

Article

Tradition with a New Identity: Thomist Engagement with Non-Christian Thought as a Model for the New Comparative Theology in Europe

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Abstract: British theologians have criticised contemporary comparative theology for privileging learning from other religions to the exclusion of challenge and transformation in the Christian encounter with the thought of other religions. Moreover, a wider concern in Britain about contemporary expressions of theology in the academy, including comparative theology, is about their accountability to the ecclesial communities to which theologians belong. This paper aims to retrieve the Thomist engagement with non-Christian thought as a model for contemporary comparative theology that also addresses these concerns. The paper outlines Aquinas' understanding of Christian theology's engagement with non-Christian thought as being one of transformation, using the Biblical image of water changing into wine to illustrate what is involved. The paper points to historical examples of Thomist encounters with Indian thought and suggests some new applications. Using the Thomist model for contemporary comparative theology is a case of tradition coming to have a new identity, one that balances learning with challenge and transformation, one that bridges the divide between the academic and the ecclesial exercise of theology.

Keywords: comparative theology; Thomas Aquinas; Catholic Church

1. Introduction

This article emerges out of my own experience as a British Catholic theologian and Dominican friar of the Province of England, who is engaged in the exercise of comparative theology in the university

and seminary contexts and concerned to explore what form of comparative theology might bridge the gap that often exists between what is possible to do in the university and what is acceptable and attractive to the wider Catholic community. Within the English speaking Catholic community in Europe there are a number of attitudes that are becoming increasingly widely and strongly held among the younger generation and which Catholic theologians have to address: first, a suspicion of contemporary theologies of religions and of interreligious dialogue as supporting a doctrinal position that does not hold clearly enough to traditional and official Catholic teaching; second, a concern over the degree to which the theology done in the modern university context is still carried as a confessional discipline that has a clear connection with and is accountable to the ecclesial community and faith traditions to which the theologian belongs; and third, a re-emphasis on the classical theological traditions of Catholic Christianity as found in the Fathers of the Church and Scholastic theology as providing the theological account necessary for sustaining the present and next generation of Catholics, along with an affirmation of Pope Benedict's teaching that the documents of the Second Vatican Council, including those dealing with other religions, should be read within a 'hermeneutic of reform' marked by renewal in continuity with these earlier theological and doctrinal traditions of the Church [1]. All three attitudes reflect concerns over what is felt necessary for the Church to continue in the highly secularised context in which the European Catholic community finds itself.

The new comparative theology has as yet gained little acceptance in Britain among Catholic theologians, or by those in theological or seminary training, or within the wider Catholic community. Getting beyond this is very difficult, not least because comparative theology is easily taken as epitomising what is objected to by those who hold the three attitudes I have outlined above: comparative theology's emphasis on respectful openness to and learning from other religious traditions seems very close to an affirmation of pluralist and relativist theology of religions; the different forms of comparative theology developed in the academic context often have no clear connection to the norms of ecclesial traditions and are often perceived to be indistinguishable from the more secular disciplines of comparative religion or religious studies; moreover, the very 'newness' of the new comparative theology seems to make it very much one of those forms of Catholic theology emergent since the Second Vatican Council which are characterised by a 'hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,' breaking with the classical traditions of patristic and Scholastic theology and with traditional doctrinal teaching.

For such reasons comparative theology is seen as being on the edge of mainstream Catholic theology. This is unfortunate, when the pioneers of Catholic comparative theologians, such as Francis Clooney and James Fredericks, themselves both Catholic priests, have taken pains to assert that comparative theology is distinct from religious studies precisely by being confessional in character, as something done by believers and for believers, as 'faith seeking understanding' (*fides quaerens intellectum*) in the classical Western formulation of theology. Moreover, considerable space is given by such theologians to reading classical Christian texts alongside those of other religious traditions. However, there is a gap between such claims and the actual perception and reception comparative theology has had.

In such a situation, in order for comparative theology to gain greater acceptance and credibility within the wider Catholic community, those engaged in it would do well to show clearly that it can address the concerns and expectations of that community. With this aim in mind, in the years in which

I have myself been engaged in comparative theology, it has seemed to me necessary to return to and to retrieve the classical models within Christian theology for engagement with non-Christian traditions and to demonstrate that comparative theology is in continuity with them, that it is *tradition with a new identity*. My own work has centred on a comparative encounter between the Scholastic theology of the 13th century Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–74), the most influential of all the Scholastics, and the Hindu tradition of Vedānta and so it has been natural for me to revisit the model Aquinas himself gives for engaging with non-Christian thought. Comparative theologians working with the Church Fathers or other Scholastic thinkers might want to consider how well the different models of engagement found in those other thinks might work as forms of comparative theology.

In this article, then, I would like to consider the approach taken by Thomas Aquinas as a form of comparative theology that is thoroughly traditional, but also capable of being thoroughly contemporary. It is one that helps bridge the gap between the exercise of comparative theology within an academic context and the expectations of the ecclesial community to which that theologian belongs, in this case the Catholic community. Moreover, Aquinas's account is instructive in itself as a model of how to do comparative theology in that he sets out a number of general principles that show why and how Christian theology can engage constructively with non-Christian thought and he gives us a very clear analysis of the actual process involved in Christian theological engagement with non-Christian thought, what happens to that thought as it is assimilated into Christian theology. As a pattern for engagement, then, it remains very helpful.

At first sight, however, it might seem an odd thing to look to Thomas Aquinas for a form of comparative theology. Was not Aquinas rather more against the Gentiles than for them, as the title of one of his major works, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, suggests? Yet, if we read his works what is remarkable is the extent to which he does engage with non-Christian thinkers, whether Greek, Jewish or Muslim, as he explores and constructs his own Christian theology. Aquinas takes them seriously and he takes pains to argue that Christian theology can engage with and learn from their thought without the integrity of Christian faith being undermined. His resultant theology is in fact profoundly shaped by non-Christian thought.

In the Catholic tradition Thomism has enjoyed very considerable prestige and has impeccable credentials as a normative model for any theology to follow. There is also currently a revival of Thomist studies, finding new ways of reading and applying the thought of Aquinas to the current concerns of theology and the Catholic community. Contemporary Thomists have themselves increasingly come to characterise the work of Aquinas and other Scholastics as interreligious and comparative in nature, as they relate their work to contemporary disciplines of study, including comparative theology ([2–4]; and other essays in [5]). The continuing importance of the Thomist tradition for Catholic theological engagement with non-Christian thought within official Catholic Church teaching can be seen in the fact that as recently as 1998, in *Fides et Ratio*, Blessed John Paul II commends Thomas Aquinas as a model for doing theology in the contemporary world because of his 'dialogical' engagement with Jewish and Arab teaching as well as with Greek philosophy (FR 43). The Pope also encourages further contemporary engagement with non-Christian cultures and their traditions (FR 72).

In order to expand on the initial points I have made about the context and perception of comparative theology, I shall first consider the work of Gavin D'Costa as the British theologian who has responded

most fully to comparative theology. I then outline the model Aquinas himself gives, with examples of how it has been used by later Catholic theologians and of how it might be applied to new engagements with non-Christian thought. The retrieval of such a classical model does not have to mean that a contemporary comparative theologian is unable to change and adapt it and so find a new identity for it and in the final section of this article I indicate ways in which the model should be developed to incorporate shifts in contemporary Catholic reflection on other religions as well as the methods and concerns found in the new comparative theology.

2. A British Theologian Reflects on the Context and Exercise of the New Comparative Theology

Professor Gavin D'Costa, who holds a chair in Christian Theology at Bristol University is one of the UK's leading Catholic theologians. D'Costa's perspectives are important for those interested in the reception of the new comparative theology in English speaking Europe, because he is a theologian who represents the three attitudes I noted in the introduction, but also one very interested in a sustained and positive engagement with other religious traditions. D'Costa is not a comparative theologian as such, but has been very much concerned with Christian theology of religions and with the exercise of such theology in the contemporary English-speaking academy [6–9]. D'Costa is sympathetic to the aims and approaches of the new comparative theology, but also critical of many of its manifestations as failing to be sufficiently theological and doctrinal in character. Central to D'Costa's position is the affirmation of the tradition-specific nature of any theology of religions, so that other religions are inevitably approached from within the theologian's own perspectives and evaluative criteria. D'Costa's positive vision for the future of academic theology of any kind also involves a retrieval of classical and specifically Thomist models of theology.

D'Costa's wider concerns about and programme for theology as a discipline in the modern academy, as set out in his study, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (2005). D'Costa does not deal explicitly with comparative theology in this book, but his arguments provide a wider context for understanding and appraising his critical affirmation of comparative theology. D'Costa argues that contemporary universities in the English-speaking world have become increasingly secularised. The discipline of theology in these institutions is likewise losing its tradition-specific and confessional character and becoming increasingly replaced by, or translated into, religious studies, the modern discipline held ideally to operate as the phenomenological study of a variety of religious traditions determined by the application of neutral reasoning. Examining accounts of how the shift from theology to religious studies has taken place in academic institutions, D'Costa finds a key element to be the separation of theology done in the academy from the ecclesial community, whether it be it through loss of Church control over the institution, diminished employment of practising members of that ecclesial community to be governors and teaching staff within the university, or the decline of a clear relationship between the shape and practice of theology and the faith traditions of the ecclesial community ([10], pp. 40ff). The greater such separation becomes, the more difficult it has been for confessional theology to maintain a place in the university context.

The alternative to, or remedy for, the demise of theology in academic institutions lies in a retrieval and explicit reaffirmation of the connection with the ecclesial community to which the theologian belongs. As modern examples of what form such a connection looks like from a perspective of official

Catholic teaching, D'Costa points to two recent official documents of Catholic Church: *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (On Catholic Universities), issued in 1990 by Blessed John Paul II and on the *Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, published by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith also in 1990, documents which emphasise the intellectual connections that should exist with the doctrinal and moral traditions the Catholic Church, as well as the spiritual and ethical dimensions of doing theology, with God himself the ultimate object of all theology and of human life. Far from resulting in a sectarian retreat from interest in and engagement with other religious traditions, such documents promote a positive engagement with other academic disciplines, including the study of other religions. As D'Costa puts it, quoting from *ex Corde Ecclesiae*:

[t]he theological understanding suggested here, although not unpacked in minute detail, envisages mutual conversations and enrichment with theology as the initiator, as it is able to straddle the disciplinary boundaries of each subject. Theology:

serves other disciplines in their search for meaning, not only by helping them to investigate how their discoveries will affect individuals and society but also by bringing a perspective and an orientation not contained within their own methodologies. In turn, interaction with these other disciplines and their discoveries enriches theology, offering it a better understanding of the world today, and making theological research more relevant to current needs. Because of its specific importance among the academic disciplines, every Catholic university should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology ([10], pp. 95–96).

D'Costa looks to Patristic and Scholastic views about Christian theological engagement with philosophy, the non-Christian learning available at the time, as models for understanding how to do theology in the present ([10], pp. 7ff). In the Patristic period he identifies three attitudes towards engagement with philosophy: first, the position which shunned engagement, often associated with Tertullian (c.160–225), that since all truth and salvation were to be found in the Bible such philosophy was of no value; second, the critical encounter and accommodation of Justin Martyr (c.100–165) and many following him:

The second, containing rich diversity, sees the Greek philosophical heritage as *preparatio* (preparation) and *paidagogus* (an education finally aiming at Christ). Origen (c.185–254) uses the metaphor of the ransack of the Egyptians for the future of Israel, so that all leaning could in principle be turned to the service of God ([10], p. 7).

And third, opposition to uncritical adoption of philosophical concepts in such a way that they shape and determine the Christian message rather are shaped and transformed by it.

It is the second approach that D'Costa favours as the right way for the present and for his vision of how theology should operate in the contemporary academy. D'Costa points to the flowering of this approach in the Medieval period, which saw the emergence both of the institution of the Western university and of Scholastic theology within it, manifest in the work of such Scholastic theologians as Albert the Great (1079–1142) and Thomas Aquinas:

[d]ialectics becomes firmly established as part of Christian education, giving an important role to *ratio*, thereby providing a bridge between all forms of knowledge and learning and Christian revelation. This was embodied in the Aquinas's great synthesis of the Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions in Thomism, providing an important role for philosophy, adequately Christianized, to expound doctrine. It also allowed

Aquinas to relate the different disciplines and show the role of the virtues (both intellectual and moral) in education. It also showed in practice how all knowledge can be integrated, critically, into the Christian vision. Aristotle, Islamic appropriation of Aristotle, and Greek philosophy are all brought to the aid of Christian theology in Aquinas. My own book flows out of this tradition. ([10], p. 12)

Fundamental to D'Costa's position is to defend the place of confessional theology in the modern academy against the argument that religious studies is preferable, because it is a neutral discipline. Here he follows closely the influential position put forward by the moral philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, who argues that all reasoning and practice is tradition-specific and who rejects modernity's claim to be able to advance neutral disciplines ([10], pp. 13, 26, 88ff). Any intellectual system or rationality is formed within a particular system and this conditions the reasoning of those within that tradition and hence their perspectives on other cultures. There is thus no neutral vantage point from which to view different religious traditions.

What D'Costa is proposing here about theological engagement with other religious traditions turns out to have a great deal in common with the stance taken by new comparative theologians, when they insist that comparative theology is different from religious studies, precisely because it is confessional theology. The convergence between what D'Costa proposes and comparative theology, *qua* theology, can be seen later in the book when D'Costa draws together his arguments and explores how such a confessional theology is able to produce a 'theological religious studies' ([10], p. 144). Here he considers two cases of women from different religious traditions who are revered for the manner of their deaths, understood to be acts of atonement for their own sins and those of others: the Hindu Sati Roop Kanwar and the Christian martyr, Edith Stein. D'Costa aims to 'to show how a theological reading is often able to understand what modernity cannot: religious self-sacrifice as a means of winning merit through grace ([10], p. 145). Rather than establishing a neutral common concept of holiness or sanctity as a cross-cultural category, which tends to downplay and hence distort the irreducible difference of traditions, he argues that a Christian theologian can study another religion in its integrity, but will also view it from within Christian categories of sanctity. Thereby, the theologian may come to recognise in Roop Kanwar both the presence of a self-sacrificing sanctity of the sort present in the case of Edith Stein and the work of divine grace in her actions ([10], chapter 5).

D'Costa's final goal, it has to be said, is to have separate institutions where Catholic theology can function with integrity ([10], pp. 216–7). Even without this, however, he can still see a place for theologians within the wider modern academy insofar as they can maintain the distinctive character of their discipline, sustained by explicit connections with the ecclesial community and its traditions of faith and theology. D'Costa's arguments, it seems to me, are true of the wider context in which theology is being done in contemporary British universities and hence true of the context in which comparative theology is done as well. For this reason, I want to concretise D'Costa's suggestions and explore what it means to do comparative theology within the frame developed by Thomas Aquinas, as a theological approach that does have a very strong connection with the Catholic ecclesial community and its traditions, while also engaging with non-Christian thought from within the interpretive criteria of Christian faith, evaluating and transforming the thought it encounters so that this thought serves to enrich the expression of Christian faith.

D'Costa also comments explicitly on the new comparative theology and how well it fits his own understanding of what is necessary in Christian theological engagement with other religions. In *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (2009) D'Costa recognises comparative theology as an approach to Christian engagement with other religions that wants to do something different from earlier forms of theology of religions concerned with general theories of other religions, especially their salvific status. D'Costa agrees with central features of the new comparative theology, such as its insistence on particular engagements with texts and on the potential for such encounters to transform Christian self-understanding. However, he disagrees with the position taken by Fredericks that separates dialogical encounter from theology of religions, since, in D'Costa's view, some kind of theological perspective is always present in any encounter. Moreover, he criticises the fact that, despite the confessional stance of comparative theologians and their insistence on the evaluative nature of the approach, what is stressed is learning from other religions (what he otherwise calls inculturation), whereas judgements from the perspective of one's one tradition about the truth of what is encountered (what he otherwise refers to as missiology) tend not to be raised. Here comparative theology is not being true to itself as a tradition-specific confessional theology:

I would prefer to see theology of religions and comparative theology as complementary, as aspects of dogma on the one hand, and missiology and inculturation on the other. In the latter, the reality of other religions must be confronted and its exact contours responded to in terms of apologetics, proclamation, dialogue, and learning from, and one must be attentive to the ways in which some of the new findings might generate fresh dogmatic questions ([7], p. 45).

D'Costa picks out the approach taken by Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010) in the first edition of the *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1964)¹ as model for the kind of comparative theology he would like to see more of. In the third part of the book, Panikkar develops what he calls a Christological *bhāṣya*, or commentary, on a Hindu Vedāntic text. Panikkar, as a Christian theologian, identifies the *Īśvara*, the creative Lord, in Vedānta with Christ and thus reads Vedānta in the light of Christian faith in the Trinity. This, Panikkar argues, helps resolve a genuine difficulty within Vedānta about how to relate the Absolute (*Brahman*) to the world. Panikkar is thus engaged, like contemporary comparative theologians, in a serious engagement with particular aspects of a text and tradition within Hinduism. However, Panikkar is also looking at this from a Christian theological perspective and makes a judgement about the truth of what he studies in terms of the presence of Christ ([7], pp. 40–45). This is an approach very similar to what D'Costa does in his own 'theological religious studies.' As D'Costa comments:

This too is comparative theology, but in a mode that is not at all present in the work of the comparative theologians I have examined. It exhibits all the positive characteristics of the present movement, but in contrast is also able to really engage with the other, asking penetrating questions, putting challenges, engaging in mission at the very same time as really trying to understand the other in its own terms ([7], p. 43).

¹ In the second edition of this work (1981) Panikkar's theological position has shifted somewhat more towards a pluralist theology and hence does not serve to illustrate what D'Costa has in mind.

D’Costa, then, is very much in favour of the kind of encounter with other religions found in comparative theology, but wants to keep the two aspects of theological appraisal of and learning from other religions together. This, he argues is the mark of classical Christian theologians, including Aquinas:

As with any area of theology, it is demanding, and it requires learning beyond the traditional boundaries of the theological discipline. Nevertheless, historically, the greatest theologians have often done this: Aquinas, for instance, in his immersion in the Aristotelian heritage transmitted through the Arabs, injected into theology both new vigour and a profound critique of alternative traditions. Dialogue and mission are indeed part of the same activity ([7], p. 54).

D’Costa’s concern to integrate theology of religions with comparative theology and to balance doctrinal evaluation and transformation with learning is representative of responses by other theologians to the new comparative theology, as well as of internal debates among comparative theologians themselves.² Again, it is the Thomist approach that provides a good model for doing a form of comparative theology that meets these concerns. Panikkar, likewise, describes what he is doing as like Aquinas’ creative use of Greek thought ([13], pp. 134–7).

3. Theology and non-Christian Thought in the Work of Thomas Aquinas

I would now like to consider what kind of model Aquinas himself gives us for theological engagement with non-Christian thought, in the hope that it can both meet the concerns expressed by D’Costa and serve as a positive support for the type of engagements developed in modern comparative theology. For his part, Aquinas does not use the English terms ‘theology’ or ‘non-Christian thought.’ Instead he uses the Latin terms *sacra doctrina* and *philosophia*. *Sacra doctrina* (sacred teaching) is more narrowly used to mean divine revelation, the revealed truths of faith, but also by extension means the reflection on this revelation that Christian thinkers undertake, what the modern academy would call ‘Christian theology.’³ On the other hand, *philosophia* is used to refer to the disciplined exercise of natural reason, to the natural truths discovered through the exercise of natural reason, and to the works of non-Christian thinkers, be they ancient Greek or medieval Jewish and Islamic, in which these are contained. I shall generally translate *sacra doctrina* as ‘Christian theology,’ reserving the term ‘revelation’ for cases where the narrower term is more appropriate, using the term *sacra doctrina* when both senses are to be understood. I shall likewise translate *philosophia* as ‘philosophical work’ or ‘natural reasoning’ as appropriate, using the term ‘philosophy’ when both are meant. Aquinas’ account of how Christian theology can make positive use of non-Christian philosophical works is the basis for identifying his work as a version of comparative theology.

In Aquinas’ most influential work, the *Summa Theologiae*, Christian theology is depicted as a *scientia*, a ‘science’ in the sense of a systematic body of knowledge, developed by reasoning from a set

² See, for instance, the review by Daniel Keating of Clooney’s book, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindus* ([11], pp. 283–6). For a sustained examination of this issue within the new comparative theology and argument for the role of theology of religions by a comparative theologian, see Kristin Beise Kiblinger, ([12], pp. 21–42).

³ Which sense Aquinas means in the opening question of his mature work, the *Summa Theologiae*, has been subject to considerable debate. In this and his other works taken as a whole, however, both senses would seem to be implied.

of first principles to further conclusions (*Summa Theologiae* (henceforth S.T.) 1.1.8).⁴ While the labelling of *sacra doctrina* as a *scientia* is not new to Aquinas, Aquinas was the first to treat theology as a true *scientia* in the Aristotelian sense of the term. And in so doing Aquinas thus consciously adopts a non-Christian methodology for structuring his account of Christian revelation and Christian theology.

Within this theological science, the first principles are the articles of faith taken from divine revelation, which are then explored and explained through the resources of philosophical works and the exercise of human reasoning. Philosophical works are accepted as ‘authorities,’ which in different ways further the exploration of revelation. Aquinas argues that such authorities serve, ‘not indeed to prove faith...but to make manifest certain things which are handed down in revelation (*hac doctrina*).’ (S.T.1.1.8 ad 2). For Aquinas the authority of non-Christian philosophical works cannot be placed on an equal footing with either the authority of divine revelation found in the canon of Scripture or with the authority of the doctors of the Church, but nonetheless they have a legitimate and indeed very important role to play in the construction of Christian theology (S.T.1.1.8 ad 2).

In the *Summa Theologiae* and other works Aquinas uses a number of scriptural images to characterise what happens when Christian theology engages with philosophy. The most striking of these is the more Johannine image of changing water into wine and it is this image which best conveys what kind of comparative theology we find in his work. Aquinas’ approach is one of engaged, constructive theology, one that appropriates and transforms the non-Christian thought it encounters. Such an image of the encounter also accords quite well with contemporary appraisals of what is involved in cross-cultural engagements: that any attempt to assimilate the concepts and practices of one culture into another or involves some degree of rupture and change. Another aspect of MacIntyre’s position about the tradition-specific nature of all rationality is that, because terms and concepts are embedded in their own traditions, any attempt to translate or use them by another tradition will involve a process of change of what they meant in their own tradition as they become integrated into one’s own tradition ([15], pp. 370–88).

Aquinas develops the image of water into wine in his commentary on Boethius’ *De Trinitate* [16]. Although this is an early and relatively minor text of Aquinas, it is here that he gives his fullest treatment of the way Christian theology engages with philosophy, the fundamental features of which are then re-affirmed and further articulated in other works, according to the particular concerns of those works. The *de Trinitate* has thus remained a primary text for understanding the way Aquinas conceives of the relation between Christian theology and philosophy.⁵

3.1. Watering Wine Down or Changing Water into Wine

One recurrent objection to Christian theology engaging with philosophy is the idea that this introduces something foreign into Christian theology and hence that it dilutes Christian faith. This is the first and third attitudes D’Costa identifies that Christian theologians took in the Patristic period and which remained as newer forms of philosophy were encountered. In contemporary Catholic theology it

⁴ For the *Summa Theologiae* see [14].

⁵ For good discussions of the importance of the water in wine image in Aquinas and its relation to his use of philosophy, see ([17], pp. 253–69, [18], pp. 154–69).

is reflected in a general reluctance to study the thought of other religious traditions. The image of water and wine occurs a number of times in Scholastic works in the context of just such a concern.⁶ In the 13th century there was considerable controversy over the use of the thought of Aristotle communicated via the Arab translations and commentaries of Avicenna and Averroes, both over particular points where this thought seemed to contradict revelation, such as the eternity of the world, and also over the desire on the part of some Christian scholars to make philosophy the sole criterion and means for knowing truth.⁷ This is very much the third approach D'Costa identifies in the Patristic period and which he sees reflected in the contemporary academy when theology does become assimilated to the methods and values of religious studies.

In the *de Trinitate* Aquinas introduces the scriptural image of water and wine in the form of just such an objection to Christian theology making use of philosophical arguments and authorities:

Besides, secular wisdom is frequently represented in Scripture by water, but divine wisdom through wine. But, in Isaiah Chapter 1, innkeepers are censured for mixing water with wine. Therefore, teachers are to be censured who mix philosophical doctrines with revelation (Boethius *De Trinitate* (henceforth B.D.T.) 1.2.3.arg.5).⁸

In reply to this objection, Aquinas argues that what happens when Christian theology makes use of philosophy is not so much the dilution of the one by the other, but the transformation of the water of philosophy into the wine of an enriched Christian theology:

It can, however, also be said that when one of two things passes over into the domain (*dominium*) of another, it is not reckoned to be a mixture, except when the nature of both is changed. Whence, those who use philosophical doctrines in theology by bringing them into the service of faith, do not mix water with wine, but change water into wine (B.D.T. 1.2.3. ad.5).

In support of this, Aquinas makes two general points about the relationship between natural and revealed truth (and hence between philosophy and Christian theology), before setting out three ways in which the water of philosophy is turned into the wine of Christian theology.

3.2. *Nature and Grace*

The first general point Aquinas makes is to argue that the relationship between philosophy and theology is part of a wider one between nature and grace. Just as grace does not do away with nature, but presupposes and perfects it, so revealed truth perfects natural truth and Christian theology's systematic exploration of revelation perfects philosophy:

⁶ The image of water and wine is used for the same theme, but in different ways, by other Scholastics. So, for example, Bonaventure uses the image when he warns of the dangers of the use of philosophy in the exposition of Scripture: 'Indeed, not so much of the water of philosophy should be mixed with the wine of Sacred Scripture that it turn from wine into water ([19], Volume 5, p. 291).

⁷ Especially promoted by members of the Arts faculty in the university of Paris, and exemplified by so-called Latin Averroism of Siger of Brabant and Boetius of Dacia. This led to the condemnations of 1277. See ([20], pp. 387–409 and [21], pp. 32–6).

⁸ All passages are my own translations of the Latin edition [16].

It must be said that the gifts of grace are added to nature in this manner that it does do away with it, but rather perfects it; whence also the light of faith, which is infused into us by grace, does not destroy the light of the natural reason divinely placed in us (B.D.T. 1.2.3.co.1).⁹

So, just as human nature more generally is elevated by divine grace into a higher dignity of life whereby human beings come to share in the divine life itself in beatitude, so the water of philosophy is turned into the wine of theology rather than the two simply mixed together, because natural truths are elevated and transfigured as they serve to make revealed truth manifest in Christian theology.

3.3. *The Unity of Truth*

The second general point Aquinas makes is that the truths discovered by natural reason cannot be in opposition to the truth given in revelation:

And although the natural light of the human mind is insufficient to make manifest those things which are made manifest through faith, it is however impossible that those things which are handed down to us divinely through faith be contrary to those things which are placed within us through nature. For it is necessary that one be false, and since both are placed within us from God, God would be the author of falsity, which is impossible (B.D.T. 1.2.3. co.1).

For Aquinas, then, there is a unity and harmony within truth, even though that truth is made known to us in two different ways.

These two general points, then, validate the legitimate use of philosophy by Christian theology. The truths found in philosophy are not in opposition to revelation, nor separate from it and unrelated to it, but capable of being drawn into Christian theology's own exploration of truth. The water of philosophy can be made into the wine of theology.

3.4. *Turning the Water of Philosophy is Turned into the Wine of Theology*

Having set out these general points Aquinas moves on specify three ways in which Christian theology engages with philosophy:

Therefore we can use philosophy in sacred teaching in three ways: first, to demonstrate those things which are preambles of faith, which it is necessary to know in faith, those things which are proven by natural reasons about God, such as that God exists, that God be one and other such things proven either about God or about creatures in philosophy, which faith supposes; second, to make known through certain likenesses those things which are matters of faith, just as Augustine in the book about the Trinity uses many likenesses taken from philosophical doctrines to make manifest the Trinity; third, to resist those things that are said against the faith whether by showing them to be false or by showing them to be not necessary (B.D.T. 1.2.3 co.3).

The first way is where philosophy is able to demonstrate truths by the exercise of natural reason, which Christian theology already knows by the light of faith. We can know by natural reason some things about God and the world, such as that God exists certain features about God, and we can know

⁹ Likewise, ST 1.1.8

that the world is created by God. Here on one level there is simple continuity, since it is the same truths that are being made known. Natural reason fulfils a very valuable role in that it serves to make what we accept on the basis of faith more intelligible to us human beings, whose intellects are more easily led to accept and understand something when it is made known by natural reason. At the same time, the water of such philosophy is transformed into the wine of Christian theology since it is placed in the new context of theology and the truths it discovers are located within the richer knowledge about God and the world that is made known through revelation.

The second way is where theology makes use of what Aquinas calls ‘likenesses,’ (*similitudines*), philosophical concepts about ourselves and our world, which resemble the truths known through revelation. In the *de Trinitate* Aquinas gives the example of the way Augustine uses many ‘likenesses’ taken from philosophical teachings to make manifest the Trinity. Here Christian theology finds in philosophical concepts about the human mind a ‘likeness’ for understanding the revealed truth about the Persons of the Trinity. Thus, the account of the mind in terms of understanding and love present within it is a ‘likeness’ for the relationship of the Son, as the Word of God, and the Spirit, as the Love of God, within in the Trinity.¹⁰ Theology takes such ‘likenesses’ and uses them to help us again make manifest the things of faith. As with the first way there is here a form of continuity. However, the concepts are also radically reconfigured, since they are applied to a very different case. The inner life of the Trinity is not of the same order as the elements that make up human psychology and the way understanding and love arise and relate in the workings of the human mind is a very different thing to the way the Persons of the Trinity relate to each other within the Godhead.¹¹ Moreover, and in reverse, the water of human psychology becomes wine of theology in that now the workings of the human mind become seen more clearly as made in the image of God as Trinity.

The third way, finally, is where theology argues against philosophy when it advances something contrary to faith. It corrects error, showing the way reason can go wrong. Here, we might say, there is discontinuity and challenge. In keeping with the affirmation of the unity of truth, a line of reasoning or a philosophical work that contradicts what is known by revelation must be in error in some way. Here the transformation is certainly a radical one, since it is fundamentally one of dissolution. However, again a positive role is given to reasoning, in that, in the light of revelation a Christian theologian is encouraged to find reasons against such arguments brought against what is known by faith, in the certainly that these arguments must be defective.

In all these three ways, then, philosophy is placed in a new context and given a new application. And such transformation is what we actually find in Aquinas’ works when theology engages with philosophy, with all the philosophical texts or ‘authorities’ he draws upon, be they the Greek philosophy of Aristotle or the Arabic philosophy of Avicenna and Averroes or the Jewish philosophy of Maimonides. In the three ways outlined, Aquinas confirms, challenges and radically transforms the concepts and schemes he finds in these sources in the light of what is revealed about God, the world

¹⁰ As Augustine puts it, ‘We found a similar trinity in man, namely the mind, and the knowledge it knows itself with, and the love it loves itself with.’ ([22], pp. 402–3).

¹¹ Other examples include the way Aquinas uses and transforms Aristotelian virtue ethics or causality in the light of order of Christian language of infused natural and supernatural virtues or sacramental causality. For a discussion of these see ([18], pp. 154–69).

and about human nature and destiny. In this encounter, however, philosophy is of immense importance and value and does lead to a better understanding of revelation. The water of Aristotle or of Avicenna may well become the wine of Christian theology, but the water of their thought still remains the material out of which the theology is made and without it we could not have the resultant theology in the form we have it.

It is especially Aquinas' second way that has an immediate resonance with the approach taken in comparative theology. Here we see the aspect of learning that is emphasised by comparative theologians, as Christian theology is enriched through the encounter with non-Christian philosophy, finding new ways of expressing and understanding Christian faith. Indeed, when we consider just how profoundly Aquinas' theology is actually shaped through this encounter, we would seem to find here a powerful affirmation of comparative theology as a legitimate and worthy successor of Aquinas' science of theology. At the same time, we also see the aspect of transformation that D'Costa and McIntyre stress as an important and necessary part of any such encounter. Taken with the other two ways, we thus find here a classical model of theology that is accepted and promoted by the wider community of Catholic theologians for the reasons considered in the previous section, and yet one that encourages the kind of further engagements that are found in comparative theology.

3.5. *The Thomist Approach after Thomas*

In the centuries since Aquinas there continued to be a sustained interaction between Thomist Christian theologians and the intellectual traditions of other religions, with newer engagements developing with the religious traditions of the East. Aquinas' approach was a model for later Catholic missionaries, theologians and contemplatives, whose theology was formed by the Thomist tradition and who worked out their own encounters with the thought and spirituality of other religions in ways similar to those set out by Aquinas between theology and philosophy.

In the case of India, for example, this led to a number of sustained engagements with Hindu thought, especially in the 20th century. Thus, for example, Pierre Johannes S.J. (1885–1955), in a series of articles published in the journal, *The Light of the East* (1922–1934), subsequently gathered together in *To Christ Through the Vedānta* (1996), engages with the thought of the various schools of Vedānta, so that he might construct from them a Vedāntic version of the Thomist account of God, creation and of human nature and destiny, accepting some elements as compatible, rejecting others as incompatible, but reconfiguring everything in the light of Aquinas' teaching. Henri Le Saux (otherwise known as Swāmi Abhishiktānanda) (1910–73), in a deep theological and contemplative engagement with Hindu spirituality set out in his book, *Sagesse Hindu, Mystique Chrétienne: du la Védānta à la Trinité* (1965, later translated into English with the title *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (1974), finds in the Vedāntic description of the ultimate reality as *saccidānanda*, 'truth, consciousness and bliss,' a 'likeness' for the Trinity, exploring how the Vedāntic experience becomes transformed in the light of the Christian experience of God as Trinity. We have already noted the work of Raimon Panikkar in the first edition of *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1964). Panikkar describes his Christological reading of Vedānta as discerning the *sensus plenior* (the fuller sense) of the Vedānta

text, a process he depicts not as the transformation of water into wine, but with the equally powerful image of death and resurrection.¹²

I would like, however, to finish this section by briefly creating a new example of what a detailed application of the model set out by Aquinas might look like in an encounter with Hindu thought, drawing on my own work exploring an encounter between Aquinas's doctrine of creation and the embodiment cosmology found in the Vedāntic theology of Rāmānuja (1017–1137). For Rāmānuja the world is the body of God and this is meant to be taken literally. In his major work, the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, his commentary on the Vedāntic *Brahma Sūtras*, he defines what it means to be a body as 'any substance which a conscious entity can completely control and support for its own purposes and whose nature is solely to be accessory of that entity is the body of that entity' (Ś.Bh.2.19) ([24], vol. III, pp. 26–7). A body, then, is any entity that has these fundamental relationships of dependence on a conscious self. In the case of a finite embodied being, like a human being, this accords with the two-substance dualism that is commonplace in classical Hindu anthropology: a human being is a non-material, conscious, self, which has an integral existence of its own, but which comes to take on a certain type of material body, which is dependent on it. In the case of the world, each entity within the world, whether a material entity or one of the finite selves, is the body of God. God is not dependent on the world nor does God form a single composite substance with the entities that make the world up. Rather the world is the body of God just because each entity is wholly dependent at all times in the ways specified in the definition.

What would it mean within Aquinas' scheme for Christian theology to use of this Vedāntic embodiment cosmology? In keeping with the first way Aquinas specifies, theology will affirm the details of the definition as true of the creational relationship itself as known by revelation and as otherwise explored by reason (S.T. 1.44–5, 103–5). For Aquinas creation is 'the emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God' (S.T. 1.45.1). God is the first and universal cause of all things, in the sense that, as their efficient cause, he bestows on them the entirety of their being and sustains them in being at all times. He governs all things by his providence and is the end of all things. In keeping with the third way, however, Christian theology could not accept that the world is literally the body of God, since the understanding of embodiment that Aquinas upholds is that an embodied being is a substantial unity or composite of soul and body (S.T. 1.75–6). Aquinas rejects the idea that God can be in composition with the world (S.T. 1.3,8). Thus, such a view of embodiment would have to be metaphorical. So, in accordance with the second way, theology could make use of Rāmānuja's embodiment cosmology as a 'likeness,' in the sense that it expresses metaphorically what the creational relationship is and helps us understand what it means in ways that accord with our human intellects and imaginations and with our own immediate experience of embodiment. In the same way Thomas sees the relationship of the soul to its body as expressing what the existence of God in creation is like (S.T. 1.8, 2 ad 3).

4. Tradition with a New Identity

In this final section I now want to consider how this model might be developed further to be more like the kind of approaches taken in the new comparative theology. As I mentioned in the introduction,

¹² For a fuller account of these and other such engagements see Martin Ganeri ([23], pp. 410–32 and [9], pp. 106–40).

adopting such a classical model does not mean that newer insights and emphases cannot also be incorporated. Here I think some of the key characteristics of contemporary Catholic reflection on other religions, as well as those of the new comparative theology, can inform the Thomist model so that it does become fully tradition with a new identity.

4.1. Contemporary Church Teaching and the Thomist Approach

In terms of wider Catholic approaches to other religions, it might seem that Aquinas' conception of philosophy as the exercise of natural human reason and of the natural truths that emerge from it is too limiting. Elsewhere in his works Aquinas does affirm that a different type of engagement can take place with Jewish thinkers, since Christians and Jews commonly hold the Old Testament to be revelation. However, where there is no such common revelation, for Aquinas it is human reason alone that provides the point of encounter.

A contemporary Catholic approach to this question would also want to include the new perspectives that are to be found in the modern official teaching, especially that found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) and subsequent Papal statements, especially those of Blessed John Paul II (1978–2005). Thus, with the Council's Declaration on the Relations of Church with Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) it would affirm that the Church 'rejects nothing that is true and holy' in other religious traditions (N.A. 2). It would also want to affirm the teaching of the Council, further articulated by Blessed John Paul II, on the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit. This teaching, with the expectations and possibilities it raises in any theological encounter with other religions, is part of the any contemporary Catholic hermeneutic of religions and needs therefore to be integrated into any contemporary application of the Thomist model. At the same time, contemporary official Catholic Church teaching would affirm with Aquinas that theology accepts as public revelation only that 'made to the apostles and prophets who have written the canonical scriptures' (S.T. 1.1.8 ad 2). In other words, the Church has no mandate for affirming the existence of other forms of revelation on a par with that traditionally accepted by Christian tradition.

So, a contemporary application of Aquinas' approach might not want simply to equate 'non-Christian thought' with 'natural human reason,' but also to be genuinely open to the presence of the 'holy' as the expression of the universal action of the Spirit, while also keeping Aquinas' understanding of what counts as public supernatural revelation. These new perspectives are important if Aquinas' approach is to be a good model for a contemporary Catholic Christian form of comparative theology. We are clearly now in the area of theology of religions, thinking about what the Church's official teaching and what a Catholic theologian can say can say about other religions and their traditions. Here is another reason for wanting to keep theology of religions integral to the exercise of comparative theology, as D'Costa and others have urged. For the contemporary Catholic theology of religions expands the Thomist approach in ways that are conducive to the aims and methods of the new comparative theology. Much the same observation will be true with any retrieval of a classical Patristic or Scholastic model.

4.2. Characteristics of Comparative Theology

Classical models can also be expanded and reconfigured by the characteristic emphases developed within the new comparative theology: its emphasis on deep study of other religions in their integrity; its concern to locate theological engagement in particular encounters with individual texts or in a theological dialogue on particular themes of common interest; its enthusiasm for the richness and sophistication of other religious traditions, with the expectation that there is much to be learnt in the encounter and that there is the real possibility of knowing God better by widening the horizons of theology to include other religions.

It is helpful here to recall some of the main distinctive characteristics of comparative theology as set by Francis Clooney. As Clooney put it:

Comparative theology—comparative and theological beginning to end—marks acts of faith seeing understanding which are rooted in a particular faith but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition ([25], p. 10).

As Clooney goes on to say, comparative theology is a:

[r]eflective and contemplative endeavour by which we see the other in the light of our own and our own in the light of the other. It ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities –texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons – near one another, so that they may be seen over and over again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each other differently because the other is near, and by cumulative insight also begin to comprehend related matters differently. Finally, we see ourselves differently, intuitively uncovering dimensions of ourselves that would not otherwise, by a non-comparative logic, come to the fore ([25], p. 11).

As we have seen, the Thomist approach is one that is more emphatically evaluative than the portrayal of comparative theology here. However, what is equally evident about both the theory and the actual practice of the Thomist approach is that it is open to learning from other religious traditions. The emphasis on learning in new comparative theology in fact allows us to see afresh and to retrieve more clearly something that is already there, but perhaps neglected in some applications of Thomism, where the content of Thomist account as it stands becomes fixed and simply something to be repeated in different ways, rather than a model of theological openness to the true and holy wherever that may be found and of the ever present possibility of new forms of theological expression that can arise from engagement with the thought of other religions.

Moreover, the emphasis Clooney puts on ‘reflective and contemplative’ and ‘intuitive’ character of this learning has been a very important contribution of the new comparative theology to all interreligious engagement. Such learning is ‘dialogical’ in the sense of a theological conversation where an emphasis is placed on the process of listening itself to what another tradition is saying and to a gradual transformation of one’s own understanding through reasoning, intuition and the imagination. What this amounts to is a way of understanding the encounter that is less dialectical than that articulated in Aquinas’ disputational works and more akin to the contemplative and imaginative reading tradition of *lectio divina* and of traditional Biblical exegesis within the Western Christian

tradition, something which has also given rise to rich theological and spiritual insights. Where a number of religious traditions are involved this is reconfigured as under the practice of *collectio* (reading together) promoted in Clooney's own form of comparative theology.

4.3. Contemporary Examples of Thomist Comparative Theology

We have noted that contemporary Thomists have now started increasingly to use the modern terminology of interreligious encounter for what Thomas was doing. To some extent this is simply a matter of labelling, but, along with this, Thomist encounter has also come to adopt more creatively the approaches found in the new comparative theology.

A pioneering figure in this was the Scottish Sacred Heart Sister, Sara Grant RSCJ (1922–2000), who spent many years studying and teaching Hindu traditions in India, as well as engaged in a deep contemplative encounter with them as the head of a Christian ashram in Pune, as she recounts in her Teape lectures, gathered later in *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian* (2002). In these lectures and in her other published work, especially her book, *Śaṅkarācārya's Concept of Relation* (1999), which is a detailed study of the relation between ultimate being and finite being in the non-dualist tradition of Advaita Vedānta against the backdrop of Aquinas' account of the relation between uncreated and created being, Grant argues that there are areas of fundamental convergence between the thought of Śaṅkara and Aquinas. Going further, she concludes that Advaita Vedānta is the best conceptual resource Christian theologians can have to express the unique creational relationship of inseparable dependence. In her opinion Śaṅkara is even more successful than Aquinas in expressing what is fundamental and unique in the relation between the world and God. Thus, she argues that his account has something of unique value to offer to all people in relating the 'realm of the spirit and the realm of ordinary life':

The radical non-dualism of Śaṅkarācārya, understood as I have interpreted it, could be of greatest assistance here, for of all the metaphysical ventures of man, it alone, it seems to me, does full justice to both the immanence of the creator and his absolute transcendence, to the creature's utter contingency and its paradoxical autonomy ([26], p. 192).

For Grant this overcomes a dualism often present in Western theology and spirituality where God is depicted as outside of all things, the 'God up there' or 'out there,' as she would put it ([27], p. 56). Grant finds Śaṅkara's Vedāntic description of Brahman as the Supreme Self, the Supreme Subject within all things and intimately present in all, far better a way of expressing the reality of God immanence in all things as the creator.

In part, in Grant's work we simply see the first and the second ways Aquinas identifies for the use theology can make of philosophy. Śaṅkara's thought is taken up and transformed as it is put to work expressing the Christian doctrine of creation. Grant's own position that there is straightforward convergence between the account of Śaṅkara and that of Aquinas is somewhat questionable. Rather, to some extent at least, she is re-reading Śaṅkara in the light of Aquinas, re-configuring Śaṅkara's thought so that it comes to express the doctrine of a positive creation. However, the encounter with the thought of Śaṅkara and with contemporary manifestations of Advaitic practice is far more than simply an exercise in conceptual theology for Grant. Her encounter with Advaita solves the deepest tensions

at the heart of her own spiritual quest, as she recounts so vividly in *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*. Advaita works on her imagination and her contemplative experience as much as her reasoning. Her encounter with Advaita is also a dialogical one, in which the holiness of Advaita practitioners was fully recognised and appreciated.

A second important example is the work of the American Thomist and Catholic priest, David Burrell C.S.C, who in his considerable scholarly studies of Medieval theology has explored and emphasised how important Jewish and Islamic thinkers are for the shaping of Aquinas' own theology, taken as fellow enquirers into issues of God, creation and human life common to all three religions. While Burrell accepts that Aquinas is not interested in other religious traditions as such in the manner of contemporary interreligious dialogue and theology, nonetheless Aquinas' serious engagement with Jewish and Muslim thinkers can rightly be labelled an interfaith and intercultural achievement. For Burrell Aquinas can also function as an important model for contemporary engagement. As he puts it:

Ours is a very different world from Aquinas,' yet his ability to see the presence of interlocutors from other faiths as a spur to understanding of his own tradition offers us a model which deftly eschews intellectual colonizing and displays the way in which every living tradition grows by carefully responding to challenges from without ([2], pp. 86–7).

More recently, Burrell has started to use the resources of the Medieval tradition to carry out his own exercise in contemporary comparative theology, one which reflects the developments in Catholic approaches to interreligious relations. In *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (2011), he considers how contemporary members of these traditions can advance in their theological understanding of a range of topics such as creation, providence, grace and eschatology through an ongoing theological conversation with thinkers from all the three traditions. As Burrell himself states, this is a comparative theology, which takes the form of 'creative hermeneutics':

I have suggested calling this inquiry an exercise in 'creative hermeneutics,' whereby conceptual patters, often developed separately, can illuminate one another once we see them as executing cognate explorations. This approach reflects the fresh face of interfaith inquiry often associated with the liberating document of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, yet more pertinently part of the air we have come to breathe ([28], p. xii).

In my own work I have also tried to create a theological dialogue between Aquinas and the Hindu Vedāntin, Rāmānuja, that is rooted in a comparison of their texts, but also allows a creative conversation to take place that illumines each other and the theological themes they deal with in such a manner that it can enrich contemporary theologising. In *Two Pedagogies for Happiness* (2010) [29], building on the seminal work by Clooney in *Theology After Vedānta* (1993), for instance, I take Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣya* as textual wholes and explore how they serve as pedagogies, leading their readers to understand why the final human goal is a happiness that lies in the knowledge of God, and, though engagement with the text, actually enabling readers to advance some way towards that goal.

Likewise, going back to the examples I gave in the previous section of how Thomas' model of engagement might be applied to Rāmānuja's embodiment cosmology, I would also want to develop such an engagement further to reflect both contemporary Catholic teaching on other religions and the emphases of the new comparative theology. Rāmānuja's theology is not just an exercise in exegetical

skills and clever reasoning. The concepts he develops serve the spiritual goals of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition to which he belonged and for which he undertook his rigorous intellectual work, the goals of realising human happiness as the body of God, with God the support and end of human existence and fulfilment. This is encapsulated in the teaching that the finite self finds its bliss in realising fully that it is the accessory (*śeṣa*) of the Lord, its principal (*śeṣin*), which is a fundamental feature of his definition of embodiment. Here we might want to consider the question of the presence of the ‘holy’ as well as the ‘true’ in Rāmānuja’s account. Moreover, the idea that the world may be thought metaphorically to be the body of God strikes me as being a very powerful resource for the enrichment of the theological imagination and hence of spiritual experience. An encounter with Rāmānuja’s account is not simply a matter of reasoning, of working out conceptual similarity and dissimilarity. Reading Rāmānuja’s texts, in which his concept of embodiment is developed, along with those of Aquinas is also an act of *collectio*, a meditational exercise that forms its own extended pedagogy, feeding and expanding my religious imagination as it seeks to intuit the closeness and delight that is being created and being destined to know God, as I learn to see myself as the body and accessory of God.

5. Conclusions

In this article I have argued that there are certain concerns within the Catholic community in Britain, which, unless addressed, are likely to militate against any greater acceptance and appreciation of the new comparative theology and I have suggested that the retrieval of classical models might serve to meet these concerns. I have explored one particular model, that of Thomas Aquinas, as a classical theological account that enjoys a very great prestige in the Catholic tradition.

Other comparative theologians may well feel the force of these concerns less strongly. Disagreement on this matter, however, would I hope not detract from appreciation of the ongoing value of classical models in themselves for the contemporary exercise of comparative theology, which I have wanted to explore and promote. For its part, Aquinas’ approach is one that supports a sustained and fruitful engagement with the thought of non-Christian traditions. The general principles of the relationship of nature and grace and the affirmation of the universality and unity of truth provide a useful theological justification for having confidence in such an engagement. Moreover, as I mentioned at the beginning, it brings a number of important contributions to the discipline of comparative theology. First, the process of transformation, captured by the image of water turning into wine, and the three ways in which this occurs, is helpful as an analysis of cross-religious encounter, one that is true to what is involved in any theological engagement across religious traditions. In concrete theological engagements some such transformation always takes place, if the thought of another tradition is actually assimilated into one’s own, and if one learns from another tradition within the terms of one’s own identity. Such theological engagement is, of course, rather different from the methods and concerns of comparative religion, where the phenomena of religions are simply compared.

Aquinas’ approach, then, is simply a good model for how to do comparative theology, when taken and developed further to meet contemporary Catholic reflection on other religions as well as the distinctive emphases of new comparative theologians. At the same time, for those concerned with such

issues, it does also have the power to unite the academy with the *ecclesia* and hence serves the interests of Catholic theologians who want to explore such cross-religious encounters without becoming dislocated from the accepted norms and traditions of their church community. Thus it can support a form of new comparative theology that is manifestly *tradition with a new identity*.

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