# A Catholic Comparativist's View of Scriptural Reasoning in the Anglican Context

Francis X. Clooney, SJ[1]

fclooney@hds.harvard.edu

ABSTRACT

This article is a response to the essays in this issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* on scriptural reasoning in the Anglican context, from the perspective of a Roman Catholic theologian, and one who is engaged in another kind of interreligious study, comparative theology. It sets out in general terms the distinctive character of comparative theology as an inquiry that crosses the borders between religious traditions. It draws attention to some of the common ground between comparative theology and scriptural reasoning and the character of each as theological disciplines, even while drawing out some of the distinctive marks of comparative theology. In this way it aims to shed light on how scriptural reasoning, even in its general form, is similar to other sustained efforts at interreligious learning, yet possessed of distinctive characteristics that make it interestingly different from the close reading that is comparative theology.

KEYWORDS: theology, comparative, reading, *lectio divina*, dialogue

I have been invited to respond to the essays in this issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* on scriptural reasoning in the Anglican context, from the perspective of my identity as a Roman Catholic theologian, and one who is engaged in another kind of interreligious study, comparative theology. Although I am familiar with scriptural reasoning, I cannot speak to its inner dynamics as an expert, nor with any standing by

1. Francis X. Clooney, SJ is Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology and Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions.

*Journal of Anglican Studies* Vol. 11(2) 217–232 [doi:10.1017/S1740355313000181]

which to comment on the Anglican grounding of the practice and the theology of it. Of course, the invitation and scriptural reasoning itself signal a congenial and open setting that favors conversation, and the rich and inviting essays by David Ford, Ben Quash, Rumee Ahmed and Peter Ochs make clear the inclusive and welcoming nature of the Anglican and scriptural reasoning communities.

Moreover, there is no reason why my identity and work – Catholic, theologian and comparativist – would make an appreciation of or participation in scriptural reasoning problematic. It is true that the institutional and personal dynamics of the Roman Catholic participation will be different with respect to what counts as the substance and place of interreligious understanding, and of course without being able to produce on demand those friendships that make it all work out as it has in the Anglican-Jewish conversation of friends evident in these essays. But there is enough common ground that I am happy to take up this invitation.

## *Comparative Theology*

What I take to be comparative theology, as I do it, occurs particularly within a Roman Catholic view of the world. As I understand it, it is my own contribution to the Catholic and Christian reflection on the pluralist world in which we live, based on needs I have perceived, and in light of capacities and interests with which I work.

Catholicism of course is not unknown to readers, with its moderation of reverence for Scripture by a concern for tradition and Traditions, for philosophy theology and doctrine, for the mystical and the ethical. A Catholic can participate in scriptural reasoning. But as we begin to reflect on scriptural reasoning from a comparative theology perspective, we must go back to the basics and explain comparative theology. Comparative theology must be introduced with some care, since it is so easily mistaken for other disciplines; it must be recognized for what it is and what it cannot be. Comparative theology has its own Catholic grounding, even if it is by no means universally accepted or recognized by Catholics or restricted only to Catholics, and even if theologizing about other religions from a remove is obviously the preferred option for most theologians. Resisting even generalizations about what is Catholic, comparative theology requires the introspective work of the theologian/reader who turns to the texts of her own and other tradition, and sees where close reading leads. This theologian reads deeply in both her own and another tradition and notices commentary and theology as well as

Scripture. She approaches the other tradition with a candid admission that her reading of that tradition is influenced by her knowledge of and commitment to her own. In turn, she returns to her own tradition differently, and reads its sacred texts and theology differently. In this process, she can reject out of hand neither the possibility of spiritual bonds to that other tradition, nor being drawn at least to the edge of the religious experiences and practices of that tradition.

I have found the following distinctions to be helpful in describing 'comparative theology' as I understand it. *Comparative religion* (along with the distinct but related fields of the history of religions and social scientific approaches to religion) entails the study of religion – in ideas, words, images and acts, historical developments – as found in two or more traditions or strands of tradition. The ideal is detached inquiry by which the scholar remains neutral with respect to where the comparison might lead or what it might imply religiously. Even if she is deeply engaged in the research and sensitive to communal issues, her responsibility is primarily to fellow scholars. *Theology* indicates 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, respect for its scriptures, traditions and practices, and a willingness to affirm the truths and values of that tradition. More deeply, and to echo more simply an ancient characterization of theology, it is *faith seeking understanding*, a practice in which all three words – the faith, the search, the intellectual goal – have their full force and remain in fruitful tension with one another. The *theology of religions* is a theological discipline that discerns and evaluates the religious significance of other religious traditions in accord with the truths and goals defining one's own religion. It may be greatly detailed with respect to the nuances of the home tradition, but most often remains broadly general regarding the traditions that are being talked about. *Interreligious dialogue* points to actual conversations, sometimes formal and academic, sometimes simply interpersonal conversations among persons of different religious traditions who are willing to listen to one another and share their stories of faith and values. *Dialogical* or *interreligious theology* grows out of interreligious dialogue, as reflection aimed at clarifying dialogue's presuppositions, learning from its actual practice, and communicating to a wider audience what is learned in dialogue.

In distinction from the preceding ventures, *comparative theology* – *comparative* and *theological* beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or

more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition(s) as well as the home tradition. Comparative theology thus combines tradition-rooted theological concerns with actual study of another tradition. It is not an exercise in the study of religion or religions for the sake of clarifying the phenomenon. It does not reduce to a theology about religions, or to the practice of dialogue.[2]

## *Some Ground Common to Scriptural Reasoning and Comparative Theology*

I already noted the prospect of common ground between comparative theology and scriptural reasoning a few years back, in my 2008 *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God*.[3] In situating my cross-reading of this pair of Catholic and Hindu theologians, I noted how C.C. Pecknold had highlighted[4] the key dynamic at stake in an interreligious reading: 'Scriptural reasoning is a risky practice. It resists dominant modes of neutral public reasoning. It embraces inherited, embodied traditions of faith and judgment, particularly those traditions generated by the story of Abraham's God. It is a practice that is local and provisional and yet risks a long-term commitment to patient dialogical contestations and

2. *Comparative* in this context marks a practice that requires intuitive as well as rational insight, practical as well as theoretical engagement. It is therefore not primarily a matter of evaluation, as if merely to compare A and B so as to determine the extent of their similarity and which is better. Nor is it a scientific analysis by which to grasp the essence of the comparables by sifting through similarities and differences. Rather, as a theological and necessarily spiritual practice (and, in my use of it, a way of reading), 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. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each differently because the other is near, 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. Much in this note and the related paragraphs is adapted from Chapter 1 of my *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

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

4. In his forward to a *Modern Theology* issue dedicated to scriptural reasoning: 'Editorial Preface: The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology* 22.3 (July 2006), pp. 339–43 (339).

conversations on a scriptural plane.'[1] I suggested that the same dynamic of fidelity to tradition, openness and risk, marks comparative theology as well. The risks, potent enough in the Jewish-Christian–Muslim context, may be seen as further intensified in the relatively uncharted realm of Hindu–Christian relations, where the openings made possible by this new exchange are not constrained by a shared story of history and human destiny, and where, from a certain perspective, it is possible to suggest that the theological differences are greater than any that occur in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim exchange.

In the same issue of *Modern Theology*,[5] Ben Quash highlighted four pertinent characteristics of scriptural reasoning: *particularity*: the insistence 'that responsible thought only ever proves itself by the quality of attention it is able to pay to the concrete and particular, by the adequacy of its descriptions of the world around it, just as by the adequacy of its descriptions of texts;' *provisionality*: a sense that conclusions are always open to revision, elusive with respect to definitive formulation, and woven into the larger ongoing drama of life in encounter with God; *sociality*: '[Scriptural reasoning] is an activity of irreducibly particular gatherings of *people*… The interrogative, argumentative and collaborative patterns of Scriptural Reasoning study depend on there being groups rather than solitary individuals at work in response to the scriptural texts on the table;' *surprise*: 'the interrogation of one's own scriptures by other voices can have the effect of making the all-too-familiar texts of one's tradition ''strange'' once again' as we thus become able to return to our own tradition with a fresh sense of possibilities.[6]

*Particularity, provisionality, sociality* and *surprise* are elements operative in the differently configured dialogue that is comparative theological study, and are relevant in describing this theology. It too is highly particular, disciplined by a reading of just (usually) a pair of (parts of) texts at once; it is provisional, in the sense that it is an exercise that can be repeated, extended, improved, tested in other unanticipated circumstances with other texts; it is social, at least in the sense that the voices of two traditions must be heard throughout our study, neither generalized according to the expectations of the other; and it is likely to be surprising, since there is no already settled framework in which its meaning can be adjudicated or the outcome predicted.

5. Ben Quash, 'Heavenly Semantics: Some Literary-Critical Approaches to Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology* 22.3 (July 2006), pp. 403–20) (404).

6. Quash, 'Heavenly Semantics', pp. 404–405.

*Distinguishing Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning*

Comparative theology and scriptural reasoning differ in interesting ways. First, in my interior dialogue as reader (learning with selected Hindu and Christian authors) and as writer, my intention is not simply to read Hindu scriptures through Christian eyes, nor simply to listen to Hindus speak of their scripture and interpretive traditions. Rather, as a Christian reader and writer, I have read conscientiously and taken to heart a theological or spiritual classic of a Hindu tradition, and remained attentive to its ideas, affective states, and its decisive movement toward loving surrender. Thus, comparative theology has, or can have, a deeply contemplative side, as *lectio divina.* Monastic exchange and *lectio divina* can provide the context for a personal interiorized dialogue.[7] Such would be a contemplative exchange, even if it seems not necessarily to have a crossover. The effects of this contemplative reading can be profound. Moving beyond comparison, my work in a respectful way also steps apart from dialogue and shared reading as ordinarily understood, since after deep comparative study there are no longer entirely settled groups of interlocutors, religiously identified, who come, meet and constitute the announced sides in the dialogue.

Even if scriptural reasoning is an extroverted practice, comparative theology's inward focus is not inimical to the mode of scriptural reasoning recommended in the preceding essays. Ford reminds us how *lectio divina* is compatible with scriptural reasoning: 'Conversation, discussion and argument around texts are intrinsic to Scriptural Reasoning, just as they are to the Rabbinic tradition of *chevruta* study that helped to generate it. But what about more meditative, contemplative approaches to scripture that have been especially part of some Christian traditions?'[8] Without this interiority, one might guess, the reading together will be drier and unlikely to bear fruit or build the anticipated bonds.

Second, the theological texts I read in comparative theology are often not scripture, even if the texts I choose are honored in their traditions as powerful classics deeply rooted in scripture. Of course,

7. See for instance http://www.dimmid.org/.

8. Ford recounts how the Benedictine nuns of Turvey Abbey undertook a kind of contemplative scriptural reasoning that proved to be very fruitful, 'a fruitful form of ''stereophonic'' interreligious reading'. He adds that 'all agreed that, done together successively, these ways of reading gave a richer appreciation of both the texts and of each other' (Ford, 'Scriptural Reasoning: Its Anglican Origins, its Development, Practice and Significance', this issue, 147–65).

scripture holds for Roman Catholics too an honored place – in the Church, and always framed by a strong sense of the community's doctrines. If doctrine may seem at first glance to have second place in scriptural reasoning, comparative *theology* more or less insists on being theological and being recognized as such. That it has to do with theology is not simply due to a preference for theory, nor due to fixity upon conceptualizations that divide. Rather it is a kind of reading, reading with Tradition, and thus it is open to the issues of doctrine, with their genesis in the texts. I, a theologian, read religious thinkers, Christian and Hindu, who are constructing in good faith what they hope to be effective renderings of the most important and transformative religious insights, utterances, practices and experiences of their traditions. By attending to theological writings and not to foundational scriptures, I highlight most acutely what happens when we study religious intellectuals like ourselves, who stand at some distance from scriptural sources, while yet making choices about how to use and extend scripture and inscribe its potent meanings in their own reflection on the cumulative body of pertinent texts.[9]

### *Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning as Implying Religious Participation*

Comparative theology, like scriptural reasoning, is best noted and noticed in the doing. It is important to note scriptural reasoning's emphasis on practice, a sensibility that meshes well with comparative theology. The work of careful reading and study requires one also to think about where practice leads, the possibility and need to move from study to worship, theology and study opening into encounter with God. David Ford remarks on how this move is connatural to the Anglican tradition:

> A culminating note concerns the worship-centred character of Anglicanism, enacting its core commitment to God and God's purposes. It is tempting to instrumentalize inter-faith relations in order to achieve worthy goals of peace, justice and the flourishing of communities and individuals in various ways. Such practical results are to be desired and welcomed, but not if they displace the primary focus: God. Part of maintaining the holiness of the practice of reading our sacred scriptures together is that, whatever the practical implications, it is primarily done for the sake of God. There are different ways in which the three traditions (and their many sub-traditions) conceive this, but each affirms the priority of God. For most Jews, Christians and Muslims, joint worship is not acceptable; might it be that

9. The preceding paragraphs are adapted from my *Beyond Compare*, ch. 2.

> joint study of our scriptures is as near as we can come to worship while being true to deeply differing faiths?

It is common enough to notice that the interconnections and 'flow' among reading, attention to words, Word, liturgy of the Word – also as at the edge of another, deep participation, in the Eucharist. This would seem to be quite in line with Anglican scriptural reasoning, but I am curious whether it is also a boundary that cannot be crossed – as it seems to be for some worried Roman Catholics. If one cannot pray together with the people with whom one studies or even to some extent participate in the worship of their tradition, we may end up backing away from the implications of what we read, and in the end leave off the reading itself. Reading is a complex process with uncertain borders; its practical implications for ritual participation and worship cannot, by contrast, be entirely neat and clear.

### *Comparative Theology as an Introspective Discipline*

Comparative theology offers primarily an interior dialogue, in my case constituted by my reading of Catholic and Hindu texts together with both intellectual and spiritual care. In a sense, the sociality of my project is minimal. I have been primarily reading books, and I have not been reading them directly with members of the Hindu traditions involved, although early on I did read with teachers, and still, when possible, share written work specifically with readers in the traditions involved. But I have always been learning from Hindu commentarial traditions. The authors I read write as members of long traditions; they can teach because they have listened to numerous older voices; in reading their works as works of tradition, we begin to engage, respectfully, the communities so deeply interwoven with such classics, and we begin to become (at first unexpected) members of both communities, even as long-term guests.

If comparative theology can be a rather introspective and individualized endeavor, by contrast, scriptural reasoning is evidently extroverted and essentially conversational. We may also then consider the personal commitments and friendships of the person engaged in interreligious study. Ford's overview of the Anglican reception of scriptural reasoning reminds us that all good intellectual work is specific; scriptural reasoning in its Jewish-Anglican instantiation is no exception:

> In the story of the Christian Ecumenical Movement and of many other past and present efforts at reconciliation it is striking how often healing is accompanied by daring friendships across deep divisions.

> Jesus was known for calling his disciples 'friends', and also for his own risky friendships across the social, economic and religious divisions of his society. Scriptural Reasoning has already shown a capacity to enable mutual hospitality among the Abrahamic traditions, and increasingly other traditions too. The potential of this hospitality around texts to enable surprising friendships may well prove to be the most important sign of peace, love and hope that it can give to our world.[10]

Ahmed notes how scriptural reasoning works best when all the participants give their time and energy to the process for the sake of the process, rather than for any ulterior motive. In the absence of such fellowship, interesting inroads can still be made with regard to new interpretations of the texts and understanding the other. But the promise of scriptural reasoning that lies in bringing together Anglicans and Muslims in shared fellowship is so great that the academic gains seem almost marginal. It is essentially a matter of conversation:

> This fellowship cannot be captured in written form, it must be experienced; requiring time, energy, and openness from all participants. My experience studying alongside Anglicans has been that the process, once started, generates its own energy, pushing us all into deeper interrogations of our traditional texts, and into closer fellowship through our shared study. It is a process that I dearly hope is replicated for the sake of academic inquiry and for human healing.[11]

That scriptural reasoning has a deeply affective side is already clear from the accounts of scriptural reasoning in practice, and the shared insights that arise. And this is made all the more clear when we notice the special place of Daniel Hardy in all this. Ford is clearly deeply indebted to Hardy's vision, infused with the warmth of his personality, while Peter Ochs movingly shows the importance of Hardy to this particular configuration of scriptural reasoning with respect to Anglicans, expressing over and again his indebtedness to his colleague. Here we find an inextricable link between practice and personal relationships. While the comparative theologian too will thrive when there are such personal friendships and instances of collegiality, the work of comparative theology is more similar to older and still more typical forms of theology such as depend primarily on solitary reading and writing. But more can be said, as in the next paragraphs.

10. Ford, 'Scriptural Reasoning', this issue, pp. 147–65.

11. Ahmed, 'Scriptural Reasoning and the Anglican–Muslim Encounter', this issue, pp. 166–78.

## Comparative Theology and Tradition-specific Identity

Its reverence for tradition notwithstanding, in my judgment some of the best comparative theological work is on the edge, so to speak, written just on the fault line where two texts, of two traditions, come to share a proximity that is difficult to decipher, insofar as neither text is to be allowed to dominate the other, neither tradition's mode of reading given absolute priority, and no higher academic perspective permitted to decide what counts in the reading. As the reading deepens, the tension grows, especially when members of the other tradition reinterpret and re-read for us the scriptures of our own tradition – and when a growing understanding of and affinity for the 'other' text changes our own relationship to a more familiar text of our own tradition, and thus begins to create a new community among those willing to engage in this reading. Here, for example, is how I describe my project in the introduction to my most recent book:[12]

> *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* is first of all a reading of the Biblical *Song of Songs (Shir ha-Shirim)* and the Hindu *Holy Word of Mouth (Tiruvaymoli)*. All that follows is entirely in the debt of this Biblical and Hindu poetry, and proceeds as reflection more particularly on the experience of a woman whose beloved has not returned and seems nowhere to be found. It is this experience of love and absence that in more than one culture has been taken to manifest what loving God is all about. It is a drama of love and loss that has been written about abundantly, over and again. In this reading I therefore attend especially to the absence of the beloved as this has been imagined, suffered, and turned back into presence in several strands of Hindu and Christian tradition. I do so in order to write about the real God who can be absent, a real beloved whose real absence makes life impossible.

I point out that *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* follows upon, intensifies, earlier work:

> In light of my previous work,[13] the current book can be said to go a step farther in focusing on the holy uncertainty afflicting those who love God

12. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming, 2013).

13. I have in mind the strand of my work that has sought a deeper and more intimate engagement among traditions. In its conviction that depth and particularity are the means to greater openness and that love can be a matter of improbable, ill-advised excesses, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is the last act in a project begun implicitly in my *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996). There I first explored the lyric and dramatic dimensions of divine-human love,

> most intensely. In pondering a God of the absences, my writing is not an innocent bystander, since the double reading essential to comparative study most often accentuates a sense that the beloved is present but never known adequately or in some definitive way. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* thus pushes to a still greater extreme the necessary risk of interreligious reading that lies at the heart of the practice of comparative theology. It is dangerous work, love's burden, for we are now implicated in the dilemma arising when one finds that the texts studied – such as these songs of her loss in love – deepen the reader's own loss in love, not by less concreteness and intensity, but by more than we can handle. It is abundance that the beloved leaves us. Yet when his absence is acutely, painfully noticed, the prospects for his return become all the more favorable.[14]

All of this, I suggest, manifests a particular and personal Catholic starting point for engagement in comparative theological work. This comparative theology – my version, not all comparative theology – is not primarily about mending injustices, nor about converting Hindus, nor about detecting deep and shared mystical roots. Such may occur, but are not the primary intent. But as an intellectual inquiry, it necessarily also affects the person, entangles one in the other tradition, and raises issues of practice, but also of the doctrines that arise from, and in defense of, close reading. This 'entanglement' can perhaps be recognized as comparative theology's engagement in social networks and new friendships.

*(F'note continued)*

sought and suffered. In terms of the intensity of focus and care for the poetic, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) manifests the same energy, clearing the way for Christian readers to take seriously and learn from Hindu goddess traditions, even when there is no place for goddesses in Christian theology. The immediate predecessor of *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is *Beyond Compare*, wherein I explored the narratives of loving surrender proposed and cultivated by two prominent medieval theologians, the Srivaishnava Hindu Vedanta Deshika (fourteenth century) and the Catholic Christian Francis de Sales (seventeenth century). There I once more argued that engaging multiple traditions of loving surrender increases rather than attenuates the uncompromising devotion deep rooted within a particular tradition.

14. At the end of the introduction to *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, I deliberately divert further discussion of comparative theology in the abstract: 'I will say no more about comparative theology in this book, not just because I have recently explained the discipline at length [in *Comparative Theology*], but more importantly because comparative theology is best learned not in what is said about it, but in what it does. All that follows is an act of comparative theology, even if the term itself need not appear again in these pages.'

But if not dialogue, what prompts the comparative theologian to do the specific work that she or he does? Here I need to be more specific about the distinctiveness and genealogy of my own comparative theological practice – the givenness of the comparative theology of myself as a particular practitioner. First, I am of a generation of American Catholics that matured in the decade after Vatican Council II. This was a time of great change – turmoil to some – but to most of us it was an era infused with optimism about more positive relations among religions. *Nostra Aetate*, the conciliar document on world religions, signaled a positive and open attitude that made it seem quite easy, in the 1970s, to be Catholic and to be open to religions at the same time:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ 'the way, the truth, and the life' (*John* 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.[15]

The document, and the Council as a whole, did combine to produce the more open context in which I could pursue my studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and thus set out on the course I still follow. The Council's new openness gave grounds for my hope that the study of Hinduism could be an act of religious learning leading to fruitful interreligious understanding and to deeper knowledge of God. I was not instructed by superiors to undertake this study, nor was the primary instigation friendships, or relationships to be repaired, with Hindus, nor would I venture to say this is the 'most urgent' of dialogues.

15. I have always taken this passage to be representative of the great tradition of Christian learning to which the Catholic Church belongs. Faith and reason are in harmony; the true, the good, and the beautiful converge; no question is to be stifled, no truth feared; to know is ultimately to know God. *Nostra Aetate* does not explicitly say all this. In any case, the Church has not always lived up to its high ideal and at times it has attempted to limit inquiry and channel the truth toward predetermined answers that make the intervening and arduous research appear superfluous. The hesitations and worries of recent decades have made the work of learning interreligiously appear less welcome in the Catholic Church. But *Nostra Aetate* nonetheless represents our best instincts. On the climate for interreligious study in the post-Vatican II Church, see my Australia lecture, 'Artful Imagining: A Personal Insight into the Study of Religions after Vatican', *Australian eJournal of Theology* 19.2 (August 2012), pp. 97–111.

Second, my own commitment to the study of Hinduism as the substance of my comparative theology is best explained in light of a personal history in which I simply found the study of Hinduism very attractive and worthy of my close attention.[16] I was disposed toward this compound name, 'comparative' plus 'theology' in part because I did not come to theology through the study of Hinduism, and did not learn Hinduism in a theological program. I learned the Christian philosophical and theological traditions, and then I learned Hinduism; I did not turn to one from the other, as if disappointed or in need of something more. Neither body of learning replaced the other, and I have chosen not to try to integrate them fully. Given my background and expertise, I was both a theologian and a scholar of Hinduism, and firmly believed that these distinctive areas of expertise were to be mutually enriching. To commit myself to theology and a double learning, I began describing my work as 'comparative theology'.

All of this differs, I think, from the prospect, promise and urgency of a scriptural reasoning community that forms around the hope of mutual understanding and spiritual exchange, particularly as alternative to hostility or cold distance. However intimate scriptural reasoning becomes, it seems rightly to have begun with a sober assessment of the situation in which Jews, Christians and Muslims live. Here one might sketch an alternate history of the post-Vatican II era, when the new ecumenical and interreligious openness was matched, sometimes overwhelmed, by geo-political forces, particularly in the Mideast, that seemed to pit Jew and Christian and Muslim against one another yet again. This new danger clearly calls for some alternate way of engagement that would work toward mutual respect and peace. By contrast, even if comparative theology too grows up mindful of a pluralistic world, the intellectual and spiritual instinct driving it is a desire to know, fueled by a confidence that God is encountered in the knowing.

## *Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning as Theological Disciplines*

It seems evident that what is learned in either comparative theology or scriptural reasoning needs to be honored as rich in theological

16. Why I have studied Hinduism all these years has something to do with my personal history and a genuine curiosity – intellectual, but also spiritual – to learn from Hinduism. I have been thinking about this body of religious traditions for a long time, beginning in 1973 when, just out of college, I went to Kathmandu, Nepal, to teach secondary school boys, all Hindu and Buddhist. There I began to study Hinduism and to learn deeply from some of its many traditions.

potential. Comparative theology and scriptural reasoning share in a common struggle against skeptics who prefer a more old-fashioned, systematic and doctrinal theology that, despite its strengths, leaves no room for what is genuinely new, from outside the predictable boundaries of theology and its sources. But once we take reading – reading alone, reading together – seriously, then theology need not be considered a more difficult realm that highlights and sharpens differences. Theology and doctrine, if not forgetful of their scriptural indebtedness, can offer a useful third space between the experiential and scriptural, between the personal and private, and the magisterial. As Catholics we are thus also inclined to respect theology as a response to the text, and not just commentary. It is important that this comparative theologian argue that she is a theologian even in the course of doing the comparative work, and just as much (in this instance) a Catholic theologian. The problem is with doctrine as static and theology-about as blocking learning, whereas doctrine, as text and as marking a process of theologization, opens creative spaces that likewise can go deep. In turn, by study of the text theology is prevented from sinking into extrinsic doctrinalizing, in this way resisting the problematic drift to generalizations about religions that either remain sterile or do harm, or help only the home community in its self-assurance.

Scriptural reasoning privileges the study of scripture because it is more fruitful and less divisive than attention to doctrine, but it does not eschew attention to doctrine. The traditions are able to change one another, as Ahmed writes, without either depending on or subverting doctrine:

> The authority of such new readings in the lived community is something of a side issue. What is most significant about the interaction is the way in which scriptural reasoning between Anglicans and Muslims allows each to move about within the other's tradition. Justification through faith alone is anathema to popular Muslim conceptions of the Qur'an. Yet, when Anglicans and Muslims are willing to read the text together through one another's lenses, a new reading emerges that allows the other to enter into internal religious conversations without leaving convictions at the door. This fosters a dialogue that forgoes any pretension to consensus. The dialogue itself, however, creates a fellowship that breeds understanding and respect.[17]

17. Ahmed, 'Scriptural Reasoning and the Anglican–Muslim Encounter', this issue, pp. 166–78.

Anglicans therefore also have something to learn from scriptural reasoning with Muslims, as Ahmed goes on to say:

> Just as Anglican questions shed light on the Islamic tradition and invite new modes of thinking, so do Muslim questions expose new ways of thinking about traditional Anglican doctrines and texts. While these new insights and avenues are a great boon that results from scriptural reasoning between Anglicans and Muslims, to my mind the greatest gift is the atmosphere of fellowship that develops from shared time discussing texts through genuine difference. Ultimately, it is a transformative experience to understand difference through texts, and one that creates an atmosphere of trust and respect. So long as each participant is agreed that the goal of the study is to understand, not necessarily to agree, such transformation is within reach.[18]

As for comparative theology: the reason this discipline is called comparative *theology* is to mark the manner of study involved; as mentioned earlier, I insist on describing it as an act of 'faith seeking understanding', and thus rather different from the study of religion and comparative religion more broadly conceived. I also had occasion recently[19] to argue that if comparative theology is to have relevance for Catholic theology, it is best carried out by theologians, doing comparisons with theological sensitivity and for the sake of their home tradition, their insights able to be related back to the doctrines and practices of the home tradition.[20]

It is a short step from comparative theology to the practice of commentary, which I take to be an admission of the value of rootedness in tradition and traditions. This is also the case for scriptural reasoning too, and this is clearly the case when one looks to its roots in Jewish interpretive tradition. Ochs' essay makes this clear, while Quash speaks to commentary's importance, and its complementary role. It need not be seen as a supplement or correction of scripture:

> Not if commentary – perhaps also doctrine – is understood as our participation in the process by which 'Scripture completes imperfection'. In some sense, therefore, Scripture requires commentary *as a mode of its fullness*, not because it has some emptiness that needs compensating for. The exciting possibility of Scriptural Reasoning is that it is itself generating

18. Ahmed, 'Scriptural Reasoning and the Anglican–Muslim Encounter', this issue, pp. 166–78.

19. At the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Chicago, 19 November 2012, a session of the Roman Catholic Studies Group: 'Is Comparative Theology Catholic?'

20. On the problem of the nature of the truth discovered in comparative theology – neither the same as nor unrecognizably different from what is learned by other forms of theology – see Chapter 7 of *Comparative Theology*.

> new bodies of commentary – bodies of commentary that are the product of the collective labour, thought and love of Christians, Jews and Muslims working on these texts together.[21]

In his deeply dialogical essay, Ochs highlights the need that traditions have for one another. He cites Ford's insistence that traditions need the other traditions in order to understand themselves, given how intertwined they have become in scriptural reasoning; engagement is essential even for self-understanding. Here too there is a sequence that makes sense in Catholic tradition: reading theology; reading with tradition, and seeing doctrine as theological development; hence, it is always reading texts with commentaries, where the classical traditions can be observed. Neither scriptural reasoning nor comparative theology commit entirely to the possibility or value of *sola scriptura*.

### *The Kinship of Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning*

Comparative theology relates obliquely to scriptural reasoning and its Anglican reception. It is a rather different discipline serving a different purpose within a different community, but without any dramatic break or shift that would compel us to conclude that comparative theology and scriptural reasoning are radically different disciplines. Even if comparative theology is prone to study doctrines and learn from them across traditions' boundaries, it does not aim at a doctrinal conclusion that would lose scriptural reasoning's more supple conversational style. Even if scriptural reasoning is essentially conversational and communitarian, the more solitary path of comparative theology is also, in a similarly essential manner, also dialogical. If scriptural reasoning is motivated in part by a desire for distance from divisive doctrinal disputes, while comparative theology can function quite well as a comparative study of doctrines, it is still the case that the conclusions drawn in comparative theology do not lend themselves to apologetic use and stand at a distance from the dilemmas inherent to the heavily doctrinalized theology of religions debates.

My hope is that these reflections on a Roman Catholic approach to comparative theological study, offered in light of the preceding essays, may shed some light on how scriptural reasoning, even in its general form, is similar to other sustained efforts at interreligious learning, and yet has distinctive characteristics that make it akin to but also interestingly different from the close reading that is comparative theology.

21. Ben Quash, 'Abrahamic Scriptural Reading from an Anglican Perspective', this issue, pp. 199–216 (my italics).