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CONCERNS that likely inspired today's panel can be traced textually to the beginnings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and to the earliest writings of what we now call Hinduism. In the field of Hindu-Christian studies, these concerns suggest ethnographic approaches that are not in themselves new, but which borrow in potentially new ways from the methodological tool-boxes of anthropology, theology and the history of religions.

A quick perusal of academic journal entries over the past twenty years shows growing attention to questions such as "What is comparative theology?" and "What is the comparative study of religion?" (These broad questions suggest a sub-question, the topic of this panel: "What is Hindu-Christian Studies, and how best might we do it?") Reasons for the growing attention to such questions about comparison are multiple. They include the pressures of globalization and, with them, a growing market—academic and popular—for studies and stories that deal with phenomena related to globalization. Other reasons include a healthy self-doubt that has arisen generally in the humanities, particularly in the study of religion among theologians and historians of religion. This self-consciousness arises from at least four corners: the loss of objectivity that has accompanied postmodernism; a post-colonial anxiety regarding the study of non-Western religions; a post-Enlightenment concern about whether theology, in particular, can or should be considered an academic discipline at all, housed under the same roof as other, more "scientific"

disciplines; and some confusion over attempts to understand the boundaries of religion itself, particularly since Talal Asad's critique of Clifford Geertz,[1] a matter I will explore shortly. For these and other reasons, both theologians (Christian theologians in particular) and comparativists have been worrying over who they are, what they are doing, and how they can be responsibly more responsive to the ever-more-impressive fact of religious plurality.

Before trying to take a stab, first, at defining "what" comparative theology might mean today, I want to try to understand it historically—particularly since I agree with Asad that the concept "religion" exists only as a historical construct,[2] as does "comparative theology," "comparative religion," "Hindu-Christian studies," or any term for that matter. Which practices and concepts we subsume under "religion," or "theology" or "comparative theology" depends, of course, on our theories, our experience, our worldviews—all of which are shaped by discursive processes and events of history. To understand something about the history of comparative theology, then, will help us see: first, how it, like any other term or practice, is a historical product of discursive processes; how, as such a product, it is open to the force of change; and how theologians and scholars of religion—themselves discursive subjects working within the process of such change, conditioned by the limits of its history and the perceived needs of the moment—can best correlate their work to these needs while trying to maintain a sense of integrity.

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In a 1987 *Encyclopedia of Religion* article under the heading "Theology: Comparative Theology," David Tracy points out that although the work of comparative religion goes back to our very beginnings as humans—at least as far back as the moment when the first worshipper of a god or gods asked herself why her neighbor is a worshipper of some other god or gods— comparative work of any sustained scholarly fashion goes back, in traditional Western theologies and philosophies, at least as far as the beginnings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.[3] Among other traditions, especially in India, Tracy points out, the scholarly work of religious comparison has been going on much longer still and with great philosophical sophistication (Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols., Cambridge, 1922-1955). Despite the rich history of philosophical and theological scholarly work in India and the vibrant theological work being carried out there as well as in other countries and traditions, one of the greatest problems with the term "theology" today is that it is still generally assumed to mean "*Christian, Western* theology," at least within the confines of the Western academy. For the purposes of this paper, both because of and in spite of this tendency—and for reasons of space—I will focus on the history of comparison within Christianity. Furthermore, while theologies of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism (though some Buddhist philosophical treatises might better be described as a-theologies) have contributed significantly to the formation of Christian theologies, it is Christian theology that has most directly influenced the formation of the academic study of religion in the so-called West.

While the term "comparative theology" has received a fair amount of caché in recent years, Christian theology, I would argue (along with others such as David Tracy, Keith Ward, Francis X. Clooney, Eric Sharpe), has always been comparative. Furthermore, it has always struggled to define itself in relation to other disciplines, and with the notion of how scientifically or normatively neutral it can or should be. Tracy reminds us in his *Encyclopedia of Religion* entry that while the term "comparative theology" was not used in the premodern period, comparative elements—that

is, reflection on "other religions"—have been present in the Christian tradition since its beginnings, both in the philosophical traditions of Greece and Rome and in the Hebrew traditions of ancient Israel. These comparative elements can be traced in leanings both positive (in terms of borrowing) and negative (exclusivism, tendencies to demonize).[4]

The emergence of the very notion of religion in Europe, furthermore, has been outlined by Talal Asad, Eric Sharpe, and Samuel J. Preus, whose book *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* traces a narrative of displacement in which religion as it is studied in the human sciences is increasingly separated from theology. Denying the possibility of transcendence and replacing it with a naturalistic paradigm, scholars of religion increasingly adopted a critical outlook towards their object of study and removed from it any appeal to a transcendent God. Key players in this paradigm shift as Preus lists them are Bernard Fontenelle, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Emile Durkheim, E.B. Tylor, and Sigmund Freud, among others.

Of these men, Schleiermacher, a Reformed theologian, is particularly key to the development of the study of religion as a human science—or particularly, at least, for theology. Theologians such as Keith Ward[5], James Fredericks[6] and others have pointed out the extent of Schleiermacher's influence on the contemporary, comparative study of religion, particularly on liberal theology and its claim to a universal religious experience. Schleiermacher's apparent appeal to a universal core linking together all religions, first (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 1799) in the sense of an intuition, sense or feeling of the infinite,[7] and in later writings (*Glaubenslehre*, or *The Christian Faith*, 1821) as a feeling of absolute dependence,[8] has been used as a basis for arguing for the "transcendental unity" of all religions—an argument which has been shown to be highly problematic. Nonetheless, this transcendental unity has served as a cornerstone for much modern thought about religion and can be seen in works of authors including Rudolph Otto, Ernst Troeltsch, Mircea Eliade, Bernard Lonergan, Huston Smith, Wilfred Cantwell

Smith, and John Hick, among many others. It is an argument appreciable for its contribution to the comparative study of religions in its stress on similarity (without which one cannot do comparison), but one also which is due refutation, along with many other contemporary scholars of religion, for failing properly to recognize distinction.

About half a century after Schleiermacher published *Glaubenslehre*, "comparative religion," or what came to be known as the historical, critical and comparative study of religions of the world, came into wide public attention. This coincided, in the 1860s and 70s, with the rise of empiricism and the new "science of religion."[9] Friedrich Max Müller, the expatriate German philologist and man of letters, famously introduced the discipline "Science of Religion" on February 19, 1870 in an address to the Royal Institution in London. This "science," as opposed to the "science of theology" outlined by Thomas Aquinas half a millenium earlier, was to be significantly different from theology. Notably, Müller did not use the terms "theology" or "comparative theology" anywhere in his address. Rather, his use of the word "science" seemed to suggest a study of religion that would analyze *historical* forms of religion as opposed to *theoretic theology*, which Tracy defines as an analysis of the philosophical conditions of the possibility for a religion.[10] The work of David Hume or G.W.F. Hegel would exemplify the latter type of theology.[11] Alternately, in 1871, on the heels of Müller's address, James Freeman Clarke published *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology*, which concentrated on the history of religious doctrines in different traditions.

A scholar attempting to do comparative theology from within a historical approach – that is to say, from within a history of religions approach – may still theorize a systematic meta-structure through which she analyzes two or more religions. One difference between her and a theoretical theologian or a theologian of religion(s), however, is that she, the historian, may be more inclined to work without making her (sometimes latent) religious or a-religious standpoint explicit, or without necessarily revealing the religious underpinnings of her supposedly neutral hermeneutical categories—

though she may acknowledge her intellectual debts to preceding scholars of religion or locate herself in a particular school of scientific thought (anthropological, sociological, psychological, etc.). The hermeneutic or methodological categories employed by the comparativist working from a history of religions approach may, like those employed by the comparativist working from within a theology of religion(s), encourage the judgment of one religion as lacking in relation to another, as less "doctrinally developed," for example, or as less symbolically rich. The categories she employs may leave certain forms of religion outside the field of comparison altogether.

The most recent, famous example highlighting the potential blind spots of such an approach was outlined by Asad in his critique of Geertz's definition of religion as a cultural system.[12] In a one-two-three combo punch, Asad first criticized Geertz for unwittingly constructing his definition out of features bearing an uncanny likeness to his own cultural-religious background (the jab: white Protestantism). Second, he critiqued Geertz for projecting a distinctly modern, post-Enlightenment bias regarding the essential nature of religion as something separate, distinguishable or able to be teased out from other aspects of life—such as aesthetics, history, science, the quotidian. Third, he revealed some of the historical shifts and discursive processes that have contributed to the production of our concept of religion as a trans-historical essence. Asad explored the processes by which this concept came to seem natural, through the effects of discipline and power in medieval Christianity and Islam. "My argument," Asad wrote, "is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."[13] If this was true, many scholars of religion were down for the count.

Though perhaps not the full count.

Many scholars mulled, while lying on their backs: How do I proceed without universal definitions?—and got up again. Bruce Lincoln, in his *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*, commented that while the

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second part of Asad's above statement was "wonderfully insightful," the reasons for the absolute prohibition in the first part—that there cannot be a universal definition of religion— were not entirely clear. "Is not all language 'the historical product of discursive processes?'" Lincoln asked.[14] That this is the case "hardly renders futile all attempts at definition, ...particularly when one understands these as provisional attempts to clarify one's thought, not to capture the innate essence of things."[15] In other words, a definition or a methodology based on proposed universals may be useful to forward a position from a particular standpoint—and then, perhaps, to move on to another position.

Despite some of the working benefits of forthrightly assuming an underlying unity of religious experience—including the benefit of providing a common ground for discussion that can encourage interreligious dialogue—the analytical disadvantages are, I believe, more significant. Asserting a unified field of religious experience can actually discourage dialogue and corrode critical scholarship. Other problems include the promotion of a subtle (or not-so-subtle) theological and/or political imperialism, or the support of an uncritical syncretism that obscures real differences. In response to these problems I agree with Fredericks, who pits his own definition of a proper way to do comparative theology against a liberal theology of religions, arguing that comparative theology must deal responsively and creatively with the plurality of religions, as opposed to a comprehensive theology of non-Christian religions based on an appeal to universal religious experience.

On the other hand, I want to avoid the extreme reaction to liberal theology as offered by the cultural-linguistic position advocated by George Lindbeck and other "postliberal theologians." Lindbeck's position, which explicitly draws on the semiotic anthropology of Clifford Geertz, proposes that religion is a like a language, with its own rules of grammar, that forms a perceptual and conceptual framework for shaping subjectivities. The grammar of this religion, Lindbeck argues, is doctrine. Doctrines change, Lindbeck asserts, not as a result of new experiences that spring *ex nihilo* out of a

changing autonomous subject, but as a result of the interactions of a cultural-linguistic system with changing situations. Religious traditions are transformed when a religious interpretive scheme develops anomalies as it is applied in new historical or cultural contexts.[16]

The experiential-expressivist model forwarded by liberal theologians—called such because of its roots in the idea that all religion is the expression of a shared, underlying experience—suggests that "the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate, and that therefore they must respect one another, learn from one another, and reciprocally enrich one another."[17] The cultural-linguistic model, on the other hand, focuses on particular religions as separate language systems. These systems may perchance be commensurable—their doctrinal similarities may happen to overlap in places— but as a whole they are not various expressions of a shared, unified core experience. Rather, the cultural linguistic model "stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms."[18] As a result, adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience; they have different experiences.[19]

The advantages of such a model—cultural particularity, historical specificity, analytical precision, agreement with recent theories of language—are evidenced by the scholarly ascendancy the model has enjoyed among historians, anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers. The disadvantages, however, remain significant. How can a person who has been trained to embody the skills of one particular religion via its doctrinal rules ever truly understand the embodied skills of another? Even if this is possible, the idea that each religion constitutes a world of its own and uniquely forms human experience might make theologians confronted with the daunting task of navigating a new world feel safer turning inward, into the world of their home religion. They might turn to ecumenical dialogue—if the theologian is Christian, say, to dialogue between Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians—rather than to inter-religious dialogue or comparison, say, with Hindus or Hinduism. While such dialogue and comparison

might happen *ad hoc*, and while points of intersection between religions may indeed be found to exist in these moments, the job of the theologian working under such a model is not thought to be one of inter-religious comparison. A cultural-linguistic model generally functions "intratextually," that is, within its own interpretive framework. Christians, according to this scheme, end up talking mainly to themselves. The same goes for Buddhists or Hindus, etc.

While I am drawn to this cultural-linguistic model for its attention to cultural and doctrinal specificity, I am concerned about the implications of its most extreme versions for inter-religious dialogue, scholarly understanding and comparison. At the same time, the model offers a helpful tool to avoid an equally dangerous liberal approach that suggests one unified, universal experience of religion.

One way out of the quandary of trying to understand the religion of the Other is to limit the scope of one's project, slow way down, and take serious stock. Scholars may suggest, along with Fredericks, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., and others trained within the Chicago history of religions tradition, that all academic exercises are tentative, and that comparative experiments may lead to particularly "limited, very tentative results."[20] Instead of offering encompassing theological theories based on claims for or against a universal religious experience, Fredericks suggests that the comparative theologian engage in "limited case studies in which specific elements of the Christian tradition are interpreted in comparison with elements of another religious tradition."[21] He bases this suggestion on the belief that a fully systematized theology of non-Christian religions is not possible.

I am drawn to Fredericks' notion of limited case studies, as well as to another interpretation of the term "comparative theology" forwarded by Clooney – with a twist. Clooney's approach could be seen to merge both uses of "comparative theology" noted by Tracy—that which might be considered part of the history of religions approach, and that which might be called explicitly theological. Clooney calls for "a truly constructive theology ... distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its

foundation in more than one tradition ... and by reflection which builds on that foundation, rather than simply on themes or by methods already articulated prior to the comparative practice."[22] This third type of theology, Clooney argues, is "a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions; it is a theology that occurs truly only *after* comparison."[23]

But not entirely after, I would argue. "After," while gesturing in the right direction, suggests a stopping point for comparison, following which the theological task begins. Clooney acknowledges in theory that this is true, but that there is "no time limit, no boundary marker" necessitated by the word "after:" "'After' also implies consequence, 'in accordance with,'" and may also suggest an ongoing quality to the work of comparison, Clooney writes.[24] Perhaps, then, we might acknowledge the existence of "an ever-evolving" theology or standpoint in relation to notions of divinity, transcendence, and the metaphysical – a theological standpoint that is modified and brought into existence only through dialogical study. This dialogue occurs only *in relation*—not only between real scholars but also between real people living in real, specific, historical situations. We are now beginning to point toward ethnography.

One might infer from Clooney's stress on "the constructive" element of the project that the difference is one of identity as well as audience: whereas an historian of religion could see herself contributing to (and therefore acting constructively toward) the field of history, the theologian could see herself as standing in the stream of a particular way of talking about divinity, or god(s), or ultimate reality—even if she herself makes no appeal to the existence of a transcendental being beyond this stream of talk. She may seek to inquire into the ways selves (or, in certain cases, no-selves) are created and molded by the words, concepts and practices of their home tradition. As she compares this home world with other cultural-linguistic worlds, or with various expressions of her own tradition in various historical and cultural moments, she may inquire into how, if at all, other selves (or no-selves, for the term "self" is a particularly Western one) are molded differently. She may

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see herself as standing in the stream of a particular religious tradition that she considers home—though she may travel in search of new analytic tools and hermeneutic horizons, with an awareness that the language of home is sometimes lacking. She may understand herself to be speaking primarily to those who identify with that home tradition, perhaps to those who feel restless within it, or to those few who pay attention to the work of scholars of religion—whether those people are academics or people trying to make sense of their own and others' lives. She may rely heavily upon the tools of history of religion(s) or area studies, and may seek to change a small public's understanding of home and/or foreign traditions via these tools. She may refrain from making appeals to the existence of a transcendent being; she may talk more about the humans who engage in god-talk than in talk about a god or gods. In the end, her position may be more one of advocacy than one of neutrality or pretended neutrality—advocacy for change in the academy, or for a wider awareness regarding difference and similarity at home.

It is this, third sort of comparative theology—a constructive sort as defined by Clooney, with valences of Tracy's first model within the history of religions—that appeals to me most. This sort of comparative work, I believe, has the potential to be most creative in its openness to a variety of traditions, to the possibility of changing not only the lens through which one looks at those traditions, but also to the possibility of changing the lens through which one looks back at the home tradition. It points, finally, to a form of theological and intellectual practice in which the subject performing the task of scholarship is explicitly open to change resulting from that study.

The "how:" methods

While this third, constructive approach seems to me best in describing the "what" of comparative theology (particularly if we view it as building on the approach most indebted to the history of religions), I would at the same time distinguish my methods from the type of comparative theology that has been so productively forwarded by Clooney. For one

thing, while recognizing the constructed, fluid nature of cultures and traditions, Clooney confines his work to traditions as defined by texts. Second, I want to push the boundaries of fairly simple notions of comparison that rely on the idea of traditions as discrete entities rather than cultural negotiations with syncretic characteristics, negotiations that are fluid, changing, permeable, informed by one another. I am less inclined, for example, to compare texts from two different traditions, A and B, rather than look at how each text is a complicated construction of, say, Acd or Bqj, or Ab and Ba. How has A been constructed in part through interaction with B, and/or with readers or devotees of B? What are the implications of such considerations for comparative theology?

Furthermore, while during the past ten to fifteen years, scholars have produced an increasing number of studies that may be labeled "comparative theology," nearly all the work being done in that area—studies not only by Clooney but also David Burrell, Joseph Bracken, Jacques Dupuis, Mark Heim and Keith Ward, for example—falls into the category of systematic or philosophical theology. Using only philosophical or systematic theological methods for a project in comparative theology presents many problems. First, it fails properly to address those oral or poetic traditions that deal not in the written word or in logical argument, but in speech, song, narrative, metaphorical language and/or myth (though Clooney has done this). Second, it fails to consider the role of practice in religion, particularly by practitioners who are unaware of or uninterested in doctrine, or who actively participate in traditions that have no explicit doctrine.

If neither philosophical nor systematic theology necessarily serves as the best method for comparative theological work, which subdisciplines or methods do? And still, even if we choose ethnography, how do we avoid the pitfalls of universalism on the one hand, and, on the other, of getting so caught up in differences or radical particularizing that we make comparison impossible?

With regards to the latter problem, Wendy Doniger suggests a method constructed from the bottom up—that is, one which "assumes certain continuities not about overarching human

universals but about particular narrative details concerning the body, sexual desire, procreation, parenting, pain, and death, details which, though unable to avoid mediation by culture entirely, are at least *less* culturally mediated than the broader conceptual categories of the universalists."[25] Working around these bodily points, Doniger continues, the scholar working from the bottom up will "lean more heavily on data, informed, even inspired though she may be by theory; she begins with a thorough historical study and then goes back to make it comparative."[26] While the scholar will be limited by the confines of her own linguistic and cultural background, she will try to master the language(s) of the other and pay attention to her sources on their own terms, in all their complexity, before she pays attention to a particular rubric or meta-narrative for interpretation. She will not work from the top down, as from a "transcendental concept" of religion, nor from some universalist theory of religion, but from the ground up: from what the texts and/or people in the field say. The scholar's own culture and life experiences will influence her interests and motivating idea— what Doniger calls the "third side" of the triangle, with the other two emanating from the two traditions or situations being compared—but that idea will lead her back to the texts, or to the field, "where she may find unexpected details that will in turn modify the idea she is looking for."[27]

Obviously, one cannot simply jump into a text or the field and receive, as if through osmosis or revelation, knowledge of data "on its own terms" or of things "as they are." One will always be interpreting. Doniger's approach continues to raise questions: *Which* bottom (or whose?), and *what kind of* up? Does one ever really reach *the* bottom? The answers to the first two questions depend, as Doniger herself acknowledges, on the scholar as well as on the data. If we take "the bottom" to mean the experience and world view of practitioners operating within a cultural-linguistic rule-game that is different from ours, we can never get there, no matter how nuanced our linguistic competence, cultural-historical knowledge, or empathic skills. Indeed, contemporary linguistic and literary theory suggests that we can never

truly know the referent, the thing-in-itself, in an unmediated fashion, let alone the thing as named and experienced by another.

Still, one can *try* to understand; one can *try* to approximate another's meaning. One may never gain fluency in another language, for example, but one may gain significant ground in getting one's message across, or in understanding what another is *trying* to tell you. The more one understands about another person and their world—the world they are from, the world they are in the process of constructing, the world they imagine, and the world they imagine you to be from—the better one's chances of building not solipsisms, but meaningful connection, in which one's world of meaning-building is influenced by another's and vice-versa. Still, the question remains: how best to try?

The "bottom-up" method that I propose happens to coincide with a developing trend within academic theology called "theologies of the people"—a growing subdiscipline that can well serve that of comparative theology, and vice versa. "Theologies of the people," which shows the influence of cultural studies, Marxist studies and anthropology, has been defined by Kathryn Tanner to mean "theologies without much textual or even extended verbal expression which are simply found, more often than not, fully imbedded in the religious practices and lived relations of those who, with reference to intellectual training, social standing, economic attainment or institutional position, cannot be counted among the elites of church and society."[28]

Tanner relies on theories of popular culture to "flesh out" conceptually this evolving project. Theories of popular culture, she argues, serve to elevate the commonly ignored religious beliefs and practices of ordinary and marginalized peoples to a level of equal importance to Christian theological "classics," while likewise showing that many of the characteristics of popular theology also hold for theologies produced by educated and religious elites. "Theologies of the people" therefore, when used in conjunction with cultural theory, can "bring down" traditional theology to the level of popular theology, while "raising" popular theology to the level traditional theology has

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thus far enjoyed. Showing all theologies to be cultural constructions "levels" the playing field among them.

It does not, however, address the problem of finding the "bottom." The economic bottom, with all that it entails—illiteracy, disenfranchisement, etc.—is no closer to the hermeneutical bottom than the privileged, literate bottom is. The "otherness" of the culture in both cases remains a barrier.[29] However, by including different economic and cultural cross-sections in a study and analyzing the constructed nature of them all, one can try to complicate matters; one can attempt to work against reified assumptions that either "the bottom" or "the top" is any closer to something called "The Truth." One can, furthermore, invite new questions for analysis and include new voices and perspectives in the mix. Finally, one can try to be clear about (or figure out) one's own standpoint in the process.

Philosophy as a tool to this project is less relevant than, say, anthropology, cultural studies or the human and social sciences in general. Yet ethnographic approaches have not been widely applied to the comparative theological field—which is paradoxical, considering the long tradition of ethnography in the history of religions. One of the reasons for this lack is the tendency within theology to consider texts, not people, as authoritative sources for theological reflection. One could trace in this tendency an aversion, imbedded within the power structures of many traditions, to recognize sources of "revelation" or authority outside the power centers of that tradition—as in the discourses of people on the margins, for example, who may have controversial things to say about a given tradition, or who engage in practices that may not be considered orthodox.

And yet, to remain viable and relevant—in fact, to continue to exist at all—theology as produced by educated elites has also always attempted at least some popular appeal. Theologies of classically trained clergy were directed, from the very beginnings of Christianity, to a very wide audience. Theologians today are as aware of the academic or even popular market as they are, perhaps, of their denominational affiliation. Relying on the cultural theory of Stuart Hall, Tanner states that

"[j]ust as popular cultural production occurs in and through a tensive relationship with elite culture, so elite cultural production often exists in and through a tensive relation with popular culture."[30] Indeed, elite theology is parasitic, "living off the host cultures that it finds and does not produce."[31] And yet, those "host cultures" *are* in part parasitic of and produced by the elite culture—in this case, elite theology. Both elite and non-elite cultures (though recent theories of popular culture problematize sharp distinctions between the two) produce and are produced in a tension-filled relation with one another. They exist (as we have likewise seen in our history of comparative religion, above) only within this relation.

As Tanner has shown, a "theologies of the people" approach works against the notion that theological and Christian identity must be kept separate from accommodation with the languages and practices of non-biblical/non-theological realms of experience. She argues that there is no way to distinguish something called Christian culture from the non-Christian by virtue of its content, although biblical or doctrinal sources may certainly clue one into whether a culture might be called Christian. In this light, conservative, neo-orthodox and post-liberal theologies that define something called culture (or Christian discourse) as a fixed impermeable entity make no sense. Tanner exposes postmodernism's effects on modern ideas of culture through its critique of holism: the notion that cultures are cohesive wholes held together by shared beliefs, symbol systems, or rituals that have a unidirectional causal force. Postmodern thought, with its attention to fragments, fluidity and the constructed nature of reality, has critiqued this idea of holism, along with the idea that cultures are closed systems, identical to social groups, or that the activities of a culture are held together by the inner core beliefs of its members.[32]

Such a critique is consistent with the work of James Clifford, an historian of anthropology who understands culture as emergent and contested. To Clifford, cultures and traditions are not natural, coherent wholes, but re-negotiated ensembles of diversity. These ensembles are not given, but made, through a process of collective, value-laden negotiation.[33]

Delwin Brown, in an article about theology and the "new ethnography," points out the radically theological nature of Clifford's concept of "refashioning" in the way that "the self...called into question is not simply a carefully protected professional façade with its assorted techniques and histories, but a person. ... At least in Clifford's analysis, what is subject to being torn, negotiated, co-created, reconstructed, and refashioned is the fabric of the whole self,

personal and well as professional."[34] Such a radical refashioning could be seen as one of the goals of comparative theology.

Answering the "how" of comparative theology with disciplinary appeals to cultural studies and to anthropology opens new questions: Which methods of anthropology or ethnography? Which cultures?

The scholar of Hindu-Christian studies faces a plethora of possibilities.

Notes

[1] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), especially chapter 1, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," pp. 27-54. The essay was first published ten years earlier, in 1983, in *Man,* but was circulated more widely and received much more attention when published with *Genealogies* and its comprised chapters.

[2] Asad, *Genealogies,* 1993.

[3] David Tracy, "Theology: Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 14: 448.

[4] Tracy, 448. From a historical point of view, it is interesting to note that the entire "Theology" entry in this *Encyclopedia of Religion* volume, edited by Mircea Eliade, consists of two articles accompanied by an editor's note. The first, by Tracy and entitled "Comparative Theology," is headlined as "a discussion of the humanistic dialogue in the academic setting that seeks to relate divergent views of faith and the nature of religion." The second article, "Christian Theology," is meant to be "a treatment of the nature and history of theology in the Christian tradition."

[5] Keith Ward, "Comparative Theology: The Heritage of Schleiermacher," from *Theological Liberalism: Creative and Critical,* London: SPCK 2000, 60-74.

[6] James Fredericks, "A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions," *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 67-87.

[7] Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers,* trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[8] Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *On the* Glaubenslehre, trans. James Duke and Francis Fiorenza (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981).

[9] Schleiermacher's writing itself was both suggested by and a reaction against the period's dominant scientific, empirical methods. Schleiermacher's position was suggested by empiricism because it took

immediate experience—*Anschaung,* "to intuit," "to see," "to glimpse"—as its epistemic foundation. His position reacted against empiricism in its denial that sense experience was the only reliable form of intuition, its claim of religious apprehension as a *sui generis* phenomenon. Schleiermacher's formulation of God suggests a new understanding of revelation as "privileged experience" through the finite; this opened the field of possible revelation beyond the confines of the Christian tradition. At the same time, it is important to note that the idea of the infinite expressing itself in the finite in circumscribed ways is not just a product of Schleiermacher's, but also a product of European Romanticism and, as such, a response to Enlightenment empiricism.

[10] David Tracy, "Theology: Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion,* ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 446.

[11] Tracy, Personal communication, April 2003.

[12] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90.

[13] Asad, 29.

[14] Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

[15] Lincoln, 2.

[16] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 39.

[17] Lindbeck, 23.

[18] Lindbeck, 34.

[19] Lindbeck, 40.

[20] Fredericks, 82.

[21] Fredericks, 83.

[22] Francis X. Clooney, "Current Theology—Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books," *Theological Studies,* 56 (1995) 521-522.

[23] Clooney, "Current Theology," 522.

[24] Clooney, email correspondence, Jan. 15, 2008.

[25] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 59.

[26] Doniger, 60.

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[27] Doniger, 60.

[28] Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and Popular Culture," *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight Hopkins, Sheila Greeve Davaney, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 103.

[29] Wendy Doniger, email correspondence, April 2003.

[30] Tanner, 111.

[31] Tanner, 111; and Bob Dylan: "Name me someone that's not a parasite, and I'll go out and say a prayer for him." ("Visions of Johanna," *Blonde on Blonde*, 1966.)

[32] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "We Don't See Color Here: A Case Study in Ecclesial-Cultural Invention," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Shiela Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 140-157.

[33] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 10, 274.

[34] Delwin Brown, "Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy and the New Ethnography," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Shiela Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.