

# A UNIVERSAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE? COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO A THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Liberal Theology's claim regarding a universal religious experience and George Lindbeck's rejection of this claim. Since a universal religious experience is frequently put forth as the basis for the transcendental unity of religions, the theological debate regarding such an experience is very pertinent to the current discussion of religious diversity. The author argues that neither Liberal Theology's appeal to religious experience nor Lindbeck's rejection of this appeal is helpful. In lieu of a comprehensive theology of non-Christian religions based on an appeal to a universal religious experience, the author proposes a comparative theology as the best candidate for dealing responsibly and creatively with the plurality of religions.

Is there a universal religious experience common to all religions? Today, this idea is widely dispersed. Some of its roots (at least for religious thinking in the West) can be found in the Christian apologists and their appeal to a universal *logos* as a basis for reconciling their Scriptures with the philosophical achievements of the Greeks. Motives lying behind this theological strategy were both apologetic and theoretical. The appeal to a universal *logos* was apologetic in that it offered a way for Christians to defend their sacred texts from the criticisms of those educated in the tradition of the Greeks. It was theoretical in that it offered an intellectual strategy for accounting for the plurality of authoritative texts. Beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, the appeal to a universal core linking together all religions has served as the cornerstone for much modern thought about religion. This theme can be traced as a leitmotif common to authors as different as Rudolf Otto, Bernard Lonergan, and John Hick. As in the early Christian period, the *animus* motivating the modern claim regarding a universal religious

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experience has been double-barreled. The need to develop a theoretical explanation for the plurality of religions is often accompanied by an apologetic desire to respond to the Enlightenment's preference for understanding religion reductively, that is, in nonreligious categories. A mystical core experience, common to all religious phenomena, meets both the apologetic and the theoretical requirements.

This article argues for a "comparative theology" in lieu of a fully systematic theology of non-Christian religions, as a creative and responsible way of addressing the intrusive fact of the diversity of religions today. Comparative theology is the branch of systematic theology which seeks to interpret the Christian tradition conscientiously in conversation with the texts and symbols of non-Christian religions. For this reason, comparative theology is very much entangled in Christianity's need for a coherent theological interpretation of non-Christian religions. Not so obviously, comparative theology can easily become caught up in the presumption of a universal religious experience which characterizes much theological thinking about other religions. Not obvious at all is the risk comparative theology runs in allowing itself to be shaped by the apologetic motive implicit in the appeal to religious experience as a category for understanding religions. In what is perhaps one of the most cited passages from *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer warns us that "the concept of experience seems to me one of the most obscure we have."<sup>1</sup> Given these entanglements, it is incumbent on theologians to reflect on the utility of this category.

In this article, I will analyze the motivations driving the presumption of an experiential core common to all religions (I and II); examine what I consider to be George Lindbeck's unsuccessful theological alternative to the category "religious experience" (III); and offer some tentative suggestions on how comparative theology should proceed in the light of these problems (IV).

### I. *The Turn to Experience*

The idea of understanding religion primarily as an "experience" is not yet 200 years old. It arose as part of a theological development which has come to be known as "Liberalism" which itself may be

<sup>1</sup>"Der Begriff der Erfahrung scheint mir . . . zu den unaufgeklärtesten Begriffen zu gehören, die wir besitzen." See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1960), 329. For the English-language translation, see *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 310. Notice that the German term used by Gadamer in this passage is *Erfahrung* and not *Erlebnis*. Although *Erlebnis* covers the more subjective and emotional aspects of the semantic range of the English word "experience," Gadamer considers not only *Erlebnis* but also *Erfahrung* to be philosophically obscure. For Gadamer's reflections on the historical development of the term *Erlebnis* in German Romanticism, see *Truth and Method*, 58-63.

understood as an aspect of German Romanticism.<sup>2</sup> The early Liberals were driven by twin theological requirements. First, they felt the need to defend Christianity from the rationalism of the Enlightenment and its “cultured despisers.” Second, the early Liberals needed to come to terms with the new awareness of religious pluralism associated either with historicism or the increased accessibility of Asian (and especially South Asian) religious texts. Ernst Troeltsch and Max Müller are the scholars most associated with the latter. The founder of theological Liberalism and the name most to be associated with religious experience, however, is Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>3</sup>

In 1799, Schleiermacher published a number of lectures he had prepared for a small circle of artists and intellectuals in Berlin. W. C. Smith has stated that *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* is the first book written dealing with religion as such.<sup>4</sup> In *Speeches*, Schleiermacher moved away from understanding religion primarily as doctrine, ethics, or history. Time-honored metaphysical foundations for religious doctrine had been loosened by Descartes and washed away by Kant. Traditional religious authority was being discredited by the secularizing spirit of the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath. Schleiermacher set for himself the task of rendering religion credible once again by freeing Christian piety from its eroded foundations in metaphysics and historical claims to authority. Religion, he claimed, is a matter of intuition, sense, or feeling and should be considered a matter of doctrine only secondarily. This turn to experience is intended as an argument against those who would reduce religion to moral postulates (in response to Kant), false scientific explanation, or

<sup>2</sup>For purposes of convenience, the term “Liberalism” in this essay is used in a very general way, referring to the entire tradition, stemming from Schleiermacher, of interpreting religious phenomena with the category “experience.” In this respect, unless otherwise specified, by “Liberals” I include not only theologians, but nontheological interpreters of religion such as philosophers, historians, and psychologists.

<sup>3</sup>Nowhere in Schleiermacher do we find the noun “experience” (*Erlebnis*) or even the then more common verbal form of the word (*Erleben*). But we do encounter an abundance of synonyms. Examples include *eigenes Gefühl* (“one’s feeling”); *Empfindung* (“feeling”); *Regung als freie Selbstbestimmung des Gemüts* (“feeling of the self-determination of the heart”); *das ursprünglich Innerliche* (“the original inwardness”); etc. For the German text, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967). Hans-Georg Gadamer notes the absence of the term “experience” in Schleiermacher as part of his argument that Schleiermacher formed the impetus within German Romanticism which later gave birth to the noun form of the word (*Erlebnis*). For Gadamer, the link between Schleiermacher and the German Romantics is Wilhelm Dilthey (Schleiermacher’s biographer). See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 57-58.

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (San Francisco: Harper Torchbooks, 1958); hereafter *Speeches*. For Smith’s comment, see *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 45.

historical claims without foundation.<sup>5</sup> Even before it is doctrine, religion is an experience, what Schleiermacher in the *Speeches* called the “sense of the Infinite.”

A major characteristic of Schleiermacher's “sense of the Infinite” is its ineffability. Epistemologically, the Infinite is experienced prior to Kant's categories. This claim allows Schleiermacher to arrive at two conclusions: (1) this experience is one of sheer immediacy which is only later sundered by thought, and (2) this experience ultimately defies final description and definition and is thus knowable only by direct personal acquaintance.

But I must direct you to your own selves. You must apprehend a living movement. You must know how to listen to yourselves before your own consciousness. . . . Your thought can only embrace what is sundered. Wherefore as soon as you have made any given definite activity of your soul an object of communication or of contemplation, you have already begun to separate. It is impossible, therefore, to adduce any definite example, for, as soon as anything is an example, what I wish to indicate is already past. Only the faintest trace of the original unity could then be shown.<sup>6</sup>

This citation serves to point out how closely Schleiermacher's views regarding the ineffability of the experience are associated with his need to appeal to the reader's personal acquaintance with the experience in order to be understood. Since the “sense” which Schleiermacher has in mind is an immediate experience, he is able to say that religion exists prior to its factoring by the categories and grammars of language. But in spite of its ineffability, Schleiermacher argues that the Infinite is expressed in language, and for this reason, the experience can be identified by using language to evoke it within the inwardness of the reader.

Some twenty-two years after the *Speeches*, Schleiermacher published his *Glaubenslehre (The Christian Faith)*.<sup>7</sup> In this later work, theological concerns replace the more general phenomenology of the early Schleiermacher. The “sense of the Infinite” of the *Speeches* becomes the “feeling of absolute dependence” on a power distinct from the world. Although Schleiermacher believes the “feeling of absolute dependence” presumes monotheism, in keeping with his earlier position regarding the ineffability of religious experience, he states that the “feeling” (*Gefühl*) is prior to all attempts to fix it in a concept.

<sup>5</sup> See *Speeches*, esp. “Speech 2.”

<sup>6</sup> Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 41-42.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 2nd ed., trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928).

As regards the identification of absolute dependence with “relation to God” in our proposition: this is to be understood in the sense that the *Whence* [*Woher*] of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is to be designated by the word “God,” and that this is for us the really original signification of the word.<sup>8</sup>

Notice that in reconciling the theological concerns of the *Glaubenslehre* with the phenomenology of the *Speeches*, Schleiermacher is led to an expressive theory of language. The concept “God” is derived from the experience. The reverse is not the case. The concept is justified only by its relative adequacy in evoking or expressing the original feeling. Religious experience precedes religious language.

As noted above, the motivation driving Schleiermacher’s turn from religious doctrine to religious experience is apologetic. With his turn to experience, he wanted to show that Berlin’s free-thinkers and bohemians could despise dogmatism and clericalism without necessarily rejecting religion itself. At the same time, Schleiermacher’s own German pietistic faith was offended by the extravagances of the *Aufklärung*’s rationalism in approaching matters religious. Here again, the turn to the category “experience” was helpful in defending religious commitments. Since the external form (doctrine) could not be equated without remainder with the inner “feeling” (*Gefühl*), religion itself could be defended by likening it to the artist’s eternal quest for aesthetic expression of his or her inner genius.

As the founding father of Liberal Theology, Schleiermacher’s legacy in both theology and religious studies has been formidable. This history of effects is visible in the numerous arguments defending the study of religion as an irreducible and *sui generis* phenomenon, as well as the many theories concerned with religious doctrine and symbolism which can be categorized under the “expressive model” of religious language. Authors indebted to this Liberal legacy (or in some cases the more general legacy of German Romantic hermeneutics) include Ernst Cassirer, Max Scheler, Michael Polanyi, and Susanne K. Langer in the philosophy of language; Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach, Gerhardus Van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Friedrich Heiler in the history of religions; William James and Carl Jung in psychology of religion; and Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Friedrich von Hügel, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan in theology.

Despite its evident popularity, the Liberal turn to religious experience has not been without its critics. A complaint common to a number of these critics is that the appeal to an ineffable experience is in

<sup>8</sup>Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 16.

effect a bogus apologetic strategy which defends religion inappropriately by removing it from the realm of critical discourse. For instance, Wayne Proudfoot, in his discussion of religious experience, points out that Schleiermacher's claim regarding the ineffability of religious sentiment is simply asserted without ever being argued. The closest approximation to a defense of this category is his appeal to personal acquaintance. The major casualty in Schleiermacher's appeal to an ineffable experience is public inquiry into the nature of religious phenomena: if the reader should be religiously ungifted, then there is no basis for further discussion.<sup>9</sup> If the feeling associated with religion is ineffable by definition, then any claim made about the experience can be refuted or affirmed based on an appeal to strictly personal, interior experience knowable only by acquaintance. Discourse about religion is effectively privatized.

Thus far, I have claimed that the initial motive behind Liberalism's interest in religious experience was the need for an apologetic against its "cultured despisers" in the European Enlightenment. What can be said for the second motive, that is, the need to offer a coherent account of the diversity of religions?

## II. *Religious Experience and Religious Pluralism*

Liberalism's turn to religious experience was originally driven by an apologetic motive. Later the category was pressed into service as a stratagem for dealing irenically with the plurality of religions. Religion's Liberal interpreters needed a theory of religion in which non-Christian religions need not be rejected *ipso facto* as immoral or erroneous. Ironically, this goal was achieved by appealing to religious experience once again, but this time in a way that tended to frustrate the traditional role of theological apologetics in mounting arguments for the plausibility of Christian beliefs and their superiority to non-Christian beliefs. The doctrines of different religions need not be taken as incompatible truth claims about ultimate reality and historical revelation. The evident differences between religions could be minimized by interpreting them as *expressions* emanating from a universal religious experience. In this way, the responsibility of theological apologetics for mounting arguments in support of the coherence and plausibility of the Christian faith, in contrast to non-Christian truth claims, was

<sup>9</sup>Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). For other arguments against the Liberal category "religious experience" and in support of reductionist theories of religion, see Hans Penner and Edward Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?," *Journal of Religion* 52/2 (1972): 107-34. Penner criticizes the Liberal attempt in "The Fall and Rise of Methodology," *Religious Studies Review* 2 (1976): 11-16.

exchanged for a Liberal/Romantic theology about the ultimate unity of all religions in a common mystical core.

To the claim of ineffability regarding religious experience was added the claim of universality. Note that this tendency was already anticipated by Schleiermacher in the *Speeches*:

... I would show you religion when it has resigned its infinity and appeared, often in sorry form, among men; I would have you discover religion in the religions. Though they are always earthly and impure, the same form of heavenly beauty that I have tried to depict is to be sought in them.<sup>10</sup>

However, with the increased availability of Asian religious texts in Europe, especially in the nineteenth century, the irenic motive supporting the turn to the category religious experience came to stand equally alongside the earlier apologetic motive.

Is there in fact a religious experience which forms a source common to all religious traditions? As with the claim about its ultimate ineffability, the claim regarding the universality of religious experience is also widely diffused. Authors taking this position include Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the history of religions; Huston Smith, John Hick, and Frithjof Schuon in the philosophy of religion; Ernst Troeltsch in the sociology of religion; and Arnold Toynbee in the history of ideas.<sup>11</sup> Belief in a mystical core which crosses cultural borders is especially prevalent in the area of mysticism studies. Take, for instance, the work of Frits Staal, Evelyn Underhill, and R. C. Zaehner.<sup>12</sup> Despite the difficulties this modern theory of religion poses to traditional theological apologetics, this belief has no

<sup>10</sup>Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 211.

<sup>11</sup>See Friedrich Heiler, "The History of Religion as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions" in Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa, eds., *The History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 142-53; Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, trans. Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (New York: Macmillan, 1932); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*; Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth* (New York: Harper, 1976); John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine" in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 60-78, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), and *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Ernst Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (Richmond: John Knox, 1971); and Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 262-64, 272-77.

<sup>12</sup>See Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911); and R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).



lack of supporters among Christian theologians as well. Notice how echoes of this theme can be heard in the work of Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, and Raimundo Panikkar.<sup>13</sup>

Belief in an experiential source common to all religions is by no means unknown among Asian interpreters of religion. Indian intellectuals, much like their European counterparts, were confronted with the need for developing a theory of religion adequate to the task of accounting for the plurality of religions. In this respect, the neo-Hinduism movement made intellectual moves remarkably similar to those taken by the Liberals in Europe in dealing with the plurality of religions. Certainly some of the religious warrants for their affirmation of a transcultural experience can be found within the orthodox Hindu tradition itself. More interestingly, there is also evidence of the influence of the European theory of universal religious experience on the neo-Hindu thinkers.<sup>14</sup> The appeal to a religious experience that is both ineffable and universal can also be found among more recent Hindu thinkers. For instance, in a manner quite reminiscent of Schleiermacher, Bithika Mukerji, a contemporary Hindu, speaks of a revelation of “the unmanifest, the unspoken, the ultimately hidden mystery of existence” as a “supreme living experience” which “cannot be communicated as a commensurable commodity” because “it is felt within the being of the aspirant and needs no confirmation because the experience is self-authenticating.” Notice that after stating without argument the ineffability and self-authenticating character of this experience, Mukerji offers these same characteristics as evidence for its universality.

No one can legislate for another as to the true image of God because his images are legion. All forms are his because he is formless, all auspicious qualities are his because he is the ultimate repository of all magnificence. . . . Christianity in the reflection of Hinduism is yet another dimension in which God has disclosed himself to his People.<sup>15</sup>

Intellectual strategies similar to that of the European Liberals can also be found in modern Japan. As in the case of neo-Hinduism, the

<sup>13</sup>See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 106-59; Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 24-43; Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 109; and Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1964), 1-30.

<sup>14</sup>For the most part, neo-Hindu thinkers trace their intellectual heritage within the Indian tradition to Vedantic thought. For a discussion of the influence of European ideas regarding religious experience on neo-Hindu interpretations of religious pluralism, see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Stonybrook, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 378-402.

<sup>15</sup>Bithika Mukerji, “Christianity in the Reflection of Hinduism” in Paul J. Griffiths, ed., *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 232-33.



need for a theory of religion which might successfully account for the modern fact of religious pluralism seems to supply at least part of the motivation for the interest in “experience” as a category. And, once again, the resources supporting the appeal to a universal experience can be found not only within the indigenous tradition (Mahayana Buddhism in the case of Japan), but also in the thought of Western Liberal thinkers. A clear example can be found in the maiden work of Kitarô Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*.<sup>16</sup> Nishida (at least in his early work) grounded his transcultural philosophy of religion in an appeal to universal and ineffable “pure experience” (*junsui keiken*) which is known immediately, prior to being factored into subject and object by discriminating thought. Although the intellectual roots of Nishida’s views on “pure experience” can be traced proximately to William James, it cannot be denied that Japanese Buddhist thought (especially Zen) also supplies warrants for his thought.

Nor is Islam without examples which parallel Liberalism’s belief in an experiential core common to all religions. Compare Friedrich Heiler’s views regarding “the history of religions as the preparation for the cooperation of all religions” with Mohammed Talbi’s recognition of the problem religious pluralism poses for an Islam unprepared intellectually for dealing with this pluralism. Islam, he suggests, must recognize its compatibility with “one world religion” in which all believers face the same “unfathomable” God. In a similarly tolerant vein and very reminiscent of Christian theologians in the Liberal tradition such as Tillich and Rahner, Fazlur Rahman calls Islam to a renewed appreciation of a “general revelation.”<sup>17</sup>

The apologetic motive behind the interest in an ineffable religious experience has had its fair share of critics. The same is the case with the theoretical claim concerning the universality of this experience. Criticisms of this claim can be focused under three headings.

First, the Liberal position regarding the universality of religious experience has been criticized for being an often-unargued assertion based on an implicit metaphysics. Very often this metaphysics is a variety of idealism. Some of the most noteworthy criticism of the work of Jung, for example, has charted this course. However congenial meta-

<sup>16</sup>Kitarô Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup>For Talbi, see “Islam and Dialogue—Some Reflections on a Current Topic.” For Rahman, see “The People of the Book and the Diversity of Religions.” Both essays are in Griffiths, ed., *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, 102-10. To be included with these two Islamic figures is Seyyed Hossein Nasr, editor of a collection of essays by Frithjof Schuon and a considerable body of his own works which suggest an esoteric turn to mystical experience in the face of religious pluralism. See *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Amity, NY: Amity House, 1986), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

physical idealism (especially neo-Platonic idealism) has been to the Christian tradition in the past, and however useful some have found it in dealing with religious diversity, Christianity cannot simply be identified with metaphysical idealism nor are Christian theologians required to turn to idealism in order to deal responsibly and creatively with the fact of religious diversity.

Second, the presumption of a universal religious experience carries with it a mixed legacy for the practice of interreligious dialogue. The fact is obviously more of a problem for comparative theology than for nontheological disciplines which study religions. The ambiguity lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the Liberal notion of religious experience can act as an impetus to engaging in interreligious dialogue.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, it can also be less than helpful by promoting (a) theological indifference toward the doctrinal claims of other religious traditions, (b) a subtle theological imperialism, or (c) an uncritical syncretism which obscures real differences. If all religions are ultimately expressing the same ultimate, ineffable truth, why need theology interest itself in the complexities of other religions? Herein lie the roots of a new kind of theological indifference toward other religions. Theological imperialism can also become a problem. Theologians such as Karl Rahner have no hesitation in recognizing in non-Christian religions the same truth as that witnessed by Christians. Rahner's inclusive theology of religions is justified by a theology of general revelation with roots in the Liberal model of religious experience. However, once the question is shifted from the realm of a concrete revelation based on a "nonthematizable" religious experience to the realm of a concrete revelation disclosed within history, Rahner is led to a decidedly less tolerant conclusion, that is, that the implicit Christian truth expressed in non-Christian religions is rendered invalid by the explicit truth of Christianity once the Gospel has been preached.<sup>19</sup> Finally, there is a tendency toward an uncritical syncretism. If all religious traditions are in fact different expressions of the same ineffable experience, then the historical specificities of the various religions can be safely overlooked as secondary, if not merely accidental. This move has the unwelcome effect of deracinating religions from their concrete historical and cultural contexts in the interest of isolating some common truth.

Besides the difficulties of an implicit metaphysics and the mixed legacy for interreligious dialogue, there is a third problem. Logical inconsistencies can accompany claims for a religious experience which

<sup>18</sup>For an argument supporting this interpretation of Rahner's controversial theology of "anonymous Christianity" see Maurice Boutin, "Anonymous Christianity: A Paradigm for Interreligious Encounter?," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20/4 (1983): 602-29.

<sup>19</sup>See, for instance, Rahner's article "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" in *Theological Investigations* 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 118-21.

is simultaneously ineffable and universal. Often ineffability itself is offered as the major argument for recognizing the similarity of two seemingly distinct religious phenomena. But if their experiences are ineffable, on what basis can it be asserted that the same experience which illumines the Christian mystic also enlightens the Zen practitioner? In fact, the descriptive data from the phenomenology of religion seem to suggest a diametrically opposite conclusion.<sup>20</sup> Religions differ radically in their doctrinal claims and symbol systems. In fairness, however, it must be noted that the phenomenology of religion cannot disprove the Liberal thesis either.

Let me complete these reflections by noting what I take to be the lasting contribution of Liberalism's turn to experience as well as the basic problem this category raises for comparative theology. In turning to experience, Liberalism has been able to conceive of theology and the study of religion as a comparative enterprise. Since religious symbols can be understood as expressions of an extratextual experience, religious symbols can be compared with other symbolic cultural expressions. Mircea Eliade's explorations of the religious dimension of modern art and Paul Tillich's reflections regarding the "method of correlation" and a "theology of culture" are but two well-known examples. Once doctrine can be construed as an expression of a truth not exhausted by language, theology can be conceived as an effort to correlate the Christian message and the modern situation (Tillich) or the *kerygma* and the scientific *Weltanschauung* (Bultmann) or traditional doctrine and the individual's existential questions (Rahner).

This is a lasting contribution which should be conserved. Unfortunately, the Liberals take away with one hand what they give with the other. Even while establishing theology as a comparative enterprise, Liberalism's claim regarding a religious experience which is both universal and ineffable works against the success of its comparisons. If all religions (or alternatively some aspects of all religions) are expressions of the same ineffable experience, it should come as no surprise that real religious differences are eclipsed in the effort to affirm the one ineffable source behind all the variant expressions. With this sizable weakness in mind, it will be worthwhile to investigate a contemporary alternative to theological Liberalism and its turn to religious experience.

<sup>20</sup>The equation of ineffability with universality can reach comic as well as cosmic proportions. Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead once reported to an approving Joseph Campbell on the analogy between the ancient Greek mysteries and modern rock concerts: "They didn't know what they were saying, and we don't know what we're saying either, but we think we're saying the same thing." See Wendy Doniger's decidedly disapproving review of *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell* by Stephen Larsen and Robin Larsen in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 2, 1992, p. 8.

### III. George Lindbeck's Postliberal Alternative

George Lindbeck has made a distinguished contribution to ecumenical theology and is no stranger to the problems presented to Christianity by the diversity of religions and their conflicting doctrinal claims. He is also keenly aware of the problems presented by Liberalism's notion of religious experience for a coherent and workable Christian theology of religions. In his much discussed book, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Lindbeck outlines a cultural-linguistic theory of religion as part of a "Postliberal" strategy for undoing what he considers Schleiermacher's error in postulating an ineffable experience common to all religions.<sup>21</sup>

Lindbeck develops his cultural-linguistic theory of religion in contrast to both the cognitive-propositional theory and the experiential-expressivist theory. In the cognitive-propositional theory emphasis is placed on the objective truth claims made by a religion's doctrinal formulae. Like philosophical systems or scientific theories, religions are fundamentally propositions that either inform or misinform us about reality. Lindbeck associates the cognitive-propositional theory of religion with all of Christian theology prior to Schleiermacher.<sup>22</sup> In the experiential-expressive theory of religion, the emphasis is shifted to the expressive function of doctrine. Like the artistic creations of the romantic poet, religious symbols and texts are fundamentally expressions of inner experience. Lindbeck summarizes many of the difficulties attending theological Liberalism with his account of the experiential expressive theory.<sup>23</sup> However one may want to quibble with his account of traditional orthodoxies (in the cognitive-propositional theory) or of theological Liberalism (in the experiential-expressive theory), Lindbeck's chief contribution to the discussion lies in his cultural-linguistic theory of religion and the Postliberal theology which it expounds.

In Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory, religion is conceived as a comprehensive framework for the interpretation of life which forms a conceptual and perceptual paradigm shaping the subjectivity of individuals.<sup>24</sup> Although the roots of this approach can be traced back to Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim (on the cultural side) and to Ludwig Wittgenstein (on the linguistic side), the affinities of Lindbeck's position with the semiotic anthropology of Clifford Geertz and

<sup>21</sup>George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 16-17, 31-32.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 32-34.

the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure can also be noted.<sup>25</sup> Religion is like a language: once it is learned, it offers a way of perceiving the world and dealing practically with it. Lindbeck reasons that if religion is like a language, doctrine must be the grammar of that language.<sup>26</sup> In opposition to the experiential-expressive theory of religion, Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory does not presume that religions objectify an ineffable and universal experience of the absolute. The cultural-linguistic theory forms an alternative to the experiential-expressive theory by reversing the relationship of "inner" and "outer" experience. In the experiential-expressive theory, inner experience forms the foundation for what only secondarily becomes an outward expression in language. In the cultural-linguistic theory, by contrast, doctrine (what Geertz calls the "semiotic code" and what Saussure distinguishes as *langue* in contrast to *parole*) is prior to experience. In fact, the doctrinal system which constitutes a religion is determinative of the range of experiences available to an individual who has interiorized that system.

Since the doctrinal system is a precondition for any particular religious experience, Lindbeck is led to conclude that there are no uninterpreted experiences.<sup>27</sup> This conclusion leads him to argue, against the Liberals, that different religions do not thematize the same experience in different ways because "the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied as the interpretive schemes they embody."<sup>28</sup>

Thus religion, including mysticism, need not be described as something universal arising from within the depths of individuals and diversely and inadequately objectified in particular faiths; it can at least as plausibly be construed as a class name for a variegated set of cultural-linguistic systems that, at least in some cases, differentially shape and produce our most profound sentiments, attitudes, and awarenesses.<sup>29</sup>

Christianity's notion of *agapē* should not be taken as an alternative interpretation of what Buddhists know as *karuna* or, for that matter, what French revolutionaries called *fraternité*. On the contrary, all three are different ways of configuring the self and the world. Given the cultural and linguistic starting point of his theory of religion, Lind-

<sup>25</sup> See Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 73-125, and Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> Based on this analogy, Lindbeck goes on to develop what he calls a "rule theory" of doctrine. See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 73-90.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

beck steers away from Liberalism's notion of a transcultural religious experience.

In place of the expressive model of religious language which typically accompanies Liberalism's view of religious experience, Lindbeck develops his theory of "intratextuality."<sup>30</sup> The meaning of texts is not to be found beyond them in an ineffable experience only partially brought to expression within the text, but not reducible to the concepts and grammatical structure of the text. Texts do not reveal, disclose, or manifest a truth which first exists outside of the text. In Lindbeck's view, both the cognitive-propositional and the experiential-expressive theories of religion are hobbled by an "extratextual" understanding of the relationship between text and meaning. In the case of cognitive-propositionalism, according to Lindbeck, the text directly names the objective reality of God. In the case of experiential-expressivism, the text expresses the experience of the ineffable. In the cultural-linguistic theory, however, the meaning of a text is established by the coherence of its claims and the adequacy of its categories to the specific social and historical circumstances for which it wants to serve as a framework for understanding and action. The meaning of a text, in short, is intratextual.<sup>31</sup>

The great contribution of Liberalism, as I have stated, is its program for theology as a comparative enterprise. Liberal theology seeks to correlate Christian tradition not only with cultural representations of truth (such as art and politics) but with non-Christian religions as well. In my view, the major weakness of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory of religion is its inability to sustain this important contribution of Liberalism.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 113 ff.

<sup>31</sup>Perhaps this point can be clarified by comparing Lindbeck's notion of intratextuality with the position of another member of what has been called the "Yale School." In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans Frei calls for the restoration of the primacy of the biblical worldview for Christian theology. Prior to the modern period, the world of the scriptural text was the prime reality for the Christian believer. Life was interpreted by the more encompassing reality of the biblical worldview. The rise of Enlightenment rationalism and historical criticism in the seventeenth century brought with it the "eclipse" of biblical narrative as a comprehensive framework for interpreting life religiously. Scripture, once the framework for interpreting the world, gradually became an object within the world to be interpreted. Lindbeck's call for an intratextual understanding of texts and a grammatical model of doctrine is fundamentally in accord with Frei's views regarding the inappropriateness for Christian theology of judging Scripture by extrabiblical criteria. In Frei's view, theology should not use worldly value-systems to interpret scriptural texts. Rather, the scriptural text is the broader framework within which the world is to be interpreted. Similarly for Lindbeck, Christian texts (including doctrinal statements) do not express an experience lying beyond the text. For this reason, they are not to be judged by extratextual standards. Instead, Christian doctrine forms a basic grammar for understanding Christianity as a symbol-system within which all of life is to be interpreted by the believer. See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

This weakness in Lindbeck's position is especially evident in the area of interreligious dialogue. In his desire to overturn Liberalism's turn to experience, Lindbeck also undermines theology's responsibility to be in dialogue with non-Christian religions. Christianity, at least in its Postliberal mode as construed by Lindbeck, constitutes a world of its own, established by its sacred texts and structured by the grammar of its doctrines. For this reason, aside from an occasional *ad hoc* apologetic skirmish which is in no way central to the fundamental theological task of interpreting Christian texts, Christianity need not concern itself with the truth claims made by non-Christian religions. Christian theological criteria for meaningfulness and truth (like Buddhist and Hindu criteria, presumably) function intratextually. In place of the comparative possibilities fostered by Liberal theology, Lindbeck's intratextuality cannot relate Christianity dialogically with what lies outside the purview of its normative texts. Non-Christian religions, being extratextual (i.e., outside the interpretive framework established by Christian texts), are incommensurate with the categories of Christian faith.

Lindbeck's Postliberal view of Christianity has been criticized as a variant of the confessionalism of Karl Barth.<sup>32</sup> Although the affinities with Neo-Orthodox theology are not to be denied, it should be pointed out that Lindbeck does not think non-Christian religions should be rejected as faithlessness. In a strict employment of the cultural-linguistic theory, other religions are neither right nor wrong, but rather meaningless as interpreted from within the universe of discourse established by Christian texts.

Unlike other perspectives, [the cultural-linguistic] approach proposes no common framework such as that supplied by the propositionalist's concept of truth or the expressivist's concept of experience within which to compare religions. Thus when affirmations or ideas from categorially different religious or philosophical frameworks are introduced into a given religious outlook, these are either simply babbling or else, like mathematical formulas employed in a poetic text, they have vastly different functions and meanings than they had in their original settings.<sup>33</sup>

All the same, it does not seem that Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory of religion is very useful for comparing religions *theologically*. Intratextuality militates against a comparative theology in which

<sup>32</sup>For a discussion of Lindbeck's Postliberal program for theology as "confessionalism," see David Tracy, "Lindbeck's Program for Theology: A Reflection," *Thomist* 49 (1985): 461-72.

<sup>33</sup>Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 49.



Christianity is interpreted from within a horizon which includes a non-Christian religion.<sup>34</sup>

But the most serious problem plaguing Lindbeck's Postliberal proposal for theology is not unlike the problem I have outlined above regarding Liberalism's apologetic use of religious experience: in both cases, the public character of theological discourse is obscured. In the case of Schleiermacher's Liberalism, discourse about religion is rendered private by his claim that religious experience is ineffably beyond the reductive analyses of its Enlightenment critics. In the case of Lindbeck's Postliberalism, discourse about religion is rendered private by his intratextual alternative to Liberal understandings of religious experience. In both cases, Christians end up being able to talk to no one but themselves.

#### *IV. Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions*

In light of the foregoing discussion of the notion of a universal religious experience, I would like to offer some observations regarding comparative theology as a way of dealing responsibly and creatively with the fact of the plurality of religions today. Comparative theology, as I will propose it here, responds to the fact of religious pluralism by engaging in comparative experiments yielding limited, very tentative results and by eschewing encompassing theories about religion in general based on claims for or against a universal religious experience. What follows are a number of suggestions on how comparative theology might serve as an alternative to a fully systematized theology of religions.

First, the notion of a universal, extra-linguistic religious experience is simply not helpful for Christians in responding to the intrusive fact of religious pluralism today. I make this claim fully aware that many Christians and non-Christians assert the existence of such an experience.<sup>35</sup> The point of the claim, however, is neither to affirm nor to deny the existence of such a religious experience. Instead, I want to underscore the conclusion suggested by the foregoing discussion of the debate between theological Liberalism and Postliberalism, that is, that religious experience is not a particularly helpful category in addressing the plurality of religions. Theological Liberals are hard pressed to explain how the ineffability of an experience is in any way

<sup>34</sup>For a discussion of a parallel problem for a Jewish theology of religions, see David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Jon Levinson's review article of this work, "Must We Accept the Other's Self-Understanding?," *Journal of Religion* 71/4 (1991): 558-67.

<sup>35</sup>For examples, see footnotes 16 through 19 above.

a sufficient warrant for believing in its universality as the common source of all religions. Moreover, such an approach tends to minimize the real and interesting differences which distinguish religious traditions by drawing our attention away from differences and toward a transcendent unity. In this way, the Liberal model of religious experience can effectively shield Christianity from the ambiguity of religious pluralism. On the other hand, a Postliberal rejection of the notion of a universal religious experience has led Lindbeck to the conclusion that religions are incommensurate. As far as the project of developing a theology adequate to the pluralism of religions is concerned, the debate regarding a universal, prelinguistic experience is simply not helpful any longer.

Second, in lieu of encompassing theological theories based on claims for or against a universal religious experience, comparative theology should proceed by means of limited case studies in which specific elements of the Christian tradition are interpreted in comparison with elements of another religious tradition. This suggestion is based on my conviction that a fully systematized theology of non-Christian religions is not possible today. Throughout most of this century, theological discussion concerning the significance of non-Christian religions has tended to polarize along lines set down by the rift between exclusivist theologies and inclusivist theologies. Karl Barth is the best known example of the former; Karl Rahner the best known of the latter. More recently "pluralist" interpretations of non-Christian religions have entered into the discussion. Where inclusivist theologies interpret non-Christian religions as real yet imperfect expressions of Christian truth, pluralist theologies see all religions (including Christianity) as partial and inadequate expressions of truth that transcends them all. John Hick's work, *An Interpretation of Religion*, is a good example of this pluralistic approach.<sup>36</sup> Generally speaking, inclusivist and pluralist theologies of religions can be associated with the Liberal claim regarding a universal religious experience. Exclusivist theologies reject that claim.

Commenting on this discussion, Francis X. Clooney observes an increasing dissatisfaction with any attempt at a grand theological schematization of non-Christian religions, including the pluralist model. This state of affairs can only partially be accounted for by the loss of Western cultural hegemony in this century.<sup>37</sup> Also to be

<sup>36</sup>For the threefold typology of theological interpretations of non-Christian religions see Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), and Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982).

<sup>37</sup>For a discussion of these factors, see Langdon Gilkey, "Plurality and Its Theological Implications" in John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 37-40.

counted a factor, notes Clooney, is the sheer increase in our knowledge of non-Christian religions:

... it is the idea itself of the grand explanatory theory—and not any particular version of it, liberal or conservative, theological or secular—that is a real contemporary stumbling block, because the information on religions now available to us is far too complex and far too concretely situated to be accounted for justly by one or another of these theories and because, by extension, there is, in fact, no universal position from which one could adequately articulate such a theory.<sup>38</sup>

Previous theologies of non-Christian religions have been articulated largely in ignorance of the religions they purport to interpret. Moreover, it should be noted that theological presuppositions about religious experience have tended to undermine the *theological* necessity of studying these religions in their concrete specificity.<sup>39</sup>

Although abandoning attempts to erect a systematic theology of religions may be difficult for Christian theologians to accept, honesty to our current situation requires this of us. The intent of the suggestion, however, is not to leave us with an agnosticism regarding the truth claims of non-Christian religions. Rather, it is to point theology in the direction of a more creative praxis in responding to religious pluralism today. Inclusivist and pluralist theologies assert a knowledge of some privileged vantage point wherein the several religions appear as examples of a more general phenomenon. In this case, a general theory of religion is offered as the lowest common denominator capable of including all religions.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to a theology of religions, comparative theology does not concern itself with the development of such general theories of religion but instead engages in limited comparisons or case studies. This means that a comparative theologian requires a detailed understanding of a specific non-Christian religion on its own terms instead of a theory of religion in general. This is certainly not the case with the inclusivist and pluralist approaches where presuppositions about experience undermine the *theological* necessity of learning about specific religions and revising our Christian self-understanding in the light of these findings.

<sup>38</sup>Francis X. Clooney, "The Study of Non-Christian Religions in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28/3 (Summer 1991): 482-94.

<sup>39</sup>For a well-argued account of the importance of the study of non-Christian religions as a necessary component of an adequate Christian theology of non-Christian religions, see J. A. Di Noia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup>Take as examples, Hick's "reality centeredness," Rahner's "Holy Mystery," or W. C. Smith's "faith."

We are not without examples of such limited comparative projects. Take, for examples, Francis X. Clooney's reading of Aquinas in relation to Advaita Vedanta texts and John Kennan's retrieval of wisdom christology by placing classic Christian doctrines in conversation with Mahayana Buddhist thought. Masao Abe, a Buddhist and not a Christian, has nevertheless offered what must be recognized as a work of Christian theology in his treatment of *kenosis* in comparison with the Buddhist notion of emptiness. In each case, generic theories of religion have been put aside in favor of limited acts of comparison.<sup>41</sup>

Third, in turning away from both Liberal and Postliberal positions regarding religious experience, comparative theology should look to hermeneutical understandings of comparison which honor differences as much as similarities. Among voices prominent in the current debate on foundationalism, I would recommend for consideration the post-Romanticist hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Particularly helpful is Gadamer's notion of understanding as a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*), but understood correctly in terms of his general dissatisfaction with "method" itself.<sup>42</sup> The advantage of approaching religions as "horizons" in Gadamer's sense is twofold. First, it allows us to think of religions as paradigms or languages for interpreting life (which is the advantage of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model over Liberalism) without thereby privatizing discourse about religions with a theory of intratextuality or rendering religions incomparable. Second, it allows religious claims to be compared (which is the advantage of Liberalism over Postliberalism) without resorting to an appeal to a universal religious experience which obliterates the significance of the real differences distinguishing religions. In effect, Gadamer's hermeneutical approach goes far in preserving the strengths of *Liberal and Postliberal theologies while avoiding their weaknesses*.

Despite these advantages of Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, difficulties remain. If Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" approach does not presume a universal and ineffable experience as the basis of comparison, on what basis then is comparison to be made? An answer to this question is suggested by the present author's own study of Buddhism, that is, the transformative power of Buddhism as Christianity's "Other." Here the works of Emmanuel Lévinas and David Tracy may

<sup>41</sup>See Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993); John P. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); and Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata" in John B. Cobb Jr. and Christopher Ives, eds., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>42</sup>Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272-74.

prove helpful.<sup>43</sup> The study of other religions by Christian theologians is not only disruptive and destabilizing. Although other religions pose a threat to the security of our present theological understandings, they also offer an opportunity for revising those understandings. One measure of the success of the limited comparative exercises I propose for comparative theology is the degree to which they resist the tendency to domesticate the Other by reducing it to what David Tracy calls “simply more of the same.”<sup>44</sup> In the hermeneutical turn away from totalizing theories, other religions become for Christianity not only a *tremendum* which resists incorporation into our already constituted interpretations, but a *fascinans* which suggests ways in which these interpretations might be revised.

Comparative theology must therefore endeavor to respond to a real and not merely a projected Other. This makes more appreciable the possibility of incomparable texts. Encounter with the Other admits to possibilities ranging from the shock of recognition of oneself in the Other, to the careful delineation of similarities and differences, to utter difference. Take, for example, the possibilities for new understanding which arise in a careful reading of Sankara and John of the Cross on divinity of Shinran and Kierkegaard on faith. Here, Tracy’s “similarity-in-difference” seems like a plausible candidate for enlarging Christian theological self-understanding. But sometimes the otherness of a non-Christian religious text may present itself as radical difference. Take for instance the case of the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*). Buddhist emptiness can be conceived as the radical negation of the holiness of the Christian God.<sup>45</sup> Emptiness, however, can also be understood as an ideology critique which opens up rich possibilities for comparative experiments with the *via negativa* tradition in Christian theology. Even the insurmountable difference of two specific texts is in itself a type of comparison. In this case, the power of the Other for transforming Christian theological interpretations is experienced at best only as an unfulfilled hope: the non-Christian religion serves as a sign of the tenativeness of all Christian theological understandings.

<sup>43</sup>For Emmanuel Lévinas see his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). For David Tracy see his *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). For a Pure Land Buddhist approach to the transformative power of the Other, see Tanabe Hajime, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>44</sup>See, for instance, Tracy’s comments on William James in *Dialogue with the Other: Interreligious Dialogue* (Louvain: Eerdmans/Peeters Press, 1990), 30.

<sup>45</sup>See Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, “Zen as the Negation of Holiness” in Frederick Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 169-78.

Fourth, comparative theology is Christian *theology*. Unlike the philosophy of religion or comparative religion, comparative theology is carried out within the context of the Christian tradition as well as the academy. The comparative theologian thus enters into the professional study of another religion with hopes and expectations. The comparative theologian is a believer in a crisis of understanding fomented by the intrusive presence of the Other. This means that the comparative theologian operates within a tension defined by (1) vulnerability to the transformative power of the Other and (2) loyalty to the Christian tradition.<sup>46</sup> All temptations to overcome this tension should be resisted. I include here exclusivist theologies (such as Barth and Lindbeck's Postliberal variant) as well as inclusivist and pluralist theologies based on claims regarding a universal religious experience.

Comparative theologians are competent Christian theologians, yet good comparison requires that they also have a degree of professional competence in the traditions, texts, languages, symbols, etc. of a religion other than Christianity. Comparison is achieved as a carefully limited constructive act of the imagination. Of necessity, therefore, comparative theology will proceed slowly and tentatively. "The rhetorical freedom that allows us to take some liberties with a textual tradition," writes Bernard Faure, "must derive from a long acquaintance with it, from have gone many times around the hermeneutical circle."<sup>47</sup>

Comparative theology leaves aside the question of a universal religious experience. It does this in order to place Christian theological understandings at risk. But comparative theology is not simply a gamble. It is an act of resistance and hope.<sup>48</sup> It resists the tendency to inoculate Christianity from the threat of a religious pluralism more radical than the Liberals suspected. It is an act of hope in that it looks to other religions as a means to understand more fully the truths of Christian faith.

<sup>46</sup>See Clooney, *After Vedanta*, 4-5.

<sup>47</sup>Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 8.

<sup>48</sup>For the hermeneutical implications of resistance and hope, see Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*.