

Translation, Interpretation and Culture: On the Disingenuity of a Comparative Theology

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Abstract

In this three-part article, I look at Francis Clooney's work on comparative theology, identify one of the crucial problems of translation that comparative studies confront and outline the nature of a task for the twenty-first century cross-cultural theology. In the first part, I show that there is no unique 'translation problem' but that it actually names a plethora of problems. Such problems include not only the translation of texts across languages but also the philosophical problems of incommensurability of theories and inter-theoretic reductions. In the second part, I undertake a fairly close examination of aspects of Clooney's enterprise. Here, I show that, quite contrary to what he promises, his project simply rehashes old dogmas of earlier Christian writers albeit in a hidden and implicit manner. In the third part, I suggest that we need to rethink some of the ingrained but hardly orthodox assumptions, if we intend to understand the cultures and practices which are other than those in the West. I suggest that a new theological practice is more adequate to our times than what we have inherited from the past.

Key words: Comparative theology; Hinduism; Christianity; India; Translation; Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The Oxford online dictionary defines the word 'disingenuous' as follows: "not candid or sincere, typically by pretending that one knows less about something than one really does." This term suffers from ambiguity and a moral load. However, this paper will ultimately disambiguate the word and provide an explanation of its sub-title.

While doing comparative theology, especially when it involves two different cultures, we face what we can term as a '*translation problem*': the issue of translating terms from one language into another. Say that the languages in question are English and Sanskrit. When we settle for 'God' as a translation for '*Brahma*', or for 'Religion' as a translation for '*Dharma*', we face this problem. Even though anthropologists had confronted this problem earlier (Hodgen, 1988; Kay & Willet, 1984) and the Christian missionaries even before them (Lach, 1994; Neill, 2002), its sharpest formulation in philosophy is due to Quine (1960) where he speaks of a radical indeterminacy of translation. Many have had occasion to take issue with Quine, the most notable of whom is Donald Davidson (Davidson, 1984).

Clooney's (2010) *Comparative Theology*, which I discuss in the following pages, takes up 'Hinduism' and Christianity as its units of comparison. His knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamil confronts him with this problem and he seems aware of its existence. As he says it explicitly,

...I concede the necessary cautions about using Western, Christian, and English-language words to characterize realities otherwise described in their own traditional contexts. But it seems to me that this process of translation and adaptation is inevitable... (Clooney, 2010, p.78).

This caution is necessary because doing comparative theology while remaining a Christian is no *sinecure*. On the one hand, one has to remain within the confines of one's religion, which makes absolute truth claims; on the other, one has to relate earnestly to faiths and traditions other than one's own which *appear* as competitors. As

a Jesuit priest, Clooney is aware of walking a tightrope. He speaks of the “tension between open-mindedness and faith, diversity and traditional commitment” (Clooney, 2010, p.21); of the “intense and difficult balance at the edge between traditions” that is at the heart of comparative theology (Clooney, 2010, p.80). He says too, “if we ourselves are faithful to our faith traditions and also intent upon honest encounter with other religious traditions, we are not going to escape the tension that energized and vexed the missionaries...” (Clooney, 2010, p.44).

It is important to notice how he has walked the tightrope and what its results are. The sub-title of his book, *deep learning across religious borders*, suggests that inter-religious learning should not only be “deep” but also that it is possible only at those borders *where religions meet each other*. We know for a fact that most Christian theologians have stayed at the centre while relating to other religions. Clooney promises to stay within the confines of Christianity, even as he touches its borders. In the process, he must also say what his solution to the translation problem is. Our expectations are raised very high. So are the stakes.

1. THREE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

However, what exactly is ‘the translation problem’? Because there are a plethora of problems, all of which also embody ‘the’ translation problem, the difficulty lies in identifying its *uniqueness*. Here, I will outline some *three* such problems. Each of these is well-known, and I presuppose this familiarity because of which I shall be sketching them briefly and abstractly.

A. Consider *abstractly* any two natural languages X and Y. Here, the problem is of translating words and sentences from one into words and sentences of the other. ‘X’ could be German and the word ‘*Dasein*’; ‘Y’ could be English, and the translation problem might involve the use of this word by Hegel and Heidegger. We can settle for a hyphenated equivalent: ‘there-being’ or ‘so-being’. We might signal the different meanings of the word ‘*Dasein*’ in Hegel and Heidegger in glossaries or footnotes. The chosen English words might not accurately translate ‘*Dasein*’ as either of the two philosophers uses it. However, this difficulty does not prevent us from reading and understanding Hegel and Heidegger in English and writing reasonably accurate tracts on their philosophies.

Exactly similar problems confront us, if we take Sanskrit as one language and English as the other: ‘God’ or ‘gods’ are not synonyms for ‘*Brahman*’ and ‘*Devatas*’ but this problem is no different from translating the Latin ‘*Religio*’ into the English ‘religion’. We can create glossaries and footnotes; we can introduce new words as translations (say, ‘pif paf’ as the translation of ‘*Dharma*’). We can enumerate the different meanings of ‘*Dharma*’ under the intension of ‘pif paf’ and leave it to the reader to learn the word-meaning.

In one sense, this is how we have solved translation problems involving technical words (‘gravitation’, ‘genes’, ‘electric current’, etc.). If we can introduce new words into a language in one domain, we can do the same in other domains as well. One could introduce new words in the English language for some ‘untranslatable’ Sanskrit words; then these new words could become a part of the English language the way ‘pundit’, ‘karma’, ‘juggernaut’, etc. have become parts of the English vocabulary.

B. Consider now two theories formulated in two *different* natural languages. Let us say that the theories under question are those of Newton and Einstein. The problem is this: could we consider, say, the English word ‘mass’ in Newton’s theory as the *equivalent* of the German ‘*masse*’ in Einstein’s theory? Even though translation is involved (finding the equivalent of ‘mass’ in German), the problem is different: here, we are dealing with words *as they are defined in different theories* and notice that their meaning in each of these theories is different. Even when we know that ‘*masse*’ in German can translate the English ‘mass’, we cannot claim that these words are each other’s equivalents in these two *rival* theories. Consequently, we are talking about the *translation of vocabulary of one rival theory into the vocabulary of another*. That is, even though the actual job is *also* one of translating between two different languages (finding the German equivalent for the English ‘mass’), we are primarily concerned with the issue whether ‘mass’ in Newton’s theory is equivalent to ‘*masse*’ in Einstein’s theory. The adequacy of translation depends not on natural language dictionaries but on the logical and mathematical consequences of these two theories. Although there is *also* a translation problem here, there is the *additional problem* of incommensurability (Kuhn, 1962; Feyerabend, 1962; Sankey, 1994; Hoyningen-Huene & Sankey, 2001) of two theories in the same domain of physics.

C. Consider now two theories formulated in a *single* natural language, say English. Let us say one theory is from the domain of cognitive neuroscience and the other is from the domain of psychology. They are both about the ‘same’ object, the human brain; they deal with the same topic, belief formation, say, ‘believing in God’. A MRI brain scan undertaken when some individual Christian prays shows that a particular sub-region of the brain is activated; psychology of religion describes the same activity in terms of ‘total surrendering to God’. Surely, there is also a translation problem here: translating the vocabulary of psychology of religion into the vocabulary of cognitive neuroscience. This is the problem of inter-theoretic reduction (Hooker, 1981; Balzer, Pearce, & Schmidt, 1984; Patricia Churchland, 1986; Bickle, 1998) in philosophy of science.

Cultures and Translations

Consider the English language, which has a rich corpus of religious writings. (Here, I am completely ignoring the

problems involved in translating many such writings from Greek, Latin and other European languages into English.) In order to make the problem visible and tractable, let me just speak of 'theology', while ignoring texts like sermons, prayers, liturgy, etc. Even here, I speak only of 'Christian theology'. Because there is no 'single' Christian theology but a multitude of them, let me use the convention of speaking about *the language of theology* in order to signal that theologies are at least theories of some kind and that there is a multitude of them. So, I speak of two *kinds* of languages: natural language and theological language. (Neither, as must be obvious, is meant in the singular.) From now on, when I speak of 'theological language', I refer to theologies in the English language.

Because the theological language is in English, we confront the problem of translation between two natural languages, say English and Hindi, in the first place. Second, because theology is a set of theories, there is the additional problem of *translating a theoretical vocabulary*: words like 'God', 'grace', 'salvation', 'sin', etc. are theoretical terms in these theologies. In the third place, we confront the issue of identifying the target: *into what* are we translating these theoretical terms?

The last question is important because the answer specifies which issues we confront. If we make the claim that the terms from this theological language (considered as terms within theories) are being translated into another theory, we have to identify the *kind* of theories in question. That is to say, do we confront a problem related to finding equivalences between Newton's theory and the theory of Einstein, or a problem similar to reducing psychology to cognitive neuroscience? If they are rival or competitor theories, we face the problem of incommensurability; in the second case, we have to answer issues raised by inter-theoretic reduction.

There is another possibility not mentioned so far because it is not a translation problem in any straight forward sense. Is the attempt to translate concepts from the theological language into an Indian language akin to *directly* translating the vocabulary of evolutionary biology into that of an economic theory? Consider, for example, the theory of inflation. How could one translate 'inflation' directly in terms of 'genetic drift'? One cannot. These two theories are not explaining the same phenomenon. Nor are they competing theories in the same domain. Even if one uses theories from modern evolutionary biology as metaphors to describe economic phenomena, the two theories do not relate to each other as source and target languages. An analogous situation could also confront us in the case of translating the theological language into an Indian language. Hence, the next question: are we translating terms from one theory into another that are neither each other's rivals nor allow for a *simple* inter-theoretic reduction?

However, if neither of the three is the case and we are merely translating theoretical terms into a natural language, the task is equivalent to translating, say,

Einstein's theory (formulated in English) into Hindi. In that case, one has to introduce new, technical terms for 'God', 'sin', 'salvation' 'justification', 'scripture', etc. *How to decide* which is the case here?

Hitherto, this decision process took a very simple form of *endorsing as true* those assumptions that solved this problem in one particular way. People assumed that religion is a cultural universal and that the difference between the Indian and the western culture (among other things) lies in the differences between their 'religions'. They also presupposed that both religions have notion(s) of 'deity', 'sin', 'salvation' etc.; and that, therefore, both were talking about the same objects. Consequently, they were convinced that the theological languages are mutually translatable. Further, they also presupposed that these religions also have 'theologies' and that they were *rivals* as a consequence. Thus, the difference between these theologies lay only in their content: for centuries, people in the West believed that the Christian theological language was richer (and thus superior) to the Indian theological language, the way Einstein's theory is richer than Newton's theory.

If these assumptions are not made, it is difficult to say what kind of problems we confront when we translate from Sanskrit to English: Is '*anruta*' to be translated as 'falsehood' or not? Is '*sat*' the same as 'existence' or 'the real' or neither? Is '*atman*' the same as the 'soul', the 'Self' or the 'personhood' or none of these? Does the Buddha deny that human beings have 'souls' when, according to some interpretations, he formulates the 'doctrine of *anatta*' or does Shankara do the same as well even when he speaks about the '*atman*'? Is '*Brahman*' to be translated as 'God' or are these two terms as unrelated to each other as 'inflation' and 'genetic drift'?

Further: how should we solve these translation problems? Should we ask a pundit who has studied Sanskrit texts, but does not have a clue about what 'soul' or 'falsehood' or 'existence' means? Should we ask a 'westernized' Indian academic who knows neither what 'soul' is nor what '*atman*' is but thinks he understands Heidegger's '*Dasein*'? Alternatively, should we consult Monier-Monier Williams who uses a generic Christian theology to translate what he takes to be words from Indian 'theologies'? Or should a German study Sanskrit in the hope that his native language will somehow give him access to Sanskrit without the mediation of many centuries of Christian translations of the Sanskrit language? Or should we train a new generation of Indians to access what they cannot 'easily' access today?

2. ISSUES IN THE DISCUSSION

These are some of the questions that a twenty-first century comparative theology faces in its quest. Thus, Clooney must confront these questions and seek answers. If Clooney does not take up this job, there is only one route open to him: he has to presuppose as true what requires

the proof of its truth. That is, he has to presuppose the truth of the ‘consensus’ that has emerged from centuries of habitual Christian-theological thinking about self and the other. Inevitably, his ‘comparative theological study’ will then end up reproducing the very same descriptions that Christian theology has produced of the Indian culture and its traditions for centuries. In that case, it is impossible for his comparative theology to change “how we experience ourselves and our world” and to inculcate us with a new learning that “disabuses us of false ideas about the other” (p.78). Instead, it will keep our experience and ideas stable. Instead of touching the religious borders where “deep inter-religious learning” can take place, Clooney would firmly anchor himself at the centre by virtue of which no “learning” would be possible, deep or otherwise.

In this part, I intend to explore whether this prediction is true with respect to three issues: (a) the nature, (b) the need and (c) the character of comparative theology.

2.1 The Nature of Comparative Theology

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, most of these studies not only incorporated the belief that ‘Hinduism’ is the religion of the ‘Hindus’ but also the characterization of the Indian ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ as minions of the Devil. Because Clooney does not speak in these terms, the questions are: how else does he speak about the Indian *deva’s and devi’s*? Has he *distanced* himself from this stance or does he merely *keep silent* about it? To answer these, we need to look at a few examples.

A. Consider how he describes his experience at a shrine for Laksmi, the wife of Vishnu.

To visit this temple and stand before the Goddess Laksmi opened for me new possibilities of vision beyond what I had seen or thought before...I knew that according to the Hindu tradition I was also being seen by Her...*There is no room for Laksmi in Christian theology*, no easy theory that makes sense of Her presence...I suppose I might even have worshipped Her, because I was already there, as it were seeing and being seen. *But Christians do not worship Goddesses*, so I did not. (Clooney, 2010, p.102)

It is strange to read that there is “no room” for Laksmi in Christian theology; centuries of Christian theology say otherwise. What kind of an ontological claim is Clooney making?

Here is one reading: Clooney is denying that God has eternal consorts and, therefore, also denies that Laksmi exists. This reading is supported by the fact that he does not claim that he is being seen by her in any absolute sense but only “according to the Hindu tradition.” Consequently, Clooney might want to say that while Hindu tradition affirms her existence, his Christian theology denies it. However, this *cannot* be the right reading of the passage because he affirms her presence (and thus her existence), when he says that there is “no easy theory that makes sense of her presence.” In other words, Clooney is affirming that Christian theology cannot easily make *sense of her presence* but not that it denies her existence.

Here is another reading of the same passage: Christian

theology allows the existence of Laksmi but not *as a Goddess*. However, this option is denied to us because Clooney explains that he did not worship her *because* “Christians do not worship Goddesses.” Of course, it is the case that *one cannot possibly worship what does not exist*; therefore, one could again argue that this explains why Clooney did not worship Laksmi. However, if Clooney wants to say that Laksmi’s existence as a goddess is denied by Christianity, there is no way she could provide him with the inspiration to draw parallels between Mother Mary and Laksmi. Any and every ordinary woman could be compared to Mary but that will not do for Clooney’s purposes: he needs that Laksmi exists in some non-human capacity, as someone related to a ‘god’ and thus *as a goddess*. Consequently, we must now assume that Christianity does countenance the existence of Laksmi *as a goddess*.

In that case, Clooney is making both statements: Christianity recognizes the existence of Laksmi as a goddess, while, at the same time, it denies her existence and thus fails to provide a “room” for her in its theology. How to understand this *apparent* contradiction?

There is one way to make sense of Clooney here: he is claiming that there is “no room” in Christian theology for Laksmi as a *true Goddess*. However there is “room” for her *as a false goddess*. So, Clooney is saying this: there is no room in Christian theology for true goddesses, but there is room for false goddesses. Because Christians do not worship the latter, Clooney does not worship Laksmi. If this is the case, why does he not say it openly and dissimulate instead?

It is not easy to speak about Laksmi as a false goddess in the twenty-first century world which is why Clooney talks about the absence “easy theories” to explain the “presence” of Laksmi. Nor can he, theologically speaking, call Laksmi a false goddess and then go on to compare her with Mother Mary. That is why, on the one hand, he endorses millennia of Christian theology; on the other hand, he is also forced to be *disingenuous* by speaking half-truths.

B. This is not a one-off case. The same disingenuousness repeats itself when he speaks about the Vaishnava tradition and the mantras they use to do *puja* to Narayana. Here, Clooney wants to relate one of the Mantras from this tradition (“Aum, obeisance to Narayana with Sri”) to the Christian prayer (“Abba, Father”). He puts the result of this “inter-religious reading” this way:

An interreligious reading should at least mean that a Christian reader takes the mantras to heart and finds in them a way to hear and utter anew prayers central to the bible and Christian tradition. When we pray ‘Abba, Father,’ we can learn to hear an echo of the Tiru Mantra. (Clooney, 2010, p.80).

Of course, he cannot possibly be saying the Narayana of the Vaishnavas is the God that Clooney worships. In that case, a formidable question opens up: given that the Christians pray only to God and worship only Him, how can a mantra directed at *some other entity ever help* such a prayer? Here, a variety of Christian theology with some modifications could help answer this question.

Consider the following rather simple formulation of a Christian thought: God instilled a sense of divinity in man which expresses itself as hunger and thirst for Him. If unaided by God's revelation that tells him who He is and how to worship Him, human beings can only devise human ways to worship God. Here is where the False God steps in and deceives the unaided human.

If the above idea is acceptable, we can make sense of Clooney. When he prays 'Abba, Father', all that a Christian can *learn to hear* are the *echoes* of those others who have not yet found this 'true God'. He cannot hear the *sound* of the mantra; all he "can learn" to hear is its mere echo. Clooney's inter-religious reading *only apparently* does not focus on false gods; this lack of focus is only 'apparent' because the mantras cannot substitute for the Christian *prayer*, which is directed only at the true God. Clooney implicitly says is that even when men *worship* entities *other than God*, Christians should take cognizance of their desire to worship the true God and not focus on the actual object of worship. If we do this, we can indeed hear the echoes of other 'religiosities'; after all, *false religion* is also *religion*. Perhaps, while praying to God, the Christian can be grateful because he hears the echoes of those who still have not found Him. Even then, surely, this cannot be the "inter-religious learning" that Clooney is trumpeting, is it? To some extent, the answer to this question depends on what "inter-religious learning" means to Clooney. Here is his answer:

Even the more enclosed medieval European Christian era was not lacking in instances of interreligious learning. We can think here of Aquinas's dialogue with Jewish and Muslim thinkers in the *Summa Theologiae*. (Clooney, 2010, p.39).

Are we supposed to believe that Aquinas' dialogue is the "deep learning" at the religious borders that Clooney talks about? If Aquinas 'learnt' from the Jewish and Muslim thinkers about his own religion through this dialogue, he must have learnt the most from Aristotle, a pagan thinker if ever there was one. If this is an instance of inter-religious learning, then the history of Christianity is the story of an unbroken process of inter-religious and intra-religious (surely, there were also 'dialogues' with the heretics) learning! This is disingenuous.

C. As a final example, let us look at how he talks about 'Hinduism' and notice that the terms of description are *entirely different* from the way he thinks and speaks about Christianity. "*Hinduism*" is a set of human, cultural, and religious energies...beginning with the indigenous ... religious traditions of India, probably including the *cult* of multiple *local gods and goddesses*... (Clooney, 2010, p.85).

This Hinduism, as he says, included probably a cult of "local gods and goddesses." However, the question is this: what makes these gods and goddesses 'local' and in which sense are they that? Surely, they could not be 'local' in the sense that only a group of people from a particular geographical region worshipped such entities; nor could

this phenomenon be a 'cult' because the number of people worshipping such entities is not huge. If either is the case, the God of Israel will become 'local' as well; Judaism would be a 'cult' in exactly the same sense too. What, then, would become of the Christian God? This pseudo-anthropological/sociological approach which characterizes Clooney's description of Hinduism is nowhere in evidence when he speaks about Christianity. Having set up the terms of comparison on these terms, Clooney goes on to speak about the further developments: "*This Hinduism combines* the complex indigenous and Vedic heritage, brahminical orthodoxy and ascetical extensions and alternatives...*devotion to new, popular Gods* such as Siva, Visnu, Rama, Krsna, leading to the formulation, particularly in brahminical discourses, of major theistic traditions..." (Clooney, 2010, pp.85-86).

This Hinduism, over time, acquires "new" Gods, who are "popular" with the masses. From where did these 'Gods' emerge? Whatever the answer, Clooney cannot possibly say that the Indians *discovered* these 'Gods' either in the world or outside it. They could not have found their 'Gods' *empirically* in the world; if they did, their 'Gods' would be as real as any other object in the world. They could not have discovered them through 'revelation' either because, as a Jesuit priest, Clooney cannot allow for this possibility. Consequently, of necessity (this is a *logical* necessity), human beings could only have *invented* them. That is why these 'Gods' are "new" and their edification lies in their popularity with the masses. That is to say, the Indian "Gods and Goddesses" are mere inventions of human beings whereas, quite obviously, the Christian God is not. However, as Clooney says, Indians *worship* these gods and goddesses. How does Christianity call that worship which human beings do *to their own creations*? Historically, *it has been called 'idolatry'*. In short, when Clooney sets up a comparison between his 'Hinduism' and his Christianity, *his own terms of description* sets up a comparison between idolatry and the worship of the 'true' God, or between *the true religion and the false religions*.

Historically, that is how Christianity set up the debate. But the virtue of that old discussion is that these ideas have been proclaimed openly and honestly by their proponents. Clooney, however, does not do so; he *dissimulates* instead.

2.2 The Diversity Argument

Clooney provides his brand of comparative theology with a justification for its existence. However, this too follows the nature of his arguments so far. It is every bit as contrived as the presentation of his notion of inter-religious encounter and learning. To appreciate the force of this observation, we need to look at his basic argument about the need for 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...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. (Clooney, 2010, p.3).

In other words, the contemporary religious diversity and the need to retain one's own religious practices are alleged to foster the need for comparative theology. How credible is this suggestion?

By way of answering this question, let us keep the context of the origin of Christianity in mind. Surely, if nothing else, the Roman religious landscape was no less diverse than our own (Ruether, 1974; Wiedemann, 1990; Phillips Roberts, 1986). While it is true that Islam did not exist then, there existed more religious cults in the Roman Empire of yesteryears than what we see today. Given the contacts the Greeks had with India (McEvelley, 2002) and the travelogues written by them, one cannot argue that there was no knowledge of religious diversity in India back then.

In that case, *why did Christianity not indulge in comparative theology?* Why did Christian theology not become comparative at the outset? The answer is that Christianity *did compare*: it compared itself to Judaism and to the multiple pagan traditions of its time. Christianity found all other religious traditions either wanting or false and proclaimed itself as *the truth* that even the pagans were implicitly striving to attain. The most noble among the Pagans were mere "preparations for the Gospels" (*Praeparatione Evangelicae*), as Eusebius, the early Church Father, put it.

It appears to me that there are two possibilities to choose from: either (i) Clooney does not endorse the truth-claims of Christianity, or (ii) he does not consider this the 'right' way of doing comparative theology. Given that he is writing as a Jesuit priest, we are not justified in assuming the first. However, if we choose the second of the two options, what are we to make of the following idea then? "Comparative theology is a practical response to religious diversity *read with our eyes open*, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with *a willingness to see newly* the truths of our own religion in light of another" (Clooney, 2010, p.69).

Should we assume that the early Christianity, the apostolic and the Early Church fathers read with their 'eyes closed' and that they were unwilling "to see newly" the truths of their own religion? What, in any case, are "the truths" that Clooney has in mind? For example, Christianity has always claimed to be 'the truth' and that the pagan traditions are 'false' religions. What exactly does it mean to see this truth "newly"? Does the truth of a statement change into falsehood when looked at "newly"? If it does not, why look at it "newly" with one's "eyes open"? This vague way of talking might help garner votes in an election, but it is pernicious to think in such an obfuscating manner when involved in the intellectual endeavour of building a comparative theology. In any case, without speaking about the ways in which 'our'

religious diversity diverges from the diversities faced by early Christianity, there is not much mileage to Clooney's comparative theology.

2.3 THE EARLIER COMPARATIVE THEOLOGIES

If there is one thing that is consistent in Clooney, it is his vague and nebulous language-use, which, I think, is deliberate. An isolated fact or even a few of them are brought in as evidence, while it is totally unclear what the evidences.

A. For example, St. Paul is alleged to have "in his own way...honored both Greek ritual and Greek literature" when he visits Aeropagus in Greece (Clooney, 2010, p.69). However Clooney does not tell us what this 'honouring' in Paul's "own way" is an evidence for or even why what he does is an honour.

So Paul stood before the whole council of the Areopagus and made this speech: 'Men of Athens, I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous ['too superstitious' in King James] you are in all religious matters, because, as I strolled round looking at your sacred monuments, I noticed among other things an altar inscribed: To An Unknown God. In fact, the unknown God you revere is the one I proclaim to you'. (The Acts, 17, p.22-23)

While I leave it to you do discover what honour is done to the Greek ritual here, St. Paul's 'honouring' of the Greek literature "in his own way" consists of saying this: "Since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist, as indeed some of your own writers have said: We are all his children" (The Acts, 18, p.28).

The Jerusalem Bible identifies the author of the citation, "We are all his Children," as Aratus in his *Phainomena*. Thus, according to Clooney then, to cite an author is to honour the literary tradition of a people.

If we read how St. Paul felt about the Athenians and their city, we also discover the context for the alleged honour he bestows upon the Greeks: "Paul waited...in Athens and there his whole soul was *revolted at the sight of a city given over to idolatry*" (The Acts, 18:16).

I do not want to dispute with Clooney that this is St. Paul's "own way" of bestowing "honour" upon Greek literature and Greek ritual. Even so, is the entire history of Christianity with its truth-claims undone by this 'honoring' of Greek ritual and literature? Perhaps, one could be forgiven for asking whether Clooney too follows St. Paul in honouring 'Hinduism': does Clooney 'honour' the Hindus by citing their mantras and observing their 'superstition', when he too is revolted by Hindu idolatry?

Continuing further, Clooney makes the following observation:

The theologians of the early Church were *often learned* in Greek and Latin literature, and possessed of detailed knowledge of Greek and Roman religion, and philosophy. Though confident about the novelty and uniqueness of the Christian message, they forged Christian identity in light of deep cultural affinities

present in the Mediterranean world, fierce ruptures with pagan belief and cult notwithstanding. Though often combative, their arguments for Christian distinctiveness were supported by considerable learning, and articulated through a deep appropriation of what was new and strange to them. (Clooney, 2010, p.39)

Quite apart from the fact that the basic idea expressed here is very well-known to all the students of early Christianity, what exactly does this citation do? It is brought in as some kind of evidence for the existence early comparative theology. But can it function that way? If we are told that “some” (not all) early Christian theologians knew pagan thought and “some” (not all) of them knew it reasonably well and that they appropriated this “learning” in formulating Christian thinking, what exactly is proved thereby? Was not Tertullian criticizing precisely this “considerable learning” and “deep appropriation” when he asked, in *The Prescription against the Heretics*, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy and the Christian with the heretic?”

What Indeed? Nothing at all, affirmed Tertullian:¹

Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon...I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.²

The point is not to support Tertullian here but to notice that Clooney’s point has been used as evidence for its opposite in the early Christian tradition. In that case, what exactly is Clooney’s remark an evidence for?

B. Nowhere is this deliberate obfuscation more visible than in the way he talks about the early history of comparative theology, especially when referring to the early missionaries in India.

He indulges in quite a bit of hand-wringing while speaking about their failures: they are alleged to have been contaminated by ‘imperialist’ and ‘political’ ideas, even while motivated by intellectual desire to know and understand the Indian ‘religions’.

The religious interactions of Hindus and (the)...newly arrived Western Christians...were complicated and often enough tainted by politics and power; here, too, learning was often enough narrowed by the presumption that the Indian religious traditions had no salvific value... Polemic crept into even the most energetic efforts to learn; debates were often counterproductive, even when a concern for truth was central. Yet the missionary documents show real theological concern for God, truth, and salvation. Faith...made the missionaries curious, and that curiosity instigated a great deal of learning. In the letters and treatises that have come down to us there is much information that would change European views of religion, and much

speculation that would affect how we all have thought about religion, its origins and development. (Clooney, 2010, p.26)

A quick reading generates the impression that Clooney is critical of the work of early missionaries; a careful reading shows nothing but obfuscations. The religious encounters between the Hinds and western Christians is said to be “often enough” tainted by “politics and power”, but ‘often enough’ for what purpose? The learning was “often enough narrowed”; but why did this ‘narrowing’ come into existence and of what did it consist?

This notion of ‘learning’ is so loose that, in the case of India for example, it can only refer to the facts about the Indian ‘religions’ which the missionaries penned. Missionaries were ‘curious’, to be sure; but about what were they curious? We are supposed to applaud the missionary documents because these Christians showed a “real theological concern for God, truth, and salvation.” One would be surprised if the missionaries did not show such theological concerns. Finally, when he wrings his hands because he finds polemics “creeping” into even the most “energetic efforts to learn,” one feels like throwing up one’s hands; *what precisely were the missionaries so ‘energetically’ trying to learn?* They were in India to convert people into Christianity and preach the Gospels. What were they supposed to learn except how to fulfill their vocation properly? Surely, all their ‘learning’ was an integral part of this endeavour. Clooney’s deliberate obfuscations here are not merely disingenuous; they are dishonest as well.

C. Even though I am not the most qualified to speak about Christian theology, I shall do so to draw the third element of disingenuity into the picture.

Clooney begins his characterization of theology as ‘faith seeking understanding’, which, understandably enough, he finds in Christianity and also, surprisingly, among the ‘Hindus’. It is understandable because this well-known motto comes from St. Anselm (*fides quaerens intellectum*). But it is surprising because Clooney uncritically assumes as true what centuries before him also accepted *without* argument, evidence or proof, viz., Hinduism is also a religion. However, I will not take issue with this assumption here, but speak about Anselm’s motto instead.

The ‘faith’ of Anselm is the attitude of the believer towards God which is one of complete trust and total dependence. This is the attitude of ‘believing in’ somebody and not a mere act of believing in the truth of a proposition. Such faith, when held by a human being, is not a mere human achievement. Having or attaining this faith is a joint result of human attempt and divine working.

The ‘understanding’ of Anselm is the effort by the human intellect to grasp the nature of this faith. This finite and fallible process is aided by the infinite and infallible acts of revelations of God. When ‘faith seeks understanding’, we need to say: it is the faith of human beings in God that seeks to understand itself through human reason using God’s revelations.

That means to say that ‘faith seeking understanding’ makes sense *only* in the context of God’s working and

¹ Full text is in an old translation in Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 3, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*. American reprint of the Edinburgh edition (n.d.). (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978).

² The alternate translation is cited from Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1971) p.43.

God's revelations, without which neither faith nor the kind of understanding that Anslem speaks about is possible. Even if 'Hinduism' has "some salvific value" (Clooney 2010:40), Clooney as a Christian priest is not claiming that the 'Hindus', when they do their 'theologies', are also doing what Anslem is talking about, is he? Not only does it distort Anslem and Christianity, it also distorts what the 'Hindus' have been doing when they wrote their tracts.

Let me outline the difference between the two. When Christians talk about 'faith seeking understanding', they are talking about *the experience of faith*, which they are trying to understand. They have this faith *in God*. However, in the case of the Hindus, they have *faith in experience*; they believe that their *truths are experiential in nature*. The Christian's faith in God is an attitude that undergirds all human experiences of the world; the Hindu's faith in experience arises from the belief that experience *tests* the spiritual *truths* of traditions. One's faith in Truth is the basis of all experience; the other's faith in experience tests truths about the world. If one does not understand the different meanings accruing to the word 'faith' here, one distorts both Christianity and 'Hinduism'.

However, in a typical manner, Clooney hedges: "I will argue for Hindu theology and Hindu comparative theology, though *without arguing that "Hindu theology" is exactly like Christian theology*" (Clooney, 2010, p.78).

Only Christian theology can be "exactly like Christian theology"; not even Islamic and Jewish theologies are "exactly like" Christian theology. What is interesting to know is how and in what sense the 'Hindu' theology is "exactly" *unlike* Christian theology and how, despite that, it too is 'faith seeking understanding'. Clooney's nebulous thinking does not allow of answers to such 'exact' questions.

2.3 Summary

Clooney has not touched any religious border in any sense of the term. His "deep learning" is disingenuous: it *hides* the fact that there is no learning. His distance from the early theologians is a vanishing point and woefully inadequate to understand diversity, whether Ancient or modern. The nebulous and vague story of Clooney does not even begin to capture the questions that the Indian culture and her 'religions' have faced and continue to face. In this sense, if there is to be a true inter-religious dialogue, one needs honest and open discussions and not merely some well-intentioned hand-wringing. Clooney had the possibility of beginning such a dialogue; but he has demonstrated his inability even to suspect the questions that underlie the task. It is high time that intellectuals 'open their eyes' and 'look newly' at *this reality*, instead of being disingenuous if they want to seek truth.

3. THE FUTURE OF A TASK

As the Indian culture becomes an increasingly important player on the world arena, both its historical and contemporaneous problems are beginning to get a fresh

treatment in the hands of her intellectuals. Hitherto, their discourses were determined and constrained by what the western intellectuals said and did; that is increasingly less the case now. As a result of their research, Indian intellectuals are discovering issues and problems that the western intellectuals have become blind to.

One such is about how a religion like Christianity could fruitfully approach and understand a culture like India. This requires looking anew at our own ideas about the so-called inter-religious encounters. If one simply accepts antiquated ideas about this phenomenon, there is no theologically acceptable way for a Christian to talk about other cultures except to fall back upon what has already been said before. The challenge is to remain faithful to one's own religion (in this case, Christianity) and yet talk *reasonably* about other cultures and their traditions. However, to do this we need to go beyond the straight-jacketed thinking inherited from the past.

What does that thinking consist of? Amongst other things, it consists of the belief that all people, in all cultures, have their own brand of religion. Though almost all contemporary intellectuals believe in it, this idea is not 'orthodox' in any sense of the term. In fact, for centuries long, Europe knew of challenges to this belief from the Jesuits, especially when they encountered the Chinese Culture for the first time (Kors, 1990). Today, of course, this dogma has even received a blessing in the form of pseudo-scientific speculations from evolutionary psychologists (Atran, 1990; Guthrie, 1993; Boyer, 2001; Dawkins, 2006; Dennett, 2007).

Once we understand the historical and contextual reasons for the emergence and acceptance of the idea of universality of religion (Balagangadhara, 2005), we will be in a position to *rethink* the entire debate about entities like 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'Jainism' etc. (Bloch, Keppens, & Hegde, 2011) and also reconceptualize the so-called 'inter-religious' encounters that we speak so much about. If it transpires that such 'religions' are intellectual and 'imaginary' constructions of the western culture (Almond, 1988) then, with this realization, we can really begin the exciting and fruitful task of theologically and philosophically making sense of the traditions that this culture has. If Indian culture does not have religions, how could we make sense of what we have hitherto been studying? If 'Brahma' and 'deva' are not Gods and deities *a fortiori*, then they cannot be false gods any more than 'Hinduism' can be a false religion. In such a case, Christian theology will lose its negative and polemical edge but become instead the bearer of a positive set of messages.

Our current ideas about 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' have their first partial roots in the way the early Christians understood the Greek and Roman traditions. Here, Christianity's early understanding of 'paganism' has ended up colouring our approaches to the contemporary world. The second part is to be traced to the polemics that the Reformation Christianity launched against Roman Catholicism, while also appealing to the Antique sources. In other words, an inter-Christian debate has ended up

defining how we look at a culture like India. Today, the time is ripe to recognize this state of affairs and move away from those facts which have been determined by erroneous theories about cultures like India and 'religions' like 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism'.

It requires to be emphasized that these erroneous theories are the results of human thinking and human speculations. Any appeal to the Christian scriptures that transforms the Buddha or Vishnu into the embodiments of the Devil becomes theologically unfounded once we realize that these 'religions' quite simply do not exist outside the imagination of western intellectuals and their 'westernized' counterparts in India. One can become more 'radical' than the *Nostra Aetate*, which allows a mere "ray of light" to shine in other cultures, without losing out on 'orthodoxy'. We need to begin serious theological reflections on phenomena that exist in India and not undertake 'comparative theologies' when under the sway of dogmas quasi-universally held in the West for centuries.

Of course, it is not easy to let go of centuries of straight-jacketed thinking. It literally took us centuries to free ourselves from geocentric theories. This physical phenomenon, where we see the daily movement of the sun around earth, has its cultural counterpart: the temples, the statues, the incense, the puja, the mantras and the breaking of coconuts. Like the Aristotelians of yester years, we too have our pundits, priests and philosophers who expound on how the '*nirguna Brahman*' is a variant of the God of Christianity or how 'Narayana' is a "new and popular God" or how Lakshmi is a Goddess worshipped by 'Hindus'. Much like the vast impact that Aristotelian philosophy had, we have sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and religious studies specialists waxing eloquent on the 'world religions'. We even have our academies, much bigger than what the Ancient philosopher had: each respectable university has its own 'centre of world religions' or a graduate course on 'Hinduism'. However, now, as then, we need people who dare think and rethink what we see in this world and of what it is made up. If, as then, we seek truth and intend to move forward, we need to question radically our inherited experiences of the world and the staid dogmas that sustain them. This is the task facing us in *Nostra Aetate*, our time, which is the world of the twenty-first century and beyond.

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