Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems*

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Abstract

Comparative theology generally begins from a study of texts, scriptural texts that have been canonized, and commentaries on these texts—as well as philosophical, theological and mystical treatises. Though this textual focus gives us access to some of the most subtle and nuanced reasonings developed in various traditions, I am concerned that this textual focus may limit our understanding of religion, and I am convinced that broadening the scope of comparative theology beyond texts will also contribute to the theological creativity of this approach. I hypothesize that, depending on the sort of source from which we theologize, different questions will come to mind relating to different theological problems. Indeed, turning to material and ritual practices, in addition to textual sources, will reveal aspects of the divine that remain invisible when one stays within the limits of textual study. I do not, in any way, want to turn this into an either/or story in which reading texts is placed over against engaging ritual and material practices. What I envision is a complementarity between textual and ritual comparison, not a privileging of one over the other.

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Introduction

The primary questions comparative theologians ask are: Where does God reveal Godself? Where does God provide knowledge about Godself? These theologians refuse to limit God's activity *a priori* in the world, and they engage in in-depth study of other religious traditions, seeking traces of God, and asking how their comparative study might deepen and even alter their understanding of the divine. Comparative theology generally begins with a back-and-forth reading of texts: scriptural texts that have been canonized, and commentaries on these texts as well as philosophical, theological, and mystical treatises.[1] This textual encounter with the religious other is recognized as a potentially interruptive, disruptive event that may unexpectedly put us on the path to God. New theological insights emerge by turning to other traditions and comparing their texts to ours.

Though the practice of cross-reading gives access to some of the most subtle and nuanced reasonings developed in various traditions, there is a growing concern among comparative theologians that this textual focus may limit both our understanding of religion and our theological creativity. As I will show in what follows, the preference for texts, such as philosophical treatises or theological commentaries, is not an "innocent" one but is rooted in a long and complex history in which mind (reason, reading, texts) was privileged over body (senses, performance, symbolic practices). In the past, theologians often dismissed the theological value of experiences and insights gained in bodily practices, which are central to lived religion, as being only of secondary importance or even as superfluous or extraneous. Increasingly, theologians are beginning to realize that our concept(s) of the divine are codetermined by the sources from which we theologize. The type of source from which we theologize gives rise to different questions regarding different theological problems.

Before I continue, allow me to give just one example that came to my mind when preparing this article. In her work, Melissa Raphael, a feminist post-Shoah theologian, analyzes and explores the different ways that Jewish men and women experienced the atrocities of the Shoah, how they tried to hold on to their human dignity, and how they endeavored to make God present in the world. Raphael's book *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* is not about who suffered more, but rather about how men and women experienced God's absence/presence differently and how this difference of experience led to different theologies, since their rituals led to different ways of relating to God.[2] She points out that the dominant theme in most post-Shoah theologies has been that of God's absence or his hiddenness

[1] Catherine Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," in *How To Do Comparative Theology: European and American Perspectives in Dialogue* (ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch; Comparative Theology: Thinking Across Traditions; New York: Fordham University Press, 2017 [forthcoming]).

[2] Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz. A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (Religion and Gender; London: Routledge Press, 2003).

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(*hester panim*). Raphael, however, argues that God's absence was not the main theological concern of Jewish women in Auschwitz. She seeks to discern the way in which women in Auschwitz tried to embody their relationship with God in their concrete care for each other. God's face, she concludes, was made present in the material, ritual, and spiritual care for the other. For these women, their rituals created a space that made allowance for the feminine divine, understood as *Shekhinah*. She continues to say that there is "a causal relationship between the holiness of women's relational acts in Auschwitz and God's self-manifestation or presence."[3] Raphael is not a comparative theologian, but her work does exemplify the fact that when we, as comparative theologians, limit ourselves to textual sources and do not see non-textual sources as suitable reference points for God, we may limit our capacity to perceive God's activity in the world and his dealings with human beings. Turning to material and ritual practices, in addition to textual sources, will reveal aspects of the divine that remain invisible when we stay within the limits of the study of texts.

Realizing how the focus on texts may not only hinder their understanding of the other and her tradition but also limit their theological creativity, several comparative theologians like Bagus Laksana, Emma O'Donnell, James Farwell, and myself have been trying to open up comparative theology by drawing on a variety of symbolic practices.[4] In 2015, the comparative theology group at the American Academy of Religion also dedicated a panel to the "liturgical turn in comparative theology," which featured Francis X. Clooney, Jon Paul Sydnor, Joshua Ralston, James Farwell, and me. The panel showcased how a cross-fertilization between "traditions" can happen through practices of cross-riting in addition to cross-reading. This article is a continuation of those lines of thought and explores how broadening the scope of comparative theology beyond texts can contribute to the theological creativity of this approach. I will argue that by opening up comparative theology to other sources, such as material and symbolic practices, we will discover different ways of thinking about our relationships to God. I do not, in any way, want to turn this into an either/or story in which reading texts is placed over against engaging ritual and material practices. What I envision in this article is a complementarity between textual and ritual comparison, rather than a privileging of one over the other.

[3] Ibid., 61.

[4] Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future: The Experience of Time in Jewish and Christian Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015); Albertus Bagus Laksana, *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations Through Java* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). The following papers were presented at the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia 18-21, November 2015: Francis X. Clooney, "Deep Ritual Thinking: Challenge and Opportunity for the Comparative Theologian"; Jon Paul Sydnor, "Phenomenological Analysis of Interreligiously Shared Monoreligious Rites"; James Farwell, "Not Two with Christ: Reflections on Comparative Liturgical Theology from Dual Liturgical Practice."

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On Comparative Theology

Comparative theology is theology that proceeds by comparison. Rather than taking religious phenomena at face value, patient learning and close study are promoted so that religious differences (and similarities) are recognized and taken seriously. For that reason, Paul Knitter connects this approach to the motto of "saving the particulars."[5] Considerable time and energy is spent on actually trying to understand the other. Instead of going broad, comparative theologians prefer going deep: by reading smaller textual portions together and comparing them, the comparative theologian gains some insight into the world of the other without laying any claim to full understanding. As a hermeneutical endeavor, comparative theology makes use of various historical and linguistic skills to enable the comparison, even to the extent that the comparative theologian becomes almost like a trusted friend who is acquainted with the religious language of the other. As with any deep relationship, diligent scholarly work is the basic condition for any comparative theological project: it is slow and patient. In the words of Michelle Voss Roberts,

> [T]he theologian chooses from among the internal diversity of traditions to study a single thinker, text, or practice. The faith commitments of the theologian enter into a dialogue with the chosen exemplar, and the theologian might be impelled to return to particular texts and thinkers in her own tradition in light of this learning. The back-and-forth motion of comparison is prolonged and its effects subtle.[6]

This diligent scholarship, however, is part of a theological project. As Stephen Duffy explains, comparative theology is *fides quarens intellectum*: "Neglected meanings of the Christian tradition may be retrieved; established meanings may be extended and enhanced; meanings perhaps unintended by authors of our texts may . . . occur to newly situated readers."[7] Thus, this comparative process becomes an opportunity for constructive theology. With each new comparative project, novel questions arise evoking new insights. However, comparative theology is theologically humble, acknowledging that the theological questions raised by religious plurality are too grand to be answered now, and that it may be more meaningful to reign in our theological ambitions. From that perspective, it refrains from developing a full-blown systematic theology of religions. In a certain sense, you could say that comparative theology is theology under construction: it does not have the intention of resulting in a system of thought, but it is in favor of more open-ended reflections.

[5] Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002) 178.

[6] Michelle Voss Roberts, "Introduction," in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection* (ed. Michelle Voss Roberts; Comparative Theology: Thinking Across Traditions; New York: Fordham, 2016) 1–22, at 2.

[7] Stephen J. Duffy, "A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?" *Horizons* 26 (1999): 105–115, at 111.

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Comparative Theology as a Textual Practice

Historically speaking, comparative theology has developed as a praxis of comparative reading. Texts provide "scope and clear boundaries for comparative analysis."[8] Reading a certain portion of texts is manageable and fits in the paradigm of going back-and-forth. While it can sometimes be opportune "to proceed by way of attention to art, music, ritual, and the various modalities of popular religion," most comparative theologians regard reading as "the most practical and solid means of theological learning."[9] Other resources can be seen as text-plus.[10] The texts that are chosen for comparison are not first and foremost portions from sacred scriptures—though that is possible too—but rather theological, philosophical, and mystical texts. This results in, for example, a comparison between Ramanuja and Schleiermacher, or between Tillich and Sankara, or between Mechthild and Lalleśwarī, or between Abe, Nishida, Nishitani and Cobb—and to add one more example, between Thomas Aquinas and al-Ghazali.[11]

There are several good reasons why, generally speaking, comparative theologians prefer to work with texts. First of all, certainly in the major world religions, texts have nourished the religious and moral imagination of religious communities and their adherents for centuries. These stories and their characters have played several key roles: in promoting appropriate behavior; in finding the right measure in complex situations; in learning how to deal with situations of infidelity, jealousy, and despair; and in seeking to cope with the human condition in all its weakness and greatness. Stories about the temptation to evil, the vulnerability of man and woman, narratives of holy anger, vocation, obedience, and responsibility have helped to cultivate dispositions such as hope, pride, trust, courage, and acceptance—and, yes—even revolt. These stories are not only narrated, but also ritually enacted in

[8] Lissa Gasson-Gardner and Jason Smith, "Feeling Comparative Theology," in *Comparative Theologies in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries* (ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin; New York & London: Routledge, 2015) 113–25, at 117.

[9] Francis X. Clooney, "Comparative Theology," in *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, Ian E. Torrance; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 653–669, at 664.

[10] Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 67.

[11] Jon Paul Sydnor, *Ramanuja and Schleiermacher. Toward a Constructive Comparative Theology*, with a Foreword by Francis X. Clooney (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2011); John Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*: *God*, *Creation, and the Human Predicament*; *An East-West Conversation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006); Michelle Voss Roberts, "Flowing and Crossing: The Somatic Theologies of Mechthild and Lalleśwarī," *JAAR* 76 (2008) 638–63; Ernest M. Valea, *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue as Theological Exchange: An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015); Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Editions Rodopi, 2006).

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ceremonies. What is more, they have inspired generations of artists and musicians.[12] In short, scriptures are part of the collective memories of religious communities. From this perspective, it makes sense to engage them when one wants to understand another tradition. In reading these strange narratives, we "are called upon to use [our] imaginations to enter into that world [of the other], to discover how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is."[13]

Secondly, texts have been the traditional object of religious studies. Kevin Schilbrack explains that

> when the study of religion began as an academic field, about 150 years ago, it was dominated by the translation and the interpretation of books. The reasons are not surprising. On the one (conceptual) hand, the focus was the result of Christian assumptions that scripture was essential to the nature of religion and, on the other (physical) hand, the *Sacred Books of the East* are easier to transport to the classroom than, say, the 12-day Agni fire ritual.[14]

Comparative theology builds on that academic tradition. Religious texts, because they are written down, are the most stable material at our disposal. They form a rather fixed basis to which one can always return. As Catherine Cornille explains, "while ritual forms and material artifacts change through time, texts offer a continuous basis for reflection. To be sure, the interpretation of sacred texts changes and differs, but at least they offer a basis from which to study those differences and consider their significance for one's own comparative theological reflection."[15] Since texts are regarded as the primary and most stable means through which religious meaning is communicated and shared over generations, they are regarded as the most obvious hermeneutical access to understanding another tradition. Hence, comparative theology reads the "other" primarily through her texts.

Thirdly, and continuing along these lines, texts are also central to theology, which usually takes the form of "conceptual reasoning based on critical engagement with texts, on topics such as God/the divine/the Real, the human condition, the world, and the relationships among these."[16] Whether in Christianity or in other scriptural traditions, holy writ has given way to highly nuanced discussions among the intellectual elite in particular traditions.[17] By reading these sacred scriptures

[12] David F. Ford, "Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims," in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (ed. David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 1–22, at 4.

[13] Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995) 5.

[14] Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 33.

[15] Catherine Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*.

[16] Martha Moore Keish, "Interreligious Ritual Participation: Insights from Inter-Christian Ritual Participation," in *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (ed. Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof; London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 67–77, 66.

[17] Francis X. Clooney, *Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 58.

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together with their commentaries or by studying certain philosophical or spiritual documents, one gains access to the discussions that occupied the minds of the wise men (and some women) in a tradition—issues and questions that were deemed worth debating. Hence, they are a gateway to the conceptual subtleties, nuanced reflections, as well as internal debates that address the grand questions about the meaning of life, the nature of God, and the relation between the divine, human beings, and nature. Reading texts, you literally see theologies in development. As comparative theology proceeds by comparing theologies, texts would indeed seem the most obvious point of departure.

However convincing these arguments may sound, I have certain concerns. First of all, we must ask whether reading texts really provides the best hermeneutical access to understand the particularities and subtleties of another tradition. Second, I also think we have to examine further the common assumption in theology in general, which is shared by most comparative theologians, that texts are the primary source for doing theology. Liturgical theologians in particular provide some good reasons to question this theological primacy of texts. In what follows, I want to develop this line of thought further in a two-fold movement. I will first explain why I think the textual focus is not unambiguous by tracing the genealogy of comparative theology back to the study of religion as it emerged in the late-nineteenth century. In the second part, I will suggest what such a turn to material and ritual practices might yield.

Beyond Texts: An Archaeological Exploration

Those who practice comparative theology are quite aware that there is no neutral ground from which one can approach the religious other and her tradition—prejudices and certain assumptions always play a role in the way one reads strange texts and tries to make sense of them. The challenge is not to let these prejudices get the upper hand but rather to allow oneself and one's assumptions to be questioned and interrupted by the texts. In this regard, I fully agree with Clooney, who suggests that "if we see our biases and watch them in operation, we can become freer, more vulnerable in our reading."[18] In line with this self-critical outlook, comparative theologians see it as part of their scholarly work to explore, test, and, if needed, revise the "conceptual categories" through which they interpret their data.[19] Michelle Voss Roberts, along with others, has contributed to a feminist critique of comparative theology.[20] Recently, John Thatamanil explored the category of religion, and building on his findings, he asks whether it is possible

[18] Ibid., 64.

[19] Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 14.

[20] Michelle Voss Roberts, "Feminist Comparative Theology: Beyond the Hegemonies of Gender," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (ed. Francis X. Clooney; London: Bloomsbury, 2010) 109–28.

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to do comparative theology after religion.[21] Hugh Nicholson scrutinizes the very notion of comparative theology and uncovers its rather problematic roots in the late-nineteenth century. This self-critical work is never finished. We will always need to spotlight our biases, blind spots, and inadequacies. We must ask whether "the discourse of religion . . . already presumes that the other is constructed in our image before he or she is permitted . . . to respond."[22] In what follows, I am inspired by the critical work that has already been done by Voss Roberts, Nicholson, and Thatamanil. In line with their work (and that of others), I have developed a genealogy of comparative theology, which will explain why the textual focus of comparative theology is at least somewhat ambiguous.

The academic study of religion originated in the nineteenth century, and though it claimed to be a scientific approach, it was also shaped by certain ideological assumptions. These assumptions can be seen at work in the way that texts, rather than material and ritual practices, became the preferred objects of scrutiny in the study of religion. In those early stages of the emergence of the discipline, it was not uncommon to rank religions in hierarchical orders, according to their "developmental status." The more attached a religion was to material and ritual practices, the less cultivated it presumably was and, of course, vice versa: the more a tradition had successfully expressed its beliefs in textual form, the greater claim it could lay to being cultured. Rituals were often associated with popular religion whereas texts were seen as more elevated. This sometimes resulted in binary schemes that placed ritual against texts, the mind against the body, belief against practice, emotion against reason, the universal against the tribal, and inner against outer. As Birgit Meyer rightly points out, "the pivot of these evolutionary models is the idea that the human mind can do increasingly better without the baggage of outward forms."[23] True religion is internalized: it is pious and reasonable. One more related element to this hierarchical presentation of religion is that more cultivated, advanced, and developed religions were presumably oriented to a more transcendent and universal "God," whereas less cultivated, less advanced, and underdeveloped religions remained oriented to a more tribal or particular god, manifest and present in the material world. The "ideal" image was that of an invisible and unrepresentable God. Religions that envisioned the relation with the divine as mediated by means of concrete, palpable material were devalued, and notions such as incarnated or embodied meaning and *presentia realis* became suspicious.

The genesis of this conception of religion can be traced back to numerous factors. Protestantism, with its focus on piety and personal faith, certainly played

[21] John Thatamanil, "Comparative Theology after Religion," in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Post-Coloniality and Theology* (ed. Stephen Moore and Mayra Rivera; New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 238–57.

[22] Ibid., 246.

[23] Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion" (Inaugural Lecture, Utrecht, 19 October, 2012) 9.

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its part.[24] Some scholars speak of a Protestant bias in this regard. This, however, may be overstating it somewhat. What is more, such a charge runs the risk of reifying an entire tradition without further nuance. This spiritualizing tendency goes back to Paul and certain church fathers (e.g., Origen, Chrysostom) who developed anti-Judaic patterns of thinking, placing Carnal Israel over against the Spiritual Church.[25] Moreover, Protestantism is certainly not the only tradition that privileges the inward and the interior. However, it cannot be denied that under the influence of various reformers, religion came to be seen as "carried out through the mind and the soul, experienced and expressed through interior faith and belief, and not primarily concerned with objects or externalities."[26] Interior spirituality became privileged over bodily performances, and ritual practices that engaged materiality—handling objects, touching statues, cherishing relics, worshiping the wafer—became questionable. Not only did such ritual acts entail the risk of inauthenticity (think of empty formal ritualism), but there was also the real danger of idolatry. Departing from a rather pessimistic anthropology, many Protestant minds, more than Catholics for that matter, were concerned that ordinary believers would get confused when in a context permeated by images, statues, and symbols. As Jonathan Edwards put it: "Nothing spiritual can be present when there is anything material and physical."[27] Against externalist religious practices, reformers such as Zwingli and Calvin pleaded for a return to the purity and immateriality of scripture as distinguished from "things" that claimed to mediate divine presence. Commenting on this legacy, Matthew Engelke explains that "[t]he Bible was different from a crucifix or religious painting because language did not share their material qualities. The Word did not engender illusions, and the Bible, as a providential presence, was properly 'spiritual' and not 'material' or 'physical'. What Protestantism brought about was an increased emphasis on Scripture, and with it, language, as a kind of immaterial presence."[28]

Enlightenment philosophical traditions, too, with their depiction of the human person as a solitary and rational being, are an important factor. The Cartesian subject approaches the world primarily by means of his mind, and in his effort to make sense of the divine, he likewise makes use of what sets him apart from

[24] Meyer, referring to the work of Engelke and others, rightly notices that "historical and ethnographic studies of Protestant religiosity in everyday life have yielded intriguing insights that question the privileging of 'inward' belief above 'outward' ritual practices, content above form, texts above objects (Engelke 2007; Engelke and Tomlinson 2009; Keane 2007; Kirsch 2008; Klassen 2010; Luhrman 2012)." See Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence," 12.

[25] Marianne Moyaert, "Christianizing Judaism? On the Problem of Christian Seder Meals," in *Is there a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective* (ed. Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) 137–64.

[26] Julian Droogan, *Religion, Material Culture and Archeology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 25.

[27] Jonathan Edwards quoted in Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 13.

[28] Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (London: University of California Press, 2007) 21.

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other living beings, i.e., his capacity to think. Indeed, according to Descartes only the mind could be trusted to reveal the truth. Influenced by modern philosophical traditions, religions came to be viewed as systems of thought or intellectual constructions, which to a greater or lesser extent depended on material expressions and ritual performances. The more reasonable a religion could claim to be, the more philosophical appreciation it would generate. What is interesting is that in these Enlightened philosophical circles too, idolatry—i.e., confusing what is divine with what is natural—continued to be seen as a "grave mistake." Especially problematic was the superstitious and childish belief that natural objects (inanimate matter) could have divine power (for example, animism).[29] Ritual and materiality came to be associated with primitivism, in contrast to a more spiritual, disembodied and intellectual understanding of religion. Consider in this regard the following passage from Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764):

> It is clear that each person made a judgment according to the degree of his reason, or his credulity, or his fanaticism. It is obvious that priests associated as many divinities as they could with their statues, in order to attract more offerings. We know that philosophers condemned these superstitions, that warriors mocked them, that magistrates tolerated them, and that the people, always absurd, did not know what they were doing.[30]

Various forms of religious superstition were seen as an obstacle hindering human progress toward reason and freedom or as a sign of human foolishness.

This modern understanding of religion has had a great influence on the shaping of nineteenth and twentieth century religious scholarship. It cannot be denied that for a long time, within academia, a mentalist approach to religion has prevailed, according to which what really matters in the religious life is one's inward dispositions, beliefs, experiences, and religious feelings. The outward manifestations of religious life—e.g., rituals, symbols, sacred sites, and rules—is only of secondary importance. Symbols and rituals, from this mentalist perspective, are mostly seen as expressive of particular insights, convictions, and truths that are elsewhere formulated in a conceptually clearer and more transparent way, e.g., in written sources. As a consequence, compared to the study of texts far less attention has been paid to sacred sites, statues, symbols, and ritual practices, despite their prominence in most religious traditions.[31] When religious scholars have refered to material objects and ritual practices, they have often done so by way of corroboration.[32] Whenever symbols and ritual practices seem to contradict scriptural evidence, however,

[29] Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (Hurst & Company: London, 2005) 205.

[30] Quoted in Patrick Graille, "Idolatry," in *Encyclopedia of Enlightenment* (ed. Michel Delon; 4 vol.; London: Routledge, 2001) 1:680–82, at 682.

[31] Benjamin Fleming and Richard Mann, "Introduction: Material Culture and Religious Studies," in *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object* (ed. Benjamin Fleming and Richard Mann; New York: Routledge, 2014) 1–20, at 2.

[32] Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997) 6.

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scholars typically have treated such cases as aberrations that can be attributed to popular religion, which immediately devalues them.

Even though this mentalist understanding of religion has been criticized thoroughly, its lingering effects can be felt to this day, and I would argue that it is part of comparative theology's self-criticism to consider how it has been affected by this legacy and to explore new approaches that could further deepen and strengthen both our hermeneutical and theological work. Although comparative theology rejects stereotyped depictions of the religious other and her tradition, and although few, if any, comparative theologians would subscribe to binary schemes in which primitive religion is opposed to more evolved expressions of religiosity (neither would most religious scholars, for that matter), it is fair to say that comparative theologians are more comfortable reading texts than observing things and the symbolic practices revolving around these things.[33] Even though there are exceptions (e.g., the work of Laksana, O'Donnell, and Farwell), most comparative theologians do not explicitly thematize material and ritual practices as a source for their theological reflections (even though many do participate in some of the rituals of the tradition they study). What religious people do, and how their beliefs are deeply embedded in particular symbols and symbolic practices, remains mostly outside of the scholarly scope of comparative theologians. One consequence is that comparative theologians focus their attention on a limited subset of religious phenomena—the intellectual legacy of particular traditions as it is written down in texts. But what about what religious people do: the rituals they perform, the relics they cherish, the statues they dress up and carry around in processions, the pilgrimage sites that are visited generation after generation, the way religious communities dispose of their sacred texts? What about the way religious communities make use of symbolic practices to educate their adherents and mold their bodies and minds so as to create the proper religious and moral dispositions? It makes sense to claim that they also deserve our attention. Indeed, these symbols and symbolic practices have consoled many and irritated others. They have sometimes strengthened communities; other times they have been the source of intra- or interreligious conflicts. Religious authorities have used them to showcase their theological arguments, while at other times certain popular practices have challenged official doctrines.

My point is not simply that texts are only a small subset of religious phenomena; I am actually convinced that turning to non-textual sources may also redirect the way we think about the divine in and across traditions. I think that by paying attention to the material and ritual practices of traditions, we will start asking different questions and maybe even develop new theological concepts.[34] This conviction springs from an understanding of religion in which "mediation" is central.

[33] Gregory Schopen, "Relic," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 256–68, at 256.

[34] I also think that by paying attention to material and ritual practices we may also start to read other texts that previously escaped our attentions (e.g., ritual guidelines and liturgical reflections).

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Mediation and Meaning Embodiment

Certainly among comparative theologians who uphold a particularist understanding of religion, one can often hear the claim—to which I subscribe—that religious traditions "provide a symbolic framework through which the transcendent is experienced."[35] This framework is analogous to a language (in the broad meaning of the word) or culture that gives shape to experience and knowledge. Each religion, as it were, has a specific vocabulary that is both discursive and non-discursive.[36] By learning to speak a particular religious "language," believers learn how to deal with the limits of existence, with conflicts, and with their own finitude by placing their own life in the greater whole of the tradition to which they adhere and the community in which they celebrate their belief. Rituals, symbols, and narratives structure the world and make it possible for human beings to find meaning in it.[37] Within this framework I would like to call attention to the notion of mediation.

At the heart of religious life are various media making present the divine and enabling a relation between human beings and the divine. Certain material objects and sacred sites can serve as a way in which the divine becomes present within the world, and ritual practices revolving around these tangibles enable people to relate to the divine. In this sense, Robert Orsi states:

> Religion is the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various dimensions and possibilities of human interiority itself, as these are understood in various cultures at different times, in order to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses in the circumstances of everyday life. Once made material, the invisible can be negotiated and bargained with, touched and kissed, made to bear human anger and disappointment.[38]

This mediation happens in a variety of ways: through scripture, nature, symbols, sacred sites, ritual performances, images, statues, paintings, music, dance, and food, to name a few. Though it seems to be the case that within a particular tradition one specific form of mediation may be more authoritative than others (e.g., scripture, or meditation, or recitation), it is not unusual that within one and the same tradition a variety of media exists. All of these mediations function as bridges to the divine: they make visible what is invisible; understandable, what is beyond our understanding;

[35] Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future,* 11.

[36] Though I uphold a particularist understanding of religion, inspired in part by George Lindbeck, I take issue with his claim that religions are untranslatable. See Marianne Moyaert, "The (Un-) Translatability of Religions? Ricoeur's Linguistic Hospitality as Model for Interreligious Dialogue," *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 37 (2008) 337–64.

[37] Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham: Lexington, 2014) chapter 2, 45–68.

[38] Robert Orsi, "Material Children. Making God's Presence Real Through Catholic Boys and Girls," in *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader* (ed. Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell; London & New York: Routledge, 2012) 147–58, 147.

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nearby, what is transcendent; palpable, what is beyond our reach.[39] In the words of S. Brent Plate,

> People see icons and the clothing of the clergy, they touch stones and water, and they hear music from the instruments. Food is smelled and tasted. Religious traditions are multi-sensual, and much of their staying power comes directly through their appeal to the senses and their impact on the emotions. While the sensorium (the overarching range and ratio of the senses utilized within a group or by an individual) of religious cultures varies from place to place and from time to time—some emphasizing vision and others hearing, for example—all traditions create and promote particular objects to be seen, smelled, touched, tasted, or heard.[40]

These media not only express certain insights we already have beforehand, nor is it correct that to say that these media function as some sort of intermediary without additional value. Rather than saying that these media are merely expressive of our religious knowledge and experience, I would say that they are also constitutive and formative of what we (think we) know and experience. Put differently, the form of the mediation matters. Different mediations may illuminate different aspects of the divine and may enable a different way of relating to the divine. Or by means of different media, the presence of the divine in the world may be experienced differently. I think it matters whether we relate to the divine by listening to "creation" or hearing the divine voice as an ethical commandment, or experiencing its presence primarily in adherence to monastic rules or through the veneration of icons or perhaps even in a call to protest in a political fashion. Sacred sites, statues, food and drinking, ethical actions, reading scripture, recitation, prayer or mediation—they all mediate the divine in different ways. We need to take these media themselves seriously and explore how they contribute to a particular way of experiencing the divine.

Going back to the textual focus of comparative theology, I would like to make two remarks. First of all, scriptures, but also other theological texts, are one specific form of mediation next to other forms of mediation. Second, it is important to emphasize and recognize that written media, certainly when they are individually and silently read, speak to the human being in his or her capacity to think conceptually. In doing so, they appeal primarily to the sense of sight (which has become almost synonymous with the human capacity to reason and understand, as in the expression "Do you see?"). Other media will address or appeal to other human senses, such as taste, touch, smell, and hearing. Third, continuing along these lines, I wonder whether there could be a correlation between our textual preference

[39] That religion revolves around mediation also holds for those traditions with certain iconoclast tendencies or traditions that emphasize the importance of spirituality as detachment from mediation. Even when religious knowledge and experience is construed as being immediate (e.g., Quakers), religious experience and knowledge are still mediated.

[40] S. Brent Plate, "Material Religion: An Introduction," in *Key Terms in Material Religion* (ed. Brent Plate; London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 1–8, at 5.

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(especially philosophical and theological texts) as a medium for our knowledge of the divine and our more abstract representations of the divine and more abstract questions which are removed from religion as it is lived. On the other hand, could it be that by redirecting our attention to material and ritual practices in various religious traditions we could become more alert to the divine as a near and real presence?[41] It could also be that our modern mind has difficulty taking seriously ritual practices that revolve around material objects. By redirecting our attention to what happens in the ritual realm, we may also have our perspectives altered, allowing us to rediscover texts dealing with questions that are often overlooked.

Liturgical Comparative Theology

Comparative theologians seem to work from a classical understanding of theology as mainly textual, having been drawn from textual sources and presented in a textual form, which allows ideas to travel. If comparative theology is about comparing theologies, then it makes sense to focus on written texts rather than on various other non-textual media. As a matter of fact, I cannot imagine any theology (nor philosophy for that matter) that can do without texts and its conceptual reasonings. Nevertheless, also from a theological perspective, there are good reasons to complement the textual focus of comparative theology with a ritual interest.

Rituals do more than express or enact certain beliefs, which can be further developed in theological reflections. As long as one thinks of symbols and symbolic practices as merely expressive of preceding contents, their relevance for theology is reduced to that corroboration (or viewed as an example of aberration). The underlying assumption, which is typical of a mentalist approach to religion, would be that beliefs take priority over rituals. That does not mean that rituals would be taken as unimportant. On the contrary, even in a mentalist understanding of religion, there can be appreciation for the role rituals play in the formation of religious believers and the transmission of tradition. From this perspective, one could point to the way that rituals, by impinging upon the person in her entirety, as an embodied mind, potentially have the power to transform the ritualist, to mold her identity through rewriting the body. Thus, even from a mentalist understanding of religion, one could acknowledge that rituals play a more central role in the preservation of tradition and the communication of faith than texts.[42]

[41] Matters are, of course, more complex than this question suggests, since our various traditions also contain texts that are sensual to the extreme, and in which a craving for the divine, a deep desire to be near the divine is expressed. Many traditions also contain liturgical reasonings in which the nature of certain practices is explained and theologically discussed. But as a question that probes after tendencies, I think it is worthy of consideration.

[42] As I argue elsewhere, religious knowledge is in part explicit knowledge, i.e., codified knowledge that can be found in scripture and its commentaries, teachings, and guidelines. This faith can be communicated with relative ease and may even be accessible to outsiders. See Marianne Moyaert, "Inappropriate Behavior? On the Ritual Core of Religion and its Challenges to Interreligious Hospitality," *JAAR* 27 (2014) 1–21.

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What this approach, which prioritizes beliefs over rituals, does not fully grasp is that rituals are not only important as expressive and even formative means, but that they are also productive of meaning. Material and ritual practices do not simply express or transmit truths that already exist apart from them. Rather, they are truly creative: they can alter understanding and generate new insights and even criticize tradition. Participating in ritual activities can sometimes generate new thoughts and bring about change in tradition. Rituals can be pioneering, rather than simply expressive; they can be the starting place of imaginative and creative thought, which may even challenge and contradict tradition. Nicole Boivin explains this as follows:

> While it's certainly true that ritual has a role to play in transmitting information or reproducing a particular social order, it is almost certainly somewhat limited to see it only as a way of expressing or transposing onto another plane something that somehow already exists in its absence. . . . What I wish therefore to assert, in contrast, is that a far more interesting argument can be made that, in many cases, ideas and cultural understandings do not precede, but are rather helped into becoming by, the material world and human engagement with it during the course of ritual activity. Human thought and experience has not only used the world as a prop for expressing itself, but has, in fact, often been enabled by that world. Ritual can be a very creative act that does not just express or represent but actually does something; it can alter understanding, bodies, or the world itself, as understood by human beings.[43]

Christian liturgical theology in particular has developed more fully the idea that there is thinking through ritual.[44] Liturgical theologians like Kavanagh, Fagerberg, and Schmemann argue that liturgy contributes to the ongoing development of tradition and gives rise to theological reflection. Thus, it is both a source (subject matter) and a location for theology. According to Kavanagh, although liturgy may present itself as unchanging, it does change over time in response to new experiences and concerns. Liturgy is adjusted, and these adjustments are theological in nature.[45] David Fagerberg argues that liturgy is *theologia prima,* and that, in Haspelmath-Finatt's words, "liturgies are not only expressions of theology: liturgy is the foundation of theology. Liturgical language brings reality into existence. It constitutes a new reality. It is transformation, not expression. *Lex orandi* establishes *lex credendi*."[46]

Though Fagerberg may be overstating his case, and although a more nuanced understanding between liturgy and theology may be in order, it is important to

[43] Nicole Boivin, "Grasping the Elusive and Unknowable: Material Culture in Ritual Practice," *Material Religion* 5 (2009): 266–87, 274.

[44] Kevin Schilbrack (ed.), *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[45] Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary*, 1981 (New York: Pueblo, 1984), 74.

[46] Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, "Theologia Prima: Liturgical Theology as an Ecumenical Challenge to Lutheran Worship," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48 (2009) 374–79, especially 376–77.

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realize that liturgy is not something added to theology, but rather an important locus where the community theologizes and develops its understanding of the divine. Theological insights sometimes develop while celebrating, and these insights may alter and transform and correct the church's theologizing about tradition (and the other way around). Of course, if one takes this argument seriously, and applies it to other religious traditions in an analogous way, that would imply that comparative theologians ought to turn to the ritual domain and engage in some form of comparative liturgical theology that tries to "read the symbolic, embodied language of liturgical performance, and that seeks to grasp the extra-verbal content."[47] Material and ritual practices then become important loci for comparative theology, offering yet another means of deep learning across religious borders, because rituals have the power to affect ritualists.[48]

Cross-Riting or Cross-Ritual Participation

Just as there is no such thing as religion in general, there is no such thing as liturgy in general. Attending to the particulars of a foreign religious world requires attentiveness. This passage by Aidan Kavanagh on how one learns to approach and understand a strange liturgy strongly resonates with the way comparative theologians usually urge us to become guests in another textual tradition and to attend to the particulars:

> [L]iturgy in general is a convenient abstraction, a category that we use to signal vastly differentiated sets of motives, acts and patterns. Like all such categorical abstractions, liturgy in general is so fascinating in its generality that as it excites it also blinds and leads one astray. The fact is that liturgy in general does not exist in the real order. It is a mental construct, an analogical spread; like all analogies, it is capable of obscuring real differences by the splendor of the sameness it provides without toil or hazard for those whose inclination is to avoid the toil of getting their facts straight and to avoid the hazard of being discovered to have been wrong. Such people excel in making obvious generalizations which may well be destructive when reduced to practice. But when one approaches a concrete liturgical event, or an actual tradition of such events, one needs first to place tempting analogies well after the toil of discriminating facts and accounting for differences. One must also learn quickly to hazard being wrong and be prepared to change one's mind. Liturgy, like language, is not always logical, and one who begins to learn one language by studying language in general begins badly. . . . Even an untrained observer can tell the obvious differences between French and English, between Byzantine Divine Liturgy and a Methodist Covenant Service. It takes greater discipline, however, to go deeper into the surface structure. One must learn new vocabulary, alien grammar, different syntax in both language and

[47] Emma O'Donnell, "Embodying Tradition: Liturgical Performance as a Site for Interreligious Learning," *Cross Currents* 62 (2012) 371–80, at 371.

[48] Ronald Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*: *Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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> liturgy. One must unlearn the ways one has spoken and worshiped before if one is ever to experience the other idiom from the inside, so to speak as it is experienced by its natives, and is yet more difficult to do.[49]

When you turn to a liturgy that is strange and belongs to another tradition, you will have to "learn new vocabulary, alien grammar, different syntax."[50] You will have to attend to the particulars. So how should we proceed to enable a comparative theology that includes ritual and material practices? I suggest we complement practices of cross-reading or back-and-forth reading with practices of cross-riting or back-and-forth riting.

In a manner not unlike cross-reading, cross-riting too will engage in a detailed study of a specific ritual procedure or religious ceremony. Comparative theologians will be attentive to: (1) the space in which the ritual is performed, (2) the time when the ritual occurs, (3) the ritual objects used, (4) the sound and language employed and produced, (5) the roles of the ritualists, and (6) the actions performed.[51] Usually, this implies field work and participant observation. To attend to the specificity of symbolic practices, scholars should also interview ritualists and examine individual, emic accounts. The emic approach helps the ritual scholar to understand what the ritualists under consideration think of the acts they perform. What do the practitioners understand themselves to be participating in? How do they interpret the ritual performed? What local theologies can be found at a liturgical site? The first focus will be on what religious believers belonging to different religious traditions actually do and what they think they are doing when engaging in ritual performance.

Apart from observing what others do, a practice of cross-riting will also include doing as others do; thus the body becomes tuned until it knows in a way that the mind on its own cannot. In that way, the comparative theologian (1) learns through her own body and (2) learns by observing the bodily activities of others and doing as others do. The comparative theologian becomes an active learner. In Jeannine Hill Fletcher's words,

> by drawing encounter in through the body, inter-riting promises a significant alternative to inter-textuality insofar as the written word of comparison invites us in through the mind and the intellect, while inter-riting has us comport

[49] Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 79–80.

[50] Ibid., 80.

[51] Ronald L. Grimes, *The Beginnings of Ritual Studies* (rev. ed; Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995) 1–7. For example, comparative theologians might ask: What shape is the space? What size is it? To whom is the place oriented? What direction does it face? Do up and down, left and right, back and front have values associated with them? What hierarchies does the space facilitate? What and how many objects are associated with the ritual? What are their physical dimensions, shape, weight, and color? What is done with the object? What happens to it before and after the ritual? At what time does the ritual occur – night, dawn, dusk, midday? What other concurrent activities happen that might supplement or compete with it? On what date did that ritual occur? At what season?

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> through our bodies. This bodily dimension brings us in in such a way that my senses and my body precede my conceptual understanding of the event.[52]

In his research on shared pilgrimage sites, comparative theologian Bagus Laksana testifies to the transformative power of such forms of ritual participation or what he calls a double visiting.[53] In language that resembles that of Clooney, Laksana says: "In the process, the comparative theologian-cum-pilgrim pays extended and multiple visits to the religious world of the other and then returns home more refreshed both in terms of spiritual affect and theological understanding."[54] The participation in the text is complemented with a participation in the rituals of the other. The comparative theologian now learns through her body and, thus, gains access to the silent dimensions of the other tradition.

The key becomes to study the Torah as it is studied by Jewish students, to engage in a Friday Prayer with Muslims, to sit zazen with Buddhists, to partake in the puja ritual in the Hindu temple.[55] Entering the sacred space of another religious community and being shaped by their rituals create the possibility of deeper interreligious understanding rooted in real religious life. Hence cross-riting can open one up to the mysteries of a foreign religious tradition that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Moreover, like texts, rituals do something to those who engage them, and cross-riting can become a new avenue for interreligious learning, especially in the way it opens up the religious imagination and may lead to creative theological insights.[56] As Farwell explains, cross-participation like cross-reading may simply begin "as illumination, a moment of coming back with fresh eyes to one's own tradition and seeing aspects of that tradition more clearly or anew, or having fresh resources to think about them. Those illuminations arising from comparison may with time and thought be developed into more constructive moves."[57]

We can formulate two concerns with respect to cross-riting. The first has to do with the fact that comparative theologians, even when they participate in the rituals of another tradition, remain outsiders. They belong to another faith community which holds different beliefs; this is their home to which they will return, although altered.[58] Because they do not share the beliefs that are embedded in the material and symbolic performance in which they nevertheless partake, one can wonder to what

[52] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "When Practice Precedes Theory" (paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GA, 21 November 2015).

[53] Bagus Laksana, *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations Through Java* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) 191.

[54] Ibid., 192.

[55] Stephanie Paulsell, "Faith Matters: Devotional Difference," *Christian Century* (25 January 2012) 35.

[56] Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future,* 182–85.

[57] James Farwell, "Not Two with Christ."

[58] In the introduction to their co-edited volume *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin say that comparative theology follows an exitus-reditus schema (New York: Routledge, 2016).

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extent this practice of cross-riting really allows them to gain access to the deeper layers of meaning in other traditions. As O'Donnell, who addresses this problem in her book *Remembering the Future*, explains, "Liturgy is an 'insider' activity in multiple ways: the full experiential depth of liturgical performance . . . can only be experienced in complete integrity by a committed member of the religious tradition in which it is situated."[59] Even though I think being shaped by the rituals of another traditions creates the possibility of a deeper, more experiential understanding rooted in religious life, I agree that it does not give access to the "full" understanding that comes with belief.[60] Nevertheless, comparative theologians do not claim that full understanding is either possible or necessary. Whether one engages texts or rituals (or preferably both), there will always be asymmetry between one's home tradition and the other tradition which will always remain strange to a certain extent. There are gradations to understanding, and while full understanding is not possible, there can be more or less understanding, and one's comprehension of another tradition can be more or less complex, more or less vivid, more or less experiential. To realize and recognize this is also an expression of deep appreciation for the otherness of another tradition. Or, as O'Donnell puts it, to recognize "the inaccessible depth of another religious tradition" is one of the great benefits of any interreligious learning process.[61]

There is yet another concern with regard to the viability of cross-riting as part of the comparative theological project. This second concern has to do with the question of how one can actually theologize from non-discursive religious practices whose deep meaning is mainly tacit. The move from non-discursive tacit practice (ritual performance) to a discursive and explicit practice (theology) is not self-evident. Deeply embodied meanings resist translation, which always goes together with a loss of meaning. The rich, textured and experiential knowledge gained through ritual practice cannot be translated to theological discourse without loss. The ritual practices lose their expressiveness and become impoverished abstractions. Some might even say that we should refrain from engaging in such a process of translation.

The problem alluded to here is a well-known problem for those who do translation: the original can never be duplicated. This problem is not specific to the move from non-discursive practices to discourse; it also exists when one either translates a poem into another language or when one tries to explain a poem. It is true the explanation can never replace the experience of reading poetry, just as comparative liturgical theology can never replace the act of ritual participation. Nevertheless, just because translation is not possible without loss of meaning, translation is not, therefore, meaningless. Indeed, I would say that every translation,

[59] Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 183.

[60] Some comparative theologians who have engaged in practices of cross-riting actually become believers in more than one tradition. Some of them would call themselves dual belongers. See Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian: An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (Routledge: London, 2011).

[61] Emma O'Donnell, *Remembering the Future*, 378.

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however imperfect it may be, is still better than no translation at all, because the translation actually also opens one up to new insights that may also be translated back to practice. Loss of meaning goes together with gain in meaning. If we do not reconnect our liturgical experiences and insights that we gained from different traditions with how we actually think about the divine in relation to us, then the whole endeavor of comparative liturgical theology will not make any sense. It is precisely because these practices are also full of meaning that we must engage in a theological exploration nourished by these practices. That will, I am convinced, enrich our understanding of the divine. Consider Farwell's reflections in this regard:

> Liturgies are not reducible to an exposition of the words they employ, their hymns or chants, or the structure of the rites; nor to the metaphysical, affective, or conative referents they enact, even though all those things are set in motion in and by liturgical action. . . . Every exposition of what a liturgy "means" must stay bone-close to the liturgy itself, to its structure or content. Even interpretation of liturgy . . . is in a dialectical relationship with liturgy's performance; teaching about it informs experience of its performance; performance gives rise to the teaching. *But in a certain way, every liturgical theology is something of a felicitous betrayal of liturgy; in the very process of translating the meaning of rituals into words we will misrepresent them even as we illuminate them*. Comparative theology ought to be conscious of that felicitous betrayal; and we should think about what that means for a liturgical turn in comparative theology.[62]

The Lasting Importance of Texts: Closing the Circle of the Argument

Inter-riting implies a turn to "lived religion," which balances out the mentalist approaches of most theologies. Hopefully this turn will stretch the interreligious imagination even further and will open up new possibilities for thinking the divine.[63] Nevertheless, I do not want to turn this into an either/or story in which reading texts is juxtaposed with engaging ritual tradition. I rather envision a relationship of complementarity between inter-texting or cross-reading and inter-riting or cross-riting. Appreciation for the role of material and ritual practices as a theological source should not result in a depreciation of the importance of texts. I for one cannot imagine any comparative theology without texts. I agree with Kevin Schilbrack who states that "[t]exts have a representationalist function—that is, they can make and justify claims about what exists—in a way that practices cannot." But it is likewise important to recognize that the study of material and ritual practices

[62] James Farwell, "Not Two with Christ" (italics added).

[63] Bagus Laksana, *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations through Java*. In his recently published research, Bagus Laksana moves in this direction by developing a comparative theological approach grounded in a practice of double visiting in Java. For him pilgrimage became a primary locus to be in the proximity of the religious other as well as of God; indeed it can become a privileged occasion to get to know the religious other while seeking to better understand God.

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may complement the study of texts, because they are not only expressive but also generative of thought.[64]

First of all, it is important to appreciate the role that texts play in a ritual context: the liturgical rubrics, prayer books, scripture, and the blessings. This will surely include asking questions about the use of these texts, how they are recited, sung, prayed and heard (by whom), how they are handled as symbolic and material objects (touched, read, kissed, smelled), or even venerated as divine embodiments in a communal setting. Attending to the various ways that texts are being used and handled in a ritual setting will correct the too-modern academic or scholarly assumption that texts are only there to be read and studied in solitude. This will also draw attention to the fact that texts are often venerated, treated as sacred, and not because of their content, but rather because they are embodiments of the divine. That is why, for example, in Jewish tradition the *yad* is used to read the Torah, so as not to touch the scrolls. Or why in the Catholic Church the priest kisses the Bible after reading from it, or why worn-out copies of the Qu'ran are ritually burnt or buried; or why in Mahayan Buddhist traditions, the sutra (the sacred texts attributed to or inspired by the Buddha) are venerated. I agree with Kristina Myrvold, who argues that "the very existence of these and other practices suggest that texts attributed a sacred status evoke powerful values associated with both their contents and their physical forms. In many religious traditions people have a deep concern for providing a respectful treatment of their sacred texts, similar to deities or human subjects of exalted status, even when the texts are considered obsolete and useless."[65]

Secondly, we should not forget that even as ritual objects, these texts have content: they say something to someone about something.[66] As religious discourse, these texts play a key role in religious communities and their ritual practices, continuing to stir the religious imagination, guide ritual performances, and inspire the creation of images, statues, and sacred spaces for devotion and worship.[67] They do so both in a ritual context (where often the textual and material dimension of the texts are interwoven) and outside that context, where these texts are expressed in art or music or simply read or contemplated. Together with the lifeworld of ritualists, they are part of the hermeneutical framework that molds people and affects what rituals mean. Ritual contributes to the production of religious meaning, but that always happens as ritual is inspired by, in conversation with, or in reaction to particular religious texts which belong to the collective memory of a tradition and which are

[64] Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 36.

[65] Kristina Myrvold, "Introduction," in *The Death of Sacred Texts: Ritual Disposal and Renovation of Texts in World Religions* (ed. Kristina Myrvold; Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) 1–10, at 1.

[66] See Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B.. Thomspon; London: Athlone, 1991) 82.

[67] Anne M. Blackburn, "The Text and the World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (ed. Robert A. Orsi; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012) 151–67, at 151.

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recognized (even when they are contested) as authoritative. As James Farwell puts it: "[F]ormation, and hermeneutics through practice, is happening in both directions, at the intersection between the lifeworld of the person and the liturgical rites; and within both the lifeworld of the members of the assembly outside the ritual, and within the ritual, texts are a part of their formation."[68] Rituals produce meaning, but they also only mean something within a broader hermeneutical framework in which texts have a key role to play.[69]

Thirdly, and just as importantly, it is necessary to attend to texts that contain explicit liturgical theology. Though it is true that religious meaning is produced in and through rituals and that the latter are an embodied enactment of theological reasoning, it is also true that what happens ritually is often (though not always) made a topic of theological discussion in liturgical texts. These texts contain forms of reasoning in which the theological meaning and significance of particular ritual procedures, prayers, and ceremonies are made explicit. These texts not only often attend to the performative dimension of ritual and are quite often specific about ritual rules (what to do, how to do it, who can do it) but also connect that performative dimension with the larger theological tradition. To neglect these texts would come at a high price, says Anne M. Blackburn, "for one then misses valuable witness to the restless creativity of generations of intellectuals and practitioners. For decades and centuries, women and men faced the inspiration and limitation of their textual and liturgical moment, and then in words and deeds—exceeded it, vitalizing their communities of being and shaping the textual heritage of future generations."[70] Inter-riting alone will, to my mind, not suffice to grasp the meaning of the performance of ritual, just as inter-texting alone is too limited. In this regard, I agree with Anne Blackburn, who, while critical of the textual focus of religious studies, also warns against an approach that would deny the value of the study of texts altogether. Just as I think it would enrich theology to turn to ritual, it would impoverish comparative theology if such a liturgical turn implied a retreat from the study of texts. We need to avoid finding ourselves in "an intellectually untenable position, [where] we . . . fail to recognize the often profoundly influential connections between texts and devotional practice, for example, and to neglect the very high value accorded to textual composition, transmission and interpretation with the communities we seek to understand. Moreover, in retreat from the study of texts, we ignore crucial evidence of the processes by which religious collectivities have renewed and transformed themselves, and continue to do so."[71]

[68] James Farwell, in a mail conversation in which he responds to an earlier draft of this text.

[69] See also Marianne Moyaert, "Religious Pluralism and Eucharistic Hospitality," *Liturgy* 31 (2016) 46–56.

[70] Anne M. Blackburn, "The Text and the World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, 151–167, at 153.

[71] Ibid., 151.

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Lastly, comparative theologians are writers. They produce texts to disseminate their insights and reflections, which will hopefully be read by others and contribute to a better hermeneutical and theological understanding of the other and her tradition in comparison to their own tradition. Though liturgy is a *locus theologicus*, certainly in academia theology will continue to be produced in a written form, which also guarantees (at least to a certain extent) that the ideas expressed can travel around the world and can be picked up and discussed by others. The abstraction of writing potentially saves lived religion from its local context. For all of these reasons, I think the field of comparative theologians needs both textual scholars who read and compare texts from two traditions in a detailed fashion and those scholars who place more emphasis on field work and lived religion. Ideally, both will work in close contact with one another and engage in an intellectual discussion that will further inspire their theological work.

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