

## chapter one

# The Immanent Divine and the Human Predicament



Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,  
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat.

—Rudyard Kipling<sup>1</sup>

I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me  
this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, command-  
ing, *choose, choose*. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do  
not choose between you. Lassoos, lariats, I choose neither of you, and  
both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.

—Salman Rushdie<sup>2</sup>

## How Far Is East from West? A Question for Comparative Theology

Globalization and hybridity—these are among the watchwords of our time. The first names an omnipolar movement of capital, technology, people, and ideas that renders obsolete an older story that speaks of a simple unidirectional flow of modernity from West to East. The second term points to the

1. Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West," in *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1946), 233.

2. Salman Rushdie, "The Courter," in *East, West: Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 211.

complex way in which these “global flows” come to be etched onto the bodies and minds of persons who are compelled to fuse together creatively multiple traditions and values. Contrary to Kipling, East and West have met and continue to meet daily. The setting for such meetings now includes not only the marketplace and cross-cultural marriages but also, as Salman Rushdie’s fiction has shown, the psyches of multicultural persons. For such persons, choosing between strands of selfhood might simplify life but such choice is neither possible nor desirable. Surgically separating conjoined twins is simpler. The task at hand is the skillful navigation of double belonging so that it might lead to dual citizenship rather than to cultural homelessness.

This fusion of elements from East and West is especially visible in religious life. Laypersons and virtuoso practitioners alike are becoming hyphenated boundary-crossers. Buddhist-Jews, Hindu-Christians, Buddhist-Christians—the permutations are endless, intriguing, and sometimes disturbing.<sup>3</sup> Religious practices and ideas float across religious boundaries and take root in new soil. Christians do Zen, Buddhists engage in social activism, and everyone does Yoga.

What do Christian theologians have to say about these new religious configurations? Can Christian theologians offer critical guidance for such novel forms of religious practice, or are they bound by tradition to adopt a defensive and ineffectual “Just say no” strategy? Change is slower in religion than in culture at large, and only a few, albeit a growing few, speak and write about the mutual transformation of religious traditions or even multiple religious belonging.<sup>4</sup>

Mainstream theologians have long recognized that other religious traditions represent a real challenge for Christian faith. The emergence of theology of religions as a lively and productive area of specialization demonstrates that theologians well appreciate the dramatic cultural shifts now underway.

3. On the disturbing features of contemporary spirituality movements, see Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Carrette and King persuasively argue that the discourse of spirituality has done much to reduce spiritual practices to commodities subsumed by and made to serve the interests of global capitalism. Put very concisely, “spirituality is big business” (1). In the process, the commitments of religious traditions to justice and to the collective good are often forgotten.

4. The most famous exponent of the idea of “mutual transformation” is John B. Cobb. See his now-classic work, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (1982; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1998). On the idea of multiple religious belonging, see Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

Christian theologians have long been thinking about whether persons from other religious traditions can be saved. They have typically turned within to scripture and tradition in search of alternatives to reigning exclusivist habits of mind that relegate most, if not all, non-Christians to perdition.<sup>5</sup>

But very few theologians have engaged in theological reflection that draws on the resources of more than one tradition. Thinking *about* other traditions rather than thinking *with* them—this has been until quite recently Christian theology’s standard approach to religious diversity. Also most thinking about other religions has been confined not to a consideration of those traditions in detail but rather to the broad question of what Christians ought to make of the sheer fact of religious diversity. Is religious polyphony God-willed, or is it a fall away from an original religious simplicity, a polyglot Babel bound to pass away?

The emergence of the fledgling discipline of comparative theology marks a new stage in Christian theology’s encounter with other religions.<sup>6</sup> Comparative theologians are not content to think generally about the meaning of religious diversity for Christian faith. Instead they wish to engage specific texts, motifs, and claims of particular traditions not only to understand better these traditions but also to determine the truth of theological matters through conversation and collaboration. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., rightly describes comparative theology as constructive theology proper that draws on resources from more

5. For an even-handed and masterful summary of the current conversation in theology of religions, see Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

6. Among the most important recent works within comparative theology are those of Joseph Bracken, S.J., Francis X. Clooney, S.J., and James L. Fredericks. See Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., *The Divine Matrix: Creativity as Link between East and West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995); Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); idem, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); idem, “Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989–1995),” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (1995): 521–50; idem, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); and idem, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1999). For a recent book that does not claim to be a work in comparative theology but nonetheless demonstrates how Christian theology is enriched when it draws upon resources from another tradition, in this case Tibetan Buddhism, see Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

than one tradition and is willing to be changed by what it learns from those other traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Why is comparative theology so late born?<sup>8</sup> Surely one reason is the general assumption that vast, fundamental, and irreconcilable differences separate Christianity from other traditions, especially Eastern ones. On this assumption, religious diversity presents a scene of sheer incommensurability and the fusion of elements drawn from several religious traditions everywhere evident in cultural practice is said to be either impossible or confused—syncretism standing in as the technical word for confusion. But how vast are the differences that separate East from West, and just what are those differences? Ironically, the question cannot be answered apart from comparison. The presumption of qualitative and incommensurable difference has delayed comparison, but only comparison can tell us whether such presumption is warranted.

A major reason for supposing that there is an impassable gap separating East from West is the widespread conviction that Eastern traditions are pantheistic whereas Western traditions are dualistic. When such claims are made, theologians usually have in mind Christianity and Hinduism. On standard accounts, Christianity maintains a strong commitment to creation *ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing, whereas Hinduism affirms that the world emerges out of Brahman, the impersonal ultimate reality at the heart of nondualistic Hinduism. *Creatio ex nihilo*, on the contrary, rules out *creatio ex deo*, creation out of God, whereas Hindu sacred scriptures ultimately teach not only that the world emerges out of Brahman, but that the true Self just *is* Brahman. The traditional Christian commitment to positing a radical and relatively impermeable separation between the creator and creature stands in sharp contrast to Hindu commitments to nonduality (*advaita*). The doctrine of creation appears to erect an unbridgeable chasm between God and the world and so

7. Clooney's own words are worth citing here. He writes, "comparative theology can also be thought of as truly constructive *theology*, distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its foundation in more than one tradition (although the comparatist remains rooted in one tradition), and by reflection which builds on that foundation, rather than simply on themes or by methods already articulated prior to the comparative practice. Comparative theology . . . is a theology deeply changed by its attention to the details of multiple religious and theological traditions; it is a theology that occurs truly only *after* comparison." Clooney, "Comparative Theology," 522.

8. It is possible to argue that Christian theology has been practiced comparatively from its very inception. Christian theology's conversation with Jewish traditions, Neo-Platonism, Hellenistic philosophical traditions, and later with Aristotelianism and Islam can all be seen as genuine exercises in comparative theology. The turn to comparative theology in our time is perhaps more truly characterized as a rebirth and renewal of ancient practices of engagement.

also between Hinduism and Christianity. Those who live in a postcolonial globalizing world, the world of Rushdie and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, may speak of multiple religious identities and hybridity, but when it comes to theology, there can be no blurring of lines, no crossing of boundaries.<sup>9</sup> God's creative activity keeps asunder what globalization has brought together. The question of God's immanence to the world appears to function as a decisive theological stumbling block to any reconciliation between Hinduism and Christianity, between East and West.

Intimately related to the question of immanence is the matter of theological anthropology. Christian tradition posits not only a sharp distinction between God and creatures but also insists upon the fallibility and sinfulness of human beings. The doctrine of original sin maintains that human beings are radically broken and diseased and so incapable of realizing the good apart from divine healing. Such a robust doctrine of sin also appears to be at odds with Hindu claims that human beings are innately or essentially divine. At first sight, Hindu doctrines appear utterly incompatible with Christian theological claims, and conversation between East and West appears, if not impossible, then at least unpromising. How is productive conversation possible if differences are so stark? From a broad aerial view of the religious terrain, Hindu and Christian traditions do appear to be hopelessly at odds. No fusion of elements drawn from the two seems theoretically possible even if such fusion is now practically routine.

But matters become more complex as soon as one considers specific thinkers and texts. A view from closer to the ground demonstrates that religious traditions are neither univocal nor static. After all, Hinduism also includes forms of dualistic theism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity offers to human beings the possibility of deification, of becoming divine. This is to say nothing of Western Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa who offer accounts of divine immanence that rival Hindu nondualism in affirming a deep underlying unity between humanity and divinity. There are many Christianities and multiple Hinduisms and differences *within* traditions are as sharp as differences *across* them.

The turn toward particularity reveals not only a multiplicity of voices within traditions but also that those traditions are constantly changing. Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the Christian doctrine of creation has undergone important modifications. Under the influence of process theology, feminist theology, and the growing power of the ecological movement, many theologians have reconsidered positions that take the world

9. On the notion of hybridity, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

to be an extrinsic product of divine activity, a work of the divine will wholly external to the divine life. For decades now, feminist and ecological theologians have been calling us to greater reverence for the world by urging us to see creation as “the body of God.”<sup>10</sup> Without pretending that there is anything like a consensus within Christian theology, there has been a marked growth in the sheer number of theologians who affirm some variety of panentheism.<sup>11</sup> Broadly defined, a theology is panentheistic to the extent that it affirms that the world is part of God’s life even if God’s life is in some sense more or greater than the life of the world. Within panentheistic theologies, the created world is not flatly external to the divine life. God’s nature is determined by relation to the world, a world that is understood not merely as a product of God’s willing or doing but also as part of God’s very being.

The remarkable profusion of panentheistic theologies in the twentieth century should transform the received sense of what is possible in any relationship between Christianity and Eastern traditions, most especially Hinduism. The emergence of panentheism as a live possibility for Christian thought should also prompt theologians to recognize and revalorize submerged moments within Christian history, moments in which the relation between God and creation was characterized by far greater intimacy than some now reigning accounts of Christian doctrine suggest. What was once deemed esoteric need no longer seem so as the dynamic flow of a changing tradition casts new light on the Christian past.

The idea that the Christian doctrines of creation and Eastern notions of nonduality are absolutely incompatible becomes far less plausible once appreciation for the vital diversity within Christian tradition grows. This is not to say that difference will vanish and homogeneity reign. More likely is a new and

10. The feminist ecological theologian Sallie McFague is the most distinguished thinker of the concept of the world as God’s body. See her book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). For a more recent feminist theology of creation, one that rejects *creatio ex nihilo* altogether for a *creatio ex profundis*, a creation out of the chaotic depths, see Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

11. It would be difficult to offer anything like a comprehensive list of important modern and contemporary panentheistic theologians. Michael Brierley provides a list of more than fifty figures who have either explicitly identified themselves as panentheists or have been so identified by others. His list includes Joseph Bracken, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, Peter Hodgson, Jay McDaniel, Sallie McFague, and Paul Tillich. See Michael Brierley, “Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology,” in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 1–15.

growing appreciation for the importance of subtle differences, differences discovered by way of careful comparison rather than posited before comparison begins.

Such comparative labor is ultimately unavoidable. Only comparative theology can critically evaluate the sometimes profound but often haphazard, solipsistic, and market-driven hybrid spiritualities now so much in vogue. Comparative theology in its constructive dimension seeks to do what theology has done always and everywhere: guide and orient faithful practice, especially when practice assumes forms heretofore unseen.

In other eras, men and women were accounted wise when they had achieved practical mastery of a single tradition's vision of the world. Our pluralistic era calls also for a different sort of wisdom: the double capacity to see the world multifariously and to show others how creatively to reconcile what such visions disclose when juxtaposed. The promise of comparative theology rests precisely in its aspiration for such pluriform wisdom.

### Why Sankara, Why Tillich?

If Christian theology is now open as never before to a concrete engagement with other traditions, then the time has come to put aside unwieldy and unsustainable generalizations about East and West or even Hinduism and Christianity taken as a whole. Christian theology must subject conventional assumptions about immutable differences between traditions to critical scrutiny to determine how the very ideas that seem to be the source of outright conflict between traditions actually play out in the work of specific theologians from different traditions.

This book ventures just such an experiment by comparing one Hindu nondualist with one major modern Christian theologian precisely on the contested issues enumerated above, namely the relationship between God, creation, and the human predicament. The Hindu nondualist is Sankara, the eighth-century master teacher of the Advaita Vedanta<sup>12</sup> tradition, and the Christian theologian is Paul Tillich, the twentieth-century existentialist theologian who best understood that the time had come to formulate a Christian theology worked out in conversation with the history of religions. At the close of his life, indeed

12. The term *advaita* means nondualism. The root *dva* is related to the English word *dual* and *a* is the negative prefix. The word *Vedanta* can be broken down into *Veda* and *anta*. The Upanishads are regarded as the end, conclusion, or summation (*anta* is a cognate of the English word *end*) of the Vedas. Taken together, Advaita Vedanta names the school that holds that the highest teaching of the Upanishads is nondualism.

in his final lecture delivered a mere ten days before his death, Tillich reportedly suggested that were he to write his systematic theology anew, he would do so precisely by way of engagement with the world's religious traditions.<sup>13</sup> This project picks up on Tillich's unfulfilled intention by bringing his theology into conversation with Sankara's Advaita Vedanta. It does so not merely to catalog similarities and differences but to demonstrate by example that a new kind of theological venture is possible, one in which genuine conversation takes place between traditions for strictly theological reasons. Through such conversations, theologians can compare, sift, and finally make normative proposals about the similarities and differences discovered during comparison.

For good or ill, when Western theologians and philosophers think of Hinduism, the figure who almost always comes first to mind is Sankara. Even though the very large family of Hindu traditions also includes the dualism of Madhva and the qualified nondualism of Ramanuja, received notions of the monistic mystic East inevitably render Sankara's Advaita Vedanta the prototypical form of Hinduism par excellence.<sup>14</sup> Sankara's theology affirms that the true Self is not the impermanent body-mind complex but rather the Atman. Atman is the eternal light of consciousness (*cit*) that illumines the mind but is not itself the mind; rather it is the inner witness of the workings of mind and body. Sankara insists that the Hindu scriptures teach that this Atman is Brahman.<sup>15</sup> Brahman is ultimately ineffable, but it can be characterized provisionally as the unchanging and infinite ground of the world. It is not a being among beings but is

13. What Tillich actually said is as follows: "I must say that my own *Systematic Theology* was written before these seminars [with Mircea Eliade] and had another intention, namely, the apologetic discussion against and with the secular. Its purpose was the discussion or the answering of questions coming from the scientific and philosophical criticism of Christianity. But perhaps we need a longer, more intensive period of interpenetration of systematic theological study and religious historical studies. Under such circumstances the structure of religious thought might develop in connection with another or different fragmentary manifestation of theonomy or of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. This is my hope for the future of theology." Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 91. It is Eliade who interpreted Tillich to be saying that "had he time, he would write a new *Systematic Theology* oriented toward, and in dialogue with, the whole history of religions." See Mircea Eliade, "Paul Tillich and the History of Religions," in Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions*, 31.

14. On Western interest in "mystic Hinduism," Advaita, and Sankara in particular see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 118–42.

15. Scholarly convention dictates that terms drawn from foreign languages must be italicized unless they have become part of the English language and can now be found in standard English dictionaries. Some examples other than Atman and Brahman include karma, dharma, samsara, and nirvana. Other than such terms and proper names and titles of scriptures, all foreign terms will be italicized.



rather being-itself (*sat*). Precisely this affirmation of the identity of Atman and Brahman qualifies Sankara's position as nondualistic. Moreover, Sankara stipulates that only that which is everlasting and unchanging can be called truly real. By definition then, there is only one reality that qualifies as real in this absolute sense, and that is Atman-Brahman. This is yet another reason why Sankara's position qualifies as a strict nondualism. The goal of spiritual discipline in Advaita Vedanta is knowledge (*jnana*) of the identity between one's true Self and Brahman. Only such transformative knowing leads to liberation from *samsara*, the beginningless round of birth and death. Given Sankara's prominent role in shaping how the West imagines the East and given his commitment to the radical teaching of nonduality, he is an important interlocutor for an inquiry into Eastern approaches to divine immanence.

On the Christian side, Paul Tillich serves as a compelling conversation partner for Sankara because the German-American's theological program is deeply informed by precisely those moments within Christian tradition in which God's immanence to the world was mostly vigorously announced and championed. Tillich's theology amounts to a twentieth-century distillation of the history of Christian mystical theology.<sup>16</sup> To read Tillich is to hear again in modern idiom the voices of Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, and the many other Christian thinkers who kept alive a radical sense of divine presence. As a result of Tillich's extended engagement with mystical thought, his theology offers one of the most robust accounts of divine immanence available in twentieth-century Protestant theology.

Tillich's theological vision is also compelling for comparative theology because of its attractiveness to persons from other religious traditions; no major modern Christian theologian has received more sustained attention from Eastern thinkers than Tillich. Thus far, he has been particularly attractive to Buddhist thinkers. Tillich's own interests lay in this direction. But Tillich's theology can also find a promising hearing in encounters with Hindu theology.<sup>17</sup> Although Tillich's own

16. Tillich is deeply indebted to mystical theologies even though he doubts that mystical experience can offer an adequate religious solution to the problems of the human predicament.

17. Except for the valuable work of Terence Thomas, almost no attention has been given to the question of the relationship between Tillich's theology and Hinduism. See Terence Thomas, *Paul Tillich and World Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1999), 101–22. He observes that Tillich certainly knew of Sankara but rightly acknowledges that it is difficult to determine just how much he knew. Particularly frustrating, Thomas notes, is the fact that we do not know whether Tillich read Rudolf Otto's book on Sankara, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, trans. Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (1932; reprint, Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987). Thomas concludes, "whether he read Otto's work or not he did not seem to know or at least accept certain interpretations of Sankara given by Otto. For instance he seemed to have no awareness of what Otto regards as the theistic side of Sankara" (109).

engagement with Eastern traditions was largely restricted to Zen Buddhism,<sup>18</sup> he was cognizant of similarities between his own thought and Advaita, though these similarities were never the object of sustained scrutiny in his own work. This book picks up on scattered hints of similarity in order to assess them more thoroughly than Tillich was able to do.<sup>19</sup>

One striking point of similarity is that both Sankara and Tillich characterize divinity not as an infinite being among beings but rather as being-itself, that which gives being to all beings but is not itself one of those beings. Tillich is justly famous for his radical claim that it would be truer to say that God does not exist than to say that God does.<sup>20</sup> Beings exist and are determinate. To say God does not exist is to stipulate that God is not a determinate being but is rather the source of being for all that exists. Given this shared consensus, it is possible to maintain that both thinkers transcend theism. They are neither theists nor atheists in any conventional sense. It would perhaps be more accurate to characterize both as “transtheistic” because both believe that conceiving of God as one albeit special being among others is ultimately inadequate and so must be surpassed. Transtheists do not take theism to be flatly erroneous in every sense. Tillich might rightly pass for a theist given his claim that God is not less but more than personal; symbolizing God as personal is a critical and enduring feature of Tillich’s theology. Sankara also ultimately takes leave of theism, but he takes for granted that religious life begins with devotion to Brahman understood as personal Lord and only later moves onto nonduality. In sum, both Sankara and Tillich believe that divinity is better understood as being-itself rather than as one, albeit special, personal being.

Within this context of broad agreement, noteworthy differences come to light, differences that raise sharp questions for theological reflection. As comparison will show, Tillich and Sankara disagree about the nature of

18. For an important summary and analysis of Tillich’s conversations with the Zen thinker Shin’ichi Hisamatsu, see Joan Stambaugh, *The Formless Self* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 55–71.

19. Readers might object that letting Tillich speak for the Christian tradition in its conversation with the East amounts to cutting corners. By choosing a theologian who is already deeply committed to divine immanence, I might be accused of escaping difficult issues that would arise had I selected a less congenial conversation partner; for instance, Karl Barth. There is some justification to that charge. But I would argue that comparison is most interesting, challenging, and productive when differences are not starkly and glaringly evident. Comparison is far more rewarding when similarities and differences have to be discovered through careful scrutiny. The subtle but important differences that divide Sankara and Tillich are provocative of thought and lead to rich conversation and even the possibility of mutual transformation.

20. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), 1:205. Hereafter, ST.

being-itself. Despite shared agreement that divinity is not finally to be understood as one entity among others, Tillich understands being-itself to be a dynamic creative power that gives rise to what it grounds (even though this “giving rise” cannot be understood to be a causal process), whereas Sankara believes that being-itself is an unchanging absolute not to be identified with the unreal but changing subject-object world. Sankara’s metaphors encourage readers to imagine Brahman as an unchanging substratum onto which the changing realities of the world are projected like images on a screen or mirages in a desert. Without the desert, there can be no mirage. In that sense, the desert gives being to the mirage but not in the sense that the desert actively creates the mirage. Brahman, like the desert, remains perfectly still. The ramifications of this disagreement are far reaching, especially for each thinker’s account of salvation (soteriology) and each thinker’s understanding about what it means to be human (theological anthropology).

The roots of this disagreement can be traced back to the primary scriptures to which each theologian is indebted. Sankara’s theology can be read as a sustained exegesis of the famous Upanishadic dictum, “I am Brahman (*aham brahmasmi*),”<sup>21</sup> whereas Tillich’s theology can be read as an extended creative meditation on St. Paul’s famous confession, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”<sup>22</sup> Comparing Sankara and Tillich amounts to a close, theologically mediated exploration of the vital sense of divine immanence conveyed in these two fundamental scriptural loci. To understand what is at stake in any conversation between Sankara and Tillich and the traditions they represent, one must appreciate the difference between an account of the ever-present Brahman and an alternative account of Spirit as one who brings about a reunion between humanity and divinity that was not already realized.

Because the writings of Sankara and Tillich are theological elaborations of the sense of divine presence disclosed in these foundational scriptures, the resulting comparison is more than just an exercise in comparative metaphysics. At stake here are not merely two conceptions of divinity, but rather the question of how divinity comes to human beings, how human beings encounter divinity. In Tillich’s theology of Spirit, God comes to human beings when they are grasped by the power of being-itself and driven beyond themselves into ecstatic union with the divine life. In Sankara’s theology Brahman is always present in human beings as the very light by which we see and know. Ecstatic union as described by Tillich is accomplished by divine

21. BUBh 1.4.10.

22. Romans 8:26.

activity whereas Sankara's nonduality is an eternal given awaiting discovery. The philosophical work of comparing Sankara's nondualism with Tillich's panentheism rests on and presupposes this prior scriptural and experiential account of two modes in which immanence is encountered.

This juxtaposition of a critical Upanishadic saying with a fundamental biblical verse demonstrates that turning to specific thinkers need not mean losing sight of broader questions regarding the nature of the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. To extend a much-abused cliché, focusing on these trees does not amount to losing sight of the forests from which they are drawn; rather, close comparison seeks by way of careful scrutiny of particulars to see how the life of these religious forests finds exemplary expression in these two giant theological redwoods.

### A Method for Comparison: On the Idea of Comparative Categories

If successful theological comparison requires sensitivity to how human beings from different religious traditions encounter ultimate reality in the pulsating course of religious life, then exploring God concepts taken in abstraction will not do. We must do more than begin comparison by recognizing that both Sankara and Tillich believe that ultimate reality is being-itself, as important as that discovery proves to be. What is required is a clear articulation of the religious problem that encounter with divinity resolves. To understand Tillich's conception of God or Sankara's notion of Brahman, we must discover how divinity, variously conceived, brings healing to the human predicament.

Do Sankara and Tillich believe that human life can be characterized as predicament? Given Advaita Vedanta's strong sense of the innate divinity of the Self, is Sankara in any position to offer an account of human predicament? And why must comparison begin with some such commonality in the first place? Just how does one compare theologians or traditions widely separated by cultures, languages, and histories?

Similarities and differences between traditions do not stand up and announce themselves; rather, they are discovered by careful investigation. To speak of differences or similarities is already to have learned something about the traditions in question, to have found some category that makes it possible to specify just how traditions differ or agree. As Jonathan Z. Smith and Robert C. Neville

have shown, comparison is a triadic relation in which similarities or differences between any two items require the specification of some third respect in light of which it is meaningful to speak of similarity and difference.<sup>23</sup> Put simply, successful comparison requires that the things being compared are compared in the same way. To say that oranges are sweet and apples are red is true, but these two true statements do not add up to an instance of successful comparison strictly speaking because the two are not being compared in the same respect, that is to say, with respect to either color or flavor held constant.

In the case of apples and oranges, it is easy to tell when a shared respect has been identified and what the shared respects for comparison might be in the first place. When it comes to comparing abstract realities such as “religions,” it is hard to tell whether Hinduism and Christianity possess shared features that make genuine comparison possible. It is not easy to tell whether comparing Hinduism and Christianity is more like comparing apples and elevators than comparing apples with oranges. That Western scholars have been in the habit of referring to both traditions as religions for a few centuries is no guarantee that we are indeed comparing like with like. In the last decade, a great many religionists have argued that the category *religion* tells us as much if not more about those who have created and continue to use the term than about the traditions to which the term supposedly refers.<sup>24</sup> What are the implications of this discovery for comparison?

Above all, it suggests that comparativists risk distorting the traditions they compare if they begin with general notions of what traditions *must* have in common by virtue of the fact that they are all religions. Using the category *religion* may distort or misrepresent the traditions under study, especially if one’s ideas about what counts as a religion and what sorts of features religions ought to have are determined largely by acquaintance with Western prototypes. To minimize the risk of imposing ideas on traditions to be compared, comparativists must treat any respect for comparing things as a hypothesis that might require modification or even abandonment. To suppose, for example, that Sankara and Tillich can be compared with respect to what each has to say about the human predicament is to theorize that both thinkers do in fact have something to say about the human predicament. This is a safe move in Tillich’s case; the term “human predicament” is drawn from his own vocabulary. In the case of Sankara, comparison begins with the hypothesis that he

23. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 51–53; Robert Cummings Neville, *Normative Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 59–84.

24. For an engaging, substantive, and comprehensive discussion of the problems posed by the category *religion*, see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 35–61.

too has something to say about life as predicament. Comparativists must be prepared to acknowledge the possibility that they are flat wrong. Careful comparison might show that Sankara has no account of the human situation as marked by predicament. If that should prove to be the case, then comparison would demonstrate not that Sankara and Tillich have different ideas about the human predicament but rather that the two thinkers are incomparable in this particular respect.

In the terms of Robert Neville's theory of comparison, the general notion of the human predicament is a "comparative category." A comparative category is a formal description of the respect in which two or more things are to be compared. Any such shared respect is, Neville argues, an abstract pattern that is further specified within traditional contexts. For example, traditions do not offer general notions of the human predicament but instead propose particular interpretations thereof. To begin comparison, the comparativist attempts carefully to extract an abstract pattern from its context by purifying it of strictly tradition-specific details so that the pattern so purified can serve as the general level of a comparative category. Tillich's notion of the human predicament can be employed for comparison only if his own very detailed ideas about the human predicament are temporarily distilled out from a more general idea of the human predicament. Once a general notion of the human predicament is formulated, the comparativist has in hand what Neville calls a "vague comparative category."

Comparison moves forward when the ideas to be compared, sin in Tillich's case, and imprisonment within samsara in Sankara's case, are reexpressed as "candidate specifications" of that vague category. The comparativist must show how sin and samsara are different ways of specifying the general idea of the human predicament. No comparison is possible unless vague comparative categories can be so specified because ideas expressed in their own terms are incomparable. Sin just is not samsara; samsara is not sin.

In this comparison, the task at hand is to understand the structure of claims about the human predicament across traditions. First, one must ask, Is it fair to use the term to characterize Sankara's thought? What does understanding the problem of reincarnation as one account of the human predicament say about how religious traditions understand the human predicament in general? Is the human predicament a problem to be solved, an illness in need of treatment, or a captivity from which one needs to be set free? These are all different ways of specifying the vague category of the human predicament. Comparativists understand the general conceptual structure of any pattern

only by appreciating how that pattern is filled out by various specifications within and across traditions. We learn about the general meaning of the category of human predicament by trying it out in comparison.

A category is vague if it leaves open the ways in which candidate specifications may relate to one another. Such specifications, therefore, may relate to each other as “contraries, contradictories, different but overlapping, different and overlapping, supplementary, complementary . . .” and so on.<sup>25</sup> To acknowledge that both Sankara and Tillich offer accounts of human life as predicament is not to say that they agree about how to characterize that predicament. Only further comparison can determine the extent and degree of similarity or difference. If specific ideas under consideration can be expressed successfully in the language of the vague category, then the vague category is applicable and adequate with respect to those ideas.

It goes without saying that the comparative categories so derived will be applicable to the tradition from which the category is drawn in the first place. The critical test of the comparative category is its applicability and adequacy for other traditions brought into comparison. Failure is apparent when the attempt to translate the specific ideas of a tradition into the language of the vague category distorts or omits much that is important about those ideas as expressed in their home contexts. If, for example, comparison shows that Sankara’s thought has to be contorted to fit into the vague category of the human predicament, then either the notion of the human predicament was not rendered suitably abstract or vague so as to include this Hindu variation on the theme, or, in the worst-case scenario, the category of the human predicament may just be inapplicable to Sankara’s nondualism. Even to have discovered that the category is inapplicable is to have learned something, but it would mean that Sankara’s ideas must then be compared in some other respect, or if no common respect for comparison can be found, his ideas might turn out to be incomparable to Tillich’s own.

Neville’s theory does more than show comparativists how to compare ideas from across religious traditions. It also suggests that finding and accumulating a list of comparative categories that work across traditions is precisely how theologians from different traditions develop a common vocabulary.<sup>26</sup> As theologians formulate, test, and revise comparative categories during comparison, they generate comparative categories applicable across traditional divides even as they abandon categories that fail to be generalizable. Vague categories that can be specified differently by various traditions are what religious thinkers need to communicate with each other successfully.

25. Neville, *Normative Cultures*, 63.

26. *Ibid.*, 59–84.

The history of comparative conversation has already yielded a number of categories that theologians and religionists use routinely. Terms like ultimate reality (rather than God or emptiness), ultimate transformation (rather than salvation or liberation), and human condition or predicament (rather than sin or samsara) are vague categories developed by earlier generations of theologians and comparativists who labored to discover terms general enough to encompass specific notions from the world's religious traditions without arbitrariness and distortion. Unfortunately, no neutral, prefabricated, ecumenical Esperanto exists for interreligious dialogue. Only comparison can grow the language needed for comparison.

### The Human Predicament as Illness: The Medical Model as a Tool for Comparison

Theological reflection is rarely driven by an abstract quest to understand ultimate reality but is instead typically concerned with the existential question of how human life ought to be lived in relation to ultimate reality. That question regularly brings with it a keen awareness of shortcoming; the world's religious traditions recognize that human beings fail to be what they truly are or become what they ought to be. That awareness seems reason enough to suppose that religious traditions will likely offer accounts of the human situation as marked by predicament—explanations for why human beings routinely fail to live as they should.

This proposal regarding a vague comparative category that at least some religious traditions will share appears to be the sort of speculative venture warned against above, a speculation that inserts into traditions what comparativists later wish to find. To resolve this possible contradiction, this line of speculation should be treated as a hypothesis to be tested against available evidence and if necessary overturned. Here, I argue only that the category of the human predicament seems applicable to both Sankara and Tillich and to the traditions that they represent.

Still more specifically, I propose that both thinkers can be read fruitfully and without distortion as subscribing to an understanding of the human predicament as illness. To test the validity of this still more specific comparative category, I propose an examination of each thinker's theology in terms of a standard fourfold medical model or therapeutic paradigm for understanding and treating the course of a disease. If Sankara and Tillich



believe that the human predicament can be understood as illness in need of a cure, we can expect that each will offer the following: (1) a diagnosis of the human predicament, (2) an etiology of the human predicament, (3) a prognosis, and finally (4) a therapy for treating and perhaps even wholly curing the disease.

One reason for believing that the medical model is a useful tool for engaging South Asian traditions is the prominence of the medical model first in Buddhist traditions and then subsequently in other traditions such as Advaita Vedanta. It is a well-known feature of Buddhism that the Four Noble Truths can readily be mapped onto a medical model: (1) All is suffering (diagnosis); (2) Suffering has a cause, namely craving (etiology); (3) Suffering can be brought to cessation (prognosis); (4) The eightfold path is way to bring an end to suffering (therapy). Indologists have argued for some time that the Buddha is not likely to have borrowed this fourfold scheme from some then-extant tradition of medical thinking; there simply is no textual evidence to suggest that this fourfold categorization was present in the medical literature of the Buddha's time. The reigning scholarly hypothesis is that other Indic religious traditions and the Indian medical tradition itself might have borrowed what we now call the "medical model" from the Buddha.<sup>27</sup> Regardless of the trajectory of influence, it does no violence to read the Four Noble Truths in the terms of the medical model. That early Buddhist literature regularly referred to the Buddha as a physician suggests that this analogy was not unwittingly foisted onto Buddhist tradition by nonindigenous sources.

The medical model is a promising tool for comparative religion more generally because it allows for discriminating comparison across traditions. With the fourfold categorical scheme in hand, comparativists can ask a wide range of subtle questions. To what extent and in what way do Sankara and Tillich agree in their diagnoses of the human predicament? In what ways do they disagree? Do they agree on matters of diagnosis but disagree on the question of etiology? If they disagree on etiology, will this disagreement lead to sharply differing prognoses for human well-being? And what of therapy? What are the ramifications of differing diagnoses or etiologies for each thinker's understanding of religious therapy? Are they even treating the same spiritual ailment? These questions transcend in precision and sophistication the sorts of questions customarily posed in theology of religions. It is not that the standard queries of theology of religions become obsolete or irrelevant when new ones are posed. It still makes sense to ask whether persons from other religions are saved, or whether there are in fact many salvations, as theologian S. Mark

27. Paul Demiéville, *Buddhism and Healing: Demiéville's Article "Byo" from Hobogirin* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 2.

Heim has argued.<sup>28</sup> Questions derived from the medical model generate data theologians need to answer the sweeping questions posed by theology of religions. Without knowing whether the religions under consideration have identified and diagnosed the same disease, without knowing precisely what each thinker takes to be the root cause of the illness at hand, it is impossible to know whether there are many salvations or just differing etiologies and therapies for the same ailment.

These new interrogations promise rich and highly textured accounts of similarity and difference, provided of course that the categories presupposed by the questions are applicable to Sankara's Advaita and Tillich's Christianity. Comparativists are obligated not to be carried away by their fondness for any particular set of comparative categories, no matter how compelling they seem at first to be. The possibility that the categories driving comparison may require large-scale revision or perhaps even rejection necessarily haunts the work of sober-minded comparativists.

### Disputed Theological Questions: What Is at Stake in the Conversation?

The conversation between Sankara and Tillich will prompt a number of religiously exigent questions, including the following: Can human beings find their way to ultimate reality, or are we rather found by it? Do we meet divinity as we might a stranger whom we have never before met, or is meeting divinity always a matter of recognition, or perhaps even a matter of discovering a treasure hidden within? Comparative theology becomes genuinely constructive when it proceeds to assess competing answers that religious traditions provide to questions such as these.

Of the questions posed above, only the second is likely to generate ready and substantive agreement. Both Sankara and Tillich believe that meeting divinity is always a matter of recognition. Divinity is not a stranger met by chance. Advaitins would applaud Tillich's thesis that "man discovers *himself* when he discovers God; he discovers something that is identical with himself although it transcends him infinitely, something from which he is estranged, but from which he never was and never can be separated."<sup>29</sup> Whether Sankara would agree with the statement in toto depends on a precise analysis of what

28. S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995).

29. Paul Tillich, "The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion," in *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 10. Hereafter, TOC.

Tillich means by estrangement and transcendence. The conversation between Sankara and Tillich hinges not only on questions about the nature of divinity but also on theological anthropology.

To make headway on both these fronts, inquiry must begin with an appreciation for what Tillich calls “the basic intention of my doctrine of God,” namely his desire to go beyond naturalism and supernaturalism (ST 2:5).<sup>30</sup> According to Tillich, any conception of divinity that imagines God to be a supernatural being or deity who can and does regularly intervene from without into natural networks of causation is supernaturalistic. Such supernaturalism is problematic for relatively straightforward reasons, most especially because it is not only utterly incompatible with science but also because it puts God in the position of regularly disrupting the “inviolability of the created structures of the finite” (ST 2:6).

What Tillich finds most problematic about supernaturalist theologies is their dependence on dualism. A dualistic conception of God is problematic for subtle but weighty philosophical reasons; conceiving of God as a being who stands over against the world—and that is what makes this position dualistic—is problematic because it “transforms the infinity of God into a finiteness which is merely an extension of the categories of finitude” (*ibid.*). Gone is a properly infinite God. What remains is a deity subject to the categories of space, time, causality, and substance. The God of dualism is an entity who resides in heaven, acts in time, causally interacts with other beings, and is one substance among others. Such a God is just one item in a universe that proves to be more encompassing than God is. Precisely this desire to avoid so unworthy a conception of God drives Tillich to insist that God is better regarded as the creative ground of being rather than as a supernatural deity. Tillich quite rightly believes that supernaturalistic theologies err by imagining God to be more akin to the many deities of Greek myth than to the God of Christian faith.

Tillich’s rigorous and adamant rejection of dualism marks him as a Christian thinker whose doctrine of God will resonate strongly with Hindu nondualism. And yet the antidualistic character of Tillich’s theology remains largely underappreciated. Perhaps only comparativists are best able to appreciate the promise of Tillich’s antidualism for dialogue with Eastern religious traditions.

If supernaturalistic dualism is one temptation that Tillich seeks to avoid, the other is naturalism. For Tillich, a theological position is naturalistic to

30. Tillich uses the terms “supernatural” and its variations rather than the term “supernatural.” For the sake of consistency, I have adopted Tillich’s usage throughout.

the extent that it simply “identifies God with the universe, with its essence or with special powers within it” (ibid.). Naturalism, for Tillich, may be the lesser of two evils, but it is problematic nevertheless because it “denies the infinite distance between the whole of finite things and their infinite ground, with the consequence that the term ‘God’ becomes interchangeable with the term ‘universe’ and therefore semantically superfluous” (ST 2:7).

The presence in Tillich’s discourse of the term *distance* brings into sharp relief the central question of divine immanence, the question that above all haunts Hindu-Christian dialogue. In what sense can the God who is the ground of being be “distant” from the creatures that God grounds? Does Tillich reinstate dualism by appealing to the notion of “distance”? Can any theology that steadfastly dismisses dualism, whether Hindu or Christian, cogently maintain that there is a distance between divinity and the world? And if such distance can be posited, does it not undercut the Advaita affirmation that the true self just is Brahman?

For the purposes of inaugurating the conversation between Sankara and Tillich, it suffices to note that distance has two distinct senses in Tillich’s theology. First, Tillich feels compelled to posit a distance between God and creatures for phenomenological reasons. In any encounter with the holy, human beings experience the holy as that which exceeds them utterly. Here the word *distance* is a figure for the sheer depth and awe-inspiring power of the God who is encountered as holy (ibid.).

But distance also bears another meaning, a meaning primarily related not to what presents itself from the side of divinity in the human-divine encounter, but rather from the side of humanity. Distance in this second sense bespeaks human estrangement from the divine life. The term functions to name “the mutual freedom” of God and creature. Distance is a figure for freedom, the freedom of the creature to stand over against God and the freedom of God to stand for the creature who stands against God. Distance and freedom are not terms that suggest that God is elsewhere or that creature is ever at an ontic remove from God. To be is to be sustained in being by the God who is being-itself. In that sense, God is always radically present to the creature. But creaturely freedom itself is distance from God, or put otherwise, creaturely freedom requires distance even if that distance cannot be conceived in traditional supranaturalistic terms.

In sum, at the very heart of Tillich’s system is the idea that human freedom requires that creatures must be substantially independent over against the creator—independent despite the fact that human beings have no being apart from God. When human beings exercise their freedom in separation from God,

the consequences of separation lead ultimately to estrangement, characterized by unbelief, hubris, and concupiscence, three terms that together describe Tillich's understanding of the human predicament. In this process, separated creatures make themselves centers of their own lives and then attempt to draw everything else into that center.

Because Tillich believes that freedom requires creatures to ex-ist, to stand out of the divine ground, his theological vision gives rise to a somber sense of life as marked by deep ambiguity. Because creaturely life is rooted in but also separated from the divine life, it is never secure. The ambiguities that characterize the human predicament are interrupted only by episodic ecstatic manifestations of unambiguous life. Within Tillich's scheme, it is never possible to envision a robust hope for human well-being. Healing is always fleeting, and the prognosis for the human predicament is guarded at best. Although human life is punctuated by healing events of divine-human reunion, life cannot be characterized as a sustained and incremental movement into healing. Despite some emphasis on sanctification, Tillich rejects the possibility of a settled divine-human reunion. Tillich remains in this respect a deeply Lutheran theologian, a theologian of *simul justus et peccator*.

Sankara, on the other hand, presents an understanding of nonduality in which the human being is *never* other than the Absolute, namely Brahman as being-itself. Nevertheless, he also presents an account of human predicament as marked by ignorance, desire, and aversion. Because the true Self is Brahman, however, Sankara affirms the possibility of liberation while living (*jivanmukti*). In terms of the medical model, Sankara offers a far more optimistic prognosis for the human predicament than does Tillich. Because human beings are never really at a remove from divinity, because the true Self is just Brahman, divine immanence occasions radical hope for sanctification.

What makes Sankara's work intriguing—albeit puzzling for Christian theologians—is his ability to generate a sharply negative account of the human predicament within the framework of nondualism. Even though Sankara believes that human beings are ultimately nothing other than Brahman, he recognizes that we suffer acutely and cause others to do so as well. If it is possible to affirm that human beings belong to divinity without denying or minimizing the gravity of the human predicament, then Christian theologians who seek to deepen and extend Tillich's theological legacy may legitimately wonder whether a doctrine of substantial separation is necessary to generate an account of freedom and predicament. Might it be possible to frame a nondualistic Christian theology in which a stronger account of human possibilities (such as those offered by Sankara) is combined with a realistic assessment

of the depth of estrangement? Is it possible to remove the element of distance that Tillich felt compelled to preserve and thereby mitigate the note of inevitable tragedy that hangs over the whole of Tillich's theology?

### Is a Christian Nondualism Possible?

Why might a nondualistic Christian theology be desirable? Ultimately, the quest to imagine the greatest possible intimacy between humanity and divinity is driven by soteriological motivations. At the heart of Christian *mythos* and life is the conviction that human beings are brought to healing and wholeness not merely by a juridical proclamation of divine forgiveness *ad extra*; rather, healing takes place when human beings are taken *into* the divine life. Incarnation itself teaches that human wholeness rests radically on divine immanence.

But does not the very narrative of incarnation and the aspiration for *becoming* divine rather than simply *being* divine suggest the primacy of a distance that is only subsequently bridged by divine initiative? Does not God traverse a distance that human beings cannot? A partial response to these probing, even decisive, questions is to be found in Tillich's rejection of supranaturalism. Even though Tillich retains metaphors of distance and ultimately inscribes these into his ontology, his antidualistic rejection of supranaturalism goes a long way toward disrupting naïve accounts that depict God as a supranatural deity who inhabits another world and only subsequently enters into the human world by supranatural means in a singular, exceptional, and once-for-all moment of radical immanence. Whatever distance might mean, it cannot mean the distance that separates heaven from earth. "God is neither alongside things nor even 'above' them; he is nearer to them than they are to themselves. He is their creative ground, here and now, always and everywhere" (*ibid.*)

But conversation with Hindu nondualism challenges Christian theologians to carry the antidualistic impulses found in Tillich further. Sankara asks Christian readers to consider an absolute divine presence that goes so far as to make possible an affirmation of nonduality between humanity and divinity. But can a Christian imagination affirm the Upanishadic Great Saying, "I am Brahman," or does that affirmation mark an impermissible transgression by birthing an identity between humanity and divinity that ultimately annihilates intimacy by removing the distance that makes intimacy possible? Are Christians—even those holding to a Tillichian account of God as being-itself—compelled to posit a distance that can be bridged in ecstatic union but never erased or annulled?

These are among the most demanding questions that Christian interlocutors will face when in dialogue with Sankara's nondualism.

What about Hindu nondualists of Sankara's sort? How might they be challenged by conversation with a Tillichian form of Christianity? Ultimately that is a question for Hindu conversation partners. Nonetheless, I suggest that conversation with a Tillichian expression of Christian faith can raise pertinent questions for nondualist Hindu theologians. An element that might need reconsideration in Sankara's theological vision is his fundamental axiom that ultimate reality, Brahman, is unchanging and that only that which is beyond change is ultimately real. The result of maintaining this axiom is the corollary that the experienced world of change must be characterized as unreal, resulting in what Lance Nelson has called the "dualism of nondualism." Sankara cannot avoid positing a sharp duality between an unreal but experienced world flux and a real and unchanging Brahman.<sup>31</sup> Dualism is avoided technically—because only Brahman is really real—but remains practically. Here, Tillich's dynamic vision, which denies that ultimate reality is an unchanging Absolute that stands behind and apart from the realm of change, suggests the possibility of a different kind of immanence than that offered by Sankara, an immanence that also might be called nondual.

Tillich believed that he had to back off from a thoroughgoing nondualism for a host of reasons but most especially because he believed that the very possibility of human freedom requires substantial creaturely independence. But is Tillich right? Does freedom require substantial separation from the divine life? Or does the notion that freedom requires separation depend on a lingering substantialism in Tillich's thought? Can we imagine freedom without separation? Can we imagine that creaturely freedom does not require ontological independence, a move away from the primordial father? If so, then it might indeed be possible to imagine that Tillich's transitory dualism will give way to a full-fledged Christian nondualism.

### Comparative Theology as Interfaith Dialogue in Search of Mutual Transformation

Such searching questions suggest that genuine conversation between traditions will go beyond taking note of similarities and differences. Ultimately, if dialogue is marked by vulnerability to truth, it will lead to what John B. Cobb

31. Lance E. Nelson, "The Dualism of Nondualism: Advaita Vedanta and the Irrelevance of Nature," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson, 61–88 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

has called “mutual transformation.” In the course of dialogue between traditions, Cobb—speaking from extensive experience—testifies that conversation partners will encounter ideas in the other tradition that seem plausible, compelling, and even true and yet unavailable within one’s home tradition. The notion of nonduality is a case in point. When faced with such an eventuality, Cobb argues that theologians will rarely find that such new knowledge can simply be added into a storehouse of past convictions. Instead, dialogue will demand substantive reformulation of past convictions so that new knowledge can be meaningfully integrated with what one had heretofore believed. Cobb is convinced that this movement of “creative transformation” will make an impact on all traditions involved; reformulation must take place on every side if richer and more comprehensive visions of reality are to emerge. As Cobb puts it, “The task is to refine and hone what one has taken to be important to one’s own faith and similarly to refine and hone the insight one is learning from others. The goal is to find how the truth in both coheres.”<sup>32</sup> The quest for such coherence generates mutual transformation.

Comparative theology, so envisioned, is explicitly interreligious and dialogical.<sup>33</sup> Even if the comparative theologian does her work isolated in the study, the fruits of such research presuppose and are tested by conversation in which theologians from more than one tradition engage in collaboration and mutual criticism. Metaphors of conversation are especially valuable because they serve to alert all involved that the results of comparative theology cannot be anticipated in advance. The unfolding and processive nature of comparative theology is well captured in Gordon Kaufman’s argument for a dialogical model of truth. Kaufman maintains that truth should be “perceived as a process of becoming, a reality that emerges (quite unexpectedly) in the course of conversation. . . . [I]nstead of taking truth to be a property of particular words or propositions or texts . . . it is identified as a living reality that emerges within and is a function of ongoing, living conversation among a number of different voices.”<sup>34</sup>

Kaufman’s conception of truth is appealing for comparative theology because it gives to truth an event-like character. It shows just how and why comparative theology does more than rehabilitate the wisdom of the past; it

32. John B. Cobb, “Dialogue,” in *Death or Dialogue? From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, ed. Leonard Swidler, John B. Cobb, Paul F. Knitter, and Monika Helwig (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 7.

33. Francis Clooney also advocates a conception of theology as interreligious, comparative, dialogical, and confessional. See *Hindu God, Christian God*, 7–12.

34. Gordon D. Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 199–200.



must perforce remain open to transforming insights that can emerge only in and through “a process of free and open conversation on the most profound religious issues—a conversation intended to continue for years, even generations.”<sup>35</sup> Kaufman, like Cobb, quite rightly hopes that “deeper religious truth than that presently known in any of our traditions will in due course emerge.”<sup>36</sup> This conversation between Sankara and Tillich is inaugurated with the hope of discovering such deeper truth.

### A Concluding Note on the Term *Immanence*

As the title of this book indicates, the idea of immanence stands at the heart of this project. This term is a commonplace in Christian theology. But readers must bear in mind that the meaning of the received vocabulary is likely to undergo significant shifts when terms are inscribed within a nondualistic or antidualistic framework. Tillich is rather clear that the meaning of transcendence must be reconceived if one rejects the notion that God is a being who inhabits a special spatio-temporal realm removed from our own. The God in whom all beings always already participate and from whom we are never separated is not transcendent if, by transcendence, one means to refer to the distance that separates two beings one from another. Nonetheless, Tillich does not mean to give up on transcendence altogether and opts instead to redefine the term so that the term’s supranaturalistic meanings are purged.

The matter becomes still more intricate in the case of Sankara’s nondualism. If the true Self just is Brahman, what might it mean to speak of either immanence or transcendence? In what sense, if any, is Brahman transcendent? What would Brahman transcend? The term *immanence* might well be equally problematic. If the term is meant to refer to how one reality, namely divinity, draws near to another—the world or humanity for example—then it hardly seems useable within a nondualistic theology. Identity seems to trump immanence and render the question of transcendence moot. Only further comparison can determine whether traditional Christian vocabulary for thinking divinity’s relationship to the world might be viable in antidualistic theological traditions.

Yet another problem with the conventional terms *transcendence* and *immanence* is that much contemporary theological discourse places them in antago-

35. *Ibid.*, 201.

36. *Ibid.*

nistic relationship. God's transcendence always comes at the expense of God's immanence and divine immanence only at the expense of transcendence. William Placher, borrowing Kathryn Tanner's terminology, calls this a "contrastive" account of transcendence. Placher recognizes that a contrastive account inevitably "makes divine transcendence and involvement in the world into a zero-sum game."<sup>37</sup> Placher shrewdly traces contrastive accounts of transcendence back to the fundamental error of taking God to be one being among others. He observes, "If God were one of the things in the world—as implied by the contrastive model of transcendence—then it would be natural to ask where God is located—in the world or outside it?"<sup>38</sup> And, quite naturally, either answer to the question militates against the other.

Both Tillich and Sankara reject this dualistic and reified conception of divinity. If meaningful discourse about transcendence and immanence is possible within a nondualistic theological framework, such talk will surely reject contrastive accounts altogether. Nondualistic theologies will likely upset some currently entrenched linguistic and theological habits. Fortunately, Placher traces these habits to the seventeenth century and not to Christian antiquity. Resorting to the language of transcendence and immanence without asking what meaning these terms acquire when they are inscribed within new theological and metaphysical frameworks can only lead to confusion. Given these dangers, readers must bear in mind that this book asks just precisely what transcendence and immanence might mean within a nondualistic framework. Consider, for example, the following: It may be possible to imagine that God is so near to me as to constitute my very being and yet for God to remain wholly beyond my ken, wholly beyond any conceptual apparatus by which I might seek to secure knowledge of the God. In such an unknowing knowledge of an immanent but nonetheless superabundant divine, East and West might find consensus. This book is a pilgrimage in search for just such a consensus.

37. See William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 111.

38. *Ibid.*, 112.