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## *Engaging Radical Alterity*

THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM, INTERRELIGIOUS  
 DIALOGUE, AND ENCOUNTERING "REALITY"

*Louis Komjathy*

WE LIVE IN an existential moment characterized by globalization, multiculturalism, multiethnicity, and religious pluralism. There are, in turn, theological opportunities for individuals willing to engage the radical challenges of religious difference. On the one hand, we may recognize that different religious adherents have different views concerning the sacred; such engagement may lead to mutual understanding and mutual respect. On the other hand, we may engage in actual philosophical inquiry and theological reflection. In terms of Comparative Theology and interreligious dialogue, religious pluralism represents an opportunity to consider the nature of reality and perhaps to connect to something larger than oneself.

I am not a theologian, at least not in the conventional sense of the term. I have no formal training in the academic (Christian) discipline of Theology.<sup>1</sup> Rather, my training is in Daoist Studies and Religious Studies. At the same time, I would define myself as a scholar-practitioner

1. In the present chapter, I use "Theology" with an uppercase "T" to refer to the academic discipline, which, historically speaking, is a Christian adherent and normative enterprise. I use "theology" with a lowercase "t" as a comparative category to refer to discourse on the sacred, with the conception of the sacred varying depending on the given individual, community, and/or tradition. The same is true with respect to "Comparative Theology" and "comparative theology," which refer to the subfield and a comparative approach, respectively.

of Daoism with “theological interests.” Various colleagues have also characterized me as a “Daoist theologian,” both as a compliment and an accusation. The latter includes the charge of “heresy” in terms of the social constructivist and secular materialist assumptions and approaches that dominate Religious Studies,<sup>2</sup> especially with respect to power and authority. Finally, my institutional affiliation is significant here: I teach and work in a department of Theology and Religious Studies at an independent Catholic university. Like many other Catholic universities, and in keeping with a post-Vatican II ethos, ecumenism, inclusivity, and respect for diversity are, at least ideally speaking, cornerstones. There is also interest in both the overlap between these two disciplines, which have a complex historical relationship,<sup>3</sup> as well as actual Comparative Theology. While there is debate about the meaning of the “and” in the name of our department (i.e., Theology and Religious Studies), I would suggest that a postcolonial and postmodern approach might include each in the other. For me, the “and” suggests potential collaboration and cross-pollination; it represents promise, rather than threat. In some sense, then, we may say that there is a “theology of the discipline” at work in both areas of inquiry.

In this chapter, I provide some reflections on the emerging subfield of Comparative Theology, with particular attention to Daoism, my primary area of study. I then move on to explore the possibility of a quasi-normative polytheistic or pluralistic theology. This is followed by a discussion of classrooms as dialogic spaces and potential contexts for interreligious dialogue. I conclude with some reflections on the transformative dimensions of education, specifically with respect to the academic study of religion that incorporates Comparative Theology.

2. Cf. Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

3. See, e.g., Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986); and Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Interestingly, *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, including both the first (1987) and second (2005) editions, contains a lengthy essay on “Theology: Christian Theology,” but lacks a parallel one on “Religious Studies.” There are, of course, different ways to understand such an obvious lacuna, including that the publication itself represents Religious Studies as well as the politics of authorial selection. In any case, as disciplines, Theology is conventionally understood as “of” or “from” religion, while Religious Studies is conventionally understood as “about” religion. That is, the former is a type of insider/adherent discourse, while the latter aspires to follow an outsider/noncommitted approach. I am interested in what might be referred to as the “nonreductionistic study of religion.”

### *Some Reflections on Comparative Theology*

Historically speaking, Theology is a Christian undertaking, largely from an adherent, normative, and often constructive perspective.<sup>4</sup> That is, it *presupposes* that the Abrahamic god is real, or at least that the line of Christian theological reflection on “God” is relevant, tenable, and worthwhile. The Christocentric nature of the discipline remains the case in the emerging subfield of Comparative Theology, which is dominated by Christian theologians engaging other traditions, often from an assumed Christian theological perspective and as a means to deepen their own theological understanding. However, from my perspective, one of the postcolonial and postmodern promises of Comparative Theology, and Theology or Spirituality as academic disciplines for that matter, involves making space for “non-Christian” theological views and approaches.

If theology is first and foremost an attempt to understand and develop a deeper connection with the sacred, then we must be willing to question, modify, and perhaps even abandon our own theological assumptions, influences, and traditions. Perhaps Christian Theology prevents us from knowing God. Theology in the fullest sense of the word is about “the sacred” or that which is “ultimately real.” Thus, open inquiry and deep reflection are required, including engagement with the contemplative and mystical dimensions of religious traditions. It may be that an authentic Comparative Theology requires “contemplative theology” and “mystical theology,” that is, theological views informed by contemplative practice and mystical experience, respectively. Along these lines, we must recognize that reason and intellect, often elevated to the status of our “highest faculty,” are only one aspect or expression of consciousness. There are other ways of knowing, being, and experiencing.<sup>5</sup> For example, can we imagine an embodied and kinesthetic way of theologizing?

4. This is so much the case that many individuals would reject the use of “theology” (lit., “discourse on *theos*”) to discuss “non-Christian,” and especially “nontheistic,” traditions (author’s field observations). However, there are various attempts to develop “Jewish theology,” especially post-Holocaust theology. See, e.g., Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); and Steven Katz, ed., *The Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish Theology* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). There is also the important book *Buddhist Theology*, ed. Roger Jackson and John Makransky (New York: Routledge, 1999).

5. See, e.g., Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Comparative Theology is a recent and emerging subfield. It largely emerged out of a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theological ethos, with its commitment to ecumenism, inclusivity, and interreligious dialogue.<sup>6</sup> The field is further defined in a seminal contribution of David Tracy (b. 1939), a Roman Catholic theologian and Professor Emeritus of Catholic Studies at the University of Chicago.<sup>7</sup>

Usually, however, *comparative theology* refers to a more strictly theological enterprise (sometimes named “world theology” or “global theology”), which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds. Thus one may find Christian (or Buddhist or Hindu, etc.) comparative theologies in which the theologian’s own tradition is critically and theologically related to other traditions. More rarely, comparative theology may be theological study of two or more religious traditions without a particular theological commitment to any one tradition. In either theological model, the fact of religious pluralism is explicitly addressed, so that every theology in every tradition becomes, in effect, comparative theology.<sup>8</sup>

In slight contrast, Francis X. Clooney (b. 1950), a Jesuit Catholic priest and theologian specializing in Hinduism, Parkman Professor of Divinity

6. See, e.g., Byron Sherwin and Harold Kasimow, eds., *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church and a pivotal event in Christian history. For present purposes, it resulted in the foundational Roman Catholic document *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”), subtitled “Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions,” which outlines an emerging Roman Catholic ecumenism and approach to interreligious dialogue.

7. Tracy’s article was published in the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987) and edited by the major historian of religions Mircea Eliade, who will be discussed momentarily. It is noteworthy that both Eliade and Tracy were central figures in the University of Chicago’s Divinity School. Along similar lines, both Ninian Smart (1927–2001) and Raimundo (“Raimon”) Pannikar (1918–2010) worked in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. That is, there is a model of Theology including Religious Studies and Religious Studies including Theology. Rather than being understood as antithetical or antagonistic, we may view them as collaborative and mutually enriching.

8. David Tracy, “Comparative Theology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), vol. 13, 9125–34; italics in original. This definition begs the question of who qualifies as a “theologian,” specifically if some type of formal training and hermeneutical tradition is required or assumed. Simply stated, is a theologian anyone who reflects deeply and develops critical views on the sacred?

and Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University and formative representative of Comparative Theology,<sup>9</sup> suggests that such theological inquiry requires commitment to and a root in a particular religious tradition,<sup>10</sup> although multiple religious identities may also be possible.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, commenting on the next cohort of comparative theologians, Clooney explains:

A generation from now, their work will have pushed us significantly farther along the path, and then we will need a still further reconsideration of comparative theology and its prospects. By then, the very particular and narrow focus of my own work will be all the more evident, its disadvantages and (I hope) merits all the more clear.<sup>12</sup>

This is where the present chapter begins. While I see potential models in early studies, and while I have deep respect for Clooney and other pioneers, I take issue with the Christocentric assumptions and theistic normativity of much of Comparative Theology. In my own life and work, the Daoist tradition is primary, and Daoist theology represents radical alterity and subversiveness with respect to conventional Theology.<sup>13</sup> For an authentic Comparative Theology to be possible, we must allow “others” to speak for themselves and on their own terms. We must resist the nearly ubiquitous

9. Different theologians would construct the field in different ways, including by drawing distinctions with “theology of religions” and “interreligious dialogue.” From a more inclusive and broader perspective, in addition to Tracy and Clooney, some key figures include John Hick (1922–2012; United Reform Church, then Quaker), Paul Knitter (b. ca. 1942; Catholic), Robert Cummings Neville (b. 1939; Methodist), Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010; Catholic), and Keith Ward (b. 1938; Anglican).

10. Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

11. *Ibid.*, 146–51.

12. *Ibid.*, 52. See also Francis X. Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2010).

13. As far as I am aware, the first publication to define and discuss “Daoist theology” (from a comparative Religious Studies perspective) is Louis Komjathy, *The Daoist Tradition: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 101–22. An earlier attempt, written under the guidance of Robert Cummings Neville at Boston University, is James Miller, “The Economy of Cosmic Power: A Theory of Religious Transaction and a Comparative Study of Shangqing” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2000). See also Bede Bidlack, “In Good Company: The Body and Divinization in Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, SJ and Daoist Xiao Yingsou” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2011).

tendency of intellectual colonialism and domestication,<sup>14</sup> especially in the form of assumed, albeit ecumenical monotheism. Authentic dialogue often results in cognitive dissonance and irreconcilable ambiguity.

In my way of thinking, Comparative Theology is a theological undertaking, meaning that it considers what is ultimately real ("sacrality"). This may or may not relate to metaphysics. As a beginning point, we must identify the tradition-specific technical term(s) designating the sacred as well as the associated defining characteristics. In the case of Daoism, the Dao (Tao) is the sacred. It is first and foremost a Chinese character (道), and a Daoist cosmological and theological concept by extension. For Daoists, the Dao has four primary characteristics: (1) Source of everything (*yuan*); (2) Unnamable mystery (*xuan*); (3) All-pervading sacred presence (*qi*); and (4) Universe as transformative process (Nature) (*hua*). Reality is energetic in nature and process-based, being characterized by constant change. Generally speaking, Daoists do not believe in intentionality, agency, or inherent and transcendent meaning in the cosmos. That is, in contrast to many monotheists, Daoists believe in neither a creator god nor "creation" as such. Thus, the primary Daoist theology is apophatic (negational), monistic (one impersonal reality), panentheistic (immanent and transcendent sacred), and panenhenic (Nature as sacred); the secondary Daoist theology is animistic (gods/spirits in nature) and polytheistic (multiple gods in multiple sacred realms).<sup>15</sup> Generally speaking, Daoists believe that the world itself, including sentient beings, is a manifestation of the Dao. The universe is the Dao on some level. This world-affirming and body-affirming view extends to human beings, whose innate nature is the Dao. In terms of Comparative Theology, one radical challenge of Daoist theology, which is beyond the present chapter to explore, centers on the Daoist claim that the highest and purest gods do not eat meat, consume blood, or drink alcohol. We might refer to this as a Daoist "theology of blood," and in turn wonder about the centrality of blood and

14. See, e.g., King, *Orientalism and Religion*; Harold Roth, "Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies," *Religion East & West* 8 (October 2008): 1-26; and Louis Komjathy, ed., *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

15. I recognize that I am using these "types of theology" in my own idiosyncratic ways. For studies that complexify my characterizations with respect to "animism" and "panentheism," see Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Lorilai Biernacki and Philip Clayton, eds., *Panentheism across the World's Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

sacrifice in many other religious traditions and practices. This includes the widespread prevalence of blood sacrifices in the form of human and animal slaughter, which may have a theological foundation and function. There are consequences, both psychological and social, of theological commitments.

### *Toward a Quasi-Normative Polytheistic Theory of Religion*

If religious traditions provide insights into the human condition, especially in terms of subjective experience as well as meaning and purpose, this is even more the case with respect to "reality." If taken seriously, the radical alterity and pluralism of these accounts contain challenges to various assumptions and views. In technical language, this aspect of religious traditions relates to soteriology and theology, to claims about the ultimate purpose of human existence and about ultimate reality. It also may relate to "metaphysical" concerns, although degrees of immanence and transcendence come to the fore. Such considerations relate to Comparative Theology and interreligious dialogue, or at least to serious engagement with multiculturalism and religious pluralism.

We may begin by developing a methodology for engaging theological diversity. Even if one is an atheist or secular materialist, there can be little debate that concern for the "sacred" is a defining characteristic and central concern of religious adherents and communities. So, to fully understand religion, we must consider the informing worldview, especially with respect to that which is defined as "divine" or "ultimately real." Here Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), an American anthropologist and advocate of "symbolic anthropology," is helpful.

A religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>16</sup>

16. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 4. See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

According to Geertz, different religious traditions, which are basically cultural systems, involve different worldviews, that is, different accounts of "reality." These not only create a sense of meaning but also establish psychological states characterized by belief and conviction. Through enculturation, religious adherents, and members of any given culture, come to believe in a certain world and universe. That is, Geertz's account is both anthropological and psychological.

Such views also recall William James (1842–1910), an American philosopher and psychologist, who understands religion as rooted in "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."<sup>17</sup> Although one might read James's description as quasi-theological ("whatever they may consider the divine"), it is more accurately psychological. While interested in various subjective experiences of the "sacred," James is quite careful to "bracket," in the language of a phenomenological approach to interpreting religion through *epoché*, truth-claims.<sup>18</sup> From James's psychological perspective, it is enough that religious adherents believe that what they believe is true, and they should be studied as such. We need not concern ourselves with whether or not their accounts are actually true.

Along similar lines, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), a Romanian historian of religions and key figure in the establishment of Religious Studies as such, discusses the relationship between "myth" and "reality."<sup>19</sup> Religions include myths, and these myths are accounts of "reality." They also generate a distinct reality for the individuals who live in the associated mythology. Combining these various views, we may say that, at least on a descriptive, psychological, and perhaps even social level, different religious adherents inhabit different worlds. They have different values and concerns that inform their lives and create certain patterns of activity in

17. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 31.

18. See, e.g., Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973); and James Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

19. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998). See also Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966).

the world. In addition, they actually lead to distinctive restructurings of the world and particular material environments.<sup>20</sup> However, in *The Sacred and the Profane*, Eliade apparently goes farther:

Man [sic] becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. . . . It could be said that the history of religions—from the most primitive to the most highly developed—is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities.<sup>21</sup>

While it is possible to read this interpretation as parallel with the work *Myth and Reality*, I want to press it for the sake of argument. Under a more literal reading, Eliade appears to advocate a normative "polytheistic," or at least theologically pluralistic, definition of religion.<sup>22</sup> Different religious traditions are based on "hierophanies" from different realities, and, by extension, they connect religious adherents to different sacreds. For the moment, it is sufficient to consider that "reality" is plural, not singular, multiple, not unified. Of course, this requires further reflection on the relationship between individuality and collectivity, between unity and diversity. These may not be antithetical.

Various theological positions and responses are, in turn, viable. One of the most common would be a secular materialist one, in which theology is dismissed as "myth without reality." This is, of course, a theological position, although advocates may prefer the label of "a-theological" and emphasize different dimensions of religion. Another common response would involve a normative monistic position, especially in the form of Perennial Philosophy, or an assumed monotheistic position, as in the case of much Comparative Theology. This position might claim that each account is simply a different interpretation of the same

20. See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: Verso, 1991); and Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

21. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1987), 11.

22. See also Jordan Paper, *The Deities Are Many: A Polytheistic Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

reality ("Reality"). However, for this view to be viable it would have to take the complexity and variety of religious views seriously, which demonstrate that such an *interpretation* of religious diversity is unsupported by evidence. Normative monists or monotheists might, in turn, have two additional responses: (1) domesticate or dismiss the radical differences; or (2) accept religious difference, but maintain their own theological position. Only the latter is viable, but it would be further challenged by other theological positions, and arguably from actual religious experiences.

From my perspective, the comparative study of religion reveals mutually exclusive, equally convincing accounts of reality. If one understands the informing worldviews, the symbol systems and myths, and if one learns to think through adherence, one finds that different adherents and communities live in different realities, even if this is only cognitively the case. Given the radical diversity and plurality of theological claims, one might, in turn, suggest that there are different manifestations of a singular reality. One finds such views in certain forms of Hinduism, such as in the claim that the various goddesses are expressions of the Goddess, or more technically that gods are simply expressions of Brahman in theistic forms.

Alternatively, one might adopt a normative polytheistic or pluralist theological view: Religious accounts are not simply different on a descriptive level, but they are actually about *different realities*.<sup>23</sup> From this interpretive perspective, certain religious practices may lead to experiences of alternate realities, and such experiences have specific theological import and soteriological consequences.<sup>24</sup> While ultimately unknowing, such a theological approach is, perhaps, the most efficacious for engaging and understanding (and hopefully respecting) religious difference.

23. An equally viable theological interpretation of religious pluralism might suggest that the sacred is, nonetheless, singular and unified. Developing a Neoplatonic account, the One may manifest in multiple, distinct divine emanations. That is, there are multiple sacreds that derive from a singular, ultimate source. One finds this view in certain Roman Catholic interpretations of the Trinity. Alternatively, the sacred may manifest in different ways to different individuals and communities. One finds this view in certain Christian claims with respect to the "cosmic Christ." What is noteworthy about such comparative theologies is that they are actually "theologies of difference." In contrast, Perennialists, with their assumed normative monistic theology, claim that religions are simply different *interpretations* of the same reality.

24. See Komjathy, *Contemplative Literature*.

### *Classrooms as Dialogic Space and Interreligious Encounter*

The above insights apply equally to both Theology and Religious Studies classrooms. As an essential dimension of religious traditions, the sacred may be considered from a comparative perspective. This may or may not involve actual theological commitments on the part of teachers and students. For those who choose to embrace a Comparative Theology methodology, especially a constructive one, such inquiry opens up major opportunities for theological reflection, existential clarification, and often cognitive dissonance. In any case, deep and authentic education is dialogic.

Every classroom is a gathering place, a meeting of students and teachers in order to explore a specific topic and set of concerns. Education is communal and intersubjective. A course succeeds to the degree that both teachers and students are committed to the learning process. Here engagement, commitment, and self-responsibility on the part of students are some core characteristics. These values and the corresponding pedagogical approach, while appreciated by many students, are also challenged by a variety of factors, including divergent expectations of other students. When encountering this resistance, I endeavor to maintain deep faith in students' capacities, in the transformational potential of education, and in the importance of inspiration, modeling, and provocation. Moreover, as stated in my "Class Guidelines": "By choosing to attend this class, you accept the responsibility to be an active participant and engaged learner. You choose to be a member of a learning community. Part of that decision involves making a commitment to reflecting upon and cultivating certain values and practices." That is, "student-centered" and "subject-centered" learning is just that.

A dialogic model for the learning process is well articulated in David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*:

Real conversation occurs only when the participants allow the question, the subject matter, to assume primacy. It occurs only when our usual fears about our own self-image die: whether that fear is expressed in either arrogance or scrupulosity matters little. That fear dies only because we are carried along, and sometimes away, by the subject matter itself into the rare event or happening named "thinking" and "understanding." For understanding *happens*; it

occurs not as the pure result of personal achievement but in the back-and-forth movement of the conversation itself.<sup>25</sup>

This is a subject-centered approach, and it emphasizes the *process* of learning through exploration and dialogue. It may also inspire one to consider the classroom as an interreligious space.

Technically speaking, interreligious dialogue involves religious adherents engaging each other in a formal manner. There are various approaches to interreligious dialogue, with the two most common positions being inclusivism and pluralism.<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking, I do not engage in formal interreligious dialogue in my classes, but I do understand the classroom as a multicultural, multiethnic, and religiously pluralistic space. This includes both actually (there are adherents of different religious traditions) and imaginatively (students are engaging different religious traditions). I emphasize the encounter with "other" through a commitment to mutual respect and mutual understanding. This involves an initial approach centering on "generous reading" and "sympathetic understanding." Again, as expressed in my "Class Guidelines," "Knowledge and understanding are primary; possible criticisms, especially ones based in personal religious belief, unquestioned assumptions, and uninformed opinions, are secondary." Critical reflection and evaluation must be rooted in accurate understanding and sophisticated interpretation. In this way, my courses, and ideally any course on religion, involve "deep listening" and "thinking through."<sup>27</sup>

My courses help students broaden their understanding of the world, deepen their cultural sensitivity and recognition of difference, and reveal a context of complexity and multiplicity. Students are often challenged by my emphasis on diversity of worldviews, but their success in struggling with these issues in the classroom promotes intellectual maturity and social participation appropriate to a society characterized by globalization, multiculturalism, and religious pluralism. In this way, my courses not only contribute to a liberal arts curriculum but also express a commitment

25. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 101; italics in original.

26. See, e.g., Sherwin and Kasimow, *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*.

27. See, e.g., Donald Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); and Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

to diversity, inclusivity, and cross-cultural literacy. Dialogue becomes a framework for understanding religion.

Speaking in more specific terms by way of examples, I teach introductory, lower-division courses in Religious Studies ("World Religions"); tradition-centered upper-division courses on Chinese religions; and comparative upper-division courses on meditation and mysticism. In most of these courses, I endeavor to present the given tradition "on its own terms," in ways that would be recognizable to the associated adherents and communities. I also highlight the radical insights and challenges of different worldviews, practices, experiences, and so forth. In this way, there is an imagined interreligious dialogue occurring. At the same time, I often invite adherents as guest speakers to my classes, and students are usually required to have one direct experience with a religious community outside of their birth-tradition. Occasionally, students in my course on Daoism also ask me to speak as a Daoist adherent, which I reluctantly do when appropriate. This raises major issues in the academic study and teaching of religion, specifically with respect to the "insider-outsider question" and "scholar-practitioners." At the farther reaches of innovative teaching and learning, I employ "contemplative pedagogy,"<sup>28</sup> which includes "critical first-person discourse," in my Contemplative Traditions course.<sup>29</sup> This approach involves the use of "critical subjectivity," in which students explore and discuss their own contemplative practice and contemplative experience. Specifically, students choose one self-selected method to practice throughout the course of the semester. We also occasionally discuss meditation from a lived perspective, including existential, soteriological, and theological questions. Finally, students are required to have one community-based experience with the associated tradition.

Although there is much misunderstanding about the emerging interdisciplinary field of Contemplative Studies, including politicized readings

28. See, e.g., Thomas Coburn, Fran Grace, Anne Klein, Louis Komjathy, Harold Roth, and Judith Simmer-Brown, "Contemplative Pedagogy: Frequently Asked Questions," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no. 2 (2011): 167-74; Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

29. See Han de Wit, *Contemplative Psychology* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991); Harold D. Roth, "Contemplative Studies: Prospects for a New Field," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 9 (2006): 1787-1815; Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman, eds., *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); and Komjathy, *Contemplative Literature*.

by secular materialist and social constructivist scholars, most of the prominent “contemplative educators” have engaged in deep and critical meta-reflection. Many also recognize the field as not only innovative and promising but also subversive and problematic. It brings various issues in higher education to the fore, specifically adherence, experience, identity, practice, subjectivity, and so forth. Thus, contemplative pedagogy, especially when used to engage religious pluralism, opens up a host of issues related to the appropriate use of subjective discourse in an academic context. As expressed in my “Contemplative Traditions” syllabus:

Personal Experience and Interpretive Authority: This course includes practical, experiential and applied dimensions; the course involves the actual practice of meditation/contemplative prayer and occasional conversations based on personal experience with a self-selected practice. In this context, we are using “disciplined” or “critical first-person perspectives.” Such an approach requires reflection on unquestioned assumptions and ingrained opinions. In the context of this course, personal experience cannot be used to justify the appropriation or reconceptualization of other people’s practice and experience (“cognitive imperialism” & “spiritual colonialism”). Such activity involves problematic political and ethical issues, including colonialism and domestication. In this course we seek to gain a nuanced and informed understanding of diverse contemplative practices and the associated religious traditions; sympathetic understanding and intellectual generosity (“thinking through”) are essential. The primary interpretive authorities in the classroom are the primary texts, the corresponding religious communities, professionally trained scholars, and our own communal conversations. We will refrain from or critically investigate all-encompassing claims of interpretive authority based on personal experience, on egotism and assumed self-centeredness. Careful investigation of contemplative practices and corresponding experiences reveals that they lead to mutually exclusive, equally convincing accounts of “reality.” This includes diverse soteriologies and theologies, worldviews that challenge an assumed monistic or monotheistic conception of the sacred (e.g., Perennial Philosophy). Thus this course is not on “formation spirituality,” though your values and commitments may and hopefully will become clarified during our time together.

In this way, contemplative pedagogy includes subjective viewpoints, at times including “adherent questions” and “practice-based concerns.” When utilized in sophisticated ways, critical first-person discourse is self-reflective and disciplined. At the same time, contemplative pedagogy challenges the denial of embodied experience within much of academic discourse, what B. Alan Wallace has referred to as the “taboo of subjectivity,”<sup>30</sup> and brings the issue of religious adherence in the academy into high relief.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, there are ways to imagine and formally develop classrooms as dialogic and interreligious spaces. We may help students approach diversity and difference in a respectful manner, to engage alternative viewpoints, and to consider the “big questions” from multiple perspectives. This includes making space for students’ own critical perspectives, personal histories, and direct experiences. Such, perhaps, is one of the promises of Comparative Theology.

### *Education as Transformative Experience*

A number of publications on critical pedagogy have confirmed an intuition that many committed educators have: In its most profound moments, education is, and perhaps must be, transformative. In the case of the academic study of religion, many students identify their primary interest as exploring their own meaning and purpose, to clarify their own values and existential/spiritual trajectory.<sup>32</sup> I have come to think of this process through a multispectrum interpretive prism, including various analogies and symbols.

Two of the most resonant at the moment are the *kyōsaku* and alchemy. The *kyōsaku* (*keisaku*), or “wake-up stick,” is a ritual implement utilized in the context of Zen Buddhist meditation. It is a flat wooden stick or slat used during periods of meditation to remedy lethargy or lapses of

30. B. Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Ferrer and Sherman, *The Participatory Turn*.

31. See José Cabezón and Sheila Davaney, eds., *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

32. See Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), “The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose” (UCLA HERI Spirituality in Higher Education Research Report, 2005); and Barbara Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).



concentration. This is accomplished through a strike or series of strikes, usually administered on the meditator's back and shoulders in the muscular area between the shoulder blades and the spine. During meditation, a Zen Buddhist walks around "on patrol." If one notices a fellow meditator nodding off, one moves in front of the person, taps her on the shoulders, bows, and then strikes. One then exchanges positions with that person. There are, in turn, many ways to understand such activity.

For present purposes, the *kyōsaku* represents interpersonal identification and awakening, both literal and symbolic; it inspires one to become more attentive and aware. For me, teaching is a *kyōsaku*, a means to initiate awakenings. Thus, provocation, radical insight, and cognitive dissonance are central.

Another pedagogical model centers on alchemy. Here I am specifically thinking of Daoist internal alchemy (*neidan*), a major form of Daoist meditation. Daoist internal alchemy is a stage-based contemplative practice emphasizing complete psychosomatic transformation. It involves transmuting the "base elements" of personhood into their "refined counterparts." For example, psychological agitation becomes spiritual insight. For present purposes, Daoist internal alchemy represents transformation; it inspires one to become more refined. For me, teaching is alchemical, a means to initiate transmutation. However, while there is such an intention behind my teaching, the *kyōsaku* and alchemy also qualify tendencies toward a specific outcome, hegemonic viewpoint, or homogenized approach. It is each student's personal awakening that matters, and I do not know what the qualities of this will be. Each student must also work with his or her own "ingredients" in order to actualize the transformative potential of education.

In terms of the present volume, and specifically the promise of Comparative Theology and interreligious dialogue, the academic study of and engagement with religion involves consideration of radical difference. It involves the encounter with diverse perspectives and alternate realities. By way of conclusion, I would like to reemphasize a "pluralist approach." Technically speaking, pluralism not only recognizes diversity and plurality, but also represents a particular philosophical and theological response. In terms of the above discussion, a pluralist position accepts and perhaps celebrates difference, including the radical challenges of otherness and dissimilarity. While exclusivism perhaps manifests in opposition and violence, in a drive toward subjugation and extermination of the other, and while inclusivism perhaps manifests in collaboration and harmony, but

perhaps through domestication, homogenization, and convergence, pluralism views diversity and actual difference as beneficial. In place of the potential monoculture of exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism accepts a world characterized by wildness, biodiversity, and symbiotic relationships. Concern for peace and violence thus need not require cognitive annihilation or transcendence of difference. It may, rather, require complete acceptance of difference. Authentic interreligious dialogue is one that, following David Tracy's recommendation, allows the conversation to assume primacy and becomes expressed in understanding. It is thus possible to be both committed and open,<sup>33</sup> and to accept that others have a similar degree of commitment, although to perhaps different values. While this may create discomfort, it also provides opportunities for dialogue and reflection.

Beyond exclusivist and insular responses to multiculturalism and religious pluralism, and beyond inclusivist tendencies toward domestication, we may adopt a pluralist approach. Regardless of one's theological commitments, that is, whether religion is simply about myth or about myth *and* reality, we may make space for radical difference and philosophical inquiry. We may consider the insights and challenges that come from careful study of and sustained engagement with religious traditions. We may, perhaps, engage in interreligious dialogue as existential commitment and lived theological exercise. This includes making space for ambiguity and cognitive dissonance, embracing a comparative theological project that endeavors to understand reality from multiple perspectives. Perhaps then we will encounter reality as at once singular and plural, varied and unified. Perhaps then we may recognize difference as our shared humanity.

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33. See Judith Simmer-Brown, "Commitment and Openness: A Contemplative Approach to Pluralism," in *The Heart of Learning*, ed. Steven Glazer (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1999), 97–112.

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PART II

*Designing Encounters*

Teaching Interreligious Encounters