

Chapter 3 In Good Comparison, Truth, Realism, Deference, and Vulnerability Dwell

The previous chapter surveyed the continental, analytic/neo-pragmatic, and pragmatist approaches to interpretation (usually called hermeneutics by the first two lines of philosophical thought that take the interpretation of texts, not nature, to be the model for interpretation). That chapter argued that continental philosophy and analytic philosophy both, in various ways, simply replaced Kantian subjectivity with either “tradition” or “language” games, which results in the world being “well lost,” to borrow Rorty’s phrase; it also argued that pragmatism avoids the pitfalls of both “the myth of the given” and a perspectival relativism in which there is no real measure of human interpretation by offering an account of semiotic engagement. Building on the theories of Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, Robert Cummings Neville, and Benjamin Chicka (listed by chronology of publications), that chapter argued that, while human interpretations of the world are fallibilistic and vulnerable to correction, they can nevertheless move towards ever increasingly less biased truth if the community of inquirers remains dedicated to the inquiry, as Peirce would say. However, the correction of our hypotheses about reality, including ultimate reality, requires comparative inquiry. This chapter builds on that discussion of interpretation to develop a process of comparison that prizes truth, realism, deference to the positions compared (i.e., the minimization of bias), and vulnerability to correction at every stage of the comparative process (alternatively articulated as the tentative nature of comparative work).

The title of this chapter, of course, nods in deference to Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous chapter “In Comparison a Magic Dwells;” there, Smith argued that comparison was necessary for the study of religion, but that “each of the modes of comparison has been found wanting,”

such that no good method for comparison existed.¹ Smith thought that the discipline had made progress, by the early 1980s when he wrote this piece, in terms of its ability to evaluate comparisons, but that each new method of comparison simply offered a “variant” of an old model; any act of comparison, therefore, involves “a small leap” that is nothing short of “magic.”² For the disciplines of comparative religion and comparative theology³ as a whole, it may be that little has changed since Smith wrote this description; however, several comparativists have made methodological advances that avoid many of the shortcomings criticized by Smith, especially in the works of Francis X. Clooney, S.J., on the one hand, and Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman, on the other.⁴ Lifting up these two methodological approaches as exemplary may seem odd to scholars in the field who accept the standard division between the “Boston College approach” and “Boston University approach” to comparative theology;⁵ this division relies on a comparison of comparative methodologies in respect to the significance of “confessional theology” for the methodology itself. This chapter will argue that

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 35.

² *Ibid.*, 35 and 21.

³ I do not wish to make too strong a distinction between these fields, because, if there are lines between them, the lines are blurry at best. I will only say that comparative theology adds to the normative concerns of comparative religions a normative concern for truth in theological matters.

⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, I take Neville and Wildman to employ basically the same method on the grounds that many of their methodological discussions cited here are co-authored. I do detect some slight differences between Neville and Wildman, but these are relatively minor. In short, the primary differences have to do with the extent to which Neville deals with more nuanced accounts of the positions compared and Wildman incorporates more insights from the natural sciences. This strikes me as a slight shift in the balance between the same components. However, there is also a question of “nominalism” vs. “Scotistic realism” between Neville and Wildman, with Neville strongly arguing for the latter and Wildman leaning towards the former but finding no significant difference between the two positions. This is perhaps a topic for another time or this discussion may be expanded in a final draft of this chapter.

⁵ For this naming (in a somewhat joking manner), see Neville’s comments in his 2017 lecture at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions. Robert Cummings Neville, “Annual Comparative Theology Lecture: Religion-Specific or Trans-Religious?” (lecture, Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard, Cambridge, MA, March 6, 2017). Video available at Harvard Divinity School: Center for the Study of World Religions, “Annual Comparative Theology Lecture: Religion-Specific or Trans-Religious?” HDS website, <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/03/06/video-religion-specific-or-trans-religious>. Neville’s comments on this matter can be found at ~16 minutes into the lecture.

comparing Clooney and Neville/Wildman in respect to 1) truth, 2) realism, 3) deference, and 4) vulnerability to correction/the tentative nature of comparative work, brings these three comparativists much closer to one another than they are to others in the field as a whole.

Additionally, the chapter will argue that the differences between Clooney and Neville concerning confessional theology may not be as great as previous analyses have claimed, because these analyses have too quickly lumped Clooney's approach with Catherine Cornille's approach (for which this difference is very significant).

The field of comparative theology has a long and complicated history, and there are any number of excellent accounts of this history already available. Many of the really serious accounts of this history argue that theology always has been comparative⁶ and describe the ways in which later forms of comparative theology have been closely associated with colonial and imperialistic endeavors. As Clooney writes, "Colonialism both enabled and disfigured the new religious encounters;"⁷ this "disfiguration" of the new religions encountered often (though not exclusively) took the form of allowing one side (usually the Christian side) to "[shape] what the unprecedented encounters might mean,"⁸ and Neville has made similar comments about many earlier comparative philosophies of religion, e.g. Hegel's treatment of world religions in which all led up to and were fulfilled by Christianity.⁹ Despite the problematic ties of comparative

⁶ In the context of theology in the Abrahamic religions, both Robert Cummings Neville and Francis X. Clooney, S.J. note the ways in which St. Paul both allied his theology with and distinguished it from other Second Temple Judaism(s); Clooney traces the history back slightly further in his discussion of Melchizedek, a Canaanite priest whom both Hebrew Bible and New Testament writers hold in high regard. See Robert Cummings Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 128. And Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 24. See also Francis X. Clooney, S.J. on how theology always has been "interreligious:" *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

⁷ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ Robert Cummings Neville, *Ultimates*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), xviii.

theology to both colonialism and Christian missionary endeavors, a great deal of intellectual and religious growth arose from these “imperfect encounters.”¹⁰ This chapter will not provide a comprehensive history of the discipline of comparative theology but, rather, sketch the current contours of the field. This overview of the field looks first at the comparative approaches of Paul Griffiths and Catherine Cornille, whose work can be described best as continental in terms of hermeneutics; the overview will then turn to the approaches of David Decosimo and Aaron Stalnaker, whose work can be described best as analytic or neo-pragmatic in terms of hermeneutics. The overview then looks at the approaches of Neville/Wildman and Clooney. Neville and Wildman can be described best as pragmaticists in terms of interpretation, and, while Clooney does not tie his own interpretive project to any specific approaches to interpretation/hermeneutics, the approach he describes fits better with Neville and Wildman’s pragmatism than with either the continental or analytic approaches’ Finally, the chapter attempts to synthesize the methods of Clooney and Neville/Wildman.

Continental Comparison

Paul Griffiths develops what might best be called a theology of religions with strong implications for comparative theology from an inclusivist Catholic framework, informed deeply by the study of Buddhism. Griffiths provides a very rational, albeit dichotomous account of religion. He defines a religion as “a form of life that seems to those who belong to it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance.”¹¹ The comprehensive nature of a religion means that every domain must be ordered by or connected to this form of life. Griffiths’ claim that this form of life is “incapable of abandonment” suggests that a person

¹⁰ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 26.

¹¹ Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 2003 reprint (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 7.

could not be who s/he is if the form of life were abandoned; therefore, while Griffiths does not deny that people convert, for instance, he does claim that these people would no longer be who they were. The religion determines their existential identity, and religion necessitates belonging, in this account. As such, it can be divided into two groups. The home religion is the religion to which a person belongs, if they belong to any tradition at all; alien religions would be any religion to which a person does not belong.¹² This basic dichotomy then allows another distinction between people who are “religious kin,” that is members of the same religion, or “religious aliens,” people who are members of an alien religion; Griffiths does not want to claim that everyone has a religion, and so he designates people who have no religion as “nonreligious.”¹³ People who are “nonreligious” have no home tradition and, consequently, no religious kin; therefore, all religious people must be understood as religious aliens.¹⁴ Given that religion must be a “comprehensive” form of life, Griffiths would have to say, therefore, that people who do not connect every single domain of their lives, including, for example, brushing their teeth, to the religion in are in fact “nonreligious” and, therefore, have no religious kin; presumably, most people are nonreligious and everyone is a religious alien to them, though this is an empirical question.

Religious claim should be understood as a proposition “about the setting of human life, the nature of humans, or the proper conduct of human life assent to or acceptance of which is required or suggested by belonging to a religion,” on Griffiths’ account.¹⁵ Any given religious proposition or claim can be alien or domestic, dependent on its source (i.e., an alien or domestic

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

religion).¹⁶ If belonging to a religion requires assent to or acceptance of a religious claim, that claim is a doctrine; if assent to or acceptance of a religious claim is simply suggested, then the religious claim is a teaching.¹⁷ Assent to such a claim is an involuntary act, that takes the claim as true, while acceptance of a religious claim is a voluntary act that affirms the claim or takes it as a guide.¹⁸ Since, Griffiths says, religious claims can be either true or false (he does not allow that they can be true or false in certain respects), they can also, therefore, be incompatible with one another insofar as they are contradictory, contrary, or “noncompossible.”¹⁹ Each of these terms, likewise, requires a very specific definition: contradictory means that any two claims cannot both be true, but one has to be true; contrary means that both cannot be true and neither one needs to be true; and noncompossible means that the religious claims both demand or prescribe different courses of action and it is impossible to perform both actions.²⁰ An exclusivist, in Griffith’s scheme, would hold the position that true religious claims can only be found in the doctrines or teachings of the home religion, while an inclusivist of the open variety would maintain that it might be possible that religious claims in alien religions teach truth that is not already explicitly stated in the home religion, and an inclusivist of the closed variety would deny that a religious claim in an alien religion could be true if it were not already taught in the home religion.²¹ Griffiths advocates for a modalized open inclusivism,²² which means that it might be *possible* for an alien religion to teach a true religious claim not taught in the home religion, which is not the same as saying that alien religions *do* teach true claims. Griffiths also develops a similar arrangement of responses to other religions (separation, toleration, etc.).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 63.

Griffiths approaches his theology of religions very systematically and the system is internally coherent, but it lacks range for deviation. Griffith is very careful not to use the word “tradition;” rather, he consistently uses the term “religion.”²³ Griffiths maintains the possibility that there could be a religion of one. Griffiths does not want to link religion to any conception of ultimacy; rather, religion is just the form of life that encompasses all other domains of life (his definition of comprehensive) and is something that defines the religious person so completely that s/he would no longer be her/himself if the religion were abandoned.

Griffiths’ theology of religions presents some strong implications for comparative theology. A religious person’s religious home could be shared with no other people, or the person could be nonreligious and, therefore, all other religious people would be religious aliens. Initially, this framing of a “religion” might suggest that each religious person necessarily would have to approach all theology comparatively. Griffiths’ theology of religions, while extremely logical, offers little help for facilitating comparison between the theologies of different religions. Since an “alien” theology can be true if and only if it does not contradict a doctrine of the theology of the “home” religious tradition, Griffiths allows for no possibility in which the home religion’s positions might be corrected or modified in any significant way; if a person were to shift her/his views in any significant way, that person would cease to be who s/he had been prior to the shift. Moreover, this totalizing approach to other religions necessitates that the respects of comparison would be set by the home religion and the home religion alone. If the alien religion were to contain any truth, that truth could be neither contradictory or noncompossible with the home religion. Actually different views can only be regarded as true, in Griffiths’ scheme, if they do not contradict the home religion’s views. To a certain degree, Griffiths’ position does demand

²³ If the term “tradition” appears in my account of Griffiths, this is an error on my part due to habit.

that every religious claim be taken seriously, insofar as any contradictory or noncompossible alien religious claim, if taken to be true, would require the person to convert from her/his home tradition. However, this dichotomous distinction between being firmly rooted in a home religion or converting to another religion provides no option for creatively or imaginatively reinterpreting the home religion in light of what has been learned from another religion or for integrating two (or more) traditions without completely converting to a new religion that is neither the (original) home tradition nor the (formerly) alien tradition (this integration would be the creation of a new religion. Moreover, the person who converts ceases to be herself or himself. In this regard, comparative theology is impossible because the comparativist is no longer who s/he was when the comparison started. More recently (2014), Griffiths has argued that, while comparative theology can be understood as a “species” of theology when it engages alien texts “with the purpose of better understanding the LORD the church worships,” calling this discipline “theology” is a categorical error, because the term “theology” should be a reserved category for “engagement with and response to what the LORD has explicitly and directly given to the church.”²⁴ This further suggests that the home tradition or religion determines the scope of truth, on Griffiths’ account, and that a home tradition need not show deference for an alien religion’s claims in their own right, if they fall outside of the bounds of the home religion; the home traditions determines the respects of comparison entirely with decidedly rigid categories that refuse the possibility of being false themselves. Griffiths’ comments in this more recent work clearly indicate that he does believe that comparative theology is rightly understood as *theology*; at best, it would be a form of religious studies, but it offers little contribution to the “truth” as

²⁴ Abstract for Paul Griffiths, “What Are Catholic Theologians Doing When They Do Comparative Theology?” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (2014): 40-45. Boston University apparently does not have access to this whole article, only the abstract; I am still trying to track down the complete text.

determined by the tradition. Objectivity and bias, in addition to being prerequisites for theological inquiry, are not only unavoidable, but also are not things to be corrected as the inquiry proceeds; rather, inquiry merely functions as a reinforcement for what has already been determined by the church.

Catherine Cornille offers a slightly more moderate position that also emphasizes commitment to a home religion, though she would emphasize strongly that the religion is a tradition, and not just whatever form of life is all encompassing; Cornille frequently ties her comparative theology method to Clooney's.²⁵ Cornille has argued rightly that, "In addition to the diversity of choice among different traditions and different aspects of other traditions, the discipline of comparative theology has also developed a diversity of approaches [. . .]." ²⁶ This diversity of approaches presents both opportunities for enriching important "traditional" disciplines—e.g., ethics, systematics, biblical studies, etc.—and certain drawbacks due to the "fragmentation" (over-specialization to the point that conversation across specialties becomes almost impossible) and potential "trivialization" (the comparative theologian develops an inability to speak to her/his tradition).²⁷ Cornille's stance on this topic exhibits a resistance to Griffith's position that a person can belong to her/his own religion (that there can be a religion of one). However, her claims regarding the positive dimensions of methodological diversity—i.e., their contribution to disciplines already important to the tradition—and the negative dimensions of this diversity—e.g., "triviality"—suggests a hard distinction between the "home" tradition and any "alien" traditions, in Griffith's language. Additionally, since the importance of the discipline

²⁵ Articulations of this point can be found in pretty much every one of Cornille's publications. For a clear example, see Catherine Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

of comparative theology, according to Cornille, appears (at this point in the inquiry) to be the contribution it can make to the home tradition, it is unclear whether the comparativist ought to take the “alien”²⁸ tradition seriously or merely use the other tradition to enrich what is already deemed important by the home tradition; in this respect, Cornille may not exhibit as much deference to the “alien” tradition(s) as does Griffiths, since his modalized open inclusivism allows for the possibility that the alien traditions express truths that are not expressed by or in the home tradition.

Closely coupled to this ambiguity of methodological diversity in relation to the coherence of the discipline is the ambiguous status of its nature in relation to “confessional” theology, for Cornille. Cornille writes, “One of the more ambiguous aspects of the discipline of comparative theology lies in its confessional nature. When originally introduced as a distinct method in the nineteenth century, comparative theology was viewed as an alternative to traditional confessional theology, approaching religions from a descriptive and scientific rather than theological or apologetic perspective.”²⁹ According to Cornille, “most comparative theologians are on the same page” in regard to the distinction between the disciplines of comparative theology and comparative religion.³⁰ The distinction between these two disciplines relies primarily on the aims or purposes of the disciplines, for Cornille. Comparative religion aims at “understanding and/or explaining” some aspect of a religion or religions with neutrality towards the “phenomenon” under study, thus, Cornille says, it is not a “normative” discipline; comparative theology, on the other hand, aims at ascertaining “the Truth,” not only the “meaning” of

²⁸ Again, Griffith’s term, not Cornille’s

²⁹ Catherine Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (2014): 9.

³⁰ Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 20.

“particular beliefs and practices,” and is thus a normative discipline.³¹ Cornille may overstate the distinction between the two fields in respect to normativity if normativity is taken to be a valuational standard, because comparative religion also displays (at least some) characteristics of normativity by asserting that the religious “phenomena” it studies are the important phenomena to study for that/(those) religion(s). Since Cornille uses the term “phenomenon,” she may be indicating that comparative religion makes no reference to reality itself, only to the way religious beliefs, practices, etc. *appear* to the comparative religion scholar, while comparative theology concerns itself with reality (hence, capital T Truth). However, the distinction has less to do with an emphasis on objective value in the comperanda, axiological realism, or an assertion that truth is measured by reality itself, and more to do with the underlying source of norms and grounds for truth.

Cornille claims that the normative nature of the discipline of comparative theology is generally acknowledged, but that the way in which this normativity plays out within the discipline remains unclear.³² In an article titled, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” Cornille provides an alternate (though almost identical) distinction between the disciplines of comparative religion and comparative theology. Here, she says that comparative religion takes as its ideal neutral and unbiased comparison, while the latter grounds itself “in certain religious or theological presuppositions” and is, therefore, confessional,³³ the *starting points* of the respective inquires provide the distinction between the disciplines: comparative religion “starts from common and relatively neutral ‘vague comparative categories’” while comparative theology begins with “questions raised from within the texts and teachings of a

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” 9.

³³ *Ibid.*

particular tradition.”³⁴ Therefore, the distinction primarily rests on whether or not religious presuppositions should be minimized (comparative religion’s stance) or “fully embrace[d].” according to Cornille.³⁵ Cornille has argued that not only the starting point, but also the hermeneutics and goals of comparative theology derive from the home religious tradition.³⁶ Consequently, comparative theology as a general discipline could never exist; there could only be a Christian comparative theology, Buddhist comparative theology, Muslim comparative theology, etc. since the starting point, goals, and methods all derive from the theological interests of the home, confessed tradition.³⁷ Moreover, Cornille recommends that the “comparative theologians focus on topics that are of central concern to mainstream theologians in a particular tradition at a particular time.”³⁸ Cornille’s claims that tradition itself is what provides norms and what sets the bounds for truth; in good Gadamerian fashion, there is no truth apart from tradition for Cornille.

In 2014, Cornille introduced a distinction between “confessional” and “meta-confessional” comparative theologies, but largely rejected “meta-confessional” comparative theology as *theology* in its search for truth “beyond the boundaries of any particular tradition,” associating these approaches more closely with comparative religion;³⁹ this sort of approach that leads beyond a tradition presents a serious danger for a theological tradition, because the sort of truth it pursues does not serve a community and it therefore “would lead to a never-ending fragmentation of the tradition.”⁴⁰ By employing the precise language of “vague comparative

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 21.

³⁶ Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 27.

³⁹ Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” 10-11 and 14-15. Cornille writes, “[. . .]it [comparative theology] is here understood as a (given) faith seeking understanding through dialogue with other religions.” See also her discussion of “comparative religion” and vague categories on page 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

categories,” Cornille implicitly specifies Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman as the primary exemplars of this “meta-confessional” comparative theology, and she also mentions John Thatamanil as an example of this approach.⁴¹ Since this “meta-confessional comparative theology” takes a move towards an unbiased stance to the comperanda, it becomes indistinguishable from comparative religions on Cornille’s 2014 account.

By 2018, Cornille shifted the articulation of these two types of comparative theology and added a third. In this later treatment of the comparative theology typology, Cornille describes confessional comparative theology as “start[ing] from the truth of a particular revelation, which it seeks to elucidate through dialogue with another religion.”⁴² Thus, little has changed in terms of Cornille’s understanding of the confessional approach. As indicated before, Cornille adds a type to her typology of approaches: “inter-confessional.”⁴³ Cornille likens this comparative approach to Tina Ruparell’s “interstitial theology,” and suggests that this type of comparative theologian becomes a “hybrid” or “recombinant” by either focusing “on the common ground between the two [or more] traditions, or else oscillating between the normativity of one and the other tradition.”⁴⁴ Inter-confessional theology, then, has confessional ties, perhaps held simultaneously or perhaps held in repeated succession, to both (or all) traditions. “Meta-confessional” comparative theology, in this later (2018) analysis, engages in comparison in order to attain “a more universal understanding of truth;” or, to phrase it another way, it “seeks to attain a deeper truth behind the various religious expressions.”⁴⁵ In this later work, Cornille explicitly ties the meta-confessional approach not only to Thatamanil’s work, but also to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14. It is also important to note that Cornille suggests that the difference between her approach and Thatamanil’s could be a matter of “emphasis,” rather than “substance.”

⁴² Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

Neville's and Wildman's; this analysis also places Raimon Panikkar on the dividing line between inter-confessional and meta-confessional approaches.⁴⁶

Cornille's description of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, directed by Neville in the late 1990s, still suggests many of the features Cornille previously attributed to comparative religion (especially in its attempt to "capture the core of religious phenomenon"⁴⁷), rather than comparative theology; moreover, Cornille indicates that the abandonment of the "confessional stance" shifts Neville and Wildman's work away from comparative theology towards either "comparative philosophy or philosophy of religion," but their work cannot be named merely comparative religion, in Cornille's assessment, because of its commitment to truth.⁴⁸ Additionally, Cornille describes Neville and Wildman's work as "spiritual and moral," not merely "speculative."⁴⁹ Cornille's 2018 assessment of Neville and Wildman's work seems much more favorable than the earlier one, but, by shifting between meta-confessional comparative theology (which has distinct aims from confessional comparative theology) and comparative philosophy or philosophy of religion, Cornille's writing still hints at a strong reluctance (at least) to call anything that is not explicitly confessional "theology."

Cornille would not want to restrict comparative theology to the extent that the "confessed tradition" could consist of one person, the way Griffiths does. However, she acknowledges that comparative theologians are highly shaped by their own capacities and interests, such that the focus of comparative theology becomes defined by the particular comparative theologian's proficiencies;⁵⁰ the proficiencies of the theologian ought to include expertise in the other

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁰ Cornille, "The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology," 12.

tradition from which the confessional comparativist would ideally learn.⁵¹ However, this expertise in the other tradition does not necessarily mean that the comparative theologian would approach the other tradition with minimized bias; similarly, the comparative theologian need not regard the other theological tradition or text as true.⁵² Moreover, the end goal of comparative theology need not be an “understanding of the other on its own terms but the meaning of the other tradition (or some element within it) for one’s own religious self-understanding.”⁵³ While Cornille does not mention any specific figures of hermeneutical thought of particular relevance to her conception of interpretation, she seems to share Gadamer’s understanding of tradition and its associated pre-judgments as that which allows people to have any understanding in the first place. In Cornille’s forthcoming (2020) *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, she explicitly ties her hermeneutical theory to Gadamer’s.⁵⁴ Given the “perspectival nature of all understanding,” Cornille says that the new tradition should always be read through the “theological lens” of the home tradition.⁵⁵ This position offers the greatest expression of “epistemological realism and even humility,” in Cornille’s estimation.⁵⁶ This humility and realism does not authorize the comparative theologian to “willingly distort the other tradition,” but it is “an admission” that comparative theology always involves some degree of “mis-interpretation or mis-appropriation.”⁵⁷

This admission would be problematic for the discipline of comparative religion, as Cornille distinguishes the two disciplines, since comparative religion wants to understand the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 19.

⁵³ Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” 12.

⁵⁴ Chapter on comparative hermeneutics skimmed at AAR 2019 at Wiley Blackwell stand in exhibits hall. Complete references to this book will be written after the book is available.

⁵⁵ Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” 12-13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

other on its own terms and offer a neutral account of all the traditions compared. Presumably, the comparative theologian, on Cornille's account, would also suggest that the comparative religion scholar's goal of objectivity is unattainable, given the perspectival and situated nature of all understanding that she describes in her discussion of hermeneutics for comparative work. Cornille also provides two additional and closely associated reasons for emphasizing the proximity of comparative work close to the home tradition: the marginalization of the comparative theologian and the subsequent inability for the new insights gleaned from venturing far from the bounds of the community to impact the confessional community. Thus, Cornille writes, "While comparative theologians may construct interesting and coherent theological ideas based on insights gained from different religions, if these ideas become completely separated from a living faith or from a community of theological reflection, they have little chance of gaining much impact."⁵⁸ Furthermore, Cornille warns against the comparative theologian's temptation to construct new theological conclusions for the other tradition since this move would venture too far from the confessional bounds of theology.⁵⁹ Cornille acknowledges that some comparative theologians approach the discipline as a "meta-confessional reflection" that would engage multiple traditions in an attempt to develop "deeper and higher understanding "of a given question,"⁶⁰ however, her other remarks suggest that these meta-confessional comparative theologians embark on an erroneous journey since such an inquiry would not, on the one hand, be able to bring the insights back to the home tradition or, on the other hand, actually contribute to a higher and deeper understanding since the endeavor would necessarily fragment the tradition.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

While Cornille acknowledges that the charge of religious hegemony in the domestication of another tradition for one's own sake must be taken seriously,⁶¹ she also concludes that this theological move is better understood as a sign of humility: "The idea that one theological tradition defines the parameters for engaging in dialogue with another still causes unease with some theologians averse to even the slightest connotation of theological hegemony. But recognition of the confessional nature of comparative theology may be seen as an expression of epistemological and theological humility, rather than hegemony."⁶² While Cornille characterizes the differences between John Thatamanil and Clooney as primarily a "matter of emphasis," it is less clear how she would view the differences between Clooney and Neville. In earlier analyses, Cornille seems to indicate that Neville is a comparative religion scholar, not a comparative theologian, since her description of comparative religion includes a reference to "vague comparative categories," Neville's methodology for comparison; more recently, she just describes Neville and Wildman as meta-confessional theologians, but still suggests that their work is better characterized as something other than theology: comparative philosophy or philosophy of religion, perhaps.

Cornille's description of "meta-confessional" theology could also apply to Neville when he functions as a constructive philosophical theologian working from a comparative base insofar as he explores a particular question of theology comparatively in an attempt to form a deeper understanding of the question at hand. However, Cornille's label of "meta-confessional" theology seems like somewhat of a misnomer, since the approach is less interested in confessing a commitment to any one tradition than it is in getting to the truth of a matter by exploring it comparatively. Bin Song has suggested that the characterization of Neville as a "meta-

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 16.

confessional” theologian is misguided, citing Neville’s own rejection of the term in addition to his well-argued case against this application of the term.⁶³ If there is a “meta-confession” in this approach, then the confession would have to be to “truth” rather than any one tradition.

However, Cornille makes explicitly clear that she would not recommend such an approach to the discipline: the basis of comparison and its end goals, for Cornille, are set by the home tradition and the insights must always be returned to that tradition, and that tradition alone (since a constructive theological point offered to another tradition would be hegemonic and epistemologically vain). For Cornille, “the realization of the essential confessional nature of comparative theology” allows different traditions to “come to respect one another.”⁶⁴

Could Cornille’s version of comparative theology be equally valid if the “foreign” text were, for example, a Harry Potter novel? Presumably, Cornille would find this possible or probable since whatever is brought into comparison with the home tradition’s texts, practices, beliefs, etc. “need not even be regarded as a source of truth for comparative theological effort to yield interesting conclusions.”⁶⁵ Cornille’s approach could, theoretically then, bring the home tradition into comparison with any other source, as long as the comparison enhanced the home tradition’s theology; after all, “comparative theology is to contribute to and be an expression of systematic theological reflection which seeks to advance the self-understanding of the tradition.”⁶⁶ A final question is raised by Cornille’s overall approach to comparative theology: how does comparative theology differ from reading outside one’s tradition? So long as the categories of comparison are set by the home tradition, the comparison can only pick up on features that the home tradition’s prejudices (Gadamer) allow; the movement outside of the

⁶³ Bin Song, 65.

⁶⁴ Catherine Cornille, “The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology,” 16.

⁶⁵ Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

tradition in the study of other religions and cultures simply allows the comparativist to enrich her/his home tradition's own experience. The other tradition becomes irrelevant, except insofar as it plays a role in the home tradition. In contrast, a Deweyan pragmatist, like Neville, would want to expand her/his experience to include that of the other culture.

Analytic Comparison

In many respects, Aaron Stalnaker and David Decosimo might be understood best as analytic comparativists, who tend to frame their projects as comparative religious ethics, rather than comparative theology, though Stalnaker occasionally refers to his work as “comparative studies of religious thought.”⁶⁷ He makes no strong distinctions between religious thought, religious ideas, or theology; this term choice could be attributed to a concern about the implications of the term *theology* for the study of Confucianism/Ruism, which typically does not specify the category of the ultimate with personalistic conceptions often closely associated with the term *theology*. Stalnaker does not articulate in his publications any sense in which his comparative work is intended to be confessional or in service of any given tradition. Presumably, then, this title bears little significance for Stalnaker.

Similarly, Decosimo does not articulate in publication any sense in which his comparative work is intended to be confessional or in service of any given tradition. However, Decosimo agrees with Gadamer that our understanding is always already shaped by tradition and the prejudices that come from tradition are what enable all understanding; moreover, he would claim that modernism is the tradition that thinks it is not a tradition.⁶⁸ Similarly, Decosimo has stated in

⁶⁷ Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 5.

⁶⁸ Personal communication, Fall 2018. I suspect that Decosimo also would say that Paul Tillich is part of this tradition that thinks it is not a tradition, and that Decosimo would lump Neville in with Tillich insofar as Decosimo thinks that a concept (e.g. the ultimate) cannot be purified of its roots in any given tradition; Decosimo and I have not discussed Neville in this respect. However, Decosimo's question to Neville after a 2017 lecture at Harvard's CSWR indicates that my assessment of Decosimo's assessment of Neville is correct. See Robert Neville,

course lectures at Boston University that he does not think there can be a “Theology without Walls;” any such theology would just be a confessional theology that professes membership to a different tradition/religion.⁶⁹ In this regard, Decosimo bears a strong resemblance to Griffiths insofar as a serious change in a religious worldview essentially means conversion to another religion. For Decosimo, objectivity becomes a sort of denial of the scholar’s own locatedness, and a neutral comparison becomes impossible; likewise, objectivity, for the neo-pragmatist, becomes a self-deluding lie, because norms are always already implicit in the act of interpreting.⁷⁰ In this regard, Decosimo could be considered a confessional comparative theologian, though his version of confession to a tradition probably bears more similarities to Jeffery Stout’s understanding of tradition than Gadamer’s; however, he certainly understands participation within a particular set of social practices and beliefs (i.e., “tradition”) as crucial for comparative inquiry (perhaps in a similar sense to Griffiths, but this is not clear from his publications). Perhaps, a better articulation of Decosimo’s approach to comparison is that the inquiry is *committed*, not confessional.⁷¹

Stalnaker develops a conceptually ironic project by basing a theory of comparison on Richard Rorty’s notion of “vocabularies.”⁷² As noted in the discussion of the Analytic approach to interpretation in the preceding chapter, Rorty thinks that vocabularies only make sense within

“Religion-Specific or Trans-Religious?” online video. Harvard University CSWR: <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/03/06/video-religion-specific-or-trans-religious> . Accessed November, 2018.

⁶⁹ Theology and World Religions course, Fall 2018.

⁷⁰ For a good discussion of this position, see Jeffrey Stout, “Radical Interpretation: Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom on Truth,” in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Nancy Frankenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36-37. Decosimo has directed me (November 23, 2019) to this reading as a good articulation of views that he also holds.

⁷¹ For the particular use of “committed” here, see Stout, “Radical Interpretation: Davidson, Rorty, and Brandom on Truth,” 36-37. Roughly and simplistically speaking, the player of the language game self-commits her/himself to the normative activities of the language game.

⁷² Stalnaker, 5.

a particular tradition or language game; Rorty's basic claim in his plenary address in Guadalajara, and in other writings, is that comparison across philosophical language games is not only undesirable, but also impossible, equating it to "invisible light." Nevertheless, Stalnaker seems to find Rortian vocabularies an appealing starting point for his theory of comparison. Stalnaker, in his creation of "bridge concepts," attempts to develop a space in which there can be "conceptual diversity, not conceptual relativism."⁷³ Stalnaker considers Davidson's scheme-content dualism argument as a possible means of getting the comparison started, but concludes:

Davidson does help to ward off conceptual relativism. But the idea that refusal of conceptual relativism implies that people from different cultures and religious traditions could never differ significantly in "worldview" or "form of life" is baffling and wrong, given any typical sense of these expressions. The issue here is the tendency to confuse the distinction between conceptual *relativism* and conceptual *diversity*; the latter can be sorted out and analyzed, sometimes only laboriously, but it is certainly quite real.⁷⁴

Stalnaker rightly notes Davidson's conflation of conceptual relativism and conceptual diversity. Stalnaker turns to "alternative 'vocabularies,'" citing Rorty's conception of "vocabularies," as a highroad around Davidson's position of the "ubiquity of resemblance."⁷⁵ But, by adopting Rorty's alternative vocabularies, Stalnaker finds himself in need of something to reach across the non-interacting language games in order to get comparison going in the first place, since, on Rorty's account, the "world" is "well lost" and a linguistic player could not step out of the language game all humans necessarily play in order to determine that another language game were an alternative. Stalnaker realizes this problem, however, and quickly takes steps to avoid it.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

In order to get the comparison between these disparate language games started, Stalnaker “projects” a bridge concept to serve as a “best near-equivalent term” for studying these alternative vocabularies of social practices, i.e. religious ethics.⁷⁶ The “bridge concept” offers a clever solution to the problem inherited from the Analytic/Neo-pragmatic philosophical underpinnings to the project. However, this solution, at least to a certain degree, has to ignore certain parts of its philosophical underpinnings in order to work, and this move has not gone unnoticed.

In a 2010 *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* article titled “Comparison and the Ubiquity of Resemblance” and in a more recent unpublished article titled “Bridge to Nowhere: Scheme/Content Dualism and the Problem of Theory in Comparative Religion,” Decosimo claims that Stalnaker’s “bridge concepts” have no function in comparative work, because they force a dualism between a conceptual scheme and the content that fills the scheme.⁷⁷ According to Decosimo, the claim that a scholar can understand something on its own terms is “deeply incoherent.”⁷⁸ Decosimo understands a bridge concept to be something that abstracts from either our own concepts or concepts circulating in the texts to be compared; these bridge concepts are “thinned out” and neutral in regard to the various perspectives being compared.⁷⁹ Decosimo writes:

It’s vital that the [bridge] concept [in Stalnaker’s account] precisely *not* be our own – that’s the whole point – and the entire possibility of the comparison not being biased depends on this. If it *is* one of our concepts or even if it is too much *like* one of our

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁷ David Decosimo, “Comparison and the Ubiquity of Resemblance,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:1 (March 2010). And David Decosimo, “Bridge to Nowhere: Scheme/Content Dualism and the Problem of Theory in Comparative Religion,” (PDF of presentation given at The Future of the Philosophy of Religion Conference, 2016), 8-9. Cited with permission, granted December 12, 2018.

⁷⁸ Decosimo, “Bridge to Nowhere,” 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

concepts, then we merely find ourselves back in the very biased, problematic space we had been trying to escape. So, it is neither our concept, nor a concept belonging to the texts in question; instead it is some other, third thing.⁸⁰

He continues:

The “bridge concept” solution is an offshoot of the more fundamental vision of distinct conceptual schemes and our own concepts as mediating between us and the world. It is only this flawed vision that would make such a solution seem necessary or possible.⁸¹

Decosimo’s critique is admittedly a direct offshoot of Donald Davidson’s philosophy and argues that bridge concepts are not possible if they are necessary and are not necessary if they are possible.⁸² Davidson and Decosimo use the example of an anthropologist studying the language of a different civilization; both of these Analytic/Neo-pragmatic Comparativists would argue that “A text or figure or tradition [in this example, the language of the other civilization] admits of interpretation in *our language* or not at all.”⁸³ Supplying a third term/*tertium quid* offers nothing and, most likely, on Decosimo’s account, allows the comparativist to fool him-/her-self into thinking that the respect of comparison is neutral and not his/her own, when it is in fact the comparativist’s own concept.⁸⁴

Given the Rortyan-Davidsonian starting point for Stalnaker’s bridge concept, Decosimo’s critique is particularly astute and entirely valid. However, while I am, generally speaking,⁸⁵ in favor of both interpreting people and writers in the best light possible and, in this regard, applying a principle of charity, Davidson’s reasons for supporting a “principle of charity,” that

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, I take this to be the upshot of the whole argument, but pages 8 and 9 could be a good reference point.

⁸⁵ And when I am not being unnecessarily obstinate, which my wife would surely inform the reader is rare.

the interpreted text/speaker/etc. must be largely right, or “justified” in Davidson’s and Jeffrey Stout’s terminology,⁸⁶ in order for the interpreter even to identify a topic about which the two parties disagree, seem like an overly complicated way of avoiding an appeal to the real world and hiding behind language games from which the world is well lost. Moreover, and in keeping with Stalnaker’s critique of Davidson, there is another concern with Davidson’s and Rorty’s argument against scheme-content dualism can be nicely illustrated with an appeal to Rorty’s analogy (in “The World Well Lost”) that an untranslatable scheme would be like invisible color.

At least initially, it may seem that Rorty is right that there is no such thing as invisible color, but the distinction between color, i.e., electromagnetic radiation with a wavelength ranging from 700 nm (red) to 400 nm (violet), and other wavelengths and frequencies of electromagnetic radiation is only a distinction that makes sense given the biological structures of the human eye; the other wavelengths and frequencies of electromagnetic radiation, while not visible to the human eye, are just as real and completely contiguous with other varieties of electromagnetic radiation. Rather, than deny that these other wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation are color, why not 1) expand the category of color, 2) recognize that “color” in fact specifies a vaguer category of “electromagnetic radiation,” or 3) expand the capacity of the eye through some instrument? Perhaps, when the inquirer began inquiry, the “color” was indeed thought to be the only category of interest, but then the inquirer came to realize that this category had two concepts linked that could otherwise be separated, thereby allowing the inquirer to study both color and electromagnetic radiation. While Decosimo may be the more coherent comparativist in terms of the Analytic/Neo-Pragmatic philosophy that ungirds both projects, Stalnaker is surely right that different cultures and different religious traditions can vary significantly; a strict

⁸⁶ Stout, 28.

adherence to Davidson's approach to different conceptual schemes eliminates the possibility of learning from real difference. Moreover, Decosimo assumes that "disagreement always presupposes a rather massive background of [linguistic] agreement."⁸⁷ Stalnaker's development of bridge concepts allows for sufficient agreement to get inquiry started, but it posits this agreement at the beginning of inquiry in an *a priori* fashion and does not necessitate the revision of this posited category. Stalnaker clearly states that the bridge concepts are "projected into each thinker or text," and he rejects the possibility that bridge concepts are "hypotheses about transcultural universals that purport to bring a 'deep structure' of human religion or ethics to the surface."⁸⁸ Bin Song has rightly argued that Stalnaker limits inquiry by "asserting *a priori* that there is no deep ethical structure of human behaviors," and this "conservative" move "forestalls the possibility of finding new comparative points, and thus new chances to build harmony between the compared traditions."⁸⁹ Song rightly argues that Stalnaker's *a priori* rejection of deep structures limits the scope of inquiry, but this *a priori* move cannot be construed as an arbitrary block to inquiry. The Neo-Pragmatic/Analytic foundation of Stalnaker's project prevent it from making contact with the world and discussing deep structures of reality; the project must remain a comparison of social behaviors and linguistic practices on these grounds unless Stalnaker were to develop a metaphysics or move beyond Brandom's "inferentialist" engagement with reality. For this reason, Stalnaker cannot do the evaluative metaphysical work that Song would (rightly) like him to do.

Comparison with Engagement (Pragmaticism)

⁸⁷ Decosimo, "Bridge Concept", 2. This position also align well with Stout's holism.

⁸⁸ Stalnaker, 17.

⁸⁹ Song, 92-3.

The question then arises as to whether or not any approach would allow for comparison of genuinely different ideas in a manner that exhibits deference to all the comperanda with minimal bias, minimal *a priori* assertions of similarity, and an openness to the possibility that the claims are true in the sense that they are true about the world, not merely true in terms of an honorific bestowed upon a statement made in coherence with the grammar of a tradition or social practice. Robert Neville has developed an approach to comparative work that attempts to achieve all these goals; while any particular employment of this method may fail at any of these endeavors, the process itself allows for self-correction. This method looks superficially similar to Stalnaker's "bridge concept" approach, but it differs in some critically important ways.

According to Neville, any act of comparison involves three logical steps, taken all at once.⁹⁰ The first step in the logic of Comparison, then, is to choose or develop an appropriate vague category, or respect of comparison, that does not bias the comparison.⁹¹ The second step or movement within the logic of comparison is to attempt an articulation of the candidate specifications (the items to be compared) within the comparative category; this second movement involves various critical dialectics to ensure that the candidate articulations of the items compared, on the one hand, do not distort the tradition and, on the other hand, do speak to the category.⁹² In the third and final movement in the logic of comparison, the comparativist surveys the results of the articulated positions within the vague category; at this point, the

⁹⁰ Robert Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 132.

⁹¹ Robert Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 132. Neville and Wildman have articulated these movements earlier, in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, but the articulation in *Ritual and Deference* seems clearer, to my mind. For the discussion in *The Human Condition*, see Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas, in *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. By Robert Cummings Neville, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 14-15.

⁹² *Ibid.*

category is no longer *only* vague, but also specified by the compared items.⁹³ This last movement is what allows the comparativist to see the similarities and difference, where items overlap or are singular, etc. When writing together, Neville and Wildman begin their discussion of comparative methodology by introducing a relatively complicated philosophical account of the process of comparison. Neville, in coordination with Wildman,⁹⁴ writes, “when two things are compared, they are compared in the same respect. We [Neville and Wildman] call the respect of comparison a ‘vague category,’ which is to say a category used vaguely enough to allow room for the coexistence of different kinds of things within it.”⁹⁵ This quote introduces a number of technical terms in Neville and Wildman’s methodology that need to be clarified. Perhaps most important among these technical terms are “category” and “vague.”

First, Neville and Wildman mean something slightly unusual by the term “category,” insofar as it differs from both Aristotelian and Kantian understandings of categories. For Aristotle, a category involved “basic forms of predication. This supposes that interpretation is the same as predication in a language.”⁹⁶ Neville and Wildman argue that Aristotle’s supposition is false, and that interpretation is not simply a “pattern but an intentional act of engaging the subject matter with the semiotic pattern,” which includes, but is not limited to, predication.⁹⁷ Kant thought that Aristotle concept of predication was not “mere patterns in the semiotic system:

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ The authorship of the Comparative Religious Ideas Project is a complicated topic, since several of the chapters are co-authored and the work was written through a process of close collaboration. In the present discussion, I will refer to chapters primarily authored by Neville with Wildman assisting with some phrase that is a variation of the phrase used here; when Wildman is the primary author and Neville the secondary, I will indicate as much with a similar phrase. “Neville writes in conjunction

⁹⁵ Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” in *The Human Condition*, edited by Robert Cummings Neville (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 14. Neville also makes this point in *Ritual and Deference*, 132.

⁹⁶ Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” in *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, edited by Robert Cummings Neville (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 195.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

they are in fact the only respects according to which we can interpret [. . .]”⁹⁸ In other words, human knowledge must conform to the categories no matter what, even if reality (*noumena*) did not fit the transcendental categories.⁹⁹ The categories that Neville and Wildman have in mind 1) are “radically empirical,” requiring pragmatic testing that makes them vulnerable to correction from the “secondness” of reality, and 2) allow for a much richer theory of interpretation that goes beyond mere “logical predication” to include the highly symbolic and metaphoric languages that attempt to “get at religious realities.”¹⁰⁰ Decosimo treats a “category” as a somewhat rigid mental scheme, and remains skeptical of any sort of distinction between “vague” and “general.”¹⁰¹ Stalnaker also makes no distinction between “vague” and “general.” Neville and Wildman’s process of comparison provides an opportunity to expand the interpreter’s semeiotic system so as to be engaged better with the world and also to revise the starting hypothesis.

Second, Neville and Wildman indicate with clarity that “vagueness” “does not mean fuzzy-mindedness” in this context, but rather suggests a “logical notion, first analyzed in detail by Charles S. Peirce.”¹⁰² The final point in the last paragraph, the distinction between vague and general, is a crucial one. Charles Sanders Peirce distinguished between vagueness and generality in many short essays; one of his clearest discussions of these two types of abstractions can be found in “Issues of Pragmaticism.”¹⁰³ According to Peirce, a “general” category is one in which all the determinate aspects of the abstract category can be applied equally to all things included in the category; that is to say that the law of the excluded middle does not apply.¹⁰⁴ Another way

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195-6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 196. See also my discussion and refutation of Kant in the previous chapter on interpretation.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁰¹ Personal communication, Spring 2017.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰³ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* Vol. 2 (1893-1913) edited by the Peirce Edition Project, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 351.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 350-351.

of wording this would be to say that a category is “objectively *general* in so far as it extends to the interpreter the privilege of carrying its determination further.”¹⁰⁵ Peirce’s example for a general category is the phrase “Man is mortal.”¹⁰⁶ Mortality applies equally and univocally to every specification of the category “man,” and today we would say “human,” thus no qualifications would need to be made. A “vague” category, on the other hand, is partially determinate, so as to be specific enough to have meaning, but also partially indeterminate or open ended, so as to include mutually exclusive possibilities within itself; that is to say that the law of non-contradiction does not apply.¹⁰⁷ Another way of wording this would be to say that a category is “objectively *vague* in so far as it reserves further determination to be made in some other conceivable sign, or at least does not appoint the interpreter as its deputy in this office.”¹⁰⁸ To modify Peirce’s example only a little, we could say “Someone is conceited”¹⁰⁹ and this phrase would be open to further specification as to the specific person to whom the predicate “conceited” might apply, and the specification of this vague category “someone” could be specified in mutually contradictory ways, e.g., the President of the United States of America is conceited, but Gandhi was not. These examples have been relatively trivial, but they clarify the logical point that Peirce made.

Neville and Wildman make full use of this logical distinction by claiming that their “hypothesis is that comparison is by means of categories that are internally complex with two or more levels of determinateness.”¹¹⁰ The categories are determinate in relation to other categories

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁰⁹ Peirce’s phrase is “A man whom I could mention seems to be a little conceited.” *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Robert Cummings Neville and Wesley J. Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” in *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, Robert Cummings Neville, Ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 196.

functioning at the same level, but they are indeterminate, prior to actually comparing things, in relation to objects that might fall under them or instantiate them.¹¹¹ The first level or mode of the category is the vague one, then; for the purpose of comparing religious ideas, we could imagine two closely connected vague categories such as the *human predicament* and the *deliverance from* or *resolution of* this predicament. One religious tradition might *specify* the predicament by saying that humans face death, and the resolution to this predicament might be the attainment of eternal life; another religious tradition might specify the predicament by saying that the human is bound to be reborn endlessly in a cycle of suffering, and the resolution to this predicament might be the blowing out of individual existence. These “specifications” of the vague category, though making overly general statements themselves about distinct specifications of the vague category, illustrate the ways in which a vague category may be *specified* by mutually contradictory positions; this specification, as mentioned earlier, represent the second step in the logic of comparison sketched by Neville and Wildman. In North American culture, the standard example of objects that cannot be compared is “apples and oranges.” Some people try to get around this problem by saying that both are fruits; this statement is true, but “fruit” would be a general category, in its typical application, that applies in the same way to both of the items to be compared. The category “fruit” could also be treated be a vague category for this comparison, if the comparativist were a proficient enough botanist to distinguish between pomes and hesperidium. A category such as “surface texture” would be a *vague* category, capable of being *specified* by both “smooth” in the case of the apple and “rough” in the case of the orange, even

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

though both of these terms, smooth and rough, are (at least ordinarily) mutually exclusive.¹¹² At this point, the category has two modes or levels: vague and specified.¹¹³

While the example of the surface textures of apples and oranges specified the vague category in contradictory ways, the important point about the vague category itself is that it “*tolerates* all sorts of relations among the categories that are candidate specifications.”¹¹⁴ A comparativist needs to show that any specification of the vague category is in fact tolerated by the vague category;¹¹⁵ if not, then the category likely needs to be made more vague.¹¹⁶ Similarly, a vague category only “expresses” a specifying category if everything of genuine importance in the specifying category can be represented in the vague category, and only what is genuinely “trivial” in the specifying category is left out.¹¹⁷ Therefore, the vague category could include specifications that were similar, overlapping, mutually exclusive, contradictory, identical, unique, or practically any other sort of relation, as long as the important parts of the specification can be genuinely expressed in the vague category. However, the second step of comparative logic still does not allow for comparison or the analysis of these types of relations. The comparativist must “*enhance*” the vague category’s language in order “to express various specifying categories.”¹¹⁸ The process of enhancing the vague category might involve a complicated translational processes from the language of the “candidate specifying category into the language of the comparative vague category” or just more detailed descriptions (as in mathematics) in the same language.¹¹⁹ At this point, the vague category has “integrity,” and the

¹¹² Wildman uses this example also in *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry*.

¹¹³ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *The Human Condition*, 14-15.

¹¹⁴ Robert Cummings Neville, *Normative Cultures* vol. 3 of *The Axiology of Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 63.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *The Human Condition*, 14-15.

¹¹⁷ Neville, *Normative Cultures*, 63 and 74.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63-4.

enhanced language can express all candidate specifications.¹²⁰ This third movement in the logic of comparison involves the surveying of results to see just how the candidate specifications relate to one another in the enriched language of the vague category; this final stage in the process allows for the analysis of what the specifications “claim and deny with reference to one another.”¹²¹

The description of Neville and Wildman’s approach derives primarily from Neville’s extremely technical discussion in *Normative Cultures*. This articulation of Neville’s comparative methodology seems to be one of the clearest and most precise accounts; perhaps because of the precision involved in this account, it is also very challenging to understand.¹²² The very (read “overly”) simplified version of this theory of comparison is that the process of comparison involves three moments—the initial selection of a vague category (which is the context of the comparison), the articulation of specifications of that category, and the analysis of how those specifications relate to one another as specifications of the vague category—and two or three corresponding levels—vague, specified, and enhanced/enriched (this third “level” is, roughly speaking, the integrity of the category as a whole or with both levels integrated).

Moreover, each of these stages involves the formulation, testing, and revisiting (revising, reaffirming, or discarding) of hypotheses,¹²³ as Neville, Wildman, and David Eckel would all

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹²¹ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 132. See also Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *The Human Condition*, 15. See also Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *Ultimate Realities*, 199.

¹²² Wesley Wildman notes that the “first blank look” in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project came when the group read Neville’s theory of comparison in this book, which was the required reading for the day; Wildman writes, “Most people really didn’t understand what they read. They knew that Bob is smart and that it probably all makes some sort of sense but for many the reading experience was akin to staring at the Rosetta Stone: the book is written in some strange sort of code and interpreting it rightly seemed pretty much out of the question.” See Wesley J. Wildman, “During the First Year,” in *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. By Robert Cummings Neville, (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2001), 274.

¹²³ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 132.

point out, the process of comparison begins in the middle of things and is always already underway.¹²⁴ The question then becomes not whether or not to begin comparison, but how the comparison might be improved or refined.¹²⁵ Any comparative hypothesis might shift wildly and quickly initially before settling down into a more stable status; however, the hypothesis has stability only by virtue of previous comparisons, and there is no guarantee that future comparisons will reinforce this stability, for they might just as easily destabilize the hypothesis.¹²⁶ Neville and Wildman do not think that their method guarantees good comparison; it simply optimizes the possibility for feedback, rendering the category vulnerable to correction and subtle improvements in attempts to safeguard against bias.¹²⁷ Neville wants to articulate clearly the respect of comparison from the onset and the history of that category of comparison; this transparency serves to raise an awareness of the locatedness of the category of comparison itself. In this regard, Neville and Decosimo largely agree that the comparativist should not try to hide the history and context of the comparative category. Neville and Wildman do not indicate that comparative inquiry begins without bias, because all comparative categories have historical roots of development; nevertheless, comparative inquiry moves towards the minimization of bias as it exposes these underlying assumptions to possible sources of correction.¹²⁸ This methodology exhibits extreme deference to all candidate specifications of the vague category, insofar as 1) it seeks to minimize bias to any and all specifications and 2) attempts to trivialize in its theoretical abstractions only that which is of trivial importance to the candidate specifications of the vague category; alternatively phrased, “*Comparison requires understanding all sides to be*

¹²⁴ See “During the First Year,” *The Human Condition*, 276. And “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *Ultimate Realities*, 194.

¹²⁵ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *Ultimate Realities*, 194.

¹²⁶ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 132-3.

¹²⁷ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *Ultimate Realities*, 194.

¹²⁸ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *The Human Condition*, 15.

compared in their own terms."¹²⁹ If any given vague category distorts or trivializes something important among one or more of the comperanda, the category must be revised, rejected, or purified of its distorting characteristics in order to be as neutral as possible.¹³⁰ Moreover, comparison aims at truth in their "assert[i]ons about the relations among" the specifications.¹³¹ Neville's account of truth was discussed in detail in the preceding chapter on "Interpretation," but, succinctly stated, Neville's realist account of truth claims that truth or falsity have a dyadic character set in a triadic process of interpretation in which a sign engages an interpreter with an object, and the sign carries over value from the object into the interpreter.¹³²

For Neville, the amount of agreement between comparanda is an empirical question to be settled at the (tentative or temporary) end of an inquiry, not the onset. The Neville/Wildman theory of comparison differs from the Rortyan/Davidsonian based theories of comparison. First, whereas Stalnaker must place the bridge concept first in order to get comparison started, Neville and Wildman would maintain that, if there is a bridge concept, i.e., a genuine similarity between the comperanda, at all, the bridge must come after the vague category has been specified and enhanced, not before. This alternative use of "bridge concept," where the bridge comes after the comparison, can prove incredibly useful for "practical" as well as "theoretical" purposes, though I myself would not want to make any strong distinction between these two purposes, since I follow Plato in thinking that the purpose of theorizing is to guide life better; the most practical thing may be a good theory. Jon Powers, Ohio Wesleyan University's University Chaplain, uses this approach in leading interreligious discussions on important topics in the lives of his students (e.g., dating across religious traditions or the significance of sacred texts for life), and his

¹²⁹ Neville and Wildman, On Comparing Religious Ideas," *Ultimate Realities*, 190.

¹³⁰ Neville and Wildman, On Comparing Religious Ideas," *The Human Condition*, 15.

¹³¹ Neville and Wildman, On Comparing Religious Ideas," *Ultimate Realities*, 190.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 188. The account of this in the preceding chapter derived from *Recovery of the Measure*.

excellent discussion of this approach to interfaith/interreligious chaplaincy can be found in his recent essay on Methodists and Muslims.¹³³ Similarly, an international organization might wish to embark on a cross-cultural endeavor to end torture or human trafficking and construct their position on the topic in vague language that could both tolerate different specifications of the statement while still being determinate enough to be meaningful.¹³⁴ In each case, the two levels of the comparative category allow for real and significant difference; this allows for a bridge concept to be an *a posteriori* (tentative) conclusion, not an *a priori* assumption. Whereas, for Decosimo, disagreement requires a larger background of agreement and commensurability, for Neville, the objects of comparison need not be commensurate with one another, but the commensurability, similarity, dissimilarity are all to be determined once the vague category begins to undergo specification.¹³⁵

Moreover, in contrast to the rigid categories of either Aristotle or Kant, which were respectively categories of predication and the only respects according to which humans could interpret reality at all, the categories that Neville and Wildman have in mind are much more adaptive and empirical.¹³⁶ This pragmaticist theory of inquiry describes categories as “the respects in which reality might be interpreted [which] are to be discovered by attempted interpretations that pass the appropriate pragmatic tests;” this means that there could be many more categories than Kant or Aristotle would allow, and these categories, in relation to religious realities, might rely more on metaphoric uses of language than on logical predication to get at the

¹³³ Jon R. Powers, “Methodists and Muslims: Better Together,” in *Displaced Persons: Theological Reflection on Immigration, Refugees, and Marginalization*, ed. Matthew W. Charlton and Timothy S. Moore (Nashville, TN: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2018). Powers is the University Chaplain at my undergraduate *alma mater*, Ohio Wesleyan University and the reason I first applied to Boston University.

¹³⁴ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *The Human Condition*, 9.

¹³⁵ Neville and Wildman, “On Comparing Religious Ideas,” *Ultimate Realities*, 198.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

realities discussed.¹³⁷ The notion of vagueness and the hypothetical nature of comparative inquiry hedges against scheme-content dualism, rigid categories, and the assumption of agreement.

While it may seem naïve to say that a vague category has no bias, the important part of the theory of comparison developed by Neville and Wildman for this point is that the comparativist can correct for bias as the process of comparison moves along and as the comparativist becomes aware of the ways in which the vague category is specified; therefore, while a comparative category will have its own history and locatedness,¹³⁸ it can also be corrected and there could be better or worse categories for the reduction of bias. This approach does not deny that inquiry may get started with bias, as both the continental and analytic approaches to hermeneutics and comparison, would suggest; nevertheless, Neville and Wildman's methodology allows for the correction of bias in the never-completed process of comparison. For Wildman and Neville, the source of a category becomes largely irrelevant: the concern is whether or not the category remains too rigid, exhibiting a resistance to being made vulnerable because of the role it plays in a particular tradition or theory of religion.¹³⁹ According to Wildman and Neville, "the methodology of comparison must prize vulnerability for comparative categories and of the comparisons they permit" irrespective of the source of the categories.¹⁴⁰ This methodology, in contrast to the continental and analytic methodologies, allows for dynamic shifts in the categories themselves not determined by either tradition or linguistic schemes.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹³⁸ Neville and Wildman, "On Comparing Religious Ideas," *The Human Condition*, 15.

¹³⁹ Wildman and Neville, "Our Approach to Comparison," in *Ultimate Realities*, ed. By Robert Cummings Neville, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 221.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

At least one more comment must be made about Neville and Wildman's comparative methodology. As noted before, on Neville's account, any comparison involves three logical steps, taken all at once. The first step in the logic of comparison is to choose or develop an appropriate vague category, or respect of comparison, that does not bias the comparison.¹⁴¹ The second step or movement within the logic of comparison is to attempt an articulation of the candidate specifications (the items to be compared) within the comparative category; this second movement involves various critical dialectics to ensure that the candidate articulations of the items compared, on the one hand, do not distort the tradition and, on the other hand, do speak to the category.¹⁴² And the third and final movement in the logic of comparison allows the comparativist to survey the results of the various positions within the vague category; at this point, the category is no longer *only* vague, but also specified by the compared items.¹⁴³ Neville and Wildman's logic of comparison relates closely to Peirce's articulation of the scientific method in "The Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," analyzed in the preceding chapter for its theory of interpretation and inquiry.

In contrast to Neville and Wildman's theory of inquiry that aligns with Peirce's approach to the scientific method that attempts to minimize bias, Clooney does not usually attempt to address comparative theology by employing the scientific method, nor does he ever attempt to remove faith from the inquiry. Clooney understands comparative theology to be an act of "faith seeking understanding,"¹⁴⁴ a phrase he draws from Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum*. Clooney hopes to avoid the mistakes of early comparative theological endeavors while still also

¹⁴¹ Robert Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 132. This discussion of methodology offers a slightly more streamlined and less technical account of the process than the others cited earlier.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 9 and 36.

confessing a Christian faith.¹⁴⁵ At a personal level, Clooney says that it was when he was 23, serving as an English teacher in Kathmandu, that he “began to learn how faith makes possible, even demands, that we learn deeply from our religious neighbors.”¹⁴⁶ Clooney’s career as a comparative theologian and academic is, on his account, a religious practice that holds the two terms, “comparative” and “theology,” in “tension” with one another.¹⁴⁷ The first of these two terms, Clooney defines as a practice that necessitates both intuitive and rational insight; however, comparison is not a matter of evaluation, nor is it a pseudo-scientific practice of sifting through similarities and differences.¹⁴⁸ Because Clooney views comparison as a spiritual practice, he says:

[. . .] *comparison* is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other. It ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and over again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each differently [. . .] and by cumulative insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently too. Finally, we see ourselves differently, intuitively uncovering dimensions of ourselves that would not otherwise, by a non-comparative logic, come to the fore.¹⁴⁹

This religious practice of comparison, placing these realities next to one another and seeing them together, then has three steps for Clooney. The first of which is using intuition to select objects for comparison, and the intuition is of some sort of intriguing resemblance, according to

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁴⁷ Clooney’s word. *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

Clooney.¹⁵⁰ The second involves seeing the two (or more) objects of comparison together. The third involves seeing “ourselves” and our tradition anew.

All forms of theology are “study,” for Clooney.¹⁵¹ Theology as study, for Clooney, means “a mode of inquiry that engages a wide range of issues with full intellectual force, but ordinarily does so within the constraints of a commitment to a religious community.”¹⁵² Moreover, the three words of the Anselmian motto, “faith seeking understanding,” describe a practice involving forceful words that must remain in fruitful tension with one another: the faith, the search, and the intellectual goal.¹⁵³ Theology, as a practice within a tradition, must resist two opposing pressures: allowing a tradition to bind it too tightly (fanaticism in Neville’s terms), on the one hand, and slipping into a relativistic position of rejecting the possibility of making strong claims about truth and value on the other (relativism and postmodernism in Neville’s terms).¹⁵⁴ Clooney takes his home tradition to be Roman Catholicism;¹⁵⁵ given any of these specifications, it still seems fair to interpret Clooney’s comparative theology as a Christian practice. However, he also says that there is nothing exclusively Christian about comparative theology, and the practice can be performed in other traditions as well.¹⁵⁶ In this regard, Clooney and Cornille are very close to one another. On Clooney’s account, “‘Faith seeking understanding’ remains a viable base from which to learn of religions other than our own, and this is key to comparative theology as [he] understand[s] it.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁵ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁵⁶ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11 and 78-83.

¹⁵⁷ Clooney, 36.

Not only is comparative theology itself a religious practice, in Clooney's estimation, but so too are the practices of religious reading and religious commentary; this leads directly to the claim that "if we wish to learn and be changed by what we learn, we are unlikely to find another practice as reliably rich and fruitful as [...] reading."¹⁵⁸ The main issue, for Clooney, then is how theologians can "best read religiously."¹⁵⁹ In *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, he lays out a six step process for doing so; the comparative theologian must: first, choose a text; second, learn the language or choose to work with translations; third, pick up the texts and read, with loving attention and patient persistence; fourth, undergo serious self-reflection on him-/her-self as a discerning and reflective reader; fifth, reread her/his own tradition in light of the new learning; and, finally, put things back together so that the insights gained can be understood by fellow scholars and by faith communities.¹⁶⁰ One of the crucial points in Clooney's discussion here is that the theologian is a reader, not merely a consumer or deconstructor, of the texts, and this allows the comparative theologian's own work to enable her/his own listeners/readers to gain the spiritual sensitivity actualized by the theologian.¹⁶¹

Clooney expounds on his understanding of reading in a forthcoming book, *Slow Learning in Fast Times: How Reading Hindu and Christian Classics still Matters*. Part of Clooney's intent behind this work is evident from the title, and part of his claim is that reading classics across religious tradition can still be deeply meaningful, and this practice is best practiced slowly, rather than rushing through the material as most people in our era do. This analysis of the title offers little real engagement of the depth of the work. Clooney claims that his study of medieval doctrinal classics of two traditions have allowed him to hold two traditions in his mind

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

simultaneously, and this simultaneous holding, not a “better theory” is what constitutes the practice.¹⁶² Clooney’s emphasis on the adjective “slow” stems from his view that “The texts that are most intellectually and spiritually alive are those able to direct our attention to truth, without themselves becoming obstacles [. . .] This learning cannot be rushed, since reflection and appropriation are necessary components of this practice.”¹⁶³ According to this passage the practice of reading slowly allows texts to bring “truth” into focus, without hindering or standing as a barrier between the reader and reality. This statement would seem to push back against the language games played by the Analytic/Neo-Pragmatist interpreters and comparativists.

Moreover, the texts do not appear, on Clooney’s account, to be entirely independent of a harder reality that people face in daily life; Clooney ties his understanding to Philipp Rosemann’s exploration of learning practices in medieval Christianity, where “There are not separate truths inside and outside texts, nor are texts places of refuge for those fleeing the harder realities of any given era [. . .] The best readers were those [who p]refer to defer to the text, because it is ‘the Word of God, and the texture of reality; it cannot be manipulated at will.’”¹⁶⁴ The implication here is that the texts bear the Word of God to the reader, and there can be no separation of truth within and without a text—thus, the text does not appear to be something that prevents the reader from engaging truth; rather, the text carries over the Word of God Itself into the reader. Clooney, in a footnote, says that he favors the practice of *lectio divina*, but he wishes to avoid coopting the term for the intellectual study he has in mind for this work.¹⁶⁵ This account of *slow reading* seems to be in accord in at least two ways with the pragmaticist theory of

¹⁶² Francis X. Clooney, S.J. *Slow Learning in Fast Times: How Reading Hindu and Christian Classics still Matters*. Forthcoming, 36.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 37. There appears to be a typo in this passage: “those refer to defer.”

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

interpretation discussed in the preceding chapter: 1) the text itself engages the reader/interpreter with the Word of God, thus becoming a sign that carries something of value over from the interpreted object (the Word of God) into the interpretive experience of the reader/interpreter and 2) when Clooney claims that the text becomes part of the reader, by saying that the words of the text “work within us,”¹⁶⁶ he suggests that the text itself and as a whole becomes integrated into the semiotic system of the reader/interpreter.

After this early discussion of the ways in which texts bear truth and become a part of the reader, Clooney ties his account of reading to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Clooney cites the *Investigations* favorably, saying, ““Their product is not insight into or knowledge of the essence of the world or the workings of the human understanding or the hidden essences of language, but the dissolution of the problems and an overview of (some part) of the web of language.””¹⁶⁷ This Wittgensteinian linguistic move seems odd in relation to the preceding discussion of the way that texts become part of the reader, along with the truth they disclose. The question then arises whether Clooney is taking a linguistic turn or if something else is occurring here in the work. The latter option provides a better interpretation of this incorporation: the incorporation of Wittgenstein here signals not a linguistic turn that keeps humans from engaging anything but discourse, but rather Wittgenstein’s emphasis on personal involvement with, deep puzzlement at, and therapy provided by the richness of the text—all of which call the reader back to the text, again and again, delving ever deeper into the rich reading history available.¹⁶⁸ This interpretation finds justification in Clooney’s remark that the sacred texts “aim at realities older and deeper than Wittgenstein takes up [. . .]”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 80

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 116-7 and 119.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

Additionally, this interpretation finds continuity with Clooney's comments in other works. For instance, in *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India*, Clooney argues that texts allow readers to see reality without reasserting the myth of the given. Clooney writes, "Words stand in the way, words are a window, we see by seeing through words, and by seeing through our efforts to treat them as words."¹⁷⁰ The first clause in this sentence indicates that Clooney's realism does not simply reinstitute the myth of the given. The second clause here, "words are a window," could indicate that Clooney views texts and traditions as distorting "lenses," to borrow the postmodern phrase or it could indicate that texts allow the reader to see or know reality in additional ways. Do the clauses reinforce one another (i.e., the texts distort anything that might be seen) or do the clauses stand in creative tension with one another (i.e., the windows allow the reader to see reality)? The second interpretation again offers greater consistency with Clooney's ideas when taken as a whole. This realism runs throughout Clooney's writings, for instance, when he writes, "[. . .] there is a world, it can and needs to be encountered, read"¹⁷¹ or when he says, "[. . .] one can begin to see—more clearly—through words [. . .]to the realities most of us claim lie beyond, after, and within such words,"¹⁷² texts, for Clooney, express "views about the world that exists outside texts."¹⁷³ The text then becomes a sign that allows the reader to engage reality; apart from these signs ("texts" in Clooney's language), "there is no other path of access."¹⁷⁴ Moreover, the reader of texts becomes the locus of truth when the text carries over something important from the real world into the reader's experience: "[. . .] the proper reader [. . .] can [. . .] become the location of the realization of its

¹⁷⁰ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 248

¹⁷¹ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 195.

¹⁷² Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 305.

¹⁷³ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 187.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

truth.”¹⁷⁵ In unequivocal terms then, Clooney’s comparative approach does not take the linguistic turn that Decosimo’s and Stalnaker’s approaches do; rather, it expresses a realism in which texts engage readers with the world, if the reader puts in the effort to read them patiently and slowly in order to see the truth that the texts can reveal about reality. Similarly, tradition alone does not fully determine the scope of truth, as it did for Cornille and Griffiths. However, more will be said about this point in relation to the discussion of “confessional theology” shortly.

There are a three final notes to be made on Clooney’s approach to comparison. First, throughout Clooney’s writings, he claims that he “intuitively” pairs texts. Peirce, as discussed in the preceding chapter, drove the nail into the coffin in his argument against intuition in the Kantian sense; however, that analysis of Peirce’s argument provided at least two other possible ways of interpreting “intuition,” such that intuition became a logical hypothesis, either as an untested hypothesis or one so thoroughly confirmed by testing that it could be trusted as a habit of thought. Neville offers another definition that entirely avoids Peirce’s Kantian interpretation of intuition. The deep, slow reading that Clooney describes in his forthcoming book, suggests the possibility of internalizing the text and the truth disclosed by the text to such an extent that meaning of the text as a whole became a hypothesis operative as a habit of thought; this interpretation would allow both Clooney’s claim concerning the “intuitive” pairing of texts and the logical impossibility of intuition as such to coexist without contradiction. According to Neville, intuition is “a faculty for seeing that diverse things fit together, that they are compatible or, sometimes even stronger, that they necessarily entail each other.”¹⁷⁶ On this account, intuition becomes a recognition of how the “aesthetic elements hang together” and, as such, “the form of

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-5.

¹⁷⁶ Robert Cummings Neville, *Realism in Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, ____), 124.

the intuitive faculty is judgmental in the sense that to intuit the fitness of things is to judge that they fit together.”¹⁷⁷ Perhaps, then, a better account of Clooney’s intuitive pairing of texts has to do with the seeing the whole meanings of multiple texts just fitting together in a grasping of the whole. More will be said about this later, though.

A closely related second point relates to the “confessional nature” of comparative theology. There is absolutely no denying that Clooney describes his approach to comparative theology in this way. However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the description of the comparative process and the practice of the process. As indicated earlier, Clooney frequently suggests that comparative theology is a process that begins in the home tradition, ventures outside of that tradition, and then returns to the home tradition. This position finds clear expression when Clooney makes claims like, comparative theology “marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition [. . .] venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions [. . .] for the sake of fresh theological insights.”¹⁷⁸ In this regard, Clooney’s work looks nearly identical to that of Cornille and (apparently) the home religious tradition, the one in which the comparativist is “rooted,” sets the terms of the comparison.

Sometimes, Clooney’s home tradition of Christianity does set the terms of the comparison. A good example of this approach is Clooney’s *Hindu God, Christian God*, in which he states, “Not only have I begun my chapters with Christian theologians, but I frame the questions and discover answers that fit nicely into the categories and expectations of the Christian theological tradition.”¹⁷⁹ In this book, clearly the terms of the comparison are set by the home tradition; however, this book represents a somewhat unusual approach to comparison for

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

¹⁷⁹ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Hindu God, Christian God* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 181.

Clooney insofar as it explicitly employs specific categories for the comparison, rather than simply placing texts side by side and asking what insights they have to offer one another.

Clooney's more typical approach to comparative theology actually begins with the "other" tradition's text. Clooney often hints at this approach in his texts without explicitly stating it.

For instance, in *Seeing through Texts*, Clooney frames this methodological choice in a question: "What does *Tiruvāymoli* remind me of, what do I read along with these songs [. . .]?"¹⁸⁰ For those unfamiliar with the *Tiruvāymoli*, it is a sophisticated theological work in the form of sensual poems discussing a female's love for God. If Clooney asks what he should read alongside the Hindu text, then the Hindu text has already been selected; the specifically chosen Christian text(s) are chosen because the whole meaning of the Hindu text(s) reminds Clooney of a similar meaning in the Christian tradition. Therefore, Clooney then "introduce[s] six representative texts which merit attention in this context—texts which, because they productively open a (Christian) reader to affective engagement and commitment, accentuate some of the possibilities available after one has beg[un] to read *Tiruvāymoli*."¹⁸¹ At first, it would seem that the *Tiruvāymoli* itself determines the context for the comparison, but a second look reveals something slightly more nuanced occurring here. Clooney chooses the six Christian texts "because they productively open a (Christian) reader to affective engagement and commitment."¹⁸² Clooney rarely articulates his own approach to comparison as employing "vague categories" or "respects of comparison;" he prefers instead to discuss close reading and intuitively pairing texts. However, if intuition be construed as just "seeing that diverse things fit

¹⁸⁰ Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 256.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

together,”¹⁸³ then the sense in which the diverse things hang together can itself be described as a respect of comparison. The respect in which these six Christian texts compare (with both similarities and differences) to the *Tiruvāymoli* is the “affective engagement and commitment” with and to God. Now, “affective engagement and commitment” as a category does not abstract very far from the *Tiruvāymoli* or the Song of Songs (one of the six Christian texts), but it functions as the respect of comparison in the same way that Neville’s respects of comparison function for him, albeit at a less abstract level. This process can also be properly articulated as an intuitive one: if Clooney’s process of reading texts slowly, deeply, and repeatedly, really does what he claims—makes the text an inseparable part of the reader—then the entirety of the text becomes an integrated part of the semiotic system; from this immediate grasping of the whole meaning of the Hindu text itself and previous knowledge of the whole meaning of previously read texts, Clooney is able to intuitively see together two different things as a single harmony with diverse elements.

If Clooney’s comparison does not (always) allow the home tradition to set the terms of the comparison and, in many cases, the Hindu text sets the initial terms of the comparison, then 1) in what sense is Clooney’s comparative theology *confessional* and 2) does this particular version of confessional theology fall prey to Neville’s very strong objections to confessional theology? First, Clooney’s theology can still be construed as confessional theology in two regards. Clooney says that “when we read, we bring our prior reading, what we have read and how it has taught us to read, to what we read now; and we learn to anticipate differently too.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Robert Cummings Neville, *Realism in Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, ___), 124.

¹⁸⁴ Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 331.

This comment sounds very similar to the Gadamerian description of prejudice or bias, but Clooney again differs from a strict continental approach to the topic in at least two respects.

Clooney thinks that good comparison necessarily has an obligation to engage the “other” tradition fairly and avoid distorting the other tradition as much as possible:

Good comparative study [. . .] depends heavily on the ability of the comparativist to articulate a viable understanding of the ‘other,’ in which the encountered ‘other’ is not manufactured to fit the comparativist’s prejudices and expectations. The comparative theologian must achieve a certain distance from her or his own starting point [. . .] to learn from another tradition by understanding it on its own terms, and in a way that can never be entirely predicated on the expectations of one’s home tradition [. . .]¹⁸⁵

In other works, too, Clooney indicates that one of his basic goals “is to present their tradition coherently, integrally, in an intellectually and spiritually sensitive fashion [. . .] in this part of the world.”¹⁸⁶ While Clooney would not say that privileging an objective standpoint in comparison is desirable,¹⁸⁷ he also does not want to provide an overly biased account of either tradition; his comparison depends on quality Indological work.¹⁸⁸ For Clooney, the “dynamics of mutual influence” in reading influence both “one’s expectations” and “one’s tastes.”¹⁸⁹ The result of this comparative process is that a comparative theologian may make theological choices that are not “‘entirely Christian’ or ‘entirely Hindu;’”¹⁹⁰ this position may result in a “cultivated hybridity,”¹⁹¹ but, even if the comparativist chooses to return to the home tradition, that return

¹⁸⁵ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 7.

¹⁸⁶ Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, xix.

¹⁸⁷ Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 3.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁹ Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 331.

¹⁹⁰ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 160.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

requires a “consequent reappropriation of her of his theological presuppositions and commitments.”¹⁹²

This reappropriation leads directly to the second sense in which Clooney’s comparative theology can be called confessional. He routinely asserts that the insights learned from comparison must be brought back to the home tradition. Comparative theology, Clooney claims, “draws what we learn from another tradition from another tradition back into our own, highlighting and not erasing the fact of this borrowed wisdom.”¹⁹³ In bringing the insights of comparison back to the home tradition, Clooney’s comparison is, at least in some sense, for the home community and is, therefore, confessional. While Neville would admit that it is unlikely that someone deeply committed to her/his own tradition would simply abandon it, he would claim simultaneously that the return to the home tradition is not obligatory or guaranteed; Neville would also rightly emphasize that the new theological position indebted to both traditions places the comparative theologian in a position of multiple religious belonging (roughly equivalent to Clooney’s “cultivated hybridity”).¹⁹⁴

Whether or not any given comparativist returns to or remains rooted in the home tradition is an empirical question: given membership trends in North America, Neville’s hypothesis seems more probably, but Clooney’s hypothesis may be more probable for Christian traditions in South American and Asian contexts where church membership is growing. Either way, this disagreement between Neville and Clooney is an empirical matter, and not a particularly theologically interesting one. Insofar as confessional comparative theology can be construed as the bringing back of insights from comparison to a home tradition, Neville also could be

¹⁹² Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 9.

¹⁹³ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 16.

¹⁹⁴ See the Preface of *Ultimates*, xv and following. And “Annual Comparative Theology Lecture: Religion-Specific or Trans-Religious?”

considered a confessional theologian, though he rarely functions as such in academic publications;¹⁹⁵ anyone with even a little knowledge of Confucianism/Ruism, for example, can hear the comparative insights in Neville's sermons when he preaches—a nice example of this can be seen in his 2010 sermon "Five Things Are Ultimate;" the same holds true for Wildman—a nice example of this can be seen in his sermon "God the Destroyer," which was preached in a Christian setting but clearly takes its intellectual cue from Śaivism. Therefore, while Neville and Wildman do not think comparative theology demands that the theologian bring comparative insights back to the home tradition, they nevertheless do so in their own practice.

In order to determine if Neville's and Clooney's approaches to comparative theology are mutually compatible, we also need to explore the second question about Clooney's comparative theology: does Neville's criticism of confessional theologies apply to Clooney's particular version of comparative theology? Neville states what is perhaps his strongest objection to confessional theology (in relation to the topic of comparative theology) on the first page of his second systematic trilogy; here, he writes, "For an inquiry to presuppose a committed religious location inevitably turns those who occupy different committed locations, or none, into outsiders. The outsiders' response to a theology argued from within such a committed location at best is curiosity about how 'others' do it and more likely is plain neglect."¹⁹⁶ Neville finds two philosophical shortcomings in this confessional approach. First, it fails to make the theological hypothesis(-es) vulnerable to correction from as many sources as might be able to offer corrections. Second, it likely does not take seriously the corrections offered by "outsiders" to the home tradition.

¹⁹⁵ One exception to this claim about "academic" theological publications is Neville's "Christology" book, *Symbols of Jesus*; he also has published several volumes of sermons.

¹⁹⁶ Robert Cummings Neville, *Ultimates*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), xv.

The first horn of Neville's objection may indeed apply to Clooney's methodology, but not because it is confessional. Clooney often insists on dealing with a single text and often refuses to say that it represents a larger trend in the tradition, or sometimes even the author. During the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, Clooney indicated that the particular text of Vedānta Deśika cited in *Ultimate Realities* was very different from not only other Hindu texts or Vedāntin texts, but also many of Deśika's own other writings; Clooney intended that his discussion of the text "puts one in touch with multiple Hindu and Indian ways of thinking about ultimate reality. But [he was] also claiming that advances in this area [generalizations about Hindu religious ideas] are [. . .] almost essentially controversial, argumentative."¹⁹⁷ Neville's concern about failing to make a theological position vulnerable to correction from as many angles as possible, then, may indeed apply to Clooney's approach to comparison, but not because of the confessional nature of his comparative work; rather, it might apply because of Clooney's focus on particularities—essentially, every text of every author would need to be compared with every text of every other author, since the texts have little representative force. Neville and Clooney genuinely disagree on this point, even though the disagreement does not center on the confessional nature of comparative theology.

Perhaps, as a consequence of Clooney's focus on particularities, the second horn of Neville's objection to confessional theology does not apply in principle to Clooney's approach: Clooney appears to take every difference seriously, even differences between particular texts of particular authors. At the same time, Clooney says that he "usually give[s] preference to similarity over difference, preferring to foster theological conversation between specific Hindu and Christian theological discourses that seem in harmony with one another;" moreover, the

¹⁹⁷ Clooney and Neville in *Ultimate Realities*, 154-5.

“accentuation of difference” has never been “the center of [his] work.”¹⁹⁸ At the same time, he cautions readers to “resist easy resemblances, since attention to specifics undoes many a quest for sameness [. . .]”¹⁹⁹ More recently, Clooney has argued “that the next great test for comparative theology is to engage these difficult, near complete systems to see how comparison works in the face of an intensely rationalized other that is difficult because it requires intense thinking [. . .] in a difference that is not a matter of experience [. . .]”²⁰⁰ This move calls comparativists to take real difference seriously as a possible source for correcting theological ideas. While Clooney’s emphasis on particularities ensures that real difference is taken seriously in comparison, this narrow scope may also make it difficult to differentiate between a difference that offered a correction to the theological position or whether the difference amounted to an idiosyncrasy of the particular text. Again, this objection has little to do with Clooney’s approach to confession and more to do with the scope of comparison.

In *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Clooney points out that there are a variety of “assessments of the relationship of comparative theology to theology and the study of religions other than one’s own.”²⁰¹ Clooney suggests that his own take on the discipline as follows:

we may see comparative theology as a practice that can be understood primarily when we reflect on the doing of it. This comparative theology in practice will be more confessional and probably less philosophical, more personally engaged and more deeply rooted in the choices of a particular comparative theologian who, in our postmodern world, is

¹⁹⁸ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 75-6.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁰⁰ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “Difficult Reminders: Seeking Comparative Theology’s Really Difficult Other,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 207.

²⁰¹ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 52.

necessarily making her own choices and then hoping to make sense of them to her community.²⁰²

This excerpt highlights several key points in Clooney's understanding of comparative theology in addition to the ones already noted, e.g., its nature as religious practice and as confessional, that illustrate some differences between his approach and Neville's closely tied to the difference in the scope of comparative theology. Clooney is not trying to provide any sort of "grand theor[y]"²⁰³ that accounts for the different perspectives. This, along with Clooney's strong emphasis on particularities and avoiding "generality,"²⁰⁴ might make reconciling his theory of interpretation with Neville's very difficult.

However, Clooney objects only to generality, not to vagueness; it is unclear if Clooney's word choice here employs the logical distinction developed by Peirce, but he has employed this distinction in other writings.²⁰⁵ Again, while it is unclear if Clooney intentionally distinguishes between vague and general in this specific writing, he is aware of the distinction and is a careful writer, so the choice of "general" in contrast to "vague" could be intentional. Neville's system is *vague* and fallible, vulnerable to correction from any and every direction that might bear on it; additionally, in order for the actual comparison of things, the vague category requires the specified moment or level, otherwise comparison would not be possible. An objection to generalization or abstraction on the grounds that generalization always distorts that from which it generalizes provides, ironically, only a generalization of generalizations; the more relevant questions are whether or not any particular abstraction distorts the important parts of that from

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰³ Clooney says that the attention to particularities in his work "chastens grand theories." Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 16.

²⁰⁴ Clooney, *Slow Learning*, 112.

²⁰⁵ One example of this is in Clooney's essay "From Truth to Religious truth in Hindu Philosophical Theology" in *Religious Truth: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, ed. By Robert Cummings Neville, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 59.

which it abstracts and, then, whether any general statements made from the abstractions have stability. While the fallibilism of Neville's abstractions and systematizations may not make it immune from such mistakes, it does require that these mistakes be corrected as inquiry proceeds.

Moreover, Clooney specifically compliments Neville on his specific approach to systematic thinking and abstractions, while indicating a significant difference between the two of them. Clooney writes, "Neville's approach [. . .] does not tarry long with the concrete realities of individual traditions [. . .]," though Neville's work also "balances a concern for larger philosophical schemata with a respect for plurality that is deep enough to initiate a significant process of thinking, one that balances detail with legitimate, careful abstraction."²⁰⁶ Clooney also suggests that Neville's particular approach to abstractions could provide a helpful model for anyone seeking to "move beyond specific experiments in comparative study."²⁰⁷ These passages nicely illustrate both the differences between Clooney and Neville and the compatibility of the two. Clooney obviously has strong reservations about generalizations and perhaps even prescinding from the particular data in comparisons, but he indicates that Neville's particular approach to the abstraction process provides both legitimate abstractions and deference to the comperanda.

Clooney often, in recent publications, makes an appeal to postmodernism in his comparative methodological accounts. Neville certainly does not do this and rejects almost all of the underlying assumptions of postmodernism. This difference again could be a block for synthesizing their methodologies. However, it seems to me that Clooney's appeal to postmodernism is an attempt to be epistemologically humble as a Jesuit comparativist in light of

²⁰⁶ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., "Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989–1995)" *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 542.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

the negative historical dimensions of early Christian missionary interactions with other religions, especially in India. While the move to humility is admirable, Clooney's emphasis on truth and realism, in addition to his attempts to get to know the "other tradition" on its own terms, all run against the deepest impulses in a postmodern philosophy; if my interpretation of Clooney's purpose in appealing to postmodern positions is correct, then his purpose could be equally (probably better) served by adopting the fallibilism and emphasis on vulnerability to correction common to the pragmaticist line of interpretation. Clooney does emphasize that all comparative results are tentative, and this point finds accord in Neville and Wildman's emphasis on the hypothetical nature of each stage of comparative inquiry, and both moves guard against both fanaticism and the relativism of postmodernism. As argued in the preceding chapter on hermeneutics and interpretation, one of the greatest problems with a postmodern approach to different positions (philosophical, theological, political, etc.) is that there is no location from which to compare the values in different positions. Neville's comparative categories allow for the necessary perspective on different positions to be compared at the vague level, which remains fallible and vulnerable to correction from any and every direction that might bear on it; but, Neville's approach to comparison also necessitates that the vague category be specified with genuine instances of the vague category. Clooney's close readings and internalization of the texts themselves would allow nuanced specifications of the vague categories and his method of reading with commentators serves 1) as a helpful critical dialectic to check that the candidate specifications indeed specify the category and 2) to see how a symbol or symbol network (e.g., a text) engages an interpreter (commentator) with an interpreted object (Brahman or the pure act of *esse*, for example).

To be clear, I agree fully with the way Neville frames the process of comparison. However, Neville typically suggests that the critical dialectic (especially in step two) might be approached best through collaborative work.²⁰⁸ This methodological move towards collaborative work seems inappropriate in a dissertation, which necessarily articulates a student's own original work. Consequently, another approach to this critical dialectic must be found; fortunately, Clooney's approach to comparative theology offers such a dialectic in his method of close reading and reading with commentators. However, synthesizing these two distinct approaches to comparative theology involves coping with some real differences, especially in regard to the scope of comparisons and the representation nature of any given text or commentary; this attempt to synthesize the two methods does not attempt to say that they are identical, only that their differences are not mutually exclusive. The preceding discussion of Clooney and Neville's methodologies has indicated 1) that the differences regarding the confessional nature of theology typically attributed to Neville's and Clooney's respective approaches are not, in fact, quite what they initially appear to be; 2) that the real differences present in their methodologies do not mutually exclude one another; and 3) that the two methodologies have several genuine similarities in respect to their understandings of truth and realism in theology, their deference to the comperanda, and their emphasis on the tentative nature of comparisons. Partially, this attempt to synthesize the two methodologies arises from noticing that both Neville and Clooney exhibit a sagely genius in their comparative work. Their approaches need not be treated as opposite ends of the spectrum as they often have been; in the overall field of comparative theology, as sketched above, Neville and Clooney seem much more similar than any other scholars in the field in

²⁰⁸ Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 132.. Neville also sometimes suggests that this collaboration may just be imagining what the person down the hall *would* say. For this comment, see Neville, "Annual Comparative Theology Lecture: Religion-Specific or Trans-Religious?"

respect to truth, realism, deference to comperanda, and their emphases on the vulnerability of their comparisons to correction.

The important differences between their comparative endeavors revolve around the issues of 1) scope vs. attention to detail and 2) the representative status of a given text. Clooney's hesitancy to allow any given Hindu text much representative status, and therefore, his emphasis on detail over breadth, makes a great deal of sense, given the history of the term "Hinduism;" as Neville notes, "With only a little irony, Hinduism can be said to be a bit like the Buddhist idea of the self, a construction placed on a vast and confusing multiplicity but itself without an essence."²⁰⁹ However, the disagreement concerning scope vs. detail could be resolved, in part, by granting a more representational status to a given text or figure, so long as that representative status retains a tentative nature (Clooney's language) or the logical status of an hypothesis that is vulnerable to correction (Neville's language). Clooney may be correct in saying that a given text only puts us "in touch" with larger elements of the tradition, but the ways in which it puts us in touch with that tradition also need to be explored in any given comparison. In the long run, it may turn out that a given text or figure does not represent the full diversity of the tradition (almost certainly the case) or only represents it in certain respects; however, this is an empirical question to be decided in the long run at the "end" of inquiry, not assumed *a priori*. Granting (tentatively) a greater representational status to any given text or figure goes a long way in addressing the issues of scope, though it does not fully resolve the issue.

While the implication of Clooney's emphasis on particularities might be right that comparison ought to compare every theological text of every author with one another, this line of inquiry is unfeasible and would likely lead to many redundancies; a more pragmatic approach is

²⁰⁹ Robert Cummings Neville, *Religion*, vol. 3 of *Philosophical Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 143.

to allow for a greater representative status for a text and allow that representation to be corrected if and where it errs. Closely related to this issue of representation and scope is the scope of the constructive theological project built on the comparative base. As noted early, Clooney does think that comparative theology is constructive theology, but he certainly does not construct a full blown systematic theology from the comparative base the way that Neville does. I share Neville's interest in systematic philosophical theology with a comparative base; however, Neville's *Philosophical Theology* trilogy relies significantly on prior collaborative comparative work involving both specialists and generalists (i.e., the Comparative Religious Ideas Project); again, this reliance on collaborative work seems inappropriate for a dissertation and so the scope of my philosophical theology in Part IV of the dissertation will build primarily on the comparative base that I can manage as an individual scholar playing the roles of both the specialists and the generalists in the project, and pointing out possible ways in which this philosophical theology might be corrected by other traditions in which I am limited by language mastery and expertise. Any work of constructive comparative theology balances expertise (depth) and scope (breadth). My particular comparative theological project in this dissertation falls more in line with Neville's *The Tao and the Daimon* or Clooney's *Hindu God, Christian God* than with Neville's *Philosophical Theology*. In this regard, it is only a step in the right direction of scope while also maintaining enough expertise to make credible claims at this stage in a theological career.