Introduction

Imagine that you are building a house. The first things that need to be put in place are the basics: the foundation, the walls, the roof. Only once these core pieces are set is it possible to attend to the interior aspects of the house: bookshelves, kitchen cabinets, curtains. These decorative pieces are not essential to the construction of the home, but they certainly make it a nicer place to live.

This is the metaphor that I find helpful in describing the place of interreligious dialogue in much of contemporary Christian systematic theology. If you pick up any one-volume systematics written in the past few decades, it is typical to find one chapter on "Religious Pluralism" nestled somewhere toward the end—if it is there at all. The reason for this is that, typically, consideration of other religious traditions has been seen as "window dressing" for Christian theology: it is not essential to the task, but something that occurs alongside it—as a footnote or an aside. In other words, once the Christian "house" has been built, with all the right doctrines in all the right places, then one can engage in some interreligious exploration—if one has the time and the inclination to spruce the place up a bit.

This book is an attempt to do systematic theology in a new way, by considering interreligious engagement as part of the *foundation* of Christian theology, rather than its decoration. In the context of this book, what this means is that, for example, in the construction of a Christian doctrine of God, I include for consideration the concept of the goddess in Hinduism; and in the construction of a Christian understanding of the human person, I include for consideration Islam's belief in humanity's capacity to obey God. In this way, I am attempting to incorporate some general methods and commitments of comparative theology into the basic practice of Christian systematic theology itself, such that the task of defining and describing Christian doctrine includes *inherently* the task of interpreting that doctrine in conversation with specific practices and beliefs of non-Christian religious traditions.

The reason for this is twofold. First, by assuming that Christian theology can accomplish the task of observing, articulating, and proclaiming the work and presence of God in the world without any acknowledgment of that work and presence in non-Christian religions, we unnecessarily restrict the theological enterprise and we also exclude millions of people from the scope of God's self-revelation. Second, the human family is deeply and vastly

interconnected, with bonds of love, work, and play interweaving all of us together all around the globe. These bonds crisscross religious boundaries in all kinds of ways, and therefore, when Christian theology is trying to make sense of human life in the world and the relationship human beings have to God, it must recognize that what Christians confess about God, creation, and human beings crosses those boundaries, too—being both informed by and informing non-Christian religions.

I recognize that such work is not easy. For many students of theology, beginning this task for the first time, it is enough to try and get one's head around Augustine, Luther, Barth, Cone, and Ruether, let alone Muhammad and the Buddha. Quickly the task seems to spiral out of hand and out of control, and one is always in danger of losing one's way. This may be true, but frankly, it would be true without the addition of Muhammad and the Buddha; Christian theology is never anything but challenging, multifaceted, and dangerous: How could it be otherwise when we are venturing to name God, describe salvation, and envision the reign of God? So, while it cannot be denied that there are risks and challenges to this enterprise, I argue that the scales tip heavily on the side of reward; and there are three fruits in particular of this comparative work that make it of such critical importance for Christian theology.

First, in light of the interconnectedness of the human family mentioned above, it is incumbent upon Christian theology to engage non–Christian religious traditions for the sake of the neighbor, whom Christians are called both to refrain from bearing false witness against, and even more, to love. Second, Christian theology can and should expect to learn something about God in the course of that engagement, based on God's own universal self-revelation. Finally, Christian theology can and should expect that it will be stretched and challenged, but at the same time deepened and strengthened through this engagement, in ways that can transform and nurture the whole Christian community, empowering not only its witness to the gospel but also its relationships to non-Christian communities all over the world, with whom it must partner in the work of justice and peace. It is my hope that all three of these commitments are demonstrated in the chapters that follow.

INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

There are two particular points of elaboration and explanation that are necessary by way of introduction to the first part of this book. The first relates to the specific audience for which this book is intended, and the second relates to the specific content of the chapters themselves.

The first four chapters consist of brief introductions to four major non-Christian world religions: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam; and the choice of these four in particular requires a word of explanation. Certainly, the term "world religions" or "global religions" is not the category it used to be, in light of the unprecedented, rapid movement of both people and ideas in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Besides merely pointing to "religions that are practiced in the world," which would be its most general meaning, more specifically, the category of "world" religions refers to religious traditions that are not geographically bound: they transcend national, cultural, and physical barriers. Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam warrant the term because they are, inherently, "missionary" religions—that is, they actively welcome new adherents in new geographical locations: "In these traditions, the very core of their faith includes the notion that their religion is greater than any local group and cannot be confined to the cultural boundaries of any particular region."[1] Judaism and Hinduism belong to this category not because of an inherent transnational principle within each religion itself, but primarily because of migration and the establishment of diaspora populations all over the world. Four of these five are also the largest global religious traditions—Judaism is the exception. Certainly, other traditions could be considered: Sikhism likely would be the next logical choice. However, these four religious traditions, together with Christianity, are the ones typically named as the principal "world religions," and so they are the ones included here.

The introductions to these religions are intended specifically for Christians, particularly for Christians who are in seminary and preparing for careers in public ministry. Here is why that is important. Given my intended audience, I have chosen and organized the material for these chapters into categories that make sense for Christians, anticipating the questions Christians will ask, and the specific things Christians will want to know. What this means is that, basically, I am putting Hinduism into a Christian-shaped box, custom-fitting it for Christian eyes and minds. Inevitably, then, there will be distortions and omissions.

Think of it this way. Imagine that you have been asked to interview someone, to learn about who she is and what is significant in her life. The way you choose to do this is to ask her ten questions that you think are the most important, the most critical, the best, for getting to the heart of who she is. And, in the interview, that is what you do: you ask your questions, she answers them, and then you thank her and leave. Certainly there is no doubt you will have

1. *Global Religions: An Introduction*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

received very important information, and certainly you will have a good picture of who she is. In that way, your interview will have been a success. However, think about what you have missed by not allowing *her* to narrate the story of her own life: allowing her to choose the topics of importance, allowing her to judge what is and is not significant, and allowing her to speak on the things that are most critical in her eyes. You may well miss some vital pieces of the puzzle, and you may distort other things by describing them out of context: giving some things too much attention, and giving other things too little.

So too, I fear, in the four chapters ahead. In order to be as clear as possible for a Christian audience, I have sacrificed some of each religion's own voice (I hope not too much), and I am telling their story in a way different from how they would tell it for themselves (continuing the metaphor). I say this to be honest up front: I am a Western Christian writing primarily for Western Christians, and this fact naturally affects the picture I am painting of these religions. Thus, it is not the same picture that an insider would paint. One's perspective always influences one's conclusions, and all scholars, particularly scholars of religion, must be transparent about that fact. It is my hope that the reader will seek out other sources of information, particularly texts and/or personal contacts from within these traditions, so that the unique voices of these religions might be heard on their own terms.

The second point of explanation relates to the content of these four chapters—specifically their brevity. Obviously in a book of this size and scope, there are serious and substantial limitations on the amount of detail, the number of differing facets, and the various exceptions to the rule that can be included. Some of this is actually quite fine: for those who are unfamiliar with these religious traditions, there is a limit to the amount of new information that can be accurately retained and processed in the grand scheme of this theological endeavor. Too much information is simply overwhelming and unhelpful. These chapters are meant to be stepping stones and entry points, nothing more.

However, the downside, of course, is that it has been impossible to describe at any length the nuances, subtleties, and intricacies of each tradition—to say nothing of the various subtraditions within each. These chapters use broad strokes, not detailed outlines; highways, not the back roads; and headlines, not marginalia. There is simply no way in these introductory chapters to do justice to the complexities of each religious tradition; thus I have not even tried.

Again, let me suggest an analogy. Imagine as a Christian you were asked to describe the Christian faith for someone entirely unfamiliar with it. Suddenly, you would find yourself in the unenviable position of having to describe and explain accurately not only mainline Protestantism, but also Roman

Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Pentecostal traditions, Seventh Day Adventists, etc. Somehow, you would have to create an umbrella under which these very different Christian groups could be located—to some degree at least. I hope it is clear that you would, by necessity, have to leave some individual particularities out, make use of generalizations, and privilege some traditions over others, based on your own particular Christian lens.

For example, as a Lutheran, when describing baptism, even though I can describe and explain "believer's baptism," my own theological understanding of baptism is rooted in infant baptism, and therefore my explanation of what baptism is, why Christians baptize, what baptism means in the life of an individual reflects that particular standpoint. This type of preferencing is unavoidable; and, inevitably, it will be in evidence in the following chapters, as my description of each religion necessarily reflects not only my own biases, but my academic and personal experiential background as well.

One final point of clarification needs mentioning here as well. Throughout the book, I have chosen not to use the diacritical marks needed to accurately transliterate foreign words into English, words from Arabic, Sanskrit, and Hebrew, for example. These marks are used to indicate pronunciation, vowel placement, and inflection, among other things. Obviously, they are very important for those who know the languages; however, for those who do not, they are meaningless and confusing; and because this book is not designed for specialists, I have chosen to omit them, primarily to avoid bogging down the general reader. Those who know the words in the original languages will mentally supply them, and those who do not will not miss them.

INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

The second part of this book is where the heart of the comparative work occurs. As noted previously, the three chapters that make up Part Two demonstrate the core theological claim that I argue is essential for a faithful and relevant articulation of Christian theology in the twenty-first-century global context: Christian theology is strengthened and enhanced through the engagement with non-Christian religions. Basically, the argument is that "[Comparative theology] can in non-trivial ways be in harmony with traditional (doctrinal) theology";[2] and, even more, comparative theology actually can augment and deepen doctrinal theology.

2. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 111.

Seeking to demonstrate that claim, Part Two is comprised of three constructive theological chapters, each of which focuses on one central Christian theological locus—God, humanity, and creation—enriched by a vital comparative component. The chapters are laid out as follows. Each chapter elaborates the core claims Christian theology makes regarding each locus—the central assertions Christianity affirms about God, the human being, and creation. However, interspersed and alongside those claims, relevant and related doctrines from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam are introduced. Through this juxtaposition, the chapters seek to nuance and deepen an understanding of Christian theology, helping the reader see familiar territory in new ways, and gain a fresh perspective on traditional faith claims.

In his book, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Francis Clooney writes: "If [comparative theology] does not disrespect doctrinal expressions of truth, neither does it merely repeat doctrinal statements as if nothing is learned from comparative reflection. Rarely, if ever, will comparative theology produce new truths, but it can make possible fresh insights into familiar and revered truths, and new ways of receiving those truths."[3] This, then, is the overarching goal of the book as a whole: creating for the Christian reader in particular the possibility of fresh insights, and new ways of understanding and articulating those insights—not only for one's own theological edification, but for the sake of the church as whole, and the presentation of the gospel.

In the pursuit of this goal, one deliberate choice has been made in constructing these three chapters: I intentionally have not drawn specific conclusions from the interreligious comparisons I present, in order to avoid telling the reader what she should think about this or that particular doctrine and its relationship to Christianity. Instead, I have left the specific interpretation to the reader, inviting her to make connections for herself. The simple reason for this is that I do not want readers to be limited or hindered by preestablished assumptions that prescribe what conclusions "should" be drawn. Instead, my hope is that readers will see connections I have not, thus contributing to the theological conversation in their own ways, from their own theological contexts and traditions. At the same time, however, to facilitate these connections, there are questions at the end of each chapter, inviting reflection on specific interreligious contrasts.

Finally, one last thing needs to be said. The principal theological conviction that grounds this particular book, and the comparative method that

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3. Ibid., 112.

shapes it, is my belief that theology *matters*: it matters for one's individual life in the world, and it matters for the human community as a whole. It is my strong conviction that Christian theology can and should positively inform and transform the way Christians think and live, in such a way that not only are their lives richer and more meaningful, but also that they, in turn, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are inspired to create richer and more meaningful societies. But this can only happen if Christian theology meets people where they are, and speaks to the situations in which they find themselves.

James Cone, in *Risks of Faith*, recounts his struggle during his doctoral studies as he tried to bring his experiences as an African American in the civil rights movement into his theology courses. He writes, "When I asked my professors about what theology had to do with the black struggle for racial justice, they seemed surprised and uncomfortable with the question, not knowing what to say, and anxious to move on with the subject matter as they understood it. I was often told that theology and the struggle for racial justice were separate subjects."[4] This is untenable. If Christian theology has nothing to say about race, justice, and an ethical society—as though God has no interest in race, justice, and an ethical society—it renders itself irrelevant and relegates itself to the sidelines of human existence.

In the same way, I would argue that if Christian theology has nothing to say about the vast world of millions and millions of people with vibrant, diverse, passionately held religious beliefs and practices, it is hardly living up to its name as "God-talk." More is required of us. In addition to fidelity to the gospel and a healthy respect for the tradition, Christian theology also requires courage, daring, and innovation. It requires seeking God where God is found, loving the neighbor God has placed in front of us, and trusting always that God is with us, guiding us down paths as yet untrodden, where a marvelous future awaits. This is the spirit in which this book was written. I hope that it is also the spirit with which it is read.

4. James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), xiv.