The BOISI CENTER for
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Symposium on Religion and Politics

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE COMMON GOOD

"Religious Diversity: A Comparative Theological Perspective"

Reading Packet 4

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BOSTON COLLEGE

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Chapter 1

Religious Diversity and Comparative Theology

We live in a world where religious diversity is increasingly affecting and changing everything around us, and ourselves as well. No religious community is exempt from the pressures of diversity, or incapable of profiting from drawing on this new religious template. No community, wherever it is and however it is configured, will casually abandon its traditional commitments and practices in the face of religious diversity. If we are trying to make sense of our situation amidst diversity and likewise keep our faith, some version of comparative theological reflection is required.

While religious diversity can justly be celebrated as enormously interesting, it is also an unsettling phenomenon for people who actually are religious. Individual religious traditions are under internal and external stress as they are challenged to engage an array of religious others. Some find themselves under siege, threatened by a bewildering range of religious possibilities; some withdraw and demonize their others; some, perhaps too accommodating, begin to forget their identities. Some of us are relatively untouched by the phenomenon, but none of us avoids changing inside and out.

If we want to take diversity and religious commitment seriously, then there is a need for comparative theology, a mode of interreligious learning particularly well suited to the times in which we live. When I speak of "comparative theology," I will be arguing the case for keeping "theology" and "comparative" together, precisely for the sake of specific acts of interreligious

learning appropriate to our contemporary situation. Doing theology comparatively will be more and not less fruitful, when diversity is most evident and most intensely felt.

Like all forms of theology, comparative theology is a form of study. Now it is true that a commitment to study religions may seem a less than urgent response to what is happening in our world today, a detour that distracts us from our own traditions, perhaps even speeding up the dissolution of particular commitments. But, in fact, the cultivation of a more interconnected sense of traditions, read together with sensitivity to both faith and reason, grounds a deeper validation and intensification of each tradition.

In the following pages I take the United States to be the context of my reflection, and I write from an American Catholic perspective. Readers in other cultural settings, and with other perspectives on the United States, will of course want to modify my insights accordingly. But, whatever the cultural and religious setting, diversity similarly challenges concerned individuals who care about the future of their traditions and the meaningfulness of religious and spiritual commitment. Faith and reason, faith seeking understanding in a world of diversity, will still be at stake.

Diversity around Us

The context for today's comparative theology is growing religious diversity. Diversity in and among religions is not novel, but its impact has intensified in recent decades as a pronounced and defining phenomenon that is global but still impacts us in the particular places where we live. Fluid immigration patterns have brought people of many religious backgrounds together in the places where we live and work. Religious traditions previously foreign to one another now flourish nearby to one another. It is by habit that we still apply tidy labels such as "Eastern religions" and "Western religions" to religions that are taking root everywhere; by habit, some of us still imagine that "other religions" are to be found only in far-off parts of the world. In varying degrees

of proximity and intensity, all religions are near to us; whether we are conscious or not, they are becoming part of our lives and influential on our religious identities.

The challenge impacts us more forcefully as a vast increase in available knowledge about religions creates new learning possibilities. Religious traditions are vividly present in every kind of media. Never before has so much been available so easily, in such quality. As never before, we can learn easily about other religions, but we need to learn deeply across such borders. Even were we to limit our attention to theological concerns, we would be on the spot, since we now have available to us an abundance of great theological texts from many traditions, in accessible translations with ample annotations. It is easy to read, and harder than ever to justify not reading inside and outside my own tradition.

Our time and place therefore urge upon us a necessary interreligious learning. Diversity becomes a primary context for a tradition's inquiry and self-understanding; particular traditions in their concreteness become the place where the religious meaning of diversity is disclosed. By such learning, intelligently evaluated and extended, we make deeper sense of ourselves intellectually and spiritually, in light of what we find in the world around us. We can respond to diversity with a distinctive set of sensitivities and insights that balances respect for tradition and community with the wider play of what is possible in our era, such as none of our traditions has been able to anticipate.

The proliferation of available knowledge certainly applies, for instance, to the Hindu traditions of India to which I will keep returning in the following pages. The sheer volume of Sanskrit literature available in translation is formidable, and there is also a wealth of still lesser-known literatures – often in vernacular, regional languages – that lead us deeper into the various religious traditions. Thus, we can read texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which have been available for a long time and for which there are some excellent translations. But we can also study texts of great theological interest that are less known (in the West), such as Bengali goddess poetry, the songs of the saints of Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, or Maharastra,

and descriptions of ritual performances in numerous local settings. We have technical scholastic treatises of numerous Hindu traditions, ritual manuals and ritual exegeses, commentaries, poetic works, grand epic narratives, law texts, and the like, and these are pertinent to theology even in its most technical forms. There is also significant modern historical and social scientific research on religious traditions in their origins and in their histories, and much information and interpretation available on the arts in various cultures. We can read the primary sources; we can read about them in some detail as well, and with guidance from traditional and modern academic perspectives.

Where it is possible to learn, there is also a responsibility, if we are not artificially and arbitrarily to cut short our quest to understand our faith. So much information, so easily available, should puncture religious stereotypes and free us of conventional judgments about other religions that persist simply as bad habits. We should be increasingly reluctant to confuse the necessary shorthand claims we make about religions – we cannot ever say all that needs to be said – with the full, adequate accounts of those traditions. Theologians have particular responsibility, since the public credibility of faith positions relies in part on our demonstration that we are interreligiously literate, knowing what to say, how to make measured judgments within the bounds of our learning, and when also to stop speaking about things beyond our expertise. Other religions are not less complex than our own, and there is no reason, no excuse, for not acquiring credible knowledge about them. This learning, and how we use it, is the challenge of comparative theology.

Diversity within Us

Diversity not only envelops us, it works on us, gets inside us; if we are paying attention, we see that attentiveness to other religions affects even how we experience, think through, and practice our own religion. Religious choices become more urgent and more complex, even among people with continuing religious commitments. To make sense of their own faith lives, individuals

have to make choices regarding how to form and balance their religious commitments.

Individual sensitivities heightened in the face of diversity in turn unsettle traditions, as more people find at home only some of what they seek spiritually. Communities may find their most alert members deeply affected by what's going on religiously around them, and accordingly more tentative and fluid in their commitments, more acutely aware of the possibilities available in other religious traditions. At the same time, our culture fosters personal, individual responses to the multiplicity of religious options. (Overly) critical questioning unsettles the learning that traditions have passed down, and raises doubts about whether any particular wisdom is really absolutely superior to other ways of living spiritually and well. Religious diversity, thoughtfully understood, raises awkward questions that can make an exclusive choice seem almost impossible. Perplexed by diversity, we may seek excuses not to take it seriously, on the grounds of the sanctity and sufficiency of our own religion. Or we may find relativism the easier path to tread. But we are better off if we keep paying attention to the dynamics of diversity intelligently and with the eyes of faith. Whatever our commitment and intentions, we need to be able to make intelligent religious choices about where we belong and how we shall be committed. Individuals themselves will make such choices, but cumulatively their choices affect how religious communities remain viable places where God is to be known and worshiped in a religiously diverse world.

If we are attentive to the diversity around us, near us, we must deny ourselves the easy confidences that keep the other at a distance. But, as believers, we must also be able to defend the relevance of the faith of our community, deepening our commitments even alongside other faiths that are flourishing nearby. We need to learn from other religious possibilities, without slipping into relativist generalizations. The tension between open-mindedness and faith, diversity and traditional commitment, is a defining feature of our era, and neither secular society nor religious authorities can make simple the choices before us.

Two points, then, need to be kept in mind. Because diversity is an objective feature of the world around us, we need to keep

looking outward, learning to be as intellectually engaged as possible in studying it in the small and manageable ways that are possible for us. Because diversity also touches upon our faith experience and affects our identities as religious people in our own traditions, it is changing us from the inside out. We need therefore to attend with special care and a fresh eye to the well-being of our faith in our community, and to the quest to understand it. This spiritual and intellectual response to diversity, with its outward and inward dimensions, is the comparative theological venture.

Comparative Theology as a Response to Twenty-first-Century Religious Diversity

The complications crowding in on us may seem overwhelming. But the situation need not paralyze us, and we need not pull back from theological reflection in the midst of diversity merely because we do not, and can never, know enough about those other traditions. Diversity makes it necessary to focus our thinking, to choose a particular path of learning, commitment, and participation. Liberated by the concrete and measured specificity of actual learning, we need no longer find diversity and tradition incompatible; being traditional too is a way of accentuating diversity. Even imperfect and partially realized comparative theological reflection helps us in reshaping both theology and wider cultural expectations about religion and spirituality.

In our religiously diverse context, a vital theology has to resist too tight a binding by tradition, but also the idea that religious diversity renders strong claims about truth and value impossible. Comparative theology is a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and tradition, openness and truth, allowing neither to decide the meaning of our religious situation without recourse to the other. Countering a cultural tendency to retreat into private spirituality or a defensive assertion of truth, this comparative theology is hopeful about the value of learning. Indeed, the theological confidence that we can respect diversity and tradition, that we can study traditions in their particularity

and receive truth in this way, in order to know God better, is at the core of comparative theology.

Distinguishing Comparative Theology from Related Disciplines

The preceding general reflections indicate some features of the exterior diversity and interior complexity which make comparative theology an appropriate, even necessary form of reflection today. Since there are other appropriate ways to think about and respond to diversity, I wish now to venture a few preliminary distinctions regarding various modes of interreligious reflection, so that we can proceed with greater clarity, though still without entirely fixed categories, in understanding comparative theology. The following definitions cannot cover every case, but they help locate "comparative theology" as I understand it:

Comparative religion (along with the distinct but related fields of the history of religions and social scientific approaches to religion) entails the study of religion – in ideas, words, images and acts, historical developments – as found in two or more traditions or strands of tradition. The scholarly ideal is detached inquiry by which the scholar remains neutral with respect to where the comparison might lead or what it might imply religiously. Even if she is deeply engaged in the research and sensitive to communal issues, her responsibility is primarily to fellow scholars.

Theology, as I use the word in this book, indicates a mode of inquiry that engages a wide range of issues with full intellectual force, but ordinarily does so within the constraints of a commitment to a religious community, respect for its scriptures, traditions, and practices, and a willingness to affirm the truths and values of that tradition. More deeply, and to echo more simply an ancient characterization of theology, it is *faith seeking understanding*, a practice in which all three words – the faith, the search, the intellectual goal – have their full force and remain in fruitful tension with one another.

The *theology of religions* is a theological discipline that discerns and evaluates the religious significance of other religious traditions in accord with the truths and goals defining one's own religion. It may be greatly detailed with respect to the nuances of the home tradition, but most often remains broadly general regarding the traditions that are being talked about.

Interreligious dialogue points to actual conversations, sometimes formal and academic, sometimes simply interpersonal conversations among persons of different religious traditions who are willing to listen to one another and share their stories of faith and values.

Dialogical or *interreligious theology* grows out of interreligious dialogue, as reflection aimed at clarifying dialogue's presuppositions, learning from its actual practice, and communicating what is learned in dialogue for a wider audience.

In distinction from the preceding ventures:

Comparative theology – *comparative* and *theological* beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.

Comparative theology thus combines tradition-rooted theological concerns with actual study of another tradition. It is not an exercise in the study of religion or religions for the sake of clarifying the phenomenon. It reduces neither to a theology about religions, nor to the practice of dialogue.

Comparative in this context marks a practice that requires intuitive as well as rational insight, practical as well as theoretical engagement. It is therefore not primarily a matter of evaluation, as if merely to compare A and B so as to determine the extent of their similarity and which is better. Nor is it a scientific analysis by which to grasp the essence of the comparables by sifting through similarities and differences. Rather, as a theological and necessarily

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

This notion of *comparative*, much less than a fully developed theory of comparison, is important for all that follows. While *comparative theology* might just as well be thought of as *interreligious theology*, by using together "comparative" and "theology" I seek to preserve the creative tension defining this discipline. As we shall see in chapters 2 and 3, I want also to be candid in linking my understanding of comparative theology to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century comparative studies (chapter 2), and to contemporary studies that invoke the name "comparative theology" (chapter 3).

Comparative theology is therefore *comparative* because it is interreligious and complex in its appropriation of one's own and another tradition in relation to one another. In some instances this comparison may involve evaluation, but ordinarily the priority is more simply the dynamics of a back-and-forth learning. It is a theological discipline confident about the possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition. It remains an intellectual and most often academic practice even if, like other forms of theology, it can occur in popular forms as well. While I write from a Christian perspective, there is nothing essentially Christian about comparative theology as I describe it. As I will explain in chapter 5, comparative theology can be grounded in other traditions as well, and even in particular personal pathways, provided "faith seeking understanding" is the operative principle.

I wish now to further clarify the relationship of comparative theology to the academic study of religion and religions, interreligious dialogue, and the theology of religions, since its disciplinary location must be clear, if its theological character is to be appreciated.

Comparative Theology and the Academic Study of Religions

Comparative theology must not be confused with comparative religion, since faith is a necessary and explicit factor in the former and not in the latter, where its influence might even be ruled out. But the fields need not be separated entirely, since comparative theology still has to measure up to expected disciplinary standards regarding the religions being compared. Because the comparative theologian is engaged in the study of a religious tradition other than her own, she needs to be an academic scholar proficient in the study of that religion, or at least seriously in learning from academic scholars. This is necessary if comparative theology is to be faithful to text and language, history and context, and not mistaken or lazy in (mis)using what is known about the religions in question. Shoddy or superficial scholarship about religions produces bad theology. To a certain extent, the comparative theologian works first as an academic scholar, even if she also and more deeply intends the kind of religious and spiritual learning that characterizes theology richly conceived.

While acknowledging this disciplinary responsibility, comparative theologians need also to be candid about a cultural tendency, evident in our universities, to exclude theology from the study of religions. They need to defend a space for studies that are theological in intent, pursued with faith, from a particular perspective, for a community. This more ample agenda – area studies-plus, study of religions-plus – will not merely reconfirm settled doctrines with new information, just as what is learned need not be seen as undercutting such doctrines. Scholars who are Christian believers can, for instance, still assert that Christ founded the one universal religion and that Jesus is the universal savior. Scholars

of other traditions will make similar universal claims. No one needs to put aside faith and its hope when working as a scholar, although we do need to be able to learn vulnerably without letting even deeply held truths become an obstacle to learning. Comparative theologians may even find that research complicates the case for their faith, by making it easier to appreciate faith claims professed in other traditions. This complication is good, and faith need not suffer from the fact that comparative study does not quickly confirm dearly held beliefs or smoothly undercut what others believe.

Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

There are good reasons to keep comparative theology and interreligious dialogue closely connected and clearly distinguished. Just as actual, living interaction among people of different faith traditions enhances mutual understanding, personal encounters in dialogue should remind us that religions flourish in the lives, beliefs, and activities of real people living out their faith day by day. It also reminds us that we must be accountable to other communities when we speak about their religion, even as we must give an account of ourselves to our own community. So too, assuming (as I will explain later) that all traditions have their theologians, we can appropriately expect dialogue among theologians. As essentially interreligious, each particular comparative theology is by itself always incomplete, and theologians need to hear from others how they understand and interpret the beliefs of their traditions, and how they think we ought to correct what we say about them. All of this is dialogue. But even a seriously theological dialogue among learned believers is not enough. The comparative theologian must do more than listen to others explain their faith; she must be willing to study their traditions deeply alongside her own, taking both to heart. In the process, she will begin to theologize as it were from both sides of the table, reflecting personally on old and new truths in an interior dialogue. Since comparative theology is ordinarily an academic theology, this reflection becomes eventually a somewhat specialized

discourse that is different from the rightly broader and more varied conversations that characterize most dialogues.

Comparative Theology and the Theology of Religions

Given that comparative theology and the theology of religions both involve theological reflection on a religion or religions other than one's own, and given the tendency to see comparative theology merely as a version of the more common theology of religions, I need also to clarify further the relationship between these disciplines. As I have already indicated, a theology of religions reflects from the perspective of one's own religion on the meaning of other religions, often considered merely in general terms. By contrast, comparative theology necessarily includes actually learning another religious tradition in significant detail. In brief, neither replaces the other. Neither is merely a prelude to the other; nor is defective because it does not perform the task of the other.

The theology of religions can usefully make explicit the grounds for comparative study, uncovering and clarifying the framework within which comparative study takes place. While this scrutiny of presuppositions is not necessary for the actual work of comparative study to proceed, it can help correct biases that may distort or impede comparative work. Likewise, the theology of religions relies on shorthand characterizations of other religions, and comparative theology – because it is theological and comparative – will help theologians of religions to be more specific, fine-tuning their attitudes through closer attention to specific traditions.

Once traditions are recognized as theologically complex, they are less easily categorized, and it becomes much more difficult to decide their meaning and assign them a particular theological slot that meets our expectations and answers our questions. For instance, consider the large questions common in Christian conversations: Which religion most perfectly expresses God's intentions for the world? How does God save us? Can people in other religions be saved? How are we to understand the fact that they

can be saved? These questions, important in their own way, will have to be handled with greater subtlety once the theologian begins to take into account what might be learned by actual study of several religious traditions. They are not entirely abandoned, but are distinguished first into discrete and more precise questions that can be answered on the basis of specific information acquired in studying specific traditions.

Given the distinct purposes of these disciplines, it is not wise to respond to religious diversity by concentrating solely on producing better theologies of religions, particularly when this amounts to (re)reading theologians who write on this topic in abstraction from religions in the particular. Given the need for comparative theological work and the small number of people doing it, I can sympathize with calls for a moratorium on the theology of religions, if such a moratorium allows us to direct more energy to comparative theology, the less practiced discipline.

Conversely, insofar as a theology of religions is linked to basic truth claims – such as, for the Christian, a confession of the uniqueness of Christ and universality of salvation in Christ – we need also to consider how comparative theology might shed light on matters of such importance. Were a Christian comparative theology never to approach these truths pertaining to Christ and salvation, it could easily be counted a non-theological discipline, its engagement with religious particularities at best a resource for real theologians dealing with issues of faith. Comparative learning should pertain to issues of truth, and not detach itself from matters central to faith. As I will explain more fully in chapter 7, the comparative theologian needs to do this in her own way, by attention to the particular details of traditions wherein key truths dwell, and not by a priori judgments informed only by knowledge of her own religion. This theology is not situated at the distance required for judgments about religions; its engagement in the truth/s of religions is participatory, a practical inquiry that traverses the path from the truth of one's own tradition through the other, most often ending in a return home. If judgments are to be made, they will more likely pertain to the comparativist herself and the meaning of her own faith. Comparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about

learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith. Thereafter, by a more complex route, the comparative theologian can be in conversation with other theologians about basic truths and how they are to be understood after comparative learning is well under way.

I have made the preceding comments on comparative theology, its truth, and its relation to the theology of religions, in resistance to the notion that comparative theology has identical goals with the theology of religions, or is at best a handmaid to more systematic theorizing. But I do not entirely disown the wisdom of the theology of religions discipline. My comparative theology is in harmony with those inclusivist theologies, in the great tradition of Karl Rahner, SJ, and Jacques Dupuis, SJ, that balance claims to Christian uniqueness with a necessary openness to learning from other religions. I do not theorize inclusion so as to imagine that Christianity subsumes all else, but prefer instead the act of including. I bring what I learn into my reconsideration of Christian identity. This is an "including theology," not a theory about religions; it draws what we learn from another tradition back into the realm of our own, highlighting and not erasing the fact of this borrowed wisdom. Done honestly and with a certain detachment that chastens grand theories, such acts of including need not be seen as distorting what is learned or using it for purposes alien to its original context.

Comparative Theology Autobiographically Grounded

A major theme of this book is that we learn best when we learn in detail, in small options and choices we make in the face of the vast possibilities of our religiously diverse world. We ourselves are part of the detail that needs to be noticed. So even here, at the start, I do well to be more specific about the distinctiveness of my own comparative theological practice.

I am an Irish-American Roman Catholic, born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1950. I am male, a Catholic priest, and for over 40 years have been a member of the Society of Jesus. I am of a generation of American Catholics that matured in the decade after

Vatican Council II. This was a time of turmoil, but it was also an era infused with optimism about more positive relations among religions. *Nostra Aetate*, the conciliar document on world religions, signaled a positive and open attitude that made it seem quite easy, in the 1970s, to be Catholic and to be open to religions at the same time:

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

I take this passage to be representative of the great tradition of Christian learning to which the Catholic Church belongs, and in harmony with the guiding passage from Philippians 4 which I have placed at the beginning of this book. Faith and reason are in harmony; the true, the good, and the beautiful converge; no question is to be stifled, no truth feared; to know is ultimately to know God. *Nostra Aetate* does not literally say all this, and in any case Church has not always lived up to its high ideal. It has at times attempted to limit inquiry and channel the truth toward predetermined answers that would make research superfluous. The hesitations and worries of recent decades have made the work of learning interreligiously appear less welcome in the Catholic Church. But *Nostra Aetate* nonetheless represents our best instincts. It also helped create the more open context in which I did my studies, and allowed me to set out on the course I still follow. It grounded my hope that the study of Hinduism could be an act of religious learning leading to fruitful interreligious understanding and to deeper knowledge of God.

I have been thinking about Hinduism for a long time, beginning in 1973 when I went to Kathmandu, Nepal, to teach English language and literature and "moral science" (which I soon adjusted to include Hindu and Buddhist wisdom on how to live).

I needed to learn in order to teach, and my Hindu and Buddhist students taught me much about how to think, act, and love religiously; indeed, it was there that I began to learn how faith makes possible, even demands, that we learn deeply from our religious neighbors. In those early years I already found Hinduism more captivating than Buddhism, and since I was already interested in theology, I began exploring the theological traditions of Hinduism. I learned many wonderful things, and also found wisdom supportive of openness to interreligious learning – views ranging from the compassion and attentiveness of the Buddha, to the wide embrace of detached action, knowledge, and love taught by Krsna in the Bhagavad Gita, to Ramakrishna's experiential engagement in multiple traditions and Gandhi's clear and evident respect for Christianity. I also learned that some Hindu traditions have less generous views of outsiders and remain uninterested in dialogue. Yet, as I learned more of the Hindu tradition and more of my Christian tradition in light of Hinduism, I found myself all the more confident that going deep into both of them together – sent as it were from the one to the other, then back again – created the possibility of a deep and clear interreligious learning, insight arising through the chemistry of Hindu and Christian wisdoms in encounter.

Such are the starting points from which my study of India has in fact proceeded; obviously, things could have been otherwise had any of a great many factors worked out differently. One ought not make too little or too much of such biographical data, but in fact I do believe that my comparative theology started in Kathmandu.

After Nepal, I did a Masters of Divinity degree in a program without any comparative or interreligious interests, and then a PhD in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC) at the University of Chicago, without any interreligious or theological focus. From then on, I have simply deepened two sides of my learning, back and forth, and have spent my time weaving these dimensions together. In light of this personal history, my own commitment to "comparative theology" is best explained on two levels. First, I was disposed toward this compound name, "comparative" plus "theology," because I did not

come to theology through the study of Hinduism, and did not learn Hinduism in a theological program. I learned the Christian philosophical and theological traditions, and I learned Hinduism; I did not turn to one from the other, as if disappointed or in need of something more. Neither body of learning replaced the other, and I have chosen not to try to integrate them fully.

Second, I found the term "comparative theology" to be useful in my decades of teaching in the Theology Department at Boston College, a Catholic and Jesuit institution. When I arrived there in 1984, some were still of the view that theology and religious studies were disciplines separate and at cross-purposes; the study of world religions was of course part of the latter, not the former, so interest in other religions was a sure sign that one was not a theologian. Given my background and expertise, I knew I was both a theologian and a scholar of Hinduism, and firmly believed that these distinctive disciplines were mutually enriching. To commit myself to theology and a double learning, I began describing my work as "comparative theology." In the 1980s I did not know (as I do now and will elaborate in chapter 2) that there has been a 300+ year history of "comparative theology." I have had to come to terms with this history, in light of my personal path of learning and in accord with the politics of a Catholic Theology Department. Indeed, by insisting on the name "comparative theology" when this practice might just as well be called "interreligious theology," I am hearkening back to the history of the term and to the paradox inherent when we keep "comparative" and "theology" together.

On the Limits of This Book

I close this chapter with several qualifications that make clearer what to expect in the following pages. First, this book is not an actual example of comparative theology; for the most part, I am speaking about the discipline, not working through instances of it. My chapters remain largely descriptive, even as I make the case that the discipline can truly be understood only in the practice of it.

Second, it may seem a drawback that my examples are drawn almost entirely from the realm of Hindu-Christian studies. Some readers will wish for a more comprehensive view of diversity, with examples drawn from many different traditions. I agree that attention to different traditions in different combinations will raise different interesting questions, and I encourage my readers to undertake and write about such matters, with attention to particular examples. I have simply focused on what is familiar to me, and, in any case, I do not have an encyclopedic mind.

Third, it may seem a related drawback that I most frequently refer to examples of my own work, these books in particular:

Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology (1993), which explores the non-dualist Vedanta of Sankara (eighth century) and the reading practice it exemplifies, and in that light reconsiders the Christian way of theologizing;

Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India (1996), a study of the Tamil religious classic *Tiruvaymoli*, and its interpretation in the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition;

Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions (2001), which highlights the interreligious role of reasoning, showing how key theological themes recur in the Hindu and Christian traditions because they are intelligent questions to ask, irrespective of religious differences that otherwise more deeply divide Hindu and Christian;

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Blessed Virgin Mary (2005) draws upon three lengthy goddess hymns of India to give detail and substance to Christian reflection on goddesses; it draws then upon Marian hymns, to highlight a fruitful Christian response to the theologies and pieties of goddess devotion;

The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnavas (2008) explores core Srivaisnava theological beliefs as enunciated in three mantras key to Srivaisnavism, read along with traditional commentaries;

Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God (2008) argues that comparative study,

properly practiced as religious reading, intensifies rather than dilutes religious commitment and devotion.

Drawing so much attention to my own work may seem to betray an undue measure of self-absorption – are there no other good examples of comparative theology? Of course there are, and I shall refer to some of this literature in chapter 3. But comparative theology is best understood by reflection on practice. If I am going to explain the field, explanation works well as reflection on my own practice. These books have all been experiments in comparative theology as I understand it. Though not intended as a series, they overlap in theme and text, later books picking up on issues of reading unresolved in the earlier ones. But reflection on such examples is meant only as a starting point for broader reflection. I urge readers to make room for their own reflections on diversity and its implications, carried out in light of what they learn of other traditions.

Fourth, my strong emphasis on faith and tradition may seem to marginalize readers who do not identify with any particular religious tradition, either because they have left behind the religion of their upbringing, or never belonged to a religious tradition in the first place. It is true that I do not wish to move to a tradition-neutral stance, as if to suggest that traditional foundations do not really matter. Nor do I wish to define "tradition" so loosely that it turns out that everyone has a tradition, like it or not. People who reject traditional religious commitments entirely or deny the very idea of religious tradition are not likely to find comparative theology compelling – nor are they likely to contribute to it. But others, though unaffiliated with any church or other religious community, do have their own ways of working out issues of faith, tradition, and community. Such individuals will often enough have called into being their own communities and traditions, even without specific allegiance to already-known and settled communities. They may have thoughtfully worked out their own approach to what is true and good, and devised their own understanding of personal and communal history. In this personal way they may proceed to reflect on all religions – as "other" traditions – and help the cause of comparative theology by bringing their

own concerns and sensitivities to bear on the issues otherwise expressed in more traditional theological terms.

Looking Ahead

The case sketched thus far for a comparative theology is only a beginning. That it may be intellectually plausible and has religious and personal value simply marks an ideal. This is a theology that can be realized only in its history and by way of particular experiments and practical choices. Chapter 2 sets the scene for reflection on comparative theology. I first look into the Christian missionary encounter with other religions, particularly Hinduism. I argue that even if missionary zeal and integral learning did not always mesh well, the great missionary scholars nonetheless did learn deeply from other religions, in their own way faced up to enduring tensions of faith and understanding, and provided us with new learning that changed how we think of religions even today. In the chapter's second half, I reflect on nineteenth-century Anglo-American comparative theology and its similarly awkward mix of impressive scholarship and settled faith conclusions. Again, this difficult combination seems to domesticate knowledge for the sake of doctrine, but it is also a tradition of learning integrated with faith that theologians today would be wise not to disown entirely. In chapter 3, I look into comparative theology's more recent history, noting the positions of key figures in the field and also of some younger voices, and situating my work in relation to theirs.

In light of these historical and theoretical reflections, in chapter 4 I offer my own view of comparative theology as a practice, particularly the reading of texts as a most suitable mode of comparative theology. To explain the necessity of making specific choices in order to do comparative theological work, in chapter 5 I review the choices that I, a particular comparative theologian, have made when narrowing my focus to certain aspects of Hinduism read in light of some strands of Catholic tradition. Since comparative theology imagines a theological exchange across religious borders, I also make the case for Hindu theology

and even Hindu comparative theology; on that basis, I hope for an even wider array of theologies and comparative theologies beyond the Christian context. In chapter 6 I offer a plenary address I gave at the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2003 as a full example of approach, and to show how comparative theology begins in detail but in the end still discloses a very broad set of issues.

The concluding three chapters turn to the fruits of comparative study, as it adds up to more than individual insights personally satisfying to the individuals who work in this field. In chapter 7 I explore the possibilities and problems that arise as we reconnect comparative theological study to mainstream, non-comparative theological study. I reflect on the fruits of the knowledge generated out of this study and particularly on the question of truth, giving a series of small examples of theological insights arising in my own work. Chapter 8 reproduces an essay of mine that shows how our knowledge of God can shift and grow due to comparative study. In chapter 9 I reflect on the impact of this theologizing on the comparative theologian, as her identity becomes inextricably involved in two traditions at once. I conclude by highlighting the opportunities and duties of readers of comparative theology, as they move from reading comparative theological writings by others to their own comparative reflection.

May 30, 1985

THE SPIRIT OF JAPAN, 20 MILES FROM DETROIT

By JOHN HOLUSHA, Special to the New York Times

FLAT ROCK, Mich., May 29— The Governor of Michigan took a tree sprig from an elaborately garbed Shinto minister and laid it on a small altar. Then he bowed deeply twice, clapped his hands two times and bowed again before walking away.

James J. Blanchard was taking part in a 40-minute Shinto service today that was part of the groundbreaking for the Mazda Motor Manufacturing (U.S.A.) Corporation's assembly plant here, about 20 miles from the heart of the American auto industry. The title of today's activity was the ''Sacred Groundbreaking Ceremony With the Principal Parent of the Universe.''

Among the 500 people watching the ceremony were many local residents hoping to find work at the plant, which the Governor said would employ 5,000 people.

The Mazda facility will be the fourth automobile plant to be operated by a Japanese company in this country. The emphasis on Japanese culture, in a state that has suffered the most from the effects of imports from Japan, was in sharp contrast to the largely neutral tone adopted at the other three plants.

The other Japanese auto companies have avoided the industrial centers of the Middle West. The Honda Motor Company and the Nissan Motor Company located their plants in rural Ohio and Tennessee, respectively. The Toyota Motor Corporation's joint venture with the General Motors Corporation is in the San Francisco Bay area, in Fremont, Calif.

Smashed Cars

Laid-off auto workers in the Middle West have smashed Japanese cars with sledgehammers as part of fund-raising events and slurs about Japanese imports were said to be a factor in the beating death of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American, in a Detroit suburb by two auto workers in 1982.

The Rev. Alfred Tsuyuki of the Konko Church of Los Angeles, who conducted today's ceremony, acknowledged the apprehension many Asians and Asian-Americans feel about this part of the country. When representatives of Mazda approached him with the idea for the ceremony, he said: ''I was very reluctant at first. 'I said, Michigan! You must be out of your mind.' ''

State officials and the leaders of the United Automobile Workers union went to considerable lengths to convince Mazda that conditions here were not as hostile as the area's image seemed to indicate.

Both state and local governments offered financial incentives to Mazda, and the union agreed to lower initial wage rates and to cooperate with Japanese management practices. Even Stephen Yokich, a vice president of the U.A.W., participated in today's services, although his bows were little more than brief noddings of the head.

Kenichi Yamamoto, the development engineer who is president of the Mazda Motor Company, the parent corporation, acknowledged the difficulty of transplanting a production system evolved in Japan to the unionized Middle West. ''We recognize that the guiding principles to which we have long subscribed in operating our company will be put to a real test here at Flat Rock.''

Upholding a Tradition

Nevertheless, Mazda officials have evidently decided not to minimize their own ways to blend into the background here. Asked why the ceremony, which included background music and a dance by a costumed young woman, was staged, Bill Ott, a spokesman for the company said: ''It is a Japanese company and a Shinto groundbreaking is a Japanese tradition. We thought it was something interesting for the people here to see and it is very meaningful to Japanese people.''

The plant is scheduled to go into operation in the fall of 1987 at a cost of $450 million. About half of its annual production of 240,000 cars is to be sold to the Ford Motor Company, which owns 25 percent of Mazda's stock.

Donald E. Petersen, the chairman of Ford, said today that ''we don't have a final agreement yet'' on how many cars Ford will take, but added that he was ''confident we will get substantial production from this plant.'' The Mazda factory is being built on the site of a former Ford casting plant, which is being demolished.

A fifth Japanese auto maker, the Mitsubishi Motors Corporation, has announced it is looking for a site for an American plant, which it will operate in some form of association with the Chrysler Corporation.

Industry analysts said that, by 1990, the Japanese will have the capacity to produce more than one million cars a year in the United States, which would make them collectively the rough equivalent of Chrysler.

photo of Osamu Nobuto turning ground and the Rev. Alfred Tsuyuki (AP)

Flex Films holds blessing and breaks ground
Investment will create 250 local jobs
By Sarah Bennett
Sunday, October 30, 2011 at 5:55 am *(Updated: October 30, 5:58 am)*

Gov. Steve Beshear sat cross legged on a white cushion for an hour in what may be the first bhoomi poojan ceremony held in Kentucky. He hopes it's not the last, the governor said Friday at a celebration of the Flex Films (USA) Inc. investment in Elizabethtown.

The traditional Indian ground blessing ceremony was conducted in a pit prepared at the site of the new manufacturing facility in the T.J. Patterson Industrial Park off Black Branch Road.

Because of the cool, wet weather, activities were held underneath a white tent at the construction site. For more than an hour, guests observed the traditional Indian blessing through a haze created by burning incense and a ceremonial fire. A handful of participants, including Beshear and Elizabethtown Mayor Tim Walker, sat cross legged and shoeless on cushions while a priest chanted Hindu prayers.

At the end of the ground blessing, participants shoveled the newly blessed earth into a hole in the center of the pit.

"This is a real milestone for us in the Elizabethtown/Hardin County community," former state Sen. Joe Prather said after the blessing concluded and officials gathered on stage.

The new Flex Films facility in Elizabethtown will be completed in two phases, with the first phase expected to be finished late next year.

Walker said together the two phases mark a $180 million investment and 250 new jobs for Hardin County workers, providing the area, and especially Elizabethtown, with the opportunity for economic expansion.

"It's a win-win situation for both of us, Flex Films and Elizabethtown," he said.

Flex Films is an environmentally clean company with strong business values and hard work ethic, Walker said.

The 250 jobs represent 250 Kentucky families who will be better equipped to face the economic climate, Beshear said.

"There is no doubt Kentucky is open for business," the governor said Friday.

Audi Chaturavedi, director of Flex Films, when asked why the company chose to build its new manufacturing plant in Kentucky, offers a list of reasons but always

ends by citing Kentuckians' commitment and hospitality.

"It is the people of Kentucky who brought us to Kentucky," he said.

Williams blasts Beshear for participating in Hindu ground-blessing ceremony
Ceremony part of ground-breaking
BY JACK BRAMMER
jbrammer@herald-leader.comNovember 2, 2011

SHELBYVILLE — Republican David Williams tried to stir support Tuesday by criticizing Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear for taking part in a Hindu "ground blessing" ceremony last week for a new India-based employer in Elizabethtown.

"He's there participating with Hindu priests, participating in a religious ceremony," Williams said during a campaign stop in Shelbyville. "He's sitting down there with his legs crossed, participating in Hindu prayers with a dot on his forehead with incense burning around him. I don't know what the man was thinking."

Beshear's campaign spokesman called Williams' remarks "pathetic and desperate."

"Gov. Beshear is proud that 250 new jobs are coming to Elizabethtown," campaign spokesman Matt Erwin said in a statement.

Williams' comments show that "he's frustrated because he's so far behind" in the race for governor, said Larry J. Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. Recent polling shows Williams, the state Senate president from Burkesville, and independent Gatewood Galbraith of Lexington trailing Beshear by a wide margin.

"He's got to roll the dice now, so he is bringing up religion," Sabato said.

National Hindu spokesman Rajan Zed issued a statement Tuesday night decrying Williams' "dragging of a Hindu ceremony ... into an electoral battle for governor's race in Kentucky."

"Kentucky governorship candidate David Williams should apologize for the reported comments about the Hindu ceremony, because if elected on November eighth, he would be the governor of all Kentuckians, including Hindu Kentuckians," the release said.

Beshear's office issued a news release Friday that said the governor joined community leaders and Flex Films officials to take part in a ground-blessing ceremony in preparation for the flexible-packaging company's first U.S. manufacturing plant. It said the project stemmed from Beshear's first economic-development trip to India last fall.

The Flex Films project involves at least 250 new jobs and a $180 million capital investment in Kentucky, Beshear's office said. The news release described the blessing ceremony as "a traditional service in India for new homes, businesses or other facilities."

"To show partnership in the new endeavor, both Flex Films executives and state and local officials participated in the ceremony," the release said.

The News-Enterprise of Elizabethtown reported Sunday that Beshear "sat cross-legged on a white cushion for an hour in what may be the first *bhoomi poojan* ceremony held in Kentucky" to celebrate the Flex Films investment.

The newspaper said the ceremony "was conducted in a pit prepared at the site of the new manufacturing plant in the T.J. Patterson Industrial Park.

"For more than an hour, guests observed the traditional Indian blessing through a haze created by burning incense and a ceremonial fire," the newspaper said. "A handful of participants, including Beshear and Elizabethtown Mayor Tim Walker, sat cross-legged and shoeless on cushions while a priest chanted Hindu prayers. At the end of the ground blessing, participants shoveled the newly blessed earth into a hole at the site."

Williams, a Methodist, brought up the ceremony to about 30 supporters Tuesday morning at Andriot's paint store in downtown Shelbyville.

Williams said Beshear could have attended the ground-breaking ceremony without participating in the religious portion of the event.

"If I'm a Christian, I don't participate in Jewish prayers. I'm glad they do that. I don't participate in Hindu prayers. I don't participate in Muslim prayers. I don't do that," Williams later told reporters. "To get down and get involved and participate in prayers to these polytheistic situations, where you have these Hindu gods that they are praying to, doesn't appear to me to be in line with what a governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky ought to be doing."

Williams said he was not showing disrespect to Hindus with his comments.

"I think you disrespect other people's religion when you go down there," he said.

He said he has visited countries that had Hindu ceremonies but declined to participate. "That would be idolatry," he said.

Williams added that Beshear has said in his campaign ads that he is the son and grandson of Baptist ministers.

"Yet between his not being pro-life and his support for gambling and now getting down and doing Hindu prayers to these Hindu gods, I think his grandfathers wouldn't be very pleased with Steve Beshear," Williams said.

Elizabethtown Mayor Tim C. Walker said via email that he was shocked by Williams' comments.

"Here in Elizabethtown, we were very happy that Flex Films is locating here, and I was pleased to participate in the blessing ceremony," Walker said. "It did not compromise my faith, and it's despicable to suggest that we should not welcome this company and their investment."

John C. Green, a political scientist at the University of Akron who focuses on religion in politics, said he will be "very surprised" if Beshear's participation in the Hindu ceremony changes the outcome of Tuesday's election.

He said it is common for a candidate to try to distinguish himself on religious grounds by criticizing his opponent.

"Historically, such accusations were often effective because it was important for candidates to be in the mainstream, but there is evidence in recent times that Christian groups have become less sensitive to them because Americans are becoming more diverse," Green said. "Some Christians may react negatively to Beshear for this, but I think the total impact will be much less than Mr. Williams hopes for, especially since Beshear's action was tied with the creation of jobs."

Green said that Republican U.S. Sen. Rand Paul's religion was questioned in last year's U.S. Senate race by Democratic challenger Jack Conway.

"That certainly was not a successful move for the Democrat," Green said.

Williams blasts Beshear for participating in Hindu ground-blessing ceremony
Ceremony part of ground-breaking
BY JACK BRAMMER
jbrammer@herald-leader.comNovember 2, 2011

http://www.kentucky.com/2011/11/02/1943049/williams-blasts-beshear-for-participating.html#storylink=cpy

David Williams assails Steve Beshear over participation in Hindu prayer ceremony

Jan. 4, 2012 11:25 AM | courier-journal.com

SHEPHERDSVILLE, KY. — Senate President David Williams lambasted Gov. Steve Beshear on Tuesday for participating in a Hindu prayer ceremony last week at a new manufacturing plant site in Elizabethtown, saying the governor was worshipping “false gods.”

At a campaign stop at a Frisch’s Big Boy restaurant in Bullitt County, Williams, who is running against Beshear in the governor’s race, told about two dozen supporters that Beshear’s decision to take part in the prayer service “should put his judgment in question.”

In an interview, he accused Beshear, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers, of worshipping “false gods” and said he hopes members of the Hindu faith convert to Christianity.

“I was very careful in saying that I don’t criticize anyone, you know, that is a Hindu,” he said. “It’s their right to be a Hindu person if they want to. … As a Christian, I hope their eyes are opened and they receive Jesus Christ as their personal savior, but it’s their business what they do.”

Members of the Hindu community in Louisville and elsewhere were critical of Williams’ remarks.

“If he’s essentially made a call to Hindus in Kentucky that his hope is that they find Jesus Christ, that is just absolutely unacceptable, and he owes Hindus not only in Kentucky but in the United States and around the world an apology,” said Suhag Shukla, managing director and legal counsel for the Hindu American Foundation, a Washington-based organization that does education and advocacy on behalf of Hindus. “That sort of attitude has brought up too much division between religions, and there’s no place for that in our increasingly closer-knit world.”

In recent polls, Williams and his running mate, Richie Farmer, trail by about 30 points and have little money in their campaign fund to combat the stream of television commercials supporting Beshear and his running mate, former Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson.

The groundbreaking event was at a company called Flex Films, which Beshear recruited to Kentucky after a trip to India last fall. The company has promised to spend $180 million on the plant and create 250 jobs.

Reporter Joseph Gerth can be reached at (502) 582-4702. Reporter Peter Smith contributed to this story.

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Public Reason without Exclusion? Clayton, Rawls, and the Vāda Tradition

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Abstract

A pioneering figure in cross-cultural philosophy of religion, the late John Clayton saw in the Indian philosophical tradition of *vāda* a model for public discourse in pluralist democracies like the United States. But although Clayton offers a devastating critique of Jeffersonian appeals to ostensibly neutral "common ground," I argue that these criticisms neither present a direct challenge to the conception of public reason developed by John Rawls, nor adequately address the problem with which Rawls was chiefly concerned—namely, the just exercise of coercive political power in contexts of plurality. Rather than defending Rawls, however, I argue that power is constitutive of the public sphere, and that exclusions are inevitable. Bringing Clayton's work briefly into dialogue with Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism and Amartya Sen's interpretation of the Indian argumentative tradition, I conclude that the task of liberal democratic politics is not to eliminate exclusions *per se* but to render the operations of power visible and subject to contestation.

Keywords: Chantal Mouffe; Indian philosophy; John Clayton; John Rawls; pluralism; power; public reason; vāda.

American public life—and the philosophical theorizing to which it gives rise—is characteristically preoccupied with the relation between unity and plurality, with the uneasy tension between the *unum* and the *pluribus*.[2]

1. Richard Amesbury is Associate Professor of Ethics, Claremont School of Theology.

2. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2008 meeting of the American Academy of Religion in a session of the Philosophy of Religion Section devoted to John Clayton's book *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*

Writing in 1787, but seeming to anticipate our present anxieties, James Madison observed in "Federalist 10" that

> [a] zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points...; [and] an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; ...have...divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good.[3]

According to Madison, the solution is to be sought not in enlightened statecraft—whose practitioners, regrettably, "will not always be at the helm"[4]—but in the "extent and proper structure of the Union" itself.[5] As Michael Walzer has put the point more recently, "The crucial problem of the politics of difference is to encompass the actually existing differences within some overarching political structure."[6]

But that is easier said than done, for the political institutions of open societies function not merely to impose limits on what Madison called "factionalism," but also as incubators of plurality, hothouses for the flourishing of difference. As Madison himself observed (employing the gendered idiom of his times), "As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed."[7] Thus, if an overarching political structure is the *solution* to the problem of plurality in an open society, it is also among its *conditions*, and plurality presents itself as a standing threat to the stability of the structure itself. The deeper the differences to be accommodated, the greater the difficulty of achieving agreement on the nature of the political framework, and the more susceptible the framework thus becomes to crises of legitimacy.[8]

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). I would like to thank the event's organizers, other panelists, and members of the audience, as well as this journal's anonymous reader(s), for insightful feedback.

3. James Madison, "Federalist 10," in *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1987), 124.

4. Ibid., 125.

5. Ibid., 128.

6. Michael Walzer, *What it Means to be an American* (New York: Marsilio, 1996), 8.

7. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, 123. Compare John Rawls's claim that reasonable pluralism "is the long-run outcome of the work of human reason under enduring free institutions." John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 129.

8. And in what can such a political structure be grounded, if it is to remain neutral vis-à-vis the existing differences it is meant to accommodate and manage? It is precisely an appreciation of this problem that characterizes John Rawls's later work, with its political (as opposed to comprehensive) conception of justice. Referring to his earlier argument in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls has argued that, "since the principles of justice as fairness in *Theory*

One classic response—in America, associated historically with Madison's friend Jefferson[9]—is to privatize difference, relegating it to the periphery of political life in order to capitalize on what we hold in common. Of course, the dichotomy between public and private is inherently unstable, the boundaries of political life uncertain and notoriously difficult to maintain. Moreover, whatever the sources of its appeal in Jefferson's day, an emphasis on shared values or a common culture seems less promising in our own time, to precisely the degree that America is more diverse (and its diversity better acknowledged) in the twenty-first century than it was in the eighteenth. Any thick conception of "common ground" seems ironically to leave many things out, to alienate rather than to unite, whereas what is genuinely common turns out to be fairly thin. Is there an alternative? As the late John Clayton aptly asks, "What kind of strategy would be effective in respect to this sort of diversity, so that it has a chance of becoming a positive good rather than a detriment to the stability of an open society?"[10]

This paper explores an alternative account of public reason which Clayton developed through the creative approach of applying methodological insights from classical Indian philosophical and religious thought to problems in modern and contemporary liberal political theory. A pioneering figure in cross-cultural philosophy of religion, Clayton saw in the discursive practices of the Indian tradition of *vāda* (debate) a model for public discourse in pluralist democracies like the United States. Recognizing the inherently contextual nature of reason exchange—that reasons are always such only in relation to particular groups of people—this model of deliberative democracy aspires to give differences a fair hearing in public debate. Exposing the parochial nature of what sometimes passes for "common ground"—for example, Jefferson's notion of "rational theology"—Clayton argues that the proper criterion for admission to public debate is not *neutrality* but *contestability*.

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require a constitutional democratic regime, and since the fact of reasonable pluralism is the long-term outcome of a society's culture in the context of these free institutions, the argument in *Theory* relies on a premise the realization of which its principles of justice rule out. This is the premise that in the well-ordered society of justice as fairness, citizens hold the same comprehensive doctrine...," Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xl.

9. For a discussion of Madison's views, see Michael W. McConnell, "Believers as Equal Citizens," in *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith: Religious Accommodation in Pluralist Democracies*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 90–110. For a critique of this reading see Amy Guttman's contribution to the same volume, "Religion and State in the United States: A Defense of Two-Way Protection," 127–64.

10. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 65.

Clayton sometimes presents this model as an alternative not simply to the "Enlightenment project" of Jefferson and his contemporaries, but also to the conception of public reason developed in the twentieth century by the American political philosopher John Rawls. In at least partial agreement with Jefferson, Rawls held that participants in public reason are morally obliged to refrain from arguing on the basis of group-specific "comprehensive religious and philosophical doctrines," limiting themselves instead to "presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial."[11] Despite superficial similarities, however, Rawls's conception of public reason differs in important respects from Jefferson's. I argue that Clayton's criticisms of the latter project do not apply directly to the former, and that his alternative conception of public discourse does not adequately address the problem with which Rawls was chiefly concerned—namely, the just exercise of *coercive political power* in contexts of radical plurality.

Rather than defending Rawls, however, I argue that both conceptions of public reason can be faulted for overlooking important aspects of the relation between power and political discourse. Whereas advocates of deliberative democracy, including both Rawls and Clayton, tend to conceive of the public realm as a discursive space *within which* reasons are exchanged and power is exercised—a space which is ideally open to all citizens, permitting what Chantal Mouffe has called "consensus without exclusion"—I argue that power is *constitutive* of the public sphere, and that exclusions are inevitable. The task of liberal democratic politics, I conclude, is not to eliminate exclusions, but to render the operations of power visible and subject to ongoing contestation. Bringing Clayton's work briefly into dialogue with Amartya Sen's interpretation of the Indian argumentative tradition, I suggest that one of the principal functions of public discourse is precisely to interrogate the boundaries of public discourse, calling into question the various extra-democratic grounds by means of which distinctions are maintained between citizens and outsiders.

Common Ground or Defensible Difference?

In the essays collected posthumously in *Religions, Reasons, and Gods*, Clayton looks to the various discursive strategies that have developed historically under conditions of religious diversity in various cultural contexts in an effort to retrieve an alternative to the liberal conceptions of public reason dominant in modernity. The hallmark of this approach, which Clayton

11. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 224–5.

describes as the "clarification of defensible difference," is its substitution of *contestability* for *neutrality* as the criterion for admission to public discourse. His hope is that "attending to the strategies religious communities themselves have developed to accommodate the Other in their midst may offer an alternative way of conceiving public reason—one in which reason lies open to all, to be sure, but does not require abandonment of group-specific reasons as the price of entry to the public arena."[12]

Clayton's criticisms of the "common ground" approach to public reason are part of a larger critique of what he calls the "Enlightenment project." He writes:

> The "Enlightenment project" in its most general form is an attempt to identify and to justify without recourse to outside authority or private passion but by the exercise of reason and the limits of experience alone what we can truly know, what we ought rightly to do and what we may reasonably hope. Rationality requires us in our deliberations to achieve neutrality by divesting ourselves of allegiance to any particular standpoint and to achieve universality by abstracting ourselves from all those communities of interest that may limit our perspective.[13]

Within political philosophy, the Enlightenment project manifests itself in a strict partition between "public" and "private" spheres of life, marked by the exclusion of "sectarian" commitments from the public sphere. In keeping with an account of rationality that privileged universality, thinkers like Jefferson held that "[e]xclusion of parochial religious interests from the public arena is necessary both for the integrity of the state and for the prosperity of true religion."[14] Here "true" or "rational" religion was understood to mean *public religion*—religion open to all in virtue of "being supported by reasons that are reasons for everyone."[15]

Jefferson's assumption was that rational theology "could lay a common foundation in which to ground a public religious discourse capable of expressing a kind of *consensus gentium*."[16] Rational religion was viewed not as one sect among others, but as the universal, normative core from which the various Christian sects "may deviate to varying degrees, the degree of their deviation being a measure of their irrationality."[17] But as Clayton points out, "rational religion" was able to pass itself off as universal only because of the limited theological diversity of the parties admitted to public discourse in eighteenth-century western Europe and its (former)

12. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 74.
13. Ibid., 21.
14. Ibid., 62.
15. Ibid., 64.
16. Ibid., 26.
17. Ibid., 64.

colonies. In reality, of course, Jefferson's preference for "rational religion" was itself rooted in the very narrowness of perspective he hoped by means of it to overcome. It bore more than a passing resemblance to the Unitarianism that, in 1822, in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, Jefferson confidently predicted would "become the general religion of the United States."[18] As Clayton notes, "in the Jeffersonian project, public policy and private commitment finally coincide."[19]

That rational religion's claims to neutrality masked a decided religious bias is illustrative of what Clayton recognizes as problematic about the Enlightenment project as a whole. As he puts it, the project "ends in a paradox by its own foundationalist pretensions to speak with a universal and neutral voice, when its tone is more nearly parochial and partisan."[20] To put it another way, the maintenance of what passes for common ground—whether in Jefferson's day or in ours—requires *power*, and "[a]ccess to shared space requires a willingness to conform to rules"; it is "never entirely free of regulation."[21] Every space is *some* space (or *someone's* space), and reasons are always reasons for particular groups of people.

In striking contrast to the Enlightenment and Jeffersonian projects, what we might call the "Claytonian project" emphasizes this difference and plurality. "The project I would propose...," he writes, "requires a series of displacements...: in the place of religion, rationality and God, I would substitute *religions*, *reasons*, and *Gods*."[22] That is to say, Clayton prizes particular practices and traditions over the generic construct "religion," appreciating the contextual nature of reason-exchange and—in contrast to what commonly passes for "pluralism" among philosophers of religion—recognizing within these discursive practices an irreducible plurality of ultimates and ends.[23] Yet, Clayton is unwilling to embrace relativism, or to rule out external criticism of religious claims on grounds of their incommensurability. "The otherness of the Other must be protected, by every means, but not at the price of abandoning public contestability of religious claims, whether of a cognitive or of an ethical kind."[24]

Alternative models of public discourse, which preserve public contestability while safeguarding otherness, do not need to be invented as substitutes for the Enlightenment project; according to Clayton, they can

18. Thomas Jefferson, private letter to James Smith, December 8, 1822, quoted in Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 28.
19. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 27.
20. Ibid., 32.
21. Ibid., 59.
22. Ibid., 41.
23. See ibid., 309.
24. Ibid., 35.

be discerned in historical practices of reason-exchange within and among religious communities. Consider, for example, the discursive strategies that developed among competing *darśanas* (or philosophical perspectives; from a Sanskrit word meaning "to see") in the Indian *vāda* tradition. Typically, Clayton points out, these formalized debates consisted of two parts—one negative and the other positive. During the negative half of the debate, one sought to undermine the position of one's opponent strictly by means of reasons that were considered relevant within the opponent's *darśana*, whereas in the positive half one was allowed to appeal to reasons specific to one's own *darśana*. Clayton notes that "[s]uch tradition-specific reasons were not introduced in order to cut off debate or to assert their privileged authority. For they, too, were open to challenge from the outside. Although authoritative within one's own tradition, such grounds were not immune from public contestation."[25]

Similar forms of disputation developed independently among Jains and Buddhists, enabling debate not only within, but across the boundaries of, these traditions. In this way, Clayton argues, "[o]ne could enter public space and participate in public reason without pretending to rise above difference or to abstract oneself from one's entanglements with the communities of interest that make us who we are."[26] Here religion was not a conversation-stopper: "Unlike classical European liberalism, the Indian debating tradition did not require one to give up one's own grounds in order to participate in public reason; public reason is open to all, but a share in 'common ground' is not required."[27]

25. Ibid., 39.

26. Ibid., 72. Such examples of cross-cultural negotiation are not limited, however, to the non-Western or premodern worlds. Clayton finds a similar strategy at work in the justification of contemporary conceptions of human rights. Though universal in scope, human rights claims depend for their legitimacy on the distinctive moral resources available within a plurality of discourses and traditions, both religious and otherwise, and it is a confusion to assume that universality at the one level requires universality (or neutrality) at the other. For "the discourse of human rights is itself temporal and not eternal, local and not universal." Ibid., 77. By means of reasons indigenous to multiple traditions, "specific limited goals may be tactically agreed upon by culturally diverse groups who share no common historical narrative and occupy no 'common ground' save only the fragile and threatened planet that fate has destined as our shared home." Ibid., 78–79.

27. Ibid., 72. Whether it was "open to all" is debatable. For a useful discussion of this question, see Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 6ff. Sen argues that the Indian argumentative tradition, though not equally accessible to all, was nevertheless not limited entirely to cultural elites. "If it is important not to see the Indian argumentative tradition as the exclusive preserve of men, it is also necessary to understand that the use of argumentative encounters has frequently crossed the barriers of class and caste." Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 10.

Religion and Public Reason

Although it should by now be clear that Clayton had larger designs—among them an historical assessment of the "Enlightenment Project," and especially Jefferson's contribution to it—it is natural to read his criticisms of "common ground" as at least partly a critique of the idea of public reason developed in John Rawls's later writings.[28] For according to Clayton, today's Rawlsians are heirs to the Jeffersonian agenda. "Rawlsians may have soberly realized that citizens of modern democratic societies share less in common than they had once imagined," he writes, "but they have not abandoned the strategy of seeking out and expanding the possible patches of overlapping consensus that may survive."[29]

But understood in this way—as aimed at contemporary, and not simply historical, targets—it is not as clear that Clayton's criticisms meet their mark. It is true that Rawls held that the content of public reason properly includes only what is common to all, thereby excluding all those religious and philosophical commitments about which people disagree, and in this respect he bears a superficial resemblance to Jefferson (except that Rawls had little use for the eighteenth-century dream of "rational religion"). Nevertheless, in his later work, Rawls is careful to distance his rather limited ambitions from those commonly associated with the Enlightenment. For instance, in the Introduction to *Political Liberalism* he writes:

> Sometimes one hears reference made to the so-called Enlightenment project of finding a philosophical secular doctrine, one founded on reason and yet comprehensive. It would then be suitable to the modern world, so it was thought, now that the religious authority and the faith of Christian ages was alleged to be no longer dominant. Whether there is or ever was such an Enlightenment project we need not consider; for in any case political liberalism, as I think of it, and justice as fairness as a form thereof, has no such ambitions.[30]

Of course, we need not simply take Rawls's word for it: it may be that he protests too much. Still, I happen to think there are important differences, and that understanding them can be instructive.[31]

28. See especially *Political Liberalism* and "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" (included in the expanded edition of *Political Liberalism*).

29. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 58.

30. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xviii.

31. There are, moreover, important affinities between Rawls's approach and Clayton's. For instance, Rawls argues that his political conception of justice can be justified by appeal to an "overlapping consensus" of comprehensive doctrines. The feasibility and limits of such a consensus can certainly be debated, but it is worth noting that Rawls's conception of an overlapping consensus is itself an exercise in what Clayton calls "defensible difference." Just as, on Clayton's account, human rights claims can be justified within various

Although Rawls's project was neither as similar to Jefferson's, nor as different from Clayton's, as one might initially think, my aim in pointing this out is not ultimately to defend Rawls from some perceived slight, but to suggest that appreciating how Rawls differs from Jefferson helps to shed light on an underdeveloped dimension of Clayton's alternative. The central problem here, which Rawls understood but which—I hasten to add—I do not think he succeeded in solving (and indeed which, I will suggest, does not admit of a purely rational solution), has to do with the distinctive nature and ends of political discourse and may not manifest itself to the same degree in some of the other discursive contexts that Clayton discusses as models of defensible difference.

Like Madison, Rawls saw pluralism—religious and otherwise—not "as disaster but rather as the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions."[32] The diversity of reasonable comprehensive doctrines characteristic of liberal democratic societies "is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away,"[33] and resentment of it is inseparable from resentment of free institutions.[34] Nevertheless—and here too Rawls resembled Madison—this diversity poses a challenge to the stability of the very institutions that make it possible. Surely one enduring legacy of Rawls's later work is the clarity and urgency with which it sets the agenda for contemporary political philosophy: "How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious,

religious and moral traditions (see n. 26), so, on Rawls's account, the political conception of justice is rooted in particular comprehensive doctrines. "All those who affirm the political conception start from their own comprehensive view and draw on the religious, philosophical, and moral grounds it provides. The fact that people affirm the same political conception on those grounds does not make their affirming it any less religious, philosophical or moral, as the case may be, since the grounds sincerely held determine the nature of the affirmation." Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 147–48. On this account, common ground is the *outcome*, rather than the *presupposition* of argument—although the substance of the political conception in turn places moral limits on certain forms of political discourse. As Rawls put it, "When citizens share a reasonable political conception of justice, they share common ground on which public discussion of fundamental questions can proceed." Ibid., 115.

32. Ibid., xxiv.

33. Ibid., 36. Note that "reasonableness" is not, on this account, an epistemological category.

34. Rawls writes, "To see reasonable pluralism as a disaster is to see the exercise of reason under the conditions of freedom itself as a disaster." Ibid., xxiv–v. Compare Madison: "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be a less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency." Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, 123.

philosophical, and moral doctrines?"[35] Or more pointedly: "How is it possible for those affirming a religious doctrine that is based on religious authority, for example, the Church or the Bible, also to hold a reasonable political conception that supports a just democratic regime?"[36] Or less optimistically: *is* it possible?

Part of Rawls's answer consists in his account of public reason, but this account, and the nature of the concerns that give rise to it, are often misunderstood. Far from being committed to a totalizing conception of rationality, Rawls acknowledges that reason-exchange takes many forms, and that the demands of *public reason*—in the technical sense he assigns the phrase—are tightly circumscribed. Its rules pertain only to public advocacy and voting "when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake."[37] They "do not apply to our personal deliberations and reflections about personal questions, or to the reasoning about them by members of associations such as churches and universities, all of which is a vital part of the background culture. Plainly," Rawls writes, "religious, philosophical, and moral considerations of many kinds may here properly play a role."[38] What distinguishes "public reason" from these "nonpublic" (but not *private*) forms of reason-exchange is that it issues ultimately in the exercise of *coercive political power by the state*.[39] As Rawls puts it, "in a democratic society public reason is the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution."[40] The central question is thus how that power is appropriately to be exercised—i.e., "in the light of what principles and ideals must we, as free and equal citizens, be able to view ourselves as exercising that power if our exercise of it is to be justifiable to other citizens and to respect their being reasonable and rational?"[41]

35. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xviii. It is worth noting *en passant* that although Madison had raised similar concerns in "Federalist 10", his contemporaries largely failed to grasp their significance. It was not until the twentieth century that Madison's view gained wide regard. See Larry D. Kramer, "Madison's Audience," *Harvard Law Review* 112/611 (1999): 611–79. Kramer writes, "If the Constitution embodies Madison's theory, it has come to do so only in our century, as a reflection of our present intellectual tastes." Kramer, 679.

36. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxxvii.

37. Ibid., 215.

38. Ibid.

39. Moreover, Rawls argues that the acceptance of political authority is in practice involuntary. "Political society is closed: we come to be within it and we do not, and indeed cannot, enter or leave it voluntarily." Ibid., 136.

40. Ibid., 214.

41. Ibid., 137. Rawls stresses that his concern is not simply with political stability, but with stability for the right reasons: "It is sometimes said that the idea of public reason is put

For Rawls, the special demands of public reason are no more than what civility and respect for one's fellow citizens require in such circumstances—namely, "to live politically with others in the light of reasons all might reasonably be expected to endorse."[42] It is on this ground—and not because they are presumed to be false or epistemically sub-par—that "comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrines" are to be avoided in favor of "the plain truths now widely accepted, or available, to citizens generally."[43] In a democratic exchange of reasons, what is common is to be preferred over what is particular, not because it is more likely to be true, but because one owes it to one's fellow citizens to justify the exercise of coercive power by appeal to considerations that they will also recognize as reasons.[44] It is not enough for arguments to be sound; they must "be publicly *seen* to be sound."[45] On a Rawlsian account, the content of public reason is conceived as tradition-impartial but not tradition-independent, and it is recommended for rather "communitarian" reasons: here agreement in conclusions is made possible by virtue of agreement on what count as relevant considerations.[46]

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forward primarily to allay the fear of the instability or fragility of democracy in the practical political sense That objection is incorrect and fails to see that public reason with its criterion of reciprocity characterizes the political relation with its ideal of democracy and bears on the nature of the regime whose stability we are concerned about " Ibid , xlix, n. 24.

42 Ibid , 243

43 Ibid , 224–25.

44 It is worth noting that even if "exclusionist" interpretations of the limits of public reason are motivated by moral concerns rather than tendentious epistemological assumptions, their defenders may nevertheless find it difficult to avoid falling back on philosophical assumptions every bit as controversial as the group-specific reasons in question For instance, it appears as though Rawls intends to limit the content of public reason to what we happen as an empirical fact of the matter to agree on, in which case religious beliefs could be included if society became sufficiently religiously homogenous, whereas any number of scientific truths which challenge popular assumptions would need to be excluded But the obvious difficulties with such "populist conceptions of public reason," as Christopher Eberle has called them, might push a rigorous exclusionist in the direction of the kind of foundationalist account Rawls explicitly disavows It could thus be argued that even if, in his later work, Rawls did not subscribe to the problematic assumptions that Clayton detects in Jefferson's view, aspects of his account of public reason seem to require something relevantly similar, and thus that Clayton's criticisms apply indirectly See Christopher J. Eberle, *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics* (New York Cambridge University Press, 2002), 198ff.

45 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 162 n 28, italics added.

46 Jeffrey Stout has noted that, for Rawlsians, "the social contract is essentially a substitute for communitarian agreement on a single comprehensive normative vision—a poor man's communitarianism " Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ· Princeton University Press, 2004), 73–74

To be sure, agreement in conclusions may still prove elusive. The game of politics inevitably produces winners and losers: the goal is simply to ensure that its outcome is conceived as legitimate—that the losers do not feel that they were arbitrarily excluded from the game, or that the winners won by not playing fairly. Thus, "[e]ven though we think our arguments sincere and not self-serving, we must consider what it is reasonable to expect others to think who stand to lose when our reasoning prevails." If the limits of public reason are honored, then, as Rawls puts it, "[e]ach thinks that all have spoken and voted at least reasonably...and honored their duty of civility."[47]

One can, of course, agree with Rawls on the importance of civility while rejecting his account of what it requires. Recently, Jeffrey Stout has taken up the challenge of articulating a conception of respect that does not require the exclusion of group-specific reasons, arguing that "[r]eal respect for others takes seriously the distinctive point of view *each* other occupies. It is respect for individuality, for difference."[48] Instead of attempting to couch our arguments in terms that *all* of our fellow citizens accept, *à la* Rawls, we should on Stout's account attempt to couch them in terms that *each* of them accepts, even if the terms differ from case to case.[49] Understood in this way, there need be nothing inherently disrespectful about arguing on the basis of reasons that are not "reasons" for everyone.

Stout's alternative conception of public reason is similar in some respects to the discursive strategies of the *vāda* tradition described by Clayton, and it seems right as far as it goes (e.g., it satisfies what Rawls calls the "criterion of reciprocity" at the level of form, even though content will vary), but it does not, I think, go far enough. For instance, since the reasons I offer to others will frequently differ from those by which I am myself moved, there is a real danger that reason-exchange will degenerate into manipulation. And even assuming I do act in good faith, how should I proceed when others fail to be persuaded by the reasons I have offered them, reasons whose relevance is not itself in doubt—especially when these others are in the minority and thus lack the political means to block my own preferred political outcome? Since it is usually possible to produce *some* reason, however unpersuasive, for nearly *any* conceivable decision, something more needs to be said not only about the *quality* of the reasons I offer to others, but also about the

47. Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 446.

48. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 73; original italics.

49. Rawls calls this discursive strategy "reasoning from conjecture," and he denies that it constitutes a form of public reasoning. See Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 465.

degree of justification required for the decisions I make, especially when coercion is their likely outcome.[50] What constitute *sufficient* reasons here, and who decides?

I do not mean to suggest that these questions are unanswerable. They have been discussed with depth and sensitivity by a range of contemporary thinkers.[51] My concern, however, is with the kind of answer for which we are looking. Here it is important to appreciate not simply the various forms that reason-giving takes, and the epistemic and moral standards to which these are in general expected to conform, but also the *limits* of reason constituted by the *ineliminability of power from politics*. These limits introduce an element of undecideability and a dimension of responsibility that ultimately elude even the best accounts of rationality.

The Ineliminability of Power

One benefit of counterposing Clayton with Rawls is that each calls attention to an important dimension of power that remains under-analyzed in the other's work. As we have seen, Rawls's primary concern is with the overt political power that citizens exercise over one another when they enact coercive laws, and he seeks to address it by insisting that the more significant of these decisions should be made only on the basis of premises that all of one's fellow citizens can reasonably be expected to endorse. For Rawls, the quest for "common ground" is motivated by a moral concern with the just exercise of coercive power, rather than by a foundationalist epistemology or a political *modus vivendi*: on his view, public reason provides citizens with a neutral space in which they can partipate as equals. Clayton, for his part, argues that there is a price to pay for marginalizing difference in the interests of putative consensus. Common ground is never unregulated: it depends for its maintenance on "control and power" and requires vigilant policing. Where Rawls is concerned principally with the *outcome* of public discourse, Clayton is concerned with *access to it*. But, as we have seen, power is no sooner addressed in one register than it reasserts itself in the other.

Clayton's ideal of public reason is a conversation from which the distorting effects of power have been removed, and to which all are granted access, provided they are willing to submit their claims to criticism—a looser, more capacious conception of reason-exchange. Though attractive

50. As Rawls puts it, "if we argue that the religious liberty of some citizens is to be denied, we must give them reasons they can not only understand—as Servetus could understand why Calvin wanted to burn him at the stake—but reasons we might reasonably expect that they, as free and equal citizens, might reasonably also accept." Ibid., 447.

51. See especially Eberle, *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*.

as a model for cross-cultural dialogue, such an account fails to see anything distinctive about *political* discourse, treating it as just another form of moral debate.[52] Perhaps no discursive space is altogether free from the dynamics of power, but in the political domain these are intrinsic, not incidental. Partly because public discourse issues in coercion, access to it is always subject to regulation. Here power is less a problem to be overcome than a defining feature of the landscape to be navigated. To be sure, all regulations are subject to political contestation, but the result of successful contestation is a *different* set of regulations, not the absence of regulation altogether. Moreover, deregulating the *content* of public reason—important though that can be—does not automatically lead to increased participation, as access can be blocked in numerous other ways.

In politics the choice is never simply between power and reason, or even between better and worse conceptions of reason-exchange, but between more and less reasonable and responsible uses of power. We can move power around, concentrating it at the end of reason-exchange or hiding it at the beginning—gerrymandering the boundary between insiders and outsiders so as to create the illusion of common ground—but we cannot eliminate it altogether. The best we can hope to do is to manage power more responsibly, a large part of which involves rendering it explicit, making it visible. The problem with Rawlsian or Jeffersonian "public reason," on this view, is not that common ground has a power dimension *per se*—power is inescapable here, and inequalities of access are inevitable—but that liberalism sometimes fails forthrightly to acknowledge this and address it responsibly. It is striking, for example, that while Rawls devotes considerable attention to the obligations citizens bear toward other citizens (with whom they are said to exist in a relationship of political equality), he says almost nothing about the question of how the distinction between citizens and non-citizens (who are *not* the political equals of citizens, and to whom, on this view, citizens need not justify themselves in the same way) is to be determined, taking our current civic

52. To be sure, Clayton acknowledges that the actual discursive encounters that provide the template often fell short of this ideal, noting, for example, that historically, "the asymmetry of political power in Islamic and Christian lands meant that in practice these discourses were in constant danger of being subverted politically as discourses of domination," and that even in India, where "political advantage was more randomly distributed," political factors played a role in debate, and debates sometimes functioned as means of gaining political advantage. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, 71. As these remarks illustrate, however, he tends to view relations of power as contingent intrusions into reason-exchange—which they certainly can be—rather than as constitutive of the political sphere in which these exchanges can occur.

and political boundaries more or less as given rather than as subject to perpetual negotiation.[53]

Drawing critically and selectively upon Carl Schmitt's political theory, Chantal Mouffe has argued that exclusions are necessary for the constitution of a *demos*, and so essential for democracy itself.[54] But whereas Schmitt concluded—with disastrous implications—that democracy is incompatible with liberal universalism (and thus that *liberal democracy* is impossible), Mouffe finds in this seeming inconsistency a creative, as opposed to destructive, tension.

> The democratic logic of constituting the people, and inscribing rights and equality into practices, is necessary to subvert the tendency towards abstract universalism inherent in liberal discourse. But the articulation with the liberal logic allows us constantly to challenge—through reference to "humanity" and the polemical use of "human rights"—the forms of exclusion that are necessarily inscribed in the political practice of installing those rights and defining "the people" which is going to rule.[55]

Mouffe's conception of liberal democracy as the dynamic juxtaposition of two distinct traditions is a helpful one, but she is here too quick to concede Schmitt's equation of democracy with political closure. On my view, what permits the tension between liberalism and democracy to amount to something more than a simple incompatibility is that space for the contestation of exclusions is *built right into the logic of democracy itself*. This is because exclusions, though necessary *in general*, can never *in particular instances* be justified *democratically*. For instance, the question of who is eligible to vote, crucial though *some* answer is for the possibility of democracy, cannot without circularity be decided by a vote: one can defer to tradition, precedent, or some putative authority (e.g., the "Founders"), but none of these is a *democratic* solution. To put it another way, democracy is never a fully closed system: the line between insiders and outsiders ("friends" and "enemies," on Schmitt's view) is inherently fuzzy and contestable. If democracy demands closure, it also resists it. On this reading, liberalism does not so much *oppose* democracy as *keep it honest*.

On Mouffe's "agonistic" account of democracy, the ideal of political consensus without exclusion must finally be recognized as illusory: "common ground" is always a temporary stabilization of power—a "provisional

53. According to Rawls, the "political relationship among democratic citizens" is "a relationship of persons within the basic structure of the societiy into which they are born and in which they normally lead a complete life." Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 216.

54. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 43.

55. Ibid., 44–45.

hegemony"—that necessarily rests upon some kind of exclusion.[56] "Contrary to other projects of radical or participatory democracy informed by a rationalistic framework, radical and plural democracy rejects the very possibility of a non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument where a non-coercive consensus could be attained."[57] Thus, Mouffe argues that "[i]nstead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation."[58] For as she rightly notes, "the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values."[59]

Here, the Indian argumentative tradition may again serve as a useful model, since aspects of it functioned historically to decenter prevailing hegemonies. Amartya Sen has argued that the emphasis on disputation within early Buddhist and Jain communities provided a crucial opening from which to challenge the privilege of elites. "It included a 'levelling' feature that is not only reflected in the message of human equality for which these movements stood, but is also captured in the nature of the arguments used to undermine the claim to superiority of those occupying exalted positions."[60] Though the topic cannot be pursued here, Sen offers compelling evidence that indigenous traditions of public reasoning have played a key role in the development of democratic discourses, movements, and institutions in contemporary India.[61]

Conclusion

There is much to be learned from the kind of cross-cultural analysis and concern for particularity that characterize John Clayton's work in the philosophy of religion. By drawing attention to the importance of contestability in the Indian *vāda* tradition, he offers an alternative to Enlightenment conceptions of public reason, such as Jefferson's, that prize neutrality and require the privatization of difference. Yet, I have argued here that the quest for common ground is sometimes motivated not by foundationalist theories of knowledge but by moral concerns about the nature of the respect for one's fellow citizens that the exercise of coercive political power demands. These concerns seem to have played a more

56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 33.
58. Ibid., 33–34.
59. Ibid., 100.
60. Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 10.
61. See ibid., 13ff.

significant role in Rawls's thinking than in Jefferson's, but I have argued that Rawls nevertheless did not succeed in resolving them and, indeed, that they do not admit of a purely rational solution. This is because the exchange of reasons takes place within a political space constituted by power, from which exclusions are inevitable, but in which they can never in their particularity be justified democratically. It is the perennial task of liberal democratic politics to render these exclusions visible and subject to political contestation. Insofar as the classical *vāda* tradition enables the contestation of the extra-democratic ideologies by means of which *particular* exclusions are rationalized, it may here too provide a useful model for contemporary agonistic pluralism.

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DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS ***NOSTRA AETATE*** PROCLAIMED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI ON OCTOBER 28, 1965

1. In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth.(1) One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men,(2) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.(3)

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?

2. From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She

regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.(4)

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

DECLARATION ***"DOMINUS IESUS"*** ON THE UNICITY AND SALVIFIC UNIVERSALITY OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

1. The *Lord Jesus,* before ascending into heaven, commanded his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world and to baptize all nations: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned" (*Mk* 16:15-16); "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world" (*Mt* 28:18-20; cf. *Lk* 24:46-48; *Jn* 17:18,20,21; *Acts* 1:8).

The Church's universal mission is born from the command of Jesus Christ and is fulfilled in the course of the centuries in the proclamation of the mystery of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the mystery of the incarnation of the Son, as saving event for all humanity. The fundamental contents of the profession of the Christian faith are expressed thus: "I believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come".[1]

2. In the course of the centuries, the Church has proclaimed and witnessed with fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus. At the close of the second millennium, however, this mission is still far from complete.[2] For that reason, Saint Paul's words are now more relevant than ever: "Preaching the Gospel is not a reason for me to boast; it is a necessity laid on me: woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (*1 Cor* 9:16). This explains the Magisterium's

particular attention to giving reasons for and supporting the evangelizing mission of the Church, above all in connection with the religious traditions of the world.[3]

In considering the values which these religions witness to and offer humanity, with an open and positive approach, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions states: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men".[4] Continuing in this line of thought, the Church's proclamation of Jesus Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (*Jn* 14:6), today also makes use of the practice of inter-religious dialogue. Such dialogue certainly does not replace, but rather accompanies the *missio ad gentes*, directed toward that "mystery of unity", from which "it follows that all men and women who are saved share, though differently, in the same mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ through his Spirit".[5] Inter-religious dialogue, which is part of the Church's evangelizing mission,[6] requires an attitude of understanding and a relationship of mutual knowledge and reciprocal enrichment, in obedience to the truth and with respect for freedom.[7]

3. In the practice of dialogue between the Christian faith and other religious traditions, as well as in seeking to understand its theoretical basis more deeply, new questions arise that need to be addressed through pursuing new paths of research, advancing proposals, and suggesting ways of acting that call for attentive discernment. In this task, the present Declaration seeks to recall to Bishops, theologians, and all the Catholic faithful, certain indispensable elements of Christian doctrine, which may help theological reflection in developing solutions consistent with the contents of the faith and responsive to the pressing needs of contemporary culture.

The expository language of the Declaration corresponds to its purpose, which is not to treat in a systematic manner the question of the unicity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ and the Church, nor to propose solutions to questions that are matters of free theological debate, but rather to set forth again the doctrine of the Catholic faith in these areas, pointing out some fundamental questions that remain open to further development, and refuting specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous. For this reason, the Declaration takes up what has been taught in previous Magisterial documents, in order to reiterate certain truths that are part of the Church's faith.

VI. THE CHURCH AND THE OTHER RELIGIONS IN RELATION TO SALVATION

20. From what has been stated above, some points follow that are necessary for theological reflection as it explores the relationship of the Church and the other religions to salvation.

Above all else, it must be *firmly believed* that "the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk 16:16; Jn 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door".[77] This doctrine must not be set against the universal salvific will of God (cf. 1 Tim 2:4); "it is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation".[78]

The Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation",[79] since, united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him, she has, in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being.[80] For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, "salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit";[81] it has a relationship with the Church, which "according to the plan of the Father, has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit".[82]

21. With respect to the way in which the salvific grace of God — which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church — comes to individual non-Christians, the Second Vatican Council limited itself to the statement that God bestows it "in ways known to himself".[83] Theologians are seeking to understand this question more fully. Their work is to be encouraged, since it is certainly useful for understanding better God's salvific plan and the ways in which it is accomplished. However, from what has been stated above about the mediation of Jesus Christ and the "unique and special relationship"[84] which the Church has with the kingdom of God among men — which in substance is the universal kingdom of Christ the Saviour — it is clear that it would be contrary to the faith to consider the Church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church toward the eschatological kingdom of God.

Certainly, the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God,[85] and which are part of what "the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions".[86] Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God.[87] One cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments.[88] Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals,

insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. 1 Cor 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation.[89]

22. With the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by him be the instrument for the salvation of *all* humanity (cf. Acts 17:30-31).[90] This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, that mentality of indifferentism "characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'".[91] If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation.[92] However, "all the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged".[93] One understands then that, following the Lord's command (cf. Mt 28:19-20) and as a requirement of her love for all people, the Church "proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life".[94]

In inter-religious dialogue as well, the mission *ad gentes* "today as always retains its full force and necessity".[95] "Indeed, God 'desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4); that is, God wills the salvation of everyone through the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is found in the truth. Those who obey the promptings of the Spirit of truth are already on the way of salvation. But the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary".[96] Inter-religious dialogue, therefore, as part of her evangelizing mission, is just one of the actions of the Church in her mission *ad gentes*.[97] *Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ — who is God himself made man — in relation to the founders of the other religions. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom,[98] must be primarily committed to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, the certainty of the universal salvific will of God does not diminish, but rather increases the duty and urgency of the proclamation of salvation and of conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

23. The intention of the present *Declaration*, in reiterating and clarifying certain

truths of the faith, has been to follow the example of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the faithful of Corinth: "I handed on to you as of first importance what I myself received" (1 Cor 15:3). Faced with certain problematic and even erroneous propositions, theological reflection is called to reconfirm the Church's faith and to give reasons for her hope in a way that is convincing and effective.

In treating the question of the true religion, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught: "We believe that this one true religion continues to exist in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus entrusted the task of spreading it among all people. Thus, he said to the Apostles: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Mt 28: 19-20). Especially in those things that concern God and his Church, all persons are required to seek the truth, and when they come to know it, to embrace it and hold fast to it".[99]

The revelation of Christ will continue to be "the true lodestar" [100] in history for all humanity: "The truth, which is Christ, imposes itself as an all-embracing authority". [101] The Christian mystery, in fact, overcomes all barriers of time and space, and accomplishes the unity of the human family: "From their different locations and traditions all are called in Christ to share in the unity of the family of God's children... Jesus destroys the walls of division and creates unity in a new and unsurpassed way through our sharing in his mystery. This unity is so deep that the Church can say with Saint Paul: 'You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are saints and members of the household of God' (Eph 2:19)". [102]

God at Play: Seeing God Through the Lens of the Young Krishna

By Kristin Johnston Largen

Abstract: This article begins with the absence of biblical stories about Jesus' youth. This lack means that typical boyhood characteristics, such as playfulness, are absent from a traditional Christian picture of the divine. Using the lens of stories told about Krishna's youth in the *Bhagavata Purana,* I suggest that Christians could learn from the Hindu idea of a "god at play," as such a concept enhances a Christian understanding of who God has revealed Godself to be, and how Christians are called to be in relationship to God.

Key Terms: Krishna, God at play, *Bhagavata Purana*, comparative theology, infant Christ

This article is taken from my recent book, *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation,*[1] in which I make a sustained comparison of the infancy/youth narratives of Krishna and Jesus and suggest some new soteriological insights for Christian theology. Here, however, the project is much more modest. Using the lens of "baby Krishna," I suggest that Christians could learn from the Hindu idea of a "god at play," as such a concept enhances a Christian understanding of who God has revealed Godself to be, and how Christians are called to be in relationship to God.

Contrasting Two Saviors

In my office, I have a small statue of Krishna sitting next to my computer. He has blue skin—a clear sign of his identity as an *avatar*, or incarnation, of Vishnu—a peacock feather tucked in his hair, and a mischievous expression. He looks to be about three years old. He sits with his right hand in a clay jar he has tipped over, out of which he is scooping handfuls of rich, creamy butter. His left hand is in his mouth, and he seems to be sucking the last bit of butter off his first two fingers.

This statue would be instantly and universally recognizable as Krishna to practically any Hindu, and it would call to mind any number of beloved stories of Krishna's youth. By all accounts, he was a rogue-ish baby, always misbehaving, and one of his favorite pastimes was stealing butter. In story after story, we read how his mother, Yashoda, had to punish him for this and other misdeeds; but even while punishing him, she could not help but be delighted by her son, whom she loved so deeply.

What I do not have in my office, however, or anywhere else for that matter, are any images of Jesus' youth—and in churches and museums I only rarely see such images. Christians take this fact for granted and do not question it, but on the surface, it does seem a bit odd. Why aren't there any stories in the Bible of Jesus as a young child? It's not as though he simply entered the scene as an adult; Luke and Matthew both have detailed accounts of his birth, and so it seems natural that they also would have recorded some stories of him as a young boy. However, apart from one brief, tantalizing story about Jesus wandering off from his

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parents in Jerusalem—a story found only in Luke—the Gospel accounts are silent on Jesus' life until he begins his public ministry when he is around thirty years old.

In fact, this absence of such stories in the Bible does not give us the full picture of Jesus' youth. When Christians go outside the canonical literature, they can find other stories—although it takes some digging—particularly in what has come to be called the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. In that apocryphal Gospel, we find a wide variety of miraculous stories from Jesus' youth, which, not unlike the stories of Krishna, depict Jesus as a somewhat capricious and willful child.

While stories such as these may have been circulated orally from the second century on, they were not written down until later, and their apostolic authority is dubious at best. Thus, while they existed during the time of the formation of the church, for all practical purposes, they played no role (or perhaps more accurately, they played only a negative role) in the early church's theological construction of who Jesus is and how he saves. That is, they did not affect the traditional picture of Jesus as savior, and they did not influence the traditional understanding of the relationship Jesus has with his followers.

Nevertheless, in this brief article, I would like to suggest that something indeed has been lost to Christians with the absence of any sustained account of Jesus' boyhood, and that is an appreciation of "God at play." Through a brief examination of Krishna's childhood, marked as it is by divine play, I hope to suggest that the concept of a playful God might provide new insights into who God has revealed Godself to be, and how Christians are called to be in relationship to this God.

Who is Krishna?

Unlike Christianity, which is grounded in a linear understanding of time, Hinduism has a cyclical understanding of time, in which the universe continually cycles into and out of existence, over many eons. In most descriptions of this process, instead of there being one single divinity behind it all, there are three: Brahma is the creator, the one who brings the universe into being; Shiva is the destroyer, the one who, at the right time, causes the universe to fall into nothingness; and during the in-between time stands Vishnu, the preserver, the god who sustains the universe and protects it from evil while it is in existence. It is the preserver divinity Vishnu who concerns us here.

Traditionally, Krishna is believed to be an *avatar* of Vishnu. *Avatara* is a Sanskrit word that literally means "one who descends," and the concept is almost always associated with Vishnu. In his function as preserver of the world, at various points in time Vishnu descends into the world in the form of some created being—a turtle, a fish, a dwarf, a human being—in order to save and preserve creation from a particular demonic force threatening the very existence of the cosmos. Krishna is one of those *avatars.*

Over time, however, Krishna's importance and role have dramatically increased, so that now he has a much greater role in Hinduism as a whole: "Krishna's significance in Hinduism cannot be underestimated. . . . He is believed by some to be among the several incarnations of Vishnu, by others to be a divine incarnation of unique and singular importance (as Jesus is to Christians), by others the highest and most perfect manifestation of Brahman, and by still others simply God, the Original and Supreme."[2]

For non-Hindus, if they know anything about Krishna at all, it is typically through exposure to the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata,* where the *Bhagavad Gita* is located: this text reveals Krishna to be the Universal Divine Being, the Reality containing all existence in himself. For Hindus themselves, however, it is another Krishna that takes center stage:

> While these images of Krishna [in his adult life] are highly regarded by Hindus worldwide, his early life as a child and as a young lover is often held in greater esteem. Frolicking in the simple bucolic atmosphere of Vraja, in northern India, he captured the local people's hearts, and their descendants have been retelling his extraordinary pastimes

ever since. It is *this* Krishna that is most loved in the Indian subcontinent.[3]

The bulk of the stories about the young Krishna can be found in book [or canto] ten of the *Bhagavata Purana*,[4] a text that has been described by more than one scholar as a kind of Hindu New Testament.[5] This particular *Purana* details the various avatars of Vishnu, and is believed to have been composed sometime between the sixth century and the eighth or ninth century C.E., although some scholars date the earliest pieces of the text to the fourth century C.E., and the final composition as late as the tenth century C.E.[6]

The tenth canto itself is divided into two main parts: part one, which is my primary concern here, describes Krishna's birth and childhood in Vraj (specifically the forest of Vrindavana); and part two, which describes Krishna's adult life. The picture that is painted in part one in particular is of a beautiful, loving god at play, enjoying time with his devotees purely for the joy of it, without any hidden agenda or higher purpose. In fact, although the ostensible purpose for Krishna's existence is to rid the world of demons and demonic forces, another equally important purpose described in the *Bhagavata Purana* is to encourage loving relationships of devotion that ultimately lead to salvation. One of the primary means by which Krishna facilitates these relationships is through his acts of *lila*—the Sanskrit word for play—with his devotees.

Krishna's Happy Boyhood

Krishna's childhood is marked by mischievous play, which both exasperates and delights his mother, Yashoda. Throughout, however, Krishna repeatedly gives glimpses of his true form, which remind both the readers and the other inhabitants of Vraj that while he "behaved as humans do," he does not, in fact, share true human nature.[7] As just one example of this, the text tells of a time that Yashoda was churning butter, which Krishna especially loved. While she was churning, Krishna got hungry, grabbing the stick and getting in her way. She takes him onto her lap and lets him nurse for a bit, but she realizes that the milk on the stove is boiling over, and so she puts him down before he is full. This makes him angry, so he picks up a rock and breaks the butter churn, running with the butter into his hiding place so he can eat it. When Yashoda comes back and sees what he has done, she laughs—she can't help it—and she finds him feeding some of the butter to a monkey. When she finally catches him, she tries to bind him with a rope, so he can't do any more harm, but she uses rope after rope, and still the length is not enough to contain him: "Krishna has no beginning and no end, no inside and no outside. He is the beginning and end and inside and outside of the universe. He is the universe."[8] At last, Krishna takes pity on his mother, and allows himself to be bound.

Subduing Kaliya

In such manner Krishna spends his first few years, passing time with his friends "in youthful games such as playing hide-and-seek, building dams and jumping about like monkeys."[9] This playful exuberance is in evidence even when the stakes are high, and the situation far more serious. Another famous story from this period of Krishna's life is his battle with the snake demon, Kaliya, who was polluting the Yamuna River with his poison. The problem came to Krishna's attention when his fellow cowherds and their cows, made thirsty by the heat of the day, drank from the poisoned river and immediately fell down dead. Krishna did not let them lie lifeless for long: "A few minutes passed, however, and the tears of Krishna brought them all back to life. For His mercy and love could not fail to give life and strength, and He poured them out in abundance over His fainting friends."[10]

His friends thus restored, Krishna took steps to purify the river and banish the snake. He climbed a tall tree and dived into the river, and immediately began to wrestle with Kaliya. This was nothing but sport to Krishna, and the text makes clear that Krishna was never in any real danger; instead, entirely without fear, he toyed with Kaliya, like a child plays with a rubber snake. Finally, Krishna

climbed up on Kaliya's hoods [from this we assume Kaliya to be a many-headed cobra] and began to dance, his powerful feet crushing Kaliya's heads with each rhythmic step. Kaliya is thus "danced" into submission; and recognizing Krishna's power, he worships Krishna and retreats to the ocean. The story concludes that Yamuna River is freed from poison by the great lord "who had assumed a human form for sport."[11] Stories like this fill Krishna's biography, reminding the Hindu faithful that while Krishna *appears* to be a young boy at play, he is actually the savior of the cosmos.

A Playful Lover

Another key component to Krishna's young life can be found in his relationship to the *gopis*, the cowherd girls who are devoted to him. Krishna has a special relationship to these young girls, marked as it is by erotic playfulness on his side, and passionate devotion on their side. I recount here one of the most well-known stories that epitomize this relationship.

According to Hindu tradition, this episode in Krishna's life is said to have occurred when he was between seven and ten years old. When reading this story for the first time, it is helpful to keep Krishna's age in mind, as well as the purity of his love, since, to Christian ears, there is an erotic flavor to this story that seems quite inappropriate for God. However, it is a misinterpretation to attribute to Krishna any impure or carnal motives in his interaction with the *gopis*. As Steven Rosen writes, "The tradition is clear that Krishna has no prurient interest, nor does he have lascivious motives, at least not as commonly understood. His love for the *gopis*, and theirs for him, is pure."[12]

This story of Krishna's "pastime play" (*rasa-lila* in Sanskrit) begins with Krishna playing his flute, enticing the *gopis* to come join him in the forest, under the full moon. Upon hearing the music, all the women immediately dropped whatever they were doing—milking cows, cooking, eating, putting on make-up—and went to be near Krishna: "They were in a state of rapture." Even those who could not be with Krishna in person, but only meditated on him from their homes "left their bodies" and united with him, relating to him as their supreme lover.

Krishna teases them, plays with them, embraces them, and sings with them, delighting in their company on the banks of the Yamuna River. After some time, the *rasa* dance begins.

> Govinda [Krishna] began the *rasa* pastime there, in the company of those devoted jewels of women, who linked arms happily together. The festival of the *rasa* dance began, featuring a circle of *gopis*. The Lord of all *yogis*, Krishna, inserted himself between each pair of *gopis* and put his arms about their necks. Each woman thought he was at her side only. . . They danced with the Lord in the circle of the *rasa* to the musical accompaniment of the bees complemented by the sound of their anklets and bangles. Wreaths of flowers fell from their hair. Thus Krishna, the Lord of Lakshmi, sported with the beautiful girls of Vraj with freely playful smiles, amorous glances, and with caresses and embraces. He was like a child enraptured by his own reflection . . . Although content within himself, the Lord became manifest in as many forms as there were *gopi* women, and enjoyed himself with them in *lila* pastimes.[13]

Krishna passes the whole of his childhood this way—destroying demons, playing with the *gopis*, and just generally enjoying time with his boyhood friends in the forest. This enjoyment or delight is at the heart of Krishna's existence during this time. The text is clear that Krishna's play is his purpose—it is not a means to an end, but the end itself.

Lila: The Importance of Krishna's Play

It is no surprise, then, that when one examines the stories told about Krishna's youth, the one word that reoccurs over and over in the texts is "playful." It is the adjective that is used to describe him in practically all of his youthful exploits. Not only when he is with his family and friends, but also when he is dispatching this or that demon, the

stories make clear that even when engaged in such life and death matters, Krishna's own playful attitude and the spirit of play that surrounds him is not altered.[14] Yet, after the end of part one in the tenth book of the *Bhagavata Purana,* the word hardly shows up again—and it never appears in the *Bhagavad Gita.* Clearly, then, this word points to a unique quality that characterizes Krishna during this specific time in his life—his infancy and youth; and, just as clearly, there is something "sublime" about this playfulness that has been picked up and celebrated by Hindus throughout the centuries.

Not surprisingly, the words "play" and "playful" are never used to describe Jesus in the Bible—and in fact, I would venture to guess that in over two millennia of writing and teaching in the Christian tradition, those words can't have been used in a christological context more than a handful of times, if even that many. All the more reason, then, why Christians should learn more about Krishna, "the divine player *par excellence* of Indian religion,"[15] and come to understand what significance such divine play might have for an understanding of the Christian God.

What Does the Word "Play" Mean?

In his discussion of the term *lila,* Edwin Bryant notes that "Unlike the term 'sport' or even 'game,' then, which might contain a suggestion of drivenness or competition, *lila* is pure play, or spontaneous pastime"—it is God rejoicing in creation simply from "fullness of spirit."[16] Some analogies from human experience can help illustrate what is being described here. *Lila* refers to the exhilaration of children playing in the year's first big snowfall. *Lila* refers to the joy of relaxing in the warm ocean waves under the bright sunshine. *Lila* refers to the happiness a mother gets from cooing at her infant, making faces at him, and delighting in his returned smile. *Lila*, then, has no ulterior motive and no additional purpose than the simple experience of joy—far from being simply a means to an end, *lila* is the end: the play is the point.

This is one reason why most children play much better than most adults: once you are an adult, work replaces play as one's primary mode of activity in the world; and the driving question motivating one's doings becomes, "What am I producing?" Adults are taught that their activity needs to have a goal, an assessable outcome, a product; and the very definition of play is opposed to such ends. Children, however, are under no such pressures—and if they are, it is a sad commentary on today's society. Instead, play is integral to the whole concept of what it means to be a child. Children live in the moment, and they do not need a reason for playing with modeling clay, watching birds build a nest, riding a bike through the neighborhood, or building a fort with blankets and couch cushions. The sheer enjoyment of the experience is the point.

Thus, coming back to Krishna, then, we can see how this applies to his young life as well: in these years, Krishna literally lives for enjoyment, for pleasure, for play and for delight. During his idyllic time in Vraj, this delight is his raison d'être; and this is without a doubt what makes this time in Krishna's life so unique, and sets it apart from the rest of his time on earth. While the *Bhagavad Gita* is explicit and emphatic that the purpose of Krishna's incarnation is to rid the earth of evil kings; in part one of the *Bhagavata Purana*, another reason is given primacy of place: "Krishna descends to engage in *lila* . . ."[17]

Play is the point of Krishna's young life, and it has a special function, creating the conditions for a unique experience that Krishna shares with his followers: "*Lila*, then, is an opportunity for Krishna and his devotees to enjoy themselves in the blissful and spontaneous reciprocation of love."[18] In the end, then, I think it is fair to say that *lila* is nothing more and nothing less than the unique form of Krishna's love that draws his followers to him, and creates the conditions for a unique, loving relationship with him.

Learning from Baby Krishna

Before delving specifically into what Christians might learn about God from the stories told about Krishna's infancy and youth, I want to emphasize

way in which Christians are encouraged to see their professional occupation as a "vocation" testifies to this. Linked to this is the emphasis Christians place on service to one's neighbor; and one important way in which this is lived out in congregations all over the United States is through "service projects," where some type of work is done on behalf of and for the sake of the neighbor: a building project, working in a soup kitchen, providing care for children, etc. Indeed, the belief that "without works, faith is dead," is an important part of Christian life, with many believing that Christians who do not show forth their faith in some form of "holy work" in the world are not worthy of being called Christian at all.

Play, on the other hand, gets no respect in the Christian tradition. The assumption is that, for adults at least—and even children, to some degree—play is selfish, serves no good purpose in the world, and should only be engaged in moderation. Too much play distracts from one's proper purpose in the world, and can hinder one from serving the neighbor. Play is opposed to work—they are at cross-purposes, and the former is often seen as a threat to the latter. No one has ever been canonized by excelling at play!

However, our reading of Krishna recommends another way of thinking about play, particularly if Christians use a fresh understanding of God's "play" to re-think their own attitude toward play. I suggest that just as God exhibits God's playful nature in God's dealings with the world, so too do Christians honor and serve God by their own play in the world. In many ways, this is a small step to take: who would argue, for example, that a parent is not honoring God when he whiles away the afternoon playing Legos with his son; or that two girls are not honoring God when they play with their dolls, or spend the morning swinging on swings at the playground? The step becomes a little bigger however, when we turn to adults, and the time they spend playing: riding mountain bikes, doodling, or playing with a dog on the beach—in short, doing nothing—or at least, nothing that has a purpose, or serves a final goal, or helps anyone in particular. Is it possible to think about these activities as serving and honoring God?

I argue that we can, insofar as it is also a part of human nature to be inventive, to be creative, and to enjoy life itself, simply because life is beautiful. Christians do honor the God who created them when they loiter in God's creation, appreciating the smells and the sights of the forest, the field, and the mountain. Christians do praise God when they tell jokes just to hear others laugh, when they fill a sketch book that no one will ever see, and when they read a great book, delighting in the author's prose simply because human inventive, inspired activity recalls God's inventive, inspired activity. It is not coincidental that one synonym for play is "recreation"—that is, "re-creation": the activity of creating anew, celebrating both God's creative activity and the creative gifts of others in our own unplanned, and spontaneous, inventive behavior. Play, as well as work, honors God; not every human activity has to have a utilitarian function or a practical application for it to be considered "holy," or reflective of the divine.

Conclusion

Christians sometimes wonder why they should go to the trouble of learning about another religious tradition—and why they should even consider the possibility that they might learn something of God there—when there is more than enough to learn about God in the Bible. On the one hand, that is accurate: there is enough to study in the Bible for any one lifetime. Sacred texts—classics, to use David Tracy's language—are by definition overflowing with meaning; they are living, and they compel us to believe "that something else might be the case."[22] This surplus of meaning demands that we continually revisit them, continually mining them for new riches as yet undiscovered. For Christians, of course, the Bible is the classic *par excellence*, with the continual inspiration of the Holy Spirit providing a never-ending spring of insight around who God is, how God is in relationship to the world, and what it means to be faithful to this God.

Yet, at the same time, it feels to me like there is more to be said. After all, there are other

religious classics in the world, and they too have their truths to share with us, they too make a claim upon us, and they too have insights to offer about God and God's relationship with the world. Why must it be "either/or"? Why can't Christians carve out for themselves a comfortable, even exciting position of "both/and," where their read of Scripture is deepened and challenged by their read of sacred Hindu texts, or Buddhist sutras, or the Qur'an; where those other sacred texts offer new pathways into the Bible, helping Christians learn more about the Bible than they would have otherwise?

The fact is, the more we engage in both our own religious tradition and the religious traditions of others, the more insight we have into both God and God's beloved creation—humanity included. Thus, I argue that learning about Krishna, specifically here his birth and young life, creates the possibility for a new way of seeing not only God and God's activity in the world, but also our own activity in the world in relationship to this God we love so dearly. God is with us, present and active in the world—that is the promise of the incarnation. Sure of that promise, then, Christians are invited to go out in both confidence and joy, seeking God where God may be found—even in the most unexpected of places, even in the forests and hills of Vraj.

Endnotes

1. Kristin Johnston Largen. *Baby Krishna, Infant Christ: A Comparative Theology of Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011).

2. Barbara Powell, *Windows into the Infinite* (Fremont, Calif.: Asian Humanities Press, 1996), 35.

3. Steven Rosen, *Essential Hinduism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 122.

4. See for example, Edwin Bryant, trans., *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

5. See for example, Milton Singer, ed., *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes* (Honolulu, Hi.: East-West Center Press, 1966), xiv.

6. Powell, *Windows into the Infinite*, 253.

7. Bryant, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*, 36.

8. Ibid., 46.

9. Ibid., 76.

10. Sister Nivedita, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 166.

11. Bryant, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*, 89.

12. Rosen, *Essential Hinduism*, 134.

13. Bryant, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*, 139–141.

14. David Kinsley has an interesting discussion of the whole theme of "combat as play" in his book *The Divine Player: A Study of Krishna Lila* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979). Here he notes examples from Krishna's young life, as well as examples involving other gods and goddesses, concluding, "One gets the impression that the gods are really never in trouble at all, that they condescend to battle the demons simply because it is all part of some cosmic script or because they enjoy it. . . . The combat-as-lila theme suggests in a straightforward way that the gods are so powerful, so removed from the finite limitations of the human sphere, that for them the most monumental struggle is resolved effortlessly" (pp. 49, 55).

15. Ibid., 56.

16. Bryant, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*, xxiii.

17. Ibid., xxii.

18. Ibid., xxv.

19. Kinsley, *The Divine Player*, xi.

20. Wikia, "Calvinball," http://calvinandhobbes.wikia.com/wiki/Calvinball (accessed December 14, 2010).

21. Ibid.

22. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991), 102.