

# **Theology and Non-Western Philosophy**

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## Introduction

As contemporary Western theologians consider the relationship between theology and philosophy they are aware as never before of the presence of the many highly sophisticated non-Western traditions of intellectual reflection on religious themes that show many similarities to those central to Western theology, such as revelation, God, creation, and the nature and destiny of the human person. Is it legitimate, important, useful or even possible for contemporary Christian theology to engage with such non-Western philosophy?

Before we can consider this question further it is necessary to make clear how the key terms are going to be used in this chapter. First, 'theology' and 'non-Western' are taken to denote both origin and geography. 'Theology' here means that Christian theology which has historically developed in Europe and America, whether it has remained in these areas or not. 'Non-Western' thus includes Jewish and Muslim philosophy as it developed in Islamic Spain as well in the Middle East, as well as Eastern philosophy, such as that found in Hinduism and Buddhism. If the distinction is not tied to both origins and geography, it becomes impossible to know what counts as a contrast between 'theology' and 'non-Western,' since Christianity is itself by origin a non-Western religion, and non-Western philosophy has also developed in Europe and America over the centuries. Moreover, 'philosophy' is taken to be intellectual reflection or 'thought' in general, specifically religious thought, or 'theology' as this term is often used. 'Philosophy' is a Western term, often contrasted with 'theology' in the Western context and use of the term poses particular problems when applied to non-Western traditions where the contrast is not made. In this chapter 'philosophy,' 'thought' and 'theology' are used interchangeably, though always with the core theme in mind of how reason serves religious faith.

In contemporary Western theology the discipline that argues most emphatically that theology should engage with non-Western philosophy is the emergent one of 'comparative theology,' which one of its leading advocates, the American Catholic theologian, Francis Clooney S.J. (1950-), has characterised as the 'theologically conscious study of religions other than one's own.'<sup>1</sup> Such a general definition of comparative theology suggests and indeed encompasses a considerable variety of actual approaches. Comparative theology is practised by theologians belonging to different Christian denominations, who promote different understandings of what the theological task is and who make a variety of greater or lesser claims about the aims and achievement of engagement with non-Western philosophy. They also differ in what kind of engagement they prefer, with some studying a single text or single tradition of another religion and others surveying a number of traditions centred on a major theological theme. All, however, claim that engagement with non-Western philosophy is possible, interesting and useful for the doing of Western Christian theology.

Nonetheless, contemporary comparative theologians face some serious questions about the success of their work. One area of challenge centres on the question of whether the work of comparative theologians shows sufficient continuity with Christian theology defined as a reasoned

exploration of Christian revelation and faith, in critical engagement with other positions and subject to scrutiny and validation by the theologian's own ecclesial community.<sup>2</sup> Comparative theologians are routinely academics working in a university context where there is the freedom to develop a theological account as he or she chooses. Can such comparative theology qualify as Christian theology in the sense above or does it translate into a form of religious studies, in which claims about the truth and the demands of faith and of faith communities are marginalised and excluded?

A second area of challenge concerns the epistemological issues involved in any Western theology engaging with a non-Western philosophy and relates to objections from contemporary critiques of intercultural engagement, especially Western interaction with Eastern culture. Comparative theology might appear to be as just a contemporary manifestation of Orientalism, the intellectual subjection of the East for purposes of Western colonial power and domination.<sup>3</sup> Comparative theology has, moreover, to deal with the wider objections of cultural incommensurabilists and post-liberal theologians, for whom there are considerable obstacles in the way of any meaningful communication or theological interaction between cultures.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary reflection on the relation between rationalities and cultures has highlighted the ways in which any intellectual system or rationality is formed within a particular tradition, which conditions the reasoning of those within that tradition and their perspective on other cultures. There would seem to be no neutral or common rationality that all share. Emerging from a rationality embedded in a particular tradition terms and concepts found in one tradition often do not have equivalents in another tradition into which they can be translated or compared.<sup>5</sup> To what extent do comparative theologians show an awareness of these issues and address them or do they merely assume that all religious traditions have the same rationality or can be reduced to one that is neutral and common to all?

In this chapter we shall first consider Christian theological engagement with non-Western philosophy in the mediaeval period as represented by the work of St Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-74). The work of Aquinas has been a major paradigm for understanding the relationship between faith and reason in Christian theology generally. It has also been a particular model for those Catholic Christian theologians who have sought to engage with Eastern philosophy, such as those working in India from at least the time of Roberto de Nobili S.J. (1577-1656) to the present.<sup>6</sup> In the contemporary Western academy there has also been a retrieval of Aquinas' theology as a model for modern engagement with other religions.<sup>7</sup> Second, we shall consider two leading and representative contemporary comparative theologians, Francis Clooney and the British Anglican theologian, Keith Ward (1938- ), and consider both how their work relates to that of Aquinas and how they address contemporary theological and cultural concerns about engagement with non-Western philosophy.

We shall argue with reference to the first challenge that contemporary comparative theology should be regarded as the continuance of a longstanding Western Christian theological engagement with non-Christian

and non-Western thought, especially as found in the theology of mediaeval Scholasticism, and above all in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Contemporary comparative theology thus stands within an established understanding of how Christian theology may be done. Comparative theologians are certainly keen to categorise their work as theology rather than religious studies. Nonetheless, contemporary comparative theologians are rightly criticised for showing a reluctance to make critical judgements, especially negative ones, about the truth and value of the traditions they study, in marked contrast to the approach of earlier engagements such as Scholastic theology.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the radical diversity of Christian theological traditions and positions in the modern period that form the basis on which different comparative theologians work result in theologies that are often incompatible with the Christian theology found in earlier engagements as well as that found in other contemporary theologies, comparative or otherwise.

With regard to the second challenge, contemporary comparative theology does promote a dialogical understanding of theology that encourages accountability and mutuality in theological conversations across religions. This reflects and addresses modern concerns about both the Orientalist nature of Western approaches to non-Western cultures and goes some way itself to address the anxieties about intercultural communication in incommensurabilist and post-liberal theological perspectives. At the same time, in continuity with the Scholastic approach, contemporary comparative theologians advocate a basic confidence in the universal and natural capacity for humans to reason and to have a reasoned conversation about truth across religious or cultural divides that stands radical objections to any intercultural and interreligious communication, although compatible with contemporary affirmation of the conditioned nature of all rationalities. Here again, however, there is considerable variety in viewpoint between comparative theologians and the greater the assumption or claim to neutral categories the more vulnerable their accounts become to criticism.

## 1. Scholastic Theology and Non-Western Philosophy: the work of Thomas Aquinas

Western Christian Scholasticism bears testimony to a substantial engagement between Christian thinkers and non-Western philosophy in the mediaeval period. The mediaeval West was surrounded by what Marshall Hodgson has referred to as the 'Islamicate,' Muslim dominated territories, but where there were Jewish, Christian as well as Muslim philosophers active.<sup>9</sup> Western Christian scholastics knew and used Muslim and Jewish commentaries on and adaptations of the works of Greek philosophy, as well as independently composed Jewish and Muslim philosophical and theological treatises. Christian scholastics were able to regard Jewish and Muslim thinkers as having something intelligible and useful to say about the fundamental themes of God, creation and human nature, even though Christian attitudes towards Judaism and Islam at that time were routinely very negative and condemnatory. It was, after all, a period that witnessed both crusades against Islam and persecutions of Jews.<sup>10</sup>

The most influential of all Christian scholastics, Thomas Aquinas, was remarkable for the extent to which he used Jewish and Islamic philosophy and for the respect and courtesy he showed his sources. Aquinas makes reference in his works to Muslim thinkers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina, d. 1037) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, d.1198), to Jewish thinkers such as Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), as well as to the *Liber de Causis*, a Latin work of considerable importance in the Christian West based on an Arabic reworking of Proclus, (*Kitab al Khair, The Book of Pure Goodness*), on which Thomas wrote a commentary at the end of his life.<sup>11</sup> Their philosophy exercises a considerable and positive influence on the development of his theology throughout the whole course of his work.

### Sacra Doctrina and the Relationship of Faith and Reason

What account, then, does Aquinas himself give of the relationship between theology and non-Western philosophy? At the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas defines *sacra doctrina* as a science that takes the articles of faith, the revelation received from God, as its principles.<sup>12</sup> *Sacra doctrina* is probative (*argumentativa*), working from these principles to demonstrate other things, both through the exercise of human reasoning and the use of authorities, namely Sacred Scripture, the doctors of the Church and those philosophers, who have come to knowledge of truth by natural reason.<sup>13</sup> For Aquinas the shape of such reasoning and the nature of the authorities appealed to depends on what those involved have in common, what principles drawn from revelation or human authorities they can agree on and hence reason from. Because Jews accept the Old Testament, discussion with them can draw on this part of revelation as well as human reason and philosophical authorities. In the case of Muslims, there is no shared revelation and so discussion is limited to reasoning and use of philosophical authorities alone.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Aquinas develops a scheme in which engagement with non-Western philosophy has a place within theology as the science of *sacra doctrina*. This clearly does not make Aquinas an advocate of a liberal

theology or a pluralist theology *avant la lettre*. In his account Islamic thought is given the same status as Greek philosophy, part of natural human philosophy.<sup>15</sup> His comments about Muhammad reflect the extreme negativity of his time.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in his discussion of the probative work of *sacra doctrina* the emphasis is on disputation and the refutation of the views of others. However, Aquinas' actual use of Muslim or Jewish philosophy testifies to the importance they did have for his own theology. Aquinas does not, in fact, just set out to refute what Muslim or Jewish thinkers have to say. He also agrees with many of the points he finds in their accounts. Muslim and Jewish philosophy helps to shape and clarify his Christian theology as it develops and matures. Their commentaries and independent works themselves become authorities to which he refers and with which he reasons as he constructs a Christian theology.

### **Aquinas' Engagement with Islamic and Jewish Philosophy**

The American Thomist, David Burrell C.S.C., is one of the leading advocates of Aquinas as a model for a contemporary Christian theological engagement with non-Western philosophy.<sup>17</sup> He has made clear both the extent of Aquinas' engagement with Muslim and Jewish thinkers, especially Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Moses Maimonides, and the way such non-Western philosophy makes a positive contribution to his theology. Aquinas treats Muslim and Jewish thinkers as fellow travellers and as interlocutors into common theological concerns, especially the desire to find the right relationship between what they maintain on the basis of faith and what can and should be said by the reason found in Greek philosophy:

Aquinas' intellectual inquiry bridged the divide initially posed by alien faiths, allowing him to discover and exploit cognate strategies for explicating shared perspectives on creation, providence, and often parallel trajectories towards the goal of human fulfilment.<sup>18</sup>

Burrell follows Louis Gardet's characterisation of Aquinas' approach as one in which Muslim philosophy is seen as a resource to be mined for 'conceptual strategies.'<sup>19</sup> He also notes that Aquinas appropriates and transforms the ideas he finds in this philosophy as he thinks it to be useful and necessary for the development of his own theology determined by the principles of Christian faith, just as he does with Aristotle and other Greek thought.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in order to express the distinction between God as creator and created being Aquinas takes from Avicenna the distinction between essence and existence as a useful conceptual strategy for distinguishing creatures, in whom there is composition of essence and existence and hence dependent being, from the creator, whose existence is his essence. Yet he rejects the implication he finds in Avicenna that existence should be classified as a form of accidental being that comes to an essence and instead recasts the distinction as being one between the potential and the actual being of a substance. In his mature theology the simple non-compositeness of essence and existence in God's unique case continues to be affirmed, while his final expression of creation is as the production of the whole being of a thing, wherein 'being created' is the relation of a substance has as a whole to the creator.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, it is an Islamic rendition of the Neo-Platonic work, the *Liber de Causis*, which provides Aquinas with conceptual strategies for articulating the *sui generis* relation of creation. The *Liber de Causis* is a source for some of Aquinas' most distinctive ways of depicting creation, such as the idea of God as the first and universal cause of the being of all things and the idea of creation as the emanation and participation in being. In his mature work on creation Aquinas continues to depict creation as the emanation and participation in being. At the same time, Aquinas consistently rejects Muslim acceptance of secondary creators from the Neo-Platonic scheme.<sup>22</sup>

In common with the Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, Aquinas endorses a generally apophatic approach to knowledge of God, yet he rejects Maimonides' negative understanding of divine predication, instead developing his account of analogy. With Maimonides Aquinas accepts that unaided human can establish that the world is created, but not that it has a beginning, as revelation informs us. On this question Aquinas refers to and considers the different Muslim views that developed as they inform the discussion, noting, for instance, that they felt it reasonable to affirm both the eternity of the world and its createdness.<sup>23</sup>

Non-Western philosophy, then, is clearly important to Aquinas as a resource for reasoning about faith, in the engagement between theology and philosophy. Later Christian tradition has received and accepted this engagement as making a legitimate contribution to the expression of Christian faith. Aquinas takes it for granted both that the reasoning found in *sacra doctrina* is conditioned by the articles of Christian faith and the authorities of Christian tradition and that human reasoning can cross cultural boundaries. Aquinas unbending commitment to the objectivity of truth encourages such openness, while also, and along with his commitment to the truth of Christian revelation, leads him to critically appraise Jewish and Muslim philosophy as a conceptual resource for acceptance, rejection, appropriation and transformation.



## 2. Contemporary Comparative Theology

Contemporary comparative theology, as a self-conscious commitment to do theology in a positive encounter with other religious traditions, might seem the least likely of all modern theological disciplines to present as the heir of mediaeval Scholasticism. Yet contemporary comparative theology has considerable common ground with the approach found in Aquinas. Christian comparative theologians also see theology as the reasoned exploration of faith, in which their perspectives and commitments are shaped by their being members of their Christian communities. Moreover, their engagement with other religious traditions is remarkably similar to Aquinas' account of the probative science of *sacra doctrina*. Other religious traditions function as authorities, which along with human reasoning become the resources out of which the theological account is constructed.

The work of Francis Clooney and Keith Ward helps us grasp something of the character and variety of contemporary comparative theology and to consider its relationship to Scholastic theology. These two theologians differ markedly in terms of the scope of their engagement with non-Western philosophy and in their understanding of the task of Christian theology and of central Christian doctrines. Nonetheless, they share a commitment to theological engagement with non-Western philosophy that has much in common with the approach of Aquinas, while their work also reflects and addresses contemporary concerns about Western engagement with non-Western culture in a way that cannot be expected of Aquinas.

### Francis Clooney

For Francis Clooney comparative theology takes the form of a Christian theological engagement with particular texts from different Hindu traditions.<sup>24</sup> Clooney is an accomplished and recognised Indologist, fully competent in Sanskrit and Tamil. He undertakes detailed and precise studies of Hindu texts, which are then set in comparison with other texts from the Christian tradition. This manifests his own preference that comparative theology should resist the temptation to make grand statements about religions in general and instead proceed by way of individual case studies. Clooney is very attentive to contemporary reflection on hermeneutics and its application to such textual study, as expounded by such figures as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Roland Barthes.<sup>25</sup> Clooney's main model for the theological act is, in fact, as a form of attentive spiritual reading. Comparative theology is an exercise in which the texts from the two traditions form an expanded narrative and where the theologian learns and is transformed through reading texts from a number of different traditions together. However, Clooney is also concerned to explore such engagement as an exercise in theological reasoning across traditions about central themes in theology.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, in *Theology After Vedanta* (1993) Clooney compares texts from one of the most influential of Hindu theological traditions, Advaita Vedanta, with Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and its commentaries. He characterises his own work as Indological, comparative and theological.<sup>27</sup> As

‘Indological,’ such engagement with Hindu texts has to meet the standards of good scholarship and give an accurate account of that Hindu text. As ‘comparative,’ it is concerned to consider carefully the relation between the accounts, being open to dissimilarities as well as similarities. As ‘theological,’ such work is properly ‘faith seeking understanding,’ in which the theologian is concerned about the truth of what is being studied, about what is being learned about God and the human relationship with God, and about the identity of the faith of the theologian and his and her community after the encounter.<sup>28</sup>

Accordingly, Clooney first undertakes a detailed study of the sacred texts and commentarial traditions of Advaita Vedanta. He identifies the textual character of the Advaitic tradition and its theology, in which the theological account is built up as a rich text woven from layers of sacred scripture and commentaries and in which religious truth is realised through transformative reading, through study and meditation on scriptural texts as interpreted by the commentaries. Advaita is centred on forms of textual reasoning, since it is driven on by exegetical and textual strategies for understanding and connecting sacred texts and sections of commentaries together.<sup>29</sup> Second, and in the light of this, Clooney considers how Aquinas himself constructs the *Summa Theologiae* and how authoritative texts are important to his theological method, as well as the pedagogical character of the construction of the *Summa* as a whole. He also considers the importance of a commentarial tradition on the *Summa* in Catholic Thomist theology. In this comparative section Clooney draws on modern Western discussions of hermeneutics and reading theory, in order to explore what it means to read the textual traditions of Advaita and Thomism together.<sup>30</sup> Third, Clooney considers what implications this has for the faith and identity of the theologian and for his relation to his religious community. The theology that emerges after Vedanta is for the most part simply a greater understanding of the textual character of both theological traditions. For a Christian Thomist theologian this may well mark a retrieval of an aspect of the Thomist tradition that has tended to be obscured by an emphasis on the *Summa* as simply a mine for doctrines and reasoned arguments rather than as a text to be read in its entirety. The Christian theologian engaging with Advaita Vedanta has, meanwhile, a role as the mediator for such comparative engagement for the service of the whole community.<sup>31</sup>

In *Hindu God, Christian God* (2001), Clooney develops a somewhat different emphasis, this time exploring the work of reasoning about major themes across religious traditions. Here Clooney describes comparative theology as ‘interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional.’<sup>32</sup> These last two terms are important elements in understanding Clooney’s work as a whole and build on the approach taken in *Theology After Vedanta*. Comparative theology is ‘dialogical’ in that such theology should be accountable to others. What is said about them should be accurate and the goal is a genuine conversation between theologians and theologies. The expectation of Christian theologians is that members of other religious traditions will also engage in the same type of theological conversation, using Christian texts as their other tradition for study. It is ‘confessional’ in

that the comparative theologian is a committed believer within his or her own tradition and the purpose of comparative theology is to seek a deeper understanding of his or her faith, but that this process of understanding now includes engagement with another religious tradition. The theologian will still hold to the faith claims of his or her own tradition and critically appraise others, challenging and rejecting, as well as accepting some of the ideas encountered.<sup>33</sup>

In this book Clooney considers what a number of Hindu and Christian theologians have had to say about five central theological themes: rational proofs for the existence of God, the nature of God, the possibility of divine embodiment and the relation of revelation to reason. Thus, for instance, he considers and compares the fact that theologians in both Christian and Hindu traditions have developed forms of the cosmological proof for the existence of God, as well as accounts that reject this proof.<sup>34</sup> All these arguments are of interest and importance to any theologian who seeks to resolve this particular issue:

Since the arguments cross cultural and religious boundaries, theologians of all traditions regardless of their faith positions must decide where they stand on issues related to reasoning about God's existence. They must discern which theologians from which religious traditions are their real allies and then pose their arguments in forms that are comparatively and dialogically intelligible and credible. Nor do the sides, once recognized, remain entirely stable. Arguments may actually lead somewhere; persuasion may work; theologians may change their minds; intellectual and religious conversion becomes possible.<sup>35</sup>

In these five case studies what emerges is both that there is reasoning within these traditions about these themes and that a rational conversation can take place across the traditions. The positions theologians develop and the reasons they give for them are open to scrutiny by others. They are accountable to others and are likely to be better reasoned accounts if they take into account what others say.

Thus comparative theology is simply theology that considers all the views and arguments available to it. Clooney argues that in the contemporary context where religious traditions are in such close proximity it is difficult to justify limiting theology to the study of just one tradition and to ignore these other traditions:

Religions are unique and truths are revealed, while theology remains in large part a more mundane, complex and interreligious activity in which there is no substitute for comparative and dialogical practice.

While individual theologians might be excused due to their narrow specializations, on the whole no theologian can intelligently avoid theology's interreligious implications. Consequently, good theologians are inevitably involved in reconstructing theology as a comparative and dialogical project that thereafter can be seen as confessional, attentive to specific traditions' views and confident in asserting arguable religious truths.<sup>36</sup>

For his own part Clooney does not attempt to develop a systematic theology out of the interreligious engagements he undertakes. He is primarily concerned to explore what is involved in such comparative theology itself, what methods are to be employed and what counts for good practice. He is content to point to the presence of what seem to be common themes and methods across traditions, be they textual or discursive in nature, rather than make any major claim about any theological account that might be constructed out of this encounter.

Clooney's view of comparative theology has much in common with Aquinas' approach, though the scope has now widened to include Hindu traditions. Both use texts from non-Western philosophy as authorities and enter into reasoned discussion with the views found in them. Both show a confidence that communication can take place. At the same time, Clooney differs from Aquinas both in the attention he gives to modern hermeneutical theory and, related to that, the emphasis he places on the dialogical character of good comparative theology. He is sensitive to questions about whether, or to what degree, someone outside a tradition can enter into it and understand it.<sup>37</sup> He is aware of the fact that such comparative study uses and reads texts in a way that is different from their traditional role and understanding. This is where the dialogical character of such theology is very important. A theologian should attempt to get an authentic and accurate understanding of the traditions he or she is studying and be accountable to members of those traditions. Such a theological conversation is not intended to be a one-sided exploitation of another tradition, but a mutual, positive and respectful interaction, open to such transformation as the faith commitments of theologians and their traditions allow and encourage.

How well, then, does Clooney's work meet the challenges facing comparative theology? In terms of the degree to which comparative theologians are Christian theologians, Clooney does identify himself as a Catholic Jesuit theologian and is concerned that his theology is communicated to and received by the Catholic community. At the same time, his work remains almost entirely articulated within the context of the academy and received by fellow academics. In any case, Clooney concludes very little by way of substantial constructive developments of any aspect of Catholic theology in the light of the engagements he has undertaken, so that it becomes difficult to make any assessment about the difference such engagement might make to reflection on Catholic faith. Rather the focus of his work is almost entirely on the process of doing comparative theology as such. Thus it remains to be seen what degree of acceptance his comparative theology gains within the Catholic community and what contribution it actually makes to Catholic theology. Clooney likewise argues that comparative theology should be concerned with the truth and value from a Christian perspective of what it studies, but refrains in practice from any substantial reading of the Hindu accounts through the interpretative and critical lens of Catholic faith or from making much by way of specific judgement about the truth or value of the Hindu accounts he considers.<sup>38</sup> For Clooney, the focus of comparative theology is primarily on what the Christian theologian learns from other traditions about his or her own faith in the light of the other tradition, even though it does not exclude questions of appraisal of the other tradition as well. Moreover, he argues that the larger questions of the meaning and truth of other religions as such is more the task of theology of religions than of comparative theology.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of epistemological concerns, Clooney's work is many ways a model for good practice. His outstanding Indological scholarship itself is matched by a sensitivity to the dialogical and hermeneutical issues involved

in such comparative reading. He acknowledges that a Christian theologian's entry as an outsider into Hindu traditions will be limited and imperfect, but argues that there can still be a real understanding of the texts and genuine rational discussion across the traditions. However, his work remains a product of a particular tradition, Western Christian theology. As the Hindu academic, Parimal Patil points out in his response to *Hindu God, Christian God*, from a Hindu perspective the work is one clearly framed by the expectations and categories of a Christian theology done in the modern Euro-American academic context, one that extracts and transforms the Hindu materials in the process.<sup>40</sup>

### Keith Ward

Keith Ward's approach is at once different from that of Clooney because his comparative work is set in a much grander frame of enquiry. Ward takes major theological themes and considers them in the light of a number of different religious traditions, as well as more recent developments in Western scientific, philosophical and historical perspectives. His major and mature work is found in a four volume series,<sup>41</sup> which he describes as a 'systematic Christian theology, undertaken in a comparative context.'<sup>42</sup>

In the first volume of the series, *Religion and Revelation* (1994) Ward, like Clooney, argues that the comparative approach in theology is the proper theological response to the contemporary world. Theology is faced by an awareness of the diversity of religious traditions and hence of convergent and divergent accounts of the major themes with which theology is concerned. In this context theology should consider and engage with other religions just as in the past it has engaged with the ideas and cultures current at the time:

I think the time has come when it is positively misleading to consider religious traditions in isolation. Theologians have in fact always taken their interpretative clues from philosophical and cultural factors not confined to Christianity. Aquinas, for example, took Aristotelian philosophy, well seasoned with Platonism, and used it to rethink Christian doctrine in the thirteenth century. For a short time, his works were even banned from the University of Paris; but it was not long before they became definitive for the Roman Catholic Church. Does it make sense to treat the content of a religion as a self-contained corpus, as though it at least was immune from external influence, and as though light could not be thrown upon it by a consideration of claims made by other faiths?<sup>43</sup>

Ward argues that to meet the different contemporary challenges there is need for a modification of Aquinas' concept of theology as *sacra doctrina*. While accepting a definition of theology as the 'rational elucidation of revelation,'<sup>44</sup> he argues that since contemporary theology is faced by a variety of claims for divine revelation, as well as by critical objections to any claim for revelation by developments in modern historical and scientific knowledge, theology cannot be content just to assume the self-evident truth of a given revelation, as Aquinas does, but has to go further back and consider the origins and status of revelation itself and only then to offer a reasoned account justifying a particular revelation.<sup>45</sup> In regards to other major themes, theology likewise should be open to rethinking beliefs in the contemporary context. For Ward, theology is, thus, a '*self-critical discipline*, aware of the historical roots of its own beliefs, a *pluralistic discipline*, prepared to engage in conversation with a number of living

traditions; and *an open-ended discipline*, being prepared to revise beliefs if and when it comes to seem necessary.<sup>46</sup>

To some extent, Ward wants to differentiate comparative theology from confessional theology. He states that confessional theology is the exploration of a given revelation by those who fully accept it and live by it, whereas comparative theology is 'an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions.'<sup>47</sup> Ward's concern is, however, to widen the scope of theology rather than reject the value and importance of faith commitment as such. When he comes to sum up what he has achieved in the last of the four volumes, *Religion and Community* (2000), he makes it clear that the result for a Christian theologian is meant to be a better Christian theology:

The first result of the investigation in these volumes has been to provide an interpretation of Christian faith that remains recognizably mainstream, while being modified by its response to both critical and complementary insights from non-Christian traditions. The second result is, I hope, to provide a comparative investigation of the concepts of revelation, God, human nature and destiny, and of the nature of a religious community. It is precisely because that comparative study is undertaken from a Christian viewpoint (and all such study must be undertaken from some viewpoint, acknowledged or not) that it comes to constitute a positive Christian theology.<sup>48</sup>

Like Clooney, Ward is also concerned about the dialogical character of such theology. He stresses that comparative theology is a 'co-operative enterprise. It is a way of doing theology in which scholars holding different world-views share together in the investigation of concepts of ultimate reality, the final human goal, and the way to achieve it.'<sup>49</sup> What theologians say about other traditions should also be something that members of those traditions can accept as an accurate description, without excluding critical evaluations from being possible and acceptable.

Ward is also a leading contemporary philosophical theologian and his work is a sustained exercise in carefully reasoned constructive theology. Ward's aim here is again more ambitious than Clooney. Ward intends, we have seen, to produce a 'systematic Christian theology undertaken in a comparative context.' Thus in an earlier work, *Concepts of God* (1998), he argues that there is an understanding of an ultimate Reality as transcendent, eternal and immutable being, but also as the source of the world, present in all the classical or pre-modern accounts of five major religious traditions, including Advaita Vedanta and Thomist Christianity.<sup>50</sup> In *Religion and Creation* (1996), on the other hand, he considers four twentieth century theological accounts in which the ultimate Reality is understood as having a more dynamic and responsive relationship with the world than the classical accounts allow. For his part, Ward finds the classical account paradoxical to the point of incoherent and suggests that the modern development provides both a better account philosophically, as well as one that accords with the picture of God found in the sacred texts and spiritual experience of members of these traditions. He thus promotes a 'dual aspect theism,' in which God is affirmed to have both an immutable, eternal aspect and a dynamic, responsive and relational aspect. This he finds already implicit in the

classical traditions, but only fully acknowledged and developed in modern accounts.<sup>51</sup>

Ward's type of comparative theology is thus clearly one that results in an account rather different in theological method and contents from that of Aquinas. His approach is also one that is strikingly different in scope and aims from that of Clooney. Ward is keen to argue that his approach is theology rather than religious studies and is that of an Anglican clergyman working within the tradition of liberal Protestant theology, which is marked by a rejection of the inerrancy of authority and by an openness to significant revision of Christian doctrine and claims in the light of the encounter with other religious traditions, general philosophical reflection and recent scientific discoveries.<sup>52</sup> Like Clooney, Ward argues that comparative theology engages with questions of truth and value, but for Ward this means the critical examination of all the religious traditions he deals with according to the same principles of revision as he applies to Christian doctrine and claims.

Ward's general epistemological stance coheres with his liberal Protestant theology. While affirming that the comparative theologian's work is done from the perspective of the tradition to which he or she belongs, Ward is keen to argue that there can and should be a neutral comparative theology that is distinct from confessional theology. He also argues that there are neutral criteria for rationality that people in different religious traditions share, against the idea that rationalities are particular to the religious tradition a person belongs to.<sup>53</sup> Here he refers and rejects an argument put forward by Gavin D'Costa that all theology about other religions is done according to the criteria and standards of one's own tradition, in other words, the kind of confessional theology from which Ward wants to distinguish comparative theology.<sup>54</sup> Ward seems here, however, to create a dichotomy that is unnecessary. In the case of the confessional and tradition conditioned theology of Aquinas and Clooney the ability to reason across religious traditions is depicted as part of a common human nature, but still formed by the tradition of revelation and faith to which the theologian belongs. In fact, Ward's comparative theology is as much conditioned by the categories of his own Christian tradition as Clooney's is. The decision to write a systematic theology, the choice of the major themes for the volumes within it and the type of concepts and terms used to discuss the different traditions are all drawn from liberal Christian theology as done in the Western academy.

Ward's own approach is then one very much formed by and consistent with the criteria of a theologian working within the liberal Protestant tradition. However, the kind of revisions Ward makes to central Christian doctrines and claims, especially about revelation, God, and Christology, mean that the content of his theological account is unattractive to those outside the liberal tradition, while his epistemological approach seems both to understate the importance of particular traditions in shaping theology and in any case to be unnecessary, in order to secure the possibility of theological openness to other traditions.

## Conclusion: Theological Engagement with Non-Western Philosophy

At the beginning of this chapter we noted a number of objections to contemporary comparative theology and to the engagement with non-Western philosophy it promotes. Part of our response has been to point to the continuity between Scholastic theology and such contemporary engagements. In itself theological engagement with non-Western philosophy has for long been an accepted and valued part of the work of Western Christian theology. Contemporary comparative theology may be viewed just a modern application of this, widening the scope of such engagement to include further non-Western philosophies such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Thus to object to Western Christian engagement with non-Western philosophy in principle is to object to the whole history of encounter with non-Christian philosophy and culture, including Greek philosophy.

However, even if the continuity of contemporary comparative theology with longstanding traditions of Christian theology is granted, this still leaves some major challenges that contemporary comparative theology must meet if it is to become a component of mainstream theology in the future. A *sine qua non* is that the particular Christian community to which the comparative theologian belongs receives his or her work as a legitimate and useful part of its own theological reflection. This depends on what the scope and task of theology are perceived to be within that community, and also on the exercise of an ecclesial responsibility on the part of a theologian who belongs to that community. In the case of Clooney and Ward, they work in different Christian traditions and the divergence of their comparative theology reflects this. Nonetheless, they do show a concern to locate their theology within the tradition to which they belong. Yet the accountability of contemporary comparative theology in general to Christian communities is often weak because of the academic context in which comparative theology is done. The modern university setting makes comparative theologians immune to how well their theology is understood and received by these communities and can be conducive to the comparative theologian developing theological accounts that are fairly free-floating experiments in theological speculation, without any mooring in any particular ecclesial community.<sup>55</sup>

When it comes to the wider issues of intercultural communication and the particular charge of Orientalism, the emphasis contemporary comparative theology gives to the dialogical aspect of such engagement is a helpful and important further development. Any form of cultural or interpersonal communication would seem to involve an element of subjective interpretation and involves a fusion rather than simply a meeting of cultures. What is at stake is not whether such interaction should occur, but what principles of good practice should govern it. There should at least be an attempt to develop an account of another culture that is recognisable as such by that culture. It is such a commitment to good practice that is emphasised in the dialogical aspect of contemporary comparative theology. However, in order to gain fuller acceptance for their work they still need to



address more fully the epistemological as well as the cultural objections to the interpretation and use of non-Western and non-Christian texts by Western and Christian theologians, as well the contested nature of assertions of common rationality or concepts across traditions. One way forward is for comparative theologians to acknowledge more fully the ways in which any attempt to translate and use concepts from one tradition by another is in reality a transformation both of those concepts as used in their own tradition and a transformation of the new tradition in which they come to be used.<sup>56</sup>

If Scholastic theology provides a precedent for contemporary comparative theology, the Thomist engagement with non-Western philosophy itself remains of considerable continuing interest and value for contemporary theology. Indian and other Eastern philosophies have much to contribute both to contemporary Thomist reflection on doctrines such as the nature of God and creation. The identification that there are non-Western forms of Scholastic enquiry may, likewise, contribute to the understanding and promotion of this theological genre in the contemporary academy. The Thomist is committed in principle to such an encounter, open to disagreement as well as agreement, as good reasoning in the pursuit of truth demands. 57

## Notes

1 Clooney, F.X. (2007), 'Comparative Theology', in J.Webster, K.Tanner and I.Torrance (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology. Oxford:OUP, p. 657. For useful introductory surveys see this article and Clooney (1995), 'Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books' in Theological Studies 56.3, 521-550.

2 As made for instance by D'Costa, G. (2003), 'Christ, Revelation and the World Religions:A Critical Appreciation of Keith Ward's Comparative Global Theology,' in ed. Bartel, B.T., Comparative Theology: Essays for Keith Ward London:SPCK, pp. 33-43.

3 For these issues, see Clarke, J.J. (1997) Oriental Enlightenment: The encounter between Asian and Western Thought. London and New York: Routledge

4 The classic statement of post-liberalism is Lindbeck, G. (1984), The Nature of Doctrine:religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age. Philadelphia:Westminster Press

5 Articulated, for example, in the work of the moral philosopher, Alisdair MacIntyre, in MacIntyre, A. (1988) Whose Justice? Which rationality? London:Duckworth and (1990) Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry London:Duckworth and with specific reference to interreligious engagement in D'Costa,G. (1993), 'Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neural Vantage Point from which to Judge Religions' in Religious Studies 29.1, 79-95

6 Such as the twentieth century 'Calcutta School' of Jesuit Indologist missionaries and their successors. See Halbfass, W. (1988), India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding. New York:SUNY

7 See the various articles in (2004) 'Aquinas in Dialogue' Modern Theology 20.1, and Ganeri, M. (2007) 'Catholic Encounter with Hindus in the Twentieth century: In Search of an Indian Christianity,' in New Blackfriars 88, 410-432 'Knowledge and Love of God in Ramanuja and Aquinas,' in Journal of Hindu Christian Studies 20, 4-1, (2010) 'Two Pedagogies for Happiness: Healing Goals and Healing Methods in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas and the *Sri Bhasya* of Ramanuja' Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement. 66

8 For a detailed consideration of this, see D'Costa, G. (2009), Christianity and World Religions. Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 34-55

9 Burrell,D. C.S.C. (1993), ' Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish Thinkers' in N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (eds) The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas. Cambridge:CUP p. 61

10 For example, Gilson, E. (1955) History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages. London:Sheed and Ward; McGrade, A.S. ed (2003) The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy. Cambridge:CUP

11 For this text and Aquinas' engagement with it see, Hess, C.R O.P. and Taylor, R.T. (trs) (1996), St Thomas Aquinas Commentary on the Book of Causes. Washington: CUA and Burrell (2004) 'Thomas Aquinas and Islam,' Modern Theology, 20.1 71-90.

12 Summa Theologiae 1a 1.2

13 S.T.1a 1.8 c. and ad 2

14 S.T.1a 1.8 c. and ad 2; Summa Contra Gentiles 1.2.3

15 S.C.G. 1.2.3

16 S.C.G 1.6.4

17 For example, Burrell, D. (1986) Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas. Indiana:Notre Dame; (1993) Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions. Indiana:Notre Dame

18 Burrell (2004) p. 73

19 (2004) pp. 73-4

20 (2004), pp. 74-5

21 (1986), pp. 19-50; (1993), pp. 62-70

22 (2004) pp. 71-90

23 (1986), pp. 51-70, 92-108, (1993), pp. 70-79.

24 Clooney, F.X. S.J., (1993) Theology After Vedanta New York:SUNY, (1996) Seeing Through Texts. New York:SUNY, (2002) Divine Mother. Oxford:OUP, and (2009) Beyond

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- Compare. Washington: Georgetown University Press (2001) Hindu God, Christian God. Oxford:OUP, (2010) Comparative Theology:Deep Learning Across Religious Borders Oxford:Wiley-Blackwell
- 25 See, for instance, Clooney (1993), pp. 70-75; (2007), pp. 77-82
- 26 Especially, Clooney (2001) Hindu God, Christian God. Oxford:OUP
- 27 (1993), pp. 1-14
- 28 (1993), pp. 4-6
- 29 (1993), pp. 37-152
- 30 (1993), pp. 153-186
- 31 (1993), pp.187-206
- 32 (2001), pp.7-12
- 33 (2001), pp. 168-181
- 34 (2001), pp. 29-61
- 35 (2001), p. 60
- 36 (2001), p. 163; see also (2007), p. 653
- 37 For instance, (1993), pp. 149-152; (1996), pp. 42-47; (2009), pp. 139-142
- 38 Something rightly observed about Clooney and other comparative theologians by D'Costa (2009),
- 39 For instance, Clooney (2010), pp.15-16
- 40 (2001), pp. 185-196
- 41 Ward, K. (1994) Religion and Revelation, (1996) Religion and Creation , (1998) Religion and Human Nature and (2000)Religion and Community. Oxford:OUP
- 42 (2000), p. 339
- 43 (1994), p. 37
- 44 (1994), p. 1
- 45 (1994), p. 7, 36
- 46 (1994), p. 48
- 47 (1994) p. 40
- 48 (2000), pp. 340-1.
- 49 (2000), p. 339
- 50 Ward, K (1998) Concepts of God . Oxford: Oneworld, originally published as (1987) Images of Eternity. London: DLT
- 51 (1996) pp. 282-284
- 52 As he states in his review of his life and work in ed. Bartel, T.W. (2003), p. 195-197
- 53 (1994), pp. 317- 324
- 54 D'Costa, G. (1993).
- 55 For a fuller examination of the problematic relationship between the practice of traditional Christian theology and that the study of religion in the modern secular university see, D'Costa, G. (2005) Theology in the Public Square Oxford:Blackwell. Many contemporary comparative theologians work as academics without no substantial belonging or accountability to a Christian tradition, as acknowledged, for instance, by Clooney in his survey of comparative theology and its practitioners. See Clooney (2010).
- 56 Something, for instance, which Macintyre has drawn attention to and explored in (1988), pp. 370-388.
- 57 See note v.