

**COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY:
PRESENT EXPERIENCE, REMEMBERED PASTS,
IMAGINED FUTURES**

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INTRODUCTION (REID B. LOCKLIN)

In the summer of 1991, thirty years before this annual meeting of the CTSA was originally scheduled, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* brought out an article entitled, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church.”¹ Drawing on conversations that took place at the CTSA the previous year, this essay drew attention to a “generation gap” among theologians doing interreligious work, between “those whose theological education was essentially complete before Vatican II” and “the newer, ‘post-Vatican II’ theologians who were educated after the Council.”² The consequences of this generational change, according to this interpreter, were profound for imagining how a scholar could or should approach the task of thinking Catholic interreligiously, as our conference theme would have it.

The primary differences between the two generations followed from their different starting points. The older generation received its theological formation prior to the council, and its members began from a shared assumption that the data of other religious paths could be located within “a coherent Catholic worldview” and an “already articulated Catholic language.”³ Scholars of the new generation, by contrast,

¹ Francis X. Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 482-94.

² Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” 483-84.

³ Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” 484.

received their theological formation in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, took the openness of the church to religious and cultural diversity for granted, and in many cases studied other traditions earlier in their formation and according to the professional methods of the secular academy.⁴ The result? A cohort of “Post-Vatican II comparativists” who dwelt “among multiple Catholic vernaculars” and lacked “a single Catholic language” to ground their interreligious work.⁵ This new generation tended to produce theologies “rich in examples, modest in systematizations” and less prescriptive about boundaries between Christian self and non-Christian other.⁶

The author of this article, as many might have guessed, was Francis Clooney, and he identified himself firmly among this younger generation of interreligious theologians. In the essay, he makes an early case for what would become known as the “new comparative theology,” as an alternative and strident critique of “the theology of religions” in all of its variants. Clooney writes that

It may be desirable for a time to reverse our priorities, to give a higher priority in our theological writing and educating to the practice of comparative theological experiments and the accumulation of the wisdom of such experiments, and a secondary, less prominent place to the construction of theories about religions and their relationships.⁷

It is important for our purposes, however, that Clooney makes this proposal and describes this transformation precisely in terms of generational change. The new comparative theology is not simply a logical development from earlier modes of interreligious engagement; it is the fruit of a new generation of theologians, shaped by their distinctive locations in place and time.

Of course, time does not stand still, and the cycle of generational change continues to turn. Clooney published his essay in the summer of 1991, as a Baby Boomer and early career faculty member at Boston College. That same summer, fresh from my undergraduate studies, I was in the process of relocating from Georgia to South Dakota and from my dorm apartment to a trailer home we called “the Big Pink.” Mara Brecht was wrapping things up at Mrs. Fiorina’s third grade class at Sacred Heart Elementary and starting a new chapter of her life in an in-house soccer league. And Stephanie Wong, for her part, was working on basic language development, with recent milestones like “more rice” and “go to park.”

The task we set for ourselves in this essay—as a collaborative effort of Gen X and Millennial theologians—is to think together about the question of generational change in comparative and interreligious theology in the Catholic Church. Beyond simply speaking from our own distinctive histories, as Clooney did in his 1991 article, we hope

⁴ Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” 485-87.

⁵ Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” 487.

⁶ Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” 488.

⁷ Clooney, “The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church,” 489.

also to explore a generational perspective on comparative theology *itself* as a scholarly discipline. That is, we attempt to reconsider comparative theology as an ongoing, multi-generational project informed by a remembered past, inspired and chastened by imagined futures, and enacted according to the distinctive social, institutional and historical exigencies of the present moment.

As a practical matter, the three of us prepared this piece together, as a single script, rather than presenting in series and only then entering into dialogue. We wanted, as much as possible, to build responses to one another into our individual sections. And we also decided to specialize, with each of us taking on one of the broadly generational perspectives of past, present and future. So, with apologies to Charles Dickens, I assume the role of the “Ghost of Comparative Theology Past,” reflecting on how we remember prior generations of comparativists and the history of the discipline. As the “Ghost of Comparative Theology Future,” Stephanie looks unflinchingly and hopefully to future generations of interreligious scholars. Before we offer these reflections, however, it seemed prudent to ask Mara, the “Ghost of Comparative Theology Present,” to ground our thoughts about past and future firmly in the here and now.

PRESENT EXPERIENCE (MARA BRECHT)

April 12, 2020. Easter Sunday. Where were you? Were you in your living room watching a live streamed service? Saying Mass to an iPhone streaming video from an otherwise nearly-empty church? Answering FaceTime calls with *Alleluia He Is Risen*? At the highpoint of the liturgical year, Catholic religious practice looked a lot like the practices of millions of worshippers around the world: it took place through a screen.⁸

I was with my very large lockdown pod, which included my parents, sister, brother-in-law, and their five daughters, my husband and our children: three households and three generations. We were gathered in my sister’s living room. My nieces had laid the makeshift altar. They’d then arranged themselves into a quintet—piano, violin, ukulele, clarinet, and guitar—to accompany my brother-in-law as cantor. My husband proclaimed the Easter Gospel. My mother gave the homily. My sister scattered holy water with a branch clipped from a forsythia bush in her yard. We shared cinnamon rolls and orange juice as a symbol of Eucharist.

We also had laptops around the room whose cameras steamed our liturgy to cousins, aunts and uncles, my brothers and nephews. Grandparents who we typically never see on Easter joined us that Sunday from hundreds of miles away. It was not the Easter Mass we were used to, but in my estimation it was among the richest liturgies I’ve ever experienced.

⁸ Take, for examples, the following surveys of global Muslim and Buddhist practice during the earliest stage of the pandemic: Awra Ibrahim, “Praying a Time of COVID,” *Al Jazeera*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/6/praying-in-time-of-covid-19-how-worlds-largest-mosques-adapted>; Alex Thurston, “Islamic Responses to COVID-19,” *Project on Middle East Political Science Studies*, The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa 89, 15-18; Benjamin Schonthal and Tilak Jayatilake, “Religion Amid the Pandemic: A Buddhist Case Study” in *Covid-19 in Asia*, edited by Victor V. Ramraj (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

The pandemic hit many people around the world in different ways. In North America, 2020 was a year when digital reality became more firmly embedded in our “real” lives—when we held our faculty meetings, taught our classes, helped our children go to school, sang happy birthday, and wished anniversary cheers on Zoom. For some, a final goodbye to a dying loved one was mediated by a screen. We celebrated and grieved on FaceTime. Easter of that year represents a significant shift in how we practiced our faith—an unprecedented moment for celebrating liturgy digitally and practicing religion online.

Reid began this plenary with Frank Clooney’s 1991 essay, in which Frank points to Vatican II as catalyzing a change in how Catholic theologians approached other, non-Christian religions. But Vatican II constituted other shifts as well, including the very conceptualizations of “church” and “theology.” In the post-Conciliar period, the church became a community open to the world beyond, and theology became a discourse that attends to the “signs of the times.”

As far as such signs go, Easter 2020 is—in my view—an interstate-highway-sized “sign of the times.” It represents new confluences among digital reality, spiritual practice, and shifting patterns of religious belonging. These confluences were not caused by the pandemic, but they were accelerated by it, and they are now firmly a part of our lives.

A digitally-blended reality is, I contend, also a religiously blended one. There are bodies of research to support my claim, but I’ll leave my evidence in the footnote and instead make my case anecdotally.⁹ Friends of mine told me about an experience they had while watching their church’s Sunday online services. When the livestream glitched, YouTube’s algorithm kicked in and automatically sent another worship

⁹ A recent overview of research on religious pluralism in online environments can be found in Anna Neumaier and Gritt Klinkhammer, “Interreligious Contact and Media: Introduction,” *Religion*, 50, no. 3 (2020) 321-335. Neumaier and Klinkhammer point out that the relationship between interreligious encounter and media is not yet comprehensively studied. Still, the authors acknowledge that online environments foster a range of interreligious interactions: “In times of electronic media, the frame of interreligious contact is generally expanding and changing: media enhances translocal exchange, it individualizes the participation in societal discourses, and it fosters the perception of pluralities of everyday life without necessarily being in local contact with them” (326). Heidi Campbell’s research has been groundbreaking in considering the relationship between religious practice and new media, see: *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010); *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013); “Understanding the Relationship between Religious Practice Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012): 64–93; with Brian Altenhofen, Wendi Bellar, and Kyong James Cho, “There’s a Religious App for That!: A Framework for Studying Religious Mobile Applications,” *Mobile Media & Communication*, 2, no 2 (2014): 154-172. Some scholars argue that online environments are “third spaces” that encourage new forms of religious hybridity (see Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, “The Third Spaces of Digital Religion,” working paper presented at the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture at the University of Colorado [2014], <https://thirdspacesblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/third-spaces-and-media-theory-essay-2-0.pdf>) and that online environments are “hypermediated religious spaces” in which online and offline participation are fluidly interactive (Giulia Evolvi, “Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, [Hyper]mediated Spaces, and Materiality,” *Zeitschrift für Religion Gesellschaft und Politik* [2021]: 1–17).

opportunity to their iPad: a livestream of the *Hajj*. There's a boundlessness to digital reality, a mediated immediacy to worlds and communities beyond our own that is *just different* from what we experience in the slower, embodied world of analogue reality. Decades ago, a wrong turn on Main Street might have taken us to an unexpected church. Now, a moment of lagging bandwidth can send us careening into faith communities we've only read about.

In this context—in which we are ever more reliant on digital technologies, in which we transition back-and-forth between real and virtual, in which YouTube autoplays Muslim pilgrimage when we're trying to find our way to Mass—we must anticipate new ways of being Catholic that can accommodate the religiously pluralizing possibilities of digitally-blended reality. And I argue comparative theology—the practices of thinking Catholic and interreligiously—has much to teach us about navigating this present moment.

Let me begin by sketching the pandemic's effects on Catholic life. In November 2021, the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate conducted a study of US Catholics' faith lives, trying to understand how parish-based formational programs are or aren't meeting the spiritual needs of younger Catholics.¹⁰ Participants in the study were between ages eighteen and thirty-five years old.¹¹ Ninety-five percent of participants in the study identified as life-long Catholics.¹²

Prior to the pandemic, 13 percent of study participants reported weekly Mass attendance while about a third reported rarely attending Mass.¹³ Prior to the pandemic, 6 percent reported being very involved in their parish, a third reported some involvement, and well over half reported no involvement with their parish.¹⁴ Prior to the pandemic, 3 percent of respondents reported participating in reconciliation at least monthly while an overwhelming majority reported participating in the sacrament twice or once a year, or never at all.¹⁵

No, Mass attendance, parish involvement, and the sacrament of reconciliation aren't the only indicators of "being Catholic," but they are significant components of a

¹⁰ Mark M. Gray, Michal J. Kramarek, Thomas P. Gaunt, "Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2021), *hereafter cited as CARA*.

¹¹ Forty-three percent of respondents to CARA's "Faith and Spiritual Life" survey identify as Hispanic; forty-four percent identify as white; thirteen percent identify as Asian, black, or identify with some other racial category. Fifty-five percent of respondents are women and 47 percent are men. CARA, 1.

¹² Seventy-five percent were baptized by age of one, 20 percent were baptized in their childhood or adolescence, and 5 percent became Catholic as adults. CARA, 2.

¹³ Thirteen percent of participants in the study reported weekly Mass attendance; twenty-one percent reported attending monthly Mass attendance; thirty-one percent reported attending Mass a few times a year; thirty-six percent say they rarely attend Mass. CARA, 3.

¹⁴ Six percent of study participants reported high involvement with their parish; thirty percent reported some involvement with their parish; sixty-four percent reported no involvement with their parish. CARA, 3.

¹⁵ Three percent of study participants to the CARA study reported participating in sacrament of reconciliation at least monthly; twenty-eight percent participated once or more than once a year; forty-nine percent reported participating in the sacrament of reconciliation less than once a year or never at all. CARA, 58.

church that sees itself as a eucharistic people whose vocation is to serve the world.¹⁶ The religious lives of young Catholics are strikingly different from the vision encouraged by Vatican II's ecclesiology. And yet, participants in the study understand themselves as deeply connected in the Catholic tradition.

Almost all respondents agreed with that statement that it's possible to be a good Catholics without going to church every Sunday, 44 percent think of themselves as practicing Catholics, and 39 percent agree with the statement that they could never imagine leaving the Catholic Church.¹⁷

These reports raise the question of what it means to belong to a faith tradition that one has little or only intermittent concrete contact with. The question is intensified when we consider how spiritual practices are shaped in and by online contexts.

The pandemic awakened new digitally blended modes of practicing Catholic faith: Faith-formation groups met online. Ministries were conducted over Zoom. Masses were streamed. Motivated both by mission and ministry, as well as financial need, parishes migrated to the digital landscape.¹⁸

The CARA study also asked open-ended comparative questions about faith life *before* and *during* the pandemic. Before the pandemic a third of participants reported praying and a quarter reported going to Mass. After the pandemic, more than 40 percent reported praying, 15 percent reported taking part in a streaming Mass *or* doing some other online faith-related activity, and 15 percent reported doing nothing at all. In other words, the pandemic drove already-dwindling corporate Catholic faith practice largely in the direction of individualized practice, or no practice.

The stark reality laid bare by the CARA study is that Catholics who are my age and younger don't go to church. They aren't involved in parish life. They don't seek regular sacraments. To be sure, the cultural shifts that account for these patterns extend far beyond the pandemic and, yet, the pandemic accounts for an intensification of the

¹⁶ See Richard R. Gallardetz and Catherine Clifford's discussion of Vatican II's eucharistic ecclesiology in *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 66-75.

¹⁷ Seventy-three percent of respondents agreed with that statement that it's possible to be a good Catholics without going to church every Sunday. Forty-four percent think of themselves as practicing Catholics. Thirty-nine percent agree with the statement that they could never imagine leaving the Catholic Church. Thirty-three percent are neutral on the question of whether they could leave the Catholic Church. Twenty-two percent disagree with the claim that they could never imagine leaving the Catholic Church (CARA, 4).

¹⁸ Both economic interest and missionary principles motivated parishes to move Masses and ministries to the online environment, as the deleterious economic effects of the pandemic were forecast to be worse for those that parishes that didn't offer online Mass. In a study of the pandemic's financial impact on 169 parishes, Villanova's Center for Church Management found that parishes without online Masses had a greater drop in collections than those that did at the start of the pandemic. Matthew Manion and Alicia Strandberg, "Covid Parish Impact Study: Summary of Findings," *Villanova University Center for Church Management* (2020), <https://villanovachurchmanagement.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/COVID-19-Parish-Impact-Study-Summary-of-Findings.pdf> . Some theologians call for new understandings of liturgy and sacrament in online environments, for example: Deanna A. Thompson "Christ is Really Present, Even in Holy Communion via Online Worship," *Liturgy* 35, no. 4 (2020): 18-24; Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

shifts. The CARA study suggests that younger Catholics won't be returning to Mass post-pandemic, and that their ways of being Catholic will happen in other ways—ways that are often private, isolated, and, most importantly for my purposes, negotiated online.¹⁹

Young Catholics understand themselves as Catholic apart from specific, concrete communities of belonging. Catholics today are not formed and do not practice in a single-layered reality, but instead a digitally-blended one. As such, they will likely engage in “convergent practices” and “tinkering.” These terms describe the highly-individualized, customizable, and often temporary practices of blending and assembling rituals and information that is fostered by doing religion online.²⁰ Because the internet offers limitless access to information and social media beckons us seemingly barrier-free to witness first-hand the rituals of other lives, a digitally-blended reality invites us to take, sample, experiment, test, assemble, collect, and connect what we find there. Scholars of online religion identify tinkering and convergent practice—both interreligious in nature—as characteristic of the digital age.

Way back in 1991 when I was not yet ten, Frank observed the effects of different contexts and therefore different patterns of formation on Catholic theologians:

These newer scholars were not completely formed as Catholics, nor accomplished as theologians, before they began to visit Thailand and live among Buddhists ... hence what they have seen and read in Thailand or India or Pakistan or Nigeria has inevitably become a part of how they present themselves as Catholics and as theologians.²¹

Where and with whom the scholars lived, read, and learned shaped them and their scholarship. Likewise, young Catholics are exposed to experiences and ideas daily that required world travels only a few decades ago. We carry interreligious exploration around with us in the palms of our hands. The pandemic forced even luddites to learn and use technology in new ways, and for spiritual formation. Thus, virtually all of us already have the tools of those first-generation of theologians about whom Frank wrote.

¹⁹ Early in the pandemic, commentators wondered if American worshippers would lose the habit of communal worship at churches, synagogues, mosques. It seems not to be the case. A 2020 Pew study found that, during the pandemic, 92 percent of regular worshippers expressed their intent to return in person, be that to the church, synagogue, mosque, or temple (Alan Cooperman, “Will the Coronavirus Permanently Convert In-Person Worshippers to Online Streamers? They Don't Think So” *Pew Research Center* [August 17, 2020], <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/17/will-the-coronavirus-permanently-convert-in-person-worshippers-to-online-streamers-they-dont-think-so/>), and these predictions seem to have borne out. Another 2021 Pew study reported that religious congregations in America, broadly speaking, were on a path to return to normal (Pew Research Center, “Life in U.S Religious Congregations Slowly Edges Back Toward Normal,” [March 22, 2021], 3) These trajectories seem to have continued into 2022.

²⁰ Heidi A. Campbell and Guilia Evolvi, “Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies,” *Human Behavior & Emerging Technology* 2 (2012): 5–17; Paul McClure, “Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior and Belonging,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 3 (2017): 481–497.

²¹ Clooney 1991, 487.

Frank called for an important shift: Stop thinking *about* other religious traditions. Instead think “Christianly with a set of resources that includes non-Christian elements.”²² And here, as we look out on a post-pandemic future, we need another shift. We need to assume the kind of interreligious convergence and tinkering that emerges from a digitally-blended reality.

We need to think Catholic interreligiously for a digital age.

Consider this example: A decade ago, a Pew study found that 40 percent of Catholics report regularly meditating.²³ If we presuppose a blended context—a world shaped by the ubiquitous presence of unlimited information online and a culture that encourages constant exploration—it seems unlikely that Catholic meditators are shaped by traditions of *Christian* silent contemplation. It seems more likely, instead, that Catholics meditators subscribe to apps with names like *Chakra Balance* and *Zen Guided Meditation* just as much as they do *Word Among Us* and *Hallow*.

My own Catholic-school-attending children learn to do yoga at school. Though they do yoga during the P.E. part of the day, it’s also not just about exercise. The school highlights yoga’s social-emotional value, but even this framing—and I say this happily—is not devoid its religious valences. I’ve noticed that when my kids come home on yoga-days and show off their poses, they conclude with a few actions that they didn’t learn at school: They offer a prayerful *namaste*. They also take off their “cosmo-noculars.” These elements they picked up from doing *Cosmic Kids Yoga* during the many months of lockdown when many of us couldn’t figure out what to do with our kids. Jamie instructs kids in yoga and helps them see into the many stories of the universe with the help of her trusty, trademark cosmo-noculars.

My point is this: My kids encounter yoga in multiple modes, at school and online. They organically incorporated an element they picked up in one place into the practice they learned in another. They tinkered. They blended. Do they understand the interreligious dynamic of their endeavor? No. But are they imaginatively interpreting multivalent ideas and exploring cultural crossovers that deepen their experience? Most definitely.

One way to approach these prodigious shifts is with a sense of loss—with sharper boundaries, stronger divisions. Or we can approach them—as I do—with hope and openness to the graces they offer. Comparative theology, it seems to me, gives us resources for handling the diversity and difference, the shifting boundaries of our blended worlds. This involves adopting comparative theological habits for use *within* “Catholic” life and practice: the habit of questioning the stability of boundaries, of problematizing neat separations and clear gaps, of prioritizing the actions of getting proximate to and intimate with difference.

As we look with Reid to the past and with Stephanie to the future, we’ll think more concretely about the shifting contours of the field, and the way we narrate those contours, to help us further name the bestowals of comparative theology for a digitally and religiously blended reality.

²² *Ibid.*, 488.

²³ Pew Research Center “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” (May 12, 2015), retrieved at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

REMEMBERED PASTS (REID B. LOCKLIN)

In her account of our present moment in mid-late-pandemic North America, Mara draws our attention to connections between the “digitally-blended world” and a “religiously-blended world,” so effectively symbolized by a YouTube Mass abruptly interrupted by a video of the Hajj. Such interruptions might just be that—brief moments of surprise, before we return to our digital and religious silos. But they also offer the possibility of something deeper, a transformation of consciousness and erosion of boundaries between persons and traditions once regarded as “other.” In the profound disruption of stay-at-home orders, Zoom liturgies and imaginary “cosmo-noculars,” on Mara’s reading, we may be witnessing the birth of a new kind or new depth of thinking Catholic interreligiously.

Advocates of contemporary comparative theology have also tended to characterize our particular style of interreligious engagement as “new.” We began this shared reflection with Clooney’s essay in the year 1991. For his part, Paul Hedges marks the “emergence of the contemporary discipline” with the dates 1995, when Clooney published an important review essay in *Theological Studies* and 2006, when comparative theology was recognized as a unit of the American Academy of Religion.²⁴ Set against the full history of Christian theological reflection, then, the discipline is still very much in its infancy.

Or is it? In the last decade and a half, comparative theologians have become preoccupied with the longer history of our discipline. Inconveniently, the first book in English with the title *Comparative Theology* was published by a Scottish Episcopal theologian in 1700, and the legendary Orientalist Max Müller adopted the term to describe his own project in a series of lectures he gave at Oxford University in 1870.²⁵ Comparativists have often noted, with a wave of the hand, that interreligious engagement has defined most Christian thought, across generations. Now, it has begun to appear that our form of such engagement, as a scholarly discipline, stands in a more well-defined historical genealogy, tightly bound with the emergence of modernity.

Historical memory, however, is a complex thing, and it matters deeply what choices we make in remembering our collective pasts. So, in a few pages, I would like to reflect on the past—or, perhaps better, the pasts—that we could or should tell about comparative theology as a discipline and as a privileged mode of thinking Catholic interreligiously.

²⁴ Paul Hedges, “Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective,” *Theology* 1, no. 1 (2017): 2. He is citing Francis X. Clooney, “Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989-1995),” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (1995): 521-50; and he also takes note of the inclusion of Clooney’s chapter on “Comparative Theology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain R. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 653-69.

²⁵ See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Boundaries* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 30-33. He cites James Garden, *Comparative Theology; or the True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology: A Subject Very Necessary, the hitherto almost wholly neglected* (Bristol: T. Caddell, 1756 [1700]); F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Study of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1873); and F. Max Müller, *Natural Religion: The Gifford Lectures* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1889).

Before turning directly to these histories, I propose that we take a short detour through Dipesh Chakrabarty's now-classic 2000 monograph, *Provincializing Europe*.²⁶ In this work, Chakrabarty engages in an extended argument with Karl Marx about the very "idea of history."²⁷ Through a close reading of *Das Capital* and related works, Chakrabarty discerns two different, sharply contrasting approaches to the past. "History 1" represents the past as a single, totalizing and linear narrative. For Marx, this narrative rationalizes the emergence of capital, telling a history that centers on Europe and, over time, subsumes other places, peoples and cultures into itself.²⁸ "History 2," on the other hand, relates to the more local pasts of all those diverse places, peoples and cultures drawn into the ambit of History 1. To capture their diversity and locality, Chakrabarty usually uses the plural form, "History 2s."²⁹ These alternative accounts of the past persistently—and necessarily, for Marx's own interpretive purposes³⁰—resist complete absorption by History 1 even as they become entangled with it through colonization and globalization. "History 2s," Chakrabarty argues, "are thus not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital's own logic."³¹

What does this have to do with comparative theology? Well, I would contend that in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of something like a consensus narrative about our collective past. The seeds for this narrative were planted by Tomoko Masuzawa's brilliant 2005 historical genealogy, *The Invention of World Religions*.³² It then entered the comparative theological mainstream through the work of Hugh Nicholson³³ and gained wide recognition as *the* history of the discipline, as revealed in introductory surveys by Clooney, Hedges and Catherine Cornille.³⁴ Stated simply, this telling of comparative theology's past views the contemporary discipline as an organic development from the 19th-century "old" comparative theologies of James Freeman Clark, F.D. Maurice, and George Matheson, among others. This earlier comparative theology represented a true advance in interreligious reflection, but it also translated the terms of European Christian hegemony into the putatively neutral, de-

²⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd ed (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008 [2000]).

²⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 47.

²⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 49-57, 62-65.

²⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 64-65.

³⁰ See especially the further discussion of Marx's vitalism and the importance of excess meaning in his critique of "abstract labor" in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 58-62.

³¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 64.

³² Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³³ Hugh Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (2009): 609-646; and Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁴ Clooney, "Comparative Theology," 654-660; Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 30-35; Hedges, "Comparative Theology," 5-10; and Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 11-18.

politicized language of “world religions.”³⁵ Arguably, this translation functioned to rationalize the colonial project and to mask its violence. Nicholson, Clooney and Cornille, among others (including me), have tended to envision the contemporary discipline in a kind of dialectical relation to this colonial legacy, building on the good and correcting the bad.³⁶ For other interpreters, things are not so clear. On their reading, the “new” comparative theology may risk simply pouring the old wine of Christian triumphalism into new skins.³⁷

Either way, this conversation has tended to reproduce the logic of what Chakrabarty calls History 1. That is, the past accepted by both advocates and critics of comparative theology is a universalized past “posited by” the contemporary discipline as its logical antecedent and necessary precondition.³⁸ It is a narrative of the past that begins in Europe and then, bit by bit, absorbs other places, times and cultures into a single, developmental and totalizing frame.

But what if this is not the only way to think about the discipline’s past? What if, to adopt the language of Chakrabarty, in addition to this History 1, there are also diverse History 2s that deserve our attention? In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty locates such alternative histories in the diverse “life-worlds” of subaltern peasants and upper caste Bengalis in colonial India.³⁹ Where might we look for comparably dislocating pasts of thinking Catholic interreligiously, pasts with the potential to call into question

³⁵ See Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 49-78; Hugh Nicholson, “The New Comparative Theology and Theological Hegemonism,” in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 43-62; and Reid B. Locklin and Hugh Nicholson, “The Return of Comparative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 2 (2010): 482-89.

³⁶ Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 79-105; Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 35-37; Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 104-108; Locklin and Nicholson, “Return of Comparative Theology,” 489-99; and Reid B. Locklin, “Hinduism Compared,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, 2d ed., ed. Gavin Flood (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 536-50.

³⁷ See Judith Grüber, (Un)Silencing Hybridity: A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Theology,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 21-35; Pravina Rodrigues, “A Critique of Comparative Theology,” *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 68-90; Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, “White Christian Privilege and the Decolonization of Comparative Theology” in *The Human in a Dehumanizing World: Reexamining Theological Anthropology and Its Implications*, edited by Jessica Coblenz and Daniel P. Horan, The Annual Volume of the College Theology Society, 2021, Vol. 66 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 85-95; and the more nuanced assessments in Paul Hedges, “The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourse on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions,” *Religions* 3, no. 4 (2012): 1120-37; and Hedges, “Comparative Theology,” 27-58.

³⁸ This sentence deliberately mirrors Chakrabarty’s account of “History 1” in *Provincializing Europe*, 63: “. . . Marx gave this history a name: he called it capital’s antecedent ‘posited by itself.’ Here free labor is both a precondition of capitalist production and ‘its invariable result.’ This is the universal and necessary history we associate with capital. It forms the backbone of the usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production. Let us call this history—a past possessed by itself as its precondition—History 1.”

³⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, e.g. 18-20, 72-96, 117-48.

any simple, linear progression from the old comparative theology to the new one? For the moment, let me suggest just three possibilities.

First, I think, we can look to contemporary mission studies. It is noteworthy that Clooney has not generally identified the nineteenth-century “old” comparative theology as the only or even the primary antecedent for the new one. Instead, he has also drawn our attention to the writings of early Jesuit missionaries in Asia and in the Americas.⁴⁰ And, as Stephanie will discuss in greater depth, recent scholarship has greatly broadened our understanding of global Christianity, including its missionary pasts. Thus, for example, Sunder John Boopalan has traced how the different social backgrounds of the Jesuits Roberto De Nobili (1577-1656) and Gonçalo Fernandes (1541-1619) informed their conflicting approaches to religious diversity in South Asia,⁴¹ and my University of Toronto colleague, Nhung Tuyet Tran, has drawn on a repertoire of early modern vernacular letters, catechisms and testimonies to unfold a “Vietnamese Catholic cosmopolis” quite distinct in its negotiation of hungry ghosts, Confucian heavens and other markers of religious difference.⁴² This Vietnamese textual record unsettles the privilege we grant to European sources in our collective remembering, whether these be Jesuit missionaries like DeNobili, Fernandes or Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660)⁴³ in the seventeenth century or comparativists like Max Müller, James Freeman Clark and J.A. MacCulloch in the nineteenth.⁴⁴

Second, arguing along similar lines, Tracy Tiemeier has identified the trauma of the slave trade and Middle Passage as a stark challenge to Eurocentric histories and practices in the discipline.⁴⁵ In her 2021 essay, “White Christian Privilege and the Decolonization of Comparative Theology,” Tiemeier draws on the work of Khyati Joshi and An Yountae to indict the discipline as—at least in its present configuration—irremediably bound up with structures of oppression.⁴⁶ Comparative theologians are “standing on the decks with the slavers” and building our scholarly project “on the backs and bodies of enslaved, colonized peoples.”⁴⁷ But Tiemeier also draws attention to historical processes of creolization among Afro-Caribbean peoples as a liberatory

⁴⁰ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 27-30; Francis X. Clooney, SJ, “A Charism for Dialogue: Advice from the Early Jesuit Missionaries in Our World of Religious Pluralism,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 34, no. 2 (2002): 1-39; and Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *The Future of Hindu-Christian Studies: A Theological Inquiry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 23-46.

⁴¹ Sunder John Boopalan, “Hindu-Christian Relations through the Lens of Caste,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations*, edited by Chad M. Bauman and Michelle Voss Roberts (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 169-92.

⁴² Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Releasing the Soul*, unpublished manuscript provided by author.

⁴³ E.g. Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); and Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

⁴⁴ See Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 30-35.

⁴⁵ Tiemeier, “White Christian Privilege,” 85-87.

⁴⁶ Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

⁴⁷ Tiemeier, “White Christian Privilege,” 88.

alternative. “The theo poetic process of creolization,” she writes, “was and is a process of relational solidarity and communal becoming in the colonial abyss. This process was also comparative and multireligious. ... This is the comparative theology of the colonized, creolized peoples working actively to reconstruct their creolized God.”⁴⁸ Tiemeier issues a prophetic call in and for the present; but she makes her case, at least in part, by recovering and reimagining a suppressed past.

Finally, we can look for History 2s, alternative pasts of comparative theology, among Indigenous peoples and nations here on Turtle Island. In her 2017 study, *A Clan Mother’s Call*, Jeanette Rodriguez notes “three major contributions” offered by Haudenosaunee nations to all peoples in this land, namely, North American traditions of democracy, feminism and ecological awareness.⁴⁹ Perhaps the same could be said for North American traditions of comparative theology. Important work in this area has been done in relation to the Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk (1863-1950), including by Damian Costello and my Toronto School of Theology colleague Michael Stoeber.⁵⁰ The Kanien’kehá:ka Saint, Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680), also represents an intriguing example of not only thinking, but actively embodying Catholicism interreligiously in her life and ascetic practices,⁵¹ and the Yakama scholar Michelle Jacob has highlighted the ways Kateri’s legacy has been sustained in the annual Tekakwitha Conference.⁵² For the moment, however, I would like to explore another figure that I find particularly compelling and disruptive: the Métis visionary Louis Riel (1844-1885).

Riel holds an important place in Canadian imaginaries as an Indigenous resistance leader, as the founder of the Province of Manitoba, and as a kind of martyr of Confederation.⁵³ In recent years, Thomas Flanagan and Jennifer Reid have also brought out the specifically religious character of Riel’s messianic self-understanding.⁵⁴ As a

⁴⁸ Tiemeier, “White Christian Privilege,” 89.

⁴⁹ Jeanette Rodriguez, with Iakoiane Wakerahkats:teh, *A Clan Mother’s Call: Reconstructing Haudenosaunee Cultural Memory* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), 7-9.

⁵⁰ Damian Costello, *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Damian Costello, “Black Elk’s Vision of Wanikiya: The Ghost Dance, Catholic Sacraments, and Lakota Ontology,” *Journal of NAIITS* 16 (2018): 40-56; and Michael Stoeber, “Indigenous and Roman Catholic Canonizations of Nicholas Black Elk: Postcolonial Issues and Implications of *Black Elk Speaks*,” *Theological Studies* 81, no. 3 (2020): 605–30.

⁵¹ See especially Nancy Shoemaker, “Kateri Tekakwitha’s Tortuous Path to Sainthood,” in *Negotiators of Change*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55–77 and Darren Bonaparte, *A Lily Among Thorns: The Mohawk Repatriation of Kateri Tekahkwí:tha* (Mohawk Territory of Akwasnesne: Wampum Chronicles, 2009).

⁵² Michelle M. Jacob, *Indian Pilgrims: Indigenous Journeys of Activism and Healing with Saint Kateri Tekakwitha* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016).

⁵³ See Albert Raimundo Braz, *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Thomas Flanagan, *Louis ‘David’ Riel: ‘Prophet of the New World’* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Jennifer I.M. Reid, “‘Faire Place à une Race Métisse’: Colonial Crisis and the Vision of Louis Riel,” in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, ed. Jennifer I.M. Reid (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 51-66; and Jennifer Reid, *Louis Riel and the Creation*

Métis and as a former seminarian, Riel was uniquely positioned to articulate a vision of Catholicism that was theologically astute, cross-cultural and at least implicitly interreligious. Ultimately, he proposed radically original interpretations of the papacy, the Eucharist and the new people of God, all rooted firmly in the soil of Turtle Island.⁵⁵ Many of Riel's contemporaries recognized the threat that his religious and political vision posed to the colonial *status quo*. Catholic authorities sent him to the insane asylum; Protestant authorities sent him to the gallows.⁵⁶ His was a form of thinking Catholic inter-religiously with real consequences, both for Riel himself and for the settler state of Canada.

These three examples of History 2—in early modern Vietnam, in the trauma of the Middle Passage, and in the Métis Nation of the Red River—are each, I think, compelling and interesting in their own right. But what is their significance for comparative theology? One temptation might be to attempt a reconstruction of the field from the ground up, in light of one or another of these newly remembered pasts. Tiemeier, for example, calls for a complete “realignment of the field to decolonial liberation and relational solidarity,” inspired by the histories of Afro-Caribbean creolization she highlights in her essay.⁵⁷

Perhaps due to my own location as a white settler scholar, I find this call inspiring and beautiful, but hard to imagine in practice. So I find myself returning instead to Dipesh Chakrabarty. For, in *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty does not disavow or diminish the importance of History 1.⁵⁸ Instead, he recommends a continual, self-conscious practice of interruption. “History 2,” he writes, “is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1.”⁵⁹ He articulates a similar idea in more general terms elsewhere in his book, when he contends that “European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate,” in constant need of disruption “from and for the margins.”⁶⁰

Perhaps, then, we should not seek to displace or replace the Eurocentric narrative of comparative theologies, old and new. Instead, we can strive to render this narrative “both indispensable and inadequate,” to give it a privileged place in our collective self-understanding while also resisting its totalizing ambitions. In this task, we are greatly helped by remembering those pasts of interreligious reflection that don't fit the narrative, in what might be regarded as an ascetic, continual practice of interruption.

In the next section, Stephanie surveys some future prospects for thinking Catholic interreligiously. The futures she imagines are not singular or coherent. They are

of Modern Canada: Mythic Discourse and the Postcolonial State (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012).

⁵⁵ See Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel*, 73-96; Reid, “Faire Place,” 58-61; Reid, *Louis Riel*, 187-201; Louis Riel, *The Diaries of Louis Riel*, ed. Thomas Flanagan (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1976), 57-88, esp. 63-66, 80; and the creative reinterpretation in David Day, *The Visions and Revelations of St. Louis the Métis* (Saskatoon: ThistleDown Press, 1997).

⁵⁶ Cf. Hans V. Hansen, ed. *Riel's Defense: Perspectives on His Speeches* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014).

⁵⁷ Tiemeier, “White Christian Privilege,” 92.

⁵⁸ Chakrabarty is a Marxist interpreter, after all, and he depends upon ideas derived from History 1—including universal ideals of human rights—to advance his own interpretive agenda.

⁵⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 66.

⁶⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

complex—and this makes good sense. The future is plural in no small part because the past is plural, and there is no obvious, linear path to the future, because there was no single, linear path that brought us to this point. But that does not mean that there are not a few more well-trodden paths, and real judgments to be made about how to move forward in a good way.

IMAGINED FUTURES (STEPHANIE WONG)

From the vantage of 2022, recognizing the plurality of the present and of the past, what might we say about comparative theology into the future? I'd like to begin with two metaphors for what Catholic comparative theology might need or try to do:

Imagine first that you sit in a submarine moving through the deep ocean. You're gazing out the round portal windows hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysteries of the sea. As a comparative theologian, you begin looking through your familiar window, but you take time to scoot over and take a studied, slow look through another window to see what you can see from there. *Was that a seahorse? There's a view of the coral from over here!* Indebted to the details of that other view, you return to your own window enriched. In this picture, comparative theology means going back and forth between the windows of religious tradition, looking there, looking here again.

Imagine now that you sit in the middle of a plaza, leaning back with eyes closed to enjoy the afternoon and holding a musical instrument. Others are already there in the plaza, and you listen as they play: *there's the relaxed pluck of a guitar, and, oh, now a driving beat from a djembe drum.* As a comparative theologian, you listen for a long time to hear the other's themes and improvisations unfolding, sometimes familiar and sometimes jarring to you. And you reconsider what you've got: Could the instrument you're holding harmonize alongside the melody, or would it do better as rhythm, coming in on the offbeat? You could even pull the keys out of your back pocket, and shake those; or maybe not play at all. In this picture, comparative theology means listening to the ongoing dynamisms of traditions in process, nearing and diverging.

In a nutshell, I am going to propose that Catholic comparative theology operates in both these ways today—both like looking through submarine windows and like hearing strains of music—but I will hypothesize, for three reasons, that comparative theology will be pulled more and more towards the latter mode.

Comparative Theology and the Academic Multiverse

First, comparative theology exists in an expanding academic multiverse, where scholars in myriad geographic and linguistic settings hope to account for that mix of History 1 and History 2s that Reid Locklin has mentioned. After all, we're in the midst of several parallel disciplinary expansions.

On the one hand, "theology of religions" has been nudged to make room for the more open-ended inquiry of "comparative theology."⁶¹ Comparative theologians

⁶¹ James Fredericks points out two problematic features of theology of religions: its *a priori* method, aspiring to work out a stance about other traditions independent of any empirical study of them; and its presumption to offer a totalizing perspective on religions as though from an

generally refrain from any initial soteriological judgment of other traditions to defer meaning and let the quest for insight unfold in a more genuinely inter-religious way. At the same time, “missiology” has been nudged—sometimes shoved—to make room for studies in Global or World Christianities. There, scholars hope to foreground not the perspective of foreign missionaries but the theological expressions of local Christian communities thinking in their own (often inter-religious) contexts.

Granted, in both cases, theorists have questioned how radical a break there is. Catherine Cornille and Kristin Kiblinger, have argued that comparative theologians inevitably presuppose some conception of the epistemological status of the other tradition⁶² and do better to make that explicit.⁶³ Postcolonial scholars in intercultural studies, like Judith Gruber, have pointed out that paradigms of inculturation can still reinforce a Euro-American hegemony, leaving the West as the silent “center” of the tradition while highlighting voices from “from the margin” as inculturated theologies.⁶⁴

I would argue the liabilities of each enterprise can be mitigated by doing them in conjunction. Comparative theology doesn’t have to study Buddhist or Hindu ritual only as foreign *per se*, but a global church means doing theology from contexts where these are majority practice. Attention to the global South and East doesn’t have to script contextual theologies as forever peripheral, but can and does serve as a platform for us to hear the voice of the Indonesian, Kenyan, or Brazilian theologians reflecting interreligiously on the traditions of their own environs.

As Paul Hedges has pointed out, the new comparative theology here has developed mostly “within modern and contemporary Western theologies.” Here, comparative theology can be intensely self-conscious in trying to justify the practice of going between windows and prove itself as a scholarly academic subfield in the context of its containing submarine, the Western academy itself.

But we work at a marvelous time, when the wide world of interreligious and intercultural reflection is expanding our very sense of what theology is and what disciplines do. I recently became aware of a scholar in Hong Kong, Pak-Wah Lai, who engages in scholarly comparison of Traditional Chinese Medicine practice and early Greek Christian texts and rituals to look at issues of what we might call psychology and spiritual health.⁶⁵ So while Western academic comparative theology has been debating *whether* comparative theology does best to focus on sacred texts or might grapple with practice (and Marianne Moyaert has made compelling cases for the

objective place. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 109-112.

⁶² Catherine Cornille, “Is All Hindu Theology Comparative Theology?” *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 1 (2019): 126-132.

⁶³ Kristin Beise Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, edited by Francis X. Clooney (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 32.

⁶⁴ Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity After the Cultural Turn* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 2013.

⁶⁵ For example, see Lai Pak-Wah “Patristic Studies and Chinese Medicine” Parts I and II, International Association of Patristics Studies (I.A.P.S), accessed May 7, 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoyjMskDEL4>>.

latter⁶⁶), I see Chinese theologians largely assuming it, and then—if they interface the English-speaking academy at all—doing so in all kinds of idiosyncratic spots: biblical theology talking to ritual studies; Traditional Chinese Medicine showing up at the International Association of Patristics? Okay! Or in a Chinese theology conference, I saw a presentation on political art, where the painter had rendered his fleeing family with statues of the Buddha and Jesus, their faces peaceful but also oblivious to the vicissitudes of human life—a theologically provocative interreligious grappling, but turning up at the intersections of the Chinese theology and Chinese art disciplines. I'm willing to include these kinds of inquiries and critiques in the category of interreligious reflection, and would warn against drawing the circle of comparative theology too narrowly. For isn't it great when people pursue along axes that bust one's own sense of disciplinary lines?

My point is that there are a lot of different kinds of comparative theologies (plural), many not going under the moniker of "comparative theology" at all. From our academic plaza, we might hear sounds from yet other streets and spaces.

Comparative Theology and the Political

Second, I see comparative theology scholars and teachers eager to own the ethical responsibilities of choice-making: what do we choose to pay attention to, and how do we represent ourselves and the religious other to the public?

As we all know, the humanities here are under significant pressure to justify our place in higher education. Explaining the "so what" of it all—to college leadership, to prospective students, to the media—is not easy. Moreover, anybody working on dynamics of difference must navigate what Tamara Underiner has called the "rock of fetishization" and the "hard place of indifference."⁶⁷ Too often, the public cares about what we do only insofar as it facilitates either a faulty mimeses of finding oneself in the other (e.g., "their devotion to the Quran operates the same as our devotion to the Bible") or a shallow rejection of the other (e.g., "Jesus respected women and democracy, but those Confucians... nothing but patriarchal hierarchy!"). It takes time to get below stereotypes and into the workings of how exactly a religious world construes value.

Of course, a concern for epistemic fairness and scholarly responsibility is hardly new in comparative theology. From the beginning, early founding figures like Francis Clooney, James Fredericks and Catherine Cornille have been well aware of the risks of distortion. They've urged humility in inquiry, vulnerability to the insights of the "other" tradition, and the necessity of suspending as much as possible one's own

⁶⁶ Marianne Moyaert, "Broadening the Scope of Interreligious Studies: Interrituality," in *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiation of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations in Interrituality*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 1-34; "Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges and Problems," *Harvard Theological Review* 111 (2018): 1-23.

⁶⁷ Tamara Underiner, "Beyond Recognition: Toward a Pedagogy of Privilege." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000): 1295 quoted in in Mara Brecht, "Soteriological Privilege" in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, edited by Mara Brecht and Reid. B. Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 92.

categorical assumptions to apprehend the other text or thinker on their “own terms.” But as the conversation has developed, some have worried this ends up re-crystallizing tradition in terms of its most “traditional” dominant voice. Lynn Hofstad asks, “Could more connections be made with other traditions by including voices from the margins of theology?”⁶⁸ Judith Grüber wonders if comparative theology shouldn’t have a more “profoundly unsettling impact ... on its home tradition: an *exposure* of its constitutive ambivalence and internal diversity.”⁶⁹ Probably the answer is a both-and, that we must really aspire to receive what the other is saying, and also let the process turn up the quieter voices in both traditions.

At any rate, the big question behind all this is: what sort of representations will the comparative theologian undertake, and what sort of generalizations will we put before the non-specialist as aides to better understanding?

The religious studies scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, being critical of his own discipline’s tendency to extrapolate parts as wholes, once urged scholars to own more their role in constructing generalizations: “Too much work by scholars of religion,” he said, “takes the form of a paraphrase, our style of ritual repetition, which is a particularly weak mode of translation, insufficiently different from its subject matter for purposes of thought. To summarize: a theory, a model, a conceptual category, a generalization cannot be simply the data writ large.”⁷⁰ His point was that the scholar treads most dangerously when they imagine they are merely presenting the data. Comparativists do better to embrace the fact that we are always re-representing. So there is a deep call to responsibility in comparison, but it lies less in reproducing first-order data as second-order output, and more in making explicit what we have chosen to pay attention to and to the difference we have added in analysis.

Returning to my metaphors, we do have to undertake comparative theology with a concern for epistemic justice and service. But it may not be so much about achieving a kind of justice *between* traditions, in making sure we look at the Muslim fish as carefully as we looked at the Christian fish. Rather, I suspect that comparative theologians must rise to the challenge of explaining to our institutions and to the publics that care, what is going on in the pluralistic plazas we’ve sat in. For me, in the Chinese village plaza, why do we hear the Catholics setting off firecrackers at the consecration rather than bells, and why do we no longer hear the call to prayer from Uighur and Hui mosques? To pay attention in interreligious reflection is inevitably political.

⁶⁸ Lynn Hofstad, “The Challenges of Comparative Theology: An Assessment of Kärkkäinen’s *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*,” *How to Do Comparative Theology* 59, no. 4 (2020): 344-347.

⁶⁹ Grüber, “(Un)Silencing Hybridity,” 31.

⁷⁰ Smith makes the case that generalization is, in itself, not a bad thing; indeed, we have a responsibility to own that we are generalizing and re-representing religious traditions to the non-specialist: “The cognitive power of any translation, model, map, generalization or re-description—as, for example, in the imagination of ‘religion’—is, by this understanding, a result of its *difference* from the subject matter in question and not its congruence.” Jonathan Z. Smith “A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religions’ History,” *Numen* 48, no. 2 (2001): 145.

Comparative Theology in the Age of Overwhelm

Finally, this concern for communicating understanding brings me to my third point about the generation yet to come, our Gen Z students and future colleagues. Comparative theology will proceed in an age where many of our students feel a weariness or even wariness about the sheer quantity of different perspectives that digital media brings just a click away.

Even though I'm here representing the 'young' generation, I am old enough to remember a different, perhaps more naive world. Though the internet existed, as an undergraduate student in 2010, I still imagined that if I could just read every page of my Abrahamic Traditions textbook or Buddhist Philosophy anthology then I'd have a beginning mastery of the subject and be ready to encounter our multicultural world in informed and positive ways.

Well, that world has passed away, and comparative theology sits more awkwardly amidst doubts and tensions over what sort of learning is worthwhile, what sort claims are to be believed:

First, given the internet-infused practices of higher education today, our students immediately feel the fragmented and potentially unlimited nature of information. Many professors have replaced traditional course textbooks or edited print anthologies with online resources. This is for good reasons, like broadening the canon or easing economic strain on students. But it means that students encounter the material for their various classes as a tumult of pdf files from Blackboard or Canvas, potentially unlimited and somewhat stripped of context until the instructors explains where the pages come from and why they have included the selection in the uploads. So too, when students conduct research, they often embark on open-ended Google searches that can take them into either distracting rabbit holes or fruitful interdisciplinary connections. Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize winning political scientist and economist, noted in the 1970s that the Western world was moving into an "attention" economy, where attention—not sources—is "the bottleneck of human thought:" "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." For our undergraduates in 2022, it has always been obvious to them that you can't know it all, and all of our understanding is selective.

Second, writers from Foucault to Willie Jennings have urged us towards a healthy suspicion of the goal of epistemic mastery. Jennings has argued compellingly that theological education has all too often carried forth under a white ideal of the individualistic, self-sufficient man who has it all under his control.⁷¹ Surely, the point is well taken. What could be more spiritually wrongheaded than to undertake theology as an exercise in "mastery" over the divine, or over the traditions or people we study?

But, third, the next generation of student-scholars is coming of age at a cultural moment that can trend deeply utilitarian on issues of global connectivity, and the constructedness of identity narratives. In their daily lives, they use and appreciate the efficiency of global communications. Yet for many Gen Zers, over-connectivity is how you get hacked! In their schoolwork, students are often asked to grapple with how history produces multiple narratives and they are very accustomed to seeing and

⁷¹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

participating in culture wars as contestations over narrative. In my former Rustbelt Midwestern institution, the politically Right students of Q-Anon wear t-shirts with words like: “January 6th: Keep questioning the narrative”—a postmodern statement if you ever saw one, taken up as a slogan for Far Right militancy. On the other hand, the politically Left students in the minority didn’t like it, but interestingly, took it as natural that every group would have and promote its own narrative as a tool of identity formation and defense.

My point with these observations is just this: that our students and future colleagues are less likely to be marveling at a world coming into connection than the Gen Xers and Millennials were. They are native to more wary mental habits: trying to hold at bay the overwhelm of information, and always trying to work out the spin.

Still, our students are looking to us to help them parse the “liquid modernity” of our pluralistic world,⁷² and I imagine that Gen Z comparativists might have much to help society to reclaim meaning and wonder in the years to come. For comparative theology stares multiplicity in the face, not looking away from the fact of religious and cultural plurality, acknowledging that religious “tradition” exists nowhere but the messy, murkily bordered, usually political dynamisms of history. And yet comparative theology still holds forth that it is possible to be an informed-enough construer of meaning and value to recognize gold where we find it.

If the comparative theologian puts their trowel to this or that spot digging for wisdom, it’s undertaken in the trust that traditions *do* carry riches. The Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has written of religious traditions disclosing a “secret” or “hidden” drama that cuts against the sense that traditions are just records of “bare history”—events occurring in sequence.⁷³ John Thatamanil has spoken of different religious traditions as vast repositories of accumulated wisdom, which “groove” on particular kinds of wonder.⁷⁴ And Francis Clooney remains hopeful that if our faith can “suffer poetry and the drama of uncertain love,” then the epistemic risks we take may be the risks of “loving God.”⁷⁵

Comparative theology can be one of the places of judgment where intellectuals do that vulnerable, tentative work of trying to decide—with a wide-top funnel and from our various starting points of hybridity trying to grasp towards and negotiate identity⁷⁶—what is worth studying and pondering and reproducing in ongoing representations of value? If *we* don’t embrace the responsibility of initially curating for

⁷² Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007).

⁷³ David Bentley Hart, “Tradition and Authority: A Vaguely Gnostic Meditation,” in *The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World*, edited by Tal Howard (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 56-76.

⁷⁴ John Thatamanil, interview with Tripp Fuller, *Homebrewed Christianity*, audio podcast, February 16, 2021, <https://trippfuller.com/2021/02/16/john-thatamanil-a-comparative-theology-of-religious-diversity/>. Traditions are “attempts to gain comprehensive qualitative orientation,” trying to read reality faithfully and conform to reality rightly, and reality and experience speaking back too; “vast repertoires” of accumulated wisdom of practices and conceptual wisdom” (46:00-50:00).

⁷⁵ Francis Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013), 141.

⁷⁶ Judith Grüber, “(Un)Silencing Hybridity,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, edited by Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 25.

them some really “golden” ideas to taste for themselves... then I am afraid the Q-Anons of the world will be all too happy to do that formative work.

Zhuangzi's “Useless Tree”

So in holding out hope for the ultimate to still surprise us through the particularities of tradition, I want to conclude with an account of comparison, where the unexpected does speak with ethico-political power.

It's a story from the early Chinese Daoist tradition, which was always a thorn in the side of the Confucians. The classical Confucian texts promoted programs of moral-self-cultivation, hinging often on metaphors of human agriculture and cultivating sprouts into predictable virtues. Meanwhile, the Daoist *Zhuangzi* gives us instead the resistant voice of *ziran* nature, in this passage, the voice of a feisty gnarled tree who has its own priorities in comparison:

Shih the carpenter was on his way to the state of Chi. When he got to Chu Yuan, he saw an oak tree by the village shrine. The tree was large enough to shade several thousand oxen and was a hundred spans around. It towered above the hilltops with its lowest branches eighty feet from the ground. More than ten of its branches were big enough to be made into boats. There were crowds of people as in a marketplace. The master carpenter did not even turn his head but walked on without stopping... His apprentice took a long look then ran after Shih the carpenter and said, “Since I took up my ax and followed you, master, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you do not even bother to look at it and walk on without stopping. Why is this?” Shih the carpenter replied, “Stop! Say no more! That tree is useless. A boat made from it would sink, a coffin would soon rot, a tool would split, a door would ooze sap, and a beam would have termites. It is worthless timber and is of no use. That is why it has reached such a ripe old age.”⁷⁷

Then the great part:

After Shih the carpenter had returned home, the sacred oak appeared to him in a dream, saying, “What are you comparing me with? Why do you compare me so unfavorably? Are you comparing me with useful/cultivable (wen) trees? There are cherry, apple, pear, orange, citron, pomelo, and other fruit trees. As soon as the fruit is ripe, the trees are stripped and abused. Their large branches are split, and the smaller ones torn off. Their life is bitter because of their usefulness. That is why they do not live out their natural lives but are cut off in

⁷⁷ 匠石之齊，至於曲轅，見機社樹。其大蔽數千牛，黨之百圍，其高臨山十個而後有枝，其可以為舟者旁十數。觀者如市，匠伯不顧，遂行不轍。弟子厭觀之，走及匠石，曰：自吾執斧斤以隨夫子，未嘗見材如此其美也。先生不肯視，行不轍，何邪？曰：已矣，勿吉之矣！散木也，以為舟則沉，以為棺則速腐，以為器則速毀，以為門戶則液桶，以為柱則蠹。是不材之木也，無所可用，故能若是之壽。

their prime. They attract the attentions of the common world. This is so for all things. As for me, I have been trying for a long time to be useless. I was almost destroyed several times. Finally I am useless, and this is very useful to me.”⁷⁸

What’s important to notice is that the tree is embodying a kind of *wu-wei* efficacious uselessness (shading the cattle, the people, staying itself alive). It is only useless according to the carpenter’s hierarchy of value, which compares what can be harvested from trees.

But when the tree shows up in the intimacy of his dream to speak its winsomely resistant piece—“Finally I am useless, and this is very useful to me!”—we see that the tree’s ethic of comparison is not about fruitful profit & utility (*li* 利 and *yong* 用) but rather survival & sustainability (*shou* 壽). The story is typical of much early Daoist writings, which validated the ways of the natural world and often contained subtle critiques of the Confucian insistence on political philosophy and social education as doing a kind of violence upon people and their ability to live in harmony with the Dao. After all, the verb *zhuo* 斲, often used in pre-imperial literature to describe how philosophers parsed language, connotes cutting in the way that an axe splits apart wood, and the Daoists suspected that so much Confucian word-splitting was not conducive to the *wuwei* life.⁷⁹ Certainly, Zhuangzi’s tree is on the side of living rather than being physically chopped up.

The *Zhuangzi*’s winsome critiques of comparison can delightfully disrupt and animate our efforts to invite studies into comparative studies of religion. Where I have had some success teaching Gen Zers is in teaching passages like these; for instance, I have assigned Zhuangzi’s gnarled tree alongside the Gospel of Matthew’s flowers of the field who do not labor or spin. We do the careful gazing, looking through the glass. But my favorite part is when the undergraduates—as utilitarian or cynical as they may be—still sit back a bit and the noise of conversation starts, wondering at Daoist trees and Second Temple Jewish flowers, and wondering whether they themselves are surviving according to what construal of value in their own years to come.

It is in those moments, that in the plaza of the classroom, I delight in not knowing who will say what next.

⁷⁸ 匠石之齊，至乎曲轅，見櫟社樹。其大蔽數千牛，絜之百圍，其高臨山十仞而後有枝，其可以為舟者旁十數。觀者如市，匠伯不顧，遂行不輟。弟子厭觀之，走及匠石，曰：「自吾執斧斤以隨夫子，未嘗見材如此其美也。先生不肯視，行不輟，何邪？」曰：「已矣，勿言之矣！散木也，以為舟則沈，以為棺槨則速腐，以為器則速毀，以為門戶則液楠，以為柱則蠹。是不材之木也，無所可用，故能若是之壽。」匠石歸，櫟社見夢曰：「女將惡乎比予哉？若將比予於文木邪？夫狙、梨、橘、柚、果、蓀之屬，實熟則剝，剝則辱，大枝折，小枝泄。此以其能苦其生者也，故不終其天年而中道夭，自掊擊於世俗者也。物莫不若是。且予求無所可用久矣，幾死，乃今得之，為予大用。使予也而有用，且得有此大也邪？且也，若與予也皆物也，奈何哉其相物也？而幾死之散人，又惡知散木！」Zhuangzi 莊子, translated by James Legge (1891), available on the Chinese Text Project, accessed July 28, 2022, <<https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>>.

⁷⁹ Albert Galvany, “Discussing Usefulness: Trees as Metaphor in the *Zhuangzi*,” *Monumenta Serica* 57 (2009), 79.

CONCLUSION (MARA BRECHT)

When Reid pulled our group together, he proposed the *Christmas Carol* ghosts as an organizing metaphor. For those of you who don't know Dickens' story, Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserly moneylender, who's visited by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley and then three other ghosts on Christmas Eve.

Reid's plan sounded good, but I have to admit I didn't think much about the ghosts beyond the way they neatly divide time. Dickens' ghosts, however, are more than just a device for narrative structure, they also serve an edifying, even moralizing role as characters in the story: there are things Scrooge needs to learn, and the ghosts come to teach him.

At the risk of carrying the metaphor too far—and in a spirit of adventurous comparison—I'd like to “deliberately juxtapose” Dickens' ghosts with our presentations to draw out the wisdom of these generational reflections *for all of us in this room*, be we comparative theologians, interreligious theologians, or just plain old theologians. This set-up puts us all in the position of Ebenezer Scrooge. This doesn't mean that I think Catholic theologians have been saying “Bah! Humbug” to comparative or interreligious theology, but rather just that comparative theology has something to teach all of us.

In Dickens' story, the Ghost of Christmas Present is a jolly giant in a green Santa suit, with dark curls and sparkling eyes. The Ghost escorts Scrooge to other worlds in Scrooge's own time—to places he would never visit. When there, Scrooge hears laughter from an abyss and hears a withered Tiny Tim bless his family. Scrooge learns that people, places, and life situations that seemed to him impoverished turn out to be places of joy and hope. He discovers forms of wealth he didn't know existed, and comes to see the uselessness of his own wealth.

In my talk, I argued that the pandemic accelerated digital blending and, further, that these circumstances foster interreligious tinkering and convergent practices. At the same time, I sketched a church with unfilled pews, empty confessionals, and vacant parish council seats.

My message wasn't too far off Dickens': Scrooge is surprised to find mirth in humble places, and challenged to assess his standards of values. Likewise, I want us to be surprised by the spiritual treasures that rise out of unexpected blends and challenged to evaluate our presumed standards of a “full” church or a “credible” spiritual practice.

Going forward, our church will not look like—will not practice like—it did even a few decades ago. It already doesn't. Can we learn from comparative theology how to hold productive tension among divergent theological imaginations, how to search out the riches of intimate interreligious coalescences? Can we learn to not just think interreligiously, but to *live and be* interreligiously?

The ethereal Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to his childhood, an unhappy time he recalls but doesn't want to have anything to do with. As he journeys through his past he finds himself interrupted by swells of affection and surges of joy for the past, as well as regret over the present. At each turn, Scrooge begs the Ghost to

take him away. But the Ghost insists, “I told you these were shadows of the things that have been. ... They are what they are, do not blame me!”⁸⁰

The Ghost of the Past forces Scrooge to see things as they are and not as Scrooge has constructed them. This is precisely the point of History 2s—they interrupt the dominant narrative.

Scrooge ultimately can’t bear having his own personal History 1 disrupted. He grabs a candle extinguisher, and “though [he] pressed it down with all his force,” Dickens writes, “he could not hide the light which streamed... in an unbroken flood upon the ground.” History 2s resist being absorbed into the globalizing story of History 1. Their light will not be extinguished.

Reid applies Chakrabarty’s theory to the more-or-less collective story of the “new” comparative theology, noting History 2s that contest the cohesiveness of that account (for example, the emergence of creolized religion in the context of colonialism and enslavement and Louis Riel’s messianic self-understanding). The challenge that Reid raises to comparative theology’s received History 1 can be generalized as a challenge for all of us—as individuals and in our families, in our departments and disciplines, in our parishes and neighborhoods: When we’re confronted with memories that interrupt and contradict the teleologically-ordered stories we tell about ourselves, will we cry out, like Scrooge, “Show me no more!”? Or will we have the courage Scrooge lacks, and allow our grip to be loosened and the light of History 2s’ memories to flood in?

The bell strikes twelve. A new ghost arrives, and not a pleasant one either. Scrooge beholds “a solemn... draped and hooded” phantom who takes him to a world that exists without him. He cries out in dread. He begs for reassurance, but is met with only a spectral hand pointing to a neglected grave. Confronted with his feeble unmourned, death, Scrooge calls out: “This is a fearful place. In leaving it, I shall not leave its lesson, trust me. Let us go!”

No, Stephanie’s account is not so grim as the Ghost of Yet to Come. She does not lead us to our metaphorical grave. And yet, I think there are elements of warning in her comments.

The first warning is couched in a message of possibility. It’s a marvelous time, Stephanie says, with the sounds of the wide world playing to us across the plaza. But we can all too easily tune into only the notes that ring familiar. It’s not only the melodies we should pay attention to—their harmonies and discordances—but who makes the music, whose instruments are missing or broken, who isn’t present, and who sits quietly aside.

Stephanie’s second warning is plainer: The digital age isn’t new for future generations. It’s old. And it’s wearying. With so much always coming at Gen Z from every direction all the time, best to find a story to believe and hold fast to it. Best to sign up for the useful major and get the other requirements out of the way. Best to carve a path of expediency and travel along it. The untended grave Stephanie points to is characterized by utility, cynicism, and wariness. Here, comparative theology may play an important role in inviting students to thoughtfully choose values.

⁸⁰ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46>.

To think Catholic interreligiously, by contrast, is to foster efficacious uselessness, to nurture wonder, to embrace surprise. With Scrooge let us pledge to not leave behind the lesson of the untended grave.

Dickens finishes his tale by returning to the present, showing us a Scrooge who has been both chastened by a possible future while also comforted and warmed by the past and present. We the readers are left to imagine what Scrooge's real Yet to Come might look like. Having explored with Reid the pasts of interreligious reflection that don't fit the dominant narrative and with Stephanie the future prospects for interreligious reflection in a universe that is at once expanding and contracting, we also are left to imagine our own interreligious Yet to Come and, like Scrooge, make good on our promises toward it.

There are no better words to close this address with than Tiny Tim's own: "God bless us, every one!"