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INTERRELIGIOUS READING IN THE CONTEXT OF DIALOGUE: WHEN INTERRELIGIOUS READING “FAILS”

TRACY SAYUKI TIEMEIER

Introduction

Although nineteenth-century intellectuals, such as the American Transcendentalists, were fascinated with Asian thought, it would be the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 that would initiate the modern American dialogue movement. Legal restrictions on immigration and widespread religious, ethnic, and racial discrimination through the mid-twentieth century prevented positive interreligious contact and dialogue on a large scale. This changed with the rise of civil rights and other American social movements interested in justice and with the passing of the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which loosened prejudicial immigration restrictions in the United States and opened the doors to a flood of Asian immigrants and their religions. Despite continuing prejudice in America, the visibility of religions other than Christianity grew as the numbers of non-Christians grew, and as their leaders and followers gained in popularity. This popularization of religions other than Christianity and their practices led to wider interest in interreligious dialogue.

Religious communities became more interested in formal dialogues in order to foster positive inter-faith relations and collaborate on social issues of mutual concern. For minoritized religious communities, dialogue was a matter of survival in America. For dominant communities, dialogue was seen as an important part of growing religious interest in the emerging social movements and work for justice. This collaboration on formal, institutional

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dialogues coincided with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* (in 1965) at the Second Vatican Council. It was a watershed moment for Catholic ecumenical and interreligious relations. While the call to engage with other religious traditions and persons worked its way slowly into wider American life, it was embraced particularly in big cities like Los Angeles that had long histories of interreligious encounter. Official Catholic participation in Los Angeles interreligious dialogue efforts began in earnest after Vatican II with Archdiocesan participation in the formation of the Interreligious Council of Southern California in 1969.¹ While the Archdiocese of Los Angeles participated in the Council, it would not be until significantly later that it would initiate its own formal bilateral dialogues.

This article examines the history and practice of the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue (a dialogue group that I currently co-chair). A common feature of the monthly dialogue meetings is the reading of texts from both traditions on a chosen topic. While the group has had many “successes” in interreligious reading over the Dialogue’s twenty-five year existence, it has also had many “failures”. My focus here is on some of those examples of interreligious reading that simply failed to be productive for our dialogue. I also interrogate Comparative Theology’s own practice of interreligious reading in light of dialogical interreligious reading. Ultimately, I argue that examples of “failed” interreligious reading done in the context of this dialogue help to highlight important elements of comparative reading that comparative theologians ought to consider more thoroughly in their work.

Creating a Bilateral Dialogue: Participation, Parity, and Friendship

The Reverend Monsignor Royale M. Vadakin, of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, conceived of the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue in 1989. Monsignor Vadakin asked a Hindu friend, Brother David (“Jnana”) Stump of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, to help him with the dialogue. In his letter to Stump, Vadakin says, “I would like to explore something with you. Due to a long and nourished friendship, I would like to begin this exploration by an informal private meeting with you”.² After the meeting, Monsignor Vadakin wrote to Swami Swahananda (Vedanta Society of Southern California), saying:

As you know I met with Bro. David Stump today. The purpose of that brief and informal meeting was to raise the possibility of a Catholic/Hindu bilateral dialogue here in Los Angeles. The Archdiocese has a

¹ See the website of The Interreligious Council of Southern California: <http://irc-socal.org/fait>; last accessed 12 October 2012.

² Royale M. Vadakin to David Stump, 18 December 1989, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier’s personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

distinct bilateral dialogue with the other three religions mentioned in *Nostra Aetate* (Judaism, Islamic [*sic*], Buddhism).

With this correspondence may I formally and officially propose the establishment in early 1990 of the Catholic/Hindu bilateral dialogue . . .

May I add that *Nostra Aetate*—and Roman Catholic interreligious dialogue here in Los Angeles—seems incomplete without the richness, moral vigor and antiquity which Hinduism brings to the world. For me personally, it would be a great sense of completeness to begin and develop such a dialogue.³

Creating an “equal” field of dialogue when history and a hulking hierarchical institution loom was more than a challenge. Hindu participants in the Dialogue have remarked over the years that, then and now, they were warned not to participate in a Catholic-Hindu dialogue because Catholics have a covert agenda of conversion. Indeed, the history of colonialism and conversion in India, and associations of Catholics with other Christians practising aggressive proselytization tactics in India (and elsewhere) create an unbalanced dynamic for any Hindu-Catholic dialogue, and even more so for an official dialogue sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. Vadakin sought to mitigate these problems by firmly grounding the dialogue in friendship and including equal numbers of Hindus and Christians.

Vadakin explicitly tied the Dialogue to Vatican II and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*. The purpose of the Hindu-Catholic Dialogue was explained in the press release announcement (28 March 1990):

The Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese and representatives of Los Angeles’ Hindu community have established an “ongoing and official dialogue”—a significant Southern California development in relationships between the Catholic Church and the world’s four great non-Christian religions in Southern California.

Announcement of the 16-member Roman Catholic/Hindu Dialogue was made jointly by the Archdiocese’s Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, the Hindu Temple Society of Southern California, and the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

Serving as co-chairs of the Dialogue are Swami Swahananda of the Vedanta Society, Dr. S. K. Durairaj of the Hindu Temple Society, and Msgr. Royale Vadakin, archdiocesan director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

³ Royale M. Vadakin to Swami Swahananda, 29 December 1989, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier’s personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

Already existing are separate dialogue groups with the Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist communities.

“The beginning of a Catholic/Hindu bilateral is a significant development in local dialogue with four great religions of the world, so richly present here in Los Angeles”, Msgr. Vadakin stated.

“Inauguration of the Roman Catholic/Hindu dialogue this year is particularly appropriate, as 1990 is the 25th anniversary year of the Vatican II decree on Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)”, he added.

The Dialogue will consist of eight Catholic participants and eight Hindu participants, with its purposes being the following:

- Establish a formal and ongoing dialogue.
- Encourage and promote contacts between Los Angeles’ Hindu and Catholic communities.
- Become more aware of the historical developments of both religious communities.
- Identify areas where there are mutual concerns.
- Develop language and conceptual frameworks for the joint exploration of religious topics and themes.

The Vedanta Society and the Archdiocese’s Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs have worked together since the early 1970s on a number of ad hoc events and through the Interreligious Council of Southern California.

Two of these events included the 1986 Assisi Peace Day Observance and the visit of Pope John Paul II to Los Angeles in 1987.

Now with the inclusion of the Hindu Temple Society, the dialogue has a wider and more inclusive religious and cultural dimension.

Swami Swahananda, reflecting on the Vedanta Society’s “friendly relationship with the local Roman Catholic community for a number of years”, added that “it is only appropriate that we meet together and examine some of the areas in which there might not be a complete understanding”.

He expressed appreciation to Msgr. Vadakin and Archbishop Roger Mahony for the initiative “they have taken to establish this dialogue” and stated it is “another welcome development in the remarkable outreach that has occurred since the Vatican II Council”.

Dr. Durairaj said the Hindu Temple Society “welcomes the idea of having an ongoing dialogue” among the various religious communities and “will extend its full assistance and cooperation in the true tradition of Hinduism, (*Sanatana Dharma*—Universal Religion, in the Sanskrit language).”

“We are sure that such a dialogue will go a long way to remove the many misconceptions in the proper understanding of the different religions and their practices”, he added.

Msgr. Vadakin explained that he had no idea—when the Interreligious Council of Southern California was started in 1969—that the dialogue would grow and widen to what it has become in 1990.

“Twenty-one years later, I can only marvel and give thanks for the marvelous religious understanding and cooperation which our communities enjoy. It is a gifted moment of religious cooperation”, he said.

“However, that window of opportunity has to be valued and struggled with”, he cautioned. “What has so marvelously opened can so quickly close, without effort, vision, and vigilance.”

“I see this beginning of the Roman Catholic/Hindu dialogue—which now enjoins the four great world religions mentioned in ‘Nostra Aetate’ bilaterally with the Catholic community—as marking a capstone moment in my own personal 21 years of ecumenical-interreligious ministry here in Los Angeles”, Msgr. Vadakin concluded.⁴

The Dialogue was mindful of the diversity within Hinduism and had three co-chairs, one Catholic, one Hindu from the Vedanta Society of Southern California, and one Hindu from the Hindu Temple Society of Southern California.

Surviving Dominus Iesus

Over the course of the Dialogue, structures and dynamics shifted with different participants and different Archdiocesan directors. In a 1994 letter to his fellow dialogue partners that announced a move from the Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs back into parish life, then Director Reverend Vivian Ben Lima noted that he left his office “having made so many friends and colleagues who have stretched and shaped my life and my ministry” and “armed with the conviction that dialogue is the only way to understanding and peace”. He also announced a shift in the structuring of the Dialogue groups. The Archdiocesan Director would act as a kind of coordinator, but the Catholic co-chairs of the individual Dialogue groups would come from the engaged participants within the groups themselves. This assures “the enthusiastic continuation of each group” and enables “a wider participation in leadership from the Catholic community at large”.⁵

In a 1998 letter to Reverend Gilbert Romero, the new Director of the Los Angeles Archdiocesan Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Brother Stump says:

⁴ Press Release by Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 28 March 1990, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier’s personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

⁵ Vivian Ben Lima to Colleagues in Dialogue, 6 June 1994, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier’s personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

Since its inception in February of 1990, the Hindu/Roman Catholic dialogue's three directors have brought their unique skills and different approaches to organizing the agenda and special projects. No doubt, your office records and the previous directors have been very helpful to you.

Under Msgr. Vadakin, there was a greater involvement of Catholic clergy and there was an examination of particular subjects, documents, articles, etc. I believe Msgr. Vadakin envisioned some kind of joint publication resulting as a fruit of the dialogue, but it never came to be. Beginning in the Fall of 1991, Rev. Ben Lima took over and developed some themes, started a plan of discussions designed (yet unfulfilled) to lead to a publication, arranged for guest speakers, and organized a conference, with plans for another. When he stepped down, Fr. Burnham [the next director] requested Fr. Sean [Cronin] to conduct the meetings and only attended once or twice. By then, the only priest was Fr. Sean joined by Sister Gregory. The Hindu faith has been represented by several monastics from the beginning, including, for the last several years, our Assistant Minister, Swami Sarvadevananda. Lay people from both traditions have also contributed significantly.

For the last couple of years, the idea to publish seems to have been set aside.⁶ We have followed some general themes and outlines with presentations from participants and we've had a lot of enriching spontaneous discussion, which was also true under the previous directors.⁷

Thus, the withdrawal of the Director from formal chairing of the group allowed the groups to develop their own initiatives and expand lay participation and leadership. But it also disconnected the group somewhat from the Archdiocese.

Father Romero was in office when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated the controversial document *Dominus Iesus* (2000). The promulgation of *Dominus Iesus* was a disaster for Catholic dialogue groups everywhere. Dialogue groups around the world scrambled to understand the context of the document, respond, and keep their dialogues afloat. The Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue was no exception, managing renewed suspicions from many in local Hindu communities. Members of the Dialogue felt it important to register a clear statement with the Archdiocese, addressing the Archbishop, Roger Cardinal Mahony.

⁶ Although the group set aside its publication aspirations some time ago, two of the participants at the Dialogue's 2010 event "Teaching Hinduism in Catholic Schools: A Workshop and Dialogue" co-authored an article based on their presentations: Pravrajika Saradeshaprana and Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Viewpoint: Teaching Hinduism in Catholic High Schools", *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 24 (2011), pp. 46–50.

⁷ David Stump to Gilbert Romero, 3 April 1998, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier's personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

The Hindu-Roman Catholic Dialogue met today, September 13, 2000. We discussed and responded to the document *Dominus Iesus* and your editorial statement in the Los Angeles Times on September 10, 2000. The non-Roman Catholics among us resist any attempt to be converted to the Roman Catholic faith. We take issue with the characterizations of our faiths as deficient and/or defective. We understand the need for faiths to hold firm within their own belief systems but find contradictory the notion in *Dominus Iesus* that there can be equality of persons but no equality of doctrinal content. The deepest and best parts of our personhood derive from our faith including its doctrines. Dialogue by nature allows faiths to learn from one another, which implies that no one faith possesses the totality of truth.

We appreciate your concern for the tone of *Dominus Iesus* and its apparent implications. Many of us in this group come from parts of the world where *Dominus Iesus* will have very harmful effects on the relationship between Hindus and Roman Catholics. In our dialogue here in Los Angeles we respect one another as friends. We intend to continue with our dialogue, in a spirit of mutual search and sharing.⁸

Although *Dominus Iesus* may not have been out of line with Vatican II's teaching on other religions, many experienced the document as profoundly out of line with the spirit of Vatican II. Certainly, the document lacked any sense of the years of deep inter-faith dialogues that had developed in the thirty-five years after *Nostra Aetate*. For some non-Catholics suspicious of dialogue with Catholics, their fears were confirmed: "dialogue" is really about conversion. The Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue's public efforts were challenged, but the deep friendships that had developed within the Dialogue prevented a rupture.

"Failures" in Interreligious Reading

In recent years, the Dialogue has followed a particular practice along with enthusiastic and invaluable participation by the Archdiocese's Ecumenical and Interreligious Officer, the Right Reverend Alexei Smith. There are two co-chairs, one Catholic and one Hindu. The overall format generally follows a four-fold dialogue of life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience.⁹ We meet once a month, rotating between our "home" bases, and share a meal over light chitchat and personal updates (dialogue of life). At the

⁸ John Casey, Christopher Key Chapple, Rada Krishna, Sumitra Menon, Joseph Prabhu, and David Stump to Roger Mahony, 13 September 2000, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier's personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

⁹ The Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (19 May 1991), 42, available at: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

first meeting of the year, we will choose a theme for discussion throughout the year (dialogue of theological exchange). We will make suggestions for readings and start thinking of a public event based on the theme. Over the course of the year, we will have readings each month, talk about the readings, slowly plan a public event, and collaborate on community projects of mutual concern (dialogue of action). Over the course of the year, and at the event itself, the group also shares in meditation or prayer (dialogue of religious experience). At the end of the year, the Dialogue hosts a large event—a conference, workshop, or celebration. Themes have included Women and Spirituality (1999), Social Service and Spirituality (2000), Spiritual Practice (2001), Sacred Celibacy (2004), Ecological Spirituality (2005), Human Rights (2006), Teaching Hinduism in Catholic Schools: A Workshop and Dialogue (2010), and Death and Dying (2011).¹⁰

Although the group has engaged in many efforts in interreligious reading that were mutually enriching, challenging, and sustaining (lasting numerous sessions and often culminating in a public event), I focus here on two interreligious reading efforts by the Dialogue that simply went nowhere. Because the texts or combination of texts did not inspire lasting conversation, mutual insights, or further interest, I call them “failures”. However, experimental “failures” are often as instructive as experimental “successes”. I explore here what insights can be drawn from our “failures”.

The first effort began in a very interesting and promising way. One of the members of the Dialogue suggested reading a Christian commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Hindu participants did not object to a Christian reading of a Hindu sacred text; instead, they disagreed among themselves on focusing on the Bhagavad Gita. While the Gita is a very popular text, it is far from being universally normative among the many and vastly diverse Hindu traditions. Indeed, one Hindu participant wondered if the Dialogue’s selection of the Gita reinforced both Western attempts to find one single book that could easily define Hinduism and some Hindu attempts to create a seamless Hinduism that simply did not exist. Nevertheless, the group ultimately decided to proceed and went on to select a set of Christian commentaries in order to get a diversity of reflections on the text.

In the first meeting, Christian participants discussed how reading the Gita opened up their own understanding, and how Christian readers of the Gita broke open spaces for new ways of thinking and praying. Trying to stay focused on the broader question of insight through interreligious reading, we avoided the “minor” errors we noticed in the commentaries. When a Hindu participant noted the errors, we readily agreed and spoke out against them. I even showed my marginal comments noting the problems! We Christians wanted to smooth things over and maintain a positive exchange. A Hindu

¹⁰ Event programs and posters, Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Archive, Tracy Tiemeier’s personal collection, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.

participant noted that Hindu readings of Christian texts were hardly the model of representation and scholarly textual interpretation. And yet, someone asked: do not interreligious readers have a responsibility to understand the “other” first and read the text as it is embedded in its own religious tradition?

While these exchanges offered the impetus in another piece to reflect on the importance of grounding interreligious reading in the texts’ communities and in deep interreligious engagement,¹¹ I was not then in the position to reflect on how our interreligious reading developed thereafter. What happened was . . . nothing. The series of commentaries was essentially forgotten. Some participants simply did not bring the book to subsequent meetings. Others did not have time or make time to read. Other topics became far more interesting to discuss at our meetings. Efforts by myself to refocus the conversation back on our readings went nowhere. I always dutifully emailed participants with instructions, reminders, and a note of the meeting’s readings. But we simply never made it around to the readings at the meetings. Or the comments on the readings were brief and unenthusiastic. The commentaries became uninteresting to both Hindu and Christian participants.

Another “failure” was of great surprise to me. To celebrate the one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda’s birth and the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of Vatican II in 2012, the group tried for months to read Vivekananda’s teachings and the texts of Vatican II together. Frankly, I thought it would be a wonderfully productive year of interreligious reading, as the majority of the Hindu participants in the Dialogue are members of the Vedanta Society of Southern California and the spirit of Vatican II continues to inspire the Dialogue. But other matters always seemed more interesting or important than the texts themselves.

In order to salvage our year of “dialogue about dialogue”, we recently read the Gospel of John (Chapter 14) along with the Rig Veda (1.164) in order to think about the relationship between one and many, and about Christian and Hindu inclusivisms. To begin and contextualize the discussion, the reading also included Harvey Cox’s “Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue”.¹² The article holds together the “inclusivist” approach of John 14:2 (“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places”, NRSV) and the “exclusivist” approach of John 14:6 (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life”, NRSV).

At the meeting, Hindu participants wanted to know right away why I had chosen the Rig Veda passage, for although the Rig Veda is highly authoritative

¹¹ Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, “Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation”, in Francis X. Clooney (ed), *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 129–149.

¹² Harvey Cox, “Many Mansions or One Way? The Crisis in Interfaith Dialogue”, *The Christian Century*, 17–24 August 1988, pp. 731–735.

among most Hindus, it is complicated and hard to understand; moreover, it is not a text that is often read or discussed on its own. Indeed, the Rig Veda may be considered even more sacred than the Bible, but it is not something as widely read as the Bible, even among Hindu adepts. In our dialogue, we looked at the brief verses that were familiar to Hindus and the short passage that is often referred to when discussing Hindu "inclusivism" (1.164.46). But the discussion ended there.

The passage of John, on the other hand, was very interesting to the group. One Hindu member likened the exchange between Jesus and Philip to the relationship between Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. Christian participants found this both surprising and interesting. Conversation followed this comparison and lasted quite some time. The parallels between Philip and Arjuna, Jesus and Krishna, made the seemingly exclusivist verses in John 14 take on a holistic, integrative, and cosmic tone. In a sense, then, the discussion was a "success". The interreligious conversation on John 14 was indeed fascinating. But since the initial juxtaposition of Hindu and Christian texts on a parallel theme did not really "work", I want to explore it more fully.

Factors that contributed to these less than ideal results included (but certainly were not limited to): 1) the decision to proceed with commentaries on a text that at least one participant thought was overemphasized; 2) the decision to try to keep reading commentaries some found objectionable in their misrepresentation of the Gita and its traditions of interpretation; 3) the decision to juxtapose Vivekananda's teachings, which are offered to a broad audience, with Vatican II's texts, which have a less conversational tone and target an "insider" audience; 4) juxtaposing an accessible biblical narrative with an esoteric hymn; and 5) including a "bridge" reading that considers one reading but not the other. These issues are largely related to textual selection, a process that varies for the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue from individual selection to group brainstorming. But issues related to the selection of texts do not explain everything. The group has read a wide variety of texts together, with sometimes gross misrepresentations of Hinduism and Christianity, in a wide variety of genres, often unbalanced, and with various target audiences. That the readings ended up being less than ideal does not necessarily, then, explain fully the "failure". It would therefore seem that sometimes texts or their juxtapositions just failed to inspire the group. After some initial remarks, the commentaries and the juxtapositions simply led to a collective indifference. Other topics, or only an individual text in the juxtaposition, became the material for dialogue. In the context of dialogue, the conditions for productive interreligious reading are not always obvious.

Interreligious Reading, Dialogue, and Comparative Theology

The interreligious reading in the Comparative Theology of Francis X. Clooney is characterized by reading religious texts together in order to

produce new insights and perspectives for theology. For him, comparative reading aims “to inscribe within the Christian theological tradition theological texts from outside it, and to (begin to) write Christian theology only out of that newly composed context”.¹³ The goal of this (re)inscription of texts is the production of a “comparative intertext”.¹⁴ Clooney is influenced by Western postmodern scholarship, mimicking the “collage effect” of Jacques Derrida’s experimental work and juxtaposing texts in columns.¹⁵ He writes:

Comparative theological reading shares features with this strategy of collage, as the constructive comparativist unsettles two (or more) traditions by excising important and familiar materials from their “legitimate” contexts in order to use them together newly, necessarily without prior warrant. The traditional interpretations woven around both texts, though recognized, are bracketed and rendered momentarily inarticulate. The reader, a member of either tradition who chooses to become a comparativist, is compelled to interact with the materials in a way that neither tradition would recognize as “its own way”. She or he must work very hard with the newly aligned materials, each subjected momentarily to the disorienting power of temporary acts of decontextualization and recontextualization. The procedure is effective and productive, in part because there is no established, approved set of margins within which the reading can be contained; nor is there any entirely adequate summation, before or after the reading, of what the juxtaposition is supposed to mean.¹⁶

The juxtaposition destabilizes texts from their traditions and produces new insights neither controlled by, nor necessarily recognized by, the texts’ home traditions. Yet even as Clooney plays with the subversive nature of interreligious reading, he expends a large portion (even a majority) of his energy contextualizing texts, particularly in light of commentarial traditions.

Even as dialogue and comparison grounds texts in their communities and traditions, both recognize the limits of reader control. In *Seeing Through Texts*, Clooney offers the Srivaisnava practice of *prapatti* (surrender) as a model for interreligious reading.¹⁷ Later, Clooney would emphasize the affective, loving, dimension of surrender in *Beyond Compare*.¹⁸ In focusing on surrender to the text, Clooney highlights the ways in which texts construct readers (and

¹³ Francis X. Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 7.

¹⁴ Francis X. Clooney, *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 297.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

¹⁶ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta*, p. 174.

¹⁷ Clooney, *Seeing Through Texts*, pp. 310–311.

¹⁸ Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

not the other way around). But there is another surrender that becomes clear through “failures” in interreligious reading in the context of dialogue: the surrender of individuals to the back and forth flow of the group. Dialogue, even when “successful” (whatever that means), is often tedious, boring, circuitous, meandering, and frustrating. Actual conversations cannot be scripted or clearly structured. The ebb and flow of a dialogue moves forward, backward, sideways, and every which way in between. Particularly for those persons looking to “accomplish something”, dialogue is bound to be an exercise in madness. When readings simply do not “work”, on their own or together, there is nothing that can be done to redirect the conversation or to produce results.

In this respect, the interreligious reading done by Comparative Theology is deceptively productive. Some texts resist comparison. Not every text or juxtaposition can be integrated into (or even held in tension in illuminative ways for) a Comparative Theology. More attention needs to be paid to the process of Comparative Theology in the selection of texts and the exploration of how and why some comparisons “work” and some do not. To take this into account is to recognize that the comparative theologian cannot squeeze meaning out of any arbitrary juxtaposition. And sometimes a comparison that seems obvious just does not yield any profound insight. To include reflection on “failures” in the comparative “experiment” is a more honest approach to Comparative Theology that recognizes the limits of the theologian to control and produce insight in cross-religious reading.

Moreover, although Clooney notes the ways in which comparative reading dislodges (temporarily) texts and theologians from their traditions, it is clear that the backgrounds (social, psychological, religious, etc.) of texts, readers, and contexts of traditions do not fall away when reading. Indeed, in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, Clooney draws on Julia Kristeva’s insight into how the autobiographical “text” interacts with texts in order to discuss the interaction of multiple religious texts.¹⁹ But he does not explore fully the role of the autobiographical text in interreligious reading. For any number of reasons (personal and otherwise), certain texts and certain combinations of texts will “speak” (or not) to readers. This cannot always be anticipated, even when an individual knows her dialogue partners or her texts well. This autobiographical “text” is always present in interreligious and comparative reading. Thus, while some readings might be obvious choices to bring together, they may just not inspire insight. Moreover, even where readers try to keep an open mind and bracket out their preconceptions and assumptions, interreligious readers inevitably ask questions, choose topics, select texts, and privilege certain lines of discussion that fit with their own narratives. While insight is not scripted, and often leads to unexpected conclusions, personal and

¹⁹ Francis X. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

interpersonal realities are always at play. The personal issues of interreligious readers can plague dialogues and inhibit theologies. They can also bring dialogue partners together and provide unique approaches that would not have otherwise been considered.

Concluding Reflections

In interreligious and comparative reading, everything from the selection of texts in dialogues to the purpose of the comparison is an act of power that can be questioned.²⁰ Albertina Nugteren, for example, points out that:

In colonial times, adventurous and greedy men sailed off to distant places, especially the Orient, in search for spices with which they could preserve and season their bland food at home. Now, can the same mistake be avoided here, i.e. that of interfering thoughtlessly with far-away people and their socio-economic infrastructures in this age for the sake of adding non-Christian spices to a Christian dish that may have become too bland? . . . Many are now well aware of the blind spots in the colonial enterprise, such as blatant cultural assumptions and dramatically uneven power relations. Yet many are still guilty of being mindless consumers on today's markets.²¹

When "failures" occur in dialogical reading, dialogue participants can question the person who suggested particular texts and topics. Particularly when the group has developed deep relationships, members are comfortable raising difficult questions of representation in texts, unbalanced texts, possible bias, or colonizing tendencies in the interpretation of texts. When Comparative Theology is done in isolation from others, there is no group to call the theologian to task and challenge her interpretation of texts.

Therefore, I have argued elsewhere that interreligious friendships and a deeply engaged dialogue community are essential spaces for comparative theologians:

Through [dialogue], the theologian is held accountable to the concerns, interests, and goals of her dialogue partners. Even if a theologian publishes or speaks on a classic text seeming to have little present-day relevance, she serves her friends (and not just the academy) by contributing to mutual understanding and by allowing the overall body of her work to

²⁰ See Helene Egnell, "Scriptural Reasoning: A Feminist Response", in David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Judith Gruber (eds), *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 79–82.

²¹ Albertina Nugteren, "Entitled to Understand: A Critical Look at Comparative Theology", in Cheetham et al. (eds), *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe*, pp. 156–157.

emerge from and serve the needs of the wider community. In this sense, then, the comparative theologian remains embedded in the real-life concerns of religious believers.²²

The emphasis on interreligious solidarity and friendship [in dialogue] is essential for addressing the question of imperialism in comparative theology . . . That is, I need friends to be myself fully; however, true friends are ends in and of themselves, to be treated so. By extension, a comparative theologian needs a community of interreligious friends. But if they are truly friends, they are not important just because they improve my theology. Rather, they are persons with their own goals, interests, and needs.²³

In the context of a diverse and multivocal dialogue where friends can call each other to task, problems of power can be raised, discussed, and addressed in ways that (hopefully) lead to more successful practices of interreligious reading in the future. Friends also can change the subject and dictate lines of discussion that may or may not be where we had hoped to go, shifting the power dynamics and offering more parity in the discussion. In this way, a comparative theologian who surrenders herself to a group of interreligious friends can be changed and challenged by her friends in significant ways that will factor into the focus of her work.

To be fair, for all of his celebration of the destabilizing nature of Comparative Theology, Clooney's careful approach to texts actually functions in ways similar to a dialogue group, investing texts and their traditions with an integrity that must be honored:

Skilled authors compose in such a way as to transform their intended attentive readers, to bring their lives into conformity with the realities and values their texts describe. Step by step, such texts draw the well-disposed person into a religious reading that is richly multidimensional and productive of affects irreducible to reasons offered in justification. Religious writing itself becomes the locus for further theological reflection: if openings for spiritual commitment and practice are written into a text, and if the text is read across religious boundaries to good effect, then intellectual and spiritual formation may be deepening and intensifying, as it were, line by line.²⁴

Thus, as much as the comparative theologian sets up a particular project, texts are transformative wholes with a prior integrity that affects readers in ways

²² Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Comparative Theology and the Dialogue of Life", *The Japan Mission Journal*, 65:2 (2011), p. 130.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁴ Francis X. Clooney, "Passionate Comparison: The Intensification of Affect in Interreligious Reading of Hindu and Christian Texts", *Harvard Theological Review*, 98:4 (2005), p. 368.

they cannot control. Texts in dialogue with the comparative theologian are friends in dialogue, whose difference, otherness, and integrity must be maintained.

In *Bridge to Wonder*, Cecilia González-Andrieu draws on the notion of “interlacing” as a way to understand the complex relationship between religion and the arts:

[A] braid—the geometric representation of interlacing—incorporates difference as beautiful. As we picture a braid, it is possible to appreciate that the uniqueness of each thread is precisely what contributes to the dynamism and complexity of a multistranded rope, and it is the action of intricate weaving that makes this possible. The different strands of a rope have a definite sense of openness and ongoing engagement, never moving swiftly apart as intersecting lines do, but rather continuing to come together.²⁵

Interlacing preserves difference, valuing the inherent beauty of each strand, yet noting the ongoing richness of bringing together the sacred and the beautiful. As practices of interlacing, Comparative Theology and interreligious reading done in the context of dialogue do not (should not) erase differences, but rather hold onto and value them, even as the process of reading together creates something entirely new.

The practice of interlacing also highlights more precisely the problem of power in interreligious reading. The image of interlacing calls to mind an outside and unfettered theologian who weaves texts and traditions together for her own “greater” purpose. Even if the integrity of texts is maintained as texts are embedded in their own long “strands” of communities of belief and practice, a “higher” (Christian imperial) authority is able to transcend, “bracket out”, her own tradition and claim expertise enough to manipulate materials from both traditions—and in the service of the often privileged home tradition of the theologian. The image lays bare the reality that Clooney’s confidence in the careful and “well-disposed” reader to truly surrender herself to an original authorial intention, interweaving texts where there are invited openings, is perhaps overly optimistic. Even when checked by an open group of interreligious friends or a deep care toward texts, the fundamental problem of the theologian’s power in interlacing texts remains.

For her part, González-Andrieu is acutely aware of the ways in which the notion of interlacing demonstrates clearly the problem of power in scholarship, religion, and culture. Thus, her theological aesthetics is particularly interested in the conflicts over who controls the production and display of “religious art”. Even more, her work has a distinctly liberationist edge. Thus,

²⁵ Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 88.

it becomes clear that the problem of power is less about theologians' positions of power and their entanglement in intellectual traditions of co-optation—this is inevitable—as it is about scholars failing to recognize situations of privilege in explicitly anti-colonial ways.

Not every comparison “works”. Not every practice in interreligious reading is productive. “Failures” in interreligious reading done in the context of the Los Angeles Hindu-Catholic Dialogue highlight the limits of readers' capacity always to produce meaning through textual comparison and the extent to which readers' backgrounds and contexts inform the reading process. Exploring examples of “failures” can assist the theologian as she attempts to construct a comparative theology that honors the “other”, attentive to the ways in which texts and traditions resist easy consumption. Constant self-examination and analysis of privilege allow the theologian to name how much she really is involved in the production of meaning. More sustained attention to both of these elements in comparative and interreligious reading is essential, if Comparative Theology is ever to shake the charge of hegemony.