the service of a very basic idea: despite their complexity and variety, scriptures are all simply channels through which a certain manifestation of the divine can enter the world.

After deconstructing the concepts of religion, faith, revelation, and scripture, the next step is to reconsider the idea of mission. “The old concept of missions was unilateral” because it was based on the simplistic idea that the Christian missionaries possessed the truth and were arrogantly convinced they had the right and duty to bring light to people in the shadows of ignorance. Now, however, participation should be considered the true form of the gospel announcement. The term participation describes at least two movements: first, it hints at the necessary acknowledgment that God works in human history, and that is necessary for the Christian communities to collaborate among themselves and with God in taking part in this work of universal significance; second, it suggests that a profoundly new phase has begun in the religious history of mankind, a phase on which the whole world today seems to be embarked. Not merely is it one in which one person or group may participate in the religious evolution of another tradition; we are reaching a point where eventually each will participate in all. The new emergence is the unitary religious history of mankind.

Smith’s idea of the increasing interdependence among peoples and religions does not

simply describe the macro-evolutions that the postmodern world is experiencing in the process of globalization and their effects at the level of religious identities, but he is foretelling something else: the current intertwining of different worldviews has the potentiality of better unveiling what is a permanent truth—that all history is a history of salvation through which God converses with humanity. Thus, Smith affirms: “all human history is Heilsgeschichte. Not Israel’s only, either the old or the new; but the history of every religious community, every human community.”120 Consequently, for him theology should definitively put aside the concept of revelation in which an exclusive event, despite its uniqueness, can unfold and affect all of human history. Such a conception is “intellectually untenable today along with modern knowledge.”121 In this distinctive view of salvation history, then, history and theology can find an unexpected harmonization:

For I have come to feel—dare I say: I have come to see—that the true historian and the true theologian are one and the same. No doubt, I am a historian of religion; yet human history is essentially the history of religion. And the history of religion, my studies have increasingly pushed me to hold, is the one true basis for theology.... Since my contention is that the true historian of religion and the authentic theologian are in the final analysis identical—that a true understanding of the history of religion, and theology, which means true theology, converge—therefore to fellow historians my presentation would take the form of showing that to improve our historical studies, we must perceive more fully and more exactly the transcendent component in human life across the centuries. It is part of the task of Religion departments in Arts faculties to enhance intellectual awareness by the academic, rational mind of the transcendent dimensions of human affairs.122

However, what to Smith seems to be a feasible, even desirable, reconciliation between what modernity presents as two almost antagonist disciplines, this original but nonetheless debatable solution does not generally please either historians or theologians. Even if theologians might be convinced to believe with Smith that “the basis for theology must now be the history of religion”123

120 Smith, Towards a World Theology, 172.
121 Smith, Towards a World Theology, 172.
without at the same time necessarily embracing his conception of revelation or the pluralistic outcome of his position, still it seems to me it would be much more difficult to persuade professional historians of the scientific legitimacy of this quite radical stand:

It is, frankly, preposterous to imagine that anyone insensitive to the presence of God can understand or interpret human history in any but drastically inadequate ways, given the extent to which human lives have been lived in that presence.\textsuperscript{124}

Nonetheless, Smith himself initially showed a certain reluctance to adopt the term theology to describe the nature of his work. Referring to his eventual choice of the title \textit{Towards a World Theology}, he explains his initial hesitation as due to a kind of awe mixed with modesty:

Trepidation is in order; or at least, will explain why I waited till my mid-sixties to publish my first book with the word “theology” in the title. And even in that recent work, the word “towards” is to be stressed, as well as “world.” That work is a revision of a lecture series that I agreed to give, agreed to tackle the subject, only after initially declining, and then being pressed to do so. Similarly, it is with some hesitation that I take this opportunity to place before you some ideas in the theological realm to which my historical studies have gradually pushed me.\textsuperscript{125}

We can certainly trust on Smith’s own words if we want to discover his real intentions. However, I believe that the reluctance that he mentions may be due not simply to trepidation but to another crucial factor: in embracing a mystical view of human history, Smith radically departed from the main standpoint on which the modern science of history was founded—the naturalistic approach. This makes Smith’s position quite heterodox, if not incomprehensible, in the eyes of his fellows historians. Consequently, it required of him not simply that he explain his new perspective but that he openly refute the naturalistic solution:

I have spoken of current misconceptions in our recent Western understanding of history. Salient is the naturalistic fallacy. This is an interpretation of human affairs that imposes a naturalistic ceiling on human history, and legislates it for historiography—insisting that historians \textit{qua} historians must not step beyond the rigid boundaries of that particular

\textsuperscript{124} Smith, “Theology and the World’s Religious History,” 55.
\textsuperscript{125} Smith, “Theology and the World’s Religious History,” 54–55.
ideology. One might expect secularists to feel this way, even though one might permit oneself some surprise in finding how dogmatic a position it prevalently is and how fiercely held; also, how derivative, from a dubious metaphysics.\footnote{Smith, “Theology and the World’s Religious History,” 61.}

While Smith rejects both the traditional Christian idea of revelation and what he sees as the implicit dogmatism of secular historical studies, he does not seem to me fully aware, or at least willing to admit, that his position also implies a certain metaphysical presupposition which should not be merely asserted but actually proved. This is what the academic audience should understandably expect from him. However, his detractors generally direct their criticism toward some less fundamental issues and they challenge him on the level of methodology rather than on his philosophical foundations. In my opinion, the alleged precariousness of his methodology should be demonstrated as resulting from insufficiently strong metaphysical foundations. Smith’s reaction to this kind of criticism sounds quite irritated. He contends that methodology is “the massive red herring of modern scholarship, the most significant obstacle to intellectual progress, and the chief distraction from rational understanding of the world.”\footnote{See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings,” in Methodological Issues in Religious Studies, ed. Robert D. Baird (Chico: New Horizons Press, 1975), 2.} He explains, in what seem to me some quite convoluted and tautological statements, that there is just one method in academy, the “academic method,” which he defines as rational, inductive, and empirical at the same time:

Nevertheless, except for the fact that mathematics would seem to be an exception to the inductive–empirical matter, this academic method is, as I have said, generic for all university studies; it is not particular, differing from discipline to discipline.

In other words, in my vision of academic procedure and rational inquiry there is no specific method for one subject differentiating it from another. Academic method is what all scholars have in common, not what differentiates them.\footnote{Smith, “Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings.” 3.}

Endless lucubrations on questions of methodology seem to annoy Smith even when it is a matter of designating the boundaries between theology and religious studies. First of all, he
strongly pleads for the adoption of a history-of-religions orientation in theology, which he sees as resolving many theoretical problems in theology:

… many of the outstanding theoretical problems of the day do seem to be resolved in the history-of-religion orientation. The Church does indeed sorely need, and an understanding of the world-wide history of religion can indeed provide, an intellectually strong, rationally coherent, empirically based, inductively argued, logically persuasive, transcendentally adequate, integrative theory to do justice to our faith and to our work: to what we know with our hearts and what we know with our minds, at their best.129

Second, he dismisses the common idea in the academy that theologians lack professional honesty and skill. In order to defend his view, he introduces a quite conventional distinction between those who, he maintains, are true theologians and, on the other hand, those who are mere apologists. The former are serious and well-informed intellectuals who are able to draw their conclusions not simply from the point of view that is proper to their respective communities, but who let other religious views inspire them so that they come to reformulate their previous understanding accordingly. The latter are so closed-minded in pursuing their own agenda that perhaps they do not even deserve the title “thinker.” Certainly they cannot be pointed to as the best illustration of who a theologian is:

In discussions on the reputed difference between Theology and what is called “Religious Studies,” a remark has at times been heard to the effect that that difference is simple: to be in theology is to be close-minded, to be in the “academic” side is to be open-minded. What those who voice such a view presumably think of as a theologian is not someone endeavoring to ascertain what can truly be said about God, but someone who rather is defending or seeking to perpetuate what others have said (others in his or her own particular community). It is alas historically (and dolefully) the case that there have been of late people like that; but it is gratuitous to think of them as theologians. Apologists, perhaps; pitiable, certainly. No significant Christian (or for that matter Muslim or other) theologian of any stature over preceding centuries has ever been of that type. Theologians of repute have been men or women of high intelligence who have struggled to express in words the best understanding of the divine to which they could manage to rise, using the most promising data available to them and integrating those data sincerely with their own life experience and with whatever else they knew of the world. I am simply suggesting not only that what else we know is today of course new, but also that we can and must use a different

and wider range of data: namely, those available to us from the whole history of humankind’s religious and spiritual life. Our own group’s certainly; but all other communities’ too.\textsuperscript{130}

Finally, Smith clarifies his idea of theology in general terms and with a broad conception as follows:

Throughout I have spoken of “theology,” never of “Christian theology.” Indeed, the phrase “Christian theology,” once one stops to reflect about it, is a contradiction in terms. At the very least, it is un-Christian, in any serious meaning of the word. This suggestion, which I have elsewhere adumbrated, may strike you as novel, unexpected, and even bizarre. Historically, however, it is the phrase “Christian theology” that, rather, is recent, odd, and finally untenable. It is virtually unknown before the nineteenth and rare before the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{131}

For Smith theology is none other than to speak the truth about God, and truth is by definition something that can only be known intuitively and never fully grasped nor possessed. He consequently comes to envision a concept of theology that really reflects the breadth of its concept of revelation, understood as God’s communication to humanity throughout all human history in any culture and religion. Therefore, he proclaims laconically: “There may be a Christian attempt at theology; and indeed there should be. An attempt at Christian theology, on the other hand, is too narrow a goal; and in the end, is self-contradictory.”\textsuperscript{132}

I have decided to concentrate particularly on Smith’s position because he is truly the “father of contemporary religious pluralism,”\textsuperscript{133} as John Hick himself rightly acknowledged. Moreover, I think that it is possible to look at the new comparative theology with more depth only by examining this author’s intellectual contribution. In fact, although the proponents of a new comparative theology strive to distance themselves from theology of religions and its limitations, it is arguable

\textsuperscript{130} Smith, “Theology and the World’s Religious History,” 56–57.
\textsuperscript{131} Smith, “Theology and the World’s Religious History,” 70.
\textsuperscript{132} Smith, “Theology and the World’s Religious History,” 71.
\textsuperscript{133} Hick, foreword, ix.
that the former discipline has largely been generated from the latter. Therefore, before turning to the proposals of Ward and Cummings Neville, I will reflect briefly on two of the major proponents of pluralism in theology of religions, John Hick and Paul Knitter, trying to discern the traces of Smith’s contribution to their thought.

John Hick’s philosophical theology and philosophy of religion pluralism are deeply indebted to Smith. In particular, in his convictions on the matter of the concept of religion, the irreducibility of the different religious claims to a single truth, and even some aspects of his Christology, the latter’s influence is more than perceivable. Moreover, in his contribution to the Festschrift in honor of Smith, as well as presenting the heart of his pluralistic paradigm, Hick also conveys the idea that his position does little more than draw the logical conclusions from what Smith has already proposed. He opens his chapter thus: “Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his work on the concepts of religion and of religions has been responsible, more than any other one individual, for the change which has taken place within a single generation in the way in which many of us perceive the religious life of mankind.”

Hick’s interests go far beyond those of Smith. In his career, Hick did not only tackle questions related to theology or the history of religions; philosophy of religion, sciences, and the philosophy of science, and psychology are just some of the various fields that exercised his intellectual curiosity. However, if one had to summarize in a few words the essence of his main position, one could refer to the following definition which Hick himself gives:

Stated philosophically such a pluralism is the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is manifestly taking place—and taking place, so far as human

observation can tell, to much the same extent. Thus the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological ‘spaces’ within which, or ‘ways’ along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfillment.\textsuperscript{135}

In such a definition, Smith’s influence is recognizable at least in two aspects. The first is the tendency to defend the different religious paths as alternative but still plausible ultimate options. The result of such a relativistic view is clearly the diminishing of Christ to the role of a metaphor, an idea that Hick presents in his edited volume \textit{The Myth of God Incarnate},\textsuperscript{136} and which he will develop fully in \textit{The Metaphor of God Incarnate}.\textsuperscript{137} Both his stress on the plausibility of different soteriologies and his demythologizing of the Christian creed with its supposed absoluteness are already present, even if only inchoately, in Smith’s thought.

A second typical feature of Smith’s reasoning is detectable in Hick’s position: the inclination to insist on a high degree of differentiation while at the same time inventing new forms of generalization. In order to avoid hegemonic readings of different religious traditions, both authors promote the deconstruction of the classical conceptual tools of religious studies. However, in order to open their analyses to a universal horizon, they are led to coin new umbrella terms that are able to encompass very different phenomena in a what still seems to be a single category. For example, the concepts of “Ultimate Reality” and “the Real” which are so central to Hick’s whole intellectual production are effectively empty shells shaped with the intention of avoiding unfair discrimination. However, they have the perhaps unintended effect of creating new forms of reductionism.

This aspect of Hick’s thought has been as much criticized as Smith’s tendency to

\textsuperscript{135} Hick, “Religious Pluralism,” 156.
generalize; for example the latter’s use of the term faith to describe the human response to the
divine in general, has been criticized for its dependence on the Semitic tradition—as Hick himself
acknowledges. However, it is not by chance that the paragraph reported above, in which the
concepts of the Real and the Ultimate feature in Hick’s definition of his pluralistic paradigm,
comes from his contribution in honor of Smith. In concluding the presentation of his philosophy
of religious pluralism, Hick affirms, “But I hope that in this paper I may have said enough to
indicate the possible fruitfulness of this general standpoint, a standpoint to which Wilfred Cantwell
Smith’s work has contributed so centrally and so notably.”

The special connection and complementarity that exist between Smith’s and Hick’s
intellectual projects have something else to tell us. If Smith is really, as Hick maintained, the father
of the pluralist paradigm in theology of religions, then perhaps we should conclude that this
position has its origins in Smith’s comparative work. He emerged as a systematic theologian from
within a concentration on a very specific area in the field of history of religions, and it is because
of the distinct perspective with which he became deeply involved that he began to question his
faith orientation. The particularity of his experience pushed him towards broader philosophical
and theological discussions. When it comes to the so-called “new comparative theology,” however,
the opposite move is made—from generalization to particularity. On the basis of the observations
we have made about Smith’s trajectory from particularity to generality, we might expect that things
might now full circle: once comparative theologians have reinstated particularity as their focus,
they will experience the same pressure Smith did to develop new synthetic overviews.

In the same way we have seen the traces of Smith’s influence on John Hick, we could
perhaps find similar evidence in the work of Hick’s collaborator Paul Knitter. However, let us to
confine ourselves to one particularly interesting phenomenon in the development of Knitter’s thought. It is intriguing to note that the movement from a desire for generalization back to a concern for particularity is manifesting itself in a new way in Knitter. He does not renounce his pluralist convictions; instead he deepens them, to the point that he promotes for himself (and clearly for others, despite his modesty in declaring it) a religious double belonging as “a new way of being church,” a Christian community “that lives and finds life through dialogue;” in his case a Buddhist-Christian hybrid identity.140

In *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, Knitter presents his personal religious and intellectual itinerary, from his teaching in Catholic institutions, to the involvement with world religions and Liberation Theology. His engagement with Buddhism also derives from a very concrete fact that has completely changed the course of his life, about which he talks with heartfelt words: the encounter with his wife, a practicing Buddhist. The nuptial metaphor often recurs in this book as a natural way of illustrating his point that double belonging is not simply possible and theologically justifiable but that it can be a very rich experience, both spiritually and intellectually. It is not clear that *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* would be formally considered a work of comparative theology by new-comparative theologians, because even though it engages two particular religious traditions, it is still attempting to arrive at generalizable theological results. However, of all Knitter’s works this is the one that comes closest to Clooney’s ideal of dealing with particularities. What this means concretely, is an issue that should interest both pluralist theologians of religion and new-comparative theologians: it seems that the boundaries between their respective intellectual endeavors are shifting and overlapping once again.

“Never has a theology exceeded Neville’s in its capacity to support thinking and living

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through the challenges of religious and cultural pluralism.”\textsuperscript{141} This is Wesley J. Wildman’s appreciative evaluation of Robert Cummings Neville’s theology and his willingness to incorporate into the Christian discourse some promising aspects of other religious traditions. In his attempt to present Neville’s system of thought on the basis of some fundamental issues such as symbolic engagement, creation, God, and the religious life, Wildman closes his thoughtful essays by stating, “Neville is every bit as much practical theologian and pastoral theologian as he is systematic metaphysician.”\textsuperscript{142} This last comment is acute, because in a few words it succeeds in describing the multifaceted nature of Neville’s approach to theology.

For the sake of brevity, for now I will focus only on Neville’s idea of theology. However, I intend to come back to some aspects of his contribution later on. Although I cannot agree with some of Neville’s presuppositions and conclusions, I particularly appreciate both his analysis of language as a symbol of world engagement and the interdisciplinary project of comparative religious ideas he directed in Boston from 1995 to 2000 and which culminated with the publication of three valuable volumes: \textit{The Human Condition},\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ultimate Realities},\textsuperscript{144} and \textit{Religious Truths}.\textsuperscript{145}

In all his production, Neville seems always to keep in view two dimensions of thinking simultaneously: the issue that in each intellectual endeavor is properly the center of his attention; and the metatheoretical implication of this discourse. Therefore, reflection on the nature and aims of theology somehow surfaces in all his works. However, since in Neville the boundaries between


\textsuperscript{142} Wildman, “Neville’s Systematic Theology of Symbolic Engagement,” 27.


theology and philosophy are not always identifiable—and this is not only one of the main traits of his thought but perhaps one of his most effective intellectual challenges—I will consider in particular those of his works in which he addresses the nature and the roles of comparative theology directly, *Behind the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology*,146 *On the Scope and Truth of Theology: Theology as Symbolic Engagement*,147 and *Ritual and Deferece: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context*.148

Another characteristic feature of Neville’s thinking is his tendency to combine his analytical ability in classifying and sketching taxonomies with his facility in designing syntheses of thought on the macro level. Rarely does a contemporary thinker seem to have succeeded, as Neville does, in pursuing both these competencies with a high degree of proficiency. Therefore, before turning to his proposals for classification, it is worthwhile explaining first how, in general, Neville conceives of theology.

First of all, he defines theology as “the reflection on ultimacy or ultimate matters, embracing things that are ultimate and the ultimate dimensions of things that are not.”149 Hence, for Neville, theology is the investigation of things that are fundamental to recovering the meaning of all of reality and human life. He is fully aware that such a definition is vague but he defends the vagueness of his concept of theology as an advantage rather than a limitation. Although some scholars legitimately question the application of theistic views to religious paths that have different metaphysical assumptions, such as the West Asian religions, Neville is convinced that theology, precisely for its vagueness, can also be applied to these contexts without necessarily falling into

149 Neville, *On the Scope and Truth of Theology*, 1 [italics in the original].
forms of hegemonism. He explains his motivation as follows: “What is needed, therefore, to describe reflection on ultimacy in any culture is a word that does have a particular history, as ‘theology’ does, but that can deliberately be made vague so that it can encompass religions with alternative histories and register their intellectual reflections without bias.”

In this passage, we find expressed not only Neville’s all-embracing idea of theology but also one of the most interesting of his contributions to the development of comparative theology. When he praises the indistinct nature of the term “theology,” he is just applying to this specific case his general conviction that all categories in the study of religions have an heuristic nature which must be recognized in order to maximize their benefits:

A notion is vague… when it can entertain mutually conflicting or contradictory specifications. As a vague term, “theology” allows that different theologies might not be compatible at all, and makes the question of whether they are compatible an empirical question… That the use of the word “theology” to describe reflection on the ultimate is historically determined entails that it is subject to criticism when it fails properly to be embracing. That the word can be re-constructed in a broad, embracing way, however, means that it can register the highly particular and even contradictory thought-forms in different religions that are different ways of specifying the vague notion of matters bearing upon ultimacy.

Neville’s argument contains three recognizable lines of descent: the pragmatism of Pierce and Dewey, the process thought of Whitehead in particular, and his allegiance to the Chinese philosophies he definitively advanced in the so-called “Boston Confucianism” Project. Francis X. Clooney neatly recognizes each of these in commenting as follows:

Due perhaps to the combination of his area of expertise—American pragmatism, process thought, Confucian traditions—Neville values comparison as a process of increasingly refined approximations crafted wisely. Words, methods of comparison, and the substantive tenets of tradition achieve a certain balance in comparative study, but they are always still open to adjustment as further insights occur across cultural and religious borders.

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152 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 47.
In my future comparative projects, I will rely on the idea of the heuristic nature of categories in the study of religion, though with some important differences. However, at present I intend only to remark how this idea is essential in Neville’s own conceptions of both theology and comparison. Returning to the discussion of the breadth and potential inclusiveness of Neville’s view of theology, one cannot but realize how, incidentally, it could also find some parallels to Smith’s position:

Whether theology is primarily a Christian mode of thought can be given a decisive historical answer: No. *Theologia* was the word used in the ancient Greek world, by Plato and Aristotle, for instance, for the study of gods. The Greek pantheon was a development from the earlier proto-Aryan pantheon that unfolded in roughly parallel ways in the Indus Valley and Iran as well as in Italy. Those cultures also had inquiries into their gods. By the time of the rise of Christianity, theology had come to include comparative studies of different pantheons, with suggestive correlations from one to another and some understanding of the overlay of one culture’s pantheon on another’s. Early Christians took up the term “theology” in this sense, explaining and justifying their conceptions of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the divinity of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, to people of other religions as well as to themselves. Christian theology began as comparative and apologetic.153

Against a strict confessional idea of theology, Neville retraces the origins of this term in the philosophical discussions of the ancient Greeks and finds some parallels in older or coeval civilizations in which the reasoning about the gods, their nature, and their roles in the universe had always played a significant role not just in day-to-day life but also in erudite speculation or in their wisdom traditions. Next, he describes the specific Christian attempt at theologizing as inserted in this more general framework, and as responding to the challenge that this more generally accepted worldview constituted for the early Church.

Therefore, he introduces a first distinction which will find a correspondence in his efforts to differentiate aspects and modes inherent to the theological enterprise. However, when he affirms

that “Christian theology began as comparative and apologetic,” he is describing two movements that, although distinguishable, were not yet able to be dissociated at this stage of the Christian reflection. Thus, Neville draws inspiration from this substantial simultaneity to design his personal program for a Christian theology in three movements so that his theology would be able “to understand, to express, and critically to examine the truth of the gospel in the experience and language of all the world’s people, and in reference to all natural and social contexts.”

Hence, as the early Church shaped its own reflection on the divine in critical conversation with the pagan discourse on gods of its time, Neville conceives the possibility of a Christian attempt at theologizing in the wider horizon of the mutual exchange and the dialogue with other religious traditions, which in his opinion should be increasingly integrated in the Christian way of looking both at the divine and at the world:

> With respect to other world religions, Christian theology needs to be in intellectual continuity. The experiences, texts, languages, and living practices of those religions need to be incorporated into Christian theological experience, not uncritically, but as the very object and resource for Christian theological interpretation. The dialogue among world religions thus creates a partially new language or discourse, continuous in different respects with each religious tradition but punctuated by different interpretations of the various traditions. Each religion can adopt much that is valuable in the others, although the adoption appropriates the others to its own perspective, enlarging the perspective.

Subsequently, on the basis of the recognition of the pluralistic dimension as a truly substantial subject for Christian reasoning, Neville differentiates three correlated moments that show the breadth of the duty and nature of Christian theology: evangelical, historical, and systematic. As mentioned before, Neville’s taxonomic inclination pairs with his holistic inspiration: “although theologians may focus on one to the relative neglect of the others, each is

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partial without the others, I believe, and the wholeness of theology, hence the integrity of any of its parts, requires an assumptive commitment to coherent positions in all three moments.”

First, evangelical theology is “the most original and ancient form of Christian theology.” It corresponds to the act of inhabiting and submitting oneself to the languages and the cultures of the countless peoples of the world, trying to understand how the gospel message works in this new linguistic and cultural framework. Like St. Paul’s mission activity shows clearly, the Christian message is not only able to add something remarkable to these contexts but is also capable of recognizing some essential aspects of truth in those cultures. Therefore, Neville infers what follows:

… Christian theology need not enter the scene either to reject or copy the language and experience of the diverse conditions of people. Rather its role is to discover what the gospel of Christ means there, thence to interpret those experiences and conditions in a Christian way, perhaps adding to the languages of understanding, and to enrich the larger body of Christian understanding with the results of the new and ongoing work.

Second, historical theology responds to the need that consequently emerges for “interpreting the connections among the diverse contexts in which Christianity has come to understand itself.” Christian categories are generated in history and through history. The act of gospel interpretation entails history in the sense that language is always situated in a given context. Then, while historical theology is the presupposition for the other two moments—the evangelical and the systematic—it is the necessary condition for a certain theology to be coherent and tenable:

Quite to the contrary of those who fear that historicizing one’s present theological work makes it subjective and untrue, understanding one’s work to be in a historical context is the only thing that can provide the conditions under which theology can be true. That theological truth is contextual is simply a function of its being a kind of truth: all truth is historically contextual.

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160 Neville, *Behind the Masks of God*, 32.
161 Neville, *Behind the Masks of God*, 33.
Third, systematic theology is “a kind of reflection that considers abstractly the connections and differences among the various theological expressions, that systematizes these around central issues, and that articulates the essential continuities of Christianity throughout.”162 In the systematic moment, Neville’s vocation of an all-embracing perspective can finally find an adequate expression. Here, the pluralistic dimension does not simply constitute the context in which the Christian message is called to be announced and, accordingly, reformulated. Rather, the other religious truth claims should become more a part of Christian reasoning:

Specifically, systematic theology articulates, examines, and criticizes the assumptions of all other kinds of theological expressions, formulating the basic categories expressing those assumptions. In addition, systematic theology applies the same analysis to the theological expressions of other religions, and to the atheological alternatives of unreligious domains of culture.163

Then, given that systematic theology is primarily interested in the question of truth, and truth is a complex and multidimensional thing, systematic theology must dare to include other important subject matters and partners in its discussions. Neville asserts, “theology includes basic philosophy, philosophy of religion, and metaphysics within itself,” but it also “must encompass as universal a cultural experience as possible. It needs to provide an articulation of the sciences and arts in terms relative to the Christian life in each context.”164

Neville dedicates the penultimate chapter of Ritual and Deference entirely to comparative theology and to a discussion on comparativism. He does address the different models of comparative theology; however his analysis quickly becomes a discussion of the modes of comparison in philosophical terms. First, he briefly describes five models for comparative

162 Neville, Behind the Masks of God, 33.
163 Neville, Behind the Masks of God, 33.
164 Neville, Behind the Masks of God, 34.
Theology.

The first model is constituted by social scientific approaches, which “are not theological strictly speaking (because they do not argue for normative theological teachings), they nevertheless are extremely important resources for comparative theologies.”¹⁶⁵ These kinds of approach usually do not intend to offer new theological insights or interpretations, but rather aim at simply describing how theological ideas were generated. Neville takes the intellectual endeavors of several historians of religion into account here.

The second model is represented by historical comparative theology, which Neville sees exemplified in Randall Collins’ work *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*.¹⁶⁶ This kind of contribution is similar in perspective to the first model but is distinguished by the wider range of its interests and its more evident stress on comparativism. It “traces the genealogies and heritages of the world’s great philosophers from all traditions” and also shows “how they so often interacted across traditional boundaries.”¹⁶⁷

Unlike the others, the third model derives its motives for comparison not from empirical data but from a metaphysical scheme. These schemes usually organize and evaluate the different religious truth claims on the basis of “a system of classificatory categories so that a grid of possible positions is produced.”¹⁶⁸ For instance, Hegel, by bringing “world theologies into relation according to his metaphysical theory of the dialectic of Spirit,”¹⁶⁹ properly fits in this kind of contribution.

The fourth model is constituted by those theologies, markedly Christian, which deal “with

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¹⁶⁵ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 129.
¹⁶⁷ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 130.
¹⁶⁹ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 130.
the classical loci of the tradition, but drawing on supportive elements in other traditions for the sake of enrichment and pointing out where the other religions differ from or deny Christian doctrine.”

Neville recognizes that this kind of research has contributed considerably to the enrichment of Christian reflection, but he nevertheless warns against a limitation he sees in it: “this model does not go far to press the question of truth where the traditions are seemingly at odds.”

Because theology is fundamentally interested in the question of meaning and truth far beyond sociological approaches, it cannot avoid considering the discrepancy in truth claims. Hence, “comparative theology cannot beg the question by assuming that the Christian agenda and its traditional answers are true.”

Finally, the last model is related to the previous one but stands out for its syncretistic tendency to integrate different religious truth claims into what it considers a single coherent framework. Neville sees an outstanding example of this kind of perspective in the multiple works of Raimundo Panikkar, who managed to combine Christian worldviews with some fundamental aspects of both Hinduism and Buddhism. However, to produce tenable comparisons and consistent normative positions, this model requires selecting from the broad variety of available material. As a result, those following this model are prone to discard those elements of the multifaceted traditions that they do not believe fit in the final framework. Thus, Neville concludes, “the model does not promote vulnerability to correction from comparisons with what might be radically critical.”

Looking back to the multiple positions in comparative thought, both in theology and philosophy, Neville therefore identifies two major fundamental categories: the objectivist

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approach and the normative approach. He defines the first perspective as follows: “the objectivist approach treats the positions to be compared as finished objects, takes up a perspective of distance upon them, and measures its comparative judgments in empirical ways over against the evidence of the positions.”\textsuperscript{174} On the other hand, he describes the opposite model as follows:

The normative approach centers, first, on addressing contemporary philosophical problems and looks to the historical positions as resources for contemporary thinking, bringing them into comparative perspective against the contemporary background. The normative approach thus involves reconstructing the traditions, as any living tradition does in growing to meet new philosophical situations, and does so by bringing them into comparative interaction.\textsuperscript{175}

It is superfluous to add here that his predilection is for the second approach, although he is willing to admit that “obviously the normative approach to comparison needs to embrace the objectivist approach.”\textsuperscript{176}

Subsequently, within the objectivist model he identifies a subset of four main types of comparison. “One is what might be called classificatory comparison and derives from the ancient Aristotelian heritage.”\textsuperscript{177} A second type of objectivist approach to comparison is “the social science causal approach.” The third type could correspond to the integration of these first two approaches, which is feasible but “remains to be accomplished.”\textsuperscript{178} The last type of objectivist comparison is a “philosophy of culture.” In this classification he is considering both theological and philosophical projects at the same time; and after his presentation of this grid of classification, he also offers some illustrative examples from the recent literature in the field of comparativism. However, while at the beginning of his illustration the focus on comparative theology was quite evident, in the course of his discussion it gets somewhat lost. Or better we should say that, given

\textsuperscript{174} Neville, \textit{Ritual and Deference}, 133.
\textsuperscript{175} Neville, \textit{Ritual and Deference}, 133–34.
\textsuperscript{176} Neville, \textit{Ritual and Deference}, 134.
\textsuperscript{177} Neville, \textit{Ritual and Deference}, 134.
\textsuperscript{178} Neville, \textit{Ritual and Deference}, 137.
the very broad conception of integrative philosophy that he envisions as a sort of intellectual public square where the most variously assorted traditions of thought can meet and learn from each other, he treats Christian theology as one partner in discussion among others. Evidently Christian faith ceases to be the distinctive perspective from which one should read and evaluate other contributions.

Finally, to describe Neville’s distinct idea of theology we could resort to the definition that he himself employs: a “naturalistic philosophical theology.” Neville strives to distance himself from Stanley Hauerwas’ witness-supernaturalist theology and any other similar attempt at portraying theology as a mere vindication of the Christian identity. He affirms that his position is quite opposed to that of Hauerwas in at least three aspects: the method, the public, and the resources he employs. While for Hauerwas, “witness” is not simply the aim but also influences the method of his theologizing, for Neville reason and inquiry are the starting points for research. Furthermore, unlike his friend, Neville does not speak primarily and univocally to Christian communities but to a global audience, because theology based more on reason than revelation has the ability to invite into discussion various kinds of interlocutors, non-believers included. Then, if for Hauerwas the source for Christian theology is essentially the Bible, for Neville other scriptures and religious traditions are also relevant, as are the cultural expressions and disciplines such as science, art, law, and more. In brief, Neville’s position could be illustrated as a neo-liberal correlation project that finds in George Lindbeck and Paul Tillich two other important points of reference.

Neville’s consistency in relying on this distinct approach is also clear in one of his

180 Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).
contributions that is apparently centered solely on Christian revelation: *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement*. Here, Neville intends to apply his theory of theology as symbolic engagement also to christology and to some of its fascinating aspects; for this reason he reflects on the power of several images traditionally associated with Jesus whose recognition, he thinks, could be fruitful for today: the Lamb of God, the Cosmic Christ, the Trinitarian Person, the Incarnate Word, Friend and Savior. Stanley J. Grenz expresses both appreciation and discomfort toward this specific endeavor of Neville and, interestingly, explains his concerns as follows:

My sense in reading *Symbols of Jesus* is that in the end the book is not merely an attempt to treat the symbols that Christians use to speak about Jesus. My suspicion is that in Neville’s estimation, Jesus—the prophet of Nazareth who was crucified outside of Jerusalem two thousand years ago—is dead. Or as Neville would state the point, Jesus is not temporally here, which is the meaning of the symbol of the ascension. This Jesus does “live” on, of course, but only insofar as his followers “objectify” him, that is, insofar as people continue to find their lives transformed by the kind of attitude toward being in the world that they derive from the various ways in which Jesus has been presented by Christians throughout the ages. The effect of this is to change Jesus himself into a symbol.

If Neville’s naturalistic philosophical theology clearly draws inspiration from liberal and neo-liberal thinkers, Keith Ward’s comparative theology situates itself in the realm of liberalism, but with some important variants: “I develop a positive Christian theology that is both liberal and orthodox... a modern defense of liberal Christianity.” The adjective “orthodox” is of no little importance in Ward’s theological commitment. Although certainly he aims at a “holistic and eirenic study of religious belief and practice,” at the same time he does not renounce his faith commitment nor hesitate to engage in dialectical discussions for the defense of Christian beliefs.

Therefore, a kind of apologetic strain often surfaces in his contributions, particularly when he is devoting all of his intellectual efforts to the examination of the complex issues of the relationships between theology and philosophy, or theology and science. After all, as he himself revealed, he is a born-again Christian, and it is from this fundamental experience that he draws major inspiration for his theological endeavors:

I am a born-again Christian. I can give a precise day when Christ came to me and began to transform my life with his power and love. He did not make me a saint. But he did make me a forgiven sinner, liberated and renewed, touched by divine power and given the immense gift of an intimate sense of the personal presence of God. I have no difficulty in saying that I wholeheartedly accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour.186

These few sentences are crucial to understanding Ward’s programmatic view, and with the necessary attention, one can already predict what might be the major philosophical influences on his thought. From the tone and wording that he chose to reveal his faith orientation, it seems clear that he fears his reader might have some reservations about the sincerity of his open-minded theology because of that commitment. Other details are worthy of note: his emphasis on his spiritual liberation and his remark about his personal trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. And curiously enough, one finds the same motifs in a programmatic statement in Re-Thinking Christianity:

When liberalism stands alone, it can succumb to relativism and indifference. But when it is allied with transcendental personalism, it is an important part of a concern for human flourishing, and for a commitment to God as a personal ground of being that underlies and encourages the flourishing of human moral value. Liberal Christian faith is concerned above all with a search for truth and for the widest possible fulfillment of God-created personal potentialities. This sponsors a vision of the churches as positively concerned to promote societies in which such fulfillment is possible for all. The vocation of the churches is not merely to nourish the relation of individual souls to God. It is also to mediate God’s will for the liberation and flourishing of all life, and as far as possible, to enable all things to become transparent to the glory of God.187

187 Ward, Re-Thinking Christianity, 187.
Hence, liberalism, personalism, and liberation theology constitute the three main pillars on which Ward constructs his thought. Not only do these distinct philosophical perspectives find a unique combination in his work, sometimes an unexpected harmonization is also found. Whereas personalism can easily open the doors to the kind of individualism that is typical of his Anglo-Saxon background, both in matters of faith and regarding models of society, liberation theology comes to recalibrate and correct possible imbalances. However, the other two pillars are constitutive of Ward’s approach: dialogue with philosophy, and dialogue with science. For example, in *The God Conclusion*\(^\text{188}\) Ward offers a very provocative and quite original re-reading of the Western philosophical tradition, re-evaluating major authors such as Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and others; he defends the very unfashionable idea that theism is a concern of all these philosophers and that they certainly accepted the God conclusion, at least in these terms: “There is a supreme spiritual (non-physical) reality which is the cause or underlying nature of the physical cosmos, and which is of great, and maybe the greatest possible, value or perfection.”\(^\text{189}\) In his survey, there is also space for contention with David Hume’s arguments against God, with some aspects of Nietzsche’s thought, and, of course, with materialism. Here Ward’s apologetic side is particularly evident, but this is quite predictable, given the fact that reaffirming God’s intelligibility is the necessary philosophical presupposition not only for his comparative endeavor but, more in general, for his theology. Thus, at the conclusion of his book he states firmly,

> In defending a series of what may seem to be presently unfashionable views in philosophy, I have made my own position fairly clear. I think the God conclusion stands firm, and that it is the best intellectual defense of the intelligibility of the cosmos, of the objective


importance of our moral ideals, of an affirmation of the goodness, the joy and the beauty of life, and of the authenticity of those intimations of transcendence that provide some of the most sublime and transformative human experiences.\textsuperscript{190}

It is interesting to see how, while he is reflecting on materialism and its contrast with idealist positions, he is naturally led to integrate into the discussion another relevant partner—science—by referring to some of the most recent hypotheses on the origins and meaning of the universe. After all, especially in questions of cosmology, he sees the comparison between theology and science and their respective conclusions as the acid-test for the credibility of any theological endeavor today. However, the benefits of the increasing dialogue between the two disciplines can be numerous and mutually enriching for both, as he also explains in \textit{The Big Questions in Science and Religion}:

Religious beliefs cannot remain what they were before the rise of modern science any more than ancient scientific beliefs can. It would be absurd to insist that ancient religious beliefs should remain unchanged when our whole view of the universe has changed radically…. Religious beliefs have usually been formulated in the light of the best available knowledge about the universe that existed at the time. This leads to the conclusion that the unprecedented and revolutionary changes in scientific knowledge of our age will involve a new formulation of ancient religious beliefs. But my study has also led me to believe that there is a distinctive central core of religious belief that has something to contribute to human knowledge and understanding, and that is quite different from scientific knowledge.\textsuperscript{191}

The stress on the necessity of reformulating ancient beliefs in a changing cultural context is characteristic of the liberal approach to theology. The transformation to which theology needs to submit itself is certainly one of the most recognizable of Ward’s recurring themes. What distinguishes his approach is the breadth of his intellectual attention and the vast spectrum of his interests. Whereas Neville’s views in theory do not seem to differ dramatically from this kind of

\textsuperscript{190} Ward, \textit{The God Conclusion}, 147.

holistic perspective, Ward is actually able to achieve his intellectual goals by putting into practice his programmatic declarations. By discussing the most disparate issues, he manages to tackle relevant issues at multiple levels—philosophical, theological, and scientific—and to achieve a synthesis that is unique among contemporary theologies for its scope. However, while his bibliography is impressive, Ward sometimes sacrifices depth of analysis to breadth of reach.

Furthermore, it is not always clear how the relationship between continuity and transformation is to be understood in this process of continuing revision that theology is, in his view, called to embrace. In fact, particularly in Re-Thinking Christianity, he lists of the various forms that Christianity has taken on from its beginnings till now.\(^\text{192}\) However, one could ask: are these forms changing only according to the changing contexts, or do the various forms that Christianity has assumed during its long history still bear the stamp of the original message—the Gospel? Does not the Gospel, despite the numerous possible contextual interpretations that it demands, remain the solid core that the fluctuation of events cannot erode? To answer this question is, I think, of crucial importance. It seems to me that Ward is depicting Christianity as a sort of chameleon that opportunistically accommodates itself to situations. Thus he affirms:

There is no one unchanging ‘correct’ teaching handed down from Jesus himself and preserved by some group. Different Christian groups find themselves comfortable with different ‘stages’ of this development. But all of them are different from what we can recover of the ‘original’ faith in Jesus, and all of them require modification at various points to take account of expanding human knowledge.\(^\text{193}\)

I believe that this sort of relativism within the boundaries of Christianity itself, which Ward seems not just to accept but even to sponsor, is hardly compatible with other aspects of his thought. For instance, his quite sharp critique of Christian fundamentalism reveals that in his opinion there

\(^{192}\) Ward, Re-Thinking Christianity, vii–viii.

\(^{193}\) Ward, Re-Thinking Christianity, viii.
is indeed a normative mode in which the Bible should be read, and that the way fundamentalists interpret it should be disapproved of. However, for the sake of my discussion, I intend to concentrate on what Ward describes as the current stage of contextual adjustment and the very challenge for today’s Christianity:

My argument is that Christian faith has developed throughout its history and that it must continue to do so. The general direction of development is clear—towards a more pluralistic and critical faith, committed to the cause of human flourishing and centered on liberating apprehensions of Transcendence.194

Rethinking Christianity in a global context entails taking into account the phenomenon of globalization in general and in particular the increasing religious pluralism connected with it: the world religions represent not just the horizon and the setting of this transformational process, but also the natural partners in the theological dialogues. Hence, Ward elaborates his project of comparative theology in four parts that correspond to four works printed between 1994 and 2000: *Religion and Revelation*,195 *Religion and Creation*,196 *Religion and Human Nature*,197 and *Religion and Community*.198 Even if the first work, *Religion and Revelation*, has its own particular focus, Ward begins by sketching an overview of his entire comparative project. Before embarking on the discussion of some primeval forms of disclosure of the divine mystery, the analysis of four scriptural traditions—Judaism, Vedānta, Buddhism, and Islam—and the reflection about the specificity of the Christian idea of revelation, he enters the debate on the nature of comparative theology. In order to underline the distinctiveness of his approach, he distinguishes comparative theology from, on the one hand, what he calls “confessional theology,” and, on the other, religious

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studies. Hence, he explains:

One can therefore distinguish two types of theology. One is confessional theology; the exploration of a given revelation by one who wholly accepts that revelation and lives by it. The other may be termed ‘comparative theology’—theology not as a form of apologetics for a particular faith but as an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety or religious traditions…. Comparative theology differs from what is often called ‘religious studies,’ in being primarily concerned with the meaning, truth, and rationality of religious beliefs, rather than with the psychological, sociological, or historical elements of religious life and institutions.\(^{199}\)

Then, to substantiate his position and justify his option for comparative theology, he offers more arguments about the risks of becoming a propagandist or pursuing the agenda of some religious organization. Therefore, he invokes a pluralistic approach to theology in the sense that theology can permit discussion and encounter among people of different faiths. Even within the boundaries of a single Christian confession, real discussion and dialectics should be favored. Accordingly, he warns against another danger: that of inhibiting radical thinking, which he sees as a source of likely theological advancement. Finally, by sticking to the principle of free speech and free intellectual enquiry, he maintains that active conversation, even with apologists, can be beneficial:

Unless one characterizes others as irredeemably sinful, ignorant or stupid, there may always be something to learn from them. Unless one is sure that one’s own view is irrevisably correct, there is always a possibility of error or at least of restricted vision.\(^{200}\)

His liberality seems to be so open as to admit within its purview those who consider liberalism to be the source of decadence in theology. Or perhaps he is just being astute because he is well aware of a contradiction that the pluralist theologians are usually prone to overlook: to be truly pluralist one must not despise exclusivist approaches, but must strive to integrate them into

the full spectrum of possible positions, or at least to tolerate them.

However, although comparative and confessional theologies need to be distinguished, they can be mutually enriching. In line with Smith, Ward believes that using the terms, Anglican, Catholic, or even Christian theology would represent a restrictive idea of theology. Nonetheless, by conceiving theology as a sort of public square for discussions among various interlocutors on ultimate reality and the goals of human life, he admits that someone who intends to defend one specific religious view is allowed to be part of this debate. Comparative theology, therefore, finds itself in the position of somehow defending and even supporting confessional theology but not without having an evident impact on it. Comparative theology might have the capacity to transform the quality of the relationships among the different religious groups by promoting a sort of convergent spirituality, and it can also contribute to reshaping the balance of relationships within a single confession. In particular, in *Religion and Community*, Ward describes the possible future impact of the comparative approach on a conception of Church that highlights a different, less strict role for the magisterium:

> There is a place for the institution of the church in such a future. But its teaching authority will be more that of advice and guidance in sound scholarship than a defensive reassertion of ancient dogmatic formulae. Its sacramental life will be more the offer of the unconditional and personal love of God to encourage human flourishing in an equitable and just world, than a hierarchical control of the exclusive means to eternal life. And its institutional form will be more one of humble service to the community than of patriarchal dignity and control.\(^{201}\)

*Religion and Community* represents for Ward the occasion to integrate into his perspective the positions of Christian confessions other than Anglicanism: the Orthodox, the Catholics, and the Reformed Churches. It is interesting to see how his concern with the interreligious dimension meets with the ecumenical issue. However, his representation of those traditions remains in most

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cases superficial and does not add much to the discussion. Hence, one might conclude from this that, while other religious traditions can contribute to reshaping the countenance of Christianity today, different Christian confessions can do little or nothing among themselves. On the contrary, while I consider interreligious dialogue to be vital to Christianity, at the same time I think that a deep, regular, and honest exchange among Christians could be transformative for the Churches and helpful for interreligious dialogue itself.

The most engaging contributions of the tetralogy are *Religion and Creation* and *Religion and Human Nature* because in them Ward displays the quintessential example of his all-embracing thought: not only the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim doctrines on creation and human beings are investigated in comparison with Christian teachings, but also the conceptions of modern science on cosmology and evolution are called upon and welcomed into the dialogue. I believe that Ward’s lesson, despite some naïveté, should be pondered carefully by the different religious traditions, and, of course, of all the Christian denominations: theology, philosophy, and science are three rivers that originate at the same source, and it is quite urgent that these three streams of thought be willing to recognize their common origins even though they are no longer able to proceed along the same path (and perhaps this would not be even profitable).

Returning to the assessment of Ward’s position, I believe that, no matter how liberal, his position is definitively more compatible with the specific Christian faith perspective and its defense than that of Neville. However, the nature of his project is somehow indeterminate because it is incapable of explaining theologically how his clearly expressed Christian commitment and a certain apologetic tendency that sometimes surfaces in his works can really coexist with pluralistic, liberal perspectives. While he strives to undermine radical forms of pluralism like those of Hick, which he sees as drastic, relativistic and potentially agnostic, his declared endorsement of a “soft
pluralism” has not dispelled the fogginess of his hybrid, unstable position. Two authors, even though they come from opposing stances, nonetheless agree in remarking on the inconsistency of Ward’s “middle way.” Peter Byrne, after invoking from Ward the adoption of what he sees as a more consistent and convinced pluralist position, contends that “Ward’s ‘soft pluralism’, then, is not really pluralism as I have defined it.”²⁰² He concludes that, because Ward’s idea of revelation basically “embodies confessional inclusivism, though of an extremely liberal sort,”²⁰³ he cannot “consistently criticize conservative Christian perspectives on religious diversity.”²⁰⁴ Gavin D’Costa approaches Ward’s thought from quite a different viewpoint, and even though he expresses sympathy for Ward’s project, nonetheless affirms

I shall be arguing that while Ward’s basic approach is internally coherent, it is not Christological and Trinitarian enough, and Ward appears to drive his project with a form of philosophical process theism. I will suggest that Ward’s form of process theism pays little attention to the narrative doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity and fails to justify properly Ward’s account of ‘revelation’ in the world religions.²⁰⁵

I will finally frame Ward’s position as follows: despite the numerous, appreciable advantages of his encyclopedic perspective, his view is not simply inconsistent, as Byrne suggests, but it is not, pace D’Costa, internally coherent. This is because Ward’s project, as D’Costa correctly observes, is not grounded sufficiently in solid Christological and Trinitarian foundations. How can a Christian comparativist project possibly be internally coherent without establishing its foundation on Christological and, moreover, Trinitarian bases? One observes this kind of problem not only in Ward but more evidently in both Smith and Neville. Nonetheless, I believe that finding

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²⁰³ Byrne, “Ward on Revelation: Inclusivism or Pluralism?,” 15.
²⁰⁴ Byrne, “Ward on Revelation: Inclusivism or Pluralism?,” 16.
inconsistency in others’ projects is easier that solving this dilemma—the dilemma of being able to adhere to a liberal open-mindedness and at the same time to be faithful to orthodoxy. Though he may not have been intending to do so, Ward has the great merit of having brought it to light.

**Fourth Group**

This overview of the spectrum of positions in comparative theology concludes with the mention of certain authors who strive to avoid dichotomies and operate with the intention of bridging the disagreements between theology and religious studies, on the one hand, and between the theology of religions and comparative theology on the other.

I will divide the various positions—which per se are not alternative—into four subgroups: first, those proposals that entail that the comparative dimension be implicitly included in any theological endeavor; second, those authors who, without showing any methodological prudishness, are willing to draw ideas from other disciplines such as philosophy, the philosophy of religion, religious studies, and the history of religions, in order to establish comparative analyses on the macro level between two or more systems of beliefs. Third, I will report on those thinkers who, from a more specifically confessional Christian perspective, immerse themselves deeply in the philosophical and theological traditions of another religion. Without explicitly tackling the methodological issues, however, they are directed and warned of the natural risk of the cultural projection of one religious perspective over the other precisely because of the meticulous and respectful mode of their scholarly commitment. This requires that, without necessarily betraying or abandoning their faith position, they master a knowledge of the other tradition that is as objective as possible thanks to resorting to secular approaches toward religion. Finally, I will discuss those thinkers who underline the contradictions in the contrast between comparative
theology and the theology of religions, and who invoke a renewed reciprocity among these approaches that they see as compatible.

For the first sub-group “comparative Theology is not so much a field of theology as an attribute of theology and, thus, in the case of Christianity, as old as Christian theology itself.”

Like Ulrich Winkler, numerous scholars maintain that the comparative aspect is at the core of any theological enterprise, and especially of Christian discourse. Given the correlative and hermeneutical character of theology as the attempt to understand either a revelation or a given tradition in light of a specific situation, theology can only be comparative. According to those scholars, the present situation, in which human societies have become increasingly pluralistic, demands that believers, and Christians in particular, not simply engage with world religions but embrace them, not merely as the subject matter of theological discussions, but more essentially as partners in those discussions. David Tracy comments in this regard:

The fact that theology itself is now widely considered one discipline within the multidisciplinary field of religious studies impels contemporary theology, in whatever tradition, to become a comparative theology. More exactly, from a theological point of view, history of religions, in its comparativism, has helped academic theology to recognize a crucial insight: that on strictly theological grounds, the fact of religious pluralism should enter all theological assessment and self-analysis in any tradition at the very beginning of its task. Any contemporary theology that accords theological significance (positive or negative) to the fact of religious pluralism in its examination of a particular tradition functions as a comparative theology, whether it so names itself or not. The history and nature of this new, emerging discipline of comparative theology as theology bears close analysis.

Tracy’s interest in world religions finds expression in the early 1980s in The Analogical Imagination, a masterpiece of systematic theology in which he wrestles with the problem of

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how to practice Christian theology in a culture of pluralism. Already in 1977 in his Presidential
Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America he had argued that it is necessary to adopt
an analogical imagination, which corresponds to a vision of the cosmos that includes, to use his
words, “a trust that it too is somehow ordered by relationships established by God for all reality;
and that reality itself—in spite of all serious, sometimes overwhelming evidence to the contrary—
is finally benign.” On the basis of this recognized order, it is possible to infer and transmit
something true about God, the cosmos, the human condition, and society. Consequently, it is also
possible to establish a fruitful dialogue with partners from different philosophical or religious
worldviews. Analogy, as von Balthasar skillfully indicated in his assessment of Barth’s
theology, is the distinctive feature of Catholic theology. Tracy, notwithstanding his clear liberal
tendencies and his appreciation for process theology, was not willing to renounce this marker of
his confessional belonging. Moreover his personal challenge consists of claiming that it is possible
to cultivate a positive appreciation for pluralism in its multifaceted philosophical, religious, and
theological dimensions without falling into theoretical confusion or, above all, without renouncing
the principles of the Christian faith. In his own way Tracy succeeded in finding a convincing
solution to this same dilemma that we saw unequivocally exhibited in Ward’s intellectual
contribution. Hence, without necessarily embracing all aspects of Tracy’s theological system, I
will refer to some of his brilliant solutions in the course of the presentation of my case study.

In *The Analogical Imagination*, Tracy categorically affirms that other religions must “enter
into the self-understanding of the Christian religion from the beginning to end.”

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209 David Tracy, “Presidential Address: The Catholic Analogical Imagination,” *Proceedings of the Catholic
210 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius
211 Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 159.
programmatic statement finds a more complete accomplishment in some subsequent works such
as *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* and some related articles, particularly
with regard to his personal involvement with both the Christian-Jewish and the Christian-Buddhist
dialogues.\(^{212}\) In Tracy’s opinion, there are two necessary tasks for today’s theology in the context
of religious pluralism and conflicting truth claims: “first, the interreligious dialogue which
provides the principal new religious praxis which is transforming all of us and which gives rise to
new theological thoughts and theories; and second, the inner-Christian dialogue, where Christian
theologians attempt to report to others what possibilities they now foresee.”\(^{213}\) Interreligious
dialogue is, therefore, essential in Tracy’s theological project that T. Howland Sanks labels as
“revisionist” and “foundational”; a project which, given its dual commitment to faith in the God
of Jesus Christ and modern pluralistic culture, aims at a “basic revision of traditional Christianity
and traditional modernity alike.”\(^{214}\) Hence, since world religions carry cosmological, theological,
and anthropological visions that often conflict with the Christian perspective, they represent an
obstacle that Christians are required to face, but they also offer an opportunity for Christians to
rethink and reconsolidate the foundations of their faith.

Making progress in such an ambitious program depends primarily on the ability of the
theologian to set out an “interdisciplinary conversation”\(^{215}\) including not only representatives of
other religions but also experts on secular approaches to religion. Making progress also requires

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\(^{212}\) David Tracy, *Dialogue With the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Leuven: Peeters, 1990); “The Question of
Criteria for Inter-Religious Dialogue: A Tribute to Langdon Gilkey,” in *The Whirlwind in Culture: Frontiers in
Theology*, eds. Donald W. Mussner and Joseph L. Price (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone, 1988); “God, Dialogue and

\(^{213}\) Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 97.

an overview of Tracy’s theological project see T. Howland Sanks, “David Tracy’s Theological Project: An
Overview and Some Implications,” *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4 (1993); Dario Balocco, *Dal cristocentrismo al
cristomorfismo. In dialogo con David Tracy* (Milano: Glossa: 2012).

\(^{215}\) David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 248.
that the theologian consent to extending his critical analysis to any areas of the theological domain, dogmas included, because in the eyes of modernity resorting to the authority of dogma as indisputable axiom would no longer be academically tenable. In this, Tracy departs considerably from Bernard Lonergan and transcendental Thomism in general, which were the subjects of his doctoral dissertation. However, Tracy clearly inherited from Lonergan not only his scrupulous consideration of the methodological aspect but also his focus on the interreligious dimension. Therefore, it is not unfair to say that the opening of his theological conversation to interlocutors from other religions was already rooted in his original theological formation. Over the course of his career, other sources of inspiration contributed to consolidating in him his sharp attentiveness to religious pluralism, including his encounter with the correlational model of Paul Tillich and the influence of other intellectual contributions such as Mircea Eliade’s history of religions, Langdon Gilkey’s cultural theology, the hermeneutics of both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, process theology through the mediation of Schubert Ogden, and also his personal involvement in some specific interreligious dialogues, especially with Buddhism. The blending of these perspectives is quite consistent with regard to Tracy’s position on the basis of two main, foundational, intellectual attitudes. The reciprocation of Lonergan’s imperatives in Method in Theology, “Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible.” finds an original achievement in his revised, critical correlation of the two sources of theology par excellence: “message,” which refers to the Christian truth that both scripture and tradition enshrine; and “situation,” which is the context for today’s theologizing of which world religions epitomize a considerable and almost inescapable dimension.

David Tracy’s contribution to comparative theology is without equal. Rather than concretely practicing it, he provided on the level of theory new insight into the necessity for and the conditions of the possibility of comparative theology. However, at least one of his interventions on the comparison between Christianity and Buddhism is worth recalling here: “Kenosis, Śūnyatā, and Trinity: A Dialogue with Masao Abe.” This permits me to introduce the second subgroup: those scholars who, in pursuing a better understanding of the perspective of their own faith as a whole, in comparison with another system of beliefs, are willing to draw inspiration and receive support from secular studies of religion without renouncing their own commitment to faith, and without supporting dichotomies between their confessional perspectives and the more aseptic religious studies point of view.

In 1990, Tracy took part to one of the most interesting and systematic multidisciplinary dialogue projects between some influential Western scholars and Masao Abe, a Zen thinker from the famous Kyoto school of philosophy that, starting with its founder, Kitarō Nishida, strove to rethink the foundations of Japanese Buddhism in conversation with Western philosophical traditions. The proceedings of these various symposia were collected and published in several volumes between 1985 and 2003. I will consider at least three of these important collections. This will permit me to give voice to some eminent thinkers who, though not comparative theologians in a strict sense, nevertheless deserve to be mentioned in this overview both because
of the influence they have exerted in the field of the theology of religions, and for their contribution to the formation of the various proposals in comparative theology. Furthermore, the interaction with Abe’s thought will give me the unique opportunity to introduce and comment on some issues and ideas with which I will be dealing later on in the course of my dissertation.

In *The Emptying God*, a set of eminent Christian and Jewish (at least one!) scholars try to offer critical answers to Masao Abe’s proposal to read the Pauline Hymn of Philippians 2:5–8 from the Zen Buddhist point of view. In “Kenotic God and Dynamic Śūnyatā,” Abe aimed to demonstrate how this perspective could be helpful both for Christians and Jews in developing a deeper understanding of the subtle and often hidden implications of their own beliefs. He also intended to renew, in particular, the Christian-Buddhist dialogue that, although promising, was in his view in need of renewal and stimulus. He believed that Buddhists too could learn from the comments and the advice of Christians and Jews, deepening their own religious understanding and opening themselves to new horizons.

Both in his essay and in the rejoinder at the end of the volume, the distinguished Japanese thinker acknowledged that the encounter with Western thought and with Christianity in particular, had significantly changed his philosophical approach and had raised stimulating questions that Buddhists today cannot avoid answering. Even his Christian and Jewish interlocutors generally admit that Abe’s contribution was original and inspiring. However, as Cobb points out in the preface, their disagreement with Abe was sometimes formulated in a “quite sharp” way. Apart from Abe, the participants in this dialogue were Thomas J. J. Altizer, Eugene B. Borowitz, John B. Cobb, Jr., Catherine Keller, Jürgen Moltmann, Schubert M. Odgen, and David Tracy. Here, I will briefly present the contributions of Cobb, Keller, Moltmann, Odgen, and Tracy, which seem

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“Abe’s Buddhist experience allows and enables him to see in Christian tradition what few Christians have seen. That will not replace what most Christians have seen, but unless Christians in the future pay attention to what Abe has seen, their vision will be truncated.”

In a few sentences, John B. Cobb, Jr. is able to represent the significance of Abe’s contribution to Christian theological self-understanding. Cobb intends to engage seriously with Abe’s thought and in particular with the critical remarks that Buddhism can direct to Christianity. In turn, Cobb challenges Abe on three aspects: “The first is that Buddhism discourages critical rationality. The second is that its transcendence of good and evil blocks development of an ethics. And the third is that its view of past and future as reversible undercuts the concern for history.” All these points are derived from the same conceptual matrix that, in line with Abe, Cobb sees in the Buddhist idea of pratītya-samutpāda (dependent origination). According to this view, nothing exists as a single, autonomous reality, but everything is interdependently linked. Moreover, unlike in classical mainstream Western metaphysics, the arising of the whole is not conceived as originating from a first cause that in its primacy would somehow be distinguished from the whole; on the contrary, dependent origination entails that everything flows from Emptiness and, in a ceaseless chain of causes and effects, will return to Emptiness. As a consequence, in this philosophical position the possible value of rational discrimination, the interest for particularities, the respect for human beings as individuals, and the relevance of history are somehow undermined. Cobb believes that such a view is hardly coherent with the Buddhist emphasis on compassion; from his Christian perspective he does not see as true compassion the Buddhist tendency to neglect particularity and

historicity, since it is by particular historical persons and situations that ethical claims are made on us. On the other hand, Cobb is willing to admit that Christians are more vulnerable than Buddhists in facing the challenges of both scientism and nihilism and that they can learn from Buddhists how to free their minds from the eternal conflict between reason and revelation: “Indeed, one of the attractions of Buddhism to Christians and to Westerners generally is that Buddhists seem quite free from the need to defend doubtful doctrines, because of their divinely grounded authority. One of the things Christians have most to gain through dialogue with Buddhists is a similar freedom.”

I believe that Cobb’s critique is valuable and very appropriate in highlighting the contradiction of the Zen “ethics beyond ethics” when it has to deal with concrete actions of compassion. However, I see in Cobb the tendency to reduce the broader phenomenon of Buddhism to Abe’s Zen teaching. Moreover, even toward Abe, he risks domesticating and framing the thought of his interlocutor—which is truly “other” than the Western way of thinking—in some categories that are more familiar to his own perspective, instead of being dialectically and radically questioned by it. As a matter of fact, the freedom that the nondiscriminating wisdom concedes to Buddhists is quite different from the freedom from dogmas that Cobb invokes. On the contrary, “Wisdom that is truly nondiscriminating is free even from the discrimination between “thinking” and “not-thinking,” between discrimination and nondiscrimination.” Hence, not thematizing doctrines would correspond to what Abe called “not-thinking,” “a mere negation of thinking” that “is still discriminated from thinking.” Ultimately, this is the reason for which Abe was free not only to comment but also to refer to some Christian doctrines and, without feeling the urgency to justify his position all the time, to rely on the Buddhist concepts of “Emptiness” and “dependent

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origination” as two indisputable premises for his thinking.

In “Scoop up the Water and the Moon Is in Your Hand: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic Self-Emptying,” Catherine Keller primarily intends to contribute to the interreligious exchange by denouncing and unmasking the risk of religious justification of male dominance in Christianity as well as in Buddhism. After labeling Abe’s agenda of confrontation with nihilism and scientism as “slightly anachronistic,”225 she turns to his analysis of the Christological hymn of Philippians 2, pointing out that his concept of “Emptiness” could be maintained as the foundation of compulsive self-victimization and sadomasochistic spirituality, which would be detrimental in particular to women, who under the tutelage of patriarchal religious leadership have been reduced to the role of men’s servants. In spite of this, Keller contends that Abe’s contribution is highly valuable, at least for the following reasons: first, the hermeneutic of śūnyatā (Emptiness or, better, Self-Emptying), if it is intended as the perspective from which to interpret the kenosis of Christ, can lead Christians to overcome the deification of Jesus’ masculinity. Second, unlike Christian tradition generally has done, Buddhism endorses feminist theology in contrasting any religious glorification of suffering and self-deprecation. Finally, speaking of Abe’s presentation of the dynamism of the concept of śūnyatā, she appreciates his appropriate translation with the gerundive form “self-emptying” instead of the more usual rendering “emptiness” that in English “conjured stagnation, boredom, dispersion.”226

Jürgen Moltmann’s essay is entitled “God Is Unselfish Love.” After introducing a general reflection on today’s world and the difficult context in which religions are called to meet and dialogue—a time that is characterized by the dominion of reason, science, and metaphysical

nihilism—the famous German theologian reflects on Abe’s contribution, stating that the Buddhist teaching on śūnyatā can contribute significantly to developing Christian comprehension of God’s unselfish love as self-emptying from eternity. Not only did the Son of God becoming flesh empty himself, but God himself is originally self-emptying. Christ’s death on the cross, in fact, as Moltmann demonstrates in *The Crucified God*, discloses what is proper not only to Jesus’ person but to God himself in his very essence. However, Moltmann contends that Abe’s Trinitarian vision is quite limited, since it relies basically only on Tertullian’s basic statement: *Tres personae—una substantia*. Hence, Moltmann offers a brief but very profound reflection on the Trinitarian issue, highlighting how in Christian faith what stands in the center is “the perichoretical community of the three persons” rather than “the divine substance as with Tertullian”—with all the social implications of this idea that he himself stresses in his own work *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. Given that God is community, Christian faith in the Trinity immediately connects the transcendence of God with God’s immanence in the world. Consequently, creation has to be understood not merely as a work of God, but rather as “the community of God with the world.”

In “Faith in God and Realization of Emptiness,” Schubert M. Ogden raises several objections to Abe’s proposal. Although he appreciates the Kyoto School and Abe’s involvement in discussions with modern thought and Christianity, he argues that Abe’s concept of dynamic śūnyatā is not helpful in explaining Western nihilistic ideologies; nor can it lead Christians to a better understanding of their conception of a kenotic God. In his opinion, finding a perspective that allows for “the affirmation of human reason and will, and of the reality and significance of

history is what would make a difference. In Odgen’s opinion, the arguments that Abe proposes are inadequate precisely in realizing these intentions. Furthermore, with regard to the question of the kenotic God and the Zen Buddhist interpretation of Philippians 2, the conclusions of the Japanese thinker are for him shaped more by his Buddhist pre-comprehension than by serious exegetical research. Moreover, he affirms that anyone who compares the systems of thought of Buddhism and Christianity will easily realize how much they differ: while dualism in the Buddhist view is the root of every illusion, in the Christian understanding duality is constitutive. In fact, in believing in God as unconditional love, what is intrinsically implied is actually duality. However, in Christian thought this duality is not equivalent to dualism. In Buddhist thought, on the other hand, duality is ultimately incompatible with the doctrine of “dependent co-origination,” according to which the relationships between God and world, time and history are equally “reciprocal and even reversible.” In conclusion, in Ogden’s view, Abe’s attempt to read the New Testament, although interesting, demonstrates how Christianity and Buddhism are rooted in two different metaphysical understandings that are unlikely to elucidate each other.

The essay of David Tracy, “Kenosis, Śūnyatā, and Trinity: A Dialogue with Masao Abe,” is the longest and, perhaps, the most complex intervention collected in the volume. In it, he shows how the encounter with Masao Abe and, in general, the thought of the Kyoto School has remarkably changed his way of doing theology. Starting from the neo-Thomistic perspective, shifting towards the transcendental Thomism of Rahner and Lonergan, and embracing Process Theology, Tracy has finally rediscovered the importance of the Neoplatonic tradition in Christian thought and its possible applications to current theology, particularly on the question of the Trinity.

Then, the encounter with the Buddhist vision and the discovery of some unexpected similarities with some authors of the Neoplatonic Christian tradition marked a turning point in his intellectual perspective.

After considering how today it is possible to redraw the Christian-Buddhist dialogue in consonance with modernity, Tracy reviews some major themes of Abe’s contribution by confronting the issue of dynamic śūnyatā with the conclusions of two eminent Christian thinkers of the Neoplatonic current: Eckhart and Ruysbroec. In Tracy’s opinion, while the concept of “nothingness” in Eckhart, if it is read from a Buddhist point of view, is truly intriguing and, moreover, bewildering from a Christian perspective, it is however insufficient to explain dynamically the divine reality as Trinitarian. On the contrary, the adoption of Ruysbroec’s thought, though shaped by the same apophatic influences as Eckhart’s, is more suitable for a coherent reformulation of Trinitarian dogma in sincere and, at the same time, dialectical dialogue with Buddhism. In fact, only by recognizing the inner dynamism of the self-manifesting God as Father-Son-Spirit and by avoiding recourse to a fourth “element,” the Godhead-beyond-God as in Eckhart, it is then possible dialectically to understand God’s revelation as kenosis as Abe intended.

Abe’s rejoinder is a long and complex response in which each objection that his interlocutors have raised is carefully analyzed and answered. He appreciated all the contributions, particularly those of Cobb and Tracy, which in his opinion can offer to Buddhism precious intuitions for a further and deeper development. This book stimulated in me several reflections, first of all about methodology. In the debate between Masao Abe and his Jewish and Christian interlocutors, the inner plurality of Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist views is not fully reflected. I surely appreciate the project and its primary intentions, but I consider it a first step toward a wider and more systematic dialogue. For example, too often the participants speak of “Buddhism,” not
realizing that the Buddhist tradition that Abe represents is quite particular. I think that the “ecumenical” commitment—from inside the Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist world—is the precondition of a serious interreligious dialogue. In fact, when other believers observe, for example, Christianity from the outside, they are naturally led to perceive it as a multifaceted entity, rather than a single reality: so also in the case of the Jewish and the Buddhist traditions. It is true that such a dialogue would be more complex, but this, I am convinced, is essential for understanding the real similarities and differences among these three worlds. For instance, it is inadequate to consider theism absolutely contrary to the Buddhist view, as some authors seem to contend. Neither Abe nor other Buddhist currents definitively reject theism. For example, in Pure Land Buddhism, theism melds together with the metaphysics of śūnyatā in an unexpected way. Therefore, in the case in which a different believer is tempted to highlight one aspect of the other religion that is specific to only one confession, the other denominations would naturally feel called to intervene, pointing out the risks of stereotypical or partial characterizations, and thus enriching the debate. However, the openness to be radically questioned by other religious systems, which, in general, the participants in this debate show, is really good news, particularly if we consider what Keller calls the current phenomenon of “barbaric rereligion.”

The first two parts of Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue are dedicated respectively to the Buddhist approach to interfaith dialogue, in particular with Christianity, and to the discussion of Tillich’s theology. The third contains Abe’s response to some leading Christian theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, and it also deals with the legacy of Martin Buber in the Hasidic tradition. In “God’s Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness: A Christian Response to Masao Abe,”

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Küng holds that Abe’s attempt to read Philippians 2:5–8 from a Buddhist point of view is quite problematic and, therefore, untenable. As many Christian commentators point out, the hymn of Philippians—that, most probably, was preexistent and successively incorporated in the Pauline epistle—has to be understood precisely on the basis of its own literary genre: as a piece of poetry rather than a dogmatic statement. Therefore, Abe’s reading risks transplanting Buddhist categories into the context of Paul’s exegesis without prior serious hermeneutical reflection. More radically, in the Gospel there is no mention of the kenosis of God Himself but only of the Son of God, whose humiliation is circumscribed into “a unique, historical life” rather than being “a permanent status.”

Subsequently, referring to Hegel and Heidegger—two of the main references in Abe’s discussion—Küng explains the affinity and the difference between them and the Buddhist vision on Emptiness. He concludes that, unlike in Buddhism in which Nothing seems to correspond to Ultimate Reality, both in Hegel and in Heidegger what is the truth is neither Being nor Nothing but Becoming. Further, he argues that Abe’s reference to śūnyatā as the Ultimate Reality for Buddhism is actually peculiar to his own particular vision, that of “Mādhyamika as interpreted by a specific Zen philosophy,” and it is hence not representative of the numerous and nuanced Buddhist reflections on the same theme. Finally, Küng proposes to redraw the Buddhist-Christian dialogue by acknowledging the function of the concepts of nirvāṇa, śūnyatā, and dharma as analogous to “that of the term ‘God’,” since “Buddhists do not refuse, on principle, to admit any positive statement.” Küng, here, clearly attempts to assert the validity of theism or, at least, the possibility of a “positive” description of the Ultimate Reality, on the basis of several influences: the more usual reflection on Being in Christian tradition (instead of on Nothingness as in only a

235 Küng, “God’s Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness,” 33.
236 Küng, “God’s Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness,” 39.
237 Küng, “God’s Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness,” 42.
few mystical authors); Hegel; Heidegger; and Yogācāra Buddhism.

In “Beyond Buddhism and Christianity—‘Dazzling Darkness’,”238 Abe responds to Küng’s reflections and admits that they are truly provocative. Despite this, he finds the statements of the Catholic theologian not always precise, particularly when they are concerned with Buddhist matters. For example, the distinction between Mādhyamika and Yogācāra Buddhism that Küng reports is, in his view, quite stereotypical. Moreover, the Zen idea of Emptiness does not correspond to the affirmation of Nothing as in Küng’s explanation but, on the contrary, it is a more complex concept: in embracing both fullness and emptiness, it is really the Ultimate Reality, free from any form and, at the same time, from formlessness itself.

Regarding Hegel’s and Heidegger’s preference for Becoming over either Being or Nothing, Abe states that also in Zen Becoming is pivotal, but not as the synthesis between Being and not-Being as in Western dialectics. Rather, on the basis of the Buddhist principle of pratītya-samutpāda, Abe proposes abandoning the term “Becoming” in favor of “dependent co-origination.” This is better able to describe the real synthesis between Being and Nothing: the interdependence and interpenetration of everything in the universe is the kind of synthesis that really goes beyond any duality and corresponds to a positionless position. Finally, regarding Küng’s attempt to individuate “positive” homologous categories between Christianity and Buddhism in order to define the Ultimate Reality, Abe points out that his interlocutor, in calling God “the one infinite reality,”239 is still attached to a monistic vision that Buddhism has rejected from the beginning. Rather, Buddhism is neither monistic nor pantheistic. The principle of “dependent co-origination” that is the foundation and the main characteristic of Buddha’s intuition

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239 Küng, “God’s Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness,” 42 [italics in the original].
could be adequately described as panentheism, “because immanence and transcendence are dynamically identical.”

The dialogue with Thomas J. J. Altizer is simpler but no less interesting. In it, Abe turns again to one of his favorite topics: kenotic Christology as the perspective through which one understands not only the Son of God but also God Himself, in His essence. After presenting Altizer’s notion of kenotic Christology and his endeavor to establish a systematic dialogue with Buddhism, Abe presents his own answer. Although Altizer’s appreciation of Buddhism is noteworthy and his commitment to reconstructing Christian theology “by way of an immersion in Buddhism” is truly significant, his characterization of some Buddhist motives is not free from inaccuracy. For example, while he describes Judaism and Christianity, in a linear view of time, as both aiming at an eschatological future, he contends that Buddhism and the Oriental religions are just entangled in “a process of cosmic and historical involution wherein all things return to their pristine form.” In reality, the Buddhist conception of time is quite multifaceted. To simplify, I will refer to one of the mainstream ideas: in the present moment, past and future, samsāra and nirvāṇa (which do not correspond to past and future but can be roughly described as, respectively, temporality and the timeless dimension) are perceived as separated or even in antagonistic dualism only by an unawakened mind, while in reality being united and interpenetrated. Consequently, the idea of time in Buddhism does not correspond simply to the eternal return to a primordial era; rather it is the overcoming of every “beginning” and every “end” in “the eternal now” of the current circumstance.

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240 Abe, “Beyond Buddhism and Christianity—‘Dazzling Darkness’,” 145.
Therefore, in Zen Buddhism everything is self-emptying, time included. Nevertheless, although Buddhism usually conceives an idea of history as a realized eschatology, this does not entail that the passing of time is without meaning. From the perspective of an awakened mind, since everything is realized, here and now, in its suchness, time is simply the fruit of faulty perception. But since the world is full of people who are trapped by time as an illusion that brings about suffering and distortions, the challenge of living the time is still significant from a religious point of view. If time is unessential from the perspective of wisdom, it is, however, relevant for the practice of compassion. Wisdom and compassion are the two fundamental aspects of śūnyatā, and they are so interwoven that there could not be real compassion without wisdom and vice versa.

In “Faith and Self-Awakening: A Search for the Fundamental Category Covering All Religious Life,” Abe deals with another important question: is it possible to find a fundamental category that could be recognized as the essence of every religious experience and able to embrace the numerous differences? As we have seen before, according to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, this category can be individuated in “faith.” Faith cannot be reduced only to the dimension of belief. Faith is something deeper and wider since it entails the involvement of the whole human person. Abe rejects and systematically criticizes Smith’s idea. Faith implies a relationship with the Transcendent that reproduces the I–Thou schema. In Abe’s view, this structure is intrinsically dualistic; it restates the centrality of Self and is “teleological by nature,” “future-oriented and aim-seeking.”

Therefore, not only is faith a non-comprehensive category, but the recognition of the partiality of this idea leads one to conclude that there are at least two kinds of religion and that they are incompatible—religion of faith, on the one hand, and religion of self-awakening, on the other. Subsequently, by referring to the interpretation of Trinity that he presented in The Emptying

God, which is based on “the threefold notion of ‘Lord,’ ‘God,’ and ‘Boundless Openness’,” Abe proposed “Boundless Openness” as the true all-embracing category that can describe the source and the goal of any religious quest.

Finally, the last contribution in Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue that I want to report on is “Spirituality and Liberation: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation,” which sees Abe in dialogue with Paul Knitter about spirituality and liberation. This permits the Japanese thinker to clarify the Zen conception of history, justice, wisdom, and compassion. Knitter provokes Abe’s reflection, recounting how he personally spent one of his summers sitting and meditating in a Japanese Zen monastery and later joining the Church in El Salvador and assisting the poor in their concrete need for liberation. These two different experiences generated in Knitter a dilemma: how is it possible really to reconcile meditation and action? Knitter offers his own solution to this important question: these two experiences are not contradictory in themselves; however, he adds that if it is true that, as the Buddhists believe, one cannot change the world unless he or she sits, it should be even more true that one cannot sit unless he or she changes the world. Abe answers by rejecting any contraposition between these two dimensions, which, from a Buddhist perspective, are expressions of the same reality, awakening. Then, he focuses on a pivotal point: as in Buddhism, enlightenment “has a certain epistemological priority over practice,” so “in Christianity action has a certain epistemological priority over prayer.” Nonetheless, this priority of action in Christianity cannot justify the tendency of liberation theology to consider history “the ground or source of our religious experience.” Abe suggests that, in this, liberation theology risks going beyond the authentic Christian tradition in which “God is the ground and the source of

Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue is extremely stimulating, and perhaps even more intriguing than The Emptying God. Both books present high-level discussions, but in Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue Abe’s disquisition is more sophisticated and deals not only with Christian and Western philosophical matters but also with a wider range of Buddhist teachings than in the previous work. I believe that if in this contribution Abe seems more willing to take into account the differences in thought among the major Buddhist schools, that is due to the positive stimulus from his interlocutors, above all from Hans Küng. As a result, Abe was more cautious about identifying Zen’s view and the specific view of the Kyoto school with Buddhism in general. On the other hand, he was also ready to remind his conversational partners that they cannot judge the dissimilarities within Buddhism from their Western perspective. The boundaries between the different Buddhist schools are not always well demarcated, and the contrasts are, in his view, generally less sharp than in Western philosophical and theological debates. If in this series of conversations the dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism has reached a deeper level than in The Emptying God, it means that the previous conversations have had beneficial effects: the comparison between these two volumes interestingly illustrates that becoming acquainted with others from different cultures and religions is always difficult but potentially fruitful; then, it is important to be patient with ourselves and with the interlocutors until together we identify a common ground for an effective discussion, we clarify our respective categories, and so become able to reason also from the reciprocal point of view.

The first three parts of Masao Abe: A Zen Life of Dialogue mainly focus on Abe’s biography, his spiritual and intellectual journey from Japan to the West, his first theological revelations rather than action.

encounters, and the connection between his life and his thought. Parts four and five constitute, so
to speak, the “core” of the entire book. In fact, it is precisely in these two sections that Abe’s
projects of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and comparative philosophy are deepened. A large group
of scholars illustrates and critically analyzes some important aspects of Abe’s thought: first, they
consider his teaching in relation to that of the other exponents of the Kyoto School; second, they
study how he dealt with some leading Western theologians such as Pannenberg, Küng, and Tillich.
Third, they devote attention to Abe’s interpretation of Rahner’s thought. Although Abe never met
Rahner in person, he was greatly influenced by his intellectual contribution.

It is my intention to consider now only the chapters of this volume that I consider the most
interesting. Joseph A. Bracken, S.J. in “The Abe-Pannenberg Encounter” explains that for
Pannenberg the encounter with Abe was truly significant, since it helped him to a deeper
understanding of his own Christian—and, moreover, Lutheran—faith. However, he had some
criticism to aim at his interlocutor. In his view, Abe’s emphasis on kenosis and its potential
significance for the Buddhist-Christian dialogue has been overvalued. Not only is there no mention
of the Father’s self-emptying in the Scriptures, but the concept of śūnyatā would be only an
adumbration rather than a description of Trinitarian love. However, although the dynamics of
interpersonal relationships within the Trinity are too complex to be grasped and described, the
Buddhist doctrine of śūnyatā can be consulted as a means for a deeper comprehension of the divine
nature. In this sense, śūnyatā cannot be maintained as homologous to God the Father—“that is,
one of the three divine persons”—but rather as the divine nature, what the three persons have in

248 Joseph A. Bracken, “The Abe-Pannenberg Encounter,” in Masao Abe, a Zen Life of Dialogue, ed. Donald
249 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “God’s Love and the Kenosis of the Son: A Response to Masao Abe,” in Divine Emptiness
and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation with Masao Abe, ed. Christopher Ives (Valley
common, “the principle of activity whereby the three persons exist and are dynamically related to one another.”

Leslie D. Alldritt in “Masao Abe and Paul Tillich: A Dialogue toward Love” addresses the theme of the truly significant theological exchange between Abe and Tillich. The German-American theologian was one of Abe’s favorite interlocutors. After recalling Abe’s reports on his fortunate meetings with Tillich, Alldritt summarizes the major points of the renowned Christian theologian’s response to his interlocutor. First of all, Tillich found connection with Abe in viewing the living-dying problem, with all the anxiety and the troubles that causes, as endemic and structural in human beings. Then, the human predicament from being general becomes personal since “self-estrangement and anxiety are not something accidental to the ego-self, but are inherent to its structure.” While in Tillich this dilemma is understood in terms of the separation between self and world, and self and God, in Abe it is even more foundational, deriving from the cognitive dichotomy between self and object that is inherent in the act of knowledge. For Tillich, overcoming this substantial dualism is possible, but only by grace. In the relationship with God “there is an objective and subjective side,” since one must be receptive (subjective aspect) to the movement of grace (objective aspect). However, “this objective movement cannot be coerced or created—it can be received only by grace.” Subsequently, Tillich describes the movement of grace in terms of agapē (unconditional love) in dialogue with the Zen concept of compassion: the two poles represented in Zen thought by śūnyatā and compassion find their analogues in Tillich’s emphasis on God as Love. However, the two pairs of concepts are not simply the same but rather can be

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252 Abe, Zen and Western Thought, 6 [italics in the original].
understood as complementary.

James L. Fredericks in “Masao Abe and Karl Rahner: On Traces of Dualism and Monism” evaluates the weight of Rahner’s influence on Abe’s philosophical system. For Abe, Rahner was essential for building his idea of applying the dynamics of self-emptying not only to the Son but also to the person of the Father within the Trinity. However, in his opinion, Rahner’s conception of God remains intrinsically dualistic, as the Christian conception in general does. The immanence of God in Jesus Christ cannot fully overcome the fundamental distinction between Creator and creation that is typical of the Christian worldview. Fredericks accepts Abe’s criticism, but he warns him against the risk of monism that he sees inherent in Zen. Nonetheless, it should be admitted that Zen Buddhism in general, and Abe in particular, have elaborated philosophical correctives to resist the natural tendency of Zen to decay into monism. One of these correctives is certainly Abe’s use of the adjective “dynamic” applied to Emptiness, in which it becomes clear that Emptiness is not simply the opposite of Being: “as true Emptiness is no way substantial (monistic), neither does it form a metaphysical substratum as the basis for undifferentiated totality.”

I would like to express now some personal remarks on these series of dialogues that saw Masao Abe’s thought and his interaction with some illustrious theologians at the center of scholarly attention. In general, I find Abe’s writings always intriguing and illuminating, even if they are challenging and not always easy to understand. Certainly, the difficulty of Abe’s demonstrations depends not only on the vastness of his philosophical and theological references, but also on the complexity of Zen itself, as its rich spiritual vision is often unlikely to be fully comprehended by Western philosophical categories. In particular, I would characterize this complexity as the difficulty of reconciling Zen’s insistence on spontaneity and anti-intellectualism

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with the intricacy and sophistication of its thinking. This is, I believe, what Western readers perceive of Zen as substantially “other.” In this regard, Abe affirms:

Zen is not mere anti-intellectualism. It is beyond the duality of thinking and not-thinking. It is not-thinking that, being free from the opposition between thinking and not-thinking, makes them alive and able to work freely according to each given situation. It is true that intellectual understanding cannot be a substitute for Zen’s Awakening. But practice without a proper and legitimate form of intellectual understanding is often misleading, and intellectual understanding without practice is certainly powerless.  

In these few lines, I am convinced, the mystery of Zen’s essence lies. Nonetheless, I find that in this and other similar passages, Abe’s language is quite dialectical and not free from dichotomies, despite his declared intentions. I question whether the adoption of such language is really beneficial to his purposes or, on the contrary, is counterproductive. Surely, in this critical wording choice he is driven primarily by the intention of being understood by his Western interlocutors by borrowing from them a certain philosophical language. However, he is also concerned to make Zen’s otherness stand out, so that it can be intuitively perceived by way of contrast.

I decided to dedicate so much space to the dialogue between Masao Abe and his interlocutors because I consider it an illustrative example for bilateral, comparative conversations. Some ideas presented in this series of conversations have contributed to shaping not only my view on comparative theology but, more importantly, my understanding of my own faith. I find Abe’s teaching positively provocative but also potentially subversive of my own proposal for a theological semiotics on which I base this present research. Hence, while it is my intention to respond to Abe’s challenge more systemically in the next future, I will certainly return to some of his ideas and the intuitions of his interlocutors later on in the course of the present work.

The third sub-group is constituted by those authors who, without embarking on complex methodological reflections, nevertheless manage to draw a balanced Christian comparative reading either of other religious belief systems as a whole or of just some more specific case studies. They are generally so deeply involved in dialogue and, at the same time, so attentive to the differences between the Christian faith and other religious worldviews with which they are involved, that they became quite skillful in avoiding the twofold risk that any Christian comparative endeavor generally implies: on the one hand, that of reducing the Christian faith to another system of beliefs, opening de facto to a sort of syncretistic view, and, on the other hand, that of silencing the other’s challenges or so accommodating the differences through conceptual projections or rough leveling that the interlocutor tradition is no longer recognizable in its distinctiveness. Hence, I will consider two works from Leo D. Lefebure: The Buddha and the Christ, which has become a classic in the field of comparative theology, and the more recent The Path of Wisdom: A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapada. In both these contributions, the author shows an extensive knowledge of the Buddhist tradition, but at the same time he manages to offer a comparative view by relying clearly on his Christian perspective, as he personally explains:

I am writing, as a Catholic Christian, primarily for Western Christians who may not be familiar with many Buddhist perspectives, and so at each stage of the discussion I will first present an introduction to aspects of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition and then will turn to comparison and contrast of the traditions. One of the first effects of interreligious dialogue is often a renewed appreciation of themes in one’s own tradition.

Lefebure concentrates his scholarly attention on both similarities and differences, discussing them in depth and letting them both challenge and refresh his Christian commitment.

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256 Leo D. Lefebure, The Buddha and the Christ (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).
258 Lefebure, The Buddha and the Christ, xxii.
Moreover, he does not lean toward the argument either for fundamental unity or for radical difference between these two religious traditions. Rather he strives to identify some similarities while insisting on the irreducibility of their differences. In the conclusion of the book, he even comes to question the possibility of a real mutual understanding between such very distinct worldviews as Christianity and Buddhism; however, he invokes the adoption of an apophatic approach both to theology and interreligious dialogue to fill the gap of incommensurability. Furthermore, by quoting the Gospel (Mk 10:27), he suggests interestingly that, since what by human resources may be impossible, is for God always possible, a real encounter with other religions may be accomplished thanks to God’s grace. Such an encounter can represent for Christians the opportunity not only to deepen their knowledge of God but also by grace to learn something of God’s view of the other religious paths, of their meaning, and of their values. Thus, Lefebure describes his arduous endeavor in balancing the weight of both similarities and differences:

Neither extreme of emphasizing similarity or difference to the neglect of the other can do justice to the complexity of the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. On the one hand, it is not clear that the experiences of Buddhism and Christianity are fundamentally identical, for the linguistic expressions of these experiences differ in important ways, and expressions and experience always influence each other. Nor, on the other hand, are the two traditions so different that all similarities can be dismissed as superficial.²⁵⁹

Lefebure intends to predict something general about both Christianity and Buddhism as whole systems of belief taken in comparison, but he reaches this goal by contrasting single aspects and specific themes such as the teachings of Buddha and Jesus in connection with their lives; the dynamics of ascent and descent in the Mahāyāna tradition and the corresponding reflection in Dionysius the Areopagite; Pure Land Buddhism and a Christian interaction with Shinran’s

²⁵⁹ Lefebure, The Buddha and the Christ, xxi.
thought; the question of language and its relationship with the Ultimate in Augustine and Mahāyāna Buddhism; and Gustavo Gutiérrez’s liberation theology in relation to the engaged Buddhism of the Vietnamese thinker Thích Nhất Hạnh.

In order to offer the most objective portrait possible of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Lefebure draws material, methods of analysis, and insight from the secular approaches of religion. However, being involved in actual dialogues with Buddhists and having personally practiced Buddhist meditation for decades, he is naturally encouraged to avoid the asepticism and the skepticism of the usual Western approaches to the matter of spirituality. Hence, he allows himself to be challenged and provoked by various religious voices from the Mahāyāna tradition but without losing his attachment to his faith commitment nor forgetting that he is speaking potentially to Christian readers:

We can only understand a truly different perspective on the basis of our own experience. From the point of view of Christianity, the love of God extends throughout all human experience, affecting all persons, whether they are aware of God or believe in God or not. Thus it is almost inevitable that a Christian interpret a Buddhist’s experience of enlightenment as an experience of the incomprehensible and universal reality that Christians name God. Christians, however, must be wary of forcing Buddhist experience into a preconceived Christian mold. Genuine dialogue requires us to respect another perspective on its own terms, and this often means acknowledging it as genuinely different from our own perspectives. This means envisaging possibilities that are really new to us and requires a strenuous work of the imagination.260

*The Path of Wisdom. A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapada* is even more stimulating, not just because it deals with the particularity of a single Buddhist text and engages with it from a Christian perspective, but also because it represents an exemplary model for a comparative theological project, a model that I intend to look at for my own research. The structure of the book is simple: every chapter of the *Dhammapada* is translated by Peter Feldmeier from the

Pali version, and an explanation of the Buddhist context of each literary unit is provided. The Christian responses are given by Leo Lefebure, who dynamically interacts with the *Dhammapada* by resorting to analogous statements from the biblical books of wisdom, traditional Christian literature, and Christian monastic lore. The result is an intriguing, sapiential conversation in which the tendency to highlight the point of contact more than the differences is more evident than in *The Buddha and The Christ*: “Even though the cosmological and anthropological assumptions of the Buddhist and Christian traditions are very diverse, the concrete attitudes, values, and actions recommended are often quite similar.”

The literary genre of the Christian commentary of sacred texts from other traditions finds some illustrious parallels in other spiritualities and is not unprecedented in the history of Christian theology. Among the precursors, I recall Simone Weil, Hugo Rahner, and to some extent Louis Massignon. Clooney explains the nature of this theological and literary genre as follows:

Commentary is first of all simply a responsible academic activity, sensibly requiring that one be able and willing actually to read; it is also a spiritual activity, by which one cultivates close reading as a necessary basis for further reflection and deeper insight.... Commentary requires self-effacement before the text, patience, perseverance, imagination and humble practice. Disclosing productive ways of thinking, it changes the reader as she or he is inevitably drawn into the world of the text and faced with the implications of its truths. Commentary is thus an intellectual activity that becomes a spiritual activity, a patient and long-term practice that involves the reader in the inscribed project of the text that is commented on.

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Recently, apart from Lefebure, Feldmeier, and Clooney, Christian commentaries on non-Christian sacred texts have been attempted by Catherine Cornille and her pool of scholars in the *Baghavad Gītā*, Daniel P. Sheridan in the *Nārada Sūtras*, Reid B. Locklin in Śaṅkara’s *Thousand Teachings*, and John P. Keenan and Linda K. Keenan in the *Heart Sūtra*. Coming back to *The Path of Wisdom*, particularly interesting are the introduction and the epilogue, in which some key methodological reflections are offered. First of all, about the guidelines for their translation, following Walter Benjamin’s doctrine in “The Task of the Translator,” the authors argue:

We also offer a fresh translation according to the Buddhist principle of the middle way, that is, a balance of reference points or values. The first value is that the English reader would experience the text as different…. We must let the otherness of the text challenge our own language perceptions, and expand our own linguistic sensibilities. Failure to do this borders on co-opting the text, as though it looks, sounds, and feels like it originated from the contemporary West. The West has had a history of imagining Asian texts as though their authors thought and wrote like Europeans. Thus it cannot be so Western that we forget we are encountering an ancient, classic, Asian, Buddhist text.

However, given the fact that the authors address English-speaking readers, they are careful to avoid the opposite risk: that of resorting to odd expressions out of respect for the letter but that could sound as if they were “actually operating out of the syntax and logic” of their own language. The goal of readability is never pursued to the detriment of “the principle of accuracy and fairness.” Then, to be more faithful to the spirit than the mere letter of a given text means that

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“a translation such as this ought to produce an echo of the language as well as facilitate an echo of the experience intended by the original text.”\(^\text{274}\) In conclusion, the authors express their wishes as follows:

Thus we are attempting a translation of the Dhammapada that can be both experienced as a classic, ancient, South Asian text and relatively natural English. We do not want to co-opt the otherness of the text with language choices that make sense to Western readers precisely because they are grounded in Western culture, yet we want the Western reader to feel invited into the text by an attractive translation. We want to be attentive to the \(kāvya\) [Indian classical courteous literary style] quality of some of the verses and render this quality in a way that would be appreciated in English. And finally, we desire something simple as well: clear, balanced sentences, that are pleasing to eye and ear, and can be understood in a single reading.\(^\text{275}\)

I highly appreciate the authors’ care in approaching the problem of translation with all its subtle philosophical and theological implications, both on the side of respect for the text and its correlative tradition and in regard to the readers. Hence, I can infer that the translation of a religious text from another spiritual tradition already implies an exercise in comparative theology. This intuition could sound obvious, but it is a form of caution that I have rarely seen considered in the comparative projects illustrated so far. The philological level always has theological significance, particularly when it might be a case of rendering one religious concept understandable to a Western audience, which, in spite of the high level of secularization, is still affected by its Christian heritage.

Concerning the nature of their Christian approach to the *Dhammapada*, the authors devote some illuminating words. By recalling the etymology of the word “method” from the Greek *methodos*—which, in its turn, is a combination of the words *meta* (after), and *hodos* (way)—they envision their commentary as “‘a following after’ the Buddha’s *Path of Wisdom*, from the angle

\(^{274}\) Lefebure and Feldmeier, *The Path of Wisdom*, 23.
of vision of the Christian path” and “a journey of transformation.”

Although Christians might be following different paths and heading toward a different destination than that of Buddhists, it is always possible to “converse with profit along the way with our Buddhist companions.”

Hence, to offer some instances of transforming spiritual journeys, the authors appeal to both Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* but with an important distinction: “While we will catch some glimpses of Dante’s well-ordered circles of the afterlife, we are aware, that we are not yet at our final destination and thus are, perhaps, less like Dante’s saints and sinners and more like Chaucer’s diverse, flawed, and joyous band of pilgrims.” Finally, they frame their dynamic and flexible attitude theologically as follows: “With the Second Vatican Council, we find ourselves in a pilgrim Church in dialogue with those who follow different paths.”

I consider *The Path of Wisdom* a well-balanced example of a comparative enterprise that benefits from the contributions of several disciplines—comparative theology, history of religions, philosophy, Biblical studies, etc.—without fostering dichotomous ideas but rather finding a substantial and credible homogenization among these different approaches. Moreover, the notion of pilgrimage applied to comparative theology will guide my own project. It might be taken as a method that is not as arbitrary as it could appear at first glance. On the contrary, it is flexible enough to integrate unexpected findings but sufficiently stable to follow a given plan coherently.

In conclusion, despite the lack of a systematically developed reflection on methodology—an aspect, that, on the contrary, characterizes the approach of David Tracy, one of Lefebure’s major points of reference—*The Path of Wisdom* offers a convincing model of comparative theology. It would have been interesting to see the authors not simply dialoguing with the *Dhammapada* from

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their Christian angle but reshaping a Christian theology after it. However, accomplishing this task would probably have required another book. I believe that in their comparative enterprise Lefebure and Feldmeier successfully accomplish an important task: that of avoiding the pitfalls of both simplistic reductionism and theological hegemonism, a risk that they learned to elude at two schools—the rich Christian tradition and the skillful means of the Buddha’s teaching.

Finally, among those who try to avoid dichotomies without losing focus on the specificity of the Christian faith, I should mention Stephen Duffy, who denounces the inaccuracy of any contraposition between theology of religions and comparative theology. In his view, both theology of religions and comparative theology are necessary: “neither by itself is adequate for a theology that wants seriously to bring Christianity into relation with the world’s other great religious traditions.” In particular, he thinks that a theology of religions constitutes the precondition for the very possibility of the comparative theological endeavor. More specifically, he maintains:

… theologies of the religions and comparative theologies are two essential and interrelated moments of a single undertaking, for which we currently have no agreed-upon nomenclature, though such designation may be unnecessary. Together they are, respectively, the a priori and a posteriori dimensions of our effort to interrelate Christianity and other traditions in a way that, while exploiting resources available within the Christian tradition, respects the complex particularities of other traditions, studies them for their own sake and, where possible, integrates them into our theology.

In agreement with Duffy, Kristin Beise Kiblinger adds that “comparative study is not self-justifying,” and “theology of religions is properly prior to comparative theology (even if comparative theology in turn leads to theology of religions adjustments).” Then, in responding

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281 Duffy, “A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?,” 106.
283 Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” 29.
in particular to Clooney and Fredericks, she expresses her conviction of the pressing necessity of rethinking the crucial relationship between the two disciplines in a less contrasting way. In the following passage, her main assumption is synthetically expressed:

It seems to me impossible to deeply engage others on theological matters without having some preliminary theological presuppositions about those others. Recognizing and disclosing these theology of religions leanings upfront, stipulating them clearly, is preferable to leaving them implicit, I will argue, and so I recommend this as we eagerly look to the future of comparative theology.\textsuperscript{284}

I am personally convinced that the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions must be reconsidered and that these two theological dimensions are not alternatives, but rather they demand each other as a natural development or a necessary premise. I will offer some further reflections on this crucial issue in the following chapters, where I will be approaching and evaluating Clooney’s thought more comprehensively.

For what should be a well-defined discipline, the range of positions presented above with their corresponding definitions of comparative theology might seem excessive. Even the appeal to etymology, which is sometimes the last scholarly resort for delimiting the field of a given research, seems to be useless. As already mentioned, the term “theology” can barely be applied to all religious traditions without asking for further hermeneutical reflections. Likewise, instead of disambiguating the nature and scope of theology, the adjective “comparative” opens to multiple interpretations; while it can refer to the method that a theologian applies to his subject matter, it can also hint at the possibility of comparing different kinds of theologies. Ultimately, comparativism could itself be the theme of a theological meta-theory.

\textsuperscript{284} Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” 22.
In presenting the numerous positions that presently animate the debate in comparative theology, while I have striven to be as objective as possible in my description, I have also offered some evaluations of the advantages and the limitations of any single proposal. However, a sense of discomfort could arise in my readers. In spite of having a better idea of the available range of opinions and approaches, they could still find themselves at a sort of impasse: which of the positions presented above is in our current times the most coherent or at least profitable for comparative theology? Does not preferring one solution to the others guarantee that we lose some portion of truth that those other perspectives still preserve despite their limitations? Is there some way to maintain the positive contributions of all these positions without stumbling into a relativist stance or into mere theological opportunism?

So far, we have not considered the important aspects of the timespan during which these proposals developed and the traditional authorities to whom they appeal. Although some authors insist that comparative theology is still a young discipline, I believe that, on the contrary, it is possible at least to trace it origins in modernity. Moreover, I am convinced that recovering earlier layers of comparativism in the Christian theological enterprise might help to untangle the conflicting current positions and to adjudicate among them.
Chapter II
FROM OLD TO NEW

It was in 1699: a new discipline was born; a discipline whose aims and scopes were not fully clear but whose great potential was, so to speak, already fixed on the paper for the centuries to come. In the eyes of James Garden, author of *Comparative Theology; or The True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology: A Subject Very Necessary, though Hitherto Almost Wholly Neglected*, one thing was quite certain: the fact that comparative theology should have been distinct from its respective counterpart, absolute theology. While the latter was defined as “that knowledge of religion which … considers its object only as revealed and enjoined, or instituted by God; and its business is, to find out those things which are proposed to us in the Scriptures to be believed or practiced, and to discern and distinguish them from all others,” the former was announced as “the respective knowledge of religion” which “ponders the weight or importance, and observes the order, respect and relation of things belonging to religion; whether they be points of doctrine, or precepts, or sacred rites; and teaches to distinguish and put a difference between the *accessories* of religion and the *principals*, the *circumstantial* and *substantials*, the *means* and their *ends*."

Very little is known of James Garden (1645–1726) except that he was a minister of the Church of Scotland, earned his doctorate of divinity at King’s College in Old Aberdeen, and before being deprived of his chair, probably for having refused his allegiance to King William and Queen Mary of England, taught theology for some years there. To his students he addresses the

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286 Garden, *Comparative Theology*, 3–4 [italics in the original].
only written work we know of him, apart from his correspondence to the famous philosopher and
pioneer in prehistoric archeology John Aubrey, which is collected and kept at the Bodleian Library
in Oxford and shows his progressive attitude and interests in prehistoric antiquity, archeology, and
anthropology.288

The publisher of the original Latin version presents Comparative Theology; or The True
and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology to the public with enthusiastic words:

There be many who have written of Absolute Theology, and that oft-times to little purpose;
but I have never heretofore met with any who have treated of Comparative Theology. When
by chance I happened first to read this discourse, it did appear so excellent, the subject so
necessary, and treated withal in that saving way, which is not common, that I thought the
making of it publick would be a good office done to all who aspire after solid knowledge
in Christianity and divine things.289

But what makes this work so new in the eyes of its publisher? Perhaps, the kind of
enthusiasm that he shows could be due more to commercial purposes than academic reasons;
nevertheless, Garden’s essay is certainly interesting and deserving of much attention. Although it
treats questions that are related to the intra-Christian rather than the interreligious sphere,
Comparative Theology; or The True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology
anticipates something relevant to the more recent proposals of comparative theology in relation to
its subject and method. The main reason Garden addresses his proposal of comparative theology
to his students is to isolate from the bulk of the Christian faith its core, the most eminent, primary,
and original truth from which all the articles of faith and other aspects of religion descend:

Although all the parts of the Christian religion do agree in this, that they are revealed and
enjoined by God; and also, that they are directed to the glory of God and the salvation of
men: yet they are not all of the same weight and importance; but being weighed in the
balance of a sound judgment, some of them are found to be more weighty than others.290

288 MS Aubrey 12, ff. 122 ff; see also John Britton, Memoir of John Aubrey: Embracing His Auto-Biographical
Sketches, A Brief Review of His Personal and Literary Merits, and An Account of His Works (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2014).
289 Garden, Comparative Theology, iii–iv.
290 Garden, Comparative Theology, 1–2
Garden individuates this core in the love of God and judges the parts of Christian religion, precepts, and the traditional means of salvation on the basis of their efficacy in recovering this one truly necessary thing that human beings have lost because of their sin: precisely God’s love. Garden classifies them in three ranks: first, things that “are necessary and withal sure and infallible” such as “faith in Jesus Christ the Mediator; repentance, the mortifying of the corrupt nature, or the old man; the renouncing of the world with all its pompoms and vanities; and, finally, the weaning of the heart from the impure love of the world and all the creatures”; second, other things that “are indeed necessary, but not sure and infallible” such as “the holy Scriptures which… are simply necessary, that men may attain to the knowledge of such things as it concerns them to know and practice, in order to their salvation”; and third, other things again that “finally are neither sure and infallible, nor absolutely and indispensible necessary” such as “Pastors, religious societies or Churches, Sacraments, publick Worship, Ecclesiastical Polity or Church-discipline.”

After introducing the subject of his writing and on that basis distinguishing “absolute” from “comparative” theology, Garden alludes to one crucial reason that pushed him to undertake this important task:

the corrupt and dangerous state of the Christian Church at present is in a great degree owing to the want of this comparative knowledge of religion, or of a due regard had to it. For, that among all sects and parties of Christians, true piety is neglected, and divine charity and brotherly love are waxed cold… that some religious rites and ceremonies are pertinaciously retained by some Christians, and as obstinately rejected by others; that they are at peace with vice and vicious persons, while they wage a cruel war with error and erring persons.

In the background of Garden’s work there are therefore the conflicts among Christians that

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291 Garden, *Comparative Theology*, 51–54 [italics in the original].

292 Garden, *Comparative Theology*, 5–7 [italics in the original].
stained Europe with blood, particularly after the various Reformation movements beginning from
the sixteenth century onward and the wars of religion that saw Christians separated in multiple
sects and denominations fighting each other. Once again the ecumenical “predicament” reappears
in these pages, and I think that it is truly telling that the comparative urgency re-emerged in
modernity first in the intra-Christian discourse and only later extended to the interreligious domain
but with similar presuppositions and intentions, as Clooney cleverly notes:

Garden was thinking of intra-Christian and not interreligious differences, but it is
interesting that even at its earliest mention “comparative theology” was the discipline by
which to identify and privilege common ground; this usage is predictive of some of the
more hopeful and vital comparative work that has appeared ever since.293

Although Garden’s work does not present, strictly speaking, any comparative analysis of
the differences in belief of the various Christian denominations and simply aims at evaluating the
parts of what he considers the standard Christian religion in accordance with their weight and
relevance in the economy of the divine revelation, his endeavor presupposes some previous
comparative investigations. Precisely the encounter with the faithful from different churches and
the clash of their contradictory beliefs push Garden to question in depth his conception of the
Christian religion and to present to his students a theological common “platform” on which all
Christians can build their consensus. In sum, Garden’s lesson remains valid: the scandal of
diversity can bring as an unexpected positive outcome—other than the atrocity of violence—the
reappropriation and the deepening of one’s own faith.

But when in the history of Western thought did the comparative attention communicate
from the ecumenical sphere to the interreligious sphere? To answer this question, I think it is better
to pause before on another correlative issue. After considering Garden’s work, one of the first

293 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 31.
instances of comparative theology, its singular form and configuration, it is crucial to investigate
the reasons for which comparative theology made its appearance between the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries and what cultural conditions made this emergence possible. I believe that in
this case the individuation of relations of cause and effect is highly problematic and perhaps
doubtable. Hence, I think it is easier to focus our attention on that cultural atmosphere that, step
by step, made the comparative attitude needful in the intellectual endeavor in general and
eventually in theology as well. In the history of Western thought we can see a recurrent cultural
phenomenon with two movements that are like the systole and the diastole in the heart of
scholarship’s development: periods of large systematization of the disciplines in accordance with
a coherent schema or hierarchy yield ground to periods of dissolution of such conceptual
infrastructures in search for more innovative paths of research and less constrained views. Usually,
the first of these two movements is characterized by the stress on synthesis, a multidisciplinary
effort and the search for the correspondences among the macro-levels of knowledge; the opposite
movement is conversely more marked by the expertise of analysis, monographic focuses, and
fragmentation of interests. Then, in between this fluctuation, an interstice generally fits to bridge
the two motions: the taste for hybridism that often leads to syncretistic proposals that derivatively
demand the need for some further systematizations.

This is what I see happened in that large span of time from the end of Middle Ages to the
Enlightenment. As previously noted, the taste for hybridism was already present in the Middle
Ages but emerged with particular strength in the fifteenth century, and from then it was one of the
most typical aspects, if not the quintessence, of humanism. To realize this, it is sufficient to recall
here some relevant figures such as Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), Juan de Segovia (?–ca 1458),
Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), Melchior Cano (1509–60), and Federico Borromeo
Marsilio Ficino is perhaps the most relevant Italian philosopher and theologian of any time. He is renowned for his broad interests in numerous disciplines, linguistics, philosophy, theology, medicine, and astrology and his profound knowledge of Greek and Latin authors. His translations and comments of the classics, primarily Plato and Plotinus, are like milestones in the history of Western culture. He was the advocate of a renewed Neoplatonic orientation in philosophy and a supporter of the application of this perspective in theology as well.\textsuperscript{294}

Among the Renaissance Christian thinkers, the Spanish theologian Juan de Segovia is one of the most neglected, but his attempt in \textit{De mittendo gladio in Saracenos} to confute Islam with the weapons of scrupulous philological work, and thanks to his collaboration on better translations for the Qur’ān, remains legendary.\textsuperscript{295}

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was one of the most illustrious Christian humanist intellectuals, and his vast erudition and syncretistic approach is well recognizable in his work, especially in \textit{De hominis dignitate oratio}. Versed in numerous languages, among them Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, he drew material from pagan, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers and resorted to the Kabbalistic doctrine to develop and strengthen his Christian theological discourse. Initially charged with heresy by Pope Innocent VIII, after fleeing to France and being imprisoned there, he eventually found protection in Florence under the patronage of Lorenzo de’ Medici, where he was also absolved of any charge by Pope Alexander VI.\textsuperscript{296}


\textsuperscript{295}Johannes de Segovia, \textit{De gladio divini spiritus in corda mittendo Sarracenorum} (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012); see also Anne Marie Wolf, \textit{Juan de Segovia and the Fight for Peace: Christians and Muslims in the Fifteenth Century} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

\textsuperscript{296}Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, \textit{Oratio de hominis dignitate} (Stuttgart: Reclam 2009); see also Eugenio Garin, \textit{Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola: vita e dottrina} (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e di Letteratura, 2011).
The Spanish theologian Melchior Cano, though quite rigorist on the question of the salus Indorum, as his controversy with Domingo de Soto (1495–1560) well shows, was the inspirer of a new wave in theology. With his *De locis theologicis*, he was among the first to offer criteria for recognizing the authorities for theology, broadening the spectrum of tenable sources and arranging them according to a more coherent hierarchy: apart from the sources of Scriptures, tradition, and the Church’s magisterium, Melchior Cano opens the door to other references such as theologians, philosophers, scientists, and historians. The time for accepting into the theological discourse the beliefs and the traditions from other religions is evidently still far off; however, Melchior Cano with his analysis and criticism of the sources de facto lays the foundations for the future introduction of other religious worldviews into Christian theologizing.

Federico Borromeo, cousin of the more renowned St. Charles Borromeo, was bishop of Milan for 36 years starting from 1595 and was the founder of the famous Ambrosian Pinacotheca with its school of art and, above all, the Ambrosian Library, one of the most excellent cultural centers of Europe in the sixteenth century. He collected rare and precious manuscripts from all over the world written in numerous languages—Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, Ethiopian, Persian, and Chinese—and instituted the academia of doctors, a board of researchers, usually chosen from among the intellectual elite of the Milanese clergy, to study this rare material, to edit and publish some printed versions of these manuscripts, and to establish fruitful intellectual exchanges with the European intellectuals in general. Federico himself was in touch with many scholars, scientists, and missionaries, as his correspondence shows. He perfectly represented the figure of a humanistic churchman whose legendary prodigality in pastoral care, following the example of his sainted cousin Charles, was matched with an impressive open-mindedness and

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297 Melchior Cano, *De locis theologicis* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2006); see also Angelo Scola, “Chiesa e metodo teologico in Melchior Cano,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 9, no. 2 (1973).
erudition. In this, he offered a model of the ecclesiastic dignitary in the Counter-Reformation era that was quite alternative to that of one of his most celebrated contemporaries, Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, who was a champion of the Catholic faith in the theological controversies against protestants and Anglicans and the protagonist of some of the most debated trials of his time, those against Galileo Galilei, Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella.

It is particularly interesting to observe how the desire for hybridism and the curiosity toward other cultural and religious worlds that strongly characterized Europe in the modern era found echo also in the works of the major reformers: Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. If both Calvin’s and Zwingli’s positions are polarized into two different opposites, Luther, despite his strong apologetic tendency, represents a sort of middle way. Zwingli in his influential work On the Providence of God clearly manifested his humanistic inspiration in expressing his conviction about the salvation of some illustrious pagan figures and thinkers. In their human business and intellectual endeavors, they were able to embody a purity of heart that Zwingli affirms cannot be seen in those who pretend to be Christians, such as the Pontiff and his followers. Thus, he maintains:

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For nothing prevents God from choosing from among the heathen men to revere Him, to honor Him, and after death to be united to Him. For his election is free. I certainly, if the choice were given me, should prefer to choose the lot of Socrates or Seneca, who, though they knew not the one Deity, yet busied themselves with serving Him in purity of heart, than that of the Roman pontiff who would offer himself as God if there were only a bidder at hand…. For though those heathen knew not religion in the letter of it and in what pertains to the sacraments, yet as far as the real thing is concerned, I say, they were holier and more religious than all the little Dominicans and Franciscans that ever lived.³⁰³

On the other hand, Calvin is thoroughly consistent throughout his production in defending the exclusivist idea that no salvation exists apart from Christ and his unique mediation. Not only in the Institutes of the Christian Religion³⁰⁴ but also in the Commentaries, the Treatises, the Tracts, and his Letters, Calvin emphasizes the unsurpassable, ultimate nature of Christ’s mediation as the only access to God and salvation.³⁰⁵ Any other religious representation, though it may be based on the inner human religious sentiment, cannot but eventually correspond to a sort of idolatry that must be denounced and rejected. Accordingly, in the Institutes, Calvin contends:

All the more vile is the stupidity of those persons who open heaven to all the impious and unbelieving without the grace of him who Scriptures commonly teaches to be the only door whereby we enter into salvation [John 10:9]…. No worship has ever pleased God except that which looked to Christ.³⁰⁶

Compared to Luther’s asystematic and impulsive way of proceeding, Calvin’s consistency is due essentially to his firm anchoring on the connection of two doctrines: the original sin and double predestination. If after the fall all human beings became unable to reach God authentically on the sole basis of their creatural dynamism and relation with the world, predestination discriminates between those on whom God in his mercy and absolute freedom destined to salvation

³⁰⁶ Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 341–42.
and those who are rather condemned. However, in Calvin’s view, predestination neither contradicts nor invalidates the necessity of the gospel announcement. Rather, as Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen clarifies, the eventuality that someone has not even had the opportunity to receive the gospel announcement, this would simply signify that “God has predestined them to eternal damnation.”

Luther’s attitude was definitively multifaceted: from a ferocious aggressiveness toward Jews, Turks, and pagans in general—with the papists and Christian fanatics having comprised this group—to some unexpected openness with regard to Muslims and the Qur’an in particular, he came to conceive and express a truly complex position toward the other believers and their creeds. In the Large Catechism, he firmly holds that “outside the Christian Church (that is, where the Gospel is not) there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness.” Apparently, in such a terse and unequivocal statement, there is no room for either exceptions or free interpretations. Nonetheless, while Luther’s attitude toward the Jews remained constantly derogatory and even abusive, as we can easily realize from the reading of the notorious work On the Jews and Their Lies (1543) and the not-less-offensive sermon Warning against the Jews (1546), he conceived the idea of an “accidental mercy” through which God could have possibly spared some meritorious people outside of the history of salvation: “In this manner Naaman, the King of Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-Merodach, and others from among the Gentiles were saved by accidental mercy.”

Luther’s consideration of the religion of the Turks and their sacred book holds for us more surprises. Apart

307 Kärkkäinen, An Introduction to the Theology of Religions, 77.
309 Martin Luther, Von den Juden und ihren Lügen (München: Ludendorffs Volkswarte-Verlag, 1932); Martin Lutero, Contro gli Ebrei, trans. Attilio Agnoletto (Milano: Terziaria, 1997).
from the multiple references that are scattered throughout his production, he dedicated a series of
writings to these themes, which I list below:

- *Sermon Against the Turks* (1529)
- *On War Against the Turk* (1529)
- *Preface to Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (1530)
- *Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks* (1541)
- *Refutation of the Alcoran of Brother Richard, Preaching Order* (1542)
- *Preface to Theodor Bibliander’s edition of the Qur’ān* (1543)

It has generally been maintained that Luther’s characterization of Islam is just stereotypical
because he did not have access to primary sources, apart from a translation of the Qur’ān, and he
had access only to second-hand information on the costumes of the Turks. Nonetheless, Adam
S. Francisco warns us that:

Luther’s approach towards Islam was much more theological and apologetic than is
generally acknowledged. As such, his thoughts and writings on the Turks and their religion
deserve more attention in the history of Christian perceptions of and responses to Islam,
for, in his unique attacks on Islam as well as his assimilation of apologetic material from
previous centuries, he put forward his own subtly-nuanced approach towards the Muslim
world.

While Luther is often unpleasant toward the Islamic movement, those unexpected
expressions of appreciation in particular toward the Turks that from time to time come to surface
in his debates cannot be simply imputed to his “key theological concern for Christian
repentance.” The Turks are praised by Luther not simply for being somehow the instrument of

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314 Henrich and Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” 250.
the divine wrath through which God calls the world to repentance but also because in their habits and their beliefs, they are the bearer of values that, at least for the sake of truth, one should not avoid recognizing. Accordingly, Luther affirms:

Indeed, those who only censure and condemn the base and absurd characteristics of the enemy but remain silent about matters that are honest and worthy of praise do more harm than good to their cause. What is easier than to condemn things that are manifestly base and dishonest (which in fact refute themselves)? But to refute good and honest things that are hidden from sight, that is to further the cause, that is to lift up and remove the scandal, to despoil the messengers of their counterfeit image of the light and to render them appropriately hateful because of their base plundering of the light.  

It is evident here that the main target of criticism is not simply the Islamic movement but primarily the papists and what Luther judges as their inappropriate and dishonest apologetics. What is more, recalling that “the religion of the Turks or Muhammad is far more splendid in ceremonies” besides “the modesty and simplicity of their food, clothing, dwellings, and everything else, as well as the fasts, prayers, and common gatherings of people” has the purpose, first, of putting to shame the liturgical apparatus of the Pope’s courtesans and then unmasking their ambitions that contradict the Gospel: “The Christian religion is by far something other and more sublime than showy ceremonies, tonsures, hoods, pale countenances, fasts, feasts, canonical hours, and that entire show of the Roman church throughout the world.” In directly addressing the Pope’s followers, Luther thus concludes: “Here you see that the splendor of your ceremonies is no splendor at all alongside the excellent splendor of the Turks and that your customs are clearly an abomination when compared to theirs.” Hence, though for apologetics reasons and primarily in order to contrast the papist ecclesiology, the interest in the Muslim tradition managed to sneak into Luther’s

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315 Henrich and Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” 259.
316 Henrich and Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” 259.
317 Henrich and Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” 259.
318 Henrich and Boyce, “Martin Luther – Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” 259–60 [italics mine].
theological discourse in a striking comparative fashion.

The comparative interest that will become a consolidated philosophical perspective only in the nineteenth century—comparativism—is in a way the quintessence of the modern era. Moreover, it is the necessary outcome of the clash of worldviews that progressively come to offer alternative if not opposing views of reality. Unlike the Middle Ages, in which the encounter with the other was in some way mediated by some solid common cosmological and philosophical perspectives, here the collision with unprecedented ways of describing the universe and the human condition undermined the efforts of the traditional religions to offer a plausible and sharable metaphysical basis. Already within the humanist movement and especially later in the period of the Enlightenment, the encyclopedic need to collect, classify, and systematize an increasing number of sciences is the sign of the emergence of dissimilar teleologies that are hard to reconcile. However, the collection of such heterogeneous material in only one literary “container” like the encyclopedic works, the histories of humanity, or the “universal treatises” that proliferate already in the humanistic period, follow the analogous ancient models in Greek and Latin literature and previous illustrious medieval examples.\(^{319}\) Only later these kinds of monumental works will take on the actual form of the encyclopedic dictionary as we see in Diderot and d’Alambert’s impressive enterprise.\(^ {320}\) In any case, what is worth remarking here is that precisely this renewed encyclopedic interest generated the occasion to compare distant geographical and ideological worlds. To cite some wonderful examples, the *De expetendis et fugiendis rebus*\(^ {321}\) by Giorgio Valla (ca. 1447–


Margarita philosophica\textsuperscript{322} by Gregor Reisch (1467–1525); Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta\textsuperscript{323} by Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638); and Trattato universale. Descrittione et sito de tutta la Terra sin qui conosciuta\textsuperscript{324} by Urbano Monte (1544–1613), completed in 1590 and kept in the library of the Seminary of Milan in Venegono Inferiore. Apart from the numerous maps in watercolor of the known areas of earth at that time, it present detailed and learned reports on the customs and habits of the peoples of the world.

That the comparative attitude is the quintessence of modernity is perceivable on multiple levels. On the philosophical level, humanism and the Enlightenment, despite their conspicuous differences, are movements of thought that, as we saw before, find in encyclopedism a common trait. In both cases, the coexistence of various plausible worldviews postulated by the numerous sciences that developed in the modern era as autonomous disciplines with their own methods demanded the adoption of a comparative perspective. To offer an illustrative example, it is sufficient here to recall the famous Galileo affair. In his defense we find expressed an important principle: theology and science have the same right to predict something about the cosmos from the point of view of their specific perspectives, which have equal standing because they intercept different aspects of reality. Moreover, God’s Word cannot be understood and read as a treatise on the origins and structure of the universe. Rather, God’s Word must be investigated in accordance with the hermeneutical principles that are proper to it, and that the Fathers of the Church in their sophisticated distinction of the multiple levels of Scriptural meaning were already able to

\textsuperscript{322} Gregor Reisch, Margarita philosophica (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 2002).
\textsuperscript{323} Johann Heinrich Alsted, Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta (Herbornae Nassoviorum: Typis G. Corvini, 1630).
individuate.\textsuperscript{325}

New geographic and astronomical discoveries contributed considerably to fragmenting the unitary medieval cosmological view and stimulating the dreamlike idea that other possible worlds can coexist next to ours. After all, the profusion of utopian proposals of perfect societies that we see proliferating in this period in philosophy, literature, and art is the logical outcome of a dramatic new acquisition that these discoveries brought about: not only are we Western humans not the only ones in this universe, but neither are we in the middle of it. In some way, the utopian views of Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella and even the sardonic prospects of Voltaire in \textit{Candide}\textsuperscript{326} are per se comparative since they intend to stimulate in their readers the consideration and the evaluation of the differences and similarities between their actual societies and the alternative models they propose.\textsuperscript{327} The geographic discoveries had the consequence of increasing not only comparative studies in botany and zoology but also clearly an ethnographic interest in the physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual characteristics of newly discovered peoples, particularly on the American continent.\textsuperscript{328} Their original and pristine religious sentiment provoked animated debates among the missionaries and the theologians of this era, particularly Domingo de Soto (1495–1560), Andreas de Vega (1490–1549), Melchior Cano (1509–60) and Domingo Bañez (1528–1604) from the school of Salamanca.\textsuperscript{329} Their discussions, which are remembered in historiography as the question of the \textit{salus Indorum}, were centered on the human dignity of

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\textsuperscript{326} Voltaire, \textit{Candid or the Optimist}, vols. 1–2 (London: W. Mason, 1823).
\textsuperscript{329} See Ilaria Morali, “The Early Modern Period,” in \textit{Catholic Engagement With World Religions}; see also Luis E. Rodríguez and San Pedro Bezares, \textit{The University of Salamanca from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance} (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2013).
\end{flushleft}
Indians, the value of their religious traditions and the problem of their possible salvation, and the relation between, on the one hand, the sufficiency of the natural understanding of God and generally of innate religious sentiments and, on the other, the necessity of faith.

On the other side of the globe, the Jesuit missions expanded toward the East and not only propagated the Gospel till the ends of the earth but promoted interesting spiritual encounters and enculturation processes with the cultures and religions of the newly evangelized peoples until these courageous experiments were abruptly stopped from 1645 with the so-called controversy over the Chinese rites.\(^{330}\) However, the writings of these missionaries are full of fascinating accounts of their travels and evangelization efforts and often present comparative discussions on theology, philosophy, and religion. They had enviable success already in Leibniz and among Enlightenment intellectuals such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and later Chateaubriand, who saw in them not only a collection of precious information but also an instance of unprecedented forms of cultural mediation. To name just a few of these missionaries, St. Francis Xavier (1506–52) was perhaps the most famous Jesuit after the founder; he travelled extensively in India, Borneo, Japan, and other areas. For India, I recall Thomas Stephens (1549–1619); Jean Venance Bouchet (1655–1732); Costantine Beschi (1680–1747); Jean Calmette (1692–1740); and in particular Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), Roberto de Nobili (1579–1656), and Gaston-Laurant Coeurdoux (1691–1777), whose works are extremely interesting for current comparative theologians for their deep analysis of the Hindu religions and comparison with the Christian, Greek, and Roman religious heritage they present. For Southeast Asia, I mention Cristoforo Borri (1583–1632), whose

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Relatione 331 represents the first Western report on Vietnam, as well as Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660), Giovanni Filippo de Marini (1608–82), and Joseph Tissaner (1618–88). For China and Tibet, how can we forget the impressive enterprises of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733)? Both these missionaries are still celebrated today among the most impressive Christian authors of any time. 332 Their works deserve special attention. In particular, for today’s comparative theology two works from Ricci are of paramount importance: *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* 333 and his first work in Chinese, *On Friendship*, 334 both of which offer and indirectly stimulate some important comparative reflections between Christianity and the various Chinese forms of religiosity and tradition, besides some important insight on Ricci’s evangelization strategies.

The modern era, besides being a period of renewed evangelization efforts, was also a time of harsh contrasts and religious wars. After the *Reconquista*, the *moriscos* were definitively expelled from Spain, which consequently embraced Catholicism as the religion of State and a symbol of identity. 335 In the East, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Turks continued their policy of expansion, pressed Europe on its eastern borders, and tried to impose their supremacy and control on the traditional trade routes that used to connect Europe with Asia. The battle of Lepanto (1571) and the victory of the Holy League of Spain, Venice, Rome, and other

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Italian states soon became the religious symbol of the victory of Christianity over Islam, as the cult of Our Lady of the Rosary that spread after it well shows.\(^{336}\) However, the modern era is above all a time of inner struggles and theological conflicts within Christianity, particularly due to the subsequent movements of Reformation that started from 1517. The symbolic date when Luther, as tradition says, nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Schloßkirkhe in Wittenberg troubled the whole of Europe. The consequences of this turmoil were considerable on both the philosophical and the social levels. As I previously noted in presenting Garden’s thought, the division of the societas Christiana among various confessions and sects brought about the necessity for Christians to search for a shared theological basis on which to found a more tolerant society. The emergence of the deist proposal, the recovery of the idea of natural religion, and the doctrine of natural law must be eventually attributed to this necessity.\(^{337}\)

The idea of tolerance, the relativizing of the weight of dogmas, and the emphasis on ethics were some of the most investigated philosophical themes that the humanists before and the Enlightenment intellectuals later came up with to cope with the problem of religious violence. While inquisitorial trials, charges of heresy, and condemnations continued to stain the European states with blood without regard to their different confessional belongings— with a certain obstinacy also on the part of those Reformed groups that originally emerged to contrast the obscurantism of the previous religious jurisdictions—humanist thinkers like Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) began to preach tolerance, clemency, and patience as sure weapons to counter the Catholic obsession with heresy, Protestant intransigence, and the Turkish threat.\(^{338}\)

\(^{336}\) See Jack Beeching, La battaglia di Lepanto (Milano: Bompiani, 2006).
promotion of tolerance soon became a *leitmotiv* in philosophy, theology, and politics, as is witnessed in the works of French *politiques* like Michel de L’Hospital (1503–73) and other thinkers such as Sébastien Castellion (1515–63), Sebastian Franck (1499–1542/43), Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert (1522–90), Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), Roger Williams (1603–83), William Penn (1644–1718), Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), Voltaire (1694–1778), Kant (1724–1804), Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), and to some extent also John Locke (1632–1704). On this basis, works like Coornhert’s *Synod on the Freedom of Conscience*, which, under the mask of fiction, promotes the ecumenical encounter of Christians, were not only made possible but also multiplied especially in the eighteenth century. By following the model of Cusanus’s *De pace fidei*, Coornhert’s *Synod* presents discussions in the city of Vryburgh (“Freetown”) among some illustrious representatives of the Catholic Church—Melchior Cano, Stanislaus Hosius, and Ruard Tapper, and some Reformed delegates—Calvin, Beza, Brenz, and Bullinger, in front of the divine judge Daniel. Precisely the insistence on the theme of tolerance permits Coornhert to build a theological platform that promotes both the recognition and the comparative assessment of the differences and similarities among the Christian confessions.

In conclusion, comparative theology as a new and autonomous science appeared only in the late modern era, in particular in the lead-up to the Enlightenment, with the various attempts to rethink theology in light of the modern idea of science that characterized this fruitful period of time. If this is true, however, it is important to remember that these endeavors based themselves

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on solid foundations and in continuity with the previous Renaissance investigation of other religious traditions and natural curiosity for diversity, as well as long before with the Patristic and medieval reflections on these matters. Hence, although it would be interesting to find some parallel comparative efforts in the production of other religious worlds in the same period and pause on them, it is sufficient here to say that comparative theology is certainly the daughter of Western culture but is also the result of the osmotic exchange and positive interaction with other religious worldviews.

The Establishment of Comparative Theology

Comparative theology was just born and soon found its life at risk: the Age of Enlightenment saw, on the one hand, a renewed stimulus toward a more embracing comparative effort, on the basis of the encyclopedic project; on the other hand, it was marked by a form of skepticism toward religion that began to be perceived as provocative and as subversive of the established order. This was due to multiple factors: the increasing criticism toward ecclesiastical institutions progressively transmuted into a more general disillusionment toward all religions, with their conflictual contrapositions, and a form of skepticism toward the plausibility of the classical metaphysical systems of thought on which various apologetics had founded the truthfulness of their respective creeds; the proclamation of the victory of reason over any form of superstition; the emergence of the idea of science as founded on the experimental basis and the idea of falsification; and the primacy of the individual over all authorities and hierarchies of any kind.

Conversely, the romantic era constituted the natural humus in which some new, courageous experiments in comparison were attempted. Romanticism had a special fascination regarding nature, human feelings and, in particular, the innate, universal sense of infinity, prophecy, art, and inspiration; as well as the person of Christ and other founders of religious movements, it stimulated
a renewed interest toward religion and its related dimensions. In this kind of cultural environment, the so-called older comparative theology was able to grow and progress. It would not be proper to speak of an established school at this stage of the discipline’s development. However, several works started to appear in various intellectual environments from Europe to America that displayed some explicit references to the expression “comparative theology,” either in their titles or in the body of their texts.

Before presenting the major authorities of the older comparative theology, however, we should pause for a while on three authors who deserve to be mentioned here. They were truly three pioneers who, although undoubtedly moved by some clear apologetic intentions, strove to establish a more rational and systematic examination of world religions: the German Johann Sebastian von Drey (1777–1853),\(^{342}\) the British Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72),\(^{343}\) and the American James Freeman Clarke (1810–88).\(^{344}\) Von Drey, the celebrated founder of the School of Catholic Theology in Tübingen, dealt with the crucial difference between Christianity and other religions in several of his contributions. From his time onward, von Drey’s main idea had great success in many Christian apologetic representations of world religions: while the non-Christian traditions merely correspond to national cults, Christianity and especially the Catholic Church present, even


\(^{343}\) Frederick Denison Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1854); see also Herbert George Wood, *Frederick Denison Maurice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

if imperfectly, the characteristics of the universal religion that transcends all particularities.

Maurice’s main contribution is also based on a similar standpoint. However, his research on a more phenomenological approach to the study of the other religions appears better documented. Maurice was professor at King’s College in London and was later appointed to Cambridge University. In 1847, he published a series of lectures on the theme of world religions under the illustrative title *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity.*\(^{345}\) The tone of these lectures is manifestly controversial: Maurice’s intention was to investigate what he calls the “most prevailing forms of unbelief”\(^{346}\) of his day to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity by contrast. This is well attested by the following passage. Here, the gist of the author’s view on other religions seems to me symptomatically expressed:

Do not *all* demand another ground than the human one? Is not Christianity the consistent asserter of that higher ground? Does it not distinctly and consistently refer every human feeling and consciousness to that ground? Is it not *for this reason* able to interpret and reconcile the other religions of the earth? Does it not in this way prove itself to be *not* a human system, but the Revelation, which human beings require?\(^{347}\)

Hence, for Maurice, if Christianity is the only true religion, this is primarily because it is a faith that does not merely boast of being for the whole of humanity but actually *is* “for men, here and everywhere.”\(^{348}\) Similarly to the religions of older civilizations—like those of the Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Goths, which all perished—the existing traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam are too tied to some regional milieus to be able faithfully to correspond to the true faith, “which must belong, not to races or nations, but to mankind.”\(^{349}\) Similar ideas also occur in James Freeman Clarke’s treatise *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in*

\(^{345}\) Frederick Denison Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1854).

\(^{346}\) Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*, 257.

\(^{347}\) Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*, 257 [italics in the original].

\(^{348}\) Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*, 262.

\(^{349}\) Maurice, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*, 256.
Comparative Theology, which is a more sophisticated and truly monumental work that deserves special consideration.

James Freeman Clarke (1810–88) was a Unitarian minister, an adjunct professor of religion at Harvard, and a prolific author. During his life, he managed to publish 32 books and a vast number of articles. He is renowned for his battles against slavery and his influential connections both in the intellectual and political spheres. His masterpiece is without doubt Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology, a work in two volumes. Here he presents the object and the aims of his endeavor:

The present work is what the Germans call a Versuch, and the English an Essay, or attempt. It is an attempt to compare the great religions of the world with each other. When completed, this comparison ought to show what each is, what it contains, wherein it resembles the others, wherein it differs from the others; its origin and development, its place in universal history; its positive and negative qualities, its truths and errors, and its influence, past, present, or future, on the welfare of mankind. For everything becomes more clear by comparison. We can never understand the nature of a phenomenon when we contemplate it by itself, as well as when we look at it in its relations to other phenomena of the same kind. The qualities of each become more clear in contrast with those of the others. By comparing together, therefore, the religions of mankind, to see wherein they agree and wherein they differ, we are able to perceive with greater accuracy what each is.

Clarke organizes his treatise in two paths of investigation that cover the length of the two volumes: analytical and synthetic. In the first part, after dedicating some space to presenting the nature and the value of comparative theology and before starting his long and detailed analysis of the ten religions, Clarke pursues two important objectives: first, criticizing the strictness of the classic Christian apologetic approach for its tendency to debase the worth of the other religions;

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351 See Arthur S. Bolster, James Freeman Clarke, Disciple to Advancing Truth (Boston: Beacon Press 1954); Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, 75–79; Clooney, Comparative Theology, 33–34; Nicholson, Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry, 22–26.
352 Clarke, Ten Great Religions, 1–2.
second, stating his main thesis, namely that Christianity is the only religion that truly enshrines the 
apōma, the fullness of truth. Then, he sketches a first way of classifying all religions by distinguishing them into two groups: “Ethnic,” or those religions which are per se bound to a certain race or nation, and “Catholic,” which are religions that, conversely, have a universal destination. Finally, he tackles the first foundational problem of his essay: the analytical presentation of ten religions with the intention to “distinguish each religion from the rest” and to “compare them to see wherein they agree and wherein they differ.” The ten great religions are in the following original order: Confucianism, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the Egyptian religions, the religion of Greece, the religion of Rome, the Teutonic and Scandinavian religion, Judaism, and Islam. The first volume closes with a first evaluation of this long survey and a brief but interesting comparison of Christianity, taken as apōma, with the single ten religions with the intention to show the latter’s limits and the characteristics of being a religion of progress and of universal unity of the former.

The second part presents a synthetic analysis of all the material and the arguments previously adduced. It “considers the adaptation of each system to every other, to determine its place, use, and value, in reference to universal or absolute religion.” Hence, it examines “the different religions to find wherein each is complete or defective, true or false; how each may supply the defects of the other or prepare the way for a better; how each religion acts on the race which receives it, is adapted to that race, and to the region of the earth which it inhabits.” More specifically, the themes that Clarke confronts are the following: First, after rejecting what he considers as some false or inadequate ways of classification of religions, both in theology and

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353 Clarke, Ten Great Religions, 2.
354 Clarke, Ten Great Religions, 2.
355 Clarke, Ten Great Religions, 2.
cultural anthropology, he offers a more nuanced schema by adding to the previous distinction another group, the “tribal religions,” which correspond to the traditions and worship of the primitive peoples and which have a lesser degree of evolution than the ethnic religions. Then, he protests against the shortsightedness of certain Christian apologists who used to condemn all other religions as false and superstitious without considering the character of each and, above all, the coherence and conformity of this unique character with the aspects of climate, territory, race, and nationality in which those religions developed. Subsequently, Clarke tackles the difficult problems of the origin and development of all religion; the different ideas of God in the various patterns of belief—animism, polytheism, pantheism, ditheism, tritheism, and monotheism; the question of the existence of the soul and its transmigrations; three different ways of explaining and describing the origins of the universe—evolution, emanation, and creation; prayer and worship; inspiration and art; ethics; and eschatology in all religions. Finally, Clarke concludes his impressive contribution by adding a final chapter on the essence of Christianity as the chief of all of the Catholic religions—the religion of civilized man and progress and the future religion of mankind.

In spite of a certain degree of improvisation in his analyses, his limited access to both primary and secondary sources, and the rudimentary level of some of his evaluations, I find Clarke’s work truly fascinating and inspiring. However, if one takes into account the period of time in which it was produced, Clarke’s *Ten Great Religions* can also be recognized as an impressive accomplishment even to contemporary readers. Hence, I find Clooney’s assessment not to be wholly fair when, by referring to this glorious enterprise, he too dismissively affirms:

Clarke marshals impressive learning in support of a conclusion that, while making sense as a faith position, reaches well beyond the vast score of information supposed to support it. He seems not to see that his conclusions were also his presuppositions, or that his impressive data might just as well have been read differently, for the sake of other conclusions. Perhaps the enthusiasm of religious scholars is inevitable, as they expect study to confirm the truths of faith. But research does not always serve faith’s interests, and the
honest scholar must readily confess the gap between expectations and results.\textsuperscript{356}

I will return to Clooney soon. What I want to stress now is that I differ from Clarke’s idea of comparative theology in this substantial assertion: “The work of Comparative Theology is to do equal justice to all the religious tendencies of mankind. Its position is that of a judge, not that of an advocate.”\textsuperscript{357} I believe that to be equally just means also to become an advocate of the matter that one is researching. I dare to say so also because I see Clarke himself doing this when he defends his subjects of study from the strictness of the traditional Christian apologetics that usually only sees the traits of superstition, falseness, and demonic possession in the other religions; even more so if one considers that, for Clarke, religions are paramount stages not only toward human civilization but, more precisely, toward the fullness of truth that only Christianity will encompass. I believe that dealing with spiritual facts requires always being an “advocate” (\textit{paraclētos}) of the delicate matters that one is approaching. On this conviction, I will build my own proposal of comparative theology as an apology \textit{sub contrario specie}. I am convinced that the more I will be able to recognize and respect the value, the uniqueness and the importance of the single religious paths other than Christianity, the more I will be able to present my own faith as the \textit{plerōma} of truth.

Furthermore, I cannot avoid mentioning the Dutch theologian and scholar of religion Cornelis Petrus Tiele,\textsuperscript{358} who beyond his various interventions on the history of religions and the elements of the science of religion is renowned for having sent the address “On the Study of Comparative Theology” to the first meeting of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago,

\textsuperscript{356} Clooney, \textit{Comparative Theology}, 33–34.  
\textsuperscript{357} Clarke, \textit{Ten Great Religions}, 3.  
in 1893. There, other important contributions were offered: Max Müller himself, a delegate from Oxford, gave a brief speech entitled “Greek Philosophy and the Christian Religion”; Charles D’Harlez from Louvain submitted his paper, “The Comparative Study of the World’s Religions”; and, from the University of Sorbonne, Paris, Jean Réville presented his intervention entitled “Principles of the Scientific Classification of Religion.”

Tiele was an esteemed scholar of religion and also well versed in theology. In his address, he mainly intended to offer a contribution on the distinction between the comparative study of religion in theology and in religious studies. He expressed his main conviction quite tersely in the following excerpt:

To me, comparative theology signifies nothing but a comparative study of religious dogmas, comparative religion nothing but a comparative study of the various religions in all their branches.

Finally, I cannot help but recall John Arnott MacCulloch (1868–1950), a British scholar of religion and expert on mythologies, particularly the folk tales and the Celtic and Scandinavian traditions, who published a work in 1902 simply entitled Comparative Theology. It is crystal clear from this book’s outline that the author considers Christianity the true religion, through whose major themes he strives to interpret other religious phenomena: monotheistic tendencies, the Trinity, creation, rites of purification and initiation, communion, sin, sacrifice and atonement, and even church are just some of the issues that MacCulloch lists and employs to read through the

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other religious traditions. Interestingly, after restating the supremacy of Christianity, he introduces the necessity of the comparative approach as follows:

But allowing (what few will deny) that Christianity is the absolute religion, it may be asked, Do the faiths of the past and of the present have any bearing upon its content? Is it possible to take any Christian belief, and, after comparing it with those of other faiths, to find any resemblance to it? And if so, may we say that the earlier belief is a foreshadowing of, a kind of testimony to, and a preparation for, the final form?\(^{363}\)

However, MacCulloch’s contribution cannot be reduced solely to his apologetic perspective. His main intention was firstly to show how God reveals himself abundantly to any culture and people, even under the forms of partiality and analogy. Therefore, it is necessary to remove the artificial barrier erected by scholars between Christianity and pagan beliefs precisely in order to prove the supremacy of Christianity itself. According to MacCulloch it is no longer possible to study Christianity in isolation from all that was coming to be known about other religions.\(^{364}\) Such isolation was merely a theological strategy designed to make the Christian message seem absolute and immune from syncretism.

Some of the most eminent authorities of the so-called older comparative theology were undoubtedly Max Müller (1823–1900) and Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), each of whom is worthy of a lengthy depiction.

Max Müller

Research on Eastern languages, ethnography, and religions progressed throughout the humanist era. However, these kinds of studies were systematically improved and developed only during the eighteenth century. As we have seen, at the dawn of the modern era the reports on east

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\(^{363}\) John Arnott MacCulloch, *Comparative Theology*, 3.
\(^{364}\) John Arnott MacCulloch, *Comparative Theology*, ix.
and south Asia from missionaries, travelers, and merchants were increasing and innumerable letters, essays, and accounts began to be collected and piled in the libraries throughout Europe. They initially attracted only little interest from scholars: The humanist academia was definitively more occupied with recovering and celebrating the ancient splendor of the Greek, Latin, and Egyptian civilizations (see the discovery of the Hieroglyphica by the ellenist Horapollo in 1419) and by attempting the first philological approaches to both the Bible and the Qur’ān than in paying attention to the peoples of Persia, India, China, and Japan, no matter how glorious their pasts and cultures. The first Western scholars who attempted a translation of Persian and Indian literature were Charles Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1751–1830), Alexander Dow (1735/6–79), John Zephaniah Holwell (1711–98), Abraham Hyacinthe Antequil-Duperron (1731–1805) and, in particular, William Jones (1746–94) and the brothers August Wilhelm (1767–1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829).365

What was almost neglected during the humanist period was, on the contrary, extolled in the centuries to come, especially in the romantic era wherein Persia, India, and China became more and more the focus of the attention of scholars and artists. A true Oriental fever affected the Europe of that time. Starting from the end of the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth, European academies and Western culture more generally were captivated by the massive penetration of some fascinating but mostly unfamiliar narratives and pieces of figurative art from their colonial dominions, particularly from the Middle East and Asia. The continual references there to religious creeds and practices that were only vaguely known at that time posed questions to the Western audience in its forms of incipient secularization, if not enthralled it through phantasmagoric narrations and precious artifacts. The traces of this pacific but vigorous invasion’s

365 See Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, 1–33; 147–78.
considerable impact are especially perceivable in these domains of the romantic and post-romantic culture: archeology and philology; philosophy; anthropology, ethnology, religious studies, and the history of religions; literature; figurative art; and music. The centers of diffusion and circulation of these new influences were at first the capitals of those countries which were directly involved in the colonialist conquest of the East: London and Paris were essential in spreading ancient Asian texts, pieces of art, and manufactured goods of any kind that considerably impressed the collective imagination of that time.

It was German intellectuals who were the most important actors—not simply in diffusing the ancient texts from Asia, but primarily in trying to translate and study them according to the criteria of historical criticism. It is more than probable that without those illustrious pioneers we would not have either Schopenhauer’s or Nietzsche’s philosophies. While Ernest Renan was in France, deepening his knowledge of both the languages and the civilizations of the Middle East with the intention to capture and classify, so to speak, the Semitic character, the problem of Aryanism started to surface in central Europe. The new discoveries on the matter of linguistics and the classification of languages in some homologous families had the result of fostering the idea of the sharp distinction between the Semitic and the Indo-European domains. Hence, while the Indo-European hypothesis was systematically verified and the comparative study of European languages was advancing, their sub-families individuated and the similarities with the Indo-Aryan vernaculars discovered, comparative philosophy and comparative theology were progressively reformulated on the basis of these innovative studies. In particular, the interplay between religious studies and linguistics became more and more frequent, as the endeavors of thinkers such as August Schleicher (1821–68) testify. However, the champion of the “philological” approach to the study of religion was undoubtedly Friedrich Maximilian Müller (1823–1900), who was a German
Indologist, philologist, and comparative scholar of religion. He was a naturalized British citizen who spent most of his life collecting, translating, and commenting on ancient works from the East, offering conferences—the most famous are his Gifford lectures—and formulating criteria for the scientific study of religion on the basis of strict philology. Although Max Müller is presently under the fire from various quarters, he is undoubtedly one of the leading scholars of the nineteenth century. I believe that, despite the fact that some authors dissociate themselves from his thought, without Müller’s impressive endeavor, the scholarly achievements of these same thinkers would not have been possible. This is certainly true for Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) and Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945).

Among Müller’s numerous works, one should at least remember his celebrated translation of theṚgveda, the fifty-one volumes of the Sacred Books of the East that he edited, and his collection of essays in five volumes Chips from a German Workshop. From this last work, I will choose two contributions that I consider not only to represent Max Müller’s general approach to the study of religion in general and comparative theology in particular but also to be quite helpful to my own discourse. At first glance, they seem to be an apparent contradiction: In “On the Migration of Fables,” Müller retraces the Indian background of various accounts and fables spread in all of the European traditions and, therefore, seems to promote the comparative studies of fictional recurrent motives between Eastern and Western literature; on the contrary, in “On False

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366 See Lourens van den Bosch, Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities (Leiden: Brill, 2002).
367 See Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, 207–56; Clooney, Comparative Theology, 32–33; Nicholson, Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry, 22–26.
368 Friedrich Max Müller et al., eds., Sacred Books of the East, with Critical and Biographical Sketches (New York: Colonial Press, 1900).
Analyses in Comparative Theology,” he appears to be quite skeptical about those theological endeavors that intend either to establish doubtful contacts among distant religious worlds on the sole basis of the recurrence of some clichés or to decree that the origin of global myths lies in only one ancestral tradition such as, for instance, that of India.

However, if we look at these two texts more attentively, we can easily realize how they rather insist on the same convictions. “On the Migration of Fables” opens with reference to the famous fable La Laitière et le Pot au Lait from La Fontaine, who himself declared that he owed most of his story “to Pilpay the Indian sage.” As a matter of fact, the model of this fable is well recognizable in two accounts of two illustrious collections of Indian tales: the Pañcatantra, which was subsequently translated into different languages and reached medieval Europe under its Arabic version of the Kalīlah and Dimnah, and the Hitopadeśa, which Müller himself translated into German. Although the Indian accounts differ from their French descendant in some important details about the identity of the main character, Müller nonetheless firmly holds that “no one… will doubt that we have here in the stories of the Pañcatantra and Hitopadeśa the first germs of La Fontaine’s fable.” Though it is quite difficult to trace back all of the steps that this story took from its Sanskrit background to modern French, Müller enthusiastically affirms:

It seems a startling case of longevity that while languages have changed, while works of art have perished, while empires have risen and vanished again, this simple children’s story should have lived on, and maintained its place of honor and its undisputed sway in every school-room of the East and every nursery of the West. And yet it is a case of longevity so well attested that even the most skeptical would hardly venture to question it. We have the passport of these stories visité at every place through which they have passed, and, as far as I can judge, parfaitement en règle. The story of the migration of these Indian fables from East to West is indeed wonderful; more wonderful and more instructive than many of these fables themselves.
Hence, Müller tackles three important questions regarding the spread of Indo-European stories. First of all, he explains that the Aryans, in their expansions and migrations, carried with them not only the store of their language and knowledge, but also their folklore, legends, and religious myths. As a result, Indians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germans, and Slavs have a share in some similar religious and legendary accounts. The second question is more arduous to resolve: whether stories with a moral purpose or that are connected to some proverbs can already be a part of the first Aryan heritage. After taking into account some curious instances, Müller concludes that one thing is the migration of myths by means of oral tradition that dates from “a pro-ethnic period,” another is the second migration of fables, such as those collected by La Fontaine, that spread in “strictly historical times… through more or less faithful translations of literary works.” To confuse these two levels “would be an anachronism of a portentous character.” The third question concerns the existence of other channels of osmotic cultural exchange between East and West. Thus, Müller maintains:

Persian and Arab stories, of Indian origin, were through the crusades brought back to Constantinople, Italy, and France; Buddhist fables were through Mongolian conquerors (13th century) carried to Russia and the eastern parts of Europe. Greek stories may have reached Persia and India at the time of Alexander’s conquests and during the reigns of the Diadochi, and even Christian legends may have found their way to the East through missionaries, travelers, or slaves.

Finally, he presents some literary cases in which the recurrence of some common motifs and the similarities of description might encourage one to think of some borrowings. However, such borrowings are not simply difficult to prove; they are improbable. Before accurately retracing the various possible steps that the story of the milkmaid had to walk through before coming to La

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Fontaine, Müller concludes: “while the traces of the first migration of Aryan fables can be rediscovered only by the most minute and complex inductive processes, the documents of the latter are to be found in the library of every intelligent collector of books.”\textsuperscript{378} Included in the “minute and complex inductive processes” there is, of course, the resort to philological analysis. Philology is, in the absence of clear historical and traceable contacts between two similar but distant cultural motifs, the final authority appealed to in order to have a definitive verdict on certain comparative matters.

A similar concern pervades the discussion of “On False Analogies in Comparative Theology,” in which Müller recounts some known cases of scholarly deception in comparative theology due to naïveté on the part of the researcher, lack of philological proof, and an uncritical desire to establish easy connections among distant religious worlds. Famous is, for instance, the story of Lieutenant Wilford, who was convinced he had found in a Sanskrit manuscript the evidence that the Brahmans had, in their mythological repertoire, some motif that would later be borrowed by the authors of the Old Testament, as well as by Greeks and Romans. Though initially skeptical, Sir William Jones himself, the noted British Orientalist, was misled for a while. However, given the fact that in the course of the translation of that manuscript the coincidences became too many to be true, it soon became clear that it was the Indian Pandit with whom Lieutenant Wilford was working who committed the forgery. Facing this new evidence, Müller draws his conclusions:

One lesson only may we learn from the disappointment that befell Colonel Wilford, and that is to be on our guard against anything which in ordinary language would be called “too good to be true.”\textsuperscript{379}

\textsuperscript{378} Müller, “On the Migration of Fables,” 150–51.
\textsuperscript{379} Müller, “On False Analogies in Comparative Theology,” 110.
Afterwards, he warns not only against the deceits of similar literary clichés that are an expression of humanity tout court without being the necessary proof of a historical contact among some distant cultures, but also against linguistic assonances. He applies this same criterion to comparative mythology:

Comparative Philology has taught us again and again that when we find a word exactly the same in Greek and Sanskrit, we may be certain that it cannot be the same word; and the same applies to Comparative Mythology. The same god or the same hero cannot have exactly the same name in Sanskrit and Greek, for the simple reason that Sanskrit and Greek have deviated from each other, have both followed their own way, have both suffered their own phonetic corruptions; and hence, if they do possess the same word, they can only possess it either in its Greek or its Sanskrit disguise. And if that caution applies to Sanskrit and Greek, members of the same family of language how much more strongly most it apply to Sanskrit and Hebrew!\(^{380}\)

Subsequently, after reporting about other curious cases of philological misrepresentation and misunderstanding and with the intention of unveiling the various tricks that linguistic or cultural coincidences can cause, he passionately and convincingly affirms:

A comparative study of ancient religions and mythologies, as will be seen from these instances, is not a subject to be taken up lightly. It requires not only an accurate acquaintance with the minutest details of comparative philology, but a knowledge of the history of religions which can hardly be gained without a study of original documents. As long, however, as researches of this kind are carried on for their own sake, and from a mere desire of discovering truth, without any ulterior objects, they deserve no blame, though, for a time, they may lead to erroneous results. But when coincidences between different religions and mythologies are searched out simply in support of preconceived theories, whether by the friends or enemies of religion, the sense of truth, the very life of science, is sacrificed, and serious mischief will follow without fail. Here we have the right, not only to protest, but to blame.\(^{381}\)

This peremptory statement can apparently be adapted to undermine comparative theology itself and any comparative approach in the liberal arts. On the contrary, Müller reassures his readers by saying that running into an accident in comparing either words or religious texts “ought


to serve as a useful warning, though it need in no way discourage a careful and honest study of Comparative Theology.”  

Hence, despite the numerous pitfalls and illusions into which a comparative scholar can inadvertently fall, the comparative endeavor remains potentially fruitful and is required by both philology and history of religion. Concluding this presentation of Max Müller’s thought, it is worthwhile recalling his enthusiastic comments on the proven Indian origins of some well-known Western fables:

Will it be believed that we, in this Christian country and in the nineteenth century, teach our children the first, the most important lessons of worldly wisdom, nay, of a more than worldly wisdom, from books borrowed from Buddhists and Brahmans, from heretics and idolaters, and that wise words, spoken a thousand, nay, two thousand years ago, in a lonely village of India, like precious seed scattered broadcast all over the world, still bear fruit a hundred and thousand-fold in that soil which is the most precious before God and man, the soul of a child? No lawgiver, no philosopher, has made his influence felt so widely, so deeply, and so permanently as the author of these children’s fables.

If this is true for children’s fables, can it be true also for religious accounts? The amazing case of the story of Barlaam and Joasaph to which Müller himself refers at the conclusion of his essay is the proof that a story, though marked by a distinct religious perspective—if it is good and speaks to the deepest in human beings—is able to enthrall and attract the souls of different believers. After these believers are emotionally and spiritually captured by it, they will do everything possible somehow to accommodate to their religious universe.

Rudolf Otto

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) is one of the most influential German thinkers in history but, at the same time, is one of the most misunderstood and neglected in theology. He is generally recalled

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for his undisputed masterpiece *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917),\(^{384}\) in which the famous oxymoronic definition of the sacred as *fascinans et tremendum* occurs (see Chapters 4 and 6); a definition that is quoted by many authors, including theologians, but not always with consideration of the complex philosophical analyses that Otto offers together with it. Though he studied philosophy and history of religions, he should be remembered first of all as a theologian. In fact, his entire intellectual project can be inscribed in the theological framework: his interest in the reality of *homo religiosus*, as well as the history and phenomenology of religions, can be adequately understood only if one recognizes its fundamental motive: the Christian revelation can be fully comprehended and its claim of absoluteness defended only if is studied in the wider picture of the history of religions and, in general, in connection with the innate sense of the *numinous* that pervades human consciousness, cultures, and the entire reality.

Otto’s thought somehow places itself at the crossroads between on the one hand Kant and Schleiermacher and, on the other hand, Fries and Ritschl. However, in any case, it is consistent with that Lutheranism that put at the center of its attention religious sentiment with its unfathomable profundity and the mystical experience of the divine. Otto’s monographic contributions on some specific themes of the history of religions were numerous, especially on India and Hinduism. He travelled considerably, through Asia in particular, to collect material and refine his research. However, apart from these texts that can be correctly ascribed to the phenomenology of religion, Otto’s other texts always manifest a clear theological intention. In spite of this breadth of interest and depth proficiency, Otto was often criticized as ambiguous or incoherent. On the contrary, I believe that, though not strictly theological, Otto’s work on Indology should also be read as being germane to his wider and more ambitious theological project.

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In my opinion, four of Otto’s works reveal his fundamental and consistent theological perspective: *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries* (1931),\(^{385}\) *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (1932),\(^{386}\) and *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man: A Study in the History of Religion* (1938).\(^{387}\) In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto’s main intention is to give voice to the irrational in religion, a dimension that is fundamental in any experience of the divine and that, particularly in Christian theology, is often eluded in favor of some more logical, conceptual, and verbally transmittable conceptions. Hence, he coins the category of the numinous to typify the experience of the sacred that, being per se ineffable, can only be hinted at but never wholly and openly displayed:

Accordingly, it is worth while, as we have said, to find a word to stand for this element in isolation, this ‘extra’ in the meaning of the ‘holy’ above and beyond the meaning of goodness. By means of a special term we shall the better be able, first, to keep the meaning clearly apart and distinct, and second, to apprehend and classify connectedly whatever subordinate forms or stages of development it may show. For this purpose I adopt a word coined from the Latin *numen*. *Omen* has given us *ominous*, and there is no reason why from *numen* we should not similarly form a word ‘*numinous*.’ I shall speak, then, of a unique ‘numinous’ category of value and of a definitely ‘numinous’ state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied. This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined. There is only one way to help another to an understanding of it. He must be guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reach the point at which ‘the numinous’ in him perforce begins to stir, to start not life and into consciousness.\(^{388}\)

Such a definition can appear at first quite vague and the concept of numinous so vast as to seem applicable to all sorts of mysterious realities. In reality, Otto’s view can be adequately understood only if one recognizes his main intention and considers some correlative ideas that

\(\text{\(^{385}\) Rudolf Otto, *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries* (New York: Richard R. Smith Inc., 1931).}
constitute the conceptual pillars on which he builds his entire theological project. The sacred is a composite reality since it is constituted by some rational and some irrational aspects. However, in Western scholarship, and in Christian theology in particular, the common approach to religion has been more careful to emphasize the rational dimension to the detriment of the irrational. The general tendency to consider spurious or merely superstitious symbolic and emblematic manifestations of collective religious sentiment has had the negative consequence of neglecting important data for a more comprehensive understanding of religious phenomena. However, Otto’s intention cannot have been limited to making conscious the unconscious, so to speak. Rather, his program is definitely more ambitious. For Otto, the Holy is an *a priori* category since it functions precisely like the pure concepts that Kant describes in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: our knowledge is generated from experience and there is no other means to get to know objects than by being stimulated in the senses by the perception of them. However, although knowledge depends on experience, it does not arise merely from it. There is pure impression, on one hand, and there is a kind of cognition that is occasioned by the sense-impression but which is not limited to that sense-impression, since it depends on a superior faculty of knowing. The numinous is of this kind; moreover, it is even deeper than pure reason. It is what mysticism would call the *fundus animae*:

> It issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, and, though it of course comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural word and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise out of them, but only by their means. They are the incitement, the stimulus, and the ‘occasion’ for the numinous experience to become astir, and, in so doing, to begin—at first with a naïve immediacy of reaction—to be interfused and interwoven with the present world of sensuous experience, until, becoming gradually purer, it disengages itself from this and takes its stand in absolute contrast to it.\(^{389}\)

Hence, the Holy is *per se* indefinable and impossible to be fixed in writing. However, it

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can be “known” on a different level than logic. The sacred can be experienced and it is only on the
basis of experience (Erlebnis) that it can be somehow communicated to others. Religious
experience is, for Otto, the source, subject, and framework of knowledge, as much as it is for
Schleiermacher. Furthermore, the concept of Gefühl (sentiment, touch, feeling, emotion) is equally
important for him and often recurs in order to explain the inexplicable, something that can be
awakened in one’s mind —either by way of contrast or by way of analogy:

We can co-operate in this process by bringing before his notice all that can be found in
other regions of the mind, already known and familiar, to resemble, or again to afford some
special contrast to, the particular experience we wish to elucidate. Then we must add: ‘This
X of ours is not precisely this experience, but akin to this one and the opposite of that other.
Cannot you now realize for yourself what it is?’ in other words our X cannot, strictly
speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes
‘of the spirit’ must be awakened.  

It would be interesting to pause to consider Schleiermacher’s influence on Rudolf Otto in
greater depth. However, at least one question is worthy of mention here. The concept of the Holy
in Otto is certainly analogous to that of “religion” in Schleiermacher and the preference for the
term Gefühl constitutes a clear link between the two systems of thought. However, while Otto
appears more concerned than merely reverent in distinguishing the level of the transcendental (the
sentiment of the Holy) from that of the categorical (positive religions), Schleiermacher plays with
a single term, religion, which is intended as both the innate human sentiment of the infinite and its
various historical expressions.

Knowing the Holy is therefore possible but always, so to speak, asymptotic. Even when it
is experienced in depth through an inner revelation (innere Offenbarung), it is hardly
communicable. However, analogy permits the sacred to become somehow relatable. Not only can
the numinous be recognized at the personal level by analogy with other similar experiences and

390 Otto, The Idea of the Holy, 7 [italics in the original].
states of mind, but it can be also acknowledged on the macro level, namely when it surfaces in the history of cultures and traditions—particularly in the special case of mysticism, a kind of religious phenomenon that occurs widespread in almost all religions. The recovery of analogous religious experiences and their comparison is therefore necessary for the investigation and the understanding of the numinous: this is what Otto opts for in *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, where he describes the Buddha’s experience of Illumination in the terms of the doctrine of grace as *gratia antecedens, operans, and succedens*.391

More decisively in *Mysticism East and West*, Otto subjects to a comparison of the mystical experiences of Meister Eckhart and Śaṅkara, first by drawing some parallels and then by investigating their differences more in depth with the twofold purpose of freeing the German thinker from the charge of pantheism and showing the distinctiveness of Christian mysticism in contrast with other analogous experiences. Also, in *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, Otto recovers the recurrent ideas of God’s sovereignty and the election of an individual as a mediator and redeemer for all in the Indian and Persian religious repertory of motifs. Further, he studies its possible influence on Judaism, particularly its apocalyptic movements. Also in this case, however, his analysis is distinguished into two stages: first, the discovery of parallels, then, the exploration of the Christian distinctiveness.

In conclusion, while Otto’s intention is not simply theological but is, more specifically, apologetic, his contribution to the history and phenomenology of religions and theology is inestimable. It would be sufficient to consult the works of authors such Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Wolfgang Pannenberg to realize that. On one hand, the history of religions can certainly have an autonomous course from theology, but not from religious experience or from a

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personal involvement with the numinous, which is the kind of subject that, as we saw, must be experienced personally in order to be known. On the other hand, theology cannot stand without relation to the history of religion. Since all religions, when taken together, describe and constitute a *Heiligegeschichte*, they also constitute the source and the framework for theologians to know the religious in itself. Consequently, they discover by contrast the fundamental reasons for the distinctiveness and absoluteness of Christianity. The Christian message shows its universal pertinence, above all, in reference to the religious experiences of humanity. For this reason, a theology that does not welcome these important data and is not willing to subject them to analysis and comparison with its presuppositions is for Otto ultimately not credible.

Four Influential Thinkers

After reflecting on the foundations and conditions of birth of comparative theology, it is now my intention to focus on some single figures of scholars, who from the eighteenth century until the present, either mastered comparative theology as a tenable autonomous discipline or simply influenced both its establishment and development. I will choose four illustrious thinkers who are still very influential in this field. I will present them in chronological order, and through their lives and thought it will be my intention to cast a glance at the cultural and religious contexts in which they were operative and the intellectual relationships they could maintain.

Friedrich Schleiermacher

If the Kantian dichotomy between spirit and nature, represented by the realms of noumena and phenomena, is too great for Schleiermacher, the Romantics’ insistence on collapsing these distinctions into a single mode of poetic awareness ends with too vacuous a line being drawn between spirit and nature. Although Schleiermacher finds the notion of the thing-in-itself obscure, his realism keeps him in touch with the objective world and serves as a restraint on the efforts of the young Schlegel to poetize reality. In view of these exacting discriminations, it is little wonder that Schleiermacher’s relationship to Kantian thought as
well as to Romanticism is so frequently misrepresented. The chief poles of his formative youthful thought were complementary. The present book was conceived by a writer who stood at the confluence of the most vivid intellectual options of his day and whose thought is incomprehensible apart from these alternatives.  

Richard Crouter’s evaluation of Schleiermacher’s On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers is particularly efficacious since, in a few lines, it is able to synthesize the reasons why it is so difficult for the critiques to assess the nature and the weight of the thought of the so-called Father of Modern Liberal Theology. On one hand, Schleiermacher was attracted by Kant’s teaching and its aftermath in post-Kantian controversies; on the other hand, he was deeply repelled by the stringency of the separation between necessity and freedom. He also had recourse to the thought of Fichte, from whom he adopted the key concept of the “infinite.” However, Schleiermacher was quickly disappointed by Fichte’s deference to a kind of rationalism. If he initially took refuge in the circle of the romantic Schlegel and other thinkers, such as Novalis, and if these intellectual associations led him to focus his attention on the sentiment of love and art and their relation to faith, then the readings of Spinoza, Herder, and Jacobi pushed him to find a middle path between Enlightenment and romanticism, a way to get through both the movements of thought but, at the same time, remain autonomous from them. Schleiermacher truly is a watershed between two eras, but not in the sense that he drew inspiration from some heterogeneous inspirations and then assembled this material randomly or, conversely, slavishly; rather, if it is hard for the interpreters to find agreement on Schleiermacher’s evaluation, then this is perhaps the most evident sign of the greatness and originality of his non-conventional intellectual endeavor.

Born in Breslau, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834) was the son of a

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393 See Jaqueline Mariña, The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Julia A. Lamm, The Living God: Schleiermacher’s Theological Appropriation of Spinoza
Reformed chaplain. After attending the school of the Moravian Herrnhuters and being highly influenced by their distinct form of Pietism, he travelled to Halle, where he lived with his uncle, a theologian, and entered the university. There he continued to deepen his knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics and engage in the study of philosophy, that of Kant in particular. Subsequently, he was appointed pastor in Landsberg and later in Berlin, where he began frequenting the romantic circle of intellectuals and became a great friend of Friedrich von Schlegel. After moving back to Halle, where he started his academic career as a professor of theology, he was finally admitted to the faculty of the newly founded university of Berlin, where he taught until his last days.

It would be quite arduous now to present Schleiermacher’s multifaceted interests in philosophy, theology, mysticism, Biblical studies, psychology, literature, art, and his commitment to writing books, essays, and articles for the literary magazine the Athenaeum, corresponding with illustrious contemporary intellectuals, translating Plato from Greek or travel literature from English, writing about Jesus and his life, and founding modern biblical hermeneutics. Just introducing and commenting on his major work, The Christian Faith, a treatise on dogmatics, would require specific attention that is beyond the aims of this presentation. It is sufficient for us to focus on his early work, On Religion, which was written in 1799. It highly influenced the rediscovery of the theme of religion, both in philosophy and theology (in this regard, the subtitle is particularly symptomatic and ironic at the same time: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers) and stimulated subsequent comparative inquiry into religious pluralism.

On Religion is a collection of five speeches, of which two are particularly interesting for our purpose: the second on the essence of religion and the fifth on the multiplicity of religions and

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the question of religious pluralism. After a passionate apology of religion and its most authentic interpreters in the first speech, Schleiermacher opens his discussion on the essence (Wesen) of religion: “Religion never appears in a pure state. All these are only the extraneous parts that cling to it, and it should be our business to free it from them.” The first step toward accessing the essence of religion is, therefore, to separate it from “the interference of metaphysics and morals.” Religion is like a diamond that is hidden amidst base material but that can be recovered, thanks to the action of contrasting its nature and aims against metaphysics and ethics. While the latter disciplines basically focus their attention on the sole humanity and, from only this perspective, they investigate its interrelation with the universe, religion “wishes to see the infinite, its imprint and its manifestation, in humanity no less than in all other individual and finite forms.” For Schleiermacher, religion’s essence is “neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling” of the universe (“Anschauung und Gefühl des Universums”). This is the basic definition of religion that Schleiermacher offers in the first edition of the Speeches. In the edition of 1806, he replaces this double expression with the sole term of “Betrachtung” (contemplation, reflection). This change is not immune from consequences on the level of Schleiermacher’s evolution of thought, as Johnson well observed:

In the Reden (1799), “Anschauen des Universums” was the most characteristic definition of Religion. In the Reden (1806) this definition had been omitted. “Anschauen des Universums” was no longer the definition of Religion, but “Gefühl” had taken its place. “Anschauung” had become only one aspect of the nature of Religion. When “Anschauung” was united with “Gefühl,” “Wissen” was formed. “Anschauung” formed the objective side of “Wissen” and “Gefühl” the subjective side. “Anschauung,” therefore, was replaced by “die Betrachtung.” “Die Betrachtung” observed the finite in the infinite, the temporal in the eternal, and the eternal in all change and variableness…. “Die Betrachtung” located everything in God and God in everything (“the Finite in the Infinite and the Infinite in the Finite”). “Gefühl” became, therefore, the most significant expression for Religion in the

396 Schleiermacher, On Religion, 22.
397 Schleiermacher, On Religion, 23.
398 Schleiermacher, On Religion, 22.
Anyway, this indecision in framing the concept of religion represented an important step in Schleiermacher’s early reflection toward a more definite and mature definition of religious sentiment as the “feeling of Absolute Dependence” in *The Christian Faith* (I § 4). Coming back to *On Religion*, Schleiermacher explores the phases of formation of religious sentiment and its nature in the third speech. First of all, religion is able to touch “the innermost being of every individual who breathes its atmosphere.” Second, every human being is born with the innate capacity for religious feeling:

A person is born with the religious capacity as with every other, and if only his sense is not forcibly suppressed, if only that communion between a person and the universe—these are admittedly the two poles of religion—is not blocked and barricaded, then religion would have to develop unerringly in each person according to his own individual manner.

The blocking of this innate religious sentiment unfortunately tends, according to Schleiermacher, to be the norm. Subsequently, he declines his view of religion as an intuition of the world, as the sentiment for the whole, a kind of holistic perspective on the universe and its meaning that other disciplines or points of views are incapable of reaching; rather, they tend to dissect and dismember what religion feels to be a whole that has meaning:

For it can be something in the universe only through the totality of its effects and connections; everything depends on this totality, and to become aware of it one must have considered a thing not only from an external point of view but from its own center outward and from all sides in relation to the center, that is to say, in the thing’s differentiated existence, in its own essence. To know of only one point of view for everything is exactly the opposite of having all points of view for each thing; it is the way to distance oneself directly away from the universe and to sink into the most wretched limitedness, to become a true serf, bound to the place on which by chance one may be standing.

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The third speech closes with a consideration of the relationship between religion and art and their affinities. In the following chapter, after addressing the social element in religion (“once there is religion, it must necessarily also be social”) and the aspects of the formation of churches and priesthood, Schleiermacher tackles the difficult problem of sectarianism that agitates and troubles Christianity and generally speaks of some inauthentic ways to embody the religious sentiment. Since the true religious spirit meets in the common experience of feeling the universe, despite different starting points, division and separation are perceivable only at a lower level: the most religious people are able to see and establish a universal association in which there is no room for fanaticism and parochialism. Moreover, exclusivist views are openly and decidedly banished:

Where is the infamous mania for converting everyone to individual definite forms of religion, and where is the horrible motto: “Outside of us, no salvation”? In the way I have presented the society of religious people to you and as it has to be by its very nature, it is only meant for mutual communication and exists only among those who already have religion, whatever sort it may be.

The question of religious pluralism and its plausibility is the main focus of the fifth speech. First of all, Schleiermacher reads the existence of various forms of religions as different manifestations of only one reality by referring to the event of Incarnation:

I wish to lead you, as it were, to the God who has become flesh; I want to show you religion as it has divested itself of its infinity and appeared, often in paltry form, among human beings; in the religions, you are to discover religion; in what stands before you as earthly and impure, you are to seek out the individual features of the same heavenly beauty whose form I have tried to reproduce.

Hence, while Schleiermacher condemns the conflictual division of the churches, he

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404 Schleiermacher, On Religion, 73.
405 Schleiermacher, On Religion, 77.
considers diversity and religious plurality “as something necessary and unavoidable”\textsuperscript{407} because the multiplicity of positive religions is somehow rooted in the essence of religion itself:

Each infinite force, once it divides and separates itself in its manifestations, also reveals itself in unique and varied forms. Hence the plurality of religions differs completely from that of churches. Yet in accord with its concept and essence religion is infinite and immeasurable, even for the understanding; it must therefore have in itself a principle of individuation, for otherwise it could not exist at all and be perceived. Thus we must postulate and seek out an infinite number of finite and specific forms in which religion reveals itself.\textsuperscript{408}

However, when Schleiermacher speaks of religion per se, he does not intend to support the dualist distinction, which is typical in deism, between “positive religions” and “natural religion” wherein the former are just the sum of historical corruptions and distortions, while the latter is so refined and devoid of contingency as to be purely an idea. Furthermore, since natural religion “allows little of the unique character of religion to shine through,” one should strive to intuit religion “in the determinate forms in which it has already actually appeared” and “deem these all the more worthy” of one’s “contemplation, the more unique and distinguishing features of religion are formed in them.”\textsuperscript{409}

Among those forms, Schleiermacher’s presentation pauses only a little while on the Oriental and Egyptian religions, but privileges the Greek and Roman religions, and primarily Judaism and Christianity with a more thorough discussion. Judaism and the problem of the civil rights of the Jews in Prussia for which Schleiermacher advocated are also the subjects of another of his contributions,\textit{Letters on the Occasion of the Political Theological Task and Sendschriben (Open Letter) of Jewish Heads of Households},\textsuperscript{410} which was published in 1799. At first glance,

\textsuperscript{407} Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion}, 96.
\textsuperscript{408} Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion}, 97.
\textsuperscript{409} Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion}, 98.
Schleiermacher’s affirmation in *On Religion* that “Judaism is long since a dead religion”\(^{411}\) can appear ungenerous to the glorious tradition of Jacob’s sons or even replicate some unfortunately common and tragic stereotypes among Christians of all confessions of that time. However, one should consider that these kinds of ideas were circulating also among the Jews of the German Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) with whom Schleiermacher was in touch and on whose behalf he was advocating for both emancipation and full rights. In spite of his characterization of it as a dead religion, Judaism remains, in Schleiermacher’s eyes, a religious phenomenon that “had such a beautiful, childlike character.”\(^{412}\) He sees its essence in the following idea of the universe:

> It is none other than that of a universal immediate retribution, of the infinite’s own reaction against every individual finite form that proceeds from free choice by acting through another finite element that is not viewed as proceeding from free choice. Everything is considered this way; origin and passing away, fortune and misfortune; even within the human soul an expression of freedom and choice and an immediate influence of the deity always alternate. All other attributes of God that are also intuited express themselves according to this principle and are always seen in connection with this. The deity is thus portrayed throughout as rewarding, chastising, and punishing what is singled out in the individual person.\(^{413}\)

In comparison to Judaism, Christianity has the character of adulthood since it “most frequently and best prefers to intuit the universe in religion and in its history” and “treats religion itself as material for religion and thus is, as it were, raised to a higher power of religion.”\(^{414}\) Schleiermacher does not conceal the idea that, throughout history, Christianity was distorted and stained by corruption. Nonetheless, he convincingly maintains that:

> The original intuition of Christianity is more glorious, more sublime, more worthy of adult humanity, more deeply penetrating into the spirit of systematic religion, and extending farther over the whole universe. It is none other than the intuition of the universal straining of everything finite against the unity of the whole and of the way in which the deity handles this striving, how it reconciles the enmity directed against it and sets bounds to the ever-

\(^{413}\) Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 114.  
greater distance by scattering over the whole individual points that are at once finite and infinite, at once human and divine. Corruption and redemption, enmity and mediation are two sides of this intuition that are inseparably bound to each other, and the shape of all religious material in Christianity and its whole form are determined through them.415

In his praise for Christianity, Schleiermacher shows himself to have sided, in his own way (probably heterodox), apologetically and not impartially, with his own religious tradition, and in this he differs considerably from some of his heirs in liberal theology. However, for Schleiermacher, Christianity per se neither exhausts the infinite nor can it fully hold the intuition of the universe, and in this it remains a positive, transitory religion like the others. Even more to the point, “Christianity has expressly recognized this transitoriness of its nature; there will come a time, it declares, when there will be no more talk of a mediator, but the Father will be all in all.”416

If Christianity can be raised to a higher power of religion, it is due only to the fact that it is the privileged perspective from which to see, intuit, and recover that religious sentiment that appears all over, even in the so-called positive religions.

Schleiermacher’s destiny is quite curious: not only did he have difficulty being understood in his time, as is well indicated by the disparaging words that his superior, Father S. G. Sack, wrote in a heated correspondence417 with his pupil on the occasion of the first publication of On Religion, but also in the following centuries the reception of his thought was polarized in two opposite views. On the one hand, there were scholars who accused him of having superimposed a Christian schematic on the other religious traditions, as Crouter himself seems to believe:

Although less blatant than Karl Rahner’s formulation of “anonymous Christianity” Schleiermacher’s model has the appearance of universality but is Christian in derivation. In saying this, one can also acknowledge that the theme of struggle between the finite and the infinite has had an impressive appeal in modern protestant Christian thought and that

this position continues to have advocates. But if, as the argument suggests, Christianity is “religion raised to a higher power,” then this idea appears to take on a privileged capacity to stand in judgment of all others, simply because, as a polemical and self-critical religious principle, it is willing to stand in judgment of itself.\footnote{Crouter, “Introduction,” xxxvi.}

On the other hand, there were scholars who, on the contrary, saw very little of the Christian revelation in Schleiermacher’s idea of religion and accuse him of pantheism and Spinozism. In this regard, Barth’s overall assessment of his contribution sounds quite dismissive, if not ferociously derogative:

There was for him no bondage of the will in the sense of the reformers, no sin that meant real and effective lostness, no word of truth that was more than one of many possible expressions of subjective experience, no justification that was not viewed as an infusion of righteousness after the manner of Roman Catholics.\footnote{Karl Barth, The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 102.}

Such polarization continues to the present day. I think that much is true in both perspectives, but neither of them is able to give voice to Schleiermacher’s main intention. I do not intend to advocate here in favor of or against Schleiermacher’s orthodoxy. I only believe that his position can be better evaluated if one considers what was really at stake in theology at that time. After the collapse of the traditional metaphysics and the various forms of Scholasticism, a good theologian was required or—better—would have felt the need to respond to a difficult challenge: that of drawing a concept of religion that would have stood within the limits of reason alone, but, at the same time, was able to avoid the flaws of Kant’s philosophy that the quarrels in the post-Kantian debate had highlighted. After investigating Schleiermacher’s early studies of Spinoza’s writings and studying their not-so-marked influence on his later work, Julia Lamm, in a way that seems to me to be quite balanced, concludes:

If the qualified ways in which, as well as the reason why, Schleiermacher appropriated Spinoza are understood, then the usual charges of Spinozism and pantheism do not hold.
The focal issues are what precisely Schleiermacher meant by a living but not necessarily personal God, and what according to such a view of the deity is the status of the individual. Schleiermacher moved from a personal to a living God, which stands in contradistinction from, on the one side, a “lifeless and blind necessity” in nature and, on the other side, the anthropomorphized God of previous dogmatics and popular religion. Schleiermacher offered a third alternative that, he was convinced, while not perhaps presently accepted as “orthodox,” is certainly at least an “inspired heterodoxy” that would one day be recognized as truly orthodox. I argue that Schleiermacher’s notion of a living God, while indeed influenced by his appropriation of Spinoza and neo-Spinozism, is developed in the Glaubenslehre in such a way that it is free from the charges of pantheism commonly made against it.420

In conclusion, regardless of the most correct way to approach Schleiermacher’s thought, one thing remains certain: it had such an enormous impact that not only comparative theology but also theology tout court cannot today be thought of without him.

Ernst Troeltsch

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923)421 is certainly one of the major figures of German protestant theology whose thought influenced entire generations of theologians. Born in Hauenstetten near Augsburg, he lived in a family that naturally stimulated in him the desire to acquire knowledge. In particular, as a physician his father inculcated in him the attitude of scientific observation. After studying classical languages at the Gymnasium, he decided to focus on theology, the only subject that, according to his view, would have permitted him to study the interrelation among philosophy, metaphysics, and history. These three disciplines were not simply matters of personal interest; according to him it was essential that their interrelation be studied during his time, while the modern era was drawing to its close.

420 Lamm, The Living God: Schleiermacher’s Theological Appropriation of Spinoza, 5–6 [italics in the original].
At the conclusion of his theological training, he started teaching in Göttingen, then he moved to Bonn and finally to Heidelberg, where he taught systematic theology as an ordinary professor. Subsequently, he was appointed to the chair of philosophy of religion in the University of Berlin. During his career he was in dialogue, either directly or indirectly, with towering contemporary intellectuals, as his writings well attest. His dedication to various themes such as philosophy of religion, ethics, sociology, history of religions, etc., reflects not only his erudition but somehow also the fertile dimension of the German culture of his time.

Despite the crisis that undoubtedly affected philosophical speculation at the end of the nineteenth century, the intellectual context in which Troeltsch was operating was animated by the contribution of ingenuous contemporaries, however, such as his master, Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), and the other compatriots, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), Max Ferdinand Scheler (1874–1928), Hermann Usener (1834–1905), and Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918); or the French thinkers Joseph Ernest Renan (1823–92) and Alfred Firmin Loisy (1857–1940). He was personally in touch with some of them; above all, with the exponents of Ritschl’s school and the circle of the friends of the academic journal Christliche Welt. From the annual debates that this association of intellectuals used to organize often came for Troeltsch the occasion for building his original thought, either in line with or by contrast to the proposals of his respective interlocutors. As a matter of fact, The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions, one of his most renowned works that still has much influence on current comparative theology, is nothing else than an expansion of a lecture that he gave precisely on the occasion of the conference of the Friends of the Christliche Welt in 1901 at Mühlacker. In it Troeltsch

recognizes both the nucleus and the starting point of his scientific work.\footnote{Ernst Troeltsch, “Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen,” in Id., \textit{Der Historismus und seine Überwindung. Fünf Vorträge eingeleitet von Friedrich von Hügel} (Berlin: Pan Verlag Rolf Heise, 1924), 62.} However, before getting into the analysis of this important work, which is quite crucial for our purposes, it is better to pause for a while on the standpoints of Troeltsch’s thought as we see them sketched in his previous works and somehow recapitulated and reorganized in his masterpiece.

Science and theology and their possible coexistence in the modern era had been part of Troeltsch’s concerns since his youth, as one can read in his biographical profile. Moreover, in his pivotal article “Die christliche Weltanschauung und die wissenschaftlichen Gegenströmungen,”\footnote{Ernst Troeltsch, “Die christliche Weltanschauung und die wissenschaftlichen Gegenströmungen,” \textit{Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche} 3 (1893).} he tackles the same theme with more scientific intentions. Here, he turns his attention from the purely confessional character of his previous interests within Ritschl’s school to the wider horizon of the dialogue between theology and the sciences. He remarks how the experience of salvation, despite its immediacy and intimacy to the subjects, can hardly be taken by theology as a sufficient proof of its truthfulness while facing the challenge of the modern sciences and the often alternative visions of the world they promote. If the traditional Protestant schools of thought, Ritschl’s followers included, used to consider the personal experience of salvation the undisputed basis for Christian theology and the self-evident witness of its veracity, then Troeltsch appeals for a new and less biased foundation: the close interaction between theology and modern sciences becomes the most urgent accomplishment and it will radically modify the face of theology from the aspect both of methodology and content.

In particular, with regard to the historical sciences, theology must question if what the church has passed on during the centuries truly conforms to the true Christian faith, or if it is simply the result of some cultural and historical contingencies. It is therefore legitimate to doubt all
Christian religious experiences when they appear to contradict what scientific research has proved. If doubt is legitimate, however, it is so only on the level of the Christian experience, but not regarding the validity of the theological endeavor itself, which remains unquestionable for Troeltsch despite the reforms that it clearly needs. Hence, theology can redeem itself and avoid the risk of being invalidated by the modern sciences if it learns about and from the methods of the sciences of nature, arts and literature, philosophy, history of religions, psychology, and sciences of culture in general. Consistent with this conviction, Troeltsch himself dedicated much of his time to reviewing various works of contemporary scholarship in very different disciplines for several prestigious academic journals.

However, theology can demand respect from the other sciences. It is also shown to be tenable in the wider discourse of culture, but under one condition: that of safeguarding the autonomy of religion as a self-contained discipline. In “Die Selbständigkeit der Religion,” Troeltsch shows how religion carved itself a large space in modern reflection thanks to the historical sciences. Modernity is the era in which religion started to be studied historically and traditions, beliefs, and religious truths were seen in their particularities and in their development during the ages. While Troeltsch invokes a similar treatment for Christianity, which cannot remain unaffected by this philosophical turn, he supports the study of religions according to the perspectives of psychology and sociology that can shed light respectively on human consciousness as the source and origin of religion and on the social impact of any religious belief. Christianity itself must be studied from the same perspective, not appealing to an alleged supernaturalism as the reason for its incomparability with the other religions but by paying careful attention to the psychological and sociological conditions of its constitution and development. Only if Christianity

is considered within the sphere of the religious disciplines can it be more accurately and coherently studied. Hence, not only is comparativism especially supported by Troeltsch as the surest way to understand religion in itself as an autonomous discipline within the history of culture, but it is also promoted as the only genuinely scientific approach that can unveil the essence of Christianity itself. Consequently, the historical perspectives are used to undermine the traditional dogmatic method. The differences between these two alternative means of research are the main subject of two other important contributions by Troeltsch: “Geschichte und Metaphysik” and “Über historische und dogmatische Methode der Theologie.”

However, while Christianity can reveal its true character within the comparative theological endeavor, at the same time it can also show the reasons for its supposed absoluteness. In *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, which could be said to represent the apex of Troeltsch’s theological reflection and which presents the coherent recapitulation of all of the ideas and proposals that he previously offered, he questions precisely this claim. The main thesis of this major work is briefly but clearly enough expressed in the opening paragraph of the second chapter, dedicated to the reexamination of the evolutionary apologetic:

> It is impossible to construct a theory of Christianity as the absolute religion on the basis of a historical way of thinking or by the use of historical means. Much that looks weak, shadowy, and unstable in the theology of our day is rooted in the impossibility of putting such a construction on Christianity.

Previously, in the first chapter, in reconstructing the background of the problem of the absoluteness of Christianity, Troeltsch has been explaining the mutation of the idea of history in modernity from the ancient conceptions of either state or ecclesiastical historical reports. Though

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these two cases are quite distinct in their inspiration and aims, they are similar regarding their allegiance to some external ideological motives and dogmatic postulates that they evidently reflect:

The understanding of history that prevailed in antiquity was the history of single states. It operated with the rudiments of historical criticism, with excellent but fragmentary results in terms of analogical and psychological comprehension, and with political and patriotic criteria. The idea of history in Catholic culture was the history of mankind. It proceeded, however, not only with purely dogmatic criteria used to absolutize the classical culture of Catholicism but also with a commitment to subordinate all important matters to purely dogmatic postulates. Thus it drew everything together under one all-embracing critique that involved an almost total absence of skill in, or inclination toward, sympathetic understanding. In both cases the idea of history was an appendix or adjunct to the dominant thought of the culture. It conformed to the national, rational, or theological norms of thought.\textsuperscript{430}

Conversely, modern historical criticism, by promoting the systematic and scientific analysis of the sources on which it relies, ends up delineating an idea of history that is radically different:

In contrast to these two ways of thinking, the modern idea of history, which depends on critical source-analysis and on conclusions derived from psychological analogy, is the history of the development of peoples, spheres of cultures, and cultural components. It dissolves all dogmas in the flow of events and tries sympathetically to do justice to all phenomena, first measuring them by their own criteria and then combining them into an overall picture of the continuous and mutually conditioning factors in all individual phenomena that shape the unfolding development of mankind.\textsuperscript{431}

Then, after reaffirming that the absoluteness of Christianity cannot be maintained any longer as an indisputable axiom, Troeltsch, from the point of view of the historical-evolutionism, gets into the analysis of the Christian standpoints in comparison to (and sometimes in contrast with) the worldviews of some other major religious traditions, such as Judaism, Islam, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. The result of this brief but very complex analysis, in which the history of religion meets with phenomenology and metaphysics, is the negation of the concept of

\textsuperscript{430} Troeltsch, The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions, 46.
\textsuperscript{431} Troeltsch, The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions, 46–47.
absoluteness in favor of the adoption of an alternative idea, that of superiority. According to Troeltsch, it is no longer an uncritical and ideological presupposition, but history itself that submits to the honest researcher the evidence of the superiority of Christianity over the other religions. The reason for this superiority lies primarily in the special balance that Christianity shows in conceiving and connecting the elements of the divine, the cosmos, and, above all, the personalistic dimension which modernity treats as the quintessence of its concerns:

Among the great religions, Christianity is in actuality the strongest and most concentrated revelation of personalistic religious apprehension. It is even more than that. It occupies a unique position in that it alone has worked out in a radical way the distinction between the higher and lower worlds that is found on every hand. It alone, by virtue of a higher world deriving from its own reality and inner necessity, takes empirical reality as actually given and experienced, builds upon it, transforms it, and at length raises it up to a new level. It makes this achievement possible by redemptively uniting souls that are ensnared in the world and in guilt with the outgoing and embracing love of God. Christianity represents the only complete break with the limits and conditions of nature religion. It represents the only depiction of the higher world as infinitively valuable personal life that conditions and shapes all else. It renounces the world, but only to the extent that its superficial, natural significance clings to it and the evil in it has become dominant. It affirms the world to the extent that it is from God and is perceived by men of faith as deriving from and leading to God. And renunciation and affirmation, taken together, disclose the true higher world in a power and interdependence that are experienced nowhere else.\(^{432}\)

Finally, after restating that “the higher goal and the greater profundity of life are found on the side of personalistic religion” and demonstrating that there are “certain general considerations that lift this choice above the dimension of mere arbitrariness,”\(^ {433}\) Troeltsch pauses a while to look back at his proposal and ponder it. He understands that in adopting the idea of superiority in place of absoluteness, there is still the eventuality of promoting a new form of apologetics, though under disguise, and in this betraying his open and radical loyalty to the principles of historical criticism. To obviate the problem, he comes to affirm that the superiority of Christianity can be maintained

\(^{432}\) Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, 112.

\(^{433}\) Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, 111–12.
only provisionally since history leads us to think of this actuality. However, it can never be said that this is true in the absolute because in the future there might appear in the world a more excellent kind of religion.

Such a conclusion seems to deliver theology into a form of radical relativism, something that Troeltsch had excluded as an inauthentic solution from the outset of his endeavor. While the impression of a certain relativistic outcome cannot easily be erased, nevertheless, one should consider also what Echol Nix subtly notes, in order to be more accurate and honest in the evaluation of Troeltsch:

Troeltsch acknowledges the failure of both the supernatural-exclusive apologetic of orthodox Protestantism and the evolutionary apologetic of liberal Protestantism and insists that theology’s method should, therefore, be that of the history of religions (die religionsgeschichtliche Methode). However, modern historical consciousness does not entail the conclusion that the results of historical inquiry can be nothing more than a “roaring ocean of trivial relativities, without meaning and purpose in history.” To speak of all religions as “relative” simply means that all historical phenomena are unique, individual configurations. This does not entail “denial of the values that appear in these individual configurations.” These values may be “oriented in the same direction,” or “may have the power to encounter and influence one another, and may ultimately, as a result of such interaction lead [men to discern their inner truth and necessity and thus make a choice] among them.” The problem is not that the relativity of human experience deprives the experience of all normative value. Rather, the problem is how to discern the normative in the relative.434

In conclusion, the radicalization of the contrast between the dogmatic and the historical methods, which is one of the most recognizable aspects of Troeltsch’s thought, is possibly at the root of the slightly relativist outcomes of his theological endeavor. Nevertheless, this contraposition inaugurated a new philosophical trend and, at the same time, echoed and systematized some positions that were already on stage but that would become more prominent

434 Echol Nix, Jr., Ernst Troeltsch and Comparative Theology (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 3. The section in brackets is missing from Nix’s quotation from page 89 of Absoluteness. The words are omitted by Nix the first time he quotes this passage of Troeltsch, though not the second time he does it on page 68, nor the third time on page 213.
with the modernist crisis. What is more, despite the many contradictions that such a dichotomy caused both in his theology and in those liberal views he later inspired, Troeltsch’s decisive demand for a systematic dialogue between theology and modernity had an undoubtedly positive effect. Not only did it serve as the groundwork for more recent theological methods of correlation but, more importantly, it contributed to rescuing theology from the irrelevance that at his time seemed almost inevitable.

Paul Tillich

Tillich had always lived, according to his own account, on the “boundaries,” between philosophy and theology, between religion and culture, and between his native Germany and America.\(^{435}\)

Paul Tillich\(^{436}\) was a hero of two worlds, Europe and America, and his original thought bears the traces of cross-fertilization between two different worldviews at a time during which humanity’s balance was dramatically upset by the outbreaks of the First and Second World Wars. Tillich was “on the boundaries” not only by choice or simply for intellectual orientations but, first of all, because of the need to preserve his freedom of thought and, eventually, save his life.

Tillich was born in 1886 in Starzeddel, a little town in the state of Brandenburg, Germany. This very simple, almost anonymous location, however, provided him with a sense of attachment to his European cultural roots and the special opportunity of relating to the enchantments of nature. Moreover, during the years of the humanistic gymnasium, he learned from the German poetic heritage how mystical participation in nature and the idea of the Holy, which he drew from his

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personal religious experiences, can end up supporting each other. However, this ideal and secure ambience became too limited for Tillich, as he himself describes in *My Search for Absolutes*:

The town was medieval in character. Surrounded by a wall, built around an old Gothic church, entered through gates with towers over them, administered from a medieval town hall, it gave the impression of a small, protected, and self-contained world.\(^{437}\)

The year 1900, at the opening of a new century, represents a turning point in Tillich’s life: he moved with his father and to Berlin and the great city had an enormous impact on him.

The impression the big city made on me was somehow similar to that of the sea: infinity, openness, unrestricted space! But beyond this it was the dynamic character of life in Berlin that affected me, the immense amount of traffic, the masses of people, the ever-changing scenes, the inexhaustible possibilities.\(^{438}\)

In Berlin, Tillich continued his studies in the Gymnasium, where he developed a special love for Greek and Latin literature. His academic training then continued in Breslau, where he earned a doctorate in philosophy; and, in Halle, a licentiate in theology. Those years were essential for his formation because he deepened his knowledge of philosophy, and of the German philosophers in particular, focusing primarily on Schelling. In the meantime, in 1912, Tillich was also ordained a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. At the outbreak of World War I, he enthusiastically decided to serve his country by joining the Army as a chaplain. Nonetheless, his initial fervor soon faded and gave way to a dramatic change in disposition:

The first weeks had not passed before my original enthusiasm disappeared; after a few months I became convinced that the war would last indefinitely and ruin all Europe.\(^{439}\)

After the war, from 1919 to 1924, Tillich was appointed as a Privatdozent of Theology at the University of Berlin; later, he started teaching in Marburg during Heidegger’s tenure as

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professor of philosophy there. The impact of existentialism on his thought became slowly but effectively more and more tangible:

Existentialism in its twentieth-century form crossed my path. It took years before I became fully aware of the impact of this encounter on my own thinking. I resisted, I tried to learn, I accepted the new way of thinking more than the answers it gave.\(^{440}\)

Subsequently, Tillich took positions at the Universities of Dresden, Leipzig, and Frankfurt and offered lectures all over Germany that soon ended up displeasing the growing Nazi movement. In particular, some of his works and a lecture in Frankfurt on the impact of the Jewish thinkers Spinoza and Marx on German literature and philosophy caused his expulsion from the university and later his exile: he fled to the United States with his family. There, he taught at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York. Subsequently, he took a position at Harvard, and finally at the University of Chicago, where he lived until his death in 1965.

The works that Tillich produced during his time in America and his lectures at several academic institutions made him famous worldwide and renowned as one of the most studied and discussed contemporary theologians. Also, his previous contributions in German were recovered and translated. Among his works, I will list only the most important: *The Interpretation of History* (1936),\(^{441}\) *The Protestant Era* (1948),\(^{442}\) *Systematic Theology* in three volumes (1951–63),\(^{443}\) *The Courage to Be* (1952),\(^{444}\) *Dynamics of Faith* (1957),\(^{445}\) and *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (1963).\(^{446}\)

Because he was an iconoclastic thinker, renewal and change were part of Tillich’s most

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\(^{440}\) Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes*, 42.

\(^{441}\) Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936).


evident theological attitudes. Hence, it is difficult to characterize his thought by focusing on a single stage of his theological development. However, commentators generally agree in identifying his masterpiece, *Systematic Theology*, as the work in which he systematically elaborates his “method of correlation” and establishes his theology of culture. According to Tillich, no method can be adequate for every subject, because a methodology is often part of the reality that one intends to comprehend and measure. However, in order to build a plausible perspective of analysis, one should usually have access to a sort of a priori knowledge of the object to be studied. In the case of theology—and systematic theology in particular—this a priori knowledge corresponds to the Christian faith; and, more specifically, to the deposit of the Christian symbols. In particular, Jesus as the Christ is the final criterion and the lens, so to speak, through which existential questions can be illuminated. Hence, in this sense, the preferred method for systematic theology should be that of correlation: the main subject of analysis is culture in its multiple forms of expression. From them, the theologian can derive the fundamental questions to which the Christian revelation offers its convincing answers. Among the questions that Tillich investigates, I will recall here, in particular, those with which he deals in the three volumes of his *Systematic Theology*: the nature of reason and the quest for revelation; the ontological problem and the question of God; the existential drama and the quest for the Christ in his historical and trans-historical meaning; the multidimensional unity of life and the manifestation of the spiritual presence; and, finally, history and the quest for the kingdom of God. With the following words, Tillich explains his method:

In using the method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions…. The analysis of the human situation employs materials made by man’s creative self-interpretation in all realms of culture. Philosophy contributes, but so do poetry, drama, the novel, therapeutic psychology, and sociology. The theologian organizes these materials in relation to the answer given by the Christian message. In the light of this message he may make an analysis of existence which is more penetrating than that of most
philosophers.\textsuperscript{447}

Kelton Cobb proposes an interesting reading of Tillich’s theology of culture and, in his thought, identifies two phases, if not two different theologies, of culture.\textsuperscript{448} In the first phase, Tillich resorted to culture in order to discover therein traces of the divine revelation, in the firm conviction that religion is not the only aspect of human life that connects to the Ultimate. Rather, culture, in its multiple philosophical and aesthetic expressions, often bears witness to the divine. Even quasi-religions (like Socialist and Marxist ideologies), which offer alternative solutions to the human predicament than those of Christianity, are considered worthy of consideration by Tillich. The second phase, which essentially starts with the beginning of World War II, is more concentrated on the hardness of the human heart and the powerful influence of the demonic principle on human consciousness. Cobb eloquently typifies the two phases as follows:

The distinction between his two theologies of culture can thus be characterized as an earlier theology of culture via positiva that peers expectantly into the depths of cultural activity for novel stirrings of the unconditioned, and a later theology of culture via negativa that studies cultural activity for expressions of the limit, the raw edge, the wound of human existence—and thus the most revealing disclosures of its own deepest absence.\textsuperscript{449}

However, Cobb does not limit himself to recovering and analyzing these two distinct approaches in Tillich; instead, he discovers a certain intellectualist position in Tillich that drives him toward a problematic neglect of the popular lore that, conversely, a true theology of culture should have acknowledged. Cobb synthesizes his thesis as follows:

Whether material culture was a symbol for divine revelation or for the human predicament, Tillich favored analyzing the most erudite and the most prized creations of culture. Tillich avoided expressions of popular culture when he turned to culture as a source for his theology. This is true whether he viewed culture as a source revealing the ultimate or as a

\textsuperscript{449} Cobb, “Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich’s Theology of Culture,” 64.
source disclosing the human predicament.\textsuperscript{450}

Cobb identifies the roots of what he considers Tillich’s prejudice in the continuing influence of his philosophical formation and, especially, his “mandarin” conception of \textit{Kultur} and his allegiance with the Frankfurt School of Social Research.\textsuperscript{451} I think that Cobb is certainly correct in denouncing this dangerous intellectualist tendency in Tillich’s position; however, his assessment should be mitigated with a more attentive recognition of another factor in the evolution of Tillich’s thought. His involvement with the world religions and their interpreters contributed largely to helping him appreciate aspects of the popular cultures that religions enshrine and that a purely philosophical approach could be somewhat prone to neglect. Hence, although a certain intellectualism remains in Tillich, the rediscovery of religions and religious symbols made him capable of appreciating the importance of the popular traditions, even if only indirectly. For instance, while submitting religious symbols to philosophical analysis in their essence and functioning, he recognizes that they cannot be described and studied as any other intellectual concept, since they arise as the result of complex chains of semantic references and naturally emerge out of the collective unconscious:

Symbols cannot be produced intentionally…. They grow out of the individual or collective unconscious and cannot function without being accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being. Symbols which have an especially social function, as political and religious symbols, are created or at least accepted by the collective unconscious of the group in which they appear…. Symbols do not grow because people are longing for them, and they do not die because of scientific or practical criticism. They die because they can no longer produce response in the group where they originally found expression.\textsuperscript{452}

However, other (and perhaps more relevant) are the positive effects that involvement with world religions created in Tillich’s theologizing. He himself admits that the previous stages of his

\textsuperscript{450} Cobb, “Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich’s Theology of Culture,” 65–66.
\textsuperscript{451} Cobb, “Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich’s Theology of Culture,” 66.
\textsuperscript{452} Tillich, \textit{Dynamics of Faith}, 42–43.
theological endeavors were characterized by a certain provincialism. According to John Dourley, this change in mind brought Tillich to embrace positions that were quite different from those that he endorsed in the previous stages of his work and that are somehow reflected in his masterpiece:

Late in Paul Tillich’s life a series of events conspired to effect a perceptible broadening of his theological perspective. This expanded consciousness was most evident in late confessions of an earlier and, by implication, somewhat sustained provincialism running throughout much of his theological endeavor to that point. Such confessions of provincialism led him, in his more occasional late statements, to positions in considerable tension if not contradiction with his earlier Systematic Theology.453

Dourley points out four facts that, in his opinion, contributed to changing Tillich’s mind toward a better appreciation of popular culture. It is interesting to note that all these events are somehow concerned with Tillich’s encounter with world religions. First, while at Harvard, Tillich had the opportunity to start a fruitful dialogue with the Buddhist Japanese scholar Hisamatsu Shin’ichi; second, in 1960, Tillich had the opportunity to visit Japan, where he got to know the Japanese religions closer and established various stimulating interreligious exchanges. Third, Tillich’s acquaintance with Carl Jung’s work and, in particular, the latter’s idea of the archetypal relationship between religious symbols and psychology stimulated in him a better appreciation of other religious worldviews. Finally, during his tenure at the University of Chicago, he had the special opportunity to collaborate with Mircea Eliade and appreciate the latter’s system of thought. All these events represented for Tillich a positive stimulus toward the overcoming of his personal form of provincialism and, more radically, against any form of theological narrow-mindedness:

These events point to significant influences in the biographical and intellectual background to Tillich’s late confessions of the provincial nature of his earlier theology and to his renewed warning that such provincialism remained an ongoing threat in the then current theological situation.454

And yet, although the evidence of a transformation in Tillich’s perspective is undeniable, there were thinkers, such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who considered it insufficient:

Probably Tillich belongs to the last generation of theologians who can formulate their conceptual system as religiously isolationist.\(^{455}\)

However, such an evaluation seems ungenerous. Tillich’s great contribution to interreligious dialogue, theology of religions, and comparative theology is beyond any doubt. Otherwise, one should wonder why current Christian thinkers who are deeply involved in conversations with other religious partners and in the comparison between Christianity and other religions consider Tillich one of their major authorities. Even more so, thinkers from other religious traditions either resort to Tillich as their ideal partner in dialogue and as a representative of Christian thought or are at least willing to acknowledge his special contribution to the cause of interreligious exchange. To show how genuinely open Tillich was to the positive inputs that can come from the treasures of other religious traditions, it is sufficient to report his comments on the significance of the history of religions for Christian theology:

First one must say that revelatory experiences are universally human. Religions are based on something that is given to a man wherever he lives. He is given a revelation, a particular kind of experience which always implies saving powers. One never can separate revelation and salvation. There are revealing and saving powers in all religions. God has not left himself unwitnessed.\(^{456}\)

Later in the same text, Tillich seems to correct his method of correlation and broaden his idea of culture by including the religious aspect but without considering it as an aspect of reality among others as his previous work seemed to do. Rather, the relation between religious and secular becomes mutually corrective and manifestly dialectic, because this time the religious is viewed as


fundamentally intrinsic to culture, if not its deepest soul:

The history of religions in its essential nature does not exist alongside the history of culture. The sacred does not lie beside the secular, but it is its depths. The sacred is the creative ground and at the same time a critical judgment of the secular. But the religious can be this only if it is at the same time a judgment on itself, a judgment which must use the secular as a tool of one’s own religious self-criticism.\(^{457}\)

Dialectics is also the key perspective for understanding the traditional Christian positions toward other religious beliefs. On the one hand, it implies the rejection of radicalism and some forms of blind opposition that are typical of those who see other religious experiences as essentially of demonic origins. On the other hand, allegiance to the Christian faith requires a strong attachment to the depositum fidei and the exclusion of any form of irenicism in considering religious views that are quite often opposed to that of the Christian faith:

One thing should have become clear through the preceding descriptions and analyses: that Christianity is not based on a simple negation of the religions or quasi-religions it encounters. The relation is profoundly dialectical, and that is not a weakness, but the greatness of Christianity, especially in its self-critical, Protestant form.\(^{458}\)

Among all religions, nobody can deny how special the bond was that tied Tillich to the Jewish community and its heritage of thought. Albert H. Friedlander attests his esteem toward Tillich from a Jewish point of view and judges his intellectual contribution as highly fascinating and, at the same time controversial, in this quite vivid comment:

What Tillich taught is important to Judaism—important enough for us to start our own controversies about him, to challenge and to reject, to approve and to accept what he has to say. However, it is not only the teaching but also the teacher that matters to Judaism. We listen to Tillich the theologian because Tillich the human being extraordinaire cast his lot with the Jewish people in dark times.\(^{459}\)

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\(^{457}\) Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 81–82.

\(^{458}\) Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 51.

Among the privileged Jewish partners with whom Tillich loved to discuss matters was Martin Buber. To him, Tillich felt indebted not only on an intellectual level but, more profoundly, for their friendship and commonality in the same existential questions and problems. Upon Buber’s death, Tillich pronounced the following intense words:

It is characteristic that we never discussed the Jewish-Christian contrast directly. This was not the existential question today for either of us. It was not denied, but our real problems could not be discussed in terms of unity and trinity, not even in terms of law and gospel. The reason was that Buber’s universalism transcended any particular religion, although it was derived from his interpretation of Judaism, just as I derived my universalism from what I think to be the true nature of Christianity. This is the reason why our dialogues never were Jewish-Christian dialogues but dialogues about the relation of God, man, and nature. They were dialogues between a Jew and a Protestant who had transcended the limits of Judaism as well as of Protestantism, while remaining a Jew the one, and a Protestant the other. This concrete universalism seems to me to be the only justifiable form of universalism.460

Finally the significant impact of other religious views can be detected in the theological outcomes of some of Tillich’s late positions; which, though already rooted in his previous contributions, have progressively taken up a new form. In particular, the relevance of the influence of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism can be observed in Tillich’s rejection of the Christian provincialism of those envisioning God in the terms of personalism described in the Bible. Though already announced in Systematic Theology,461 Tillich’s endorsement of nontheism in his late lectures and work is total, as Dourley also notes:

Nevertheless his late authentication of Godless religions as truly salvific lies in direct continuity with his earlier and ongoing rejection of the biblical reduction of the divine-human relation to the wholly personal and marks an advance in his making explicit what previously had been at most a tantalizing implication in his thought.462

In conclusion, recovering the discourse on religion and investigating the sacred was so

461 “God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him”; see Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol. 1, 205.
crucial in Tillich’s reflection that they—whether acceptable or not; this is quite debatable—determined most of his final changes of position. Moreover, not only history of religions—but, more properly, theology of religions and new comparative theology, which in his time were either incipient or still developing—made such an impact on his thought that contemporary comparative theologians accordingly consider him one of the most authoritative theological voices in their field, as Pan-Chiu Lai strongly attests:

Tillich’s talent for interpreting the meanings of religious symbols or theological doctrines for particular problems has had no equal this century…. With regard to the contemporary discussion on the theology of religions, Tillich’s thought is very illuminating. Nearly all of the present approaches to the theology of religions can find their shadows and echoes in Tillich’s thought.463

George A. Lindbeck

Comparative Theology. This expression of the Acceptance Model is not dependent on, but resonates with, the postliberal groundwork of Lindbeck and Heim. It calls Christians and theologians to put their philosophical and theological concerns aside and just plunge into a study and embrace of other religions.464

In the above passage, quoted from his better-known survey on theologies of religions, Paul Knitter curiously inserts the new comparative theology among the postliberal theological perspectives and links this kind of project to the name of George A. Lindbeck with his significant influence on postmodern theology. In his work, Knitter presents and explains the three classical paradigms of theology of religions—the replacement model that, in his terms, basically corresponds to the exclusivist view; the fulfillment model, which explicates inclusivism, and the mutuality model, which he sees as the basis for the acceptance of religious pluralism. However,

464 Knitter, Theologies of Religions, 177 [italics in the original].
beyond these three paradigms, he identifies another one that he calls the acceptance model. He describes it briefly as follows: “It’s a theology that insists that the religions of the world are really different and that relationships between them must be built on accepting, cherishing, and, perhaps, learning from those differences.”

Thus, he lists and presents various authors who, though starting from different perspectives, have something substantial in common in that they all echo the postliberal turn in postmodern theology in at least the two following aspects: first, in their approach to a given comparative subject they are more attentive to the differences than to the similarities; second, they avoid dealing with “metanarratives,” intended as universal truths, in order to focus on “narratives,” that is to say, on some specific textual traditions. Among the authors who give voice to this new perspective Knitter mentions first of all Lindbeck, then William Platcher, Paul Griffiths, Joseph DiNoia, S. Mark Heim, James L. Friedericks, and Francis X. Clooney.

Although the link between the new comparative theology and Lindbeck—as Knitter warns—cannot be established directly, in order better to illuminate the characteristics of the new comparative theology, it is still necessary to get back to the thought of that author who “shook the foundations—you might even say, set a fire within—the comfortable houses of many a Christian thinker.”

To reflect on Lindbeck’s work will be vital to revealing not only the direct points of connection between postliberalism and the new comparative theology, but also to disclose in which aspects the latter discipline started to depart from the former inspiration.

George Arthur Lindbeck spent his childhood in Asia, firstly in China, where he was born in 1923, in Loyang, to a family of Lutheran missionaries, and then in Korea. After completing his primary and secondary schooling, he settled in Minnesota, in the United States, where he attended

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466 Knitter, *Theologies of Religions*, 178.
Following his graduation, Lindbeck moved to Yale University, where he earned first his bachelor in divinity in 1946 and, later, his PhD in 1955. His major interests were medieval studies; accordingly, his dissertation dealt with the thought of John Duns Scotus. During his doctoral research, Lindbeck had the opportunity to study with eminent medievalists in Toronto and Paris. Finally, after earning his doctorate, he was appointed to a professorship at Yale, where he taught until his retirement in 1993.

Together with his colleague Hans Wilhelm Frei, Lindbeck is considered the founder of postliberal theology and the “New Yale School” of theology. Because of his emphasis on the regulative role of the Bible in systematics and in general on language and narration, he was the inspirer of narrative theology, which has recently received much attention in scholarly debate, at least in some of its forms. Besides his interests in medieval thought, Lindbeck is also noted for his convinced ecumenical involvement, particularly in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, at both the national and international levels. What is more, the Lutheran World Federation appointed him as a delegate and observer at the Second Vatican Council. This experience and, more generally, his engagement with Lutheran-Catholic reconciliation are echoed in some of his first contributions, especially The Future of Roman Catholic Theology (1970)\textsuperscript{467} and Infallibility (1972).\textsuperscript{468} It is interesting to read his favorable impressions of and comments on the renewed impetus that the Second Vatican Council gave to the Catholic Church:

The entire work of the Council could be described from the viewpoint of this surrender of pretensions. Its three most dramatic acts, the Decree on Ecumenism and the Declarations on Non-Christian Religions and on Religious Freedom, all reflect the conviction that Catholics should be respectful, willing to learn, cooperative, and even protectively affirmative toward other religions, churches, and movements, as well as toward individuals outside the church, because God is at work through them also and not only in Roman Catholicism.\textsuperscript{469}

\textsuperscript{468} George A. Lindbeck, Infallibility (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1972).
\textsuperscript{469} Lindbeck, The Future of Roman Catholic Theology, 38.
Lindbeck was convinced that this new process of reform that the Catholic council inaugurated is still relevant also for all the Christian confessions, which in their turn were both provoked and stimulated by such a great ecclesial event:

This Council has opened up immense possibilities for the growing together of the Christian family, but whether they are actualized, and how they are actualized, depends on the collaboration of all the confessions.\(^{470}\)

The ecumenical problem and the solution of the ancient misunderstandings among the Christian denominations remains one of the most urgent priorities in Lindbeck’s theological effort throughout his entire career. His undoubted masterpiece, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984),\(^ {471}\) though dealing with many other important theological issues that are quite significant to our subject, is primarily animated by these same concerns. As a matter of fact, his reflections on doctrine are certainly rooted in sophisticated philosophical and theological debates on the relationships among language, culture, and religions but are, nonetheless, aimed at solving the conflicts among Christians.

Given the modest length of this and other major works, Lindbeck appears to be averse to voluminous works. However, his contributions are always dense and thoughtful and, especially in *The Nature of Doctrine*, he shows a special ability to concentrate provocative questions and clever insight in just a few pages. The novelty that this work has represented in the postmodern theological scene is witnessed by the infinite book reviews, comments, enthusiastic approvals or, conversely, disdainful rejections it has generated.\(^ {472}\) Despite the most varied accusations that *The

\(^{470}\) Lindbeck, *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology*, 118.


\(^{472}\) See for instance Stefan Eriksson, “Refining the Distinction between Modern and Postmodern Theologies: The Case of Lindbeck,” *Studia Theologica* 56 (2002); Jay Wesley Richards, “Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine*,” *Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (1997); Kenneth Surin, “‘Many Religions and the One True
Nature of Doctrine elicited—vagueness, confusion, inconsistency, tendentiousness, fideism, etc.—I believe that, in this paramount piece of scholarship, Lindbeck’s thought is clear, easily traceable and quite consistent with the positions he previously took during his career. As I will show, while I am open to accepting some of the credible criticisms that academia has raised, I reject the obstinacy of those forms of rejection that often reveal a malicious intention to undermine Lindbeck’s whole project at any cost rather than objectively evaluating it. I am driven to think that, since this work was so innovative in some of its aspects, it was probably perceived as potentially subversive of others’ agendas.

Lindbeck’s thought on religions and comparativism is well displayed and summarized in The Nature of Doctrine, but some of his standpoints were first suitably anticipated and then applied in others of his contributions. Here, I will refer in particular to three of them: “Fides ex Auditu and the Salvation of Non-Christians: Contemporary Catholic and Protestant Positions,”473 “Barth and Textuality,”474 and “The Gospel’s Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability.”475 Given the consistency of Lindbeck’s procedure, I will refer to them only when it might be necessary to draw attention to some aspects of his demonstration, as they are presented in his most renowned masterpiece.

As I have already anticipated, The Nature of Doctrine is a brief but quite complex work that stimulates deep reflection and opens itself to multiple readings. For the sake of my project, I will concentrate my attention on chapters two and three; there, Lindbeck presents first his cultural-
linguistic model for the quest on religion while offering the reasons for which he considers the alternative models inadequate. Then, he focuses on the interrelationships of religions, the crucial questions of religious comparativism, and the benefits and possibilities of interreligious dialogue.

From the study of the existing approaches to the subject of religion, in both philosophy and theology, Lindbeck sees the recurrence of three different perspectives that he considers equally inadequate despite the undoubted advantages they all provide. First, he singles out what he calls the propositional-cognitive model, the perspective that is typical of the most traditional orthodox approaches in religious studies and theology as well as of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy: it “emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities.”

Second, he recognizes in the vast heritage of liberal theology, starting from Schleiermacher until the present day, the insistence on an opposite line of thought; namely, the experiential-expressive model, which “interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.” This perspective makes it easy to stress the similarities of religions to the detriment of their particularities, on the basis of a strong conviction: in all experiences and traditions of faith there is a common core that, apparently, would constitute the original and most authentic religious sentiment. In this view, all the variants in belief, while they would enshrine and cherish this core, would simultaneously be incapable of manifesting it in all its depth and completeness. Furthermore, the existential-expressive model “highlights the resemblances of religions to aesthetic enterprises” and is especially devoted to dialogue with contemporary cultural milieus and to the adjustment of the Christian revelation to philosophy,

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human thoughts, and feelings. Finally, he sees a third way that is simply the result of the combination of the first two models: this is the particular case of two “ecumenically inclined Roman Catholics,” 479 Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, whom he labels “the two-dimensional experiential-expressivists.” 480 According to Lindbeck, Rahner and Lonergan would basically offer a hybrid position in which “both the cognitively propositional and the expressively symbolic dimensions and functions of religion and doctrine are viewed, at least in the case of Christianity, as religiously significant and valid.” 481

In Chapter 3, while dealing with the specific questions of salvation and other faiths, Lindbeck shows how this third position of Rahner and Lonergan is an amalgam of the first two models. At first, Lindbeck identifies in the thoughts of the two Catholic theologians one of the most noted examples of the existentialist-expressive perspective in the theology of grace:

They identify the prereflective, inarticulate experience of the divine, which they hold is at the heart of every religion, with the saving grace of Christ. Those non-Christians who respond to the inward call already share in the same justification, the same salvation, that is at work in Christians even though, unlike Christians, they have no conscious adherence or visible sacramental bond to the historical Jesus Christ who is both the ultimate source and the only fully and finally appropriate objective correlate of their inner experience of salvation. 482

Although the existentialist-expressive tone is predominant in both Lonergan and Rahner, in some parts of their work they nonetheless show that they are still dependent on positions that are close to the propositional perspective. It is true that, in Method in Theology, 483 Lonergan occasionally seems to replicate some aspects of the position of the classicists he criticizes, and this despite the high degree of sophistication of his analysis and his declared opposition to classicism

479 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 2.
480 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 42.
481 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 2.
482 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 42–43.
in theology and to any abstract or normative conception of culture. In my opinion, Lonergan’s cognitivist influence emerges in particular in Chapter 11, where he presents the relationship between the foundational reality of doctrines, systematics and communications, and pluralism in expression.

However, it is undeniable that, despite some lingering classicism, Lonergan is generally more aligned with the existential model. This is particularly evident, as Lindbeck notes, when he is ready to identify sanctifying grace directly with a primordial religious experience that he describes expressively as “God’s gift of love”\textsuperscript{484} and “the dynamic state of being in love without restrictions.”\textsuperscript{485} According to Lonergan, religion is “the prior word God speaks to us by flooding our hearts with his love.”\textsuperscript{486} Then, to illustrate better what this common core is in world religions, Lonergan refers to the work of Friedrich Heiler, who identified the following common areas in “Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Zoroastrian Mazdaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism”\textsuperscript{487}:

- that there is a transcendent reality; that he is immanent in human hearts; that he is supreme beauty, truth, righteousness, goodness; that he is love, mercy, compassion; that the way to him is repentance, self-denial, prayer; that the way is love of one’s neighbor, even of one’s enemies; that the way is love of God, union with him, or dissolution into him.\textsuperscript{488}

In Lindbeck’s opinion, both Heiler’s and Lonergan’s positions would be unlikely to be welcomed by the adherents of other religions since their list of proposed commonalities is clearly shaped by the Christian worldview and language; furthermore, if it is true that true religion corresponds to the saving grace that abides in human hearts and therefore would be sufficient to bring people to salvation, then this would manifestly contradict the traditional Christian belief in salvation through faith in Christ alone.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{484} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 106.
\item \textsuperscript{485} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 120.
\item \textsuperscript{486} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 112.
\item \textsuperscript{487} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{488} Lonergan, \textit{Method in Theology}, 109.
\end{itemize}
Jay Wesley Richards, on the authority of Stephen Williams,\textsuperscript{489} denounces Lindbeck as follows: “One should note that Lindbeck’s inclusion of these theologians is fairly contentious, and that his later appropriation of Lonergan for his own purposes probably evinces a serious misreading of Lonergan.”\textsuperscript{490} I believe that Williams’s criticism of Lindbeck’s use of Lonergan can be considered a misreading only in relation to the former’s hermeneutics of Athanasius and Nicaea; to apply such an assessment to Lindbeck’s overall reading of Lonergan, as Richards does, is rather unfair.

Also, Rahner’s famous theory of the “anonymous Christian” is not tenable from either Lindbeck’s point of view or a cultural-linguistic approach. Rahner somehow recalls or simply alludes to his position in several articles during his career as well as in \textit{Foundations of Christian Faith},\textsuperscript{491} which constitutes a sort of compendium of his thought.\textsuperscript{492} However, he has elaborated and displayed his views on the salvation of non-Christians more systematically in three key articles: “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,”\textsuperscript{493} “Anonymous Christians,”\textsuperscript{494} and first of all in “Poetry and the Christian.”\textsuperscript{495} Here, the category of anonymous Christianity makes its first appearance in Rahner’s speculation:

There is such a thing as anonymous Christianity. There are men who think that they are not Christians, but who are in the grace of God. And hence there is an anonymous humanism inspired by grace, which thinks that it is no more than human. We Christians can understand it, better than it does itself. When we affirm as a doctrine of faith that human morality even in the natural sphere needs the grace of God to be steadfast in its great task,

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\item Richards, “Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck’s The Nature of Doctrine,” 34, n. 4.
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we recognize as Christians that such humanism, wherever it displays its true visage and wherever it exists, even outside professed Christianity, is a gift of the grace of God and a tribute to the redemption, even though it as yet knows nothing of this. Why then should we not love it? To pass it by indifferently would be to despise the grace of God.496

According to Rahner, members of other religions should not be regarded as non-Christians, but rather as “anonymous Christians,” particularly if they are living out the expression of a religious tradition that, after the beginning of the Christian mission, has been in contact with Christianity and somehow has been positively affected by it. Hence, in Rahner’s words, the anonymous Christian is more specifically:

the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is oriented in grace-giving salvation to Jesus Christ.497

However, it is not only that single individuals can be positively evaluated as oriented to Jesus—as not only Rahner, but also traditional Church teaching acknowledges—but also that spiritual paths other than Christianity can be appreciated in themselves, as though they are implicitly touched by Christ’s grace and oriented to him. It is Rahner’s conviction that non-Christian religions “have supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ.”498 Consequently, Christians should learn how to admit the positive significance of other religions and even pre-Christian religions that, in his view, were included in God’s plan of salvation. In fact, in Rahner’s view, the traces of the working of grace, though sometimes difficult to discern, reveal themselves in the religious traditions of all peoples. Hence, Rahner concludes that non-Christian religions, “even though incomplete, rudimentary, and

partially debased, can be realities within a positive history of salvation and revelation.®

For this reason, they can be approached and respected by Christians potentially as ways of salvation, given that “a positive salific function cannot be a priori and entirely denied.”®

But, the question necessarily arises: in such a position, what is the difference between explicit and implicit Christianity? Rahner’s stress on the salvation guaranteed through grace to anonymous Christians aims only at counterbalancing the traditional emphasis on the soteriological principle of solus Christus, in the form of the explicit endorsement and affirmation of the Christian faith:

The person who has concretely encountered Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen One, must also confess him in order to reach the salvation which the “anonymous Christian” has reached in a preliminary way, to be sure, but in a form which nonetheless guarantees his or her salvation.®

Rahner’s theology of grace and soteriology were certainly shaped by an expressive-existential approach; however, as Lindbeck also noted in the case of Lonergan, there are aspects of Rahner’s thought that are apparently molded on another perspective: for example, his ingenious recovery of the traditional principle of solus Christus—salvation comes only from Christ’s grace—betrays a hybridity of perspectives. Rahner strove to preserve this soteriological principle without denying the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians. For the solution of this age-old dilemma, he offers two possible answers: one stresses the presence of Christ’s grace in the present age beyond the limits of the church, as we have seen in the teaching regarding anonymous Christians; the other postpones the explicit recognition of Christ as savior to the time of his gracious intervention in the eschatological era when, either in death or at the end of history, anyone will

® Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, eds., Faith in a Wintry Season: Conversations and Interviews with Karl Rahner in the Last Years of His Life (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 102.
have to face the Last Judgment in a personal encounter with him. While Lindbeck endorses the last prospective solution; which, in his opinion, guarantees the maintenance of the *fides ex auditu* and of its relevance in matter of salvation, he cannot accept that this solution could be maintained together with the theory of the anonymous Christians: “Neither the classical cognitivists nor those who think of religions in primarily cultural-linguistic terms can adopt this explanation.”

However, it is important to recall that—contrary to what Lindbeck suggests here—it was not Rahner’s intention to relativize explicit faith in favor of anonymous Christianity. Rather, he defended explicit Christianity as the path that requires more decisive responsibility precisely because it is the religion of the immediate closeness of God to human beings in the divine self-communication to the world and, consequently, the preeminent and surest way of salvation:

> The individual who grasps Christianity in a clearer, purer and more reflective way has, other things being equal, a still greater chance of salvation than someone who is merely an anonymous Christian.  

From the presentation of Rahner’s and Lonergan’s thought, it is evident that Lindbeck rejects not just their model but also, above all, the two perspectives that they meld together: in his opinion, they are partial and incapable either of understanding the single religions in their most distinctive characteristics or of studying the interconnectedness between religious truths, languages, and cultures. To contrast these three models, Lindbeck proposes the adoption of a quite different perspective, the cultural-linguistic model, and reaches this objective by resorting to some authors who significantly reflected on the regulative aspect of language, semiotics, and the various theories of cultures either in philosophy or in theology. Among Lindbeck’s major authorities, we cannot forget first of all Ludwig Wittgenstein, then Clifford Geertz, Thomas Kuhn, Noam

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Chomsky, and Erich Auerbach.

According to Lindbeck’s definition, a religion is a self-subsistent, coherent, and autonomous system of signs whose meanings can be deduced only through links among the signs themselves, which are mutually related and reciprocally disambiguating. Moreover, cross-references between signs and the cultural context in which a religion was generated contribute to shedding light on the nature and the deepest values of a given spiritual movement.

Thus the linguistic-cultural model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. There are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol systems.\footnote{Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}, 20.}

In Lindbeck’s terms, using the appropriate symbol system is tantamount to dealing with language games—to refer to Wittgenstein’s famous expression.\footnote{Ludwig Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, trans. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, Peter Michael Stephan Hacker, and Joachim Sculte (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).} To discover the surplus in meaning of a given religious phenomenon, one should always be conscious of the semantic play of continuing references in which it has been discovered and to which it refers. Then, sense shifts with the changes of the contexts and variants that are always conjured up in complexifying this game. Also, Geertz’s preeminent influence is quite evident in similar conceptions.

While the propositional-cognitive model understands religion as something that can be known and described through straightforward and often incontrovertible affirmations, in Lindbeck’s view, sacred texts should never be read literally (as fundamentalists do) or treated as a mere reservoir of \textit{dicta probantia} that one can misuse imprudently if one fails to pay sufficient attention to both their complex literary aspect and the scriptural contexts in which they occur. For this, Lindbeck is convinced that, “in their written form, texts can have a comprehensiveness,
complexity, and stability which is unattainable in any other medium."\(^{506}\)

Religious texts are multifaceted narratives that function as bodies and whose parts can be comprehended as meaningful only if they are read correlatively. With this idea in his mind, Lindbeck comes to affirms that “Scripture is self-interpreting”\(^{507}\) because the Bible, not differently from other sacred texts, is an intratextual world that “can speak for itself and become the self-interpreting guide for believing communities amid the ever-changing vicissitudes of history.”\(^{508}\) It is a mistake to think that “the realities of which the Bible speaks are found in doctrinal, metaphysical, moral, experimental, or historical domains above, behind, beneath, or in front of the text.”\(^{509}\) Instead of projecting one’s feelings or theories on Scriptures, one should learn how to abide in them and in the new intratextual framework that they open up. Through it, readers can imaginatively “absorb extra-textual realities into the world of the text”\(^{510}\); and, even more so, are called to inscribe the cosmos in the sacred text by “troping all that we are, do, and encounter in biblical terms.”\(^{511}\)

Lindbeck’s criticism against the proponents of the propositional-cognitive model is not only due to their inadequate treatment of the Scriptures but also because of their conception of doctrines. For Lindbeck, doctrinal statements are substantially regulative and are never intended to definitively enclose truth. Doctrines, being somehow asymptotic to truth, only have the capacity to point to it without ever exhausting its depth in just a few words. Lindbeck’s conviction that traditional dogmatic statements (for example, those which were the outcomes of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon) should not be taken ontologically as incontrovertibly positive assertions

\(^{506}\) Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” 361.
\(^{507}\) Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” 365.
\(^{508}\) Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” 362.
\(^{509}\) Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” 365.
\(^{510}\) Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” 370.
\(^{511}\) Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” 371.
but as *regulae fidei* that function as grammar rules gave rise to a series of unfavorable judgments.\(^{512}\) I partly welcome these critical voices and am convinced that, in this specific aspect of Lindbeck’s thought, there is more than a little weakness. Nonetheless I believe that the following point he makes cannot be simply put aside: we know that studying religions means to focus on human experience but not without considering the importance of the cultural lens through which one reads these data. More importantly, however, Lindbeck points to the cultural conditions that form and sustain a given religious experience: there is no religious phenomenon, feeling, or representation that is not culturally pre-determined. On this point, Lindbeck primarily intends to contest the existential-expressive approach, which, in his opinion, is unable sufficiently to acknowledge the weight of cultural influence:

It remains true, therefore, that the most easily pictured of the contrasts between a linguistic-cultural model of religion and an experiential-expressive one is that the former reverses the relation of the inner and the outer. Instead of deriving external features of a religion from inner experience, it is the inner experiences which are viewed as derivative.\(^{513}\)

With this principal idea, Lindbeck seals his original perspective by calling his theology “post-liberal”; his primary intention is to show not only that the propositional model that liberal theology deprecates is defective but also that the liberal theology itself—despite the numerous and prestigious endorsements that it still receives in postmodern theology—is not at all exhaustive.

If religious experiences are predetermined culturally; then, in religious matters there is no room for individualism. Believing is certainly the result of a personal choice; however, any kind of spiritual orientation would be inconceivable and even impossible if it were not somehow anticipated by the support of a community of believers who share this same experience or, at least,

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who created a world of shared symbolic references by speaking a similar cultural language. Better yet, becoming religious means always to take part in a linguistic and cultural game that can be certainly modified by some new contributions but that predates and predetermines any possible personal spiritual involvement. In this regard, Lindbeck’s theology can be appropriately defined as “postliberal” precisely because it intentionally aims to overcome the excessive emphasis on individuals and personalism that is typical of the liberal approach.

As a matter of fact, liberal theology is characterized by the occurrence of an evident contradiction: not only does it neglect the weight of more general cultural conditioning by stressing the role of personal choice and concentrating its attention on individuals; but, by searching for an archetypal universal religious foundation beyond any differences, it is also driven to suppress differences and to reiterate a preconceived and illusory conception of religion that does not correspond to any actual religious experience. Hence, it is quite naïve, Lindbeck believes, to think that generic terms like, for example, “love” and “God” could be carelessly employed without first discerning what is specific in a given religious phenomenon:

The datum that all religions recommend something which can be called “love” toward that which is taken to be most important (“God”) is a banality as uninteresting as the fact that all languages are (or were) spoken. The significant things are the distinctive patterns of story, belief, ritual, and behavior that give “love” and “God” their specific and sometimes contradictory meanings.\(^{514}\)

In a cultural-linguistic approach, particularities are taken so seriously that religions are studied individually as closed systems and singular worldviews whose inherent references of meaning are hardly translatable or transposable in other contexts. Foreign languages are already difficult to render since, beyond any single word, there is an entire world of possible allusions that are determined—diachronically and synchronically—by the shifting of the contexts in which a

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given word is pronounced. For religions, as systems of meaning and not just simple units of thought, the question becomes even more complicated:

The difference between religions may in some cases be analogous to that between mathematical and nonmathematical—e.g., quantitative and qualitative—descriptions of reality. They may, in other words, be incommensurable in such a way that no equivalents can be found in one language or religion for the crucial terms of the other…. The means for referring in any direct way to the Buddhist Nirvana are lacking in Western religions and the cultures influenced by them and it is, therefore, at least initially puzzling how one can say anything either true or false about Nirvana, or even meaningfully deny it, within these latter contexts. Or, to push the same point farther, many Christians have maintained that the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus are part of the referential meaning of the word “God” as it is used in biblical religion and have therefore concluded that philosophers and others who do not advert to these narratives mean something else by “God.”

The idea of the untranslatability of religious languages, which is one of the most recognizable standpoints of the postliberal approach, represents the ground in which another pivotal conviction grows:

In short, the cultural-linguistic approach is open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and therefore also of what it would mean for something to be most important (i.e., “God”).

If religions are seen as enshrining notions of truth that are incommensurable, then—and only then—is it possible coherently to justify the principle of the unsurpassability of truth that is typical of several religious movements. The propositional model emphasises the notion of the inerrancy of one particular religion, and so one is inclined to judge the truth or falsity other claims on the basis of one’s specific religious belonging. In this case, the unsurpassibility of truth is seen as plausible in only one case: the one corresponding to the religious commitment of the interpreter. Conversely, in the experiential model, mutuality is certainly favored; but the idea of

unsurpassability can hardly be justified. The cultural-linguistic approach is the only model that can appreciate and explicate unsurpassibility properly without committing the common fallacy of considering it to be merely a systemic error. Rather, the cultural-linguistic model thinks of religious truths as unsurpassable since it sees them as always relative to and coherent with their specific language-game.

However, promoting the notion of both the untranslatability and incommensurability of religious languages has some side effects, particularly on the side of comparativism. If religions are autonomous systems of meaning and are therefore truly comprehensible only from their inner point of view, then we should deduce that the inconclusiveness of comparison and, perhaps, the impossibility of interreligious dialogue are the necessary outcomes of such a position. In one of his articles, Lindbeck comments in this regard:

The gravest objection to the approach we are adopting is that it makes interreligious dialogue more difficult. Conversation between religions is pluralized or balkanized when they are seen as mutually untranslatable. Not only do they no longer share a common theme, such as salvation, but the shared universe of discourse forged to discuss that theme disintegrates…. Those for whom conversation is key to solving interreligious problems are likely to be disappointed.\footnote{517 Lindbeck, “Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 427.}

However, although Lindbeck’s new approach certainly has a strong impact on interreligious dialogue, this does not necessarily mean that it is an unfavorable one:

While a cultural-linguistic approach does not issue a blanket endorsement of the enthusiasm and warm fellow-feelings that can be easily promoted in an experiential-expressive context, it does not exclude the development of powerful theological rationales for sober and practically efficacious commitment to interreligious discussion and cooperation.\footnote{518 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 41.}

As a matter of fact, Lindbeck never denies the possibility of finding relations among

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\footnote{517 Lindbeck, “Gospel’s Uniqueness,” 427.} \footnote{518 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 41.}
religions: congruently, he devotes attention to the interrelationships of religions in Chapter 3 of *The Nature of Doctrine*. Here, Lindbeck lists all the possible connections that are likely to be found among religions as follows:

Depending on the aspect, they may be related to each other from their own perspectives as complete to incomplete, different expressions of similar experiences, complementary, opposed, and authentic or inauthentic; but, on the other hand, they may also be related in only one of these ways.\(^{519}\)

These categories are not as obscure as they may at first sound. For example, there are religions like Christianity that are naturally related to another spiritual heritage, in this case Judaism, and of which they claim to be the fulfillment. The first pair of categories—complete to incomplete—explains cases that are similar to this. Although religions are closed systems of meaning, it is however possible for similar experiences to be expressed in different ways. This is the second category; to explicate them, Lindbeck recalls Rudolf Otto and his comparative work on mysticism wherein some similar experiences of mystical union are singularly expressed by both Meister Eckhart and Śaṅkara. Third, there are complementary religious experiences “in the sense that they provide guidance to different but not incompatible dimensions of existence.”\(^{520}\)

However, there is always the possibility that different religions also promote opposite goals at least in this sense: it is possible that very diverse religious experiences converge in contrasting the same views that are respectively perceived as incompatible with them; the “professed opposition of higher religions to Nazism,”\(^{521}\) for example, well represents this category of opposing relations. Finally, there is also the case of believers who find more connections with partners from different religious traditions than with their coreligionists. This is because coherency

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and incoherency, as well as authenticity and non-authenticity, can find their own way and emerge in any religious experience, unexpectedly bringing adherents of various faiths closer. Hence, the cultural-linguistic approach, though not envisioning a common religious core experience as does the experiential-expressive model, ends up promoting interreligious dialogue on a new and perhaps more solid basis:

In other words, different religions are likely to have different warrants for interreligious conversation and cooperation. This lack of a common foundation is a weakness, but is also a strength. It means, on the one hand, that the partners in dialogue do not start with the conviction that they really basically agree, but it also means that they are not forced into the dilemma of thinking of themselves as representing a superior (or an inferior) articulation of a common experience of which the other religions are inferior (or superior) expressions. They can regard themselves as simply different and can proceed to explore their agreements and disagreements without necessarily engaging in the invidious comparisons that the assumption of a common experiential core make so tempting.522

If the cultural-linguistic approach does not hinder interreligious dialogue but rather ends up encouraging it, what then is the destiny of comparative theology according to this perspective? Untranslatability of religious language and incommensurability of truths are principles of the cultural-linguistic approach that hardly can be appealed to sustain the credibility of a given comparative enterprise. However, Lindbeck does not definitively reject comparativism as implausible but somehow keeps the doors open to a very extraordinary but not impossible possibility—bilingualism:

There are ways of getting around this obstacle such as bilingualism…, but genuine bilingualism (not to mention the mastery of many religious languages) is so rare and difficult as to leave basically intact the barrier to extramural communication posed by untranslatability in religious matters.523

The new comparative theology, as we will see soon, will promote precisely a sort of

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522 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 41.
religious bilingualism as a way of mastering another religious tradition that is approached and studied in its subtlety, particularity, and complexity; and, by contrast, reinforcing both the knowledge and appreciation of one’s original religion. The problem is that, to reach this goal, the new comparative theology had to distinguish itself from postliberal theology at least in one of its indisputable standpoints: defending the unique role of the Bible rather than favoring other kinds of narrative. Thus, Lindbeck contrasts intratextuality with intertextuality:

The growing awareness of the importance of texts in our day favors the intertextuality in which all texts interpret each other on the same level, rather than the intratextuality in which one privileged text functions as the comprehensive interpretative framework. Even in our day, to be sure, some texts attain a fleeting primacy. One youthful cohort is imprinted with the TV text of Star Trek, for example, but its elders are little affected, and its younger siblings go on to other (and on the whole, perhaps, less edifying) texts. The centrifugal flux of intertextuality has replaced the community, communication, and continuity-constituting power of intratextuality, not only in traditionally Christian lands, but also in literate and pre-literate societies molded by other sacred texts.524

Lindbeck’s laudable defense of intratextuality has, however, some counter-effects, and I see in this one of his most serious limitations: in rejecting intertextuality as a sort of degeneration and a concession to the spirit of the world, he risks considering sacred texts—primarily the Bible—as a class of monads that, separated from the flux of profane narratives, have little or nothing in common with them and are chiefly relevant only among themselves. On the contrary, Max Müller’s studies have demonstrated that, in history of religion, it is not uncommon to encounter the phenomenon of the migration of some religious stories with a consequent hospitality toward these stories in religious contexts and texts that are quite different from those in which they were generated. Moreover, he showed how religious stories, after circulating diffusely and entering new worlds, ended up fecundating the collective imagination of many peoples and adding to narrations with different purposes and inspirations.

In its turn, the new comparative theology, by taking inspiration from Lindbeck’s openness to bilingualism and simultaneously choosing to deal with at least two religious texts from different religious traditions, certainly betrayed intratextuality, one of Lindbeck’s most recognizable standpoints but also created a new theological path that can no longer be simply assimilated to postliberal theology. However, before getting into the discussion of new comparative theology and the work of its most noted spokesperson, Francis X. Clooney, we have to accomplish another important task: to show the reasons for which the project of the old comparative theology faded away, opening the door de facto to its present successor.

**The Death of Comparative Theology**

Before getting deeper into analyzing the new comparative theology, we must first step back and focus on the reasons and conditions that determined the death of the so-called old comparative theology. Reflecting on the exhaustion of the old comparative project will not only function to recover important parts of our discipline’s history, but it will also be quite useful in better comprehend the present time, which is marked by the recrudescence of forms of opposition to religions, religious studies, and comparativism. These polemical voices somehow recall, if not replicate in toto, some similar critical expressions that arose in the intellectual arena spanning the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Contrasting these voices will be essential to grounding my own proposal, since they seriously risk invalidating any contemporary project of comparative theology if they are not properly taken into consideration.

It is not feasible now to investigate the several causes of this recrudescence. It is sufficient here to remember the impact of September 11, 2001, and the two-fold effect it had on the fields of religious studies and theology: On the one hand, it resulted in a remarkable increase of interest in religion. On the other hand, it provoked violent reactions from a group of thinkers who began
 openly and publicly to denigrate religion as dangerous for the destiny of humanity, intrinsically unpeaceful, and contrary to true ethics. Among them, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins are the most renowned. Some of their books have “apocalyptic” titles such as *The End of the Faith*,525 *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*,526 and *The God Delusion*527; they have circulated widely, influencing public debate as well as scholarly work.528

The objections of these contemporary scholars go beyond discussions on the plausibility of comparative theology. They dispute not only the suitability of the language used in religious studies and theology, but precisely the scientific basis of these fields themselves. It is said that the idea of religious studies and, moreover, theology as sciences isillusory and baseless, since “one of the criteria that distinguishes religious from scientific discourses is that only the latter are falsifiable.”529 Such an argument, however, is far from being original. On the contrary, it is a reductionist and more radical version of the same positivistic formula which claims not only that do the natural sciences have predominance over other fields such as the human sciences, but also that the scientific status of religious studies is not tenable at all.

Indeed, the birth and the establishment of modern empirical science provoked a true earthquake in the realm not only of religious affairs but also of human sciences tout court. Theology itself, already as a response to Enlightenment provocations and against this more recent challenge, felt the need to reorganize its field into various specific treatises, in which its subject

528 For a more systematic confutation of the scientistic arguments according to which religious studies does not have a scientific basis see Francisca Cho and Richard K. Squier, “He Blinded Me With Science’: Science Chauvinism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 2 (June 2008).
matter could be treated separately and systematically. However, the constitution of modern manualist theology had the unfortunate consequence of discarding comparative theology and separating it from the core of theological discourse, or at least confining the discussion of religions to apologetics alone.

Without reaching the extent of the current intellectual forms of strong objection against religion and its related disciplines, some evident expressions of suspicion toward the scientific status of both religious studies and theology had already entered scholarly debate in the Enlightenment era and later at the end of the nineteenth century. These expressions were all marked by a similar characteristic: they all depended on an idea of science as experimental knowledge and on the related evolutionist approach, according to which the plausibility of religion was only defensible if understood as an intermediate stage in development of humanity towards full emancipation. According to these perspectives, researching religion was allowed and even promoted but only after having adopted a naturalistic perspective or, at least, by employing the proverbial “methodical doubt” towards any spiritual phenomena. Then, if “it is the scale that makes the phenomenon,”530 it followed that the adoption of one particular method, rather than another, would determine the results of any given research. Hence, issues that pertained to the trans-historical dimension, like metaphysical speculations, were temporarily excluded from scholarly attention in order to concentrate the discussions of religious phenomena in the historical domain. In fact, looking at religion only on the basis of the transcendental had caused other factors to be overlooked, for example, social and political dimensions, which progressively became the most important interests in the post-romantic era. Although many of these empiricist approaches continued to rely on comparativism to read through religious data, the systematic challenge that

530 Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), xiii.
religious studies and theology began to face had the result of questioning the possibility of any comparative enterprise.

Several cultural factors contributed to challenging comparativism. Among them, I want to focus on three major schools of thought during the post-romantic era—the philosophical, the sociological, and the psychological—in which the perception of the comparative endeavor somehow emerged as severely biased and therefore philosophically problematic. Hence, I will refer to some authors whose work in particular—though complex, multifaceted, and to some extent well-disposed towards discussing and even acknowledging the value of religious phenomena—contributed to creating some suspicion towards religion and its related disciplines.

For the philosophical input, I refer to the thoughts of both Auguste Comte and Ludwig Feuerbach, as well as to the not-always-felicitous destiny of some of Husserl’s intuitions. The French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857)\(^{531}\) is considered to be the founder of sociology and one of the most representative voices of the positivist school. His interests, however, go well beyond the limits of sociology to embrace various issues like the doctrine of science, the classification of sciences, the role of history, and the divinization of the concept of humanity, which in his system takes on a role like the divine in religious representations. Although he lived in the aftermath of the French Revolution and saw the commencement of the romantic era, his thought already bears the seeds of future philosophical achievements, and in some sense, he anticipated evolutionary theories with specific reference to human history rather than biology.

His interests in religious matters are already recognizable in his early works and above all in his masterpiece, *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830–42),\(^ {532}\) but they remain pervasive in all

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of his work. In fact, he considered himself a sort of pontiff of a new religion, positivism, for which he even wrote a catechism and envisioned a special calendar. The pivot of Comte’s system of thought is represented by the so-called law of the three stages, which he applies both to human beings in their personal intellectual development and to humanity in general, in the universal unfolding of history. According to this idea, there are three stages of human evolution that correspond to three methods of cognition and their related worldviews: the theological, metaphysical, and positive stages. The incipient approach to reality, the first stage, can be defined as anthropomorphic: it is characterized by superstition and the belief in supernatural beings equipped with superpowers that resemble human faculties, without never equating them. This first stage of human evolution clearly replicates infancy at the personal level. Corresponding to youth, the second, metaphysical stage is typified by the substitution of divinities with abstractions, the conceptions and personifications of this world’s forces that are explained by resorting to philosophical arguments such as, for example, first causes and essences. The third stage, which is perfectly parallel to individual maturity at the global level, is distinguished by final emancipation from projections and abstractions, to the benefit of a more rigorous observation of reality and of its constant laws, which occur both in nature and history. It is evident how reductionist Comte’s conception of religion is. In his view it clearly responds to some innate human needs but needs to be successfully overcome in order to free humanity from the bonds of puerility. What is more, science must confiscate from religion the preeminent role it has had in human history up to the modern era.

Similarly to Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), a major exponent of the Hegelian Left, also represented a watershed with his intellectual contribution and in a way laid the

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foundations of subsequent post-romantic evolutions on the matter of religion, although operating mainly under the influence of the romantic movement and echoing some aspects of it in his work. After studying with Hegel in Berlin and teaching in Erlangen, his academic career was unfortunately cut short due to the provocative ideas on religion that he presented in three major works: *The Essence of Christianity* (1841),* The Essence of Religion* (1846), and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1851). To summarize, Feuerbach deduces from Hegel’s conception of the infinite and from the contradictions that he sees in it the need to recognize the infinite in the finite, unlike what his master used to think. Therefore, Feuerbach envisions a new kind of philosophy that comes forth and develops from the reduction of theology to anthropology. As a matter of fact, in Feuerbach’s opinion Hegel’s philosophy used to replicate, to some extent, the same of thought forms as theology, though only partially and in a disguised way. He thought that, although philosophy must keep the same capacity as religion has to consider the human being in his totality, nonetheless, religion and theology must be overcome since they project to another level or they attribute to other unreal entities what in reality is proper only to humanity: infinite is the human spiritual essence, and the absolute Being is the human being itself.

Among religions, Christianity is certainly the most perfect since it is able to conceive the unity of God with humanity in Christ; however, no differently from the other forms of religious life—it needs to be demythologized, so to speak, in order to unveil the illusionary elements that it inadvertently still fosters. All religions, Christianity included, are derived from the wish to respond to the many needs arising in the human heart, which in their turn are the expression of human dependence on nature. Hence, while nature is certainly the first cause and the source of religious

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feelings, the human heart—if it is adequately recognized as the infinite in the finite—is the source of human freedom, and the wishes and representations that dwell in it are just clues to humanity’s inner and potential omnipotence. Thus, Feuerbach somehow anticipates Marx’s post-romantic ideas of alienation but does this by insisting on the very romantic idea of the sentiment of human dependence on nature, of which I previously spoke in the presentation of Schleiermacher.

Finally, I would like to take into account an incorrect philosophical conception that derives from the encounter—often not without either a certain degree of misunderstanding or improper extrapolation—between two connected philosophical schools of thoughts: hermeneutics and phenomenology. According to modern hermeneutics, any act of knowledge and subsequent interpretation is driven by prejudice. This prejudice need not necessarily be seen in a negative way. On the contrary, being a pre-judgment (from the Latin prae-judicium) it is an anticipatory structure of understanding, without which any knowledge would be impossible. Nonetheless, there is also a sort of prejudice that strongly distorts the comprehension of a given matter. The difference between the former productive prejudice and the latter misleading prejudice is not always easy to distinguish; it has to be identified attentively on the basis of a specific cultural context. This is the case, for example, for the hermeneutics of narrative texts, in which reference to the tradition in which the issues under analysis were produced can eventually illuminate the author’s intentions and reveal whether the reader’s pre-comprehension was correct or inappropriate.

Nonetheless, the problem became more complicated when, for example, the old comparative theologians started comparing works from different traditions. Can one’s prejudices be productive when dealing with other cultural contexts, or are they necessarily misleading? Such

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a question, which now sounds obvious, was certainly not unknown to post-romantic comparative theology but was not always addressed adequately. One might be tempted to think that today, such a crucial interrogative—though often disclosed openly at the beginning of many comparative enterprises—is not always deduced and applied consistently. However, this question is as difficult to answer now as it was then.

To overcome this problem, some found shelter in the well-known principle of *epokhē*, on which Husserl elaborated and phenomenological reflection after him expanded. According to this principle, since the observation of a phenomenon always implies the subject who is observing, it is better to suspend any judgment about a given phenomenon in order to grasp the phenomenon itself in its reality. The application of this principle both in religious studies and theology, however, indirectly led to an unexpected and negative result for comparativism: since any act of knowledge is per se biased and, furthermore, prejudices can only have a positive role when the cultural contexts under analysis are well-determined, it seems better to avoid tackling cross-cultural comparisons.

In my opinion, the rejection of comparativism that we are currently experiencing is also mostly derived from a somewhat uncritical application of the abovementioned *epokhē* principle: instead of temporarily suspending judgment for the sake of a further nuanced insight into the subject matter one is studying, some scholars are prone to suspend the comparison itself; in the best case, they only consider comparison a desirable endeavor at the theoretical level, whereas they are convinced that it is implausible in practice, given often irreconcilable cultural differences and the consequent high probability of misunderstanding that it inadvertently involves.

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However, the fact that phenomenology does not necessarily require the dismissal of comparativism but rather presupposes it as its natural premise is demonstrated by some leading religious scholars like Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade, for whom the application of the *epokhē* principle had a completely different meaning, as Hugh Nicholson explains well:

Yet for scholars like Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade the *epoche* principle does not signify a naïve attempt to retrieve an Enlightenment ideal of detached objectivity modeled after the natural sciences. The phenomenologists insisted upon the involvement of the interpreter in the act of religious understanding. The subjective element in the interpretative act is precisely what renders one sensitive to the religious meanings in the historical material one studies. The *epoche* principle thus does not intend to exclude those presuppositions constitutive of the interpreter’s subjectivity but rather only those a priori attitudes that lead to the imposition of value judgments on religious phenomena.⁵³⁹

Regarding the second philosophical perspective—the sociological—I will refer to two schools of thought: social economics, with some brief comments on the well-known rejection of religion in Karl Marx’s system, and cultural anthropology, with a focus on the reception of Franz Boas’s work. Judaism and Christianity had a major impact on Karl Marx (1818–83),⁵⁴⁰ the famous German political philosopher, economist, and inspirer of the communist movement, and their influences on the evolution of his position have mostly been investigated.⁵⁴¹ We are usually led to think that Marx’s disposition toward religious issues was always and only negative. However, based on an attentive reading of his works, especially those written between 1844 and 1849, this does not appear to be quite true. As a premise, it is important to recall that Marx’s suspicions against religion were linked to his living and thinking in a cultural environment deeply imbued with the religious and thus particularly marked by the Jewish and Christian traditions. Then, more generally, in Marx’s view religion is an expression of suffering and a relative human attempt to

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withstand this suffering, or better in his own words: “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions.”

Regarding this fundamental and not originally negative conception of religion, I find John Raines’ comments quite appropriate:

Here Marx recognizes in religion an active moral agency, especially for the deprived and despised. Religion is not simply the ideological expression of the powerful, legitimating the social hierarchy…. No, for Marx in the hands and voices of the poor and exploited religion is “protest”: it is a crying against “real suffering,” not illusory sufferings such as fear of punishment from the gods or sufferings caused by some “impurity” inherited from a previous incarnation.

Yet it is undeniable that Marx’s position is more commonly associated with an aggressive and derogatory attitude and that this disposition has had a history of remarkable effects on the scholarly way of dealing with religious affairs. For instance, it is indispensable to mention the famous statement: religion is “the opium of the people,” which occurs in the introduction of *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. This statement is usually quoted by scholars to document Marx’s vehement stigmatization of religion as illusory and deceptive. In his turn, Marx bases this specific consideration on Feuerbach’s idea of religion as a projection of human desires, a conception that, at first, especially enthralled and convinced him. What is more, throughout his vast oeuvre, Marx often returned to the discussion on religion, which, from the materialist point of view that he progressively adopted, he usually describes as mere ideology and an instrument of domination.

As a matter of fact, just as Voltaire was already eager to denounce religion in his *Philosophical Dictionary* and also, to some extent, in his play *Le Fanatism, ou Mahomet le

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544 Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right,’* 131.
Marx depicted religion as a sophisticated and malicious means of social control from the most privileged social classes in collusion with the ecclesiastical hierarchies to the detriment of the oppressed and poor. Second, religion in Marx’s economic system represented more and more a sort of dangerous ideology that distracts one from what really counts in human life: praxis. Accordingly, Marx believes that speculation and contemplation should be put aside to make room for revolutionary action and committed efforts at transforming actual society into a more just one. Furthermore, Marx observes that while religious movements are usually well rooted among the lowest classes and rural societies, they are less frequently important in the industrialized world. Hence, given the fact that religions and churches are often the enemies of social progress, he deduces that there is a sure way to emancipate the lowest social strata and to favor their development: by unveiling the hypocrisy of the church’s acceptance of social injustice. More radically still, Marx aims at unmasking religion as the vehicle through which the bourgeois classes gain and maintain their profits and subjugate the poor.

Marx’s activity in questioning religious studies and, indirectly, also comparativism is not the only important aspect of his legacy to both post-romantic and contemporary studies of religion. Marx’s fundamental intention to undermine and exclude any essentialist conception of religion worked in favor of a more pronounced socioeconomic and political perspective. The reduction of religious sentiment to some sociological phenomena or at least its sociological reading had been attempted already by Enlightenment thinkers and was later promoted by authors such as Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825); Auguste Comte (1798–1857); Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), at least in his specific study of the symbolical interferences between religious hierarchies and military societies; and above all Max Weber (1864–1920), in his attempt to read the influence of religion

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on the economic and political development of peoples. However, in Marx’s system this perspective found its radical application: Marx’s reduction of religion to its social and economic aspects, though not always embraced fully, nor simply remaining undeclared, is still influential in the works of many religious scholars. Some of them, through this lens, continue to consider comparison a valid instrument of research; others, on the contrary, are prone to consider comparativism as a pious illusion precisely on this basis.

Another perspective that drastically questioned comparativism is ascribable to the Boasian anthropological approach. The thought of Franz Boas (1858–1942), the “father of modern anthropology,” is very complex and is still subjected to opposing interpretations. As Michel Verdon points out, these contradictory portraits of Boas by the scholars who then continued his endeavor are rooted in Boas himself, in his ambivalence between two apparently different attitudes: a “fragmented or atomized view of culture that dominated his ethnographic practice” and a “holistic” attitude that led him to search behind appearances “by recognizing the role that the ‘genius of a people’ plays in culture formation.”

Despite the variety of themes that he approached during his career and the evolution of his system of thought, Boas’s position towards comparativism seems to have been quite stable over the years. We can get to know it from one particular article that he published in 1896, in reply to Daniel G. Brinton’s contribution, “The Aims of Anthropology.” According to Brinton, it is

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possible to demonstrate, through ethnographic parallels, that current cultures are similar to those of extinct tribes. Therefore, the primary aim of anthropology should be to discover possible similarities among different worlds and interpret the reasons for such resemblance. Brinton’s main perspective is evolutionistic since to him the retrieval of similarities is ultimately aimed at confirming “the evolution of human cultures and their de facto inequality.”

In his famous response entitled “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” Boas presents a proposal that is radically different from that of Brinton. His intention was, on the one hand, strenuously to reject the multiple evolutionist experiments that were attempted in his days in order to justify racism and, on the other, to recover the specificity of any culture in its historical development. We can label his view as a sort of “cultural relativism,” but in the sense that there is no hierarchy of importance among the cultures, even if the differences among them are undeniable and, moreover, important to recover. In other words, all cultures have the same dignity without necessarily sharing the same characteristics.

Boas’s criticism was addressed against three categories of contemporary comparative scholars: those who used to adopt the evolutionist arguments in order to demonstrate the superiority of the white population over the other races; those who were attempting at showing that similarities among cultures are the proof of the uniformity of the human mind and its functioning; and those who saw in analogies the clear evidence of some sure historical connections and cultural exchanges. Conversely, in Boas’s perspective, cultural similarities could not be taken as the demonstration either that the human mind is always the same or that there is some incontrovertible historical relation among distant phenomena; they could have simply been

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generated for very different reasons. Rather, in Boas’s view, dissimilarities are the most important factors in anthropology, since they permit scholars to recover important details that determine the specificity of a given culture. The causes of the variations and the differences are eventually of two kinds: the external, which are “founded on environment,” and the internal, which are “founded in psychological conditions.”

In order correctly to understand these differences, it is Boas’s conviction that they should be read principally within their own related cultural contexts but not without considering the possible contacts with neighboring cultures. However, the examination of some cultural phenomena that are beyond the specific domain under analysis must be intended as a way better to illuminate that previous subject matter, and never as an excuse for creating improbable connections among distant and distinct worlds, as the comparative approach usually sponsors. In this regard, Elizabeth McKeown summarizes Boas’s method as follows: “‘the careful and slow detailed study of local phenomena,’ coupled with a stubborn resistance to global comparison and conclusions.”

Nonetheless, Boas’s criticism of comparativism can also be understood in a more positive way, namely as a stimulus for avoiding naïve and baseless parallelisms. After all, Boas applies—although partially and only in homogeneous areas—a sort of comparativist method by allowing the study of a given phenomenon in relation to the surrounding cultures, beyond the natural limits of its own specific context. Moreover, in the specific case of his study of the Native Americans, he showed a more “holistic” perspective in considering their style, arts, and literary production, sometimes apparently insisting on the comparative approach that he had previously discarded.

Ultimately, Boas’s proposal is marked by an interesting, fundamental paradox that I wish

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554 McKeown, “Religion Among the Boasians,” 20.
to highlight here, since this kind of incongruence seems to persist in our days: in order to defend a fundamental anthropological similarity—the equal dignity of every human being against any form of racism—and to definitively stigmatize the groundless, hegemonic idea of the superiority of whites over other peoples, he was led to overemphasize differences. Thus, he almost always approached the numerous cultures of the world that he researched as *sui generis* and incommensurable phenomena, but without the necessary acknowledgment of the essentialism that still marked his presupposition: beyond differences, all races and cultures enshrine a general idea of humanity that apparently seems quite unvarying and, above all, immune from differences. This, per se, is not problematic, but only if one is disposed to tackle the crucial and urgent relationship between universality and particularity inspired by the beginning of the comparative enterprise in the study of religions that, in my opinion, has not been sufficiently addressed by scholars who, in line with Boas, are prone to focus only on particularities and cultural differences without paying enough attention to the other side of the coin: the fundamental—I would dare to say “ontological”—similarities that make humans human.

Referring to Boas also permits me to introduce the third perspective for which comparativism was besieged and is still challenged nowadays. Using comparativism to establish historical connections among different worlds was the major trend in anthropology during Boas’s time. However, in the same period, another view was emerging by contrast, to which Boas refers with the intention of contesting it: experimental psychology, which emerged as an attempt to study behavioral similarities across cultures and the recurrence of the same cognitive processes, as proof for the unity of the human mind. Boas described this move with the following words:

A radical change of method has accompanied this change of views. While formerly identities or similarities of cultures were considered incontrovertible proof of historical connection, or even of common origin, the new school declines to consider them as such,
but interprets them as results of the uniform working of the human mind.\textsuperscript{555}

The undisputed father of experimental psychology was Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920),\textsuperscript{556} whose convincing physiological approach made him the major reference for empiricists who tended to reduce the study of the human psyche only to the analysis of mental processes. At the same time, this specific approach determined the fluctuations of fortune for his work: certainly, the success of psychoanalysis caused the momentary abandonment of his perspective. However, it was never discarded definitively and made its reappearance at various times in the history of the psychological disciplines, as—although in new forms—the recent progress of the cognitive sciences can attest.

After studying medicine at the universities of Tübingen, Heidelberg, and Berlin, Wundt started teaching physiology as a research assistant in Heidelberg. There, his specific research into the dynamics of senses and perceptions brought about a considerable change in his interests: he became more attracted by the study of the psychological sciences than of medicine. Furthermore, he did not disdain the contributions of other disciplines, such as anthropology and philosophy, which he progressively started to practice without ever renouncing the desire to deepen his expertise in the medical sciences, chemistry, and physics. In 1879, he found the Institut für Experimentelle Psychologie in Leipzig, and in 1883, the first issue of the academic journal Philosophische Studien—in which he published part of his copious academic work—was released for the first time. Among his major works, I will mention here: Lectures on Human and Animal Psychology (1863–64),\textsuperscript{557} System of Philosophy (1889),\textsuperscript{558} and The Folk Psychology (1900–

\textsuperscript{555} Boas, “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” 58.
\textsuperscript{557} Wilhelm Wundt, Lectures on Human and Animal Psychology (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1907).
\textsuperscript{558} Wilhelm Wundt, System der Philosophie (Leipzig: W. Engelmann, 1889).
This last monumental work is particularly interesting for our discourse, since many of its sections tackle the questions of myth and religion, as well as the relationships of these socially significant aspects with the functioning of the human mind. Wundt’s main assumption is that people from all cultures have similar minds that, despite differences in geographical and historical conditions, tend to replicate the same processes. What is more, the germs of humanity’s future evolution and emancipation from the primitive forms of social relationships and symbolic representations—here, Wundt’s perspective is not devoid of fascination for evolutionary theories—are already present in the human mind. On the basis of this main assumption, Wundt establishes a parallel between individuals’ functions and collective psychologies: hence, the processes of human perception, representation, feelings, and will are appealed to as corresponding to the folk aspects of language, myth, and habits. Thus, a sort of reductionism in conceiving religion and its correlated issues was inexorably and, perhaps, inevitably introduced in the psychological sciences and has persisted until now, which presents a typical example of history repeating itself.

Recently, the cognitive sciences have been widely applied to anthropology and religious studies, and are generally accepted by academia as a valid modus operandi. However, there is a sharp distinction between the scientific approach during Wundt and Boas’s time and the current one, as well as a considerable evolution of thought that occurred in the meantime and gave birth to new derivative sciences, such as the neurosciences in general and cognitive psychology in particular. What mainly distinguishes the two approaches is precisely how comparativism is treated. While in Wundt’s and Boas’s time recovering similarities and establishing comparisons

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played a role in describing the human mind and its unity, nowadays cognitive sciences, in their alleged autonomy, intend to predict what *has to be preached* regarding anthropology and religion. This is quite a subtle but significant shift that has had the result of profoundly invalidating the comparative endeavor, particularly with regard to culture and religion.

According to this perspective, “culture cannot explain culture, and religion cannot explain religion.” The comparative endeavor is therefore considered useless because it is seen as incapable of revealing what is really at stake in any cultural and religious phenomenon, apart from the repetition of the same mental processes. In this perspective, both culture and religion can only be truly understood if they are studied as a necessity of the human mind and only as powerful expressions of mental tools. Comparativism is consequently discarded not only directly, but also derivatively. In fact, by holding that belief is a basic structure of the human psyche and nothing more, one can conclude that religion is simply a projection of human needs onto a counterfeit world. This is, for example, the opinion of Richard Dawkins, who argues that religion is simply a by-product of a counterintuitive nature that the human mind elaborated in the evolutionary process as a means of escaping some critical problems, such as peril, illness, and death. Then, if religion is merely deceptive, comparativism does not ultimately mean anything, or at least it is only able to list how much this illusion has spread through examples and parallelisms.

Even in better cases, in which cognitive psychology is conversely employed to justify the plausibility of religion as a positive resource for the human mind, the consequences for comparativism are no less disastrous. If God and religion are simply the result of mental tools and the human mind is always the same, despite differences in place and culture, then there is only one

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religion that can faithfully correspond to these inner structures. Eventual variations should be interpreted as imperfect applications of the same cognitive devices and improper variants of the unique religion.

Thus, for instance, in Why Would Anyone Believe in God?, Justin L. Barret, in his attempt to reconcile religion with cognitivism, symptomatically affirms: “It will… become evident that I do not regard belief in God as strange, loony, or irrational. Indeed, once examined from a scientific perspective, both believers and nonbelievers should appreciate how very natural and almost inevitable widespread religious belief is.”562 And elsewhere:

Operating largely without our awareness, mental “tools” encourage us to think similarly about many banal features of the world around us. These mental tools also encourage people to think about and believe in gods, the Judaeo-Christian God enjoying particularly favorable treatment, especially during child development. Once introduced into a population, belief in the existence of a supreme god with properties such as being superknowing, superpowerful, and immortal is highly contagious and a hard habit to break. The way our minds are structured and develop make these beliefs very attractive.563

Barrett is convinced that the kind of theism that the Abrahamic traditions predict is the only credible religious view that perfectly matches with the human mind’s structures. Therefore, according to him, by studying mental devices one can discover plausible evidence for the scientific demonstration not only of the truth of religion but also of what the “true religion” is. In such a cogent argument, there is apparently no space for comparativism.

However, despite his positive disposition toward religion, Barrett does not dispel the ambiguity of his position. For example, one could argue that maintaining that belief in God is something natural and altogether homologous with the human mind’s structure does not necessarily mean that per se it is good for humanity. Then, from a Buddhist point of view, one

562 Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?, vii.
563 Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?, viii.
could note that the forms of mental projections that religions usually presuppose and in some cases even foster can be transcended precisely by the efforts of the human mind itself.

I think that Barrett’s proposal, despite the acuity of some of his remarks, is seriously inadequate for at least two fundamental reasons. First of all, it is curious that an expert in cognitivism seems unaware of the age-old philosophical issue of the difference between the mind and the brain. Even if one’s perspective were the most deterministic, so that according to it there would be no real distinction between “grey matter” and cognitive data, one should—at least from a deontological perspective—“prove the point,” so to speak, out of respect for the audience, which expects some illumination on this crucial issue. Then, it is clear that Barrett is lacking on the level of religious studies. He seems simply not to care for the multiple, multifaceted dimensions of religious phenomena. A bit more comparativism would have been useful for him, especially in realizing how clear is the interpretative fallacy that his work presents. If we take as a yardstick what Western minds have elaborated upon, apropos of the functioning of the brain—as if scientific theories were not just interpretations and approximations of matters of study—then the image of religion that results is obviously similar to that which the spiritual movements in the West have disclosed. Fortunately, some contemporary authors have attempted to reconcile religious studies and cognitive sciences on a more solid and coherent basis, above all, without necessarily rejecting comparativism.564

Another form of reductionism in understanding religion in psychology resulted from a quite distinct school of thought: psychoanalysis, which certainly contributed to raising various motives for suspicion about religious matters, although with different positions and purposes. In

particular, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) is generally referred to as one of the most influential inspirers of this kind of skepticism.

After studying physiology in Vienna, Freud moved to Paris, where he could focus his attention on curing hysteria through hypnosis, something that he later also developed in Vienna, in collaboration with Joseph Breuer. However, this alliance ended quickly. Then, in 1900, with the publication of one of his most noted works, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud inaugurated a new course of his career, basically giving birth to a new discipline: psychoanalysis. Starting from 1902, he founded the Psychoanalytic Society of Vienna, where he welcomed and formed many disciples: some of them, like Adler and Jung, later became as celebrated as their original master, whom they decided to abandon in order to pursue their distinct psychoanalytical perspectives and thus founded their own schools of thought. Freud’s bibliographic contributions were truly extensive and touched various themes such as the structure of the human psyche; theories of the unconscious, instincts, sexuality, pleasure, and the Oedipus complex; psychopathology and the causes of the mental illnesses; inhibition, anxiety, and anguish; and the relationships between psychoanalysis and art, and psychoanalysis and religion.

As I have already noted in Marx’s case, Freud’s thought was also deeply imbued with religious references, and his Jewish ancestry is quite perceivable throughout his work. His method of treating religious affairs was neither monolithic nor monotone, as the reconsideration of two of his paramount works—*Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Moses and the Monotheism* (1939)—can illustrate. However, Freud’s suspicions against religion are usually ascribed to the fortune of


his renowned work, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Here, Freud describes religion as a sort of universal neurosis that originated from the Oedipus complex on a global scale. Although religion’s contribution to humanity’s development is undeniable, the comparison between the feelings of the child toward the father and the attributes of divinity unveils some important truths: First of all, there is a similarity between the desiring/envious attitude of individual children toward their fathers and the kind of projections from a collectivity onto the divine sphere. Second, since neurosis is a somehow inevitable phase of a person’s evolution, religion can thus initially contribute to humanity’s development. However, if religion is not overcome in some way, this means that a sort of block has occurred in the process of human evolution; hence, instead of being an engine of development, religion risks becoming the source of some serious pathological phenomena. Third, there is a deep connection between the obsessive disorder and some aspects of religion. Finally, those relics of neurosis, which religions still support, must be put aside through the help of rational work. Once again, some evolutionist ideas managed to turn up in the history of Western thought. It is interesting to note how much they were able to influence, through the allure of rationality, even the great theorist of the unconscious.

After presenting the major philosophical reasons for which comparativism started to be refused across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the reasons for the recrudescence of some aspects of these post-romantic polemics, it is finally time to deal more closely with the works of one author about whom I have already spoken in the first chapter, in my presentation of the several paradigms of the current comparative theology: Francis X. Clooney.

Focusing on the trajectory of his thought, which recently has been the target of some

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criticism, will permit me to build my own proposal, which is simultaneously in line with and in contrast to Clooney. Hence, I will strive to enlighten both the pros and cons of his specific approach, as well as its strengths and defects, along with the reasons for which some of his intuitions can be maintained as valid, even if adequately integrated and reviewed.

Francis X. Clooney and the Rebirth of Comparative Theology

Comparative theology is now back to life. If this was possible, it was due also to a series of contemporary scholars whom I discussed for the most part in the first chapter; they generally promised to honor and respect comparative theology as their most cherished discipline. Among them, a place of particular honor must be attributed to Francis Xavier Clooney who is the prolific author of various significant comparative projects. Moreover, he was the founder of the school of comparative theology in Boston College, which every year hosts an important conference. After moving to Harvard Divinity School, he became the promoter of the online Journal of Comparative Theology where graduate students and emerging scholars have a unique opportunity to display their projects.

Francis Xavier Clooney is an American Jesuit, a comparative theologian and an Indologist of great fame. He was born in New York in 1950. After completing high school, he joined the Society of Jesus and received his Bachelor’s Degree at Fordham University in 1973. Immediately after, he flew to Kathmandu, Nepal, where he started teaching English at St. Xavier’s High School. The interaction with his Hindu and Buddhist students led him to deepen his interests and knowledge of the rich cultural and religious heritage of the Indian subcontinent. Hence, once he returned to the United States after receiving his master’s degree in divinity in 1978, he entered the University of Chicago, where he earned his doctorate in South Asian Languages and Civilizations in 1984. In his first work, Thinking Ritualy: Rediscovering the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini
(1990), which is a very complex and detailed exegetical study of the Mīmāṃsā Sūtra by Jaimini (ca. 400 BCE) as well as some subsequent commentaries, he already showed his impressive competence in the Sanskrit language and the Vedic literature besides the high degree of sophistication of his scholarship. His fascination with the intricate realm of Hindu ceremonies, Vedic liturgical dispositions, and a number of paramount commentaries on the traditional rituals is confirmed in a series of articles that he published from 1988 to 1993, the year of the release of his Theology after Vedanta, a pivotal work which inaugurates a new course in his career. The interest in interreligious dialogue and theology of religions that he showed in some of his previous works here finds a new declension: Theology after Vedanta is his inaugural work in comparative theology, a kind of perspective that he intends to offer as an alternative to theology of religions and its most common approaches. In the meantime, he never abandoned his translations of and research on ancient Indian religious literature both in Sanskrit and in Tamil. In fact, several interesting contributions on south Indian religious literature feature from the beginning of his scholarly career. Thus, the juxtaposition of some texts from different religious backgrounds and the interplay of diverse spiritual worldviews become the quintessential form of his new theologizing which in the end mirrors his multifaceted formation:

Francis Xavier Clooney as a scholar defies easy characterization. He is an Indologist whose work extends from considering the complexity of Advaita Vedanta to reflecting upon the resonances of Tamil devotional literature. Yet he is also a Catholic priest of the Society of Jesus and a theologian who has been formed in a tradition powerfully shaped by the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and the spiritualities of Ignatius of Loyola and Pedro Arrupe…. His work is born not only in the creative tension between his training as an Indologist and Catholic theologian, but also from the desire to transcend the conventional boundaries that often circumscribe these two seemingly distinct modes of inquiry.  

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570 Francis X. Clooney, Thinking Ritually: Rediscovering the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini (Vienna: Indological Institute of the University of Vienna, 1990).
Clooney’s meticulous analyses generally impress for the considerable display of scholarship. As a matter of fact, engaging particularities is the general principle of his work, and it is not by chance that it also became the motto of the Boston College school of comparative theology. Getting particular is a necessity for Clooney; shaped by the intricacies of the various Hindu theologies, he departs from the vague generalizations of the classical theology of religions, which in pursuing an immediate theological answer about the eschatological destiny of other believers, easily forgets to deal with some more complex but particular phenomena. Indeed, particularities, this “set of human, cultural, and religious energies,”\(^{573}\) are those which make the difference between a stereotypical characterization and a careful and respectful analysis of the religions of the others. Eventually, Clooney’s preference went to Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, and Śrīvaiṣṇavism, but, according to him, the decision to narrow the field of study and identify a focus should be made at the outset of any comparative enterprise and, above all, maintained coherently:

> Comparative theology is a practical response to religious diversity read with our eyes open, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with a willingness to see newly the truths of our own religion in light of another. There is great advantage in engaging diversity by an intentionally focused study that lavishes attention on particularities proper to one or another tradition, as they are brought into encounter with one another, (re)read with a deference and patience that unlocks the meaning and truth of each tradition, and of both together.\(^{574}\)

In choosing comparativism as his proper perspective in theology, Clooney acknowledges his indebtedness to Lee H. Yearley’s *Mencius and Aquinas*—one of the most significant works in comparative ethics.\(^{575}\) In particular, he approves Yearley’s idea that collecting similarities and differences is only the starting point of the comparative enterprise. Rather, in order to “penetrate more deeply” into each similarity, one should analyze and “establish more subtle relationships

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\(^{573}\) Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 71.

\(^{574}\) Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 69.

between them,”576 as well as sift through “similarities within differences” and “differences within similarities.”577 Clooney thinks that Yearley’s work, though not strictly speaking theological, can be very helpful for constructing comparative theology as a practice of reading texts:

   It too operates in the same back-and-forth movement between particularity and theory, and is unwilling to surrender either of these; it too depends on the educated imaginative act of the comparativist (comparative theologian) who is transformed by the process of comparison and thus enabled to compare sensitively and to make sense out of particular acts of comparison.578

Nonetheless, compared to that of Yearley, Clooney’s scholarly work is more prone to unveil similarities than differences. The dialectic and the interwoven movement between constants and variants, which are the essence of Yearley’s contribution, does not always have in Clooney’s theological endeavors a similar importance. As Clooney himself declares, the uniqueness of his comparative experiments “has made sweeping claims to similarity or difference irrelevant, since it is only on a smaller scale that judgment can be made.”579 What is more, his tendency to highlight the similarities more than the differences derives from a deliberate decision:

   How we use what we learn also involves choices in line with our intentions when we took up the study in the first place. I usually give preference to similarity over difference, preferring to foster theological conversation between Hindu and Christian theological discourses that seem in harmony with one another…. It is important to resist easy resemblances, since attention to specifics undoes many a quest for sameness, but I have never taken the accentuation of difference to be the center of my work. Hindu and Christian traditions differ in innumerable ways, and differences are obvious. Of course, we need theologians who do comparative theological work stubbornly focused on differences…. At a basic level, I have simply thought that privileging similarity and resemblance is my contribution to Christian theology, a reflection on our “near others” that I am able to make.580

   In *Theology after Vedanta*, we find a series of other statements in which the core of

579 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 76.
580 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 75–76.
Clooney’s perspective is put much in evidence. The predilection for textual analyses and the consideration of the link between textual representations and religious truths is perhaps the most characteristic standpoint of his approach. In this regard, he explains:

Though not reducible to their textual representations, theological truths occur only through their textual forms, and there is no other path of access to them. Such truths therefore make their claim on us first of all as theological readers, whose comprehension will depend in large part on the kind of readers we turn out to be—how skilled, rigorous, attentive to context, careful in our derivation of truths from their scriptural roots.\footnote{Clooney, \textit{Theology after Vedanta}, 191.}

Apparently, this predilection for textual analyses makes Clooney very much in line with Lindbeck’s theological heritage, as also Paul F. Knitter cleverly notes.\footnote{Knitter, \textit{Introducing Theologies of Religions}, 202–15.} However, despite the fact that in \textit{Theology after Vedanta} Clooney pays homage to Lindbeck and the latter’s idea of intratextual searching for truth, his continuing insistence on prepositional expressions such as “after” and “beyond” in his theological discourses is a clue to a slightly different vision. \textit{Theology after Vedanta} marks a significant shift of perspective which distinguishes Clooney from the number of strictly speaking post-liberal theologians: from the consideration of pure intratextual truths he advocates the inclusion of both intertextuality and extratextuality as other two equally valid fields of research. Moreover, the three domains of intratextuality, intertextuality and extratextuality can now be approached as closely interrelated. Thus, unlike Lindbeck, Clooney sees intratextual analysis as only a moment in a more complex theological itinerary in which a given text can be observed certainly in itself and through itself but also through its subsequent interpretations and, above all, in comparison with some analogous texts even from distant religious traditions. Thus, the act of juxtaposition of various texts from different ages and cultures generates a superimposition of horizons and a theological dialectics, which is feasible for creating a surplus
of meaning. This is the specific aspect of Clooney’s contribution to theology in general and theology of religions in particular:

A postcomparative theology of religions—in this case, a theology of religions after Advaita Vedānta—must replicate the dialectical activity of reading, whereby the “new” is read through and after one’s original Text, and according to the rules by which we construct and read the world in terms of our community’s privileged texts. Like other acts of juxtaposition, this dialectical act of reading creates a new signification for the non-Christian texts, and may distort as well as enhance their original meanings; likewise, new meanings will be constructed for the Bible and the theological systems composed from it, new meanings that can occur only due to the event of juxtaposition with these non-Christian texts. Only in an attentive recognition of this creative juxtaposition can a useful theology of religions be composed.\(^{583}\)

The overcoming of the strictness of the postliberal theology in promoting intratextuality as the novel more comprehensive framework for doing theology today is certainly one of Clooney’s merits; without it the new comparative theology would not have its most necessary precondition.

Whatever enterprise Clooney undertakes, it is usually related to a single text or a set of texts which, if read synoptically, can illuminate each other. Quite rarely Clooney directs his attention to narratives,—for instance, in Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children\(^ {584}\)—whereas he normally prefers to analyze poems, hymns, or theological and liturgical treatises. Very often, he studies a given text in its aesthetic and linguistic aspects and on the levels of its reception through the subsequent re-interpretations along the centuries, the traditional commentaries, and other secondary readings. In doing so, he displays the best and perhaps the deepest aspect of his scholarship. Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India\(^ {585}\) is not only the title of one of Clooney’s most successful works, but it is also the quintessential instance of his theologizing. This remarkable work is almost wholly dedicated to the profound

\(^{583}\) Clooney, Theology after Vedanta, 194.


\(^{585}\) Francis X. Clooney, Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India (Albany: SUNY, 1996).
analysis of Śaṭakōpanṭ’s Tiruvāymoli and its Wirkunggeschichte. After locating the author historically within the context of ninth-century Tamil literary production and considering the text in itself and in light of other Hindu literature, Clooney manages to relate Tiruvāymoli to some texts of the Christian tradition that in his view and his personal experience as a skillful interreligious reader have the potential to resonate theologically with the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition; thus, the Song of the Songs, John’s Gospel, Bonaventure’s Journey of the Mind to God, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and a von Balthasar’s prayer are here recalled; each of them has some of characteristics that somehow have the power to strengthen the comprehension of Tiruvāymoli through affective and symbolical echoes. The result is an unprecedented and curious exercise in composing a biblio/biographical self which Clooney presents with these words:

I used myself as the proximate, handy example in order to take up the issue of the outside reader’s self, in a preliminary, deliberately anecdotal and personalized fashion. I gave there an initial account of how it is that I have been reading these texts for a number of years, in certain contexts, within certain limits, etc. I now return to the theme of (my)self, this time somewhat more indirectly—for there is much more at stake now—by sketching a religious, literary context that has become evident in the course of this study. What does Tiruvāymoli remind me of, what do I read along with the songs, how do I now articulate something about myself, textually, biblio/bio/graphically?

This juxtaposition of very disparate classics of religion likely creates a sort of disorientation in the readers. However, in Clooney’s view, this is highly beneficial since it is precisely the interplay among different religious representations and aesthetic expressions that generates a surplus of meaning that deserves to be registered and studied theologically. Moreover, this approach represents a new way of doing theology in the postmodern age, a way that can eventually establish a more fruitful dialogue with contemporary culture, particularly with regard to the phenomenon of globalization which is characterized by the simultaneous superimposition of

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586 Clooney, Seeing through Texts, 256.
fragments from very different cultures. To paraphrase Clooney’s own words, a deeper learning can result only from living and thinking across religious borders.

Taking the other seriously and inhabiting the other religious representation can have the unpredictable consequence of losing focus on one’s confessional belonging and clarity on one’s original religious worldview. This is a risk that the comparative theologian cannot avoid but, rather, needs to accept. This kind of vulnerability, however, beyond bringing new challenges, can open up new theological horizons and fruitful discoveries: in the following striking passage taken from *Beyond Compare*, Clooney describes the unexpected positive outcomes that theologizing across the boundaries and within two or more scriptural traditions can produce for the comparative theologian and through him for the religious communities with which he or she is involved:

The careful reader engaging the two texts in their two traditions comes to know more than expected, and in a way that cannot be predictably controlled by either tradition. This reader becomes distant from the totalizing power of both texts, precisely because she or he knows both, cannot dismiss either, and does not submit entirely to either…. We are left in a vulnerable, fruitful learning state, engaging these powerful works on multiple levels and, paradoxically, learning more while mastering less; we have more teachers and fewer masters. It may appear that by this practice we acquire a surfeit of scriptures, yet have no Scripture; multiple languages and words and images, yet no tested, effective manner of speaking, a wealth of theological insights, yet no sure doctrine; not one but two rich religious traditions from which to benefit, and yet—because we know too much—no single, normative tradition that commands our attention. Although this situation will not be to everyone’s liking, it is something that a smaller group of readers can do for the communities involved. Though fewer in number, readers speaking, writing, and acting from these more intense sensitivities may in the long term have a deeper and more enduring influence on the communities involved.⁵⁸⁸

In *Beyond Compare* Clooney announces his intention also to get beyond himself by tackling even more seriously the theme of loving surrender to God. To achieve this goal, he submits to analysis the *Essence of the Three Auspicious Mysteries* by Śrī Vedānta Deśīka (1268–1369), a

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Śrīvaiṣṇava author from Tamil Nadu, and the *Treatise on the Love of God* by the renaissance bishop Francis de Sales (1567–1623). Clooney’s aim here is not simply to produce a Christian theology “after” the Southern Hindu worldviews and the convinced and respectful engagement with them, but rather to engage in a kind of reciprocal commentary where the continuous re-reading of the two texts under study favors the intensification of the experience of loving surrender and contextually generates a new kind of reader who, precisely in his or her vulnerability, rediscovers the “intelligible and imaginable” power of God’s love. This kind of transformation of the interreligious reader is described by Clooney as follows:

Eventually, our reading may open again into joy, as constrained rationalism and detached writing, relativism and fragmentation, fear and neglect all give way to the more intense insight and love that arise when we know two (or more) traditions together, in a learning that proceeds without limit or guarantee, unafraid, growing still more intense, a consolation beyond compare.\(^{590}\)

*Theology after Vedanta, Seeing Through Texts, and Beyond Compare* are certainly the most celebrated of Clooney’s works. However, I personally think that the most successful of his projects is *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*.\(^{591}\) Here, not only does Clooney offer a truly broad picture of his impressive Indological scholarship but he is also able to identify analogs for comparison in the Christian tradition that are particularly efficacious. He shows how fruitful it can be to study the various Hindu cults of the divine mother with the Christian devotion to Mary through the analysis of some specific texts. Then, in presenting the last fascinating comparison between Āpirāmī Bhaṭṭar’s *Āpirāmi Antāti* with the *Mātaracamman Antāti*, a text about Mary that was produced in South India, Clooney also manages to show a

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concrete, historically traceable link within the Indian culture that better sustains and justifies his comparative project.

In *His Hiding Place is Darkness: a Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence*, Clooney investigates the theme of the divine absence and the loving feeling of the mystical missing of the beloved in the *Song of Songs* also through the lens of three illustrious medieval European commentators and in parallel with the Hindu poem *Holy Word of Mouth* and the teachings of two medieval Indian interpreters Nanjiyar and Nampillai. This is perhaps Clooney’s most audacious project not only for the complexity and the attractiveness of its chosen topic but also for daring a new way of theologizing precisely in the form of a theopoetics: theology cannot remain immune from the subjects that it studies, and poetics, in order to be fully grasped in its deep symbolic potential, needs to be approached somewhat “poetically” also by theologians. Thus, Clooney presents his project:

*His Hiding Place Is Darkness* thus pushes to a still greater extreme the necessary risk of interreligious reading that lies at the heart of the practice of comparative theology. It is dangerous work, love’s burden, for we are now implicated in the dilemma arising when one finds that the texts studied—such as these songs of loss in love—deepen the reader’s own loss in love, not by less concreteness and intensity, but by more than we can handle. There is a holy abundance in the beloved’s departure. Yet when his absence is acutely, painfully noticed, the prospects of his return become all the more intense.

Clooney is usually very attentive and respectfully adherent to the idea of dealing with particularities, the true manifesto of his theologizing in all his works. However, there are some few exceptions that should be noted here. Apart from those articles and books in which he explores comparative theology as a meta-theory and some publications on interreligious dialogue, theology of religions, and some other specific themes, there is a series of contributions on Christianity tout

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593 Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, xii–xiii.
court and even Catholic topics that deserve at least to be mentioned. In all these cases, Clooney puts aside his more usual approach and his attentiveness to particularities simply because the problems that he tackles there on each occasion require from him another kind of approach. In some cases, Clooney even renounces also his privileged focus on similarity. For example, in his article in the collected volume *Augustine and World Religions*, he stresses the limitations of Augustine’s hermeneutics of pagan religions, and then he turns to contrasting the apologetic readings of three Jesuits—De Nobili, Bouchet, and Meurin—who dealt with the Hindus, their texts, and their religious visions. In order to show how those Christian authors used the Hindu texts instrumentally for their apologetic purposes, Clooney is led to focus more on dissimilarities. Although here his approach is not per se contrary to his more fixed attitude of privileging similarities, one gets the impression somehow of encountering another Clooney. This essay is not properly speaking a piece of comparative theology but a contribution to the history of the Catholic apologetics.

Among his major works, there is an important book in which his declared intention to dive into particularities is somehow reinterpreted, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions*. This work is a theological conversation across boundaries around four fundamental themes: the existence of God; God’s identity; divine embodiment; and revelation. The structure of this investigation clearly recalls manualistic theology, and here Clooney reconsiders apologetics as inherent to confessional theology and reaffirms its value. Unlike his other more noted contributions, in this case Clooney does not start

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reasoning from and through some specific religious texts and their literary aspects but from some reflections on fundamental Christian doctrines that he draws from the works of some noted Christian theologians: the resort to the American orthodox theologian Richard Swinburne, both the Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner, and the protestant Karl Barth is meant to offer an image of the Christian teaching that would be the most representative and comprehensive possible. The reference to Hindu literature and the way in which those fundamental themes are there either represented or simply touched on permits him to establish a broader theological conversation based on macro-level comparisons, something definitely unusual when compared to the more noted instances of his work.

Clooney’s experiments are truly intriguing and have the merit of opening new horizons not only to comparative theology but to theology tout court. Moreover, his love for the Indian traditions, and the deep respect for Hindu religion and its faithful and, above all, his unceasing attempts to open new paths of research, make him a sort of explorer of our time and an unavoidable authority for any comparative theologian. While his work remains a point of reference also for my own project, however, I dare to express some criticism especially with relation to three problems. First, as Catherine Cornille reminds us, marking the field of research always implies careful attention to the problem of the choice of subjects to compare. Clooney describes his criteria as follows:

Comparison is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other. It ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrine, persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each differently because the other is near, and by cumulative insight also begin to comprehend related matters.

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I have a fundamental objection to raise here: are we sure that the comparative practice can only be “necessarily arbitrary and intuitive”? Clooney’s position appears here quite subjectivist. Nonetheless, when he affirms that the comparative endeavor is necessarily arbitrary and intuitive he is saying that as someone who is rooted in one tradition and expert in another. So his intuitions, insights and choices are shaped by these traditions. His subjectivity is a subjectivity-in-community, so therefore not necessarily relativistic. Then, it is true that a certain degree of intuition can be fruitful in any intellectual endeavor and, in the case of comparison among distant cultural and religious worlds, is perhaps required; it is also true that aesthetic sensibility and inspiration can sometimes see into religious phenomena better than more rigorous approaches, such as those of history and philology. However, if the comparative theological enterprise is undertaken not only for the researcher’s sake alone but also for the benefit of others, one should always submit to discernment one’s criteria in determining subjects to compare. In fact, there is a kind of comparative theology that is not really rooted in the tradition and whose choices are really arbitrary and often explicitly critical of what is ostensibly the “home” tradition.

This subjectivist tendency eventually risks undermining the credibility of the new comparative theology itself. It could indirectly suggest the idea that comparative enterprises are founded on impressionism and are more useful for the expression of the author’s creativity than for either the development of the theological field or for the concrete benefit of the world. What is more, in comparative theologians who do not have same sensibility and intellectual honesty—in this I totally disagree with Balagangadhara who considers Clooney fundamentally “disingenuous”

597 Clooney, Comparative Theology, 11.
and even “dishonest”⁵⁹⁸—it could result in justifying the manipulative intervention of the author who, instead of respecting what history and tradition suggest as feasible for some fruitful and verifiable comparisons, administers the material at his disposition as a *deus ex machina* in order, perhaps, to demonstrate something that is nothing more than a preconceived theory. Clooney’s work has the merit of raising the crucial problem of the choice of subjects to compare, a question that can no longer be deferred since it determines the future of the discipline of comparative theology.

The second reason that I want to highlight here is more remote and concerns some of Clooney’s philosophical presuppositions: the enchantment with post-modernism and especially Jacques Derrida that he showed from the beginning of his career. In particular, the consequences of the adoption of Derrida’s so-called “collage effect” that Clooney invokes both in *Theology after Vedanta* and *Seeing through Texts* could be more serious than one imagines. Since this practice proceeds “precisely by strategies of excision, recomposition and new juxtaposition,”⁵⁹⁹ it could be counter-productive in the sense that it risks undoing the substantial gain that comes from that careful reading of the texts in analysis which Clooney so convincingly promotes. The eventuality of producing “hitherto nonexistent meanings which could never be otherwise expressed”⁶⁰⁰ should be seen not only optimistically as an opportunity but also as possibly generating outcomes that are no longer controllable and could be deleterious.

The discussion of Derrida’s deconstructionist project would take me too far afield. As I will explain briefly in the next chapter, there can be derived from deconstructionism some interesting insights and it is certainly a philosophical perspective that deserves attentive

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⁵⁹⁹ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 173.
⁶⁰⁰ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 173.
consideration. However, I find that the kind of application that Clooney promotes in his writings is more helpful to Hindu theology than to the Christian part. Christianity is by definition, at least on the basis of the doctrinal pivot of Incarnation, a non-decontextualizable worldview and system of thought in which the specific frameworks of history, cultural context, and language are something which always maintain a specific gravity, so to speak. As I will try to show in the next chapter, the language-metaphysics nexus acquires a different tone in each particular religious system, and a good comparative theology should at the very least be alert to this important implication.

Third, I found Clooney’s work still ambivalent in relation to his allegiance to “the Bible and the theological systems composed from it.” I affirm this perhaps because I myself under the fascination of another noted Jesuit: Carlo Maria Martini, a world famous Biblical scholar and Cardinal of Milan from 1980 to 2002, a clergy deeply engaged in interreligious dialogue, especially with Jews, and a subtle thinker involved in very complex philosophical debates whose theological reasoning and pastoral action was entirely devoted to re-center both the teaching and the life of the Catholic Church on the Bible. In light of several sources of inspiration—St. Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises; the monastic practice of lectio divina; the theological heritage of Dei Verbum; the encounter with Jewish spirituality; and the protestant principle of the Bible’s centrality—Martini strove with all his energies to present the Christian Scriptures as the soul of theology and, more radically, the supreme criterion for discerning the life of both individuals and Christian communities. Conversely, in his works Clooney pays scant attention to the biblical text. Apart from His Hiding Place is Darkness, where he deals significantly with the Song of the Songs.

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601 Clooney, Theology after Vedanta, 194.
and a brief reference to John’s Gospel in *Seeing through Texts*, we find only a few scriptural references of no great substance here and there in his work. However, this seems at odds with what Clooney announced in his 1990 contribution to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, an inclusivist response to Hick and Knitter’s pluralistic views expressed in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. Paraphrasing Lindbeck, he affirmed:

Lindbeck’s textual perspective highlights a particular form of the Christian paradox, which theology must be careful to maintain: The *whole* of the world is the locus of the story of God’s universal saving action, *and yet* the canon of texts known as the Bible is the *privileged, particular language* of this salvation and understanding. Although our faith refers to a reality that is not “merely” a product of language, it is nevertheless for the Christian constitutively shaped by the Bible.

Of course, for a scholar to change his or her mind is always licit and is often a sign of intelligence; however, one should at least announce it. More radically, Clooney’s primary theological attention seems to go to the non-Christian texts that he submit to analysis. One often has the impression that he is, so to speak, doing the job of the Hindu counterpart in the dialogue who can eventually interpret the Christian textual tradition through the lens of the Indian religious environment. While this is certainly an indication of Clooney’s deep immersion in Hindu worldviews, it is difficult to see how this coheres with his announced intention to function as a confessional Christian theologian.

In conclusion, while acknowledging Francis X. Clooney as the one in recent scholarship who has given new impetus and insight to comparative theology, I intend partly to differentiate my own position. I consider his theological experiments very stimulating and up to a point exemplary for my own research. However, I also find some of his theoretical premises less than

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convincing. The risks of arbitrariness in the choice of subjects for comparison and the slightly individualistic idea of comparative theology as an occasion to build a biblio/biographical self that he reveals in his projects, have convinced me to search also in other directions. We need to envision a new kind of approach that would be certainly “after” Clooney but, in some way, “beyond” him. In particular, if comparative theology does not establish a serious theological foundation, it is surely destined to die off again.

The long itinerary we have accomplished so far, along the centuries and through the history of Christian theology, had the twofold purpose of deepening the thoughts of the major authorities in which comparative theology is rooted, and showing the conditions for its contemporary reappearance on the theological scene. My contribution intentionally was limited to connecting some important scholarly materials that were already at the disposal of the academy but that, in pertaining to various fields, often are thought not to be related to each other. On the contrary, the investigation on the history of philosophy, theology, and culture in general, if it is conducted in a synchronic glance, permits one to see the phenomenon of the increasing interest of theology on the matter of religions with much more profundity and in a new light.

In particular, in the multiple waves of thoughts, theological movements, and schools that I have noted in my presentation, we can register some important data that deserve special consideration:

- First, modern comparative theology was born initially as a response to some intra-Christian conflicts and inner debates. The ecumenical dimension should be always kept in sight by comparative theologians, not only as a resource for a more nuanced
representation of Christianity but also as a method for the investigation of other religious realities which are often no less “plural” than the Christian traditions in their religious representations, symbols, and doctrines.

- Second, the acquaintance with other religious traditions should not be evaluated only on the basis of the highly intellectual discussions in the spheres of theology and philosophy. Rather, there are other important cultural domains—both at the popular and at the more elite levels—such as literature, architecture, figurative art, music, etc., that somehow echo the encounter of the Christian world with other religious views. This kind of influence was more pervasive than one might imagine.

- Third, the new comparative theology was born as a reaction to and in contrast with the abstract theological generalizations of the contemporary theology of religions. Dealing with particularities is therefore a necessary premise for a good, manageable comparison of some religious aspects, even when they pertain to distant worlds. However, comparative theology still necessitates showing the profound reasons of its predilection for religious texts. While this choice is truly beneficial, however, it deserves a more extended and consistent explanation not only with regard to the manageability of some particular texts rather than systems of thought but primarily on the basis of the structure of the Christian faith itself and its fondness with particularities (which ultimately is rooted on the doctrine of the Incarnation).

- Hence, comparative theology must rethink its theological premises, first in order to be more in consonance with its declared intentions and confessional nature of fides quarens intellectum in the context of interreligious exchanges. More clarity in its premises would make comparative theology more credible in the intellectual arena in
general and possibly more useful to the concrete conditions of this world marked by multiple religious conflicts which, in their fierceness, should question any human being and, of course, any good comparative theologian.

- The mutual dependence between comparative theology and the theology of religions should be reconsidered with the intention of better marking the fields and the differences between them, individuating some possible fruitful interactions and reciprocal corrections and elaborating a more grounded theological foundation for both.

In conclusion, while I defer to the next chapter the construction of my own proposal of comparative theology, my goal for this chapter was very simple: to offer another narrative voice that could recount, if not in a new at least in a different way, what other commentators have already recounted: the history of the birth, the death and the rebirth of comparative theology.
Chapter III  
TOWARD A SEMIOTIC THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The transformational power of stories is what is at stake here, particularly from the point of view of a comparative Christian theology, which views that Jesus—the Eternal Word—is not only made a story but the story of salvation for those who listen to it and those who are called to reshape their lives according to it. It is the story of God’s beloved son and his disciples that found room among the sacred stories of the elected people and became the pole star of any authentically Christian approach to the mystery of God and, consequently, of any comparative theological enterprise that intends to study this repertoire of accounts, but not without a serious and respectful engagement with other representations of spiritual reality. The previous chapter was inspired by a principal intention: to overcome the impasse in the present debate on comparative theology, which is essentially caused by the number of various and often incompatible proposals. This was attempted through a renewed presentation of the history of the emergence of comparative theology as an autonomous discipline. Presenting the main protagonists of this long-lasting tradition of interreligious relationships in a new light, and providing more visibility to some unexplored terrain or overlooked voice, were not only pursued in order to contribute something scholarly original but were also motivated above all by the conviction that the resort to history has the power to transform an audience by untying difficult knots, thus solving thorny issues or at least making visible the questions that are still in need of a tenable solution. Consequently, after attempting a new presentation of the historical development of comparative theology, now my principal duty is to justify its most recent evolutions with special relation to the deliberate choice to deal with particularities and primarily with texts. I will show how this outcome is not simply fortuitous but a necessary development and perhaps the only way of establishing a more coherent theological foundation.
To reach this goal, I will organize my demonstration in three stages: First, I will focus on Clifford Geertz’s first attempt to read both anthropological and religious data semiologically. Although marked by several problems, I will try to reevaluate Geertz’s thoughts by indicating what I see as his respective strengths and defects and showing why some of his lessons are still valid today despite being quite beneficial to my demonstration.

The second stage will be wholly dedicated to the introduction and a brief presentation of Umberto Eco’s thought, anticipated by an historical outline on the birth and development of the semiotic reflection. Despite some important differences, Geertz and Eco’s semiotic approaches and theories of culture are somewhat compatible and, in any case, are valuable in preserving the intricateness of reality in all its multiple nuances and aspects.

In the third stage of my demonstration, after restating the necessity of a new theological foundation for comparative theology, I will strive to compose the constructive part by promoting a theological semiotic theory of comparativism rigorously based on a narrative comparative theology. In order to rethink the critical issue of comparativism theologically, I will reformulate the whole question by connecting and reshaping what the scholarly debate has already suggested apropos of this critical issue, but hopefully in a more coherent way. I will devote the last section of my demonstration to reflecting on the Bible and its preeminent role as the reading rule in intertextual comparative projects that intend to be coherently Christian.

At this stage of my demonstration, before introducing both Geertz’s and Eco’s thoughts and denouncing some of their inconsistencies, I feel the need to anticipate in brief the motives for which I espouse semiotics as my own approach. First, I think that semiotics is able to integrate the valid contributions of other perspectives, such as for example morphology and structuralism, but avoiding their fallacies. Second, semiotics envisions an approach to reality that is essentially
empirical and that by its constitution is intended to be always rectifiable. One can only *sense* a phenomenon and never possess it or contract its multifacetedness: each subject of study is here treated as a complex reality that can never be reduced to a single intuition and, least of all, to some mental structures.

Then, semiotics conceives meaning as a chain of correlative references. As in a mathematical function where an argument is associated to one output quantity and the variation of one of these two elements determines the change in value of the other, so the meaning of a given phenomenon should be inferred from its relatedness with the other adjacent elements. Comparison and correlation are therefore at the roots of the science of sign interpretation, namely semiotics. Meaning is a continuum of references that, in theory, could have infinite inflexions, since a given complex reality or even a simple sign is always liable to be reinterpreted because of the variation of its correlated elements and context.

However, a correct interpretation always has some limits. I want particularly to stress this affirmation since in many semiotic proposals which are in line with Charles Sanders Peirce’s view and his heritage, such an important principle is not always sufficiently and clearly defended. As I will show soon, it is also one of Eco’s main flaws, at least in the first stage of his thought. However, from envisioning meaning as a mere fluctuating entity in the infinite ocean of language, in a sort of neo-nominalist view in which language risked being understood simply as *flatus vocis* Eco himself came to conceive the necessity of some sort of limits in the act of interpretation. This was more probably due to his encounter with Derrida’s thought and the reconsideration of some aspects of deconstructionism that he eventually found to be quite deviant.
Clifford Geertz: Semiology beyond Structuralism

Together with Ruth Benedict\textsuperscript{605} and Margaret Mead,\textsuperscript{606} Clifford James Geertz (1926–2006)\textsuperscript{607} is one of the most eminent American anthropologists of the last century and perhaps the most influential. Besides the various controversies that his intellectual work generated within the domain of his own discipline,\textsuperscript{608} Geertz’s researches were inspirational for many other disciplines: social sciences; hermeneutics, semiotics, religious studies, and theology above all. He was particularly noted for his unusual way of conducting his work directly in the field without paying much attention to general theory, or spending time in consulting libraries and adding footnotes. His writing style was quite unique, condensed and enchanting at the same time with some unexpected erudite flavor. Thus, Shweder ingeniously characterizes it:

Almost everyone initially gets side-tracked by the visibility and distinctiveness of his writing style, which is like Cyrano de Bergerac’s nose. It is conspicuous, it is spectacular, but it is best just to ignore it, for the sake of getting on with a discussion of his ideas.\textsuperscript{609}

His works on Bali and Java, where he lived for some years together with his wife, Hildred, an anthropologist herself, and his researches on Morocco were heavily discussed and criticized for their unorthodox approach to those societies, their religions and Islam primarily. However, it is


\textsuperscript{606} Margaret Mead, Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World (New York: W. Morrow, 1949); Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization (New York: W. Morrow, 1961).


\textsuperscript{608} Richard A. Shweder and Byron Good, eds., Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{609} Shweder and Good, Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues, 1.
quite paradoxical that, despite his idiosyncratic opposition to general theories, he became really popular and reached a large audience thanks to two works, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and *Local Knowledge* (1983), in which he expressed his regulative and programmatic views. In both these significant collections of selected essays, Geertz took positions in favor of the linguistic and literary critical approaches, against the more classical sociological theories, thus formulating his own general idea of culture. There are three essays that are absolutely relevant for our discourse, which are all included in *The Interpretation of Cultures*: “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” “Religion As a Cultural System;” and “The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss.”

At first glance, being inspired by linguistic theories, conceiving culture as a system of meaning in a clearly holistic approach, and maintaining that studying a single culture is like interpreting a literary text, Geertz’s view can apparently seem to be replicating Lévi-Strauss’ positions. On the contrary, he explicitly intended to distance himself from structuralism since he saw this perspective as dangerously reductionist:

> To set forth symmetrical crystals of significance, purified of the material complexity in which they were located, and then attribute their existence to autogenous principles of order, universal properties of the human mind, or vast, a priori *weltanshauungen*, is to pretend a science that does not exist and imagine a reality that cannot be found. Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.

From these words it becomes evident how much Geertz drastically diverged from Lévi-

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613 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 87–125.
615 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 20.
Strauss’ perspective. Lévi-Strauss was prone to derive from complex phenomena some invariant elements, thus subjugating ethnography to some other philosophical reflections, as the following quotation from *The Savage Mind* symptomatically testifies:

I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man. The pre-eminent value of anthropology is that it represents the first step in a procedure which involves others. Ethnographic analysis tries to arrive at invariants beyond the empirical diversity of societies…. This first enterprise opens the way for others… which are incumbent on the exact natural sciences: the reintegration of culture in nature and finally of life within the whole of its physico-chemical conditions…. This explains why I regard anthropology as the principle of all research.616

Thus, despite its high degree of sophistication, Lévi-Strauss’ research risked betraying the very purpose of ethnographic research: to use one of Geertz’s most common expressions, which I draw from the first of the cited articles, Lévi-Strauss aimed at deriving “thin descriptions” instead of “thick descriptions” with the aim of establishing a more general philosophical reflection, de facto bypassing the phenomena under analysis. Conversely, for Geertz, ethnography must not deal with “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit” but it should demand a first-person involvement from the researcher, who “must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.”617 Its act of interpretation should not simply correspond to discovering some recurrent structures or various webs of interconnections of meaning. Consequently, in Geertz, ethnography never played the role of *ancilla philosophiae*, so to speak, but it postulated the recognition of all the nuances of a given phenomenon and, therefore, the composition of “thick descriptions” as its proper objective, without other purposes or hidden intentions. Geertz’s “kind” critique against Lévi-Strauss is better displayed in the essay “The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Lévi-

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617 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.
Strauss” in which he targeted the structuralist depiction of the savage mind as fundamentally cerebral and a sort of relic from the Neo-Illuministic heritage.

Geertz viewed culture as a single system of meaning in which signs are closely interwoven and thus become mutually explanatory rather than being mere manifestation of some constants or mental processes. Thus, Geertz expressed his main argument:

Culture is most effectively treated… purely as a symbolic system (the catch phrase is, “in its own terms”), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way—according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based. Though a distinct improvement over “learned behavior” and “mental phenomena” notions of what culture is, and the source of some of the most powerful theoretical ideas in contemporary anthropology, this hermetical approach to things seems to me to run the danger (and increasingly to have been overtaken by it) of locking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life.618

Hence, Geertz’s position is neither structuralist nor idealist, neither cognitivist nor behaviorist but it can be more properly defined as “hermeneutical,” and, as he himself seem to prefer, “interpretative” and “semiological.” In other terms, observing signs, sifting through their details, guessing their subtleties, realizing their differences, connecting them in search of some multiple and correlative meanings, this is the duty of the ethnographer according to Geertz. Semiotics does not promote an exact study of the cultural phenomena as other sciences claim to do; rather, it corresponds to a kind of qualitative “glance.” This special perspective requires that the researcher become capable of sensing the phenomena under analysis, in search of a surplus of meaning that simple structures alone cannot comprise. This unfixed nature, inherent to the semiotic approach, is precisely what permits the ethnographer both to maintain reality in its complexity, without reducing it to some stereotypical motifs, and at the same time to keep open the door to the

618 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 17.
shifting of meaning of a given subject in the change of contexts. Thus, Geertz explains: “the whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is… to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.”

Geertz’s interpretative theory of culture is, in my opinion, truly valuable. Moreover, his semiotic approach promotes an idea of symbol that appears to me not reductionist. However, one could question if such a perspective does not lead to sheer arbitrariness, given the risk of reduction of anthropological research to the personal interpretation of the ethnographer that apparently it implies. This kind of risk is certainly possible since the convinced and lucid involvement of the ethnographer alone cannot guarantee the correctness and the completeness of the analysis. However, I see in Geertz’ very specific way of proceeding the features of an approach which is not only able to promote a desirable convergence between phenomenology (at least in its derivative aspects) and hermeneutics, but which is also likely to integrate some structuralist insights, like the holistic idea of system, an idea that Geertz did not reject at all but simply refined. In semiotics, a good interpretation is the one that is capable of better illuminating and tying together all the symbolic relations in a given cultural context into a truly persuasive explanation. Any interpretation is, therefore, temporary and open to being corrected; at the same time, it is apt to bring new insights and, consequently, to promote the development of knowledge. In this, Geertz’s semiotic approach can be seen as a somewhat empirical perspective (perhaps more than other so-called “scientific methods”) since, by its constitution, it calls for a continuing rectification.

In “Religion As a Cultural System,” Geertz attempted to overcome what he called the “general stagnation” of contemporary anthropological study of religion. At that time, the debate was dominated by the indubitable authority of some leading thinkers such as Durkheim, Weber,

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619 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 24.
620 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 88.
Freud and Malinowski to whom Geertz himself could not but resort. However, he felt the need not so much to put aside those important contributions as to broaden the discussion by proposing a parallel between cultural analysis and religious studies. In fact, he saw that both culture and religion could be analyzed as repertoires of a historically determined set of symbols through which human beings express themselves and relate both to the world and to others. And it is precisely in dealing with the concepts of cultural system and meaning that Geertz came out with his famous and much discussed definition of religion that I will report here:

A religion is: 1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.\(^{621}\)

I believe that Geertz’ main purpose in proposing such a definition was not so much that of offering an original and definitive solution to the old-age problem of the essence and the boundaries of the hardly unanimously identifiable field of research for religious studies. Rather, I think that he simply aimed at showing how cultural studies can become very helpful in contributing to the development of both anthropology and the sciences of religion, if only the social-structural and psychological perspectives are correctly criticized for their intrusiveness and brought back to a more receptive position. Before referring to the social and psychological dimensions of a given religious phenomenon, the anthropologist should always detect the system of meanings which constitute the specificity of it, not without previously establishing what Geertz called a “theoretical analysis of symbolic action.”\(^{622}\) He demanded that it be no less sophisticated than the correspondent analyses of the social and psychological actions which mostly direct contemporary anthropological endeavors.

\(^{621}\) Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90 [italics in the original].

\(^{622}\) Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 125.
I really appreciate Geertz for this move as much as I express my appreciation for his thought in general. However, there are some important aspects of his view on religion that are problematic. Although part of what I am going to say is touched on in his later writings, nonetheless, I find these afterthoughts only sketched and, hence, not fully developed, especially with regard to what he previously held.623 First of all, although he treats religion as a cultural system, consequently understanding and defending its multifaceted dimension, he speaks of it as if it were a point of view among and alongside others, like the historical, the scientific, and the aesthetic dimensions in human life:

A perspective is a mode of seeing…. It is a particular way of looking at life, a particular manner of construing the world, as when we speak of an historical perspective, a scientific perspective, an aesthetic perspective, a common-sense perspective, or even the bizarre perspective embodied in dreams and in hallucinations. The question then comes down to, first, what is “the religious perspective” generally considered, as differentiated from other perspectives; and second, how do men come to adopt it.624

As I will attempt to demonstrate soon, religion is not simply one perspective among others but, particularly in the ancient world and in the primitive societies, it has been always conceived as a totalizing perspective, the one—and in some cases even the only one—that is capable of connecting all the aspects of reality in a meaningful and coherent way. The contemporary recrudescence of fundamentalist views, though shaped by some specific historical conditions and ideological influences that I cannot take into account here, seem to reiterate the perennial human need to offer a clear and united explication for reality in all its multifaceted dimensions.

Second, Geertz’s thought is marked by an evident dichotomy that can easily degenerate into a striking contradiction. On the one hand, although striving to enlighten the multiple

624 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 110.
interactions between the specific religious weltanschauung and the social and political levels, Geertz remains considerably attached to a post-Illuministic and personalistic, “Protestant” idea of religion. In this, I completely support Talal Asad’s evaluation. On the other hand, when Geertz speaks of a cultural system and applies it to religion, it seems that he was still promoting models of research which respect the standards of early ethnographic work. To put it in other terms, his research was generally tied to some local cultures which survived in a specific, circumscribed territory and which, despite the influence of colonialism, maintained a certain degree of unique and original compactness. Conversely, in the pluralistic societies which are most commonly present in today’s world, I think that it is not feasible to apply Geertz’s method tout court without some important modifications.

In fact, pluralistic societies resemble a continuum, a light spectrum in which multiple colors co-exist in a sort of unity which, however, is not always harmonious; even when in the continuum there is an undoubted continuity between the single colors which, fading into one another, soften their tone, the single stratifications remain clearly recognizable and somehow maintain their distinctiveness. The same happens in those societies in which different religions together generate and shape a certain hybrid culture. In this case, the relationship between religions and culture can no longer be maintained as perfectly reciprocal but rather as asymmetrical: a single religion, although being in itself a micro-system of meanings, can illuminate only a single portion of the cultural-whole which is also constituted by other parts, so that the final result of the combination of different elements is much more complex than any one of its components. While, on the basis of his idea of system, Geertz is well aware that it is not possible to focus on some single parts without considering their interaction with the whole, he does not seem to me always conscious of

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the opposite: that a sophisticated culture, like the Indonesian culture for example, can hardly find itself wholly reflected in its multiple religious stratifications, if they are considered only individually.

Hence, between culture and religion there is often a gap that is not easy to fill or at least that should be registered attentively. Is it possible, for example, to explain the African-American Islam as a cultural system? I think up to a certain point. Its birth was the result of the encounter of some very different systems of meaning which could come to coexist only thanks to the suppression of some of their original aspects which pertained to their previous cultural environments. I think it is quite fair to say that the consequence of this kind of hybridism was that the dimension of the individual became more relevant than the social influence, since in this case religion turned out to be more a matter of a personal choice and self-understanding than a cultural humus, namely a set of some shared foundational accounts, codes of values and ethical motivations which predated and affected the formation of a given society and determined its distinctiveness.

This phenomenon of hybridism is even more perceivable in our current globalized world in which not only are new beliefs generated but even ancient religious traditions are continuously reshaped and relocated. This is not to say, as Geertz himself warned, that in the so-called “primitive” societies religion was never a matter of personal choice. However, particularly in the Western world, the emphasis on the dimension of the self has contributed considerably to changing the conception of religion itself. To use an image, it was sufficient to move a pawn on the chessboard for the entire play to be modified. Beyond metaphor, when in pluralistic societies single religions co-exist, they are naturally led to change, but without losing their specificity and even the tendency to promote their often conflicting holistic views. The result of the encounter in current pluralistic societies of various religious systems with their all-embracing nature is precisely the
spectrum effect that I have tried to explain above.

Dealing with such constantly modifying and shifting general cultural sets requires that one must adopt some flexible intellectual tools that are able to be adapted in accordance with the circumstances, and this more coherently than Geertz does. I am convinced that the heuristic nature of those temporary categories would, on the one hand, permit the researcher to investigate more respectfully his or her matter of study and, on the other, prevent him or her from absolutizing a particular kind of perspective. Above all, it is important to avoid what I consider to be Geertz’s twofold fallacy: to approach uniform, unsophisticated, “primordial” cultures with the dichotomous spirit of modernity and, to the contrary, to research compound, multifaceted, pluralistic cultures with the categories of the “savage mind” anthropology.

There are three other aspects for which I consider Geertz’s proposal partly problematic. First of all, even in all his attentiveness and search for “thick” descriptions, it seems to me that even in him there is not enough room for a consistent recognition of history. Other semiological proposals, as I will show soon, in their acknowledgment of both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions in the study of the symbolic connections in a given cultural phenomenon are more prone to grant the time factor a significant role. Second, although Geertz convincingly sponsors the comparative enterprise as both possible and necessary, it is not clear to me on which concrete and solid basis he intends to found this enterprise. While I fully agree with him when in Local Knowledge he says: “Santayana’s famous dictum, that one compares only when one is unable to get at the heart of the matter, is the precise reverse of truth,” I get disoriented when he goes on to say that “it is through comparison, and of incomparables, that whatever heart we can actually get to is reached.”626 I am fully aware that by speaking of “incomparables” he is employing a

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626 Geertz, Local Knowledge, 233.
wordplay, an expression through which he wanted to support a very detailed, localized knowledge of a given cultural phenomenon in a determined territory, possibly giving voice more to differences than to homologies. However, apart from the witty play of the words “comparison” and “incomparables,” I do not see how he can avoid the charge of incommensurability, if not of relativism. In this, I see how Lévi-Strauss was quite right: without the recognition of universals there is no correct, fruitful comparison that is possible.

Third, Geertz’s definition of his approach as semiological can be accepted only if it is intended in a broader sense and not in technical sense. The interpretative tone of all his endeavor and the link to hermeneutical speculation in philosophy are well visible, but the lack of a systematic reflection on signs and symbols is evident. While I endorse semiotics as my own approach, I consider my position somewhat different from that of Geertz. In the following sections, I will deal with the thought of another leading semiologist, Umberto Eco, by whom I am more favorably inspired, with the intention of building a more rigorous semiological foundation for comparativism in religious matters. I appreciate several aspects of Eco’s view that I do not see sufficiently contemplated in Geertz’ project, in particular his attempt to reevaluate the role of the subject in the act of cultural interpretation and the production of meaning without losing sight of the necessity to distinguish reality from the intellectual tools one employs. However, as will soon be clear, I have also some remarks to direct against Eco’s proposal: to distance myself from it will be essential in constructing my own perspective, which I strive to make as suitable as possible for comparative theology and more generally for a theological discourse on comparativism. Though, before getting into the analysis of the pros and the cons of Eco’s contribution, it is worth first pausing briefly on semiotics in general and placing it in the history and the development of the philosophy of language.
Historical Outline on Semiotics

First of all, we refer to an ancient dispute, that has been settled by now, concerning the adoption of the term “semiotics” rather than “semiology.” In 1968, Eco proposed to solve the matter by distinguishing the two definitions as follows: with “semiology” we must intend a general theory of research on communication phenomena, seen as the elaboration of messages on the basis of codes which are conventionalized into sign-systems; conversely, we call “semiotics”, those single systems of signs, either if they are formalized (as already identified as such) or can be formalized (if they shall be identified in case a code was not initially foreseen). \(^627\)

With this definition, Eco was attempting to mediate two positions that marked the semiotic reflection of that time: on the one hand, the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)\(^628\) and, on the other, those of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)\(^629\) and Charles W. Morris (1909–1979).\(^630\) In 1969, when founding the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Roman Jakobson proposed to adopt permanently the term “semiotics,” thus overcoming the impasse.\(^631\) Since then, the use of this term is generally preferred, in association, however, with some particular

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\(^627\) Eco, *La struttura assente*, 383–84.


qualifications. For instance, semiotics can be “specific” or “general.” Specific semiotics, which are of descriptive and sometimes of prescriptive or predictive nature, are “grammars” of a specific system of signs (e.g., linguistics, the study of gestural communication or road sign systems, iconography, the study of musical notes, etc.). “General” semiotics instead, is a philosophical reflection that considers objects such as sounds or gestures, as categories able to rationalize phenomena, even different from one another. In this regard, the theoretical concept of “sign” defines functional characters common to different phenomena such as communication artifices and, according to some scholars, also to some specific natural phenomena (e.g., the researches on semiosis at animal communication level by Thomas Albert Sebeok). Therefore, semiotics, differently from philosophy of language to which it nonetheless refers, generalizes its categories so as to define not only natural tongues or formalized languages, but any expressive form, even some phenomena that do not appear intentionally produced for expressive purposes. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that there is a current of thought (e.g., Eric Buysens) that reduces semiotics to a theory of merely communication gestures.

Some distinctions shall be made to trace back the history of semiotics. There is an articulated reflection on signs, a sort of implicit semiotics, that characterizes the entire history of philosophy, from the beginning to modern times, and that, however, I cannot take in consideration here. It is sufficient to recall just some important names to get the idea of the vastness of this kind of reflection: from Aristotle, Augustine and Boethius through the great season of the medieval reflection on language (see Bacon, the Pseudo-Robert Kilwardby, Alexander of Hales,

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633 Eric Buysens, Les langages et le discours: essai de linguistique fonctionnelle dans le cadre de la sémiologie (Bruxelles: Office de Publicité, 1943).
Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent, and John Duns Scotus), till the modern thinkers John of St. Thomas, John Locke, John Wilkins and Antoine Arnauld the speculation on signs attracted the attention of many schools and single scholars.\(^{634}\) In these pages, I will rather refer to the foundation of semiotics as an independent and modern discipline, thanks to two main currents, linked respectively to Peirce and de Saussure.

Pierce elaborated and reviewed his theory on signs continuously during his lifelong career, always making corrections and significant improvements but never contradicting his original inspiration. The basic structure of his thought can be traced back in the several definitions of sign that he offered in his various interventions. For example, in his correspondence with Lady Welby, he affirmed:

> I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former.\(^{635}\)

In this concise but ingenious definition two things immediately jump out. First, unlike in de Saussure who conceived a sign as the dual-aspect relation of the signifier with the signified, for Peirce a sign is always the result of the combination of three elements which together constitute the famous semiotic triangle: the “sign,” the “object” to which the sign refers, and the “interpretant,” namely the effect that the sign which is determined by the object generates in the interpreters. Second, while the first two elements of his definition seem apparently to replicate de Saussure’s twofold conception, the third element is the real novelty also because it conjures a broader idea of language. In conceiving the effect that a given sign and its relative object creates


in someone as part of the signification process and its content, Peirce attributed to the act of interpretation and consequently to human interaction a central role, thus overcoming a purely abstract and formal conception of the sciences of language.

Peirce defined “semiotics” as the discipline of the essential nature and the fundamental varieties of any possible semiosis and “semiosis” as the relation between the three entities presented above. However, according to Peirce, not only words and signs produced by human beings for communication purposes, but any event, state, or object may establish a semiotic relation if interpreted by an interpreter as a sign related to something else. Throughout his production, Peirce offered several classifications of the different kinds of signs, each time more and more sophisticated. However, a minimal account of this taxonomy can be given as follows: Peirce called icons those signs whose relation to their objects betray “a mere community in some quality”\textsuperscript{636} while indices are those which unveil “a correspondence in fact.”\textsuperscript{637} Finally, he named symbols those signs “whose relation to their objects is an imputed character.”\textsuperscript{638} Thus, while an icon is a sign that represents and resembles its object like either a portrait or a diagram, an index is a sign that is in factual relation to its object in the sense that it brings the attention directly to the object itself like for instance smoke from a chimney signifies fire. A symbol is rather a sign that is generated by virtue of some conventional or normative link between sign and object: for example the French word “homme” and the English word “man” are both symbols which denote the same object. We cannot pause any longer on this interesting analysis. I can simply inform my readers that, with the progression of his research, Peirce’s theory became more and more sophisticated, so much so that he was able to recover nine different kinds of signs and ten possible interactions.

\textsuperscript{636} Peirce, \textit{Writings of Charles S. Peirce}, vol. 2, 56.
\textsuperscript{637} Peirce, \textit{Writings of Charles S. Peirce}, vol. 2, 56.
\textsuperscript{638} Peirce, \textit{Writings of Charles S. Peirce}, vol. 2, 56.
among them. It is sufficient here to recall that this classification was made on the basis of a triple factor: whether signs refer to and signify (1) qualities, (2) facts or (3) conventional laws.

Such a complexity is also the result of Peirce’s refining of his conception of the basic triadic elements (sign-object-interpretant), with particular relation to the third, the interpretant, which soon he started to intend as a sign in itself:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen.\(^\text{639}\)

This move had two important consequences. First, Peirce started to conceive all thoughts as signs given the fact that the interpretants are nothing but expressions of cognition which in their turn are liable to be interpreted and therefore to be treated in themselves as signs of some objects. Then, Peirce named “infinite semiosis” the constant process through which each sign refers to its designated meaning thanks to another sign, and one more and so on. Hence, the semiotic process is potentially infinite. Although according to some scholars Peirce seems to have reconsidered this specific aspect of his thought,\(^\text{640}\) it is a fact that the theory of infinite semiosis affected all semiotic scholars after him so that it became a sort of undisputable principle.

Peirce’s thought was continued and refined by a series of disciples and followers among whom I recall in particular Charles Morris,\(^\text{641}\) who was essential in distinguishing three further

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\(^{639}\)Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 2, 228 [italics in the original].


study areas concerning semiosis: “semantics” which studies the relation of signs with objects to which they refer; “syntax” that deals with formal relations of signs between one another; and “pragmatics” that deals with relations of signs with their interpretants.

On the other hand, Ferdinand de Saussure’s idea of semiology is slightly different from that of Peirce, despite the apparent similarity of their analytic and logical approaches. Thus he stated in his major work, the *Course in General Linguistics*:

> It is therefore possible to conceive a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek σημείον ‘sign’). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance.⁶⁴²

De Saussure’s attention was focused on languages in general and in particular on human speech, which he intended as the most important system of signs: indeed, while he conceived the existence of other abstract systems of signs, such as for example the finger alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of courtesy, military signs, etc., he believed that the study of human speaking should have inspired methods and concepts to future semiology. Thus, despite initially envisioning it on sociological grounds, de Saussure imagined semiology as the science of linguistic signs. As previously mentioned, structural criticism largely referred to de Saussure’s work and adopted both method of analysis and principles: the distinction between “language,” intended as a formal abstract system, and “speaking,” intended as a concrete and individual expression of language; the distinction between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, namely between a study of the linguistic system that does not consider the temporal dimension, and a study that instead takes into account the relation of the language with the historical-cultural context; the prevalence of synchronic over diachronic linguistics; the conception of linguistic sign as a two-faceted entity formed by the

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⁶⁴² De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 18 [italics in the original].
signifier (a sound-image) and the signified (a concept with its meaning); and the idea that the meaning of a sign depends on the system of meanings to which it is related.

The principles outlined in the *Course* by de Saussure, were further analyzed from mid ’30s by Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), the major exponent of the Copenhagen school of linguistics, who conceived what he labeled “glossematics,” a theory that not only concerns verbal language, but any system of signs and that exploits the formal, algebraic and abstract aspects of the linguistic analysis. According to him, linguistics has to be “immanent,” that is it must analyze formal and abstract systems of signs beyond any of their tangible components, either physical, psychological, or sociological. As a science of form, linguistics was intended by Hjelmslev to outline a common point of view for many different disciplines, from the study of literature, art, music and history in general to logistics and mathematics, in order to produce a general encyclopedia of sign structures.

The influence exercised, on the one hand, by Russian formalists like Vladimir Propp (1895–1970); Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975); and the Moskow-Tartu school of Yuri Lotman (1922–93) and, on the other, by the Prague linguistic circle and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982)

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was decisive in developing modern semiotics. Jakobson, in particular, proposed to link semiotics to the studies and the theories of information, together with a convinced return to Peirce. In the meantime, the structuralist perspective entered semiotic reflection decisively and generated a large production in itself, thanks in particular to the mediation of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ studies on cultural anthropology. A fundamental contribution to the diffusion of structuralist semiotics is owed to *Elements of Semiology* by Roland Barthes (1915–80), which aimed at extending the main linguistic categories to any other system of signs. Then, the work of Algirdas J. Greimas (1917–92) and the school of Paris in elaborating a structural semantics and applying the semiotic model to the study of social sciences, the question of meaning, and passions is worthy of a special mention. However, as already mentioned, due distinctions should be made within the structuralist movement that it was so wide as to embrace very distinct positions. For instance, the principle of immanence and the predilection for synchrony, which were generally promoted by both European and American structural linguistics, were challenged by some scholars within this same current of thought. It is sufficient to recall the “genetic structuralism” of Lucien Goldmann (1913–70), where reference to the sociological and cultural context became of fundamental importance. In line with him, other theorists insisted that structures should be not considered timeless models which are always valid but some typical forms that a given cultural system assumed in a specific historical period. Then, within the structuralist trend, some thinkers rediscovered Peirce’s

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semiotics and reviewed it in the attempt to re-establish the reflection on signs primarily by
detaching it from linguistic models and the idea that they should necessarily be all-embracing and
exhaustive.651

Among other developments following these currents of thought, one should recall the
application of semiotics to the study of narrative texts, intended as fundamental units of semiosis;
the separation between the generative approach—which seeks to prove which rules and which
cultural and mental inclinations generated these texts—and the interpretative approach, which is
more focused on interpretation processes and pragmatics; the attempt to merge the structuralist
approach with Peirce’s approach; the cultural view of semiotic processes as based on systems of
rules and established codes; the tendency to discover semiosis processes at all cognitive levels,
primarily perception; and finally, the extension of semiotic concepts also to the natural world.
Among the post-structuralist proposals, that of the Bulgarian Julia Kristeva652 is particularly worth
remembering: after studying under Roland Barthes in Paris and encountering first Bakhtin’s
critique of formalism and then Derrida’s deconstructionism, she was able to build a solid cultural
theory of semiotics that covers a range of fields: linguistics, literary criticism, philosophy, and
psychoanalysis above all.

One should not forget how important were the implications brought to linguistic reflection

651 See James Jakób Liszka, The Semiotics of Myth: A Critical Study of the Symbol (Bloomington: Indiana
University Press, 1990); “Peirce and Jakobson: Towards a Structuralist Reconstruction of Peirce,” Transactions of
the Charles S. Peirce Society 17, no. 1 (1981); John K. Sheriff, The Fate of Meaning: Charles Peirce, Structuralism,
and Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Massimo A. Bonfantini, Rossella Fabbrichesi, and
652 Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York:
Columbia University Press, 1980); Revolution in Poetic Language (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984);
In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University
Moi, ed., The Kristeva Reader (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); see also John Lechte, Julia Kristeva (London:
by Chomsky’s “revolution.” In the attempt to review the linguistic problem of meaning, which
in his opinion was left unresolved by both the European and the American schools, he intended to
build a “generative grammar,” not necessarily rejecting the structural linguistic perspective per se.
Besides re-asserting the choice for synchrony and opting for a systematic view of linguistic
phenomena, in the attempt to identify the universal features of language and the linguistic
predispositions inborn in the human mind, he succeeded in radically shifting scholarly attention
from the statement to the enunciation process, from the receiver to the sender, from perception to
expression. Moreover, his research was aimed at grasping the question of meaning in the arousing,
the development and the unfolding of the linguistic processes of the locutor.

Though they are disparate, all the recent perspectives in linguistics seem, however, to have
something in common: the need to shift the focus of research from the process of describing
linguistic phenomena on the basis of some established and fixed criteria, to the interaction of those
phenomena with some extra-textual elements, as for example, the historical and cultural contexts
of the act of locution or the realm of the locutor, her psychology, mind and world. Finally, it is
essential to remark how the contemporary developments in semiotics would have been improbable
without the contribution of many correlative disciplines such as the phenomenology of language
(see Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty); the various fields of linguistics (see for

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instance Émile Benveniste for general, historical and comparative linguistics and Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson for cognitive linguistics; hermeneutics (see Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur); and philosophy of language (see Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ernst Cassirer, Bertrand Russell, John Langshaw Austin and John Rogers Searle).

**Umberto Eco: His Singular Contribution to Semiotic Reflection**

Umberto Eco (1932–2016) is considered the main Italian expert in semiotics. He obtained a degree in philosophy in 1954, presenting a thesis on the problem of aesthetics in Thomas Aquinas which revolutionized the opinion first of specialists, and then of larger cultural spheres, re-evaluating the contribution offered by medieval thought in this field. Eco’s approach to questions

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of medieval aesthetics was conceived between the ’50s and ’60s in a cultural climate in which aesthetics was considered a modern discipline, born with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten666 and developed through the great systems of romantic idealism, until Benedetto Croce.667

After taking part in the foundation of the neo-avant-garde literary movement “Gruppo 63” and collaborating with various newspapers and magazines, he became professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna and president of the Graduate School for the Study of Humanities in the same university. In 1980, he debuted in fiction with The Name of the Rose,668 which made him renowned throughout the world, followed in 1988 by Foucault’s Pendulum669 and subsequently by other novels of minor success. Among his many works on semiotics, literary criticism, philosophy of language, analysis of consumer culture and new mass communication media, I recall the most important: Opera aperta (1962),670 La struttura assente (1968),671 Trattato di semiotica generale (1975),672 Lector in Fabula (1979),673 Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio (1984),674 I limiti dell’interpretazione (1990),675 Six Walks in the Fictional Woods (1994),676 and Kant e

671 Umberto Eco, La struttura assente (Milano: Bompiani, 1968).
674 Umberto Eco, Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio (Torino: Einaudi, 1984); see also the English version Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
It is fairly complex to re-construct Umberto Eco’s thought through his extensive body of work but this operation is not necessary for the purposes of our discourse here. Therefore, I intend to discuss only a few of his key works that, however, offered a positive stimulus to semiotic reflection as a whole, opening countless debates and new perspectives. What renders particularly significant Umberto Eco’s reflection, is not so much having conceived new categories and concepts, but having systematized and then re-formulated a theme that is controversial under many aspects and that is still in constant development. Mentioning Pascal in the preface to the Italian edition of *A Theory of Semiotics*, with a certain degree of irony, he clearly declared the sense of his contribution to the academy: “Qu’on ne dise pas que je n’ai rien dit de nouveau: la disposition des matières est nouvelle.”

Following this, I will analyze those works that I deem most appropriate to identify the standpoints of Eco’s thought and also most significant for my project. As I have already mentioned, I cannot hide the fact that I have some perplexities about Eco’s project, in particular with regard to certain of his philosophical assumptions and opinions regarding the ontology of language. However, I believe that it is not contradictory to assume in our discussion certain aspects of his thought, definitely more “operational,” without at the same time espousing his entire view. It is interesting to notice how he himself adopted a similar attitude towards Chomsky’s, Hjelmslev’s, and Jakobson’s philosophies in *La struttura assente* when he stated that all these authors can, to some extent, be exploited also by those who do not agree entirely with the basic philosophical assumptions of their research.

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*The Open Work*, written in 1962, is particularly important since it constitutes a change of paradigm in the semiotics of texts, if compared to previous critical discussions. In it, Eco aimed at critically reviewing the aesthetic reflection on the history of Western poetics, something that he carried out through an interdisciplinary analysis, which he deemed necessary to understand the status of contemporary art more in depth. If a rigorously formal and synchronic analysis was favoured in the structuralist climate since early ’60s, the discussion focused more on text pragmatics. With regards to this change of perspective and after encountering Jakobson’s, the Russian formalists’, Barthes’ and French structuralist proposals, Umberto Eco described what I consider the gist of his work as follows:

… our attention must shift from the message itself, qua objective system of possible information, to the relationship between message and receiver—a relationship in which the receiver’s interpretation constitutes the effective value of the information. On the other hand, how could one examine the signifying possibilities of a given message without taking the receiver of the message into account? To consider the psychological aspect of the phenomenon merely means that we recognize that the message cannot have any meaning, at least formally speaking, unless it is interpreted in relation to a particular situation (a psychological situation that is also, by extension, historical, social, anthropological, etc.).

Precisely this work marked Eco’s distancing of himself from pure structuralism, which eventually provoked Lévi-Strauss’ reaction. I refer to the *querelle* that saw Lévi-Strauss, the spokesperson of structural anthropology of that time, confronting Eco publicly during an interview in 1965. There, he denied Eco the leading principle that had marked the latter’s research since 1963, that is the attempt to identify the semiotic grounds of the constitutive opening of every text. Thus apropos of *The Open Work*, Lévi-Strauss stated that, though remarkable, it defended a formula which he could not accept, since what makes a work a work is not the fact that it is open but rather the fact that it is closed. He thinks that in general a work

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680 Eco, *The Open Work*, 70–71 [italics in the original].
is an object endowed with precise properties, that must be analytically isolated, and this work can be entirely defined on the grounds of such properties. When Jakobson and myself tried to make a structural analysis of a Baudelaire sonnet, we did not approach it as an “open work” in which we could find everything that has been filled in by the following epochs; we approached it as an object which, once created, had the stiffness—so to speak—of a crystal: we confined ourselves to bringing into evidence these properties.\textsuperscript{681}

Umberto Eco replied to Lévi-Strauss in the preface of \textit{Lector in Fabula,} the original Italian edition of \textit{The Role of the Reader,} an essay that attempted to radicalize the concepts already expressed in \textit{The Open work,} by systematically showing the semiotic bases of the interpretative cooperation.\textsuperscript{682} There Eco affirmed that if Lévi-Strauss meant to say that a work does not contain all that anybody can put in it, he surely would have to agree with him. However, if Lévi-Strauss meant to say that the content is definitively expressed by the signifying surface of the work, like the molecular structure of a crystal is revealed by analysis, and that the eye of the one who analyzed it did not contribute to the forming of that structure, in that case he would not agree with him.\textsuperscript{683}

Thus, in \textit{The Open Work,} we found already expressed the main trajectories of Eco’s thought: the role of the reader, the importance of conceiving a given literary work as constitutively “open” to the interaction of externs in the act of the production of meaning, and the relevance of the changing of the context as a stimulus for further semiotic processes.

\textit{La struttura assente} is the only one of Eco’s main essays that was never translated into English, apart from part 4 of Chapter D, entitled “Series and Structures” that was inserted at the end of the English edition of \textit{Opera Aperta (The Open Work).} Though in some ways surpassed and partly integrated into Eco’s subsequent contributions, I still consider this work seminal in his oeuvre. The basic question of this essay of 1968 is, what is the sense of a semiologic research,

\textsuperscript{682} Eco, \textit{Lector in fabula}, 6–7.
\textsuperscript{683} Eco, \textit{Lector in fabula}, 6.
namely a research that considers all cultural phenomena as communication acts, for which reason any single message can be organized and become comprehensible in reference to some codes.\textsuperscript{684} The assumption of a semiologic approach is here defined as a “revolution” that intends to be “modestly Copernican.”\textsuperscript{685}

The book consists of five parts that, however, were extensively revised and rewritten in \textit{A Theory of Semiotics} as Eco himself stated in the preface of the Italian edition of this work.\textsuperscript{686} The most interesting section that has never been reviewed is the fourth, which is certainly the most important part since it inspired the title of the entire book. The leading question of this chapter is, so to say, in what sense can semiotics be called structuralist? After analyzing key concepts such as “structures,” “structure” and “structuralism,” Eco considered two essential perspectives which can be drawn from philosophical reflection concerning the structural model: on one hand, a composite view ranging from considering the structure either as object or model, and, on the other hand, a fluctuation between two opposite approaches—either a more methodological current which means the structural method to be an operational model, or a more ontological view which aims at researching the constant laws of the Spirit, under the form of, so to speak, “the Structure” by definition or the “Ur-Code.”

While analyzing the theories of the main linguists and underscoring the contributions and limits of their thought, Umberto Eco’s criticism reflected on that current of thought which can be defined as “ontological structuralism” and on the search for that “Structure” par excellence which is intended as a universal of thought that not only invaded the modern and post-modern cultural scene and reflection, but is usually searched for as a sort of unquestionable and stable standpoint.

\textsuperscript{684} Eco, \textit{La struttura assente}, 7.
\textsuperscript{685} Eco, \textit{La struttura assente}, 8.
\textsuperscript{686} Eco, \textit{Trattato di semiotica generale}, 5.
in contrast to what in human cultures changes, escapes, dissolves and re-composes itself.\textsuperscript{687} In particular, Eco expressed his opinion against some philosophical assumptions of the thought of Lévi-Strauss, who in the attempt to compare different cultural phenomena, identified a sort of meta-code with the purpose of defining and naming other subordinate codes. Therefore, in considering the existence of universal structures beyond differences, Lévi-Strauss, according to Eco, risked not attributing a weight to variants at least equal to that of constants, and not considering the critique brought about by the so-called “serial thought” which inspired both experimentalism and avant-garde in all fields of contemporary Western culture: according to it the sought-for “Structure” (understood as the quintessential manifestation of all universal principles of communication) shall never be identified with a determined “series” of elements because form can no longer be contemplated as a “preexisting entity” and a “general morphology”\textsuperscript{688} the way classical thought use to do. Thus, in Lévi-Strauss the concept of “structure,” from being meant as an operational analysis model, easily became identified with the “Structure,” namely an ontological principle. The consideration of certain prospects of “serial thought” drove Eco to show how the so called “Code of Codes” is in reality nothing but an ultimate term of reference that always tends to regress and vanish each time that the analysis apparently encounters its findings and the intended goals make their appearance: no single code can exhaust the substantive significance of an “Ur-Code.”\textsuperscript{689} Up to this point, I perfectly agree with Eco; nonetheless, the attempt to stem this tide of ontological structuralism led him not only to define but also to think of the Structure as Absence. In this, Eco’s position is skeptical but not necessarily nihilistic, since he did not intend openly to

\textsuperscript{687} Eco, \textit{La struttura assente}, 9.
\textsuperscript{689} Eco, \textit{La struttura assente}, 323.
support the ontology of Absence, the glorification of Emptiness, and consequently the idea that a lack of Being would constitute each of our acts. He defines this philosophical decision as perhaps true but very deep and radical. Fortunately, the result of the negation of the “Structure” does not coincide with the abandoning of all epistemological discourse. For this precise reason, I feel entitled to adopt Eco’s thought, even if partially, without betraying the principles of the theological effort. In fact, by denying the “Structure” and any philosophical affirmation of a Code of Codes, however, he asserted the existence and the importance of structures and how each of every act of communication is ruled by the existence of many codes. As a consequence, structure became in Eco’s view an operational instrument which is aimed at the analysis and the discourse around the tangible sphere of the studied phenomena. Otherwise, if the identification of the Ur-Code is the only purpose of a given research, the phenomena on which one is working are simple mediums that one chooses in order to permit the Ultimate Truth, the true regulatory principle of the investigation in progress, to make its appearance, tucked away in the middle of things. In conclusion, in Eco’s project the demonstration of the inexistence of the “Structure” led to the methodological decision to acknowledge objects as they are, using structures only as investigation models. For all these reasons, in the conclusion of the preface Eco stated—quite wittily—that if a reader driven by a desire to classify were to ask whether the book is “structuralist” or “anti-structuralist,” the author would kindly accept both definitions.

_A Theory of Semiotics_, written in 1975, is one of the most studied of Eco’s essays. By summarizing and discussing all the classic semiotic proposals, the treatise attempts to identify more coherent and rigorous categories by outlining the limits and the possibilities of a discipline.

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690 Eco, _La struttura assente_, 9.
691 Eco, _La struttura assente_, 323.
692 Eco, _La struttura assente_, 11.
that establishes itself as theoretical knowledge only for purposes of a sign theory. In it, two dialectically related categories stand out: a theory of codes and a theory of sign production in which the basic communication structure (sender-code-receiver) and the key-concept of sign function are identified as underling each communication process:

When a code apportions the elements of a conveying system to the elements of a conveyed system, the former becomes the expression of the latter and the latter becomes the content of the former. A sign function arises when an expression is correlated to a content, both the correlated elements being the functives of such a correlation.

The “sign function” can refer to a minimal unit called “sign” but also to macroscopic units such as “texts.” Therefore, already in *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco attempted to define a semiotic model in the form of encyclopedia—intended as a range of possible connotations of a given word (and sign) that is much larger than its etymological meanings—versus dictionary—intended as a mere list of semantic meanings of a given word; a model that keeps in consideration not simply semantics but pragmatics within semantics.

In the preface of the Italian edition Eco briefly clarified in what consists the novel contribution of this treatise compared to his previous works on semiotics. First of all, it better characterizes sign systems and communication processes; second, it attempts to insert a theory of the referent into semiotics; third, it merges traditional issues of semantics and pragmatics into a single model that aimed at explaining them both from a single point of view; fourth, it criticizes the notion of sign and that of typology of signs; finally, it deals with the notion of iconism, maintaining his criticism against the naïve and common idea that icons are natural, analogue and non-conventional, without however substituting the equally naïve conception according to which icons are arbitrary, conventional and can be fully analyzed with pertinence. In particular, by

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focusing on the typology of sign production methods rather than typologies of sign, Eco intended to dissolve the vague notion of iconism into a series of more complex and differently interlaced operational dimensions.695

The Role of the Reader is not properly a translation but the English version of the Italian Lector in Fabula, dated 1979,696 with the addition of other translated material. In this paramount text, Eco, by re-reading Peirce’s thought, attempted to identify the semiosis principles of the cooperation of the reader in the act of a text’s interpretation. On one hand, Eco stressed the role of the reader for his or her capability of producing a surplus of meaning in receiving a given text which represents a chain of expressive devices that, somehow, must be implemented by the receiver697; once again, attention definitely shifted from the text semantics to pragmatics. On the other hand, he analyzed those discursive, narrative, and ideological structures thanks to which a text postulates and foresees the reader’s cooperation as the condition for the implementation of its meanings. Among these narrative structures that of the “fictitious reader” is of primary importance. It is a sort of textual strategy that the author usually plans to dialogue with an ideal receiver in order better to arrange the narrative material and to make his or her language both more appreciable and comprehensible. The profile of this ideal reader can be derived from and within the text itself and its detection is essential also for the comprehension of the author’s intention. As Eco himself put it in Six Walks in the Fictional Woods precisely in reconsidering and commenting The Role of the Reader: “the main business of interpretation is to figure out the nature of this reader, in spite of its ghostly existence.”698

695 Eco, Trattato di semiotica generale, 7.
697 Eco, Lector in fabula, 50.
698 Eco, Six Walks in the Fictional Woods, 15–16.
As “open” to the interaction with the receiver as a text can be, however, there must be some limits to interpretation, also because the detection of the model reader favors the most tenable interpretation and at the same time creates a sort of narcotization of all the other possible and often contradictory readings. Thus Eco introduced in *The Role of the Reader* this significant theme:

You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however “open” it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation. An open text outlines a “closed” project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy.699

This fundamental theme is investigated and developed more in depth in *The Limits of Interpretation*, published in 1990, a work in which Eco gathered and reshaped a series of essays written in the second half of the ’80s on the same topic. After previously describing the role of the receiver in understanding and implementing the meaning of a text and also the way in which the text foresees this involvement, Eco felt it necessary to discuss more systematically the interpretation issue starting from a review of the literary studies of the last decades. In particular, he defended the existence of the *intentio operis* besides both the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio lectoris* that, previously, had been sufficiently illustrated by philosophical hermeneutics; namely he sustained the possibility of interpreting a text according to what the text itself reveals as its proper intention. In fact, after being modeled by the genius of the author, a text becomes like a creature which has a sort of autonomous life, independent even from the initial purposes of its creator. For this reason, a text is open to reinterpretation by various receivers—often different from the model reader—who, nonetheless, can interact at a deep level with it precisely because of the breadth of meaning its language and narrations usually present. Then, although one would like to scrutinize a text according to the *intentio auctoris* or rather the *intentio lectoris*, in any case the acknowledgement of the truth that the text is at the same time object and parameter of its

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interpretations, would be inescapable (apart from the case of the misuse of the text that, even if it is certainly possible, is however not tenable from a correct hermeneutical point of view). As Eco noted, in the last thirty years, many interpreters were prone to shift too much towards the initiative of the interpreter. Now the problem is not to go too far the other way, but to restate once again the impossibility of eliminating this positive oscillation between interpreter’s initiative and the fidelity to the text in its varied and rich literary aspects.\(^\text{700}\)

According to Eco, in order to limit the misuse of a text, the “literal meaning” should be always defended in its unsurpassable actuality and significance. If previously Eco had elaborated a semantic model in the form of encyclopedia—in so doing emphasizing the interpreter’s intentions—in this work he seems rather to try to restrain the drift of unlimited semiosis. Therefore, the pertinence of a semantic model in the form of dictionary is somehow rearranged. In the preface of the Italian edition, Eco reaffirmed that, within the boundaries of a given language, there is always a literal meaning of the lexical items, which is usually listed first in dictionaries and that everyone would first define when requested to say what a given word means. Consequently, no reader-oriented theory can avoid such a preliminary acknowledgment and any act of free initiative on the part of the reader cannot come after without the acceptance of this kind of interpretative constraint.\(^\text{701}\) Even more so, I believe that the implementation by the reader cannot take place if not \textit{through} this hermeneutical limitation.

Already in \textit{The Role of the Reader}, Eco defined interpretation as the search for the \textit{intentio operis} based on the dialectics between the author’s strategy and the response of the Model Reader,\(^\text{702}\)a process that, however, can easily degenerate into a free, aberrant, and malicious use of


\(^{702}\) Eco, \textit{Lector in fabula}, 59.
the texts,\textsuperscript{703} for example due to an excessive consideration of the \textit{intentio lectoris} or from underserved inferences of a psychological nature on the life of the author. By referring to some instances extracted from the history of literature, Eco admitted the possibility of misusing a text but defended the possibility, the legitimacy and the applicability of a correct interpretation on the basis of the conviction “not only that a text controls and selects its own interpretations but also that it controls and selects its own misinterpretations.”\textsuperscript{704} In fact, both interpretation and misuse always assume a text as a source reference, at least as pretext.

Starting from these considerations, Eco analyzed some explanatory examples of reckless use of texts, which are by the way the expression of some well-defined philosophical visions and not just the result of negligence and spontaneity: on one hand, he took into account “hermetic semiosis” (meaning that interpretative practice of the world and texts which somehow tends to establish—often arbitrarily—an interplay of correspondences between micro- and macrocosms);\textsuperscript{705} on the other hand, “deconstructionism,” which Eco skillfully characterized with the intention of distinguishing Derrida from his followers because in his opinion Derrida is more lucid than his heirs.\textsuperscript{706} By either overcoming or misinterpreting the literal meaning, both solutions produce endless interpretations of the sense. Thus, Eco felt it necessary to mark the difference between the countless meanings conceived by both hermetic and deconstructionist semiosis, on one hand, and Peirce, on the other, who himself understood semiosis as potentially unlimited. However, according to Eco, the “ad infinitum” expression used by Peirce had a different meaning. In hermetic production connotations usually proliferate like a cancer so much that at every step of the semiotic process the previous sign is forgotten and obliterated since the pleasure of the drift of

\textsuperscript{703} Eco, \textit{Lector in fabula}, 59.
\textsuperscript{704} Eco, \textit{The Limits of Interpretation}, 61.
\textsuperscript{705} Eco, \textit{I limiti dell’interpretazione}, 10.
\textsuperscript{706} Eco, \textit{I limiti dell’interpretazione}, 38.
meaning lies precisely in the shifting from sign to sign, and there is no other purpose outside the pure enjoyment of exploring this labyrinth of references. Rather, in the process of unlimited semiosis outlined by Peirce, there is certainly a sort of growth of the whole meaning of the first sign, since every new interpretant explains on a different ground the object of the previous one and at the end one can know more about the origin of the chain as well as about the chain itself, but this process does not necessarily favor going astray from the sum of determinations of the first interpretation. This way, the literal meaning would be anyway opened to further determinations and connotations, but at the same time without being either fatally dissolved or overlooked.

Despite the lack of an ontology of language which may not preserve the consistency and at the same time the symbolic character of the literal meaning, the solutions reached by Eco in this text seem worthy of great attention, also and above all in order to respond to some of the problems that are at the centre of my research. I will refer to a more specific criticism of Eco’s conclusions after considering how the analysis of religious texts, and the Bible in particular, requires us to review the problem of the ontological matrix of languages more rigorously.

In *Kant and the Platypus*, a collection of essays published in 1997, Eco did not intend to offer a systematic reflection but simply assembled various studies that have in common a core of similar and inter-related theoretical issues. Thus, the classic themes of his work, like iconism, denotation, the relation between dictionary and encyclopedia, are here reconsidered. However, the turning point of this work—and it is the aspect of major interest to us—is the reappraisal of the ontological question; an entire chapter is, in fact, dedicated to the theme of the relationship between language and Being. It is important to note how the review of matters that he was dealing with already in 1975 in his most systematic treaty, *A Theory of Semiotics*, is the direct consequence of

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the reconsideration of the issue of the limits of interpretation. Eco came to realize that limits of both signification and interpretation depend not just on some contextual factors but essentially on the fact that Being constitutes, so to speak, the hard core and the foundation stone of every act of human communication, as he himself well explained in the following paragraph:

In the first part of *A Theory of Semiotics*, I began with a problem: If, in a Peircean sense, there is such a thing as a Dynamical Object, we know it only through an Immediate Object. By manipulating signs, we refer to the Dynamical Object as a *terminus ad quem* of semiosis. In the second part of the book, devoted to the ways in which signs are produced, I presupposed (even though I did not spell it out) that if we speak (or emit signs, of whatever type they may be), it is because Something urges us to speak. And this ushered in the problem of the Dynamical Object as a *terminus a quo*. This decision to state the problem of the Dynamical Object first in terms of its being a *terminus ad quem* was to determine my successive interests, following the development of semiosis as a sequence of interpretants—interpretants being a collective, public, observable product laid down in the course of cultural processes, even though one does not presume the existence of a mind that admits of, uses, or develops them. This led to what I have written on the problem of signification, the text and intertextuality, narrativity, and the elaboration and limits of interpretation. But it is precisely the problem of the limits of interpretation that set me to wondering whether those limits are only cultural and textual or something that lies concealed at greater depths. And this explains why the first of these essays deals with Being. It’s not a matter of delusions of grandeur but of professional duty. As will be seen, I speak of Being only inasmuch as I feel that what *is* sets limits on our freedom of speech.708

I strongly desire to show my appreciation for this evolution in Eco’s thought. Of course, some reservations remain especially towards some of the answers, though only sketched, that he provided with regard to the complex problems of Being and the relationship of language and Being. In fact, in Eco the lack of reference to a solid language ontology may not preserve exactly both the consistency and the symbolic character of the “literal meaning” that he intended to defend. However, a difference compared to his previous positions can be here foreseen. While also in his new perspective the process of signification per se remains infinite, since signs acquire further meaning in the chain of their multiple and correlative references and meaning is conceived as a

708 Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 3–4 [italics in the original].
fluctuant entity, language can no longer be described as merely *flatus vocis*. Being somehow anchored to reality—which, nonetheless, I presume remains for Eco something ultimately unknowable—language is the door through which the universe emerges and makes itself evident to human consciousness. In other words, Eco, being somewhat affected by a kind of skepticism to which his distancing from some aspects of post-modern thought and deconstructionism did not make him immune, refused to conceive a strong and consistent theory of the connection between language and ontology. This, with regard to religion and comparativism, is quite problematic. Nevertheless, in some of his reflections on language-ontology—in particular on the so-called Aristotelian aporia of Being—and on the relationship between religion and language he indirectly ended up laying the foundations for a good review of these paramount issues. Hence, I accept the challenge to show how the so-called aporia of Being, which represents for our discourse the problem par excellence, can be powerfully illuminated by consideration of that particular type of sign system of “inspired” language and more generally the language of sacred texts.

For now, I limit myself to summarizing some of the standpoints of the semiotic reflection and the operational criteria that Eco explained in his contributions waiting for the construction of a more adequate semiotic perspective that will be appropriate for theological discourse in general and the theological comparative project in particular.

- A basic communication structure—sender-code-receiver—underlies each communication process.

- A sign function arises when an expression is correlated to a content, both the correlated elements being the functorials of such a correlation.

- The sign function can refer to a minimal unit called “sign” but also to macroscopic units such as texts.
• Literary works can be defined more appropriately as “aesthetic texts.”

• The communication between sender and receiver takes place through a “code” which can be minimally defined as the rule according to which “a given array of signals corresponds to a given response.”\textsuperscript{709}

• In the most complex case of “aesthetic texts” intended as acts of communication, their comprehension is “based on a dialectic between acceptance and repudiation of the sender’s codes—on the one hand—and introduction and rejection of personal codes on the other,”\textsuperscript{710} of course on the side of the receiver.

• Hence, the literary work shall be considered open, in terms of a pragmatics of the text that intends to examine the possibilities of signification of a given communication structure, which must always include in its analysis also the poles of the receiver and his or her “world.”

• The possible interpretative interaction of the receiver influences the construction and the actual value of a given information; therefore, a text postulates and foresees the reader’s cooperation as a condition for its implementation; on the other hand, the reader boasts also a role in the production of meaning with regard to the text.

• It is important not to shift too much towards the initiative of the interpreter. Therefore, the recognition of an \textit{intentio operis} means, on one hand, to underscore the impossibility of escaping from that inevitable circularity for which the text is at the same time object and parameter of its interpretations; on the other, it means also to re-

\textsuperscript{709} Eco, \textit{A Theory of Semiotics}, 37.
\textsuperscript{710} Eco, \textit{A Theory of Semiotics}, 275.
assert the impossibility of eliminating the oscillation between the interpreter’s initiatives and the fidelity to the text.

- Therefore, interpretation limits must be honored and can be identified on the basis of the literal meaning to which reference must be always made. After all, text pragmatics cannot be really valid if not supported by semantics.

- Thus, there are two possible outcomes of text cooperation by the reader: on one hand, a legitimate interpretation that, despite growing and implementing the original communication, does not lose the consistency of the literal meaning; on the other hand, a misuse or misinterpretation of the text which usually derives from a hyper-consideration either of the *intentio lectoris* or the *intentio auctoris* and triggers a cancerous connotative growth of meaning.

- “To defend the rights of interpretation against the mere use of a text does not mean that texts must never be used.”\textsuperscript{711} But their free use has very little to do with their interpretation, although both interpretation and misuse always presuppose a reference to the text-source, at least as pretext.

- For the purpose of a correct interpretation, the adoption of structures as operational instruments and not as ontological elements, takes the form of an heuristic and “asymptotic” exploration of the text that, in its symbolic consistency always remains irreducible to all interpretative instruments and structures; ultimately its final meaning, being unreachable, manifests itself in the form of an Absence.

In conclusion, the growing of interest around semiotics was a contemporary phenomenon

\textsuperscript{711} Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 62.
that was not immune from risks; in fact, a collateral effect also developed with it: that of the diffusing of “a kind of ecumenical tolerance”\footnote{Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 3.} towards the rigorousness in the application of its theoretical criteria. Hence, the extensive presentation of Umberto Eco’s thought and the assumption of his perspective, though not free from some criticism, had two purposes: first, that of briefly displaying and clarifying all the various references to semiotics—more or less rigorous—that we saw attempted within the history of linguistics; then, that of outlining a connection between these different semiotic approaches, by giving voice to Eco, whose reflection was able to offer an original and, under certain aspects, unique summary of the different contributions from both the American and European schools of linguistics. It is now the time to go further and attempt the foundation of a semiotic theory that can be compatible not only with theology in general but more specifically with comparative theology.

**Semiotics and Theology**

The remarkable expansion that deeply marked semiotics starting from the ’60s is undoubtedly a sign of its success but probably also of the pertinence of the questions that it raised. In fact, as Eco noted, “questioning about semiosis has become central to a great number of disciplines, even on the part of those who did not think they were practicing semiotics, or were practicing it unwittingly, or simply did not wish to practice it,”\footnote{Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 2.} theology being included in this number. We see the relatively recent theological interest in semiotics intercepting four main trajectories: Biblical exegesis, fundamental theology, dogmatics and sacramentology, all disciplines in which the contemporary reflection on signs and symbols has been especially welcomed as a helpful tool for theological advancement. Given the nature of my comparative

\footnote{Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 3.}

\footnote{Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 2.}
projects, all centered on the comparison among different religious texts, I will refer in particular to the application of semiotics to the study of the Bible; however, not without first recalling how the theme of the signs of the times became central in contemporary Christian discourse thanks to the mediation of Pope John XXIII and the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

By drawing inspiration from Gospels of Matthew (16:3) and Luke (12:54–56), Pope John XXIII already referred to the expression “the signs of the times” in *Humanae Salutis* (see § 4), the apostolic constitution through which he convoked the Second Vatican Council. From that time onward, this phrase was adopted in almost all the major documents of the following Popes, as it were like a motto to pinpoint a new style of favorable openness that, according to John XXIII, the Catholic Church should adopt toward the values of humanity within the contemporary cultures. First of all, this key expression recurs in many of the documents of the Second Vatican Council: *Presbyterorum ordinis* 9; *Dignitatis humanae* 15; *Apostolicam actuositatem* 14; *Sacrosanctum concilium* 43; *Unitatis redintegratio* 4; and particularly in *Gaudium et spes* 4, the pastoral constitution on the relationship between Church and contemporary world that played a paramount role in the reform of the Catholic Church during the last decades. In Pope John XXIII’s view, knowing how to discern the signs of the times means for the Church to assume a prophetic perspective and learn how to discern God’s will by sifting through the history of humanity and the events of this world in search of some rays of light through the darkness and amidst the human tragedies:

> While distrustful souls see nothing but darkness falling upon the face of the earth, we prefer to restate our confidence in our Savior, who has not left the world he redeemed. Indeed, making our own Jesus’ recommendation that we learn to discern “the signs of the times” (Mt 16:4), it seems to us that we can make out, in the midst of so much darkness, more than a few indications that enable us to have hope for the fate of the Church and of humanity.\(^\text{714}\)

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\(^{714}\) See § 4.
Thus, immediately after the Second Vatican Council the reflection on theological semeiology became so central that it can be seen attempted in almost all the major theological disciplines. Moreover, from the scrutiny of various possible spiritual signs within the contemporary world the discussion quickly shifted to the contemplation of the sign par excellence: Jesus Christ, the Word, the revelatory Event, the primary “Act” of God’s communication, the sacramental “Symbol” of the unity between God and humanity. From this Christocentric and at the same time personalist perspective, there are authors such as Rahner who attempted a more totalizing approach to the theme of signs and symbols. In his opinion, an ontology of symbol is particularly needed because the whole of theology could not really be comprehended if it were not first of all and above all a theology of symbol. Accordingly, he tried to apply this ontological conception to all the branches of the theological thought.

It is especially interesting to observe how, after the Second Vatican Council along with the development of the linguistic studies, semiotics slowly but inexorably made its appearance also in the domain of exegesis together with other narrative methods that are usually labeled as synchronic. Particularly in France and the Anglo-Saxon world, a number of Biblical scholars—both Catholic and Protestant—attempted to get over the strictness and the limits of historical criticism which by privileging diachronic analysis ended up fostering the dissection of the sacred texts to the detriment of their narrative and aesthetic dimensions; moreover, it approached Scriptures as a mere collection from very disparate sources and styles rather than a unity of meaning. The first experiments in Biblical semiotics were attempted in the late ’60s in France by

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Roland Barthes\textsuperscript{716} and especially Algirdas J. Greimas\textsuperscript{717} around whom a flourishing school of thought was established in Paris. Later, the foundation of the CADIR (Centre pour l’Analyse du Discours Religieux) and the issuing of the journal “Sémiotique et Bible” made of Lyon another centre of excellence for this kind of research.\textsuperscript{718} In the meantime, other schools of Biblical semiotics were created throughout the world. Among them, I recall that of Nashville and the journal “Semeia” in the United States; the circle of Jacques Geninasca\textsuperscript{719} in Zurich; the SEMANET group in Netherlands; the ASTER group in Québec; Gütgemans and his followers and the journal “Linguistica Biblica” in Germany.\textsuperscript{720}

Initially received with some degree of skepticism by the Catholic exegetical schools which after the modernist crisis had already a hard time in accepting the post-Vatican Council openings to historical criticism, eventually semiotics found mention in the important document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled \textit{The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church},\textsuperscript{721} in the chapter dedicated to recent methods of literary analysis. Thus, the document affirms in this regard:

Ranged among the methods identified as synchronic, those namely which concentrate on the study of the biblical text as it comes before the reader in its final state, is semiotic analysis. This has experienced a notable development in certain quarters over the last 20 years. Originally known by the more general term “structuralism,” this method can claim as forefather the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who at the beginning of the present century worked out the theory according to which all language is a system of relationships obeying fixed laws. Several linguists and literary critics have had a notable influence in the development of the method. The majority of biblical scholars who make use of semiotics


in the study of the Bible take as their authority Algirdas J. Greimas and the School of Paris, which he founded. Similar approaches and methods, based upon modern linguistics, have developed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{722}

The stated purpose of this document was not taking a stand with regards to all the matters concerning Biblical hermeneutics; its intention was rather that of seriously considering the current situation of biblical interpretation; analyzing objections and expectations, evaluating the possibilities which the new methods and approaches offer and, finally, identifying the specific mandate the Church is called to exercise in its exegetical efforts.\textsuperscript{723} In this respect, the speech of the Biblical Commission is well balanced and consistent with its expressed intentions. Nonetheless, in the specific case of semiotic analysis, the description and evaluation of limits and contributions seem to me partial.

First of all, in view of the most recent studies, the definition of semiotics as “method” is contradictory. The specific meaning of the term semiotics indicates a theory or in any case a systematic reflection on signs, their classification and their underlying rules. For this reason, semiotics falls within the more general field of cognitive sciences, such to constantly receive contributions and new stimuli from linguistics, neurosciences, studies on artificial intelligence, cognitive psychology, and language philosophy. The renewal of the study of literary and artistic texts and mass communication in general that the assuming of this approach on a large scale caused, is only one of its multiple effects. By progressively increasing its research area, semiotics can no longer be considered a unitary science, but it is a sort of scholarly “Middle Earth,” so to speak, which gathers contributions from different disciplines and to which, in its turn, it offers a series of general categories and operational criteria. Therefore, it is better to speak of a “semiotic

\textsuperscript{722} See § I.B.3.
\textsuperscript{723} See Introduction B.
glance” which is common to different disciplines than a specific science or an established method. Thus, a study perspective like semiotics should never be classified among the methods, like the structuralist analysis that it implemented.

Second, the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its attempt to identify the limits of the semiotic approach to Bible, may have confused this particular perspective with structuralism tout court from which it certainly derived but from which it soon departed. Structuralism developed remarkably such as to pervade philosophical reflection in general but without ever assuming the features of a consistent school of thought. In fact, it is almost impossible to limit its field of research to a hypothetical, orthodox model; already the use of the term “structure” relates to a variety of philosophical attitudes, so that trying to determine their common assumptions, is definitely a hard task. De Saussure is correctly mentioned by the Pontifical document as the forefather of structuralism. His valuable contribution consisted in proposing a series of general linguistic concepts to which, then, both structuralism and semiotics resorted. It is undoubted that his definition of language as “a system of which all the parts can and must be considered as synchronically interdependent”\textsuperscript{724} was highly influential for both perspectives. Nonetheless, the denial of the subjects of both enunciator and receiver and in general of any extra-textual reference, as well as a certain suppression of history are all assumptions that structuralism convincingly promoted but that semiotics not only discussed, but radically objected to and revised. As with Eco, any text that is subjected to the “semiotic glance” should be considered as an open work under its many aspects.

Lastly the Pontifical Commission cited the Greimas school but without sufficiently underscroing its peculiarity. I do not intend to discuss Greimas’ theory at length but I will only

\textsuperscript{724} De Saussure, \textit{Course in General Linguistics}, 100.
mention a few critical aspects concerning the specificity and the limits of his perspective. The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission provided a brief but accurate description of the leading principles of Greimas’ perspective and the levels of textual analysis which he has illustrated in his works. Most French biblicists of the schools of Paris and Lyon refer to Greimas, because his theory is based on a structuralist analysis of texts that, if compared to other authors’ proposals, appear to be quite rigorous, in particular with regard to the deep attention that he paid toward texts in general, their narrative aspects, the level of signification and the philosophical question of meaning. It is understandable that these aspects of Greimas’ work are particularly appreciated by those who intend to investigate the Scriptures with the intention of protecting the singular nature of God’s Word. Nonetheless, some of Greimas’ followers and especially certain exegetes among them, risk limiting a particularly complex theory to an operational method, in this contradicting the intentions of their master who conceived the necessity of constant modifications in the application of his model. Precisely, the employment of Greimas’ structural semantics has showed how his theories, as elaborate and sophisticated as they might be, are in need of a continuing adaptation given the singular nature of the biblical narratives that cannot be constrained in schemas that might be suitable for other cases.

However, Greimas’ theory in itself is questionable from the point of view of the most recent semiotic acquisitions. In particular, his Structural Semantics,\textsuperscript{725} which is in line with the post-Saussurian thought of Danish glossematics and theorists such as Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, is still too linked to the structuralist layout. For example with regard to his actantial model, which nonetheless provides some important instruments for the analysis of agents of a given story and

unveils a dependence on Propp’s morphological studies,\textsuperscript{726} it is clear how abstraction plays a substantial role in his approach. Despite all the care that he employed to avoid the risk of sheer generalizations, it is undeniable that Greimas tended to provide schemes of general validity, whose imprudent application may subordinate the consistency of the characters to their relative functions. In this regard, what Cesare Segre explained in \textit{Le strutture e il tempo}\textsuperscript{727} is particularly illuminating. In his opinion, especially in case of texts with significant literary weight, the analysis of the relations between characters and their actions should be rather overturned: an action is relevant in the measure in which it reflects the nature and the intent of a given character and not the opposite as in Greimas model. Moreover a character, who is usually provided with a name and a surname and, so to speak, appears in a birth register, even if fictional, is constituted by a series of attitudes and personal traits, as the English word “character” itself suggests. Then, regardless of whether a given character be either an atypical or a traditional individual or even a mask, depending on the various literary genres of the single stories under analysis, it constitutes in itself the explanation of its motions and agency and is open to further inherent developments.\textsuperscript{728} Thus, once again there is brought to our attention an important and recurrent truth: general structures cannot be applied as such to any text; in fact, when general schemes run up against narrative complexity they usually need to be either relativized or at least modified. This critical point that Segre raised seems to be extremely pertinent with relation to the application of semiotics to the Scriptures as for instance the results of the semiotic analyses of both the Groupe d’Entrevernes and Jean Delorme have well shown.\textsuperscript{729}


\textsuperscript{727} Cesare Segre, \textit{Le strutture e il tempo: narrazione, poesia, modelli} (Torino: Einaudi, 1974).

\textsuperscript{728} Segre, \textit{Le strutture e il tempo}, 41.

After pointing out certain limits in the presentation of semiotics provided in the document elaborated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission—in reality, these limits are well comprehensible given the non-specialist nature of the document and the intricacy and the ambiguity of the subject under analysis—it is necessary, in order to reach a more accurate model to be applied to comparative theology, to widen again our discussion and encounter in a more general way the recent instances of interaction between the fields of semiotics and religious studies.

**Semiotics and Religion**

Even if it is certainly an exaggeration to contend that semiotics by its constitution is antipathetic toward religion, nonetheless, one cannot but notice a certain degree of unfamiliarity between these two fields. Perhaps this was due to the fact that highly specialized metalanguages like those disposed by the semiotic theory find it difficult to adhere to a realm of signs and symbols such those of religion whose mechanisms of signification are easily perceived as nebulous and wrapped in arbitrariness. Thus Yvonne Sherwood comments in this regard:

> The interpretation of physical phenomena as signifiers for a divine signified has not been accommodated within the realm of semiotic study—presumably as the association is non-automatic, extremely arbitrary, and subject to individual and social psychology.\(^{730}\)

Despite this sort of scepticism toward religion that led the leading semioticians to neglect some important issues of religious signification, we are aware of some important experiments that starting from the ’60s till our days were pursued within the field of religious studies and that deserve—albeit rapidly—to be noted here. From the classical Lévi-Strauss analyses of myths to

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\(^{730}\) Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Reading Hosea in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 91.
the stimulating semiotic exercises on rituals by Jonathan Z. Smith, we have significant forays into
the domains of the single religions. For instance, concerning Christianity, apart from the attempts
of semiotic exegesis that I have already mentioned, significant are the pages on the sacred and
Patristic hermeneutics in Eco’s *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*, Richard Bauman’s
researches on the symbolism of speaking and silence among the Quakers, Peter Harrison’s
studies on Reformation, Massimo Leone’s works on conversion and the highly valuable
reflections on Christian mysticism, though from two different perspectives, by Julia Kristeva and Michel de Certeau. Umberto Eco also tackled the fascinating problem of the kabbalist
system of signification in several of his contributions, whereas Ugo Volli attempted reading the
Torah and some aspects of Jewish culture. Regarding Islam, interesting are the semantic
investigations of Toshihiko Izutsu and those of Daniel A. Madigan in line with him and also

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**Semiotics of the Sacred**

Felice Cimatti is an Italian philosopher of language and cognitive sciences. In his researches he has investigated in particular the difference between the animal and the human language systems and minds.\footnote{Felice Cimatti, *Mente e linguaggio negli animali. Introduzione alla zoosemiotica cognitiva* (Roma: Carrocci, 1998); *La scimmia che si parla. Linguaggio, autocoscienza e libertà nell’animale umano* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000); “Cosa non dimostra la scoperta del gene foxp2: lingue e linguaggio fra cultura e biologia,”} His main assumption is that the experience of the sacred not only
marks the difference between humans and animals but more radically that it is the direct consequence of human mental activity which is mediated by semiosis. It is the semiotic process of signification which is intrinsic in human nature that leads to the distinction between sacred and profane. He understands the experience of the sacred in terms of a transcendental property of the human species which without coinciding with religious experience is, however, its precondition. In his interesting demonstration, he draws largely from the works of two leading thinkers: Michel de Certeau\textsuperscript{750} and Ernesto de Martino.\textsuperscript{751}

While animal communication systems are all based on a “semiosis of presence,” so that a given message corresponds to an object which is, however, available if not tangible so that in animals there is no serious possibility of falsehood, in humans it happens quite differently. Words make the difference here given the fact that usually the human locution refers and alludes to an absence, to something that is not present spatially, as it is in animal communication systems, but is temporally announced and foreseen as something that shall become available at least in its meaning. Thus, the important role of speaking intrinsically projects humans into the future, in the hope of reaching something that words only anticipate. Cimatti remarks that the semiosis of absence must not be interpreted nihilistically as a radical emptiness but as a promise of something that can possibly become present. Human semiosis, therefore, establishes a deep and close connection between the aspect of communicating and the factors of time and belief. In particular, human semiosis generates a watershed within the whole reality between the presence constituted by the words, the signs of communication and the absence of the object to which the words refer.


\textsuperscript{751} Ernesto de Martino, \textit{La fine del mondo. Contributo all’analisi delle apocalissi culturali} (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).
However, this experience of non-presence opens the possibility of the Absence which is a more radical experience accompanied by incertitude: something that is absent is more than something that is not present since it could be potentially become available. The emergence of Absence complicates the functioning of human semiosis by unveiling a non-coincidence between the semantic and the noetic domains: a sign can correspond to multiple referents in the same way a gesture is open to various interpretations.

Human semiosis is consequently the realm of possibility and in this fundamental dimension is the deepest root of the experience of the sacred. Whereas the sacred is the experience of the possible, the profane is the realm of the immediacy and the transparence of reality. Hence, everything can be potentially experienced as sacred as much as profane but the sacred is the substratum and the structure of human dwelling in the world; the sacred is not simply experiencing something but experiencing the fact itself of human experiencing. The sacred is thus totally immanent to the human world and is the direct consequence of the functioning of human semiosis.

However, sustaining the incertitude that the experience of the sacred entails is dramatically arduous and, besides, it corresponds to the fundamental anthropological predicament of being uncertain about where truly we are and the reason for which we are in this world. Thus, the possibility becomes incertitude and risks always degenerating into anxiety and anguish. While the profane domain is configured similarly to the animal world since there is more generally correspondence and immediacy between sign and content, the sacred is both *fascinans et tremendum* since it corresponds at the same time to a promise and a threat. Nonetheless, the boundaries between sacred and profane are not always clear and must be constantly redrawn. Hence, the experience of the sacred calls always for a reconfiguration of one’s world: while the previous vision is led to crash by the incertitude of the sacred, a new framework is appealed to...
spring up and grow. As the profane dissolves, the sacred emerges, but only through the dissolution and the deconstruction of the meanings which are usually and collectively recognized. Thus, solipsism, narcissism, and hermeticism are the results of this critical collapse. The semiotic process certainly represents the cause of this crisis but also the “possibility” of its solution. The need for some new values determines the creation of some different worldviews and consequently of cultures which are sets of some meaningful, collective practices, norms, ideas, and aesthetic parameters which become socially relevant and publically recognized. Thus, culture is the response of the problem of the presence of the Absence that the experience of the sacred foments; its development presupposes two other prerequisites: if culture is built on a set of shared values, it is necessary to believe in the belief of the others and more radically, to believe that there is a Fundament. However, the sacred in itself is not comparable to the experience of transcendence but is only its clue and possibility. The semiotic process of signification is certain only of its reality because there is nothing outside the chain of infinite references but, once more, there is always the possibility that this absence would correspond to Something that is not yet available rather than to Emptiness. Thus, Cimatti’s analysis of the sacred lays the foundations of a further discourse: the possibility of the transcendence and consequently of religion. However, he speaks of religion in terms of belief and psychology. I am personally convinced that religion is something more and I will demonstrate it in what follows.

Semiotics of Religion

In order to build a new semiotic proposal that at the same time will be able to explain the correlation between religion and culture, the link between revelation and scriptures, and, more deeply, the possibility of truth claims, I need to build a consistent semiotics of religion. Someone
lamented with regard to the relationship between semiotics and religion that there is “no theory that would permit a group of scholars to compare widely diverse traditions against one another.”

If this is so, I think that it is not simply due to a lack of “a general and crossculturally valid theory of semiosis to compare systematically distinct religious traditions in terms of their respective perception of the nature of religious semiosis.” Above all, I believe it depends on the unavailability of a solid, consistent, and shared theory of religion of which, then, one could eventually preach a correlative semiotics. While I will defer the discussion of the appropriateness of the category of religion for the comparative work until the next paragraphs, in these pages it is my intention to offer a definition of religion in semiotic terms, by hinting to and reformulating the thought of some leaders thinkers, in particular Raimundo Panikkar and Mircea Eliade, which I will strive to link somehow in a new way.

The etymology of the Latin word *religio* is uncertain. Some have tried to explain it in connection with other terms such as *relegare, religare, reeligere, relinquere*. However, some of the Fathers of the Church from Lactantius to Augustine argued that *religio* was derived from the root *leig* that means “to bind.” According to this explanation, the word “religion” should be the equivalent of the Sanskrit word *yōga* that comes from the Indo-European root *yug* whose meaning is “to yoke,” “to hitch up,” “to connect.” This etymology of religion as “bind again” well connects with some images and narrative motifs which recur particularly in the mythological repertoires of the Indo-European civilizations but also in the Middle-East and even in Tibet. The symbolisms of the sacred and magic bond, the knot, of the yoke and the “God who binds” were studied by several

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authors and above all by Georges Dumézil\textsuperscript{754} and Mircea Eliade.\textsuperscript{755} Eliade, in particular, observed a significant diffusion of this kind of theme also in distant worlds and tried to give voice to the multifaceted and often contradictory meanings that this apparently similar pattern assumes in very different contexts. However, one of his affirmations especially attracted my attention:

This multivalency of the “binding” complex—which we have now observed on the planes of cosmology, magic, religion, initiation, metaphysics and soteriology—is probably due to man’s recognizing, in this complex, a sort of archetype of his own situation in the world.\textsuperscript{756}

I argue that, without necessarily espousing Eliade’s idea of archetype, beyond these varied and often conflicting images of knots and bindings there could lie a similar intuition of which they are just different declensions: according to this pre-conception, the image of the knot would represent the necessity of tying together all the elements of this world in which human beings find themselves at risk of dissipation and facing the harshness of absence, non-sense and incertitude, as we have seen before in elucidating the experience of the sacred. Precisely the confusion that the function of the human semiotic process generates requires the necessity of a sense which binds together all the signs in a coherent system of meaning. Thus, human beings experience the need of a general worldview that would be able to give meaning to the whole and to the single parts of reality if taken both singularly and in consideration of their relationship with the whole. Hence, I believe that the diffused pattern of the God who binds and some correlative metaphors well express and describe, through mythological language, the idea of religion as an all-embracing view, a conception that at least one of the most probable etymologies of this term (\textit{religare}) suggests.

On the other hand, Panikkar, in explaining his very subtle idea of the so-called

\textsuperscript{756} Eliade, \textit{Images and Symbols}, 117 [italics in the original].
cosmotheandric principle, provides the following explanation that well approximates what I just tried to explicate:

The cosmotheandric principle could be formulated by saying that the divine, the human and the earthly—however we may prefer to call them—are the three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real, i.e., any reality inasmuch as it is real. It does not deny that the abstracting capacity of our mind can, for particular and limited purposes, consider parts of reality independently; it does not deny the complexity of the real and its many degrees. But this principle reminds us that the parts are parts and that they are not just accidentally juxtaposed, but essentially related to the whole. In other words, the parts are real participations and are to be understood not according to a merely spatial model, as books are part of a library or a carburetor and a differential gear are parts of an automobile, but rather according to an organic unity, as body and soul, or mind and will belong to a human being: they are parts because they are not the whole, but they are not parts which can be “parted” from the whole without thereby ceasing to exist. A soul without a body is a mere entelechy; a body without a soul is a corpse; a will without reason is a mere abstraction; and reason without will an artificial construct of the mind, etc. They are constitutive dimensions of the whole, which permeates everything that is and is not reducible to any of its constituents.

What this intuition emphasizes is that the three dimensions of reality are neither three modes of a monolithic undifferentiated reality, nor three elements of a pluralistic system. There is rather one, though intrinsically threefold, relation which manifests the ultimate constitution of reality. The cosmotheandric intuition is not a tripartite division among beings, but an insight into the threefold core of all that is, insofar as it is.\(^757\)

In Panikkar’s view, the cosmotheandric experience is perceived with continuing reference to the Trinitarian mystery that is described as inhabiting everything in the world and constituting the triune dimension of any real being. For this reason, the cosmotheandric vision is markedly theistic and the divine, the third dimension, “is not just a ‘third’ opposition, but precisely the mysterium coniunctionis.”\(^758\) Thus, the cosmotheandric vision cannot be adopted as an explanation of all religious experiences, being per se theistic. Other religious worldviews like for example Zen Buddhism which do not contemplate the divine as being part of the general framework of reality risk being excluded. As a matter of fact, Panikkar takes distance explicitly from the Buddhist


\(^{758}\) Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, 60.
conception of \textit{pratītyasamutpāda}:  

I am not only saying that everything is directly or indirectly related to everything else: the radical relativity or \textit{pratītyasamutpāda} of the Buddhist tradition. I am also stressing that this relationship is not only constitutive of the whole, but that it flashes forth, ever new and vital, in every spark of the real. No word can be understood in isolation. All words are relational.\footnote{Panikkar, \textit{The Cosmotheandric Experience}, 60 [italics in the original].}

Precisely to be as comprehensive as possible in my definition of religion, I am forced somehow to adjust Panikkar’s formula. I believe that to guarantee the broadest applicability of the conception of religion as possible, we should speak of Spirit or the “spiritual” instead of the divine. This would intercept not only the Eastern religious traditions but also those Western views which, tending towards pantheism, gave birth to some spiritual movements which are now quite influential. Of course, this conception alone would be insufficient to describe and encompass Christianity in its specificity. However, I think that at least it is the necessary condition for an honest dialogue with other spiritual traditions but primarily for recovering the singularity of the Christian worldview both by analogy and by contrast with other religious phenomena. For this reason, I propose to speak of the “cosmopneumandric vision” or, even better, to limit the sexist reference that the Greek word \textit{anēr} (male) implies, of the “cosmopneumanthropic vision,” if only it were possible to pronounce such a cacophonous expression. However, if by “Spirit” or the “spiritual” we mean precisely that third dimension that is \textit{mysterium coniunctionis}, I think that we would not be totally unjust to Panikkar but, more importantly, to traditional Trinitarian doctrine, at least in the Augustinian line of reflection. Thus, I define religion as a \textit{cosmopneumanthropic view}, \textit{a vision of the totality as an inherently coherent system of signs that can be understood only if it is read as a whole and at the same time in all its perceivable parts in the light of their correlation with the totality and the linkages through which all parts are kept together in a }
meaningful complex.

Religion predates, generates, inspires and reinvents culture, precisely on the basis of its all-embracing nature. This is quite evident in those societies in which the demarcation between religious and the secular society has not been as sharp as it has been in the West. However, both the American and the European figurative arts, music, and literature, despite the great efforts that have been expended to emancipate and alienate them from their various spiritual roots, still bear the clear traces of their religious origins. Religious symbols and scriptures are like matrices that imprinted and gave shape to culture, and being recognized as unique and irreproducible by the community of believers, indirectly offered secular ways of expression enough room to develop autonomously. Thus, culture can grow independently from religion, but it is not an accident that the major cultural movements and waves of thought were often generated after a renewed confrontation with the ancestral religious substratum of a given heritage.

The holistic aspect of the religious experience, however, is not without risks. Panikkar himself warns that the holistic view does not mean that those who possess it can dominate the world and subjugate the others on the basis of it, but it rather coincides with the sense of the whole in the concrete part that we are. This all-encompassing dimension of religions is always twofold: on the one hand, the religious intuition can represent a possible and even inherently coherent solution to the problem of inquietude and non-sense that the emergence of the sacred in the dynamics of human semiosis causes; on the other hand, religions are always exposed to the lure of hegemonism precisely in being singular but encompassing languages and narratives of the whole.

Interestingly enough, Panikkar himself alludes to the dynamics of language in which no

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words can be understood in isolation, being relational. Panikkar’s simple example drawn from
linguistics offers another original point of view for reading religious phenomena through the
semiotic perspective. There is a set of rhetorical figures (merism, synecdoche, metonymy) which
have at the root a similar principle: the idea that some single aspects can be employed to represent
the whole to different degrees and in different ways, of which the *pars pro toto*, a part taken for
the whole, is just the clearest example recorded by classical rhetoric. Roman Jakobson in a famous
article entitled “Two Aspects of language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” published
in English in 1956, reserved an important place for the figure speech of metonymy which, in his
view, is one of the two poles of any linguistic functioning. In particular, in studying some cases of
aphasia, he noted that there are different kinds of disorder according to the involvement of what
he calls the metaphoric and the metonymic processes of language. Thus he explains:

The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one
topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The
metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic
way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and
metonymy respectively. In aphasia one or the other of the two processes is restricted or
totally blocked.... In normal verbal behavior both processes are continually operative, but
careful observation will reveal that under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality,
and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other.762

Since the publication of his article, Jakobson’s thought on metaphor and metonymy has
been criticized, deconstructed, and widely reviewed.763 It is not my intention now to take a position
on this very delicate debate. The only thing that I intend to stress here is that the difference between
metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and other similar figures of speech is less sharp than classical

761 Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in Id., *Word and
Language*, vol. 2 of *Selected Writings*, 239–59.
762 Jakobson, “Two Aspects of language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” 254.
763 See René Dirven and Ralf Pörings, eds., *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast* (Berlin: Mouton
de Gruyter, 2003); Donald Rice and Peter Schofer, *Rhetorical Poetics: Theory and Practice of Figural and Symbolic
Reading in Modern French Literature* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 3–15; Eco, *A Theory of
Semiotics*, 279–83.
rhetoric has envisioned, as contemporary semiotics has also convincingly shown. For this reason, the identification of only two poles that are like the systole and the diastole of linguistic functioning, is not a simplification. Also religious language, if accurately analyzed, reveals an abundance of metaphors and especially of metonymies. If it is true that metaphors establish a relation of similarity and metonymies a relation of contiguity, and religion is a vision of the whole, through this lens anything that is real can become a fragment in which the whole is reflected. There is enough here to rethink the age-old motif of the analogia entis. What is more, Eliade’s idea that any aspect of reality is potentially a hierophany is in this perspective more understandable and perhaps justifiable. Robert Yelle’s assessment of Eliade is only partly embraceable:

Eliade’s views of symbols and archetypes have been criticized on several grounds, many of them accurate. His theory of the symbol as suffused with meaning is fundamentally Romantic, a form of nostalgia for a vanished past. His account of hierophanies describes the appearance of the Sacred as something spontaneous, as a rupture in history, in which the human is a passive spectator. He ignores the role that historical traditions and individual human agency play in mediating such events. We may add that Eliade offers no detailed account of semiosis or the principles by which religious signs are constituted as such: no fine-grained analysis of the poetic form of religious discourse, and no explanation of what icons, indexes, and other signs contribute to the pragmatic function of ritual. As such, his theory of the religious symbol is scarcely systematic, much less scientific.

While it is quite evident that Eliade is deficient with regard to a systematic and detailed analysis of religious signs, their functioning and their relationship to linguistic processes in general, and while I am ready to admit that history plays a secondary role in his research, I am not equally content with Yelle when he affirms that Eliade does not offer an account of the principles “by which religious signs are constituted as such.” Hierophanies are parts of the universe taken for the whole and which mean the whole: this is the basic worldview behind the human tendency, which Eliade highlighted, to sacralize aspects of the universe. Based on the different functions

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with which some cosmological elements are sworn in, hierophanies differentiate and take on some specific meaning without, however, ever dismissing the fundamental aura of sacrality, on account of the fact that they are perceived as being somehow connectors with the whole. Often hierophanies are designated on the basis of some of their special characteristics (for instance, a natural element with a particular shape or exceptional in some of its qualities) as being a reflection of the whole also in the sense that they underscore and represent the connections among the three spheres of the cosmos, the human, and the divine. Religious symbols are particularly complex precisely because they can represent the whole and at the same time some meaningful and persuasive linkages within the various realms of reality. This is why religious symbols should by investigated always from a plurality of perspectives: psychological, sociological, theological, cosmological, and so on. Hence, morphology after Eliade can eventually be revalorized as long as it takes the shape of a line of thought that studies the differentiation and the specialization of hierophanies in consonance with linguistic theories and, for example, according to the degree of involvement of metaphorical and metonymic discourses, and their multiple subspecies.

Semiotics of Sacred Language, Revelation and Scriptures

If what Cimatti believes is true, and the experience of the sacred is the necessary outcome of the human way of knowing and communicating, thus making it immanent to reality, then there is no aspect of reality in which the sacred can surface with more evidence than language, especially human speech. If the sacred dwells principally in the sophisticated mechanism of human semiosis, phonemes, both in their transcription through distinct graphic symbols and as a whole, achieve the status of “the Sign of the signs,” so to speak. Thanks to their multiple combinations, they not only acquire the power to name, describe and represent but also substantiate the Real. Thus, they are

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somehow the custodians of the human possibility of signifying and therefore of Meaning tout court. For this and other subtle reasons, the letters of the alphabets were subjects of worship in many ancestral cultures. It is sufficient to recall here how the Sanskrit alphabet was (and is still) venerated as the language of gods and that some ancient scripts, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs and the various cuneiform writings, were considered to be special divine gifts. Even if Hebrew and Arabic are celebrated in their respective traditions as the only sacred languages—and not rarely as the language of God himself—Christianity never hypostatized one language in particular. However, it granted special privilege (and very often, an aura of sanctity) alternately to Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Ge’ez according to the regions of the ancient world into which Christianity expanded. These languages were progressively felt to be truly holy after being adopted for the rendering of the Scriptures, the liturgy, and law. To some extent, we could say that even English and German received unique treatment after becoming the favorite languages for translations of the Bible and the new arrangement of the liturgical repertoire at the time of the various European Reformations. Furthermore, just as the Armenians continue to erect monuments to the letters of their alphabet to this day, in the Jewish, Arab and Chinese cultures, calligraphy still plays a paramount role in the sphere of aesthetic expression but primarily in spirituality.

Before going into more depth with the dynamics of the semiotics of revelation, I want to pause for a while on the intrinsic relationship between sacred and profane languages. For instance, the histories of literature, figurative arts and music show that between the sacred and profane, there are almost always both a clear demarcation and a continuing, fruitful exchange. Just as the cell wall supports and defends the cells but at the same time permits their osmotic exchange with the surrounding environment, without which the cells could not be nourished and sustained, so do sacred languages need to demarcate a sort of distance from the common ways of expression while
simultaneously maintaining a kind of permeability. Without the stimulus and the provocative inspiration that comes from profane realms, sacred languages could not renew themselves, remaining appealing and meaningful to many throughout the centuries, linking generations and speaking to people of any time or geographic area.

The phenomenon of canonization, on which I will reflect soon, is certainly a manifestation of the need to distance the sacred language from day-to-day communications. However, while having established a regulative language and fixed on some normative texts, new linguistic forms are created, and they often end up receiving a similar treatment of preservation. Ultimately, this chain of canonization processes, which eventually corresponds to what we generally call Tradition, is a very interesting phenomenon that is perceivable in almost all the major religious traditions—at least, those in which scriptures and writing play a central role. It puts in evidence an important truth: the sacred and profane need to be always in dialogue and to reconfigure their boundaries continually as contexts and sensibilities of both individuals and communities change, for human language per se is shown to be sacred and has the potential to be somewhat revelatory. This can be detected from what follows.

First of all, reality emerges and receives meaning in speaking and, generally, in communication. On the one hand, the very evocative pages of Genesis describe God’s creation through the power of a Word that has the performative power of forming and transforming reality. The Vedic hymns often point to the role of Word in the formation, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe. On the other hand, human language manifests its divine origin precisely in taking part in this world by naming things and according them specific meanings. Second, as Cimatti suggests, language is revelatory of the essential human desire to grasp reality in its radical meaning and substance, a quest that is impeded, however, by fundamental human limitations and that, when
it is achieved, happens only in the form of precariousness and Absence. Language is how this human predicament finds an eminent expression and an invocation for its definite solution, be it transcendent or somewhere in this world. Thus, sacred languages are conceived as special and often inimitable, not because they are completely different or separate from the more usual ways of communicating but because they somehow preserve in their sophisticated fabric access to this simple truth: language per se has a revelatory dimension that originates from the divine sphere.

The language of revelation is usually perceived and described by the receivers as the language of God himself—or at least of some of God’s messengers. This argument has of course been systematically subjected to criticism by modern scholars of religion; thus, the heated debates on the thorny theme of inspiration in the last century have resulted in calls for a reconsideration of the role of the human medium both in receiving and in transmitting God’s Word. Therefore, cultural, sociological, linguistic and psychological inferences have been drawn to explicate the languages of revelation, sometimes at the risk either of overlooking their unique nature or, to the contrary, of overemphasizing their distinction from common speech. In particular, what has been mostly neglected by modern criticism is the meta-linguistic, twofold aspect of the messages of revelation (which the synchronic approach to these themes has conversely better identified): that of being indicative of the spiritual essence of language tout court and that of offering access to an all-embracing and self-subsistent worldview in which all parts find a consequent systematization and, ultimately, a meaning in the whole. The languages of revelation, therefore, should be in some ways exceptional and not simply equated with any vague, sacred and magic formula. There is a subtle line to draw here: revelations, truly to be God’s message, cannot be merely compared to poetry and spells—which nonetheless have the incredible faculty of unveiling the spiritual, godly and potentially omnipotent power of creating and shaping reality that is inherent to human words,
a power whose correct acknowledgment clearly subverts the utilitarian conception of language as a mere tool.

Revelations usually put in evidence a specific content that is not always immediately and easily identified with God’s will and whose accomplishment causes trouble for the receivers, both in the correct deciphering of its meaning and in the consequences that it generates. The emphasis on a specific message, whose interpretation is not always evident but that eventually corresponds to a specific desire of God, is easily traceable in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The polemics against false prophets, sorcery, and even poetry that we encounter both in the Bible and the Qur’ān have the purpose not only of distinguishing God’s Word from other worldly discourses but also of turning attention to the enchanting power of words, which can always be efficaciously employed with evil intentions, contrary to the divine plan. Hence, revelations not only insist on the innately sacred nature of human words but also usually inform about their correct use. Truth makes its appearance in speech, but the opposite can also happen: lies find a way through human speech, and with them, a fake world is simultaneously envisioned and created. The devil in the Abrahamic traditions is conceived as the father of division and lies because, through falsehood, he manages to divert people from the correct path, which leads to life. Falsehood is often associated with death because it breaks the balance between words and their actual correspondence with reality, de facto opening the door to other plans, other orders, and, ultimately, other creations. Death is non-sense par excellence, and it thus undermines the close connection between Word, Meaning, and Being, which at the root of life means accepting decadence and annihilation. Humans, through their words, have the power either to destroy this world that God’s Word has made or to nourish it with their own creativity.

So far, we have presented the semiotics of revelation as a descending process of
communication as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have generally envisioned. To some extent, we find similar representations in various sacred texts of both Hinduism and Confucianism, though these religious universes are more complex and are particularly resistant to rough generalizations. However, the phenomenon of the direct or indirect communication of the divine to some sentient being is well known and registered in the sacred literature and the folklore of all cultures. This communication can take on different shapes: an oracle, a sign, a miracle, a specific auditory message, an inner locution, or a discourse communicated through the intervention of a divine messenger, such as an angel or a prophet. These very different ways of communication insist on a similar basic schema that almost always corresponds to the basic communication structure of sender-code-receiver. Religions that envision revelation in terms similar to these usually reinterpret this fundamental schema in a very typical way. While nuances and variants are of paramount importance in a specific comparative project, they cannot be listed and analyzed adequately in these few pages. For now, it is sufficient to recall that revelation, when it is intended in these terms as an act of communication, insists on the basic semiotic structure. Hence, while God is portrayed as locutor and his message as the code, the humans, either as individuals or as groups, are the receivers.

However, this is not the only representation of revelation known in the history of religions: instead of a descending trajectory, Buddhism, Taoism, and some minor spiritual traditions depict revelation as an introspective and ascending movement. Though they often are based on some preexisting doctrines, which they intend simultaneously to depart from and revise—doctrines that not rarely are conceived as the result of a descending act of communication—these religious traditions speak of self-revelation in terms of enlightenment and awakening, namely of an inner, autonomous spiritual movement and a personal discovery of truth. Although the representation of
the divine sender and messenger is not rare in these kinds of spiritual literature, the real locution is interior and cannot be easily communicated. It is true that the Buddha, after his awakening, became a preacher and therefore a locutor in himself. However, his role in the major part of the Buddhist traditions, while pivotal, is remembered as secondary because it is just introductory: in fact, any sentient being has the potential to find truth and, not secondarily, find its way out of the circle of rebirths. According to these kinds of conceptions, as long as there is a clear demarcation between sender, code, and receiver, we are still dwelling in the realm of dualism and separation, two conditions that are the specific marks of samsāra and the originators of the eternal return. Although the different Buddhist schools debate these themes quite animatedly and distinguish themselves from one another especially on the weight they give to discriminating thought, the doctrine of the pratītyasamutpāda, which I have previously presented, constitutes a sort of shared philosophical basis according to which distinguishing, though inevitably intrinsic to the act of communication, is never the final word. Nonetheless, distinguishing is always the other side of the coin with respect to radical relativity. Hence, in Buddhist and Taoist thought, the same basic communication structure of sender-code-receiver is not discarded at all but it simply endures a different actualization, or at least, a process of concentration and contraction in one unit. One can find salvation in the recognition of the radical relativity of everything—the self, primarily. In this difficult discovery, it turns out that the sender receives a message whose code is at the same time other and not other from oneself.

This schematic analysis of two disparate semiotic trends in conceiving revelation is perhaps too schematic. The English term “revelation” derives from Latin; it became central in religious studies and Western theological debates, particularly in the nineteenth century. One could argue that the employment of this category is another superimposition of the Western conceptuality on
other religious and cultural universes. However, in this and other cases, it is not difficult to find similar conceptions and corresponding terms in the religious traditions that I have mentioned. Of course, the nuances and variants that etymology submits to scholarly attention are of primary importance and should not be overlooked. However, in these pages, I cannot devote further space to a phenomenology of the different representations of the revelatory processes in the major religious traditions. In any case, I consider the use of macro-structures essential to the comparative enterprise and that I intend to adopt general categories, such as “revelation” and “religion,” only for their heuristic benefits.

What is more, the comparison of different conceptions of revelation discloses that another, more difficult task must now be undertaken on a deeper level. Comparative reflection on the various sacred languages requires a close analysis of the different metaphysical visions that lie behind them. What is most relevant here is the question of the relationship between language and Being, and in particular, the intricate theme of the relationship of language to reality. We could start with a rough distinction that, as a first step, must necessarily be drawn. On the one hand, we have religious views that conceive of a close and real correspondence between language and its referents. On the other hand, we have visions that use more nominalist terms and for which language is just a functional tool and the result of a convention. Moreover, according to this latter view, language neither corresponds to its actual referents nor is it able to substantiate anything real. As a matter of fact, these two opposite trajectories of thought are traceable in the theological and philosophical discussions of essentially all the major religious traditions. For example, in the Hindu world, the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā generally maintains the linguistic origin of the world, the eternity and impersonality of the Veda and, above all, the correspondence between words, meaning and their actual referents. While Patañjali comes to think that even this aspect of eternity pertains
also to all words in general, some grammarians (see, for instance, Bhartṛhari) and other Indian movements of thought (such as Buddhism) tended more or less radically toward extrinsicism. It is sufficient to consult texts such as the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra to realize how Buddhism thinks of human language and the discriminating thought, which it presupposes in precarious and instrumental terms. This sutra is the quintessential expression of radical Mahāyāna nominalism, according to which the whole world is conceived as being just the manifestation of the mind; consequently, all things are found in a state of emptiness and are devoid of self. As a matter of fact, although reflection on Emptiness is present throughout all Buddhist literature, it is in Mahāyāna literary production that the connection between Emptiness and language receives special consideration. Moreover, the more one moves away from Theravāda Buddhism and enters the vast land of the Great Vehicle it is possible to trace a sort of progression towards total extrinsicism between language and reality. To illustrate the truly complex Buddhist conception of the relationship between language and reality, I will now take into account the Akṣobhyavyūha-sūtra, the Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra, the Kāśyapaparivarta-sūtra, and other paramount Mahāyāna sutras.

“All the grasses and trees leaned toward me when I realized enlightenment.” These few words drawn from the Akṣobhyavyūha-sūtra contain an important Buddhist conception of reality

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that I intend to consider. In Buddhist teaching, the whole universe was transformed and received new shape through the Buddha’s enlightenment. From that moment on, all things have been constantly attracted by the Blessed One as if he were a magnet that, staying at the center of the universe, irradiated everything with his power. Given this transfiguration of the whole, how do the Buddhist Scriptures manage to express the new reality in language? It is helpful to analyze the different types of symbolism we encounter in the Mahāyāna sūtras. There are at least three degrees of symbolic representation; the simplest is constituted of parallelisms, and the most common comprises metaphors, but there are other complex and not easily classifiable symbols that often play a special role in the economy of the sūtras. For this reason, they are worthy of special consideration apart from the first two known literary devices. However, it is important to restate that all three degrees of symbolism share a similar ideal root—they come from the narrators’ need to express in words what, by definition, is inexpressible: the inaccessible and ineffable experience of Buddha’s enlightenment. The wide use of rhetorical devices is in itself a clue of the conception that I have just mentioned above; since reality is renewed by the presence of the Buddha and his message, everything must necessarily receive new light and significance. Therefore, while words continue to imply their original meaning, they become loaded with unexpected nuances. I will offer, then, some examples better to clarify the nature of this special linguistic phenomenon and to illustrate the three degrees of symbolism we find in Mahāyāna literature.

First of all, I will consider parallelisms. I have defined them as “the first degree of symbolism” because the relationship in meaning that they establish is immediately comprehensible. Nothing is implied; rather, the comparison between two subjects or entities allows the listener better to envision the reality that the narrator intends to focus on and that otherwise would be inexpressible. This is the case, for example, in the description of the land of eternal bliss
in the sutras of Pure Land Buddhism. As we see in the *Ākṣobhyavyūha-sūtra*, the “Land of Wonderful Joy” is depicted as if it were a place similar to paradise and all the sentient beings who live there are depicted as if they were like gods. Since everything in this supreme world is outside of human perception, the author uses images from the classical repertoire of Indian literature to make its representation more imaginable. Hence, for instance, we read: “the food and drink of the people in that land are the same as those of the gods in color, fragrance, and taste.”

The second degree of symbolism is constituted of metaphors. We find extensive use of these literary devices throughout the Buddhist literature, but in the Mahāyāna sutras, they become even more sophisticated than in the Theravāda canon. In order to demonstrate, I will offer two examples from the *Kāśyapaparivarta-sūtra* and the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*. In the *Kāśyapaparivarta-sūtra* we find a suggestive metaphor that is very close (more in style than in content) to the kind we encounter in the Theravāda corpus. Here, Emptiness is compared to a medicine that is able to evacuate all the diseases of a sick man but that itself must depart from the viscera to prevent that disease from becoming more serious. This simile is more than simple parallelism. In fact, here, something is implied and it is not immediately perceivable. In order to comprehend the plurality of meanings of this kind of expression, the reader has to pause for a moment and employ his or her faculty of intuition. If Emptiness is like a medicine, it is something curative and beneficial; however, the simile also implies that every human being naturally lives in a state of fundamental illness. Moreover, the simile also alludes to the idea that Emptiness is both the remedy for every wrong speculation and, potentially, a wrong speculation itself. Then, if detachment—even from Emptiness—is the final remedy, teaching Emptiness as if it were similar to any other philosophical theory would be quite wrong.

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773 Chang, “The Dharma-Door of Praising Thatāgata Aksobhya’s Merits,” 323.
774 Chang, “The Sūtra of Assembled Treasures,” 399; 403.
A more sophisticated example of metaphors occurs in the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*. Here, we find not simple parallelisms but a plethora of truly subtle metaphors. The major part of images that are employed are intended to signify the inner potential Buddhahood of every sentient being, and these metaphors are all etymologically related to the many possible translations of the single term *garbha*, which primarily means “womb.” Hence, images such as the calyx of a lotus flower, a cave, a husk, a store, and a woman’s womb are all adopted to describe the manifold reality of the Tathāgata’s matrix—the inherent capacity of every being to attain the Buddha’s enlightenment. Hence, in the Mahāyāna conception, the Buddha’s enlightenment truly transformed everything, language included; it is only on this condition that it can be employed to signify the inexpressible new reality.

The intimate connection between language and Emptiness in the Mahāyāna vision is definitively more visible in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Scriptures on the Perfection or Transcendence of Wisdom), a set of about thirty-eight Buddhist sutras that, together with the *Lotus Sūtra*, constitute the main scriptural referents of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Among them, the most famous are certainly the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (Heart sutra) and the *Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Diamond sutra). The nature of these texts is manifestly and remarkably different from the Theravāda literature. Narrative is almost absent, and when a

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general narrative frame is present, there is no description or development of the stories. Even the doctrinal aspect is quite distinct from, for example, the Buddha’s speeches of the *Nikāyas*. In Theravāda literature, in fact, although the events and the dialogues are generally reported with a high degree of idealization, they are nevertheless recognizable as a symbolic representation of an event that may have happened. On the contrary, here, the allegorization is so pervasive that the characters appear ephemeral, and their words are difficult to capture in the literary sense. This frequent use of allegories is, however, highly significant if it is intended in connection with the main argument of these texts—precisely, Emptiness (śūnyatā). The figures are somehow “emptied” of their concreteness and subjectivity in order to typify, first, virtues or attributes, and ultimately, Emptiness itself. The allegorization, then, is part of the process of the mental, psychological and spiritual “emptying” that these sutras primarily teach.

Although it is marked by many other influences, possibly including Tantrism, we consider also *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, part of the *Prajñāpāramitā* galaxy. Among the main arguments (apart from Emptiness), we find other related issues, such as those of relativity, the reconciliation of dichotomies, and the importance of silence as the “Dharma-door” for nonduality. In this masterpiece of Mahāyāna literature, the narrative aspect becomes again paramount. In order to reveal the “reality” of Emptiness, Vimalakīrti not only speaks but also acts *sub contrario specie*, in the sense that he behaves oddly in order to puzzle his interlocutors and consequently draw their attention towards elements of truth that certain general doctrinal principles and moral behaviors are at risk of overlooking. The second chapter is truly striking, as we find a vivid picture of Indian society. Here, the wise layman Vimalakīrti is described while he is passing through the streets,

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encountering all kinds of human reality—families, schools, armies, brothels, cabarets, and even the headquarters of some adversary religious sects. He intends to transform all this into “Buddha-fields,” so to speak, places in which, thanks to his unconventional apostolate, Buddhahood can be searched for and even encountered. Ironically, he dares to correct even the teaching of the bodhisattvas.

In sum, in the whole Prajñāpāramitā production, we find an important insistence that marks a change in both style and thought from Theravāda literature and that constitutes one of the distinctive features of Mahāyāna Buddhism—the reflection on the relationships between epistemology and Emptiness, and between language and silence.

In this regard the Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra is the most emblematic case, as it is an ingenious representation of the nature of language. If reality is fundamentally Emptiness, then language should be employed to reflect this truth: this is the sutra’s main assumption. This is a real paradox, for the spoken and transcribed letters are somehow necessary for representing Emptiness. In fact, without words, this doctrine could not be perceived at all. However, if we speak, and in our way of speaking we do not say anything tangible, then Emptiness is likely to appear. Hence, the mystery of the Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra consists of this sort of dialectic play; it says almost nothing in order to signify Emptiness. Only in this perspective is there a clear and real sense of this obscure passage, which itself was intended to be recited together with the rest of the sutra: “those sons and daughters of good family who will take up sutras such as these… and master them they will be ridiculed, severely ridiculed.”

Should we conclude, then, that for Mahāyāna Buddhism language is completely futile? Not really, as the Buddha and the Buddhists of every time were always averse to explaining their truth

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in nihilistic terms. It is sufficient to recall the role of mantras—linguistic expressions that are difficult to render but that are cherished as skillful means of disposing the mind’s concentration—in realizing that language is a powerful instrument through which Emptiness appears, even in the reverse order. Even in the rich metaphor of the vajra (thundercloud) that is at the center of the Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra, we can discover the ambivalence of human skills and the doctrine itself. In Indian culture, the vajra has always been represented as a powerful weapon in the hands first of Indra and then of Śiva. For Buddhists, it became the symbol of the awareness of everything’s impermanence because the whole reality—Buddha’s words included—are, per se, impermanent—like a “dream,” a “flash of lighting” and, most precisely, a “thundercloud.”782

The various Tibetan schools, despite their multiple differences on these themes, managed somehow to position themselves in the middle of the Middle Way, so to speak, particularly after the debate at bSam-yas.783 They were able to mediate between two major (and quite distinct) influences of thought: the Indian and the Chinese. While the former promoted the idea of gradual enlightenment and consequently stressed the propaedeutic role of language in a more positive way, the latter advocated sudden enlightenment, access to which, they believed, is precluded by rational thinking and the correlative logical function of language. The famous Japanese literary practice of the koan, which has analogues in all the Ch’an and Zen schools, is the extreme radicalization of the idea that anything beyond language, though apparently insignificant, can become a mediation toward enlightenment. Language and narrations can only create bizarre situations which, the stranger and more unconventional they appear, the better they function to test Zen practitioners,

opening them to great doubt, the sole condition for becoming enlightened. Though a certain degree of correspondence to a set of some traditionally established linguistic devices is sometimes perceivable in koans, the idea of disconnection between language, logic and reality that they typify is complete, and the sense of disorientation in the receiver is intentionally pursued as its most direct effect. Zen Buddhism then developed linguistic devices to create an “epistemological shock” and open practitioners’ minds to Emptiness through the faculty of intuition per contra, but insisting on a quite paradoxical and intrinsically skeptical conception of language.\textsuperscript{784}

Mahāyāna tradition insists, in various degrees and orders, on a similar standpoint—the double negation that is also recognizable, though less evidently, in Theravāda speculation. It is a simultaneously gnoseological and metaphysical principle consisting of the negation of every possible definition of the Ultimate, followed by a negation of the negation itself. This approach is quite distinct from the mere apophaticism of some Christian negative theology, which (though under distinct forms) pervades several of the major religions and many mystical traditions. For example, we can find interesting analogues in Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. However, a sort of double negation that is similar to that of Mahāyāna is traceable also in the speculation of Pseudo-Dionysius (and implicitly also in Augustine), as Lefebure well explains:

Where Dionysius and the Mahāyāna tradition explicitly acknowledge a twofold negation, there is a double negation implicit in Augustine: (1) a negation of everything we say of God, since God is ineffable; and (2) a negation of the negation, since calling God “ineffable” does not resolve the problem, and thus God is not ineffable. We have to negate even our negations to communicate truthfully concerning God.\textsuperscript{785}

Augustine tries to solve the paradox of human words—which at the same time are the only means we have to pinpoint truth and always inadequate to define it—by appealing to divine


\textsuperscript{785} Lefebure, \textit{The Buddha and The Christ}, 118.
illumination and inspiration. In his view, there are some expressions, like those divinely revealed which the sacred Scriptures and Church doctrine safeguard, which can be recognized as being more apt to express and preserve God’s mystery. Other affirmations, conversely, are at risk of distorting this mystery and for this reason need to be sanctioned. Although Augustine strives to harmonize this solution with his more general reflection on semiotics, and more specifically with his hermeneutics of God’s signs, the dilemma of human language seems to remain unresolved—or at least it deserves to be reconsidered theologically. In particular, what remains unexplained is the correlation between the metaphysics of Presence—which revelations generally support—and the metaphysics of Absence—which is not only the necessary outcome of human semiosis, as Cimatti demonstrated, but also the inescapable destination of the major forms of mysticism, as Michel de Certeau showed. The dichotomy between Presence and Absence could be eventually tolerable or even acceptable in religious systems, such as Judaism and Islam, in which the conception of a sacred language and the devotion to knowledge, reason and logic often manage to coexist with paradoxes, contradictions, apophaticism and various other forms of via negativa. Moreover, this dichotomy could perhaps pertain to God himself in His essence; who can tell? However, a Christian comparative theology that intends to be faithfully and stoutly anchored to the Trinitarian and Christological truths needs at least to reconsider the age-old problem: how does the “nocturnal” mysticism of Absence, which many Christian spiritual figures experienced and expressed in their writings, conciliate with God’s luminous Revelation in Jesus Christ? Solving this dilemma is crucial and it is of paramount importance, not only to reach the distinct core of the Christian faith in comparison with other religious worldviews, but also to the benefit of our comparative enterprise. In fact, to be truly comparative we must first become better acquainted with the specific Christian understanding of human language and semiosis, especially if we intend
to deal with other systems of thought and other semiotic conceptions.

In his fascinating investigation of God’s way of speaking through signs and in his phenomenology of mystic enunciation, Michel de Certeau depicts the Christian metaphysics of sacred language as being caught between two antinomic perspectives: on the one hand, there are the words of the sacred Scriptures, which in their “opaque objectivity” are the ground on which Being comes to surface and God’s Will becomes manifest; on the other hand, these same words, as objective as they can be, still demand interpretation, which adds uncertainty and obscurity to what at first seemed to be clear. The hermeneutical effort always corresponds to a sort of temptation because the interpreter enters into a state of contradiction that, in itself, is inevitable for those who want to pursue God’s path and that at the same time is proof of their being on the right path. Interpretation is therefore a truly hard and even dangerous enterprise, aside from being a privilege and the sign of God’s election. Thus, interpretation makes the interpreter responsible for his or her own choice and frees the interpreter to determine his or her future; at the same time, however, it opens the door to doubt and frailty. Eventually, receiving God’s signs stimulates a hermeneutical effort, which asks from the interpreter the courage of allowing oneself and one’s certainty to die and, what is more, to unlock both heart and mind to God and divine intervention. Through illuminating grace, God intervenes to disambiguate the very signs He offered, which, beyond their specific meaning, are already a sort of anticipation of precisely His desire to accomplish all His promises. Hence, while God provides signs which, being the manifestation of His will, are the anticipation of future, He also furnishes signs that confirm that His specific plans are been eventually actualized; thus, His promises become facts, and His words transfigure

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Contradiction and antinomy are even more evident in the language of the mystics. In the symbolism of mysticism, which seeks access to the mysterious source of divine locutions, the revealed words often lose their clarity and transparency and are somehow drawn to the obscure side of Nothingness. Thus, in the mystical enunciation, the Whole often becomes the Nothing in a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum* that only the property of poetry can tolerate and what is more, pursue. Thus, God’s words find an unprecedented reformulation in the speech of the mystical subjects and, in this new form, they become the manifestation of a double freedom: that of the Spirit, the divine locutor about which, like the wind, “you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8); and that of the subjects themselves, who, thanks to the Spirit’s intervention, are now allowed to regain their full dignity despite any form of political alienation to which they may have been subjected and despite any of the penalizing constrictions that religious authorities with their habitual formulas usually foment. Mystical language is, therefore, the anti-Babel because it favors conciliation beyond differences and the resolution of both linguistic and hermeneutical conflicts, although it somehow continues faithfully to mirror the fractures of the environments from which it has issued.

However, in pushing revealed language towards Nothingness in order to free it from simplistic determinations, the mystic enunciation de facto opens the door to a sort of deconstructionism. For this reason, similar to what happens in Judaism (see, for example, the hermeneutics of Kabbalah),788 in Islam (see, for instance, Sufi and Shī‘a hermeneutics of the environments from which it has issued.

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and to some extent also in Hinduism and Buddhism, in Christianity, language is continuously generated and formed on the basis of the oscillation between deconstruction and reconstruction. This does not necessarily have to be read in a negative way. In fact, without this process of deconstruction and reconstruction, the Spirit would be equal to the Letter—to use a famous Pauline expression—and would no longer be free. The Spirit opens new paths by generating new meaning in language through deconstruction, particularly when there are standardized and fixed formulas and when the semiotic potency of language is at risk of being dulled and deadened. For this reason, deconstructionism can eventually be adopted as a valid perspective to monitor the continuous shifting of meaning in the interpretation of the sacred Scriptures, as Berg, in presenting Derrida’s thought, explains:

Deconstruction means guarding the heterogeneity of the text, remaining vigilant against closure, adhering to a critical stance which respects complexity, difficulty, obscurity; deconstructive readings do not seek to transcend the text and achieve a totalizing operation on it.

However, this inquiry must be followed and completed by considering the second movement, reconstruction, and those ways in which it can operate effectively. Hence, deconstructionism can never be espoused naively, particularly if one considers Derrida’s anarchic intention to deplete signs and their functioning in order to overthrow both philosophical and political authorities, as we can clearly deduce from these unequivocal statements:

There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of this play; today such a play is coming into its own, effacing the limit starting from which one had though to regulate the circulation of signs, drawing along with it all the reassuring signifieds, reducing all the strongholds, all the out-of-bounds shelters that watched over the field of


language. This, strictly speaking, amounts to destroying the concept of “sign” and its entire logic.  

Elsewhere, he imputes the phenomenon of infinite semiosis to the referents’ lack of any ontological consistency: “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely,” with possible regrettable outcomes. It is true that Derrida’s anarchic project is not necessarily nihilistic, as Kevin J. Vanhoozer is willing to admit:

Derrida presents his overthrow of the idols, as Bacon before him, in terms of liberation—from tradition, from truth, from authority... from social oppression.... Whether deconstruction is a genuine “renaissance” rather than a form of “nihilism” depends on whether it can make good its promise to liberate.

However, to affirm that, beyond the chain of infinite meanings, there is a lack of substance is potentially nihilistic. To complicate matters even more, Derrida’s dense and convoluted writing and the various phases of thought that he embraced during his career do not make his positions sufficiently clear. For these reasons, I doubt that it is possible to build or even to envision a true and coherent deconstructionist theology. In theology, deconstructionism can be employed as a descriptive perspective but can never be welcomed as a prescriptive stand. Moreover, if it is not adequately criticized (and for this I refer my readers to Vanhoozer), the result can only be highly counterproductive.

Coming back to our discussion of the oscillation between deconstruction and reconstruction, although I see it as an innocuous and rather diffuse phenomenon that affects almost all the major religious systems and which is potentially fruitful for their development and vitality,

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793 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 40.
authors such as Robert S. Corrington think quite differently.\textsuperscript{794} Corrington considers the antinomy of human semiosis, which manifests its nature utterly in the sacred languages, as evidence of the fallacy of those philosophies and religions—the Abrahamic religions in particular—that envision truth beyond nature. In his contemporary (and, to some extent, original) rereading of Spinoza’s naturalism, Corrington maintains that conscious meaning is simply a species of meaning tout court that emerges from the human unconscious and that is expressed through the language of signs. In his cosmological pre-theology, signs are viewed as the language of nature itself, which speaks also through human beings and the most evident manifestation of the human dependence on nature:

The situation of meaning in the world is far more like that of analyst to analysand than that of would-be seducer to a mocking and reticent conquest. In the former analogy, nature serves as the analyst who opens out the depth-structures of signification, but without guile or intention. The semiotic cosmologist is the analysand whose dreams are rooted in the depth-dreams of nature.\textsuperscript{795}

Apart from Spinoza, he rejects all the other traditional Western philosophical and theological ways to characterize and tackle the mystery of the world:

Mystery does exist, but not within the confines of the patriarchal monotheisms, where all mysteries are self-generated to protect and reinforce antecedent commitments. The true locus of mystery, which has no \textit{locus} at all, is in the depth-dimension of nature as encountered in the paradox of the precategorial.\textsuperscript{796}

For him, the fallacy of those philosophies and theologies, which are intrinsically dualistic in conceiving the Center as beyond nature, is evident in the more accepted ontological conceptions of language:

The ontological tight rope upon which we are forced to walk is very thin. On one side is the abyss that leads to the object that lies “outside” of the sign, while on the other side lies

\textsuperscript{794} Robert S. Corrington, \textit{A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
\textsuperscript{795} Corrington, \textit{A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy}, 3.
\textsuperscript{796} Corrington, \textit{A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy}, 6 [italics in the original].
the abyss that swallows up all discriminanda in a pansemioticism that devours objects (a species of postmodernism).\textsuperscript{797}

Thus, once again, human semiosis is caught in difficult dilemma: the Whole or Nothing. Sacred language, in particular, reveals how puzzling and, from an existential point of view, concretely risky is to endure this dilemma: on one hand, evoking Absence also makes plausible an encounter with Nothing (and consequently, non-sense); on the other hand, attributing meaning to everything can develop into an obsessive-compulsive attitude toward reality. Moreover, embracing the Whole can easily correspond to the suffocation of one’s identity and an inability to make distinctions of any sort. While the first risk was attentively observed by Emanuele Severino through the lens of both Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s thought,\textsuperscript{798} the second has been remarked upon by Umberto Eco.\textsuperscript{799}

Eco defines “Hermetic drift” as the attitude that pervades particularly Renaissance literary production but that, by analogy, is perceivable in almost all religious traditions and holistic worldviews and that consists of a system of intelligible correspondences between the various elements and orders of the world. He explains it this way:

I shall call Hermetic drift the interpretive habit which dominated Renaissance Hermetism and which is based on the principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which every item in the furniture of the world is linked to every other element (or to many) of this sublunar world and to every element (or to many) of the superior world by means of similitudes or resemblances. It is through similitude that the otherwise occult parenthood between things is manifested and every sublunar body bears the traces of the parenthood impressed on it as a signature.\textsuperscript{800}

According to these and other similar philosophical perspectives, religious Scriptures must be analogously read and interpreted as a unit of meaning in which each part is able to contain and

\textsuperscript{797} Corrington, \textit{A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy}, 90.
\textsuperscript{798} Emanuele Severino, \textit{Essenza del Nichilismo} (Milano: Adelphi, 1982).
\textsuperscript{799} Umberto Eco, \textit{The Limits of Interpretation} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
\textsuperscript{800} Eco, \textit{The Limits of Interpretation}, 24 [italics in the original].
represent the Whole; they can say everything exactly because they represent the numinous, which is at the same time the Whole, and being beyond any single definition, ultimately the Nothing. Thus, in the interpreters’ perception, Scriptures become “the nebula of all the possible archetypes.”

In studying Christian and Jewish traditional hermeneutics of the Bible, Eco devises a series of circularities that he does not refrain from denouncing. In particular with relation to Christianity, the relationship among sacred Text, Tradition and Church (as they are usually conceived) reveals a striking contradiction, in his opinion:

The early Christian theology had then to find a way of controlling (by an allegorical code) the free interpretation of the (symbolic and uncoded) nature of the Books. A rather oxymoric [sic] situation, indeed. At this point the topological model able to represent this situation should be even more complex (perhaps a Moebius’ Ring), since the only authority that could establish the right way of interpreting the Books was the Church, founded upon the Tradition: but the Tradition was represented exactly by the series of the “good” interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. In other words, the Tradition draws its right to control the interpretation of the Books from the interpretation of the Books. *Qui custodiet custodes?* How can the authority legitimate the interpretation, since the authority itself is legitimated by the interpretation? This question had no answer; no theory of types or of metalanguage was elaborated to legitimate the circle of hermeneutic legitimation (no theory of hermeneutic legitimation can be indeed legitimate if not by the very process of hermeneutic reading). At the origins of the hermeneutic practice, there is a circle; it does not matter how holy or how vicious.

Then, Eco adds some relevant comments on the practical and, above all, political nature of the answer to this dilemma, which the Church envisioned throughout history—a kind of solution that we see generally practiced in other religious communities, though under different forms, in which a congregation of authoritative interpreters that can offer an incontrovertible, official reading of the sacred texts plays a primary role:

The only possible answer to this question was a practical one: the rules for good interpretation were provided by the gatekeepers of the orthodoxy, and the gatekeepers of

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801 Eco, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, 149.
802 Eco, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, 150–51.
the orthodoxy were the winners (in terms of political and cultural power) of the struggle to impose their own interpretation.803

As we have seen before, Augustine himself became aware of the fundamental circularity that affects human language in general and the question of the right interpretation of sacred texts in particular. Like some of the Fathers before him, he solved this paradox by appealing to divine intervention through illumination and by referring to the person of Christ, who is simultaneously the ultimate content and the rule for the correct reading of both the Old and the New Testaments. Regarding the charge of authoritarianism against the role of the Church as the “gatekeeper of orthodoxy,” while sociological and political inferences are always possible and even beneficial to a more coherent adherence of the Church to its mission, one should consider also that other important perspectives of thought permit a better grasp of the essence of its ministry, and, at least for intellectual honesty, these should be considered. In line with Pauline and general Apostolic thought, the Fathers of the Church treated ecclesiology not in mere sociological or political terms but in close connection with the mystery of Christ and His body. In this sense, Eco’s affirmation that “no theory of types or of metalanguage was elaborated to legitimate the circle of hermeneutic legitimation” cannot be fairly held. The hermeneutical efforts of the Patristic age were almost entirely directed toward solving this paramount problem as well as illuminating the dialectical relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, as Eco himself is willing to admit in other passages of his treatise. However, he finds the Christological solution to be contradictory, as we can see from the following paragraph:

Moreover, in this beautiful case of unlimited semiosis, there was a curious identification between sender, message as signifier or expression, and signified or content and referent, interpretandum, and interpretant—a puzzling web of identities and differences that can be hardly represented by a bidimensional diagram….

803 Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 151.
This semiotic web was encouraged by the ambiguous status of the term *logos*, which is at the same time *verbum mentis* and *verbum vocis*, as well as the name and the nature of the second person of the Trinity. Moreover, the first interpreter of the ancient law was still Christ as the *Logos*, and every commentary of the Holy texts was an *imitatio Christi*, so that in the light of the *Logos* all the faithful interpreters can become *Logiko*. To make the web even more inextricable, Christ, insofar as He was the *Logos*, that is, the knowledge that the Father had of Himself, was the ensemble of all the divine archetypes; therefore he was fundamentally polysemous.804

I admire Eco’s brilliant and lucid analysis, which he based on Compagnon’s research (1979).805 However, what in his opinion is nothing but the eminent proof of the intrinsic contradiction of the principles that have moved Christian hermeneutics since from the beginning, in my view is the best demonstration of the preeminence of Christianity and of the singularity of its metaphysical view. To put it differently, what for Eco is ultimately a vicious circle is, from my perspective, a holy one—and this matters!

In fact, the structure of God’s revelation, as envisioned in the Christian worldview, reiterates in an unprecedented fashion the basic semiotic schema of communication: while the Father is the locutor par excellence (see for instance Mt 3:17; 17:5; Mk 1:11; 9:7; Lk 3:22; 9:35; Jn 1:33; 12:28), Christ is the divine Word, the message that is sent to human beings and in whom the in breathed Spirit blows, thus making them in God’s own image and likeness. Thus, without the gift of the Spirit, human beings could not decipher God’s communication, simply because they would be nothing but mere matter. Ultimately, this makes the Spirit, within the dynamics of the Trinitarian relationships, a sort of receiver. However, the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father (and for the Western Church, also from the Son) is Himself a message. Moreover, in dying, Jesus (the locutor) released his Spirit, who, at Pentecost, manifests his message in multiple languages. Mankind, in its universal dimension, which the different languages symbolize, somehow manifests

804 Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 148.
the paternity of the Father, who is now the receiver of a renewed humanity—a work of transfiguration generated by the gift of the Spirit, the divine message. In the Acts of the Apostles the Spirit is manifestly described as the divine locutor (8:29; 10:19–20; 13:2). Although in these cases, the content of His communication is something very concrete and specific, His message is nothing but God’s will—ultimately, Christ; as it is said in the Gospel of John 16:13, the Spirit “will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears.” Finally, Jesus is the Son who came into the world to witness to the Father who is the message of His communication to human beings and, in some way, also to the Spirit who lives in them. The gist of all this discourse can be better summarized in a simple sentence: God is communion because He is communication, and He is communication because He is communion.

I could continue further on with these kinds of reflections in search of some other interesting and perhaps unexpected correspondences. In particular, it would be fascinating to reconsider in semiotic terms the entire question of the relationship between immanent and economic Trinity, the problems of the Trinitarian appropriation, the processions, and the divine missions. However, one question needs to be asked here: what if the circularity of human language, which is recurrent in Christian thought, were to mirror the Trinitarian perichoresis, though only analogically? This question is worth raising. If that is the case, the legitimators or the custodes of the right interpretation of the Scriptures would not be beyond the circularity but part of the hermeneutical circle, for in Himself, God is connoted by a circular relationship, so to speak. While Scriptures do not exhaust the infinite and ineffable aspect of God’s Word, they are, however, the most authoritative traces of God’s Word, and they should somehow mirror the “circular nature” of the divine locutor. Hence, Scriptures as Tradition of the Church, somehow would be the sender, because it is through them and in the history of salvation they report that the Jewish-Christian God
speaks. However, Scriptures are also the message—and in them the *verbum incarnatum* and the *ipsissima verba* of the Son reverberate; the Church, reshaped by the gift of the Spirit, is the receiver. Thus, the Church is both sender and receiver and in some sense also the message of Tradition. If we read this hermeneutical-ecclesiological circularity not only with reference to the basic semiotic schema of communication but also in association with Trinitarian dynamics, what initially seemed to be discrepant can acquire a certain degree of plausibility.

However, the litmus test of a positive evaluation of the intrinsic circularity of Christian hermeneutics is the consideration of the Christological issue. In the complex doctrine of the hypostatic union lies the response, not only to some of the doubts that the semioticians raised but more radically to the paradox of human semiosis. Let me appeal once again to the valuable demonstrations of Umberto Eco. In *Kant and the Platypus*, Eco tackled the crucial question of the relationship between language and ontology.® Pascal (in a fragment from 1655) previously noted that while the verb “be” permits one to define everything, it cannot be defined itself without resorting to the tautological affirmation that the Being is. Aristotle, with reference to his science of ontology, used the participle *to ōn* and applied it indifferently both to existing things (which, later on, medieval Scholasticism would call *entia*) and to Being as such. The same problem surfaces in many contemporary languages, such as English, in which it is at least possible to distinguish Being from other entities precisely thanks to either the use of the capital letter ot the use (or not) of the indefinite article (Being and a being). In this linguistic and philosophical paradox lies what Eco calls the Aristotelian aporia of the Being: while the Being permits one to name the thing of the world, as such, it eludes any specific definition; the word “being” indicates concurrently both the transcendental and the categorical, the metaphysics and the physics, the *ens*

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and the *ipsum esse*. Thus, Eco explains:

But the trouble with being is not that it is just an effect of language. It is that not even language defines it. There is no definition for being. Being is not a genus, not even the most general of them all, and it therefore eludes all definition, if it is necessary to use the genus and the *differentia* in order to make a definition. Being is that which enables all subsequent definitions to be made. But all definitions are the effect of the logical and therefore semiosical organization of the world.\(^808\)

In sequence, Eco presents various methods that, within the history of the Western philosophical tradition, have been tried in order either to avoid or to solve the Aristotelian aporia. First, Neoplatonism managed to distinguish henology from ontology with the intention of distinguishing the One, the ineffable, from other beings. The result was different according to the various types of this philosophical trend. However, Eco sees in negative theology a possible common outcome: language “circumscribes the unsayable by means of exclusions, metaphors, and negations, as if negation were not itself a motor of semiosis, a principle of identification by opposition.”\(^809\) Second, medieval Scholasticism was led to identify God immediately with Being. However, this solution was not devoid of risk: whether for believer and non-believer, this solution is unsatisfactory because the former “must accept that faith will act as a stand-in where reason can say nothing,” and the latter “sees theology constructing the ghost of God in reaction to philosophy’s incapacity to control what… is still a mere ghost…”\(^810\) Then, to preserve the difference between the *ipsum esse* and the other entities, Scholasticism elaborated and promoted the analogical language for which it is eventually possible to “talk of God precisely because we admit right from the start that an *analogia entis* exists: of being, not of language.”\(^811\) However, what apparently seems a brilliant solution, Eco warns, is once again contradictory: “But who says

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\(^{808}\) Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 24.

\(^{809}\) Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 24–25.

\(^{810}\) Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 25.

\(^{811}\) Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, 25.
that being is analogous? Language. It is a circle.\textsuperscript{812}

To overcome this contradiction there are only two possibilities: the first is what Spinoza worked out (and Corrington more recently espoused), “to reabsorb language completely within being.”\textsuperscript{813} The outcome is far from easy to envision: “Being is talked of and defines itself within the all-embracing bosom of a Substance where order and the connection of ideas are the same as order and the connection of things.”\textsuperscript{814} While language, when understood in these terms, is perfectly adequate for speaking of abstract issues, it shows itself to be “very weak, tentative, perspective, and contingent”\textsuperscript{815} when it has to deal with the concrete entities of the world, and proves to be somewhat inappropriate for managing the complexity of reality. The second solution was elaborated by Heidegger in two stages of his complex intellectual trajectory. The first endeavor that he attempted was “to divorce being from itself”\textsuperscript{816} in the distinction of the ontic from the ontological. In Heidegger’s view, traditional metaphysics erroneously claimed to be concerned with the investigation of Being as such since, in reality, it focused its main attention merely on the entities. However, Being can reveal Itself only in the \textit{Dasein} (being-there, being-here); from this observation derives the idea that we can truly speak of Being only if we assume the human condition in all its poignancy and do not overlook what tragedy is living in the knowledge of death. Thus, regarding Heidegger’s option for existentialism, Eco fairly comments:

And so we cannot talk about being if not in reference to us, insofar as we are thrown into the world. To think being as being (to think of truth of being as the foundation of metaphysics) means abandoning metaphysics. The problem of being and the unveiling of it is not a problem for metaphysics as the science of the entity, it is the central problem of existence.\textsuperscript{817}

\textsuperscript{812} Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 25.
\textsuperscript{813} Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 25.
\textsuperscript{815} Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 26.
\textsuperscript{816} Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 26.
\textsuperscript{817} Eco, \textit{Kant and the Platypus}, 27.
The second stage of Heidegger’s solution consists of his famous Kehre, in which he moved his investigation to the Being-language relationship and the essence of poetry, a twist that, in the Letter on Humanism, he characterized with brief scanty but incisive words: “Here everything is reversed.” If the previous effort was finalized in divorcing the Being from itself, now it is the turn of language—“the house of being”—that undergoes disjunction. In fact, while there is a language, such as that of metaphysics, which is capable of doing nothing but suffocating and hiding Being, there is, conversely, a kind of language, such as that of poetry, that is apt to reveal and magnify the source of everything. Eco explains Heidegger’s consideration of poetic language with these pivotal affirmations:

An immense power is therefore conferred upon language, and some maintain that there is a form of language so strong, so consubstantial with the very foundations of being, that it “shows” us being (that is, the indissoluble plexus of being-language) so that the self-revelation of being is actuated within language.

While Eco seems to be sympathetic to the Kehre, he still warns his readers about two aspects of Heidegger’s thought that remain unresolved. On the one hand, Heidegger does not overcome the same philosophical obstacle; while the term “being” is surely unlimited in meaning, in its substance it is nothingness precisely because nothing can be predicated of Being as such; on the other hand, the language of poets is itself limited because it tries simply to imitate Being but remains incapable of representing it truly and substantially:

The Poets assume as their own task the substantial ambiguity of language, and try to exploit it to extract a surplus of interpretation from it rather than a surplus of being. The substantial polyvocity of being usually obliges us to make an effort to give form to the formless. The poet emulates being by reproposing its viscosity; he tries to reconstruct the formless original, to persuade us to reckon with being. But he offers us an ersatz and does not tell us

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821 Eco, Kant and the Platypus, 31.
anything more about being than being has already told us or than we have had it say, in other words, very little.\cite{Eco2020}

However, there is another element that neither Heidegger nor Eco take sufficiently into account at this stage of their demonstration: religious language, and that of the sacred scriptures in particular, which are often perceived as the matrices and the sources from which any secular language takes form. They presume to be not just a good imitation of being—and from here the usual polemics against both poetry and magic derives; they are said rather to favor the emergence of being as such and to be the real “house of being,” to use Heidegger’s words. Nonetheless, as I have tried to show above by presenting the thought of Cimatti, de Certeau, and Eco, religious language itself is inapt to overcome the aporia of Being: Buddhism is so quite intentionally whereas the other religious systems are so only derivatively; however, they all end up leading us, de facto, to an Absence. On the other hand, as Eco puts in evidence the limits of Spinozism, Heidegger’s philosophy of the Dasein could be easily invoked to curb Corrington’s enthusiasm for a renewed form of radical naturalism. In conclusion, are we deprived of any plausible solution to the paradox of human semiosis, a dilemma that neither poetic nor religious language can illuminate? I do not think so.

In Heidegger’s view, not every language can reveal Being; only a language that has a special characteristic can do so. For its evocative power and polyvocity, the language of poetry has been designated by Heidegger as the realm of Being. However, the language of poets can also be misrepresentative, obscure and ambiguous, as the history of literature of any country registers. Hence, to be the true abode of Being, language must be at least authentically referred to. Then, if what Heidegger holds is true (that Being reveals itself only in and through the Dasein), this can

\cite{Eco2020} Eco, Kant and the Platypus, 34 [italics in the original].
happen only on condition that there be a good intentionality of the Dasein towards Being; otherwise, language would not be authentic, and consequently, Being could never come to surface. Hence, I affirm that Being shows itself only in the truth and that, conversely, it is concealed, perverted and substantially altered by deception and lies, as Michel de Certeau documented in his studies on words of the possessed. Nonetheless, it is not sufficient to speak of good intentionality. To be the true voice of Being, it is necessary that in the Dasein there speaks a language that is, to use Eco’s words, “consubstantial with the very foundations of being.” Moreover, the only condition for which Being can really and fully reveal itself through the Dasein is that this language, which is consubstantial with Being, be consubstantial with the Dasein itself; otherwise, Being could emerge only randomly—only when there is the condition of authenticity. What, however, are the conditions of the possibility of authenticity itself? Who can judge whether an intentionality is good?

Now, in the history of humanity, there is a system of thought that claims to have identified, not in just any entity but in a specific one, the Dasein which is consubstantial with the language that is consubstantial with Being—a single entity in which the ipsum esse can be seen. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God because He is, first of all, the Logos through whom all things were made and, in addition, the Incarnation of the divine Word. Moreover, Jesus in his singularity and in his unique humanity is God’s ultimate and unavoidable revelation (see the school of Milan), but he is also a specific manifestation of a universal structure: the God-man (see Anselm); the universale concretum et personale (see von

823 Eco, Kant and the Platypus, 31.
the Absolute Freedom that can free itself from its Absoluteness (see Bruaire); or, to resort to a more usual expression, the mediator between the divine and the human. However, against any sort of ambiguity, Jesus is a mediator and not simply an intermediary (see Mersch and Mouroux). While the intermediary is just functional in joining two or more people together, once his function has been accomplished, he can be put aside without problem. Jesus must never be overcome to get to God; rather, since He is consubstantial with the Father, He is the God who comes to us. For this reason, Jesus not only performs signs (see how pivotal this theme is in the Gospel of John) but is himself a sign “that will be opposed” because He is “for the falling and the rising of many” (Lk 2:34).

Jesus is the Sign of signs because only in the Logos made flesh can a perfect coincidence between sign and content be encountered. Moreover, in being directed to others, the possibility of the interpretant is already contemplated in His sign. In Jesus, sign and content do not simply coexist but are united, to say it analogically, “without confusion, change, division, or separation,” (see the Chalcedonian dogmatic definition V.34). Jesus is principally and primarily what the Vatican Council preaches apropos of the Church (LG 1): “sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum”; Jesus is an instrument in the sense that through his words, we have direct access to God’s Word, but as he is himself a message, he is the sign whose referent is immediately present. Finally, he is a sacrament because his words are powerful; they perform wonders and re-create reality. Jesus is the primordial sacrament and the sacrament of salvation (see Schillebeeckx). In more evocative

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terms, resorting to Jn 14:6, Jesus is “the Way” (the instrumental aspect of language), “the Truth” (the content that is immanent in the sign), and “the Life” (the performative dimension of language). Jesus is the real symbol of God (see Rahner) because, in being distinguished from God, he simply refers to Him; at the same time, in being consubstantial, he is also God’s perfect expression.

Finally, Jesus is the coincidentia oppositorum well beyond the limits that Cusanus envisioned. The dialogue between Masao Abe and his Catholic interlocutors has brought attention to the possibility of a fruitful evolution in the comprehension of the Christological and Trinitarian nexus: Jesus in his kenosis is not simply the image of the Son “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself” (Phil 2:6–7); the self-emptying of the Son is the mirroring of God’s essence and the quality of the intra-Trinitarian relations. Then, if God is Himself self-emptying, and Jesus is God’s perfect image and likeness, there is perfect coincidence between Being and Nothing, beyond any contradictions. However, contrary to what Abe contends, there is a preeminence of Being over Nothing. First, Self-Emptying, the quality of the ipusm esse, does not correspond to “nought” but presupposes that there is Something to be emptied. Second, the concept of “nought” is always correlative to that of Being: “nought” is in itself nothing but the absence of something. Therefore, Jesus Christ, the divine language that resonates in God’s image, in the Dasein and in creation, which was generated thanks to Him and through Him, eventually leads us not to an Absence but to a Presence.

It would be interesting to continue rereading both the classical and the more recent Christological discussions and their linguistic apparatus in semiotic terms. However, I intend to

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call attention to some other important issues. Only the Logos, “the self-revelation of being”832 within language, that is made flesh can show us the being—“that is, the indissoluble plexus of being-language.”833 What remains an open question—and in this the Jewish critique and the proposals of the pluralists must be considered—is whether the Logos can be encountered only and ultimately in Jesus of Nazareth. The debate may be open but the possibility of faith also arises, and there is no thought that can be so persuasive as to compel faith. However, one thing can be prompted here: Christian thought (especially with reference to the doctrines of the Incarnation and the hypostatic union) delineates not only a possible solution to the paradox of human language but perhaps also the lines of another kind of metaphysics (which, I suppose, still needs to be fully comprehended). In this, though I appreciate Cameron Freeman’s analyses for many reasons,834 I do not agree with his proposal for a post-metaphysical Christianity. Certainly the Christian system of thought must be adequately distinguished from all the various modes of thinking that have been adopted in the past to furnish it with some solid philosophical foundations that often turn out to be a jumble. Unlike the Scholastic onto-theology that was directed to identifying the metaphysical preconditions that could sustain the Trinitarian, the Christological, and the Ecclesiological doctrines, I still welcome the conception of analogia entis—but on a distinct philosophical basis. Metaphysics is not simply a prolegomenon but the shape and the depth of the Christian message: each entity can reveal the ipsum esse because the divine Logos is inherent to it, and He is the source of their intelligible form. Human language, the profane included, can truly lead us to the presence of God because it flows from Him and it is in the likeness of His own Word. If human words can express the truth, this is because truth itself is logikos. Lies are true deceptions because they dare

832 Eco, Kant and the Platypus, 31.
833 Eco, Kant and the Platypus, 31.
834 Cameron Freeman, Post-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Teachings of Jesus: The Structure of the Real (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).
to detach words completely from their root, from truth; however, precisely in this consists the illusion that falsehood brings about (and is).

In conclusion, what linguistic and hermeneutic analysis has found as contradictory in the system of human semiosis can lead to illumination and a surplus of meaning in light of the Trinitarian, Christological, and Ecclesiological doctrines. As a matter of fact, beyond even all the plausible charges of hegemonism, the Ecclesiological aspect is also in some way “necessary.” If it is read semiotically and in sequence with the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, it appears as the natural accomplishment of the kenotic movement of God’s Incarnation: the divine Word is made flesh and enters the worldly realm, becoming history, something referable through human words. Hence, this descending movement calls for and almost requires the opposite ascending dynamic: as the history of Christian spirituality and mysticism shows the reverse path from the human discourses to the divine Word is quite significant.

Comparison with other religious worldviews, especially with the various schools of Indian speculation, can help Christian theology to sharpen its comprehension of the dynamics of God’s revelation, both by analogy and by opposition. Along with Giuseppe Giovanni Lanza del Vasto, Henri Le Saux, and Bede Griffiths, who were all deeply influenced and illuminated by the Indian metaphysical lessons, I would maintain that the patrimony of Christian theology can offer some precious insight towards solving the contradictions of both Western and Eastern metaphysical reflection. Unlike these thinkers, however, who concentrated their attention principally on the Trinitarian doctrine and its possible correspondences within the Indian tradition,

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I identify in the *plexus* and the *nexus* of the Trinitarian, the Christological and the Ecclesiological doctrines the key to solving the paradox of human language and its correlative metaphysical incongruities. Rather than insist on a preliminary metaphysics, the Christian patrimony represents a system of thought that is manifestly different from both monism and nihilism—and according to Lanza del Vasto, also from pantheism, dualism, and idealism—with their respective contradictions, and this system presents a philosophical solution that can be illuminating for other worldviews. While Christian reasoning can never compel faith, it can nonetheless be investigated as a heritage of thought that can be possibly appreciated well beyond the strict boundaries of the various Christian confessions.

**For a Christian Comparative Narrative Theology**

If Jesus is truly the archetypal Sign, he is also the *princeps analogatum* of all signs in general (and, more specifically, of any religious sign); already from this simple assumption, the need to compare Christianity with other religious views finds justification. Hence, Christian theology must necessarily be comparative; otherwise, it risks contradicting its own philosophical underpinnings. However, comparing signs from disparate sources requires the ability carefully to reconstruct their proper cultural contexts, in which they were conceived and function. Any cultural phenomenon must be attentively researched in its distinct linguistic aspect and in its historical context. Any endeavor that intends to be thoroughly comparative and theological at once, and to deal with the synoptic analysis of two or more texts from different religious worlds, must consider several levels of research: the philological aspect; the hermeneutical aspect, including both the diachronic and the synchronic analysis of texts; the aspect of religious studies and phenomenology of religion in the contextualization of the texts in their respective religious worlds and in their
potential coming into contact with each other; and the theological aspect. If even one of these elements is missing, it can seriously jeopardize the entire comparative endeavor.

About the connection between the philological and the hermeneutical aspects, semiotics, or even better a comparative semiotic theology as the one that I am striving to build, has something important to say. Semiotics distinguishes between two important linguistic concepts: intension and extension. Intension corresponds to the immediate references of a given term that we could find listed in a dictionary, whereas the quality of extension is inherent to the applicability of that term to a larger number of items which, for the phenomenon of infinite semiosis, could be limitless and therefore accredited to the status of encyclopedia. However, the concept of the infinite does not automatically equal the idea of being limitless. To say that the meaning of a certain phenomenon is at the same time infinite and with precise limits can sound quite paradoxical. However, it is possible to illustrate what apparently seems just an oxymoronic statement with the help of a simple example drawn from plane geometry: a line segment is bounded by two end points; however, it can contain infinite points as well as a line and a plane. Transferring this idea of “limited infinity” to Christology and, derivatively, to the hermeneutics of sacred texts means first of all recovering the relevance of literary meaning against any temptation to allegoric obsession. To consolidate my position, I refer to the reading of Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s pivotal work on biblical hermeneutics and his passionate defense of the literary meaning in the hermeneutics of the Christian Scriptures. The hermetic drift that affected many religions—Christianity included—insisted on an illusory mechanism: the idea that God’s speech is totally “other” than any human expression and that the depth of its meaning should be individuated beyond the level of the literal sense. This mechanism is what ultimately delivers us to a substantial Absence. Conversely, a Christological semiotic

approach demands the attentive consideration of all the potential surplus of meaning that the literary surface of the text already possesses and the sensing of its possible encyclopedic applicability. In the case of the analysis of a sacred text from another religious world, the recovery of the dictionary level of meaning cannot be reached without a serious and intellectually honest approach to the encyclopedic framework of the philosophy and theology of that tradition. For this reason, in the comparative enterprise, a true theological semiotic approach requires the attentive consideration of both the philological and the hermeneutical aspects simultaneously and of their mutual dependence.

Furthermore, particularly in the case of religious signs, it should not seem otiose to recover both the hermeneutical references and the metaphysical framework on which they insist. To offer a concrete example, we could imagine dealing with Jewish and Buddhist texts that are all centered on the literary theme of dreams; the descriptions that these texts report are so similar that we might be tempted to see either a direct derivation of this theme from the same sources or a mutual influence among those religious traditions. This is certainly possible, even if it is quite difficult to demonstrate effectively. However, interpreters should not overlook another paramount aspect: though similarly expressed, the same theme of dreams could function quite differently in different religious and literary contexts. While in Judaism dreams can be perceived and consequently described as phantasmagoric, tricky, and bizarre, on some occasions they can be interpreted as a presage of the future and can become a valid communicative instrument through which God speaks to His favorites and indicates His will. Conversely, in Buddhism, dreams have many other connotations. For instance, they can be the mirror image of the instability of reality, the vacuity of self, or the deception of language—all metaphysical standpoints that are almost unknown in Judaism and that are specific to the Buddhist worldview; recognition of these standpoints is
essential to the reconstruction of the overall meaning of the respective texts.

Hence, signs should always be read in close connection with the hermeneutical and metaphysical spheres to which they refer; only subsequently can they eventually be compared. In any case, one thing is certain: reconstructing the cultural context of a given sign always implies a sort of narrative. Semiotics shows how explicating a sign, and a metaphor in particular—though human language is somehow essentially metaphorical—necessitates the idea of narration. Thus, a sign begins to speak with more evidence as far as it is opportunely inserted in its proper semiotic chain of references; hence, narration is implied in every sign, and especially in religious symbols, to explicate which we usually need to recount something and to recover the memory of a story, myth, or fable. A religious sign is a narration in potency as much as sacred texts are narrations in act.

In their turn, scriptures are a sort of key code, so to speak—simultaneously metaphysical and existential—for accessing some distinct holistic worldviews whose faithful representation is almost impossible except under the form of a narrative. Strictly speaking, philosophical and theological treatises are just another form of narration that is distinct from pure fiction. Moreover, sacred texts must be studied as complex symbols themselves. If they are not easy to approach immediately as units of meaning, they can be treated as microcosms and as specific systems of signs that in referring to the actual cosmos are found to be in a symbolic relationship with it. “Symbol” is a Greek word that etymologically identifies an entity that connects and puts different realities together. To understand the sacred texts, therefore, it is necessary to look at the universe through them and to look at them through the universe. To maintain that the sacred texts were generated by an intense, all-encompassing experience of reality and a sensing of its meaning is correct; however, the contrary is also true, as the sacred texts themselves somehow generate a
“universe” while they are performed. In the believers’ eyes, the universe becomes an ordered and meaningful cosmos every time they resort to sacred texts to understand their position in the world. In any case, reading, interpreting, meditating, and representing sacred texts all insist on the narrative dimension.

There are other, deeper theological reasons for adopting a convinced narrative perspective. I have just mentioned the eminent role of scriptures as shrines of religious symbols, mirrors of deep intuition and complex worldviews. However, for many religious groups, and for Christians in a special way, sacred texts are also the most authoritative testimony of their history and the key to the faithful interpretation of their heritage. For Christians, God speaks in history, and it is through history that the Logos appears and communicates to human beings. This motive alone would be sufficient to show the necessity of narrative theology. In fact, history can be comprehended and preserved only if it is recounted. If the Logos speaks in history, it becomes necessary to connect theologically both the moment of the Incarnation and the time of the Church with the Heilsgeschichte of the Jewish people—and more generally, with the history of the world. God’s message is truly universal if it is able somehow to connect with the traditions, the chronicles, and the folklore of all the peoples on Earth. Wilfred Cantwell Smith is potentially right in affirming that all human history is a history of salvation. However, his position risks weakening, if not completely nullifying, the uniqueness and the inescapability of the mediation of Christ—and concurrently unhinging the true metaphysical foundations of the Christian thought: in the words of a well-known philosophical expression, Smith tends to sacrifice the individual on the altar of the universal. This would be not only contrary to the metaphysical view that Christianity promotes and that I have tried to delineate above, for which, in sum, the universal would not be truly

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839 Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 172.
universal if it were not concomitantly individual. It also diverges from what we see portrayed in
the biblical narrative, in particular with relation to the theme of God’s election, as when God shows
his preference for a single individual, who receives the benefit of a special relation of friendship
with Him and becomes His spokesperson for the sake of many. Thus, God’s covenant with an
individual person is always anticipatory and functions for the salvation of the people. Hence, the
Bible inseparably ties the level of the individual to that of the universal and so narratively
represents what would become a pivotal principle of Christian metaphysics.

According to a famous Hasidic dictum, God made man because he loves stories. Christians
could agree with this saying, but they can also add something more substantial regarding the person
of the Logos and His relation to the world. In the eternal generation of the Son, the possibility of
the Incarnation is somehow implied, and its narrative dimension is already somehow
contemplated. Hence, to reuse the same Jewish metaphor, we could say that God loves the stories
of people because they are able to reflect the Logos and thus are a powerful attestation of the truth
of the creation of everything in Christ. What is more, God loves stories because He loves the very
idea that His Son could have a story and this story actually took shape from the Incarnation. In The
Mystery of Time: A Theological Inquiry, Jean Mouroux does not come to the point of connecting
the aspect of Christ’s temporality with the necessity of a narrative perspective in theology.
However, his reflection on the correlation of the time factor both with Christ’s identity and with
his mission deserves to be rediscovered. Here, I will report only a single passage, although it is
sufficiently illustrative:

Christ’s temporal existence reveals and communicates eternity, because it is rooted in it
and springs from it at every moment. In time, Christ is the Being who transcends time but
is really expressed through time. His temporal existence is rooted in His mission. And His
mission is rooted in the act of eternal Procession. In this respect His mission itself is a
manifestation. But because Christ’s temporal existence is inaugurated by His acceptance

of the mission, the mission measures His appearance in time, His time-structuring psyche, His temporal activity—in short, His whole time.\footnote{Mouroux, \textit{The Mystery of Time}, 129 \[italics in the original\].}

Hence, Christological doctrine (and possibly its reference to the Trinitarian dimension), precisely on the basis of its semiotic structure, calls for the reevaluation of history and its importance, something that neither morphology nor structuralism, (despite their many benefits), were able sufficiently to safeguard. In consideration of the fact that signs acquire a surplus of meaning with the continuing shifting of the contexts—and in this, the time and space factors play a paramount role—semiotics permits the overcoming of the contrast between the synchronic and the diachronic approaches. Moreover, semiotic analysis promotes a consideration of both time and space that is simultaneously singular and synoptic because it is the interaction of these two factors that creates the condition of either the magnification or the narcotization of the symbolic connotations of a given sign. Thus, only a comparative narrative theology will be able to avoid losing focus on each perspective; while the comparative aspect insists more on the synchronic aspect, the narrative cannot help but taking up the diachronic dimension and regarding it in a special way.

no geographic boundaries, and it is curious to see what final image of religious literature it suggests. The concept of “story,” which our present culture conceives of as a closed and well-defined entity, is deeply influenced by the modern communication system. However, this idea is ultimately incapable of adequately explaining the process of narrative hospitality that not only characterized the formation of the major texts of world sacred literature from its beginnings, but has always affected literary production, and does so even more in the present global age. Intertextuality is, first of all, a concrete reality and not simply a desirable perspective of analysis. In biblical studies, the term “intertextuality” generally indicates the analysis of the possible sources of a given text, especially with reference to the continuous, inner allusion of the New Testament to its Old Testament background. The other possible references, such as the Judaic non-biblical writings and the pagan authorities, are treated as if they were just extratextual material, but this is not in line with the authentic concept of intratextuality as semiotics originally elaborated. Thus Julia Kristeva explains:

The term intertextuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of “study of sources,” we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality.

For Kristeva, intertextuality is the fundamental nature of all texts that are generally “constructed as a mosaic of quotations” or at least are the result of “the absorption and transformation” of other writings. World literature can probably be seen as a continuum of cross-references and of both linguistic and literary borrowings. Sacred texts did not lag behind in this respect. Although tied to a particular worldview, religious stories too, like other forms of literature,

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844 Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, 59.
can receive hospitality in the repertoire of other believers. This is especially probable when these stories excel in literary quality, when the facts they narrate are particularly intriguing and, last but not least, when they present some integration on the levels of their theological, the moral, and the spiritual teachings. If these motifs are able to strike the popular imagination, they usually generate further narrations in a continuing process of cross-references.

The harmonization of some literary motifs in a new narrative context is interesting and illuminating. In being welcomed, a story generally undergoes a series of significant adaptations to fit within the new literary frame and the general worldview the new contexts enshrine. Of course, the insertion of these foreign elements also modifies the hosts. The interweaving of pure mimetic reproductions, soft adaptations, and radical modifications presents significant data, which a comparative theological perspective can enlighten effectively and inspiringly.

If religious stories that were part of some specific religious domain have travelled the world and, despite some adaptation, remained substantially recognizable after becoming part of the scriptural corpus of other traditions, this means perhaps that sacred texts are “highways of the Spirit,” so to speak, that they are able somehow to connect people of different faiths, even if they are in conflict among each other. Sometimes some religious texts show themselves to be more in touch among themselves than their interpreters are. Hence, the mutual hospitality to other religious narratives is already a reality that religious texts indirectly promote. In any case, this does not invalidate what Marianne Moyaert proposes; in fact it rather corroborates her very wish:

I believe our world today stands in need of a spirit of interreligious hospitality that consists in transporting oneself into the sphere of meaning of a foreign tradition and in welcoming the other’s narrative tradition. This hospitality presumes an attitude of hermeneutical openness: believers give up a part of their control and mastery to become a guest in a strange narrative tradition. Precisely in this “letting go” of the familiar to make room for the unfamiliar, new and unexpected meanings can be found that give a unique depth to one’s own faith commitment. It is my conviction that such a spirit of interreligious
hospitality has the potential to break through the spiral of ethnocentric tendencies and assist in decreasing, or at least opening up discussions concerning, interreligious conflicts.\textsuperscript{846}

While it is quite hard to determine how and when in history the hospitality towards other religious narratives has effectively favored the relieving of interreligious tensions, it is more plausible to read sacred texts as unique documents that represent the secular practice of “letting go of the familiar to make room for the unfamiliar,” which stems from within many peoples, who, thanks to some cross-cultural encounters—at the same time fertile and controversial—were able to found their civilizations. From this perspective, comparative theology can truly enhance our knowledge of the history of contacts, perhaps unthought of, among nations and religions in the ancient world whose surprising interconnection is still not sufficiently acknowledged. Moreover, in studying this ancient cultural and religious mutuality, comparative theology may find a better way for establishing new methods for the contemporary exchange, besides its own proper field. However, what is most important to underline here is that the migration of religious stories requires the convinced adoption of a perspective that would be able to take sufficiently into account the interconnection of the synchronic and the diachronic functioning of given literary and religious \textit{topoi}. Once again, the necessity for a theology that would be concurrently comparative and narrative becomes evident.

Finally, if the comparative and the narrative aspects are intrinsic to Christian theology, how is it possible concretely to establish a fruitful and tenable comparison with other religious views without undermining the unique role of Jesus as both ultimate mediator and the \textit{princeps analogatum} of any religious sign? There is only one way that is consistent with these assumptions and more radically coherent with the \textit{depositum fidei}: that of opting for a comparison among texts

from different religious worlds and—above all—the adoption of the Christian Scriptures as the source, the basis and the parameter of that given comparison. While the first of these two points finds me perfectly in line with Francis X. Clooney and with the New Comparative Theology in general, the second marks a pronounced divergence of opinion among us. In Clooney’s case, in particular, despite his open declarations of faith and commitment to Christianity, the main perspective from which his comparison is technically conducted is the Hindu literary repertoire. While Clooney’s expertise is not questioned here, methodologically speaking, his approach is quite contradictory; a Christian theologian in dialogue with another religious tradition should never presume to be able to (or be allowed to) take the part of his or her interlocutors. No matter how expert one is on another tradition, if one announces an intention to do Christian theology and not simply engage in religious studies, one must first be consistent with the principles of his or her own theologizing. For Clooney and other Catholic comparative theologians, this means being at least receptive towards the lesson of Dei Verbum 24: “the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology.”

The major reason in favor of the adoption of the Bible as the parameter of any Christian comparative enterprise consists in the fact that the Bible itself, in its complex literary structure, somehow demands to be submitted to comparison; no differently than other sacred books, the Bible is the result of, to use Segal’s words, long and “complex processes of transmission, reworking, interpretation and redaction”847 in which various foreign elements were included. Although the redactional work undoubtedly often made the biblical stories seem like narrative units, to a more attentive eye the Bible as a whole and also the single books of which it is composed appear to be in the form of multilayered aggregates. The documentary hypothesis, despite the

847 Segal, The Most Precious Possession, 4, n. 10.

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various defects that contemporary critics have pointed out, and despite the high degree of
conjecturality involved in it, had the merit of trying to describe and understand this process of
adaptation and composition of various traditions into a single, closed literary entity. Thus Michael
Fishbane comments with regard to this method:

Fully appreciative of the long prehistory of many of the themes, legends, and teachings
now found in Scripture, and the fact that over time these deposits of tradition were adapted
to new situations and combined in new ways, the practitioners of this approach ideally seek
to discern the components of a tradition-complex, to trace their origins or attribution to
certain locales, and to show the profoundly new meanings which result as these materials
were integrated into more comprehensive units. At each stage in the traditio, the traditum
was adapted, transformed, or reinterpreted—be this by the use of old cult legends for
retelling the life of a patriarch, or the integration of traditions into major literary
complexes…. Materials were thus detribalized and nationalized; depolytheized and
monotheized; reorganized and reconceptualized.

Michael Fishbane’s thought is especially helpful to illustrate the nature both of the biblical
text and of biblical hermeneutics in terms of intertextuality. Fishbane sees in derivation, rather
than radical innovation, the driver of Judaism and the main source of the transformation of
religions in general. Such a dynamic and truly attentive hermeneutical perspective best suits my
idea of comparative theology in which precisely the close relation between inner- and extrabiblical
exegesis and the phenomenon of the creation of new scriptural traditions through derivation are at
stake.

In two of his most celebrated works, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel and The
Garments of the Torah, Fishbane focuses on inner-biblical and traditional Jewish extra-biblical

exegesis, not without considering the existence of other hermeneutical traditions that either have been generated within the same framework of the biblical worldview and later achieved an autonomous identity, or have possibly been affected by this worldview. However, it was not only “local Israelite materials,” such as “northern and southern pastoral, warrior or cultic legenda,” that were combined to create “an authoritative and valued anthology of traditions and a sense of national identity”\textsuperscript{852}; non-Israelite motifs, such as some “foreign mythic themes (like the primordial divine combat or the flood)” and “foreign legenda (like the destruction of Sodom)” were also integrated and adapted to “traditions leading to or expressive of Israelite history.”\textsuperscript{853}

Not only is the Bible the result of an adaptation of preceding narrative materials, some of them of foreign origin, but it is in its turn at the root of a continuing process of reinterpretation and creation of further narratives. This is perceivable first within the boundaries of the canon itself where the phenomenon of so-called inner-exegesis is commonly practiced. This phenomenon is worthy of special consideration. On the one hand, it is a clue to the authoritative nature of a certain traditum “whose religious-cultural significance” has been perceived as particularly “vital (and increasingly fundamental)”\textsuperscript{854} for the people of Israel. To give some examples, the events of the Exodus, the Revelation at Sinai and the conquest, represent the original narrative, theological, and possibly historical nucleus of the whole Torah, at least according to the major modern commentators.\textsuperscript{855} On the other hand, this process of continuing reinterpretation is evidence of the need “to preserve, render contemporary, or otherwise reinterpret these teachings or traditions in

\textsuperscript{852} Fishbane, \textit{Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel}, 6–7.
\textsuperscript{853} Fishbane, \textit{Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel}, 7.
\textsuperscript{854} Fishbane, \textit{Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel}, 8.
explicit ways for new times and circumstances.”

The stream of “textual comments and clarifications, scribal remarks and interpolations, and theological reactions and revisions” which are “among the principal traits of the exegesis within the Hebrew Bible itself,” represent also the specific perspective and hermeneutical attitude that always distinguished the Jewish approach to the world and implemented the various developments of its culture. Thus, the formation of classical Judaism can be described as marked at the same time by two apparently opposite movements: on the one hand, the establishment of the canon, “for through such closure the fluid and historically variable teachings preserved by different circles and parties—teachings which naturally promoted and supported varieties of theological and social concerns—became the inviolate record of divine speech and action.”

On the other hand, it is precisely this notion of the sacrality of the written text of the Bible that “was gradually protected, qualified, and even extended by hermeneutical systems which reopened the closed text.” It is this paradox, which is quite visible in the traditional belief in the two Torahs—“the one written and the other oral, but both given coterminously at Sinai”—that permitted the Pharisaic sages to lay claim “to the true chain of interpretation whereby the written Torah was to be historically renewed” and to exclude those groups which had different interpretations.

However, the establishment of the Pharisaic hermeneutical tradition did not prevent other religious bodies continuing in the same stream of biblical reference and re-interpretation and so constituting “an innovative traditio, continuous with the Hebrew Bible but decidedly something new, something not ‘biblical’”—if we may use that word for the moment as indicating the ancient

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856 Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel, 8.
857 Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel, 10.
858 Fishbane, The Garments of the Torah, 123.
859 Fishbane, The Garments of the Torah, 123.
860 Fishbane, The Garments of the Torah, 123
Israelite *traditum* which forms the basis for the exegetical claims of Christianity and Islam.\textsuperscript{861}

Hence, with Fishbane we can conclude that:

The Tannaitic sources (followed by the Rabbis of the Talmud), the Gospels and Pauline writings (followed by the Church Fathers), and the Qur’ān (followed by the Doctors of Islam) are three post-biblical streams of tradition which are based on the Hebrew Bible but have each transformed this *traditum* in radically diverse ways.\textsuperscript{862}

Apparently, the influence of the biblical texts and of the traditions that they generated was not restricted only to the sphere of the so-called Abrahamic religious heritage. Given the impressive spread of Jews throughout the ancient world for trade reasons and especially after both the exile and the diaspora, it is quite probable that the Jewish repertoire of religious stories has somehow influenced the literary production in other religious universes. At least the recovering in Asian literature of some recurrent literary motifs that resemble biblical models raise the question of the possibility of mutual dependence among these far distant cultural and religious worlds.

To put it briefly, the Bible appears to be a crossroads of narrative and religious references. This idea deserves consideration, since it could lead to some significant theological insights, not least because from this perspective it would seem to be particularly suitable to be compared with other sacred books. Moreover, if it is truly the result of the combination and the adaptation of various traditions, some of them originating in other religious literary repertoires, the Bible should become the focus of serious comparative enterprises above all in order to be better understood.

Hence, the Bible is the true perspective for reading other religious literary tradition. While this cannot be imposed upon others, it should be given precedence at least by Christians. The Christian Scriptures should be the “canon,” the measure for approaching other sacred texts. Even when, in a given comparative enterprise, we are not specifically dealing with some biblical texts

\textsuperscript{861} Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 10.

\textsuperscript{862} Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 10.
but with other specimens of the Christian tradition, adopting Scriptures as a canon in our comparative projects means, as Lindbeck suggested, being nonetheless Bible-minded, so as to inscribe the extra-biblical realities into the world of the Christian Scriptures. The word “canon” is here intentionally evocative; it not only refers to a general concept that is now either accepted or analogically employed by many religious traditions to describe the collection—more or less open—of what they consider their authoritative Scriptures; it is also a hint to a well-established Christian doctrine that has been elaborated through the centuries especially after the Marcionite crisis in the second century and, for Catholics, definitively systematized in some doctrinal pronouncements about this matter at the Council of Trent. I am perfectly conscious that the resort to the question of canon may raise more problems than it can actually solve. However, as I have tried to show above, the relationship between the two related dimensions of intratextuality on the one hand, which Lindbeck sponsored firmly, and intertextuality on the other, toward which the New Comparative theology is particularly inclined, still needs a convincing conciliation. I believe that only by rediscussing the question of the canon and sharpening its comprehension will it eventually be possible to settle the important problem of the interrelation between intratextuality and intertextuality. We need to distinguish between intrabiblical intertextuality and extrabiblical intertextuality and organize the spectrum of intertextual references in four concentric circles: texts that are strictly speaking canonical, intertestamental texts, other texts especially from the same period, and sacred texts from different religious traditions. However, the recognition of the relevance of intrabiblical intertextuality can favor the discovery of either direct or indirect relations

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with the other three intertextual spheres. Then, the more we get to know of the laborious and progressive phases of formations of the actual canon and the complex inner interconnection that ties the various books of the Bible, the more we can become more favorable in understanding the rule of the Scriptures’ authoritativeness as a “measuring stick” (in Greek kanōn) that can be employed theologically *ad intra* and *ad extra*; *ad intra* because for authenticity’s sake some boundaries had to be drawn by the churches between those texts that were generally considered authoritative since they faithfully represented and adhered to the rule of faith, and those texts that were perceived as either ambiguous or manifestly adverse. But since the measuring stick is an instrument that is modeled to measure something other than itself, the canon is itself open and functional to others *ad extra*.

Thus, if we recover the Jewish idea of Scripture, on which the Christian Bible compilers at least initially insisted, we can come to delineate a less exclusivist idea of the canon itself. When we think of a story, we immediately envision its written form. On the contrary, in the ancient world, stories were orally transmitted to preserve some crucial communal memory. Nonetheless, in the course of narration some poetic license was not only accepted but also recognized as a sign of the narrator’s skill. Therefore, different versions of the same story were continually created. However, the need arose for a single version in which all the community could find unity. The process of redaction of the sacred texts was usually connected to the necessity of preserving these stories in their most religiously pregnant and beautiful versions. Some exemplary variants were collected in a single account. However, those official versions were never intended to be exclusive. In fact, even if the written form of these stories was also conceived to save their authenticity from the deviations of heterodox groups, those texts were never used to limit the possibilities for new elaboration. On the contrary, the canons arose generally to show the community an official model
that would be a reference for further variations. Moreover, some recent studies on the intertestamental period, the deuterocanonical and Apocryphal literature, the Qumran manuscripts and the Nag Hammadi Gnostic library show how critically the final redaction of the Bible is found somehow to debate, dispute, and dialogue with all these literary and religious materials.\textsuperscript{865}

To substantiate the idea of the canon as the perspective and, analogically speaking, the “reading rule” of other religious literary repertoire, I will briefly introduce my future comparative endeavors under the name “Genesis project.” They have the capacity of introducing readers to the meaning of this approach and its related matters inductively and, therefore, more immediately. Among all the books of the Bible, Genesis is, in my opinion, the most apt to be studied comparatively. According to modern exegesis, it presents a conspicuous stratification of literary material inspired by various sources, often from the sacred literature of the surrounding peoples.\textsuperscript{866}

It then seems to have generated further narrations in its likeness, influencing other religious environments. Hence, it is my intention to analyze at least those Genesis accounts that, on the one


hand, modern criticism recognized as marked by foreign narrative traits and, on the other hand, history of religions hypothesized to be at the root of some further literary elaborations in other religious contexts. I would like to investigate at least the following accounts in light of both their possible foreign authorities and their Wirkungsgeschichte: the stories of creation, the flood, Abraham’s preparedness to sacrifice his son, and Joseph and his brothers. However, I prefer to follow the reverse path, namely to start my analysis from the last chapters of Genesis and proceed all the way back to the account of creation. This is due to the principle that it is better to deal first with material that is circumscribed to certain limited areas than more general subject matters such as the origins of the universe. However, the special nature of the story of Joseph has also led me to envision this backwards itinerary. Not only does it reveal clear dependence on some foreign literary motifs, it has also traveled the world, being welcomed in very distant religious traditions. Moreover, the story itself has a remarkable emphasis on the question of sign interpretation, so that it will be clear that it is not just a pretext for affirming that in some way it inspired the elaboration of a theological semiotic perspective.

However, this projects would not be truly beneficial if they were not closely tied to a reconsideration of the conceptual tools that we could adopt in the comparative enterprise. Hence, I dare to outline here some of the points that a renewed theological investigation of the canon should at least consider:

• It is necessary to survey the various forms of Scriptural collections, at least in the major religious traditions, and present both a phenomenological analysis and a comparative study of their characteristics in order to clarify whether and how the concept of the canon is adequate to express the broad need to establish a list of some authoritative sacred texts.

• It would be interesting to continue the speculation over the affinity and the correlation
between God’s Word and human words on the basis of Trinitarian and Christological principles: in the Christian Scriptures, the ontological and ultimately Trinitarian problem of the one and the many is reflected precisely in the idea of the canon and the very name of “Bible”: as a whole, the Bible is a single book that is nevertheless made up of multiple books (ta biblia). At the same time, as the recent canonical criticism advocates, despite all the corrections and the improvements that this approach certainly necessitates, the Christian Scriptures can always be read as a single unit of meaning.\(^6\) Thus, on the Christological side of the inquiry, it would be fascinating to meditate in more depth on the divine-human nature of the Christian Scriptures (and perhaps of Scriptures in general) in light of the identification of the Incarnate Logos with Jesus.

- The relationship between the Masoretic text, the intertestamental literature and the Christian canon should be adequately investigated with a special focus on the Jewish conception of Scriptures, especially in conceiving the special interrelation between Oral and Written Torah and its possible influences on Christianity. Also, the opposite movement should become a matter of analysis: in fact, the Christian canon could have stimulated the systematization of the Masoretic text. Like in an atom, where the electrons revolve around the nucleus, so the Tanakh consists of a hard core (the Torah) to which a series of texts were subsequently added. The material to which these texts were concretely transcribed—the scroll—was relevant in determining the conception itself of Scriptures as an “open” collection that is constituted by subsequent addictions. Conversely, the codex necessitates some designated boundaries and, therefore, progressively

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characterizes the idea of Scriptures under the form of a more closed entity, namely the book, as it is generally envisioned today. The possible projection of the Jewish “atomistic” idea of the Scriptures on the Christian canon should be reevaluated.

- It is crucial to reconsider concepts of Scripture in conjunction with that of Tradition, and the relationship between their oral/aural and written aspects. The anteriority in time and the precedence in relevance of the oral/aural aspect of the Jewish and only to some extent the Christian texts, compared to their written form, should be observed in light of some similar instances in other religious traditions and the phenomenon of oral commentaries on Scriptures eventually being put in a written form that ends up enduring a canonization that makes them themselves a sort of Scriptures.

- The age-old question of the dialectical relationship between the Old and New Testaments should be reexamined also in light of some recent exegetical experiments in intertextuality beyond the very classic theme of the typological interpretation of the Fathers of the Church and the modern commentaries on the New Testament use of the Old Testament. As Ulrich Luz affirms:

    Thus the biblical basis of New Testament texts is greatly enlarged. Discovering the “biblical soil” of most New Testament texts is not only a matter of the biblical texts quoted in the New Testament, but it is also a matter of allusions to the Bible, and, even more, the whole of the biblical world in ancient Jewish interpretation.

- Regarding the relation between Scripture and Tradition, it is urgent that we deepen our knowledge on the intertestamental period, the Apocalyptic and the Baptist movements, the deuterocanonical and Apocryphal literature, the Qumran manuscripts and the Gnostic libraries with special consideration of those books that, although they were never inserted into the final

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redaction of the Bible, pertain to the apostolic period and were especially revered by some communities and reported among the list of the authoritative texts by some Fathers of the Church.

- Finally, a comparison among the canons that the various Christian confessions recognize and preserve is of absolute importance. The adoption of the Christian Scriptures as a heuristic and theological instrument in interreligious comparisons requires a consensus among the Christian confessions on a less exclusivist conception of canon. In this regard, the previous reconsideration of the value of the intertestamental literature should facilitate the reconciliation of the different positions, as the exegetical studies in various Christian confessions seem to forecast. Once again, one thing should be recalled here: the question of interreligious exchanges is closely tied to the ecumenical issue. Only if Christians are sincerely open to dialogue and the possibility of overcoming any dissent among them can interreligious comparisons truly become theologically fruitful and furnish a less vague and confusing image of both the Christian worldview and those of the other religions.
Interpreting the Bible in relation to other religions is among the most far-reaching and challenging tasks facing the Christian community today. The history of Christian interpretations of the Bible includes many diverse strands and concerns, including countless conflicts over methodology and hermeneutics and many conflicting conclusions concerning proper belief and practice. Both as individuals and as communities, we understand ourselves in relation to those with whom we differ. How we interpret and negotiate differences in relationships is among the most important factors shaping our identity. Further, relations with other religious traditions powerfully shape the horizon of Christian interpretation of the Bible. Running through all discussions of the Bible are at least implicit attitudes and assumptions regarding other religious traditions. Whether or not these attitudes and assumptions are the object of explicit reflection, they are among the most powerful factors shaping the way Christians understand the biblical texts and relate to other religious bodies.\footnote{Leo D. Lefebure, \textit{True and Holy: Christian Scriptures and Other Religions} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014), 8–9.}

Like the story of Joseph, we too have completed a long journey in search of a new theological foundation for Christian comparative theology. Now the time has come to recapitulate the major points on which I base my proposal as well as offer further comments and possibly new insight.

First of all, the main intention was to offer a general idea of comparative theology and interreligious efforts that are compatible with my own faith adherence but are at the same time at least distinct from (if not alternative to) those visions that, in recent times, have been produced within my own denomination and that I consider quite restrictive. In particular, I wanted to elaborate a theology that was originally and sincerely in line with the magisterium as expressed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, in delineating my own concept of comparative theology, I have been deeply inspired by Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter \textit{Ecclesiam Suam}, which introduced and explained the key concept of “dialogue” in terms of four concentric circles: mankind, the worshippers of the One God, all Christians, and Catholics. I simply reversed
the order of these circles in the conviction that, since Paul VI’s indications principally regard the
relationships between the Church and world in general, they would need to be adapted in order to
equip comparative theology with a more convincing theological foundation. Hence, as I recalled
the teachings that the Catholic Church has produced with reference to the dialogue with other
religions, I tried to connect this patrimony of thought with other Christian perspectives that I saw
as distinct from but compatible with what the Church of Rome has affirmed. In particular, the
reconsideration of the theological visions in *Dei Verbum* in light of other Christian confessions
permitted me to deepen my own original perspective and at the same time to realize that there is
still room for some new development in the comprehension of Christian doctrine. I feel that it is
especially urgent for Catholic theology to reassess the conception of the supereminent role of the
Bible within the Tradition as it was conceived by Luther and after him by the churches that were
born from the Reformation, and to reconsider the Christological discourses that were produced in
other Christian confessions. In particular, it is crucial to rediscover those ancient oriental churches
that were improperly defined as monophysite and which, through the phenomenon of so-called
uniatism have partly reentered the Catholic sphere, bringing with them a theological patrimony
that the Latin churches need to know and appreciate better. Hence, it is essential that ecumenical
questions be first thematized adequately and then applied and extended to interreligious debate.
However, it is always possible that the encounter with other religious worldviews might bring to
theological attention some ecumenical issues that have not yet been sufficiently contemplated.

Second, the concept of religion as an all-encompassing view that safeguards the meaning
of the whole and serves as the key to the comprehension of various levels of reality and their
interconnections has two important consequences: for theology, it demands the reevaluation of the
contribution that other sciences can offer for the recovery and the recollection of the numerous
portions of truth that are scattered throughout human knowledge and experience. In this regard, I believe that Tillich’s method of correlation is still valuable. However, it needs to be somehow reassessed in light of the present cultural framework in which both science and technology play a primary role, and eventually strengthened by the inclusion of the experimental sciences. On other hand, for philosophy and the other perspectives of thought, my concept requires the acquisition of a new kind of intellectual humility since no single perspective—be it either nihilistic, materialistic, sociological, naturalistic, psychological, spiritualistic or otherwise—is able on its own to grasp the meaning of the whole and, moreover, to preserve it. The reductionist tendency that is perceivable throughout both philosophical and scientific speculation is the result of the superimposition of a single perspective over the others. It is precisely because religion cannot be reduced to the status of a mere sectorial perspective that is pretending to name the whole that it can claim for itself the duty of synthesising. However, within this holistic pretension lie also tendencies towards absolutism and fundamentalism that are all too often perceivable in religions, even those that are more used to preaching peace and non-violence. In view of this fact, honest, permanent dialogue among religions, sciences, and even agnostic views can lead to unveiling not only the reductionist fallacy that is inherent to any ideological discourse but also the intrinsic, imperialistic inclinations of religions.

However, in order to readjust the hierarchy of relations among the different sciences and pull things together again, it is necessary to recognize that starting from the Enlightenment, and more specifically with Hegel, a significant restructuring of the hierarchy of knowledge was attempted. Incidentally, Hegel described the Absolute Spirit in terms of art, religion, and philosophy in his very influential work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although all three fields

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represented for him the apex of human experience and reflection, it is not accidental that in his system, philosophy came to take precedence. This shift had a tremendous impact on Western intellectual life (and beyond!), and almost all the major philosophical forms of skepticism and suspicion toward religion in the last century were either influenced by, or drew inspiration directly from it. Indeed, I am convinced that in the hierarchy of knowledge, religion should regain its original, preeminent place—not in order to extinguish philosophy but to reestablish the original, more telling order. In fact, originally, both art and philosophical reasoning found their origin within mythic and religious discourses. Moreover, Scriptures enshrined and safeguarded a sort of metaphysics in narrative form that, unlike the more contingent and fashionable philosophical trends and systems of thought, can hardly collapse since human beings are made to listen to narratives and are themselves stories, as Nicholas Lash suggested:

I am not arguing that human beings are incapable of metaphysics, or that they ‘only’ tell stories (a formulation which betrays the rationalist’s mistrust of narrative as a vehicle of truth). It would be more accurate to say that narrative comes first, and that the formal systems we construct—whether in philosophy or science—are coloured, shaped, determined, by the story-telling soil from which they spring.\textsuperscript{872}

Third, it will be useful to recall here some of the reasons in favor of the comparative enterprise. Beyond an undoubted increase in knowledge and the encounter with other ways of perceiving reality and its meaning, comparison is worthwhile because it can enhance self-understanding. At first glance, this sentence could seem contradictory if our intention in opening ourselves to comparison is to avoid any cultural hegemony. Nevertheless, the philosophical path of modernity in the West has demonstrated just the opposite—from Schopenhauer to phenomenology and existentialism, numerous scholars have held that in the cognitive act, the subject is always implied. Therefore, knowing the world ultimately means knowing ourselves.

\textsuperscript{872} Lash, \textit{The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion,’} 18.
However, this statement does not have to be interpreted in a strictly subjectivist way. In fact, if the subject is also somehow the object of knowledge, it is consequently true that subjects are not simply “autonomous” in their epistemological efforts, since they are always determined and influenced by cultures. In the field of religion, it follows that when believers come into contact with different spiritual experiences, they are always called to re-think their own original understanding. Comparison favors the true appreciation of other religious traditions in themselves, at least to the extent of what is gnoseologically feasible and available to us. The fact that subjects are always implied in any cognitive act does not necessarily lead us to extinguish reality in the sphere of the mind, as if it were a mere projection. On the contrary, the attentive consideration of the relevance of the subjects in the act of knowing allows us to read the phenomena that we are studying in a more objective way. In fact, biases can lose their influence only when they are recognized honestly and attentively. This can be generally attested, but it is more evident in the case of interreligious exchanges where contact with diversity can help one to grow in sensibility and deepen one’s own knowledge of spiritual life.

As Müller contended, “He who knows only one religion knows none.”\textsuperscript{873} Hence, comparison “enhances our understanding of the general phenomenon of religion.”\textsuperscript{874} If we are able to recognize the differences of the others and avoid subjecting them to our own vision, this is due to the fact that religion is a universal phenomenon. Diversity, in fact, can be perceived only on the basis of a shared experience. Then, if we are allowed to explore the different ways in which the relationships among the cosmos, the sacred, and the human are differentiated, this is because all human beings have a minimum conception of what “cosmos,” “sacred,” and “human” mean. In

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this vision of religion as a universal phenomenon, it is possible to study it both as a whole and in its variants; we find the echo of several philosophical authorities such as morphology, structuralism, and cultural anthropology in general. After all, as Carr and Ivanhoe affirmed, “Religious studies began as a comparative enterprise.” From whatever perspective religion has been researched—social, historical, or philosophical—it has been a comparative study. Wach, Weber, Müller, Hume, Kant, and Hegel have all applied some sort of comparative perspective to their studies on the matter of religion. Since the comparative approach pertains to the nature not only of comparative theology but also of religious studies in general, being comparative means, on the one hand, respecting a precious heritage of studies and being attentive to their primary intuitions; on the other hand, it means contributing to the future of the various disciplines that focus on religion, since without continuing renewal rooted in the comparative approach, these disciplines run the risk of stifling growth. Collaboration and exchange among scholars within and beyond the same field and the positive involvement of academic perspectives are always advisable. While for religious studies this is strictly recommended, comparative theology should be rooted in a fundamental, broad dialogical approach.

Fourth, I strove to classify and evaluate the major trends in both the old and the new comparative theology. In order to present how comparative theology is currently treated, I resorted to the most important classics, and also to a series of new works and a set of representative articles drawn from some major journals on the study of religion and theology. As standards for their selection, I employed the following criteria: On the one hand, I tried to be as comprehensive as possible in my choices by selecting articles from the most important American and European journals. On the other hand, I gave voice to various distinct approaches by searching beyond the

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875 Carr and Ivanhoe, *The Sense of Antirationalism*, xi.
noted scholars whose distinctive perspectives are already well known. From my extensive examination, I deduced that comparative theology is caught in some struggles between different trajectories of thought and, because of this, is still inclined somehow to mirror those dichotomies in the midst of which it has developed. However, not only do I consider overcoming those intellectual fractures possible (and even necessary) but I also see comparative theology as precisely that discipline that can bridge the gap among the sciences of religion and possibly beyond these branches of thought. In particular, I see the present evolution within the new comparative theological project with respect to the choice to deal with particularities and, above all, texts more than religious ideas, as the logical outcome of a long itinerary in search of a plausible methodology. Moreover, I declared that a semiotic, narrative comparative approach can be the solution not only to the problem of the methodological weakness that has been imputed to comparative theology since the beginning, but also to the disagreements that afflict and divide the wide field of both religious and theological studies. My vision of both semiotics and narrative theology surely depends on theological reflection, but it tries more broadly to find connections with other philosophical views: linguistics, phenomenology, historical criticism, hermeneutics, and experimental sciences.

Fifth, as God’s Trinitarian Revelation can be interestingly described in semiotic terms, the ecclesiological and Christological doctrines can enlighten us about the inner circularities and the complex dynamics of both biblical hermeneutics and human semiosis in general. In particular, I tried to demonstrate how the perennial problem which Cimatti, de Certeau, Heidegger, and Eco, each in his own way considered somehow unsolvable—that the search for ultimate meaning cannot but lead to an Absence—can be better comprehended and eventually obviated thanks to the resort to the Christological discourse. The Aristotelian aporia of Being can be solved only if we come to
conceive an *ipsum esse* that is not beyond the world because it is capable of fully manifesting itself in a single *ens*. As a matter of fact, the universal would not be truly universal if it were not particular, otherwise something relevant would be excluded from its dimension. Since reality has been conceived and shaped in Christ, the divine Word, the entire reality participates in this source of its existence and is directed toward it, so that the Incarnation can be seen as the accomplishment of the kenotic process of the *ipsum esse* taking part with the *entes*. The beings that were made most similar to its likeness—human beings—in their intimate nature bear the traces of the divine attributes and manifest them especially in their performative acts of locution. God’s self-revelation is intrinsically kenotic since it puts God Himself at risk of misunderstanding and misuse. As a matter of fact, evil can enter the world through deceit and lies. Whereas God’s Word creates, reshapes, and infuses spirit into matter, evil tends toward breakdown, annihilation, and non-sense. Linguistically speaking, evil can be better described as the radical disintegration of the relationships among thought, feelings, language, action and reality.

However, that the Christological foundation of human semiosis leads us to a Presence rather than an Absence is well illustrated by a luminous example: that of Jesus’s name itself. The Hebrew name *Y’hōshūa’* (and its shortened form *Yeshūa’* from which the Greek *Ιēsous* comes) is a compound term that can be properly rendered with the expression “God saves or delivers.” Thus, Christians believe that the perfect correspondence between language and reality that characterized the intention and the proper aspect of God’s creation from the beginning but that evil has broken has been finally restored in Christ. This is what Jesus’s disciples witnessed: his word is singularly powerful and able to perform signs and miracles, and in this the ancient prophecies seem to have found their fulfillment, as in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus himself attests in response to John the Baptist’s question of whether he is the one who is to come (Mt 11:4–5): “the blind receive
sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” What is more, in Jesus’s name the disciples themselves will perform the works that he did, and, from what was promised to them, even greater than those (see John 14:12). Hence, in the name of Jesus lies a fundamental mystery: that of the perfect correspondence between language and reality and the possibility for human beings to find the same kind of coherence and consistency in their way of speaking and, more importantly, of living. In this regard, it would be very interesting to reconsider, from a semiotic perspective, the deep theological richness and spiritual profundity of the Orthodox hesychastic practice of the Jesus Prayer.

Ultimately, it is from the Christological principle that we justify both the propensity of comparative theology to deal with particularities, and its effort to study other religious phenomena, not simply from a Christian perspective but, first, according to the specific hermeneutical criteria of the traditions under analysis. The Christological principle of human semiosis can be applied to other case studies because of the nature of Christ as the Revelation of the self-emptying God. In him, there is a coincidentia oppositorum between the fullness of Being and the “emptiness” of a mercy that permits others to be really other. If we read from this angle the phenomenon of human semiosis and in particular sacred language that is its most illustrative specimen, we can come to realize how the Absence is transformed into a Presence without actually losing its ineffability; it acquires luminosity and makes itself more accessible, without ever becoming either possessed or easily manipulated. Human words, and sacred texts in particular, can lead us to a Presence as long as we do not fall into the common tendency of searching for the meaning beyond and against the limits of the literary sense. The hermeneutic drift, which is perceivable in all religious literature including that of Christianity, is, on the one hand, inevitable since it is at the basis of the process of the creation of meaning, especially on the occasion of a shifting in context; on the other hand,
it can be effectively controlled with an attentive consideration of the literary meaning, which is potentially infinite but never limitless. Plane geometry teaches us that it is possible to conceive a limited but still infinite entity: a segment which, while being limited, is nonetheless made up of infinite points. The attentiveness to the literary meaning with relation first to the immediate references (“dictionary”) and then to all the other possible references that the shifting of contexts might determine (“encyclopedia”) should be a necessary step to be honored in all religious discourses and, above all, in biblical hermeneutics. In conclusion, rather than seeking the metaphysical foundations in some philosophical, ontotheological collateral visions, we should first learn to receive Christianity as a sort of metaphysics itself.

Sixth, I proposed the idea of adopting the biblical canon first as the reading rule and the measure of Christian Tradition, and then as a way to access the narrative patrimony that other sacred texts enclose. The paradox of the Bible dwells in its being at the same time a source and a product of Tradition. However, this circularity can be seen as virtuous rather than vicious, at least according to a Catholic perspective. In fact, Tradition is the evidence of God’s walking with His people throughout history. This God’s nearness never ceased with the fullness of Revelation in Christ but was rather renewed through the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost: hence, God continues to speak through history and Tradition. However, because of the natural human tendency to confuse things that are actually just habits or institutionalized hindrances to the Spirit (Mt 15:6) with God’s will, it is necessary to find some criteria in order to detect God’s intervention in human traditions. Thus, the Bible can be recognized both as the driver of Tradition and at the same time the viewing angle through which Tradition itself can be ultimately evaluated. This imbalance between the two terms of comparison is due to the special nature of the former with respect to the latter. While it is true that the Bible itself is the fruit of a traditional process of formation and transmission,
nonetheless there is no other part of the Christian patrimony that can lay claim to being the most authoritative trace of God’s passing through this world and speaking to humans face to face in Jesus Christ. The Bible does not simply contain the *ipsissima verba iesu* (or what seems to be closest to them); it also relates what God did for the world, His people, and those who are reborn in His beloved son, and in relating these things offers different interpretations of them. Above all, the Bible is so authoritative and supereminent within the Tradition since it is a link to the mystery of Jesus, his story, and his person. If it is true that both Law and Prophets bear witness to Jesus (Lk 24:27; Jn 1:45), the Bible as a whole is all the more, within the system of Tradition, the first “traditional witness” to Jesus and his mystery. Ultimately, the divine-human nature can be preached not only of the person of Jesus but, derivatively, also of the Christian Scriptures, and this is what makes them supereminent in the Tradition’s proceeding. However, it is always crucial to remember that if Christian Scriptures are a “canon,” this is principally due to the fact that Jesus Christ himself is the “canon” of God’s Revelation.

When the Bible is understood in this way, as the source, the fruit, the driver, and the measuring rule of Tradition, it can also be employed as a “canon” for other religious narrative heritages. What apparently seems to be just a hegemonic superimposition is in reality a stimulating exercise in intertextuality that can open new horizons of comprehension in both directions: for a renewed understanding of the Christian scriptures and as a way of approaching diverse religious worldviews. Global literature is nothing but a crossroads of continuing references through either echoes, hints, direct quotations, or literary loans, and the Bible and other sacred texts are no exception in this regard. Rather, because of the wide migration of religious and ethical stories, sacred texts, like other forms of literary production, turn out to be already in contact with one another, sometimes even more than their interpreters could imagine. To approach the spectrum of
continuing literary cross-references that world religious literature with its multifaceted meanings represents, it is necessary to have at our disposal some instrument that can be truly appropriate for measuring the object that we want to access. The Bible is particularly apt for this purpose: it is itself a network of references, which reveals throughout its dependence on other preceding narrative authorities and at the same time provides the materials for further creative expressions in its own likeness, even in very distant worlds. The idea that, because of its nature as a crossroads of references, the Bible might be used as the canon for reading other scriptures could also perhaps be maintained by other believers for their own sacred texts. Muslims, for example, would use the Qur’ān as the canon against which the Bible is measured. However, those who want to be authentically Christian in their theologizing must certainly choose the Bible rather than other scriptural texts as the rule for intertextual readings and must leave other believers to do the same with their own scriptures. It is interesting to compare what a Hindu or a Muslim, for instance, is able to get from approaching the Bible through the lens of either the Bhagavadgītā or the Qur’ān. While this is quite desirable and possibly fruitful, for Christians it is absolutely vital to elect if not the Bible as such then at least a Bible-minded approach as the angle of view for their comparative endeavor, to recall what Lindbeck suggested.876 Thus, while it is always legitimate to study a text of the Christian heritage in comparison with parallels in other tradition, the ultimate reference for either presenting or evaluating the Christian worldview should in any case be the Bible.

Seventh, even though Christ is really the “canon” of Revelation and revelations, we established a model that goes beyond the three classical alternative paradigms in theology of religions—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism—and yet is not opposed to them. Thus, another sort of theology of religions can be delineated that will be able to avoid the pitfalls of the classic

models of thought. All three classical positions preserve important insights, but none of them alone is able to fully integrate the others’ portions of truth in a comprehensive and convincing way. To offer an immediately understandable example, a true pluralist should at least tolerate, if not accept, an exclusivist view.

The canonical perspective I have applied to interreligious matters shows that a kind of coexistence of the three paradigms is possible and perhaps advisable. On the one hand, my view is exclusivist in the sense that I see only in the Bible the rule of my own faith and the measure for evaluating other inspirations. However, the action of reading other sources of religious inspiration through the Christian scriptures responds to the need to somehow anticipate the eschatological recapitulation of everything in Christ so that nothing good in this world will be lost. Thus, if the canon is to become somehow functional, not for excluding other literary patrimony but to making it accessible, this makes my position appear rather inclusivist. Finally, my approach is still of a heuristic and asymptotic nature since I am fully aware that, however careful I might be in approaching these other spiritual heritages, in their own contexts other scriptures can function differently, can have a distinct value and a different interpretation than the one I can provide from my own particular viewpoint. This is ultimately a kind of pluralistic outlook.

While the three paradigms can appear truly illuminating only if they are made to interact, only a Trinitarian foundation for theology of religions can ultimately guarantee the uniqueness of other religious paths, releasing theology of religions from the aridity and the insoluble contradictions of both past and recent proposals but without betraying the principles of Christian faith. Although my position does not coincide fully with that of Mark Heim,877 I certainly agree with the way he encapsulates his nuanced and innovative position with regard to a Trinitarian

foundation for theology of religions:

Since Trinity is constituted by an enduring set of relations, the divine life has varied dimensions. So human interaction with the triune God may take different forms. It is impossible to believe in the Trinity instead of the distinctive religious claims of all other religions. If Trinity is real, then many of these specific religious claims and ends must be real also. If they were all false, then Christianity could not be true. The universal and exclusive quality of Christian confession is the claim to allow the fullest assimilation of permanently co-existing truths. The Trinity is a map that finds room for, indeed requires, concrete truth in other religions.\(^{878}\)

Indeed, I am convinced that a Trinitarian perspective and a revised pneumatology can favor the elaboration of a theology of religions that is able to connect all the good intuitions of the three classical schemas in an original and consistent way, and help Christians to recognize the *vestigia Trinitatis* in the actual singularity of other religious paths.

In conclusion, the eventual recognition of the value of other traditions is in my view the direct result of the acknowledgment of the eminence of Christianity over any other religious paths. In fact, it is the event of Incarnation and the work of the economic Trinity that permits us to conceive of the immanent Trinity and the intra-Trinitarian relationships, and to detect the different human interactions with the triune God that the other religious traditions may manifest. Ultimately, this corresponds to a form of apologetics. However, we should call it “inverse apologetics,” in the sense that it strives to show the uniqueness and value of the Christian faith through the positive, objective evaluation of other religious paths, according to their own theological discourses and hermeneutical principles. Apologetics is intrinsic to Christian theology; this is a kind of refrain that we can easily hear in fundamental theological debates. However, I do not think, as Cornille does, that apologetics in interreligious exchanges must necessarily be inhospitable.\(^{879}\) I am not

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\(^{878}\) Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 167 [italics in the original].

\(^{879}\) Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 183–86.
interested either in an apology for apologetics, to use Paul Griffiths’ words. Within the Christian religious symbolic system, style is not something accidental but substantial. There is no teaching of Jesus that is separated from his life-style. Jesus’ way of living and treating peoples, even those from other religious traditions, like the centurions and also the Syrophoenician woman whom he apparently insulted and then praised for her faith, is good news. More radically, Jesus teaches us that every encounter can be potentially “revelatory” in the sense that through the words, life, and faith of other people we are invited to enter more deeply into the mystery of God and to discern the vestigia Trinitatis that are scattered both throughout the world and in humanity despite all the corruption that evil may have brought about.

Generally, those theologians who want to justify apologetics in light of scriptural teaching refer to 1 Pt 3:15: “But in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” Nonetheless, they are often tempted to pass over in silence what follows in verse 16, which, indeed, is absolutely relevant: “yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” It is recommended that comparative theologians as well as theologians in general should take this into account.

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ABBREVIATIONS


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