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## The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions

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**Abstract:** This paper disputes that a strong contrast can be drawn between the Old Comparative Theology and the New Comparative Theology, looking particularly at the arguments of Hugh Nicholson as well as drawing on Francis Clooney. It disputes a simplistic and monolithic dismissal of the Old Comparative Theology as guilty of ‘Orientalism’, and seeks to show that in figures like Rowland Williams, as well as F. D. Maurice that the discipline was important in breaking down boundaries between traditions. Building on this, an argument is made that the New Comparative Theology should be seen as part of a lineage of progression and understanding that links it with the Old Comparative Theology and the Theology of Religions, and that any attempt to see these as different, or contrasting, discourses is based upon a distorted or partial historical understanding. In this the work of Tomoko Masuzawa is also assessed, and issues surrounding the terms ‘religion’ and ‘world religion’ are discussed. It is also suggested that the weight of history may be a factor as to why the New Comparative Theology came to prominence in the USA rather than in Europe, or at least the UK.

**Keywords:** comparative theology; Orientalism; Frederick Clooney; Hugh Nicholson; Frederick Denison Maurice; Rowland Williams; religion; Tomoko Masuzawa; theology of religion

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## Introduction

In her much commented on work *The Invention of World Religions*, Tomoko Masuzawa discusses the role of Comparative Theology in the creation of the category ‘religion’, and its concomitant term ‘world religions’ [1]. For her, Comparative Theology is a discipline complicit in the spread of a Christian theological worldview and ideology into the, apparently, neutral and pluralistic discourse of contemporary Religious Studies ([1], pp. 72–146, 259–328). Masuzawa’s work is heavily utilized by Hugh Nicholson in drawing a contrast between the Old Comparative Theology (OCT) and the New Comparative Theology (NCT). We will examine the changing face of Comparative Theology, looking at the distinction drawn between the OCT and the NCT, where some advocates of the NCT have even suggested that we should see them as quite distinct enterprises. I will begin by outlining this argument, focusing upon the work of Nicholson and Francis Clooney, suggesting that a more nuanced history of the development of Christian encounter with the religious Other is needed. (At least in places, Nicholson and Clooney admit this heritage, as such my aim will not be simply to show these connections, rather I will take issue with the more theoretical contention that the OCT engaged in one type of discourse and the NCT another type of discourse that permits a radical distinction to be drawn). This will lead us to engage Masuzawa and, indirectly, other critics of ‘religion’; her work has parallels with critiques made by such scholars as Timothy Fitzgerald, Talal Asad, and Russell McCutcheon amongst others [2–5], whose work is also employed by Nicholson ([6], pp. 26, 67–8, 87). Here, I will argue that the heritage shared by the OCT and the NCT is not inherently implicated within an Orientalist discourse as Nicholson and Masuzawa imply, rather, it may represent a process of increasing understanding in relation to religious diversity. (I employ the term ‘Orientalism’ herein in the post-Saidian sense (for a brief description see [1], pp. 20–1), however, in a way that is not uncritical). We will also consider the Theology of Religions (ToR), which is often drawn into the debate on what distinguishes the NCT from the OCT.

## The NCT and Its Discourse on the OCT and the ToR

Nicholson has argued that the NCT exists today largely without reference to its nineteenth (and, indeed, we may also add early twentieth) century forbear ([7], p. 612). Yet, elsewhere he has admitted a continuity, suggesting it ‘is not nearly as unprecedented as many of its exponents tend to assume’ ([6], p. 22). Nevertheless, he still maintains that a sharp distinction remains between the OCT and the NCT, so while he uses Rudolf Otto’s classic work as a model for his own, he nevertheless seeks to show that his own NCT has moved beyond the ‘Orientalism’ that characterizes Otto’s work ([6], p. 105). As such when comparisons are made, it tends to be on the basis of distinguishing the new venture very sharply from the old, even referring to it as the ‘antithesis’ of the former ([7], p. 620). Indeed, in reviewing some older attempts at Comparative Theology in his general survey of the field, Clooney states that, ‘I have included these examples to signal the history of comparative theology and to remind us of dangers to which it is liable’ ([8], p. 34). A similar point is made by Nicholson who warns us that: ‘By ignoring that history, contemporary theologians, particularly those who deal with interreligious issues, risk repeating some of the same mistakes’ ([7], p. 610). Elsewhere, Clooney also highlights a distinction between the NCT and the OCT [9]. (We should note, though, that the term NCT is not one

Clooney employs in this respect, and it is specifically Nicholson's term, nevertheless, the same sense of distance between the NCT and the OCT can, arguably, be detected in both).

In both Clooney and Nicholson we therefore see repeated the same message, that the OCT was a failed and flawed venture, and one which can clearly be distinguished from the NCT, although the latter, if unaware of these failings, may too become subject to such flaws. It should be noted, moreover, that while Clooney and Nicholson concede a lineage, both stress them as distinct, if not antithetical, approaches; Nicholson in particular arguing that a step-change or boundary breakage stops the OCT flowing naturally into the NCT [6]. This sense of the NCT as a different type of venture is also expressed in a contrast to the ToR. Both Clooney and James Fredericks explicitly draw a contrast between the work of the NCT and the ToR ([10], pp. 666–8; [11], p. 8). The latter is understood to be creating a stance on other religions based upon a typological paradigm, notably one based upon Race's classic Exclusivism-Inclusivism-Pluralism typology [12]; often seen today in the fourfold version of Exclusivisms-Inclusivisms-Pluralisms-Particularities ([13], pp. 17–30). Nicholson, moreover, draws a linkage from the OCT to the ToR, which he then contrasts with the NCT [7]. As such, it is suggested that the ToR shares in the same failings as the OCT and is, essentially, a failed and somewhat illegitimate venture (Fredericks, certainly, does not go this far and his suggestion for a moratorium on the ToR seems based upon its presumptuousness rather than its inherent failings ([14], p. 8).

However, the clear break hypothesis which suggests that parallels between the venture of the NCT and the OCT (and the ToR) are less significant than the discontinuities can be questioned. Therefore, I will outline the way that the OCT and the ToR is characterized by the writings of proponents of the NCT, and offer a discussion around this. In particular, I will focus upon the work of Nicholson who has, probably, most systematically discussed this distinction. It may be noted that, in his arguments here, Nicholson is not directly doing Comparative Theology, but working on the justification of the NCT in the light of critiques of the OCT, although this feeds into how he sets out his own Comparative Theology (*i.e.*, in its contrast with Otto).

### *Aspects of the OCT*

Nicholson follows the lead of Masuzawa in selecting two particular figures as representative of the OCT ([1], pp. 75–9; [7], p. 612). These two selected paradigmatic examples of the OCT, one American and one British, are each exemplified by a particular text: James Freeman Clarke *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871); and, F. D. Maurice's *Religions of the World and their Relations with Christianity* (1847) [14,15]. Both Freeman and Maurice were noted theologians, of a liberal inclination, in their own day, and their books enjoyed great popularity as accessible works discussing other religions from a Christian standpoint. Maurice's work had originally been delivered as a series of public lectures, while Clarke's work was an extension of articles originally delivered in the popular magazine *Atlantic Monthly* in 1868. In brief, both books argued that non-Christian religions mediated some form of worthy spiritual values to their devotees, but were, nevertheless, entirely eclipsed by Christianity. While these are just two examples, it is, perhaps, notable that here this is raised as a question in the UK before the US, which is perhaps indicative of the contemporary colonial interests of Britain, however, I make this here as a fairly speculative point.

Echoing Masuzawa's well-placed critique ([1], p. 79) Nicholson takes as a starting point the presupposition of Christian superiority found in both these writers, who work from a position that clearly seeks to show the advantages of their own tradition over those of others ([7], pp. 611–3). Indeed, in many ways it must be said that such a venture must be contrasted with the exponents of the NCT, figures like Clooney, Fredericks and Keith Ward, who do not set out in their work to show the advantages of the Christian tradition, but rather to lay each tradition side by side for the better to get an understanding of each, that the light shone in the venture may be that which illumines, rather than believing that there is any necessity to show that one's own position is, per se, better than the other [8,11,16]. In this sense, we do see a clear break between the OCT and the NCT. However, as I will argue this is part of an organic development from the OCT to the NCT, with the ToR playing a key part.

Nicholson sees the OCT as implicated in what he suggests is a typical liberal theological/theoretical approach: generalizing about religion ([7], p. 619). That is to say, religion was understood in fairly monochrome terms as something which approximated to the liberal theological expectations of the writers themselves and was assumed always to be fairly similar with linked characteristics ([17], p. 230). Commentating on such monolithic interpretations, John Thatamanil, utilizing the work of Paulo Gonçalves, suggests that generating homogeneity 'serves the interests of those who aspire to gain control over a tradition' ([18], p. 248).

Also, the OCT is underlain by a claim that the Christian religion alone is supreme, which Nicholson, following Masuzawa, argues is based on the belief that this judgment is the outcome of an objective comparison ([7], p. 612). As such, we may say, the theological prejudice of the writers becomes a factor in the comparative exercise itself. Indeed, Nicholson tells us, 'the older comparative theology, as we have seen, epitomizes the kind of theological hegemonism that one finds in the theology of religions' ([7], p. 620).

### *The NCT and the ToR*

Another aspect of Nicholson's critique is that the ToR is simply a continuation of the liberal theological agenda found in the OCT, and from which the NCT can also be distinguished ([7], p. 621–2). His argument is that what Knitter calls an acceptance model differentiates it from a fulfilment model of inclusivism ([7], p. 623). However, this seems unconvincing for several reasons. Firstly, Knitter's acceptance model is very broad and encompasses a great variety of approaches [19], which includes what is often termed a particularist approach, which is far from the respectful recognition of religious difference which Nicholson uses to classify the NCT ([13], pp. 194–6; [20], pp. 127–30). Second, when Clooney defines himself as an inclusivist it is not clear he does so ([21], p. 66), in the way Nicholson suggests which separates itself from pluralist stances as a way that transcends it ([7], pp. 619–20), but rather presumably sees himself in line with older inclusivist lines of thought embedded in the thinking of Vatican II and figures like Karl Rahner (on such ideas, see [22]). Meanwhile, as has been argued, it is not clear that the NCT does not indeed play the same game as the ToR does, as it must make prejudgments about other religions ([13], pp. 52–5; [23], pp. 90–1, 96–104). That is to say, a judgment about the possibility of learning from the religious Other is made before one can even engage in Comparative Theology, as such the suggestion that it does not have the kind of

pre-judgments and commitments of the ToR seems naïve or problematic. In part, what I am suggesting here is that it is by no means clear that the NCT occupies some privileged position which respects the religious Other, and which can be contrasted with other positions that do not; indeed, such an argument is made by Kristin Kiblinger [24]. Despite the compelling critiques, many proponents of the NCT understand their discipline as different and somehow ‘beyond’ what the ToR does.

### *The Political and the Religious Other*

A key part of Nicholson’s argument is that the liberal interpretation of religion, whether in the OCT or in the pluralist standpoint in the ToR effaces the political from view ([6], pp. 49ff). In each case, he argues, they see the religious as occupying a sublime position which in effect removes it from other discourses, where it might be seen as a *sui generis* concept. In contrast, he suggests, it is also thereby contrasted with a ‘political’ form of theology which it sees itself defined over and against. These are, respectively, an older and antagonistic apologetic or missionary theology, and an exclusivist or inclusivist approach in the ToR which is seen as harking back to a traditional sense of what he terms ‘Christian Absolutism’ ([25], p. 54). With regards to the NCT, Nicholson suggests that Fredericks, at least, tries to avoid this, however, he sees some aspects of the NCT as potentially involved in ‘the liberal theological project of “depoliticizing” religion and theology’ ([25], p. 55). Here, the NCT can be portrayed in terms of ‘oppositional identity’ whereby it operates against the ToR paradigms as a way of encountering the religious Other ([7], p. 621; [25], p. 55). However, the NCT, he argues, is capable of moving beyond this to a new position no longer be trapped in the denial of the political ([6], pp. 94ff). Despite the significance of this aspect for Nicholson’s work our focus is not primarily upon his analysis and so having mentioned this as one part of his distinction we will not build further upon it here.

### *Improvements in the NCT*

Having set out the key aspects of the way the OCT and the ToR are critiqued, we will turn to the positive suggestions for why the NCT goes beyond them. Nicholson gives different lists as to what he sees as the improvements between the NCT and the OCT which are synthesized here:

First, he suggests the NCT does not generalize about other religions, which he suggests is typical of both the OCT and the ToR. In particular he cites Clooney’s work as part of its ‘resistance to generalization’ ([25], p. 58). That is, it deals with the particular and local, rather than making meta-statements about all aspects of specific religions.

Second, it also resists any claims to its own supremacy in a way that denies the truth of different religions. For Nicholson, this is part of its acceptance model of inclusivism, and he cites Kristin Kiblinger as a case in point ([25], p. 57). It should be noted, though, that contra Clooney, Fredericks and Nicholson who see the ToR and the NCT as different realms of activity, Kiblinger actually suggests, as noted above, that any form of Comparative Theology actually requires the ToR paradigms as a base mark [24]. Moreover, her notion of the ‘new’ inclusivism differs somewhat from Nicholson, while she suggests that both an improved form of inclusivism or pluralism could found a NCT approach ([24], p. 42). If Kiblinger is right, and her arguments certainly seem more cogent than the

counter arguments, this destabilizes aspects, at the very least, of Nicholson's argument; this we will return to below.

Third, he also suggests that the NCT combines interreligious reflection and the practice of dialogue as parts of one principle ([25], p. 58). As such, instead of distinguishing the act of Christian thinking about the religious other from actually engaging with the religious Other, which he believes happens in the ToR, while the latter did not generally occur within the OCT, he believes the two are held as correlating poles in the NCT.

Finally, he suggests that whereas the OCT stood unaware of its own partisanship which informed its supposedly neutral and scientific judgments on other religions, the NCT openly acknowledges 'its own normative commitments and interests' ([25], p. 59). As such, instead of attempting to attain a phenomenological style of *epoche* and academic objectivity, the involvement of its practitioners as Christian theologians forms part of the engagement that takes place and so the bias is open. However, at the same time, instead of attempting to impose a Christian reading of the other religion, the NCT seeks to understand the religious Other as much as possible in its own terms, such that, to use Clooney's words, 'fresh theological insights' ([8], p. 10) are gained.

### **Assessing Discourse on the OCT and the NCT**

Having seen the way that the NCT creates its discourse about its relationship to other disciplines, we will now turn to assessing whether this is a legitimate way to portray the arguments. Indeed, Nicholson at one place concedes that the distinction, here speaking about the ToR and the NCT, may be less, with the former 'a little less rigid and dogmatic', and the latter 'a little less flexible and open' than the rhetoric suggests ([25], p. 46–7). Indeed, I would suggest that in many cases the distinction is much more open than the claims we have seen made, and that the OCT can be seen as, in many ways, less prone to the kind of charges made against it.

I will extend my argument in three main parts: first, suggesting that the movement from the OCT and fulfilment theology to pluralism (in the ToR) to the NCT was not a series of jumps as Nicholson argues ([7], pp. 616–24), but represents a more continuous progression although one that is far more problematic and contoured than any kind of linear development; second, demonstrating that the portrayal of the OCT given by proponents of the NCT, and Masuzawa, is far too monolithic and generalizing and fails to take into account the particular writers and their contexts; and, third, developing out of our first point, I will suggest that the NCT exists in a history of engagement that encompasses the OCT and the ToR rather than being part of a story of different viewpoints. This will lead us on to some further points of analysis developing and extending the issues.

First, I would like to take issue with Nicholson's evolutionary model for the development of the NCT. This suggests that the development should not be seen as fairly linear, but marked instead by a series of step-changes or jumps ([7], pp. 616–24). In this way he suggests that the move from Fulfilment Theology to pluralism in the ToR to the NCT shows marked changes in each step. Tracing the whole of this history in the space within this article would be impossible, as such I will focus upon Fulfilment Theology and pluralism within the ToR to show some of the complications and nuances within it. Firstly, while sometimes referred to as a 'school of thought' Fulfilment Theology was a complex set of ideologies which were often quite contradictory or antagonistic. For instance, two

representatives of mid to late nineteenth century Fulfilment Theology, Friedrich Max Müller and Monier Monier-Williams, both contemporaneous professors at Oxford, were poles apart theologically. The former's Fulfilment Theology being based upon what can be termed a 'liberal' Logos theology that saw religions developing in response to divine inspiration ([26], pp. 63–8). By contrast the latter's Fulfilment Theology was based in a 'conservative' strain ([26], pp. 58–63), he belonged to a notable evangelical family and tradition [27], that interpreted things from a pattern of decay from an original revelation ([26], p. 60). We see then that different strands underlie Fulfilment Theology itself (see [28], pp. 26–43). For a further example we can point to its best known proponent, John Nicol Farquhar, whose concept of fulfilment essentially meant the 'death' of Hindu ideas as they are replaced by Christian conceptions, as Hindu ideas 'died' to become improved Christian ones ([28], pp. 334–40; [29]). By way of contrast, his near contemporary Bernard Lucas advocated a form of Fulfilment Theology that moved into the development of a Christian Vedanta, where the Hindu scriptures are seen as a suitable replacement for the Old Testament in the Indian context ([28], pp. 383–7). As such, a far more positive appreciation of Hindu thought and what it could add spiritually could be seen. Therefore, while, on the one hand a 'jump' may be envisaged between the Fulfilment Theologies of figures like Monier-Williams and Farquhar to a pluralist position in the ToR, the often Logos inspired Fulfilment Theologies of figures like Müller and Rowland Williams (who we discuss more below) move by degrees into the theological position of figures like Lucas and the well known Charles Freer Andrews, whose Logos theology inspired him to give up any direct evangelization to live alongside the Hindu ([28], pp. 387–9). Yet, to see the two styles of Fulfilment Theology in opposition is problematic because we find many points of contact between those we have discussed ([26], p. 23). For instance, we discover the following of Farquhar and Andrews: 'in renouncing direct missionary work, Farquhar felt Andrews to be "grievously mistaken," but "Farquhar continued to be supportive of Andrews throughout the most troubled years, continuing to publish articles by him in *Young Men of India*"' ([28], p. 389; citing [30], p. 136), suggesting he did not see his position as antagonistic even if mistaken. As such, the theologian Ernst Troeltsch (who it has been argued moved towards a pluralistic position in his later writings ([31], p. 90), a figure discussed by Masuzawa ([1], pp. 309–27) and seen by Nicholson as part of a jump from the OCT to the ToR ([7], pp. 68–9), who it is said challenges Christianity's position as alone supreme and worthy to be presented as the single highest truth [32] stands not as a paradigm shift but in a line of development with figures like Lucas and Andrews, and therefore earlier proponents of the OCT. This brief account cannot, of necessity, do justice to the complexities of the situation, however, it is intended to suggest that Nicholson's portrayal of three stages of development in the liberal approach to the religious Other is too crude, and fails to notice the many differences, nuances, and altering patterns within each.

Second, the OCT is not so monolithic and generalizing as the portrayals of Nicholson and Masuzawa tend to imply. Certainly in regard to the examples given of Maurice and Clarke, there is a certain truth about the level of generality involved. Focusing upon Maurice, it cannot be denied that he tends to see all, at least non-Christian, religious traditions as being fairly static and unitary things each of which, he argues, possess a single overriding 'truth' or focus that they develop. So he speaks of, for instance, 'the great Mahometan truth' ([15], p. 165) which he tells us is that God is One. For the Hindu, he tells us: 'First, he has the deepest assurance that God must be an Absolute and Living Being, who can be satisfied with nothing less perfect than himself' ([15], pp. 60–1). Clearly here we see the

sense that the OCT is generalizing, however, this claim itself generalizes about the OCT. While notwithstanding that both Maurice and Clarke were popular writers in the area they were not the only exponents, and in a figure like Rowland Williams we find a very different portrayal of the Hindu tradition [33]. In a work entitled *Paramésvara-jnyána-góshthí: A Dialogue of the Knowledge of the Supreme Lord in which are Compared the Claims of Christianity and Hinduism, and Various Questions of Indian Religion and Literature Fairly Discussed* (I will refer to it by the shorter title, which appears on its spine, *Christianity and Hinduism*) he sets out a detailed study of various schools of Hindu thought—including, as many at this time did, Buddhism—which later scholars of Hinduism have remarked upon as exhibiting a knowledge of these traditions quite remarkable for its time ([34], p. 52). Indeed, far from generalizing, Williams shows differences between each school and puts them in dialogue with each other as well as with Christianity. It will not serve our purpose here to provide a detailed account of Williams' text and the kind of comparisons he draws—work which can be found elsewhere ([28], pp. 64–85; [35]), while we will say more about Williams in due course. Nevertheless, Williams example demonstrates that the OCT is not limited simply to vague generalizations.

Third, and this is a theme developed further below, as well as being implicit in the first point here, the NCT I would argue is best seen as part of a process of engagement with the religious Other within modern and contemporary Western theologies. (It is, of course, the case that different or parallel engagements with the religious Other have been occurring in many Christian communities for centuries, see, for instance, [36] for evidence of this). While it may be strategically useful for exponents of the NCT to seek to distance themselves from the perceived Orientalism and colonialism of the OCT, and also from the pluralist stance within the ToR which has been attacked (not necessarily justly—but that is another debate, see [13], pp. 94–102, 129–33) as perpetuating a Western hegemony, the idea that this means insisting upon paradigm shifts rather than a process does not seem justified. To some degree I have argued for this sense of continuity above, and will engage it again below, which suggests it may be best to see an ongoing process (from the OCT, to the ToR, to the NCT—but recognizing that each overlaps and continues alongside the others, rather than being chronologically discontinuous) rather than a set of oppositional jumps, which stresses the inter-connectedness of changes.

### *Discussion on Religious Boundaries*

We have, in this paper, approached a number of questions where to explore the scope of each would take us far beyond the space available. These include the question of the construction and reconstruction of the term 'religion' itself, as well as the way it is employed within the OCT, the NCT and the ToR. We have also raised questions about the way that the past is represented, or misrepresented, in contemporary scholarship, especially as we perceive the blind spots and prejudices of previous generations, yet can only do so from our own historical perspective (on this issue see [26], pp. 74–5). These are important questions, yet here we will restrict ourselves (although touching upon these other issues) to the way that the borders and boundaries of religious traditions are constructed and challenged by the changing discourse in the OCT and the NCT, mentioning the ToR as it becomes part of this discussion. In particular, the issue we confront is the construction of 'religion', and here it is useful to note that arguments of an extreme form that there is no such thing as 'religion' except as an academic construct tend to become dubious ([13], pp. 64–76, 81–7), and Nicholson seems to suspend



judgment on such claims by Fitzgerald ([7], p. 616). We will return to this question in due course. Certainly, even critics of the colonial construction of the term ‘religion’ have suggested it may still be employed in new senses [37].

To some extent, at least, I would argue that the development we see from the OCT, to the ToR and the NCT does not primarily represent (contra Masuzawa, Fitzgerald *etc.*) the spread of a Christian theological hegemony into the discourse of religious plurality and the nature of religion, but the challenging of the boundaries and borders of the Christian tradition itself. Is it, we may ask, a theological victory or a victory over theology that this discourse bears witness to? (In this case understanding ‘theology’ within a narrow sectarian usage). Indeed, the development of the category ‘religion’ to mean not just Christianity, in its many denominations, but many traditions could be seen not as an extension of a Christian term to ‘colonially’ occupy the space of others, but, rather, a discovery that the limits of what may be termed ‘religious’ extend beyond those borders [13,23,38]. This accords with the arguments of the historian of thought J. J. Clarke who has cogently argued, even demonstrated, that the Western encounter with Eastern thought is not a one way street of interpretation, but has involved acts of what we may term ‘subversion’ of ‘Western’ categories by ‘Eastern’ thought [39]. That is to say, it has allowed counter narratives and alternative viewpoints to emerge. To take one example, while Theosophy absorbed and reinterpreted aspects of Hindu and Buddhist thought it found congenial, and so may be said to have partaken in a Western interpretation of the Orient, at the same time it helped to popularize concepts like reincarnation which were radically oppositional to what was, at that time, mainstream Christian discourse within most Western countries ([39], pp. 89–90; [40], pp. 44–5). The OCT and the ToR have also, at least in part, also been involved in such a process, which has come to challenge the borders and boundaries of religious understanding ([8]; [23], pp. 102–4).

While Masuzawa has rightly shown that certain political discourses may have been subtlety at work behind the various typologies of categorizing religion, such as the distinction between ‘national’ and ‘universal’ religion ([1], pp. 79–104, 207–56), this does not mean that they may not also have raised counter issues. We will return to Maurice and Williams for our examples.

Maurice, as we have seen, clearly wished to demonstrate that the genius, or overriding conception, in all of the non-Christian religions found its fulfilment within Christianity, indeed, Maurice’s work is best understand as part of the development of what was later termed Fulfilment Theology (see [28], pp. 62–3). However, his work could also have been said to open a door between Christianity and other religions. As Maurice asserts, all religions were receptive to ‘a Divine Spirit who awakens the thoughts, faculties, faith, hope, love in us, and directs them to an object above themselves, to a common object’ ([41], p. 230). While he denies they have ‘Revelation’ (limited for him to pre-New Testament Jewish/ Israelite traditions and Christianity) they nevertheless are not entirely separated from the divine ([28], pp. 58ff.), while he suggests the core ideas of other religions, here speaking of Hinduism, provide ‘a principle that is as characteristic of our faith as it is of the Hindoo’ ([15], pp. 172–3). Despite a clear hierarchy of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ between Christianity and the other religions of the world we see Maurice suggesting some form of kinship.

Williams, even more than Maurice, shows this relationship in his detailed study of various Hindu traditions. Particular focus is given by him to the concept of *Vâch* [*vac*], the divine word which he equates to both Logos and the Holy Spirit ([33], pp. 100–1; see also [28], pp. 79–81). Again, his work is underlain by the principles of Fulfilment Theology such that the ‘truths’ of Hinduism find their

completion in the final form of Christianity ([28], pp. 70–5); although, unlike Maurice, he is prepared to see Revelation within Hinduism ([28], pp. 75–9). We see here a slippage of the boundaries between religions: if divine truth in some form is found outside of Christianity then we cannot simply bracket it as a category altogether differentiated from other religions. Karl Barth, of course, makes a similar point, that all ‘religion’—Christianity as much as any other—is sinful and partial ([42], pp. 50–4). However, in contrast to Barth who sees this as related to sin and human failure, Williams, like Maurice, see all religions as partaking in truth and the Logos ([28], pp. 75–81); nevertheless, we may, to some extent, take Barth as an ally who calls into question the category of any religious system as alone supreme in truth and expression.<sup>1</sup> Williams, we may note, was also significant in another way. As an early British exponent of biblical criticism he made use of his knowledge of the methods of this ‘higher criticism’ to attack the Hindu scriptures showing their errors and inconsistencies; but, out of concern for fairness (and to show that Christianity need not fear it as others should) this led him to apply the principles not just to what he would term the Old Testament but to the New Testament as well [35]. It was, thus, the OCT that helped lead the way towards the comparison of religious texts on an equal basis.

Contrary, then, to the suggestion that the OCT perpetuated a discourse of Christian supremacy—although not denying that in both Maurice and Williams that this was the rationale—we see it as a means to start to level the playing field between religious traditions. Masuzawa is quite right to suggest that in a figure like Troeltsch we see a situation, just over half a century later, when Christian theologians could no longer assert their superiority by dictat and that a serious engagement with the religious Other was leading to a more pluralist form of expression ([1], p. 320). However, we can ask is she right therefore to assert that we see a Christian domination and takeover of the discourse on religious plurality? It is my contention that the assumptions of the Christian worldview had been, to some degree at least, shattered and reshaped by the encounter with the religious Other. Masuzawa’s argument, at least partially, shares the problem that various critiques have found in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* [43,44], that it portrays the Orient as a passive recipient of Western discourses [45], whereas it is a two-way street, as we have discussed in relation to Clarke above, a point made also by David Smith ([46], pp. 85–101). Likewise, we must ask, is it fair or reasonable to claim that it is Christian theology that is shaping the discourse on religious plurality or, in as far as it does, is it a Christian theology which has itself been shaped and changed in its response to religious diversity, and so we find a rather more subtle and complex set of webs to unravel. The challenge becomes then not simply to remove ‘theology’ from the discourse on religious plurality or Religious Studies—as Fitzgerald avers ([2], pp. 33–53)—for there is no pure or simple ‘theology’, in a thing as and of itself, underlying these debates.

#### *Assessing the Relationship of the OCT and the NCT*

This extended discussion on these themes should alert us, yet again, to the fact that the sharp distinction between the OCT and the NCT is overstated. In particular, I would like to pick up on two aspects of Nicholson’s argument that they are different forms of discourse, first that the NCT, unlike the OCT, is aware of its own partisanship, and second that the OCT denies the truth of the other.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Hendrik Vroom for alerting me to the way that Barth’s theology can be used positively in this context.

Williams, at least, as we have suggested realized that the comparison must be even handed and fair and this lead him into questioning his own tradition in new ways in relation to critical scholarship. Likewise, both Maurice and Williams are at pains to stress the value of the other as a ‘real’ form of truth: Fulfilment Theology tends to stress an innate sentiment in humanity for certain religious truths so only in as far as the non-Christian religion can be said to hold something that answers to this can it ever be fulfilled by Christianity ([28], pp. 32–3).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in as far as Clooney proposes an inclusivism as the basis for his NCT then we can see a clear link between this and the thought of Maurice and Williams—what is generally termed the inclusivist position in most versions of the ToR typology is generically called the ‘fulfilment paradigm’ in Knitter’s version stressing how central such thinking is ([19], pp. 63ff.; see [13], p. 20). However, there is clearly a difference in the practice, with questions of truth being deferred in the practice of the NCT by Clooney and others, where religious ideas from different traditions are presented alongside one another [8] rather than in tension or competition. Nevertheless, it seems to make more sense to distinguish the OCT and the NCT by degree rather than by kind.

### *Religion, Orientalism and Comparative Theology*

Our argument above raises the question therefore as to whether the NCT is guilty of perpetuating a theological and colonial representation of the Other if it exists as an extension of its forebear rather than a radical step change. This, possibly, lies behind the sometimes quite vehement denial of such a link by proponents of the NCT. Certainly, while Nicholson can see a certain heritage between himself and Rudolf Otto in his comparison of Shankara and Eckhart, a key argument that he invokes is that he is not captive to the Orientalist discourse of East-West dichotomies that he argues marked out Otto’s work ([6], pp. 109ff.).

In his conclusion to *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, Nicholson sets out clearly what he sees as distinct about the NCT. Speaking of ‘scholars who reject comparison’ he tells us that they do so because it is seen to ‘exemplify the totalizing schemes and meta-narratives... identified as discourses of domination’, where ‘the cross-cultural similarities... are imagined, whereas the underlying cultural differences are real’ ([6], p. 200). Whereas he suggests the NCT realizes ‘that historical understanding is itself a creative process’ ([6], p. 200). However, he argues that it is only when a tension is set up between ‘a scientific, representational model’ and a ‘constructive’ paradigm that we truly see comparison come to fruit, where we do not see it ‘as a discourse of absolute truth, but rather pragmatically, as a political discourse of strategic intervention’ ([6], p. 203).

I do not wish to develop one outcome of Nicholson’s argument, as it seems to me, but feel it must be mentioned, which is that if we accept that it is only the historical interests of the scholar that guide

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<sup>2</sup> Certainly, a common critique made against ‘Liberal Christianity’ is that it assumes a common religious sentiment and this could be applied here, however, Fulfilment Theology in its various forms is far from a modern liberal tradition being found, as discussed above, in Evangelical and conservative traditions (which, arguably also develop a post-Enlightenment narrative), but also traces roots back through figures like Justin Martyr and others in the Christian tradition. The criticism we may not is also, arguably, fairly facile being prone to the genealogical fallacy—just because a tradition or concept arises at a certain point does not mean its ideas are limited to that context or subject to other failings of contemporary worldviews.

the comparison, and so the act is undertaken ‘strategically’, then when he suggests that his reading highlights aspects of Shankara ‘suppressed by the Orientalist characterizations’ ([6], p. 198) of Otto, we have no reason to prefer his reading to that of Otto—each is merely the appeal of a scholar to the prejudices of his day. Leaving this aside, I think that Nicholson has nevertheless highlighted an important point about the constructive endeavour. Rather than being ‘discourses of domination’, the OCT by its very nature undermined the very domination that may, perhaps, have been the intention of it; both Maurice and Williams wrote their respective works on the OCT as commissions designed towards a missionary end ([28], p. 47). However, as argued above, particularly with regard to Williams, his deep study of the religious Other led to the application of critical theory more widely to Christian scriptures. While not to downplay the strong sense of Christian superiority found within his work it is notable that Williams’ *Hinduism and Christianity* ends inconclusively, not with a conversion of the narrator from Hinduism to Christianity, but with him contemplating the various arguments—something which no doubt reflects Williams awareness that here lay a system with deep spiritual roots and strong intellectual validity [35]. As we have mentioned above, this is in accord with critics of a strong Orientalism, like J. J. Clarke and Smith, who have argued that the encounter was not simply a one-way process of Western domination, but one where the encountered Orient itself gave rise to counter narratives and new ways of thinking. It is my contention here that the OCT rather than being a simple discourse of Christian imperialism and hegemonic discourse was in fact part of a process that has led to a questioning of the borders and boundaries of the traditions. While we have shown that Williams’ more nuanced attitude evidenced this, and challenged Christianity, we could even suggest parts of Clarke and Maurice do likewise. For instance, while Clarke sees Confucianism as inherently flawed by not speaking of God, he feels compelled to admit that the Chinese character has greatly benefitted under its tutelage ([14], pp. 58–61). Again, in relation to the Hindu tradition, which he terms Brahmanism, he argues that it has a ‘special relation as a system of thought to Christianity’ ([14], pp. 135), though flawed morally. While this fits within his own preoccupation to show the superiority of Christianity we find that he is led to admit points of contact, even congruence and great insights within other religious systems. As such, while, qua Said, power is asserted over the Other and the tradition placed in relation to Christianity, contra Said, it is as part of a process of giving of respect to the Other and recognizing, even if only by limited steps, that they hold great wisdom and insights.

I would like here to map some aspects of this. The categories ‘religion’ and ‘world religion’ are often questioned as simply being an imposition of a colonial or Christian template upon other traditions, worldviews and thought forms (to which the term ‘religion’ may not properly apply). Here critics like Masuzawa, Fitzgerald, McCutcheon and Asad share a focus on dismantling what they see as problematic construction of contemporary notions of ‘religion’ and the modern scholarship in the study of religions (Masuzawa, however, admits that she lacks knowledge of the contemporary scene both within the study of religion and theology and so focuses on the period that covers the origins of the OCT [1]), employing what may be seen as an archaeological, or genealogical, approach to uncovering the layers of meaning and discourse.<sup>3</sup> Space does not permit us to discuss the arguments fully here (however, I have engaged some of the arguments elsewhere ([13], pp. 64–87; [38]), but in

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘archaeological’ here suggesting a ‘post-modern’ suspicion of metanarratives and their construction that rests upon foundational work by Foucault and Lyotard. For a discussion of this ([47], pp. 12–16).

relation to Masuzawa's specific point about the way that the OCT played a part in this process it is my suggestion that the narrative she presents needs to be, at the very least, problematized and presented with more nuance about how other discourses played into these representations. As I have argued above the OCT, as well as the ToR, are involved in complex ways with the representation of 'religion', and cannot be branded as guilty of a simple imposition of Christian hegemony. Again, debates around Orientalism post-Said are voluminous, and raise many questions about the representation of the Other, but in relation to what we have discussed above the invoking of the charge 'Orientalist' also needs to be presented with more nuance [39,44–46].

The above issues play into questions about borders, boundaries and changing discourses, and the way in which the OCT, the ToR and the NCT sit within a changing web of what is an acceptable position within Christian theology. This raises one question in particular, which is what does it mean to say that the creation of the term 'religion', or 'Religious studies' or contemporary thinking of 'religious plurality' owes some basis to a Christian theological position? Fitzgerald and Masuzawa both suggest that a liberal Christian theological position lay behind such terms and became assumed into what were often taken to be non-theological and neutral terms and ideologies. However, several points need to be raised, one of which is that there is not simply any single thing which encapsulates what 'liberal' theology is [48]. Even in relation to the religious Other we have seen that a variety of perspectives exist within figures like Maurice, Williams, Müller, Lucas, and Andrews. Meanwhile, Fulfilment Theology which is sometimes used as a touchstone of a liberal perspective for its time by Masuzawa and Nicholson [1,7] is endorsed as much by conservative evangelicals, like Monier-Williams and Farquhar, as it is by liberals [19,49]. Moreover, as argued above, the religious Other is not just represented by Christian theology but has a role in the very presentation and representation itself. We could speak of this as a subversion of 'theological' positionality, in that whatever 'Christian' position there was does not remain the same; however, and imperative in this, is the fact that there never was an 'original' pristine Christian theology; as Thatamanil warns us 'neither religion nor theology can be taken as universals' ([18], p. 251). Throughout its existence Christian theology has been in a process of cultural and interreligious engagement, and so to suggest that we have a Christian theology which imposes itself on others is itself problematic (see [13], pp. 31–44). At the same time, it cannot be denied that Western (in the Nineteenth century especially European and British) authority and worldviews were dominant and exerted an undeniable influence on the shaping of knowledge, which is part of Masuzawa's narrative [1]. Nevertheless, we must ask to what extent we can speak simply of Christian agency in the creation of these concepts. Here I would suggest that both the OCT and the NCT share common ground, for a claim made by a contemporary representative of the NCT, Thatamanil, that: '*Resources from other traditions must shape comparative theological method itself*' ([18], p. 253, italics in original). This, arguably, is found in relation to the category 'religion' itself, in that the notion of many 'religions' comes as a response to those other religions,<sup>4</sup> and as we

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<sup>4</sup> This, of course, begs the question of whether such things as 'religions' exist, but here I do not wish to insist upon any single or reified definition of what this means, but am simply referring to the various traditions which have come into dialogue, whatever specific term, or terms, we should apply to them. As has been argued elsewhere, even if we admit the term 'religion' is problematic and implicated in an Orientalist discourse we cannot avoid the historical fact that various traditions have apparently 'recognized' each other as occupying similar ground and have been in dialogue on related issues, which we might term 'an orientation to the transcendent' for many centuries ([38], pp. 297–8, 302ff.).

have seen in relation to Williams this recognition led, even in the OCT, to a questioning of legitimate interpretations and critiques of the Christian tradition. As such, in creating ‘religions’, or ‘world religions’, as something to be seriously engaged, the OCT started to break the Western vision that only its own local truths are universal and something to be considered the norm. Therefore, we should join scholars who question the strong Orientalist thesis that we must reject developments like ‘religion’ as simply impositions ([18], p. 240; [37]), a stance that sometimes draws inspiration from Mandair [50,51].

Another issue that must be raised is the question of the disavowal of the past, which if we understand it as partaking in an ‘Orientalist’ discourse which we ourselves wish to disown may seem natural. However, as Nicholson suggests, we write from the perspective of our time just as others write from the perspective of theirs. In this context, as has been argued elsewhere about our own scholarly forebears:

‘Our own interpretative strategies and, we may hope, greater self-reflexivity, is not divorced from their own attempts to look beyond themselves, but stands as part of an ongoing programme....No doubt future historians of religion will look back upon our attempts to interpret religion today and, with the benefit of hindsight, and their own agenda, pass judgement upon us. We can only ask what they will see, which we cannot see of ourselves?’ ([26], p. 75).

We must therefore ask what can be left behind from the past, what can be learnt from the past, but always we must seek not to misrepresent the past, and terms such as ‘Orientalist’ lack the nuance and subtlety to understand the varied agendas and perspectives of figures like Williams, Maurice, Müller, Otto and others.

### **Europe, America and the OCT and the NCT**

One final question arises, and which has given rise at least in part to this edition and its rationale—European responses to the NCT—which is why it is America in particular that has given rise to the discipline. Certainly it is not a uniquely American phenomenon, and scholars like Ward and others identify themselves with the label [16].<sup>5</sup> One line of enquiry may be to follow up Masuzawa’s suggestion that the discourse on religious plurality became in the twentieth century a peculiarly American phenomenon ([1], pp. 268ff.). However, I am not convinced, the kind of discourse on World Religions—seen in textbooks and university courses—is just as much a British phenomenon (and I suspect more widespread in Europe and elsewhere) as it is American (something Masuzawa notes in her introduction ([1], p. 8)). Moreover, another claim Masuzawa makes is not entirely correct: she describes on the works of the OCT, and the surrounding literature and theology, as part of a strangely forgotten set of texts and ideas; certainly she makes little or no mention of surrounding secondary literature. However, while not a major scholarly industry there is a considerable set of writing, at least by British academics, on this period, and in monographs and period reviews it has been dealt with in a good number of sources (e.g., [28,52–56])—to mention but some of the works published prior to Masuzawa’s monograph, and not including the considerable literature on Müller (see [28]). One hypothesis that comes to mind then is that perhaps the OCT remained a feature in the awareness of those within British academia such that a suspicion about embarking once again by something of this

<sup>5</sup> The other articles in this edition testify to this, and reference many such scholars.

name (not that it would necessarily have been the tag used by, for instance, Maurice and Williams for their work). What may be described as the weight of history may perhaps have pressed more heavily in the ‘old’ world, such that the NCT could not come to fruition there. Speculating upon the reasons goes somewhat beyond the strictly historical analysis undertaken here, nevertheless, some points for contemplation may be made, however, they would require further research before being considered as secure arguments. We suggested above that, perhaps, theological articulation on the relationship between religions may have been a factor in the UK before the US because of the former’s colonial context. However, for the UK, and indeed many European countries, losing this in the twentieth century may also have impacted upon the further development of the discipline, while as a veritable melting-pot of cultures such reflection may have seemed more natural in the US. As has been suggested, the sense of the UK as a multi-religious nation has come only recently ([57], p. 11), so in some ways the weight of history as a Christian nation, which for the US is certainly later, and arguably therefore less embedded, especially in its becoming a more explicitly and clearly a multicultural society may have affected theological agendas.

## Conclusions

In light of criticisms made of the OCT and the issues concerning ‘Orientalism’ raised against it, it is natural that proponents of the NCT should wish to disassociate their discipline from it, arguing that it represents a new arena of discourse. However, it is far from clear that such a clear distinction can be made, and as I have argued here there may not be grounds for seeking to make such a distinction. Rather than presenting a discontinuity between the OCT (and the ToR) and the NCT, it may be better to see them as part of a progressive challenge to a reigning hegemonic discourse in previous Christian theology (notwithstanding that, of course, legitimations for this approach are themselves founded in earlier, even foundational, Christian sources ([8], pp. 24ff.; [13], pp. 133–44; [23], pp. 146–70). Such an approach can be claimed to be not only more reflective of the actual circumstances of the development of ideas, but also presents further support to the critique of a strong ‘Orientalist’ thesis that portrays the ‘Orient’ as always subject to Occidental, especially Christian, dominionism, and fails to present the intercultural, and interreligious, history of ideas, which, I would argue, is essential to the project of Comparative Theology (and the ToR) in any form as a mature and self-reflective discourse.

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