

Article

# Reading Religiously across Religious Borders: A Method for Comparative Study

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**Abstract:** Oliver Freiberger has done us the great service of drawing our attention to how comparativists do their comparative work. Issues of method—the “methodical aspects”—of course matter greatly in the actual doing of comparison, even if the scholar is not interested in theoretical discussions of method per se. One has to know one’s craft, in order to do it well, and to be clear in practice about how to proceed: “How comparison actually works as a method in the study of religion has not been discussed in greater detail so far. With due deliberation we can, as Freiberger suggests, identify and isolate specific methodical problems, effectively confront wholesale criticism, and find opportunities to refine the methodology. His approach also allows committed comparativists to speak in more depth about what we are doing in our research and writing.

**Keywords:** comparative theology; Hindu and Catholic theology; reading religiously; intuition; illuminative comparison; micro-comparison

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## 1. Methodical Writing: How I’ve Done My Comparative Work

In his essay in this journal issue as well as in the preceding planning, the 2015 AAR panel, and all the wider conversations around method and comparative studies, Oliver Freiberger has done us the great service of drawing our attention to how comparativists *do* their comparative work. Issues of method—the “methodical aspects”—matter greatly in the actual doing of comparison, even if the scholar is not interested in theoretical discussions of method per se. One has to know one’s craft, in order to do it well, and to be clear in practice about how to proceed: “How comparison actually works *as a method* in the study of religion has not been discussed in greater detail so far. This raises the question: How seriously should we take the designation “method” when it comes to comparison?” In this direct manner he thus moves us beyond general debates about comparison and the charges against it—“decontextualization, essentialization, undue generalization,” as he puts it—to a consideration of its methodical dimensions; for its value is most visible in practice, and in this way we can, as Freiberger suggests, identify and isolate specific methodical problems, effectively confront wholesale criticism, and find opportunities to refine the methodology. His approach also allows those of us who are committed comparativists to speak in more depth about what we are doing in our research and writing.

The following analysis stays close to the projects I have undertaken over the years, as a comparative theologian whose work is Indological, comparative, and Christian theological. The composite that is my scholarly project brings together Indological study of classical Indian (and Hindu) texts in the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions, read secondarily with Christian theological concerns and commitments, for the sake of writing that will be intelligible to and pertinent for Christian theologians, and thus, third, as comparative study involving Hindu texts read from a Christian theological perspective. I will leave aside for this essay first consideration of my research in Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, and Śrīvaiṣṇavism, I will revisit my work in terms of its comparative method, seeking insights that can plausibly be applied more broadly. I will also speak to the issue of my work as theological, narrowing and specifying what is interesting about this particular comparative discourse.

My work fits loosely into Freiburger's "illuminative category," aiming at "illuminating a particular historical-empirical item, especially assumed blind spots, by drawing comparatively on other cases." While I am not quite anti-theory, I am skeptical about the value of theory that is not richly and deeply supported by knowledge of more than one tradition. My work is then "micro-comparative," zooming in "on very specific items such as certain individuals or groups, certain texts, certain objects, certain practices, etc." But in the following pages I will employ another taxonomy suited to my recollection of the work I have done over the decades. I wish to highlight the fact of my *curriculum vitae*, the flow of my writing life in its intermingling currents and confluences. Every work is unique, but there is continuity in disposition and work habits in the long run. I see three kinds of comparison operative in my work. They share a commitment to close reading and the slow accomplishment of insights "from the page up," as it were but are distinguished by intention.<sup>1</sup>

**Thematic comparison**, the first current, clarifies concepts by looking at them from different angles, during the work of comparison; it improves on them by interreligious learning; disabuses believers of inaccurate claims about uniqueness; in my case, it also engages theologians who do not do comparative work, highlighting the advantages of learning more widely simply by highlighting productive ideas that arise. Thematic comparison uses familiar categories to structure a project. Three of my books can be listed here. First, *Theology after Vedānta* (Clooney 1993) speaks to the prospects for a systematic theology by leading readers into the scholastic theology of Advaita Vedānta; much of the book is given over to explaining how Advaita Vedānta commentary and scholastic thinking works, and how that style of thinking in its distinctive form creates a new scenario and set of possibilities with respect to which Christian theology can engage Vedānta. Instead of the standard issues—monism, illusion, caste—continuing to set the stage for familiar conceptual debates, recognizing Vedānta's commentarial style. Second, *Hindu God, Christian God* (Clooney 2001) devotes major chapters to the existence of God, the Name of God, incarnation, and revelation, themes recognizable across religious borders. If *Theology after Vedānta* highlighted the manner of reading, this book deliberately shifted to engaging issues of content, in order to engage the attention of readers simply interested in the topics themselves, yet not convinced that any interreligious or comparative learning would be beneficial. Third, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* (Clooney 2005) balances *Hindu God, Christian God* by turning to the rich theological traditions of Goddess. Here the texts I chose were hymns, long songs of praise and prayers directed respectively to Śrī Lakṣmī, Mahā Devī, and Apīrāmi Devī. By choosing hymns, I intended also to push the issues involved, by raising the theologically interesting and challenging matter of the way that Goddess texts are to be engaged. Their poetic and theological power complicate the work of the theologian ready to learn outside as well as inside her own tradition.

**Comparison for a performative, transformative purpose**, the second current, intends, in my work, to exemplify the salutary effects of comparison. It proceeds by the study of texts that are notably transformative, with intense attention to the engagement of the scholar, in both traditions. In such projects I still build on and draw attention to certain **Hindu materials that I have been reading and have found personally compelling**. Then, to draw in Christian readers, I seek analogous Christian texts that famously draw readers into practice and worship. Here I list four books. First, (and again) *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, by my decision to read three potent hymns, also draws the reader toward engagement with those texts, and (possibly) with the Goddesses. Thus, this same book, just considered in current one, also belongs here. It is connected in terms of immediacy, with a book that precedes it and two that follow it. Second, *Seeing through Texts* (Clooney 1996) explores the Tamil devotional classic *Tiruvāymoli* the exposition and intensification of its 100 songs in Śrīvaiṣṇava commentary, and the effect of all this on attentive readers, ancient or modern, Śrīvaiṣṇava or not. Third, *Beyond Compare* (Clooney 2008), in addition to being about radical surrender to God as constructed and promoted

<sup>1</sup> I do not include here my books about comparative theology: Clooney (2010a), and three edited volumes: Clooney (2010b), *Comparative Theology in Europe* (with Clooney 2014), and *How to Do Comparative Theology* (with Clooney 2018).

in two traditions, is about religious reading, and an exercise in intensifying religious reading across two traditions. It draws together Vedānta Deśika (14th century) and Francis de Sales (17th century), by a cross-reading of their great books, respectively the *Śrīmad Rahasyatrayasāram* (Essence of the Three Mysteries) and *Traité de L'Amour de Dieu* (Treatise on the Love of God). Since both authors are particularly sensitive to their place as writers deeply indebted to past masters, my work had to be doubly conscious: my reading and my writing was instructed by their reading and writing, faithful to each, but also transgressive since, I think, neither would have been ready for the comparative reading to which I subjected their classic texts. Fourth, *His Hiding Place is Darkness* (Clooney 2013) is a further, possibly final installment in this series of intensifications. It is a cross-reading of the Song of Songs and the Tiruvāymoḷi with commentaries, on the vivid absence of the Beloved after powerful presence.

*Difficult comparison*, the third current, gets at a third of the aims that guide my work, namely my effort to slip the Western hold on the vocabulary and methods of the study of religions by drawing intensively on the highly developed categories of another tradition, in engagement with a primary text or texts of that tradition, read in the original language, for the sake of noting the technical vocabulary of the tradition. Such comparisons introduce difficult comparands that thwart or make all the more difficult the very project of comparison, even breaking settled discourses. Here I am thinking of my work in Mīmāṃsā, Hindu ritual analysis, which is at every point difficult for the Christian theologian. *Thinking Ritually* (Clooney 1990) is not a comparative study, but a prolegomenon to comparison, by way of engagement in a tradition of learning that is robustly, technically sophisticated, and laden with expert distinctions not easily accommodated to Christian theological themes. Second, the very tentatively entitled *Theology Rules: Summation and Perfection in Two Kinds of Religious Reasoning* further aggravates the difficulty of the comparisons begun in *Thinking Ritually*, since I deal with a text of considerable difficulty that subtly teases the theologian with the possibility of substantive comparison, while making it all the more difficult: the *Garland of Jaimini's Reasons* (*Jaiminīyanyāyamālāvīstara* (Mādhavācārya 1892), henceforth, *Jaimini's Reasons*), a 14th century Mīmāṃsā text of ritual reasoning.<sup>2</sup> It aims at the summary of complex ritual reasoning argued in 900 classic cases, putting all of them before us in a very succinct, compact form. I will say more about this project below.

## 2. Further Comments on the Methodical Elements of Comparative Reading

Depending on the project, and in which current it is best located, any given theological comparative project in one of these three categories will play out differently, in terms of details noticed and tactics employed along the way. Thus my method in any particular project is influenced, and increasingly so over the years, by prior projects. Habits of reading and comparing, sometimes proven successful and sometimes just fondly preferred, persist over time and even efforts at originality turn out to repeat both the virtues and vices of previous experiments. I grant too that my clustering of projects in the three currents may cause me to overlook other ways of configuring my work, but as far as I can see my categories mesh aptly with those more elaborately spelled out by Freiberger. Let me add a few comments on the deliberately provisional and intuitive nature of my way of working.

I like to think of myself as methodical and attentive to best practices with regard to method, but as already suggested, I am not much interested in method per se. Rather, I have found that issues of method and decisions about method become clearest in act and by improvisation, even in the middle of any particular instance of study. We study a text, and see where that study leads; we study another text; we study them one after the other, back and forth. This is stated rather too simply, I admit, but it makes sense because my method is a commitment to the work of reading closely and honestly; it is a matter of careful and close reading, such as might be called “study.” Much follows from the desire to read carefully and to follow the intuitions of one’s reading. Standing within your own tradition, pick a text in the tradition you consider to be other than your own (and for this, you

<sup>2</sup> In preparation for the work in progress, I have completed a number of essays, including Clooney (2017a, 2017b).

must be equipped with some robust sense of what it means to belong to a tradition and study another tradition without belonging to it), and then narrow your approach in accord with your instincts about what needs now to be studied and written about. Then read the text, building on philological and literary expertise, but also improvising methodologically as needed, drawing for instance on historical criticism or commentary or interreligious resemblance as needed. If you honor the work of reading and have criteria regarding what makes for fruitful reading—such as discloses the deeper life of a text, its integral wholeness, and draws the reader into that world of meaning, you will also see how your learning is becoming fruitful.

Reading closely, and back into the sources of any text, is the method in its simplest and most profound form. Comparison doubles the work of reading, though usually in a specific way: reading one thing after another. After study of one text, read another text that seems fitting. Read them together, each in light of the other. Method is provisional, thoughtfully and seriously so. Here too, reading fruitfully and toward deeper engagement matters most, as both disciplined and so rich in possibilities that over-determination is thwarted.

The activities of description, analysis, translation, and reflections on these, all occur in small increments as needed along the way, measured by their usefulness in a longer term project of communication. Comparands can be found when and as needed for the scholar to be assured that he or she is proceeding as planned; aids such as a work of theory, a work of literature, or a work of theological literature (from the same or another time period) tend to appear at the right moment—of need, or of desperation. Such comparands do not come first, as a necessary prologue to the actual work of learning and comparing. Their value is pragmatic, manifest in act.

Freiberger admits that he does not “claim that the proposed frame is the only possible way to describe the comparative method.” Indeed, “an entirely different model might focus, for example, more on the intuition of the scholar and explore how exactly this intuition works, how it is developed, and how it distinguishes itself from the intuition that is present in other scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.” In that light, I can note that this essay may be taken as complementary to the main work of Freiberger’s exposition, since I have presented a deeply intuitive method that is rooted in attention to the person of the comparativist. Perhaps my intuition is, if not theological per se, nevertheless rooted in a worldview that does not divide faith and reason, or prize in any absolute fashion the autonomy of the scholar. Drawing on my own Catholic background and studying Hindu spiritual traditions for more than four decades, I have found it desirable and also necessary, if I am to do justice to these materials, to cultivate a particular sense of what counts as “good scholarship” and “right method” and “productive results,” with an emphasis on having a simple sense of what works, what is appropriate, what will be beneficial to particular kinds of readers. But intuition does not mean taking shortcuts in scholarship or relying on sloppy method; rather, it a matter of the interiorization of what one reads, and the acquisition, as one may, of the virtues inculcated in the great religious texts we read. Since my work is energized by theological intuitions, something more needs to be said on what I mean by “theological comparative work.”

### **3. How *Theology* Matters with Respect to Comparative Reading**

I claim that all three currents of my work are guided by a theological logic and theological destination. But “theology” may on occasion prompt us to think not so much of productive method as of the imposition of doctrines that preempt learning and thwart good practice. But theology need not be any more distortive than other interpretive lenses, from other disciplines or other academic predispositions, that we bring to bear in our research and writing. It is true that dwelling on presuppositions might unfruitfully divert us into secondary theological debates that stay with one-tradition doctrinal analysis and proceed by theories about the other, rather than by a comparative learning, in which doctrine is instrumental, without learning from the other tradition. One must learn to learn through area-specific studies (such as Indology) and theologically (as by Christian or Jewish

or Hindu theology), and then too comparatively, without any dimension of learning overwhelming the others.

Regarding the theological dimension of my work, much of what I do is practical, short on theory and not directly concerned with doctrine, neither promoting it or arguing with it. My Catholic theology is practical, and its fruitfulness is tested in practice. But neither do I wish to imply that doctrine has no effect on work that is truly comparative and theological. Rather, doctrine—regarding the nature of God, creation, sin and redemption, for instance—serves not to terminate inquiry or make unnecessary the work of learning, but rather to mark boundaries for a given comparison according to a community's view of the world, so as to give learning an intellectual and practical focus.

I have found it important and fruitful to think of theology, even in its doctrinal forms, as disclosing and directing a rich and diverse set of practices proceeding by **four rules or practical habits**: *leges credendi, orandi, quaerendi, legendi*: **believing, praying, seeking, reading**. The first two rules are in practice inherent in what I mean by theology: faith is worked out in practice (and one might add the work of service, *laborandi*), and prayer proceeds from faith. Without these, we may instead be talking about an academic discipline that is still found in universities, but which is or remains theological only in a secondary sense. *Lex quaerendi* asserts theology's intellectual dimension: if there are no open questions, there is no theology, even most of the time theology is in search of answers, and truth; the *lex quaerendi* is a signal that one's theology is still alive. The fourth may be taken as a qualification of the first three, since much of my theological work is the work of reading.

When I say that my comparative work is theological, I am committing myself to the practices related to these rules. While the work of theology remains the work of individuals, yet individuals who would be a Catholic theologian must in some real sense—even if not submissively or without tension—be in conversation with a wider guild of theologians and in union with the hierarchy, the bishops of the Church (including the Pope). Thus authority, tradition, and the voice of the people, so to speak, remain operative and influential in the work of the theologian who, nevertheless, is still an individual intellectual. Being a theologian is, as it were, a family matter before and after it is attentive to a much wider world. In fact, this dynamic is operative in my reading and writing, and also in the reading and writing of the Christian and Hindu theologians whom I read. My projects become comparative theological work when, within the defined scope of a project that for me always has a Christian theological horizon; I begin as a Catholic Christian; I read a text from a tradition other than my own; I then read or re-read a text of my own tradition; I explain all of this to my Catholic and Christian community.

As with any of us, the "usual" audience for my writing is quite mixed, but a key portion of it, to which I give some precedence, are Christian theological readers (and not just scholars, but also bishops, pastors, teachers, students). The fact of a particular intended audience affects how (simply or complexly) I write, which (few or many) details are to make it to the fore, and how forthright I can be in fostering theological insights that engage a faith perspective. Comparison takes place for the sake of communicating with a theological audience (which, in a way, will always include myself). The Christian comparand itself is instrumental to explanation of a less known other ("the unfamiliar X is like this familiar Y"), but more importantly it is also a chosen site of reception, a home-coming which goes beyond the stages of redescription and rectification in J. Z. Smith's model, which Freiberger sites. This return home is then too instrumental to intensification, a home for the new learning. But this particular Christian and theological sense of audience does not fully determine which texts I choose nor, I think, does it compromise my desire to read accurately, without oversimplification and without reducing my new learning to what would be familiar to a Christian audience.

There is a further point that must be noted, if we are to understand the extent to which theological comparison is a standard or non-standard form of comparative study. When theology, comparative or not, is retained as an academic discipline within a university setting, it may or may not preserve distinctive features vital to a fuller sense of theology—faith, community, practice, and openness to the "Transcendent Reality," such that its claims are argued reasonably, but also specified in accord with

faith claims specific to the theological traditions studied. When it does take into account such features, academic theology can be a mode of study within the university, close kin to the study of religion, and still be theology. But academic theology can also fall short of what theologians in different traditions think their work to be, if it simply a study, for instance, about certain theological ideas and terms as used in one or another historical period. Historical research is necessary, and crucial to honest theology. But unless this critical examination of ideas in various contexts takes non-reductively into account a community's own estimate of its internal development of doctrine, it will remain external to theology rather than integral to it. In light of this situation, we can see how comparative theology work may, though not necessarily, remain a first-order theological discipline at the service of its community as well as of value in the academy.

While doctrinal content serves to mark off communities in distinction from one another, a practical adherence to doctrine creates rules by which communities both differentiate and find common ground. Proper doctrine creates pertinent conditions for learning while also ruling out unproductive dispositions, such as the reductive notion that fruitful comparison is impossible because all constructive work is irretrievably political, or the philosophical presupposition that there is no experience or nature that all humans share and hence no possibility for substantive comparison.

It is *not* necessary then to see theology as a discipline by history or method bound exclusively to the Christian tradition. Whether named as such or not, "theology" fairly marks as a faith seeking understanding marked by the four rules or habits I have outlined above, as these flourish in multiple religious traditions. An identification of *all* theology with *Christian* theology needlessly neglects other traditions of theologizing, reduces the methods and content of theology to those of the modern Christian or post-Christian West, and overlooks the possibilities of theology as an interreligious, cross-cultural endeavor because it is something believing humans do, not just Western Christian humans. If we recognize that theology can be found in multiple religious traditions, this expands the significance of theology as a discipline and also pushes back against the claims of any particular Christian theology to universal normativity. **Affirming theology outside Christianity enhances the importance of theology and, by pluralizing it, reduces the difference between theology and a humane anthropology.**

**For the theologian who is a comparativist**—whose faith seeks understanding, illumination, even in the work of comparison—it is necessary to act in a way that makes possible fruitful learning across religious borders, as texts are studied in ways commensurate with the respect afforded them by insiders. And it is necessary, in terms of the purpose of a project, to think about how to write in a way that is accessible to the non-expert, otherwise-expert, community to which one belongs. It can be an elite discipline, but its finality is still, in the end, to bear fruition for a wider and non-expert community of believers; if the expert knowledge must be kept secret, as it were, there is something wrong with the theology or with the recipient community.

#### 4. Two Examples of My Current Comparative (Theological) Reading

Since most issues of method are clearer—as resolved, as problematic—in practice, the path forward lies always in the *doing* of comparisons, I conclude this essay with attention to two examples of projects that at this writing (early 2017) are not completed, and thus remain vulnerable and exposed, in terms of the project of seeking and finding a way to learn well, comparatively. The comparative element, then, arises after the reading of the first text, as one searches for, or just as often remembers, an apt text in one's own tradition. A link is made, even if the newly introduced text is no more likely than the first to docilely serve the purpose of a set, predictable comparison.

My first example begins—this is a project in its early stages—by attention to theistic ritual piety, the function of devotional texts of worship, and the dynamics of spiritual intensification. In preparation for several conferences in Chennai, India, marking the 1000th birth anniversary of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu theologian Rāmānuja (1017–1137), I have been reflecting on his traditional corpus of nine works. In hopes of saying something original, I have turned to his *Nityam* ("The Book of the Daily Ritual,"

henceforth *Daily Ritual*), the least noticed and studied of Rāmānuja’s works, a work that has been translated but not much studied.<sup>3</sup> It describes the morning worship to be undertaken by utterly committed devotees aiming to utter and enact in worship their single-minded faith: purifications, image-worship, acts of obeisance to ancestors, teachers, and deities, and the utterance of sacred mantras—all leading to acts of heartfelt surrender to the one true God, Nārāyaṇa with his eternal consort, Śrī Lakṣmī. The *Daily Ritual* elaborates in practice the theology that Rāmānuja exegeted and articulated, elaborated and defended in his other commentarial and argumentative works. In it, Rāmānuja’s theoretical and practical concerns converge pointedly for the sake of worship. It marks the end point, the finality, of Rāmānuja’s overall intellectual and spiritual project in terms of its finality as a defense of the deeply realized worship of the single-minded devotee. The *Daily Ritual* thus offers a vantage point from which one can re-read Rāmānuja’s commentarial and doctrinal works.<sup>4</sup>

In a second phase of this project, in light of the first close reading and still as an Indological project, I read backwards—from the *Daily Ritual*, to the *Śaraṇāṅgati Gadya* (“The Prose Hymn of Taking Refuge”), Rāmānuja’s exemplary prose prayer of praise and utter surrender to the Lord, along with two similar prose hymns; the prose hymns give the words of worship, and the *Daily Ritual* the actions during which the prayers are recited. At a greater remove are his two great commentaries, the *Gitābhāṣya* and *Śrībhāṣya* on the *Brahma Sūtras*, and the *Vedārthasaṃgraha* (Summation of the Meaning of the Veda) a non-commentarial work that is an explication of the right meaning of the Upaniṣads). As those works are re-read in light of the performative theological practice evident in the *Daily Ritual*, then the overarching purpose of his nine works becomes clear. Rather than wondering whether a great theologian can compose a work describing daily worship, the first aim of my work will be to show why the worshipping theologian also writes great works of commentary, disputation, and doctrine.

The project opens up a comparative phase “naturally” as it were, as this groundwork enables and begs for further comparison, outside and beyond the Hindu traditions. It invites the Christian comparativist, for instance, to a host of comparisons of the closer kind that yield interesting differences only in light of obvious similarities in the daily worship of God. Given the nature of the text as exemplary of right worship by the advanced practitioner, I would place the incipient comparative project in my second current “comparison for a performative, transformative purpose,” though it might also have the thematic focus of the first current of comparison mentioned at the start of this essay. Not a “difficult comparison” that exposes the gaps between traditions, it will rather show consonances of some depth and intensity, as did my reading in *Beyond Compare* of the treaties of Vedānta Deśika and Francis de Sales. In the Christian tradition too theologians write both academically and devotionally. Even if academic theologians often and rightly draw a line between their work as scholars, and the piety and fervor of personal practice, it is not surprising to find theologians who cross the line with care.

In the fall of 2016 I used in class Rāmānuja’s *Summation* along with the *Itinerarium Mentis Ad Deum* (Journey of the Mind to God) of the Catholic Christian theologian Bonaventure (1221–1274), and by the confirmation that Bonaventure and Rāmānuja “read well together” for comparative purposes, my emerging plan is to read along with the *Daily Ritual* a work of Bonaventure, probably his *De Triplici Via* (“The Threefold Way,” treating the ways of purification [by self-scrutiny], illumination [by meditation], and perfection [by contemplation]), a relatively short work that in a mix of theological

<sup>3</sup> There are several translations of the *Nityam*. Esnoul translates it into French in her essay. In a volume (Rāmānuja 2014) that includes also Parāśara Bhaṭṭar’s *Kriyādiṭipah*, K. R. Krishnaswami has published Tamil, Kannada, and English renderings of the text. There is also a Tamil rendering by V. V. Rāmānujan (Rāmānuja 2010). I know only of several scholarly writings on the *Nityam*: Esnoul (1972) and Marion Rastelli (2005). At one remove, the *Pañcarātrarakṣā* of Vedānta Deśika is a very relevant early resource, since the *Nityam* is referred to or quoted about nearly a dozen times in that work; on this, see Rastelli (2007).

<sup>4</sup> The initial task in this project lies in attending to basic features of the *Daily Ritual* that inscribe, in the details of practice, the intellectual and affective grounds for devout worship. I draw on Rastelli for an understanding of the basic structure of this worship as indebted to an older ritual theological text, the *Ahirbudhmyasamhitā*, and thus also to highlight differences regarding purpose, relationship with God, and cosmology.

and directly prayerful language “briefly and concisely unfolds the inner dynamic processes through which a human person is empowered by grace to make the journey into the wisdom which is God.” (p. 83).<sup>5</sup> In it, Bonaventure explains how a spiritual pilgrim might strive to train (*exercitare*) and reform the soul in cooperation with grace to struggle for “true wisdom wherein there is knowledge coming from true experience.” (p. 84).

*The Threefold Way* is more expository as a theological construct than is the *Daily Ritual*—which instructs rather more concretely by way of example—but Bonaventure’s text is still practical: “The Threefold Way is divided into three chapters. Each chapter is organized around one of three spiritual exercises, that is, reading with meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Bonaventure proposes these exercises as the practical means through which a person ought to strive for the “perfection of wisdom” in accordance with the three ‘hierarchizing activities.’ While each of the spiritual exercises has its unique and distinct character, they have the common purpose of rectifying, strengthening, and enlivening the powers of the soul. Bonaventure outlines briefly the nature of each of these spiritual exercises in the text.” How Bonaventure writes his treatise could just as well be applied to Rāmānuja’s: Bonaventure “also demonstrates, in a rather abbreviated way, how the fruitful use of these exercises can lead the spiritual pilgrim toward a greater measure of peace, truth, and love—the goals of the Ways of Purgation, Illumination, or Perfective Union. The tightly argued and complex organization of *The Threefold Way* makes it a rich and demanding challenge for students of the spiritual life. Bonaventure uses an economy of words to express his thought. He also relies on numerous word images that are embedded with layers of theological meaning and are intended to invite the spiritual pilgrim into always deeper levels of conversation with this classic text.” (pp. 86–87) By long experience I know very well that even when a certain intuition of mutual aptness and harmony enables me to put two texts together, still closer reading inevitably shows that such texts differ in many ways, ranging from theology and audience to structure and style, so that all similarities must be placed too in a context of enduring differences. Only when this further work is done, does a comparative project in this current—“comparison for a performative, transformative purpose”—actually work.

Pertinent here, regarding method, is the sequence of my discovery of the text: the millennial anniversary of Rāmānuja; an option to study closely his smallest and least studied work; the discovering that the work is richly and compactly theological, even in the details of ritual description; reading backward, as it were, to view the great theological writings in light of the ritual manual; and then, with that dynamic in mind, to see through an interesting comparand. I recognize the appropriate comparand when I see what turns out to be productive in the Hindu context also brings to life questions in the Christian theological tradition—regarding how we are to study Hinduism, and regarding how the dynamics of devotion and intellectual work combine in important institutions in the Christian tradition.

A second example has to do with the text with respect to which I am currently doing my primary work. This stands in the category of “difficult comparison” introduced earlier. I mentioned above a book project under way, tentatively entitled, *Theology Rules*. It begins in my reading of the *Jaiminīya Nyāya Mālā* (the *Garland of Jaimini’s Reasons*, henceforth *Jaimini’s Reasons*) of Mādhava (1297–1388). This 14th century text of ritual reasoning in India’s Mīmāṃsā tradition of ritual analysis, in the face of a great mass of commentarial literature, takes up the work of reducing and codifying 900 cases of ritual reasoning in about 1400 two-line verses. The identification of these cases, all of them addressing problems in interpretation of word and act, and working through their logic, serves to transform a canon of ritual problems into a set of clear precedents useful regarding other ambiguous texts in religion and law. *Jaimini’s Reasons* is the most perfect instance of this genre, intensely succinct without being obscure, successful in reducing vast learning to simple expression, the minimum adequate to

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<sup>5</sup> This and the citations to follow are all from the editor’s introduction to the *Threefold Way* by Coughlin et al. (Bonaventure 2006).



highlight maxims of ritual reasoning. It ambitions no originality, but rather only to complete and perfect its tradition of ritual analysis by creating a perfect harmony of form and content, liable neither to addition or subtraction. *Jaimini's Reasons* draws notice to certain key lineages of thought, style, and influence within the Indian traditions, reading practices allied with ritual practice, and generative of the ritual reasoning arising from it.

The process by which I came to this text was in a way underdetermined, something of an accident. Looking for a new research project about three and half years ago, one that would be different from my recent work on the Biblical *Song of Songs* and the Tamil *Holy Word of Mouth* (*Tiruvāymolī*), and in a way more difficult, I noticed the three volumes of the *Jaimini's Reasons* that had sat on my shelf for thirty years. I knew this to be technical, difficult ritual detail, case upon case, and I decided to build my next project around these volumes. That is also to say, I did not begin with a theme or a Christian analogue in mind.

Much of the work I have thus far done is comparative within the Indian context, regarding Mīmāṃsā and by extension Vedānta.<sup>6</sup> But, in the essays I have written in preparation for the book, I have branched out for comparative learning in a broader sense. Perhaps surprisingly, though, my goal from the start of this wider comparison has been to create a difficult situation for the comparativist, a strong and complex text that resists cooptation, while yet inviting fellow thinkers to think through the unfamiliar cases in a realm decidedly not reducible to Western modes of thinking, while yet not being esoteric or accessible only through meditative experience, etc. *Jaimini's Reasons* is incomparable in a very interesting sense. I resist the temptation to back up to a safer level of generalization, a discussion about law and religion, for instance, or to simply translate the accessible parts of Mīmāṃsā into terms familiar to the Western philosophical and theological traditions. But such moves do not do justice to the text.

For a broader comparison that is illuminating despite the fact of its being imperfect, or *because* of this, I have turned to a Western and Christian genre of pedagogical text, the catechism, and in particular, the catechisms of Peter Canisius (1933), a leading Jesuit theologian in the Catholic Reformation that responded to Luther. There is certainly no thematic conversation with *Jaimini's Reasons* to be had regarding content, since explicitly, *Jaimini's Reasons* and Christian catechisms share almost nothing in terms of content. Key to comparison then is pedagogical intentions, and the ambitioning of an introductory text that is not disappointing to the advanced. But comparisons can regard intent and how intent affects writing and the inscription of practices such as summation and distillation of the complex into the intensely simple, and the discernment necessary to ensure that summations succeed in capturing what is most important to the tradition.

The pedagogical process includes enabling the practice of memorization, a remembering facilitated by brevity, and yet without an erasure of the larger wealth of tradition; both the *Catechism* and *Jaimini's Reasons* achieve this practical value. Many catechisms are built around—depend upon—commentary on the Apostles' Creed, Our Father, Hail Mary, and Ten Commandments, and through that structure dealt matters of faith and morals, seen from the perspective of the ecclesial community.<sup>7</sup> A few short

<sup>6</sup> The obvious next step was comparison with a similar text of the same period, Bhāratīrtha (2007) *Vaiyāsika Nyāya Mālā* (*Garland of Vyāsa's Reasons*, henceforth *Vyāsa's Reasons*). This Vedānta text summarizes the cases argued in the Brahma Sūtras in exactly the same style evident in Mādhava's text. *Vyāsa's Reasons*, whether earlier or later, serves to extend properly Mīmāṃsā ways of reasoning to new material: the focus of the former on ritual rules gives it a kind of self-sufficiency; the latter explores the rules of interpretation pertaining to a reality, Brahman, which stands outside the web of words and rules.

<sup>7</sup> Writing in the Catholic context, Canisius composes pre- and post-Tridentine versions of his Catechism, and the larger and smaller versions of it as geared to different audiences, but all drawing on the Christian creed, the Ten Commandments, and certain Christian prayers. Under these categories, Canisius collects and states as compactly as possible, by a question and answer method, the pertinent teachings of the Catholic Church. His catechism thus takes on a more or less expert guise, depending on which version one reads, and what the reader is expected to gain from it: an intelligent rendering concisely of the full essence of tradition, the essential (and perhaps only) things one needs to know, or simply the aura of importance and teaching that can now accompany the recitation of the Creed, and other texts. Even the shortest of the catechisms manifests considerable underlying learning.

prayers that anyone can say serve to contain the briefer and longer forms of the doctrines of the Church, and thus also to mark the place where deeper learning can occur.

We can contrast the certainty and straightforwardness of exposition in a Catechism that claims to be presenting the truth of scripture and tradition, with the non-thematic utilization of texts with which the Mīmāṃsā works. There is also a difference in expectations regarding which skills are to be learned; the Mīmāṃsā privileges the question and insists on making explicit the path leading to the conclusion, and not just the right answer. Similarly, in Canisius' sophisticated Catechism—in its various versions—the question and answer format models a learning process and is geared to go as far as individuals are able to progress in understanding.

A way to identify the viability of a comparison lies in asking about the intended and actual fruits of these texts. One can push the question of where one is to *begin*, if one is to properly learn the other tradition; and thus too what counts as an adequate introductory text by which to begin understanding that other. What do readers know, if they know only Canisius' catechism—or only the Creed? One might think that catechisms as bodies of knowledge are woefully insufficient to the faith and life of Christians; or, that in very concentrated form, catechisms begin to give us all that we need to know. But it is difficult to imagine being satisfied with knowing the words of the text as such, words that are merely the “front end” of an engagement with the whole of Christian or even Vedic tradition. In a certain sense, a good Catechism, like a good creed, lacks nothing in its exposition of the whole of a reasoned faith. Similarly, *Jaimini's Reasons* might be counted a beginner's text, a first step toward to a more technical (and thematic) analyses of Mīmāṃsā topics. But here too, there is a completeness: there is nothing in the vast sūtra tradition, reaching back to Jaimini, that is missing from *Jaimini's Reasons*.

If a visitor to Hinduism knows *Jaimini's Reasons* comprehensively, she just knows Mīmāṃsā Vedic ritual analysis, to be sure, and not even the Vedic rites. But such a reader has also entered upon thinking through one of the most important strands of Indian thought. It is perfectly clear that *Jaimini's Reasons* is not for beginners, for reasons of technicality of language, presupposed background knowledge, and subtlety of advanced ritual thinking. Yet it also gives the reader everything she or he needs to understand Mīmāṃsā. Catechisms are by definition and intent more accessible, of course, but surely less successful in a world pluralistic in its authorities, rules, and modes of reasoning. Statements of truth merely asserted, without sensitivity to intensely stylized modes of questioning and the relentless search for reasons, do not work. Here too discernment is at stake, in this instance attentive to how we learn, and what we decide we need to learn, if we are to know enough of our own and other traditions that comparative work will be fruitful and theologically relevant.

In summary: the tentatively entitled *Theology Rules* relies first of all on the considerable work of trying to read well: reading the 1400 verses and the (auto)commentary and translating the same (as a test of comprehensibility, in English); reading Mīmāṃsā more widely around *Jaimini's Rules*, in order to understand what is being synthesized here; finding ways to talk more briefly about the irreducibly plural set of 900 cases, looking through and beyond the details without erasing those details, as if they do not matter, by theory; figuring out how to write about *Jaimini's Rules* without merely repeating the text; constructing philosophical parallels of a certain kind, by attention to Ludwig Wittgenstein's way of writing, teaching, positing examples, and thus philosophizing; and, in the end, bringing all this into conversation with Christian theology by way of reflection on Canisius' catechism. Finally, this series of comparisons prompts new reflection on what we learn, how and why. All of this is comparative theological reading, with a method in its complexity.

## 5. In Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have reflected on the methodical dimension of my decades-long research and writing in the field of comparative theology. My goal has been to shed light on that dimension of my work, showing what I do, but still without giving the impression that my primary concern is method, or that my methods are refined and settled, out of habit or by some theological predetermination, in advance of any new project. I have also explained the way in which my comparative study, which

is largely about reading, reading anew and differently across religious boundaries, is in my mind properly considered to be theological work, because of my non-reductive respect for the texts in *their* theological commitments, my respect for the power of text and tradition as transformative of the reader, my respect for the importance of outside and insider distinctions that are complementary and not disjunctive, and finally (among many other such points that might be added) my respect for tradition-specific doctrines as truths that guide reading without making superfluous the fruits of reading.

Since method is clearest in practice, I have offered two examples of work at this writing very much in progress, with the hope that these examples of work that is incomplete and exposed, might communicate something of my method in its actual practice. My thinking in both projects highlights the construction of comparisons that are plausible, yet complex enough that work cannot be neatly described as simply shedding light on the genres of “prayer book” or “religious law” even if such too is a fruit of comparative study. Even after such comparisons have been created and executed with due thought, the untidiness of the process remains evident, since every moment of understanding prompts new disturbances that prompt further improvisation. This manner of comparative learning will be, I hope, recognizable to the scholarly community as coherent, and to believers as beneficial.

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