

**Thinking “Religion”: the Christian Past and Interreligious Future of Religious Studies and Theology**  
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**Abstract:** The category “religion” is a tripartite, emergent from Christian theology during modernity, as Christianity increased, transcended and diminished, and persistent in contemporary religious studies and Christian theology. With the postmodern and postcolonial “return of religion”: the tripartite category is located as product of Eurocentric modern Christianity; Christianity is positioned as one religion among others; and religious studies engages religious traditions, including Christianity, in their particularities, rather than in terms of overarching (modernist) categories. Within Christian theology, while Christianity transcended persists in (pluralist) liberal theologies, religion is repudiated and (particularist) Christianity re-centred in its neo-orthodox strands. While the Eurocentric entwining of Christianity with western modernity unravels, Christianity re-centred looks to a Trinitarian core, differently appropriated in the diverse locations constituting World Christianity. The recent particularist focus of both religious studies and Christian theology opens a path towards greater cooperation between the two disciplines, beyond tensions arising from the Christian-infused tripartite.

## INTRODUCTION

Christianity is one religious tradition among others; it is *a* religion, not *the* religion. Religious studies scholars will duly claim to have long advocated that Christianity accept its place as merely one religious tradition among others. This reality must also be abundantly clear from any contemporary Christian theological perspective that takes into account a World Christianity in ascendancy in the global South, alongside the persistence of culturally embedded religious traditions, even as Christian identity and commitment declines amid the population of its longstanding – and now multicultural and thus multireligious – European heartlands.

However, it is less than a century since Ernst Troeltsch portrayed Christianity as the Absolute religion of the “highly developed” peoples of Europe (1980 [1923]: 24). The category “religion” was embedded in academic and cultural discourse by his time of writing; this paper aims to contribute some historiographical clarification of the

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modernist category “religion” in order to illumine contemporary academic scrutiny of the “return of religion” to public prominence and trans-disciplinary academic concern, and the implications of this scrutiny for the related scholarly disciplines of Christian theology and religious studies. A proper consideration of the relationship between insider discourses of religious traditions other than Christianity with religious studies is beyond its scope, though my hope is that the case made here may be relevant to this question.

While Christianity is clearly just one religion among others, it is also the case that Christianity is in a unique position in relation to the category “religion”, and thus to the academic discipline of religious studies and within interreligious encounters between religious traditions. It is the argument of this article that the category “religion” is in effect tripartite, having three different meanings: namely Christianity increased, Christianity transcended, and Christianity diminished. The conditions that gave rise to this tripartite categorization have already passed away, but it remains pertinent to note that the modernist concept of “religion” – a core category for religious studies – has a specific relation to Christianity, which can be illuminated by distinguishing these three distinct meanings. This uniqueness of the position of Christianity is an ineradicable feature of global history – and of the genealogy and current constitution of the academic disciplines of Christian theology and religious studies. “The return of religion” is testament to the decline, in the context of the postmodern and postcolonial global order, of the conditions which gave rise to tripartite “religion”.

“Religion as Christianity increased” belongs to Christian theology, and has been influential also on emergent religious studies; “religion as Christianity transcended” is the mark of some liberal theologies, whereas “religion as Christianity transcended or diminished” belongs to religious studies in its modernist and contemporary forms. My aim in this paper is to make explicit the continuing consequences of these tripartite meanings in Christian theology and religious studies, consequences that continue beyond critique of the essentialising and colonialising implications of the category “religion”. I attempt to help loosen the knot that is the conflicted relationship between Christian theology and religious studies within contemporary academic scholarship, and I aim to do so by endorsing a sense of their common complicity in

Eurocentrism and highlighting related endeavours to address its implications, which are effectively bringing the two enterprises closer together. These endeavours attempt to move beyond the tripartite category “religion” by giving closer attention to religious traditions in their particularity.

The “return of religion” is a return of the prominence of the religions in contemporary political life: it is not specifically or primarily a return of Christianity in the west, though it is represented in the growth in Christianity beyond the western world, and a resurgence of diasporal Christianity within its bounds. The return of religion, where Christianity appears as one of a variety of returning religions, necessarily repositions Christianity in relation to the category “religion,” and sets new items on the agendas of Christian theology and religious studies. Christianity is moving beyond “religion as Christianity increased.” Alongside creative constructions of liberal theologies, with their imaginative traffic with Christianity transcended, a neo-orthodox Christianity re-centred emerges in response to the postmodern and postcolonial shift. One manifestation of this neo-orthodoxy that reiterates Christianity’s Trinitarian specificity, is that Christian theology manifests particularist approaches to theology of religions, congruent with its position as one religion among others, in addition to the pluralist approaches that emerge from Christianity transcended. Religious studies, too, is turning to the particularities of religious traditions, and thereby reducing reliance on generic (western) theories of religion.

In the first part of this article, the argument is made for the tripartite definition of religion, and for its formative influence in both religious studies and Christian theology. The relationship between the tripartite category “religion” and the religions is examined here, so placing modernist comparative theology, alongside religious studies, within the zone of impact of the genealogical critique of “religion”. Material selected from comparative theology demonstrates only limited Christian insight into religious traditions, despite an abundance of references to them in the prolific literature on “religion”: this limitation is explained in terms of Christianity increased.

The second part of the article turns to the postmodern and postcolonial “return of religion”, as exposing both the modernist genealogy of the tripartite definition, and the shared complicity, historically and today, of religious studies and Christian

theology in modernist Eurocentrism. The argument here concentrates on developments in Christian theology of religions, which move it beyond the assumption of “religion as Christianity increased”: here Christianity transcended is perpetuated in pluralist methods, and the turn to particularity represents a move beyond the tripartite, in the neo-orthodox form of “Christianity re-centred.” Apart from the significance of these developments for the self-understanding of Christian theology, this move also addresses from without the legacy of the early influence of Christianity increased on embryonic religious studies, and on contemporary self-understandings of the discipline.

Examples of exchange between Christian theology and religious studies are examined to identify both the legacy of the tripartite, and the impact of particularist moves beyond these formative notions of religion. I aim to identify existing strategies and resources for addressing Eurocentric complicity, in order to enable Christian theology and religious studies more effectively to understand “the return of religion” in the postcolonial and postmodern world. I suggest that, in doing this, Christian theology moves closer to the terrain of religious studies by, first, attending more closely to the lived religion of Christian faith communities, and, second, developing theologies of religion and comparative theologies which respect the particularity of religious traditions, rather than assuming Christianity to be the destination of all religions. Concurrently, by attending more closely to lived religions in their own terms, religious studies moves closer to the terrain of theology. There is thus a convergence of Christian theology and religious studies in the historical moment where the tripartite definition is subject to stringent critique.

#### “RELIGION” IN MODERNITY: A TRI-PARTITE CATEGORY

The modern tendency within Christian theology to understand religion as “Christianity increased” develops from the conjoining of Christianity with secular power, whereas the understanding of religion as “Christianity transcended” emerges from Christianity’s internal critics, who take the Protestant criticism of Christianity beyond the parameters set by Luther or Calvin. Finally, the third meaning of religion emerges in the contest between Protestant Christianity and the secularising forces of modernity.

The conjoining of Christianity with secular power is evident in medieval Christendom, from which emerged the colonial expansion of (secularising) European modernity, thereby reiterating the conjoining of Christianity with Roman imperialism in antiquity. The biblical record of the pre-imperial early Church documents a Jewish movement which becomes open to pagan Gentiles, as well as to Jews. Thus Christianity breaks new ground in its cultural inclusivism, and in its capacity to convert both Jews and pagans into a tradition that transcends territorially bound religious cultures. But in the conjoining of Christianity with secular imperial power, the inclusive impulse of Christianity, in terms of a catholicity of the Church where all peoples with all of their specific cultural traditions are welcome, becomes hopelessly entangled with a colonising universalism. This entanglement is reiterated during modern colonialism, though this impulse is complicated by the growing secularism of modernity.

In this movement, the concept of religion uncritically reflects this Eurocentric impulse towards global expansion and domination in two differently oriented trajectories: first, towards the global expansion of Christianity, in which all other religions will be displaced or fulfilled, that is, religion as “Christianity increased”; second as a universalising category that transcends all particular religious traditions, including Christianity, that is, religion as “Christianity transcended.” However, the modern category of religion also indicates a premodern phenomenon in retreat before the twin rationalist and empiricist forces of Enlightenment scepticism, with their burgeoning modern technologies. In the modern disenchantment of the world, the sacred is relegated to a separate sphere from the secular, one that is increasingly perceived as irrelevant to the production of reliable knowledge and its associated technologies of mastery. Western Protestant Christian theologies have done battle with this secularising logic of religion as “Christianity diminished” over the last quarter millennium.

### **“Religion” as Christianity Increased**

The *religare* of classical pre-Christian pagan cultures is a crucial source for the concept of religion, which is taken up into Christian discourse (so, for example,

Augustine writes of Christianity as *De Vera Religione*). But under the conditions of European modernity, the tradition of Christianity as the one true religion, which had been carried forward from the patristic era into medieval Christendom, became conjoined with expansionist colonialism: religion as “Christianity increased” refigured longstanding Christian notions of Christianity as the one true religion.

Modernity is universalising in two related senses. First, Europeans rooted in the western classical tradition assume entitlement to think for the whole of humanity. Modern western thought is thus assumed to have a universal application. As one example, we may consider the writings of Immanuel Kant on “universal history” and “perpetual peace”. In his “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose”, Kant describes a natural movement of human progress from barbarism to civilization – from the “purposeless state of savagery” towards a “universal *cosmopolitan* existence” (Kant, 1991:49+51), which is to be reflected in an international order of “perpetual peace” (Kant, 1903 [1795]).<sup>1</sup>

Kant’s intriguing use of the term “cosmopolitan” is located in the kind of world order he envisages, and the place of Europe within that order. It is clear that Europe is at the centre of Kant’s narrative of progress, wherein a “germ of enlightenment” develops through the turbulence of history, in “a regular process of improvement in the political constitutions of our [European] continent (which [Kant estimates] will probably legislate eventually for all other continents)”. A footnote to this passage elaborates this point: “Only an *educated public* which has existed uninterruptedly from its origin to our times can authenticate ancient human history. Beyond that all is *terra incognita*; and the history of peoples who lived outside this public can begin only from the time at which they entered it. [From this point] their narratives can be followed backwards” (Kant,1991:52). Civilisation and white Europe are clearly equated in Kant’s view of past history and future international polity. If the rest of the world is to enter into the order of perpetual peace, this will happen through its incorporation into the European narrative of the history of civilisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in *Perpetual Peace*, Kant sets out three definitive articles which will guarantee peace within a federation of free states (1903 [1795]).

Second, this assumed superiority is evident in the colonial territorial expansion which characterised the modern period. From its origins in the late fifteenth century annexation of the Americas, as the intra-Christian religious wars in Europe were transcended in the forging of liberal democracy, modern colonialism advanced in the confidence that European ideas, politics and technologies – together constituting European civilisation – were the destiny of all the globe. Running in parallel with this expansion of European civilisation was an increasing awareness of religious traditions outside Christianity, as disseminated via travellers' tales, and through the growing body of orientalist scholarship. However, Christianity itself continued to provide the yardstick for measuring the religions.<sup>2</sup>

Consider some examples. Schleiermacher was to make this universal religion foundational to his notion of religion as a fundamental human experience of absolute dependence on God. But Schleiermacher's general account of religion is merely a preface to his working out the implications of absolute dependency on God in terms of Christian theology alone (Schleiermacher, 1928 [1821-2]). Similarly, nineteenth century debates about Absolute Religion, often founded in Hegel's philosophical thought, led to Christianity being envisaged as *the* superior and absolute religion. Nineteenth century Anglican clergymen and academic scholars, Charles Hardwick, F.D. Maurice and John Wordsworth, place Christianity in a category of its own as the one revealed religion among the natural religions of the world, with their natural theologies (Hardwick, 1855; Maurice, 1886; Wordsworth, 1881).<sup>3</sup> In Hardwick's terms, Christianity was ever "one beacon planted on a hill", capable of making humanity at large "one again in Christ" (Hardwick, 1855, I: 75). Hardwick writes in full confidence that "Christianity will tolerate no rival" (Hardwick, 1855, I: 37). In a similar vein, the scholarly American author, the Unitarian, James Clarke, engages with orientalist scholarship on the religions, but he distinguishes Christianity as the only Catholic and universal religion from all other ethnic and local religions (1871:

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<sup>2</sup> This point could be argued with respect to the seventeenth writings of Samuel Purchas, which I discuss in the following section.

<sup>3</sup> These three authors show an awareness of religious traditions outside Christianity based on acquaintance with orientalist scholarship, with Hardwick's scholarly effort demonstrating the most impressive mastery of this knowledge. But their commitment to the superiority of Christianity over other religions is unswerving, though their language is more respectful than that of Christian writers in the previous century.

14). Christianity as “universal religion must root itself in the decaying soil of partial religions” (Clarke, 1871: 1). Religions outside Christianity are arrested:

Like great vessels anchored in a stream, the current of time flows past them, and each year they are further behind the spirit of the age and less in harmony with its demands...Christianity blossoms out into modern science, literature, art...Christianity, the spirit of faith, hope and love, is the deep fountain of modern civilization (Clarke, 1871: 29-30).

Christianity alone is *pleroma*, πλήρωμα, come to fulfil other religions (Clarke, 1871: 31). These authors write in awareness of the growing Christian missions that accompany European colonialism. Notions of absolute and universal religion are embodied in Christianity conceived as either displacing the religions, or in softer rhetoric as their fulfilment, given they are destined to wither away under the impact of European modernity. Christianity expands to fill the space marked religion. Christianity is the ultimate destiny of the religions.

As Hugh Nicholson has convincingly argued (2009:612), it is significant for the development of religious studies that pioneers of comparative religion, or *Religionwissenschaft*, notably Max Müller and C.P Tiele, shared the belief that the fullest expression of the truth of religion lay in Christianity: they differed from orthodox Christian theologians, such as Hardwick, Maurice and Wordsworth, in seeking to demonstrate this superiority by means of the science of comparative religion, independent of Christian belief that the uniqueness of Christian revelation sets Christianity apart from other religions.<sup>4</sup> Nicholson takes a dialectical approach, arguing that nineteenth century comparative theology was defined in opposition to a dominant dogmatic and antagonistic “traditional confessional theology” and in alignment with liberal (non-sectarian) theology (2009:613-4). His analysis invites discrimination between “displacement” and “fulfilment” Christian attitudes to the religions, the former tending towards the dogmatic and antagonistic, and the latter towards comparative theology as characterised in Nicholson’s dialectic. Displacement

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<sup>4</sup> However, the shared belief – between Christian believers and pioneers of comparative religion – that the future is Christian provided the rationale for including the findings of comparative religion on the syllabus for missionary training, to expedite the increase of Christianity. See Jordan, (1905:307;407-8) for a prominent example of this logic. For Christian believers convinced of the truth of Christian revelation, comparative religion provided a supplementary confirmation of their pre-existing confidence in Christian superiority and its destiny as either displacement or fulfilment of all religions.



and fulfilment positions are precursors of the “exclusive” and “inclusive” Christian theologies of religion, which emerged in twentieth century debate. Where (the Anglican) Hardwick represents a displacement view, (the Unitarian) Clarke epitomises a fulfilment perspective. My category “Christianity increased” includes both elements, and is thus at odds with Nicholson’s dialectic at this point.<sup>5</sup> But more generally, Nicholson’s argument highlights the continuity between comparative theology and comparative religion, and supports my case that “Christianity increased” was a strong influence upon the development of religious studies – though one which future generations of religious studies scholars would seek to eradicate from the discipline, while liberal theologians followed Troeltsch’s lead in questioning the Christian missionary project, and thus placing Christianity increased in question.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholson himself does not use the terms, ‘displacement’ and ‘fulfilment’. Somewhat frustratingly, he gives no representative examples of the ‘dogmatic and antagonistic’ theological ‘other’, to liberal comparative theology. Regarding my above examples, Hardwick and Clarke are clearly opposed: the former bases his view that Christianity will displace inferior religions on an orthodox theology of Christianity as the unique revealed religion; the latter, articulates a Unitarian fulfilment form of Christian universalism. It is interesting to reflect on the placing of Maurice – an orthodox Anglican cleric, yet brought up as a Unitarian – a position he chose to relinquish in order to be ordained. His instincts were towards an inclusive, fulfilment form of Christian universalism, though he asserted the superiority of Christianity on grounds of the unique revelation in Christ. (See Young, 1992 for an informative account of Maurice’s theological trajectory.) It is significant that I turn to three British Anglican writers in comparative theology, who do not figure in Nicholson’s analysis. Viewing the three through the lens of Nicholson’s dialectic would lead to all three being placed in the dogmatic category, though Maurice alone combines this with a fulfilment approach to religions beyond Christianity. His presence somewhat confounds Nicholson’s dialectic. See also my comment on Söderblom in FN 11.

<sup>6</sup> See Troeltsch, 1980:87-8 for his argument that missionary aims need to shift from a goal of conversion to one of mutual understanding between the religions. Troeltsch was a supporter of the *Allgemeiner Evangelische-Protestantischer Missionverein*, known as *Ostasienmission*. A prominent example of a religious studies scholar seeking to purge Christian influence from the discipline is Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), though, as Nicholson points out, in developing her thesis on the perverse effect of confessional comparative theology on emergent religious studies, Masuzawa does not attend to effects of belief in Christian superiority on the part of Müller and other leading comparativists (Nicholson 2009:612). Logically, a belief in Christian superiority is necessarily coupled with religion as Christianity increased, as well-exemplified by the above quote from Clarke. Nicholson’s analysis ‘challenges the standard history of the discipline of religious studies as a gradual emancipation from theology’ (614). He argues that ‘much of the subsequent history of the discipline in the twentieth century, in particular, the classic understanding of the history of religions as a hermeneutical discipline, can be redescribed in terms of a dialectic internal to theological liberalism’, which is thus continuous with nineteenth century comparative theology (615). My own argument is that Christian theology and religious studies are equally implicated in Eurocentric colonising modernity: the tripartite, emerging from Christianity, shapes both disciplines in their Eurocentric engagement with religious traditions beyond Christianity. Where Nicholson emphasises religious studies methodology as continuous with that of liberal theology, my tripartite category invites recognition of the widespread repudiation of Christianity increased, by religious studies scholars and liberal theologians alike. I argue below (see also FN 11) that liberal theologians tend to be comfortable with Christianity transcended, in the form of traffic across open, loosely defined Christian boundaries, with cultural and religious elements beyond Christianity whose understandings are not informed by orthodox Christian theology.

## “Religion” As Christianity Transcended

It was but a small step from Christianity as the absolute and universal religion, absorbing all others within itself, to the notion of an absolute religion transcending Christianity, and incorporating all the religions. This universal religion is articulated by Herbert of Cherbury in his metaphysical treatise of 1624, *De Veritate*, and his later *De Religione Gentilium*, eventually published in 1663, where he argues for a universal providence recognizable by and offering salvation to all peoples (Pailin, 1984: 3). Though Schleiermacher might explore Christianity alone to clarify his thesis of absolute dependence on God, others could use his generic category of religion to evacuate Christianity in favour of a universal religion.

One notable example is found in the discourse of Absolute Religion in the writings of Theodore Parker, an American Congregationalist minister who gained a popular readership on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing on Schleiermacher, he argues “[t]here is but one Religion” (Parker, 1875 [1842]: xiv): our “sense of dependence” is proof of the existence of the Absolute (1875: 7). In Parker’s flowery rhetoric, to cleanse “the fair temple of Divine Truth” (1875: v) theology, Bible, Church and creed are all to be swept away. The days of the Christianity of the Churches are numbered, “But Absolute Religion, Absolute Morality”, Parker assures us, “cannot perish” (1875: 207). “There is but one Religion, and it can never die out” (1875: 52):

He that worships truly, by whatever form, worships the Only God; He hears the prayer, whether called Brhma, Jehovah, Pan or Lord; or called by no name at all. Each people has its Prophets and its Saints; and many a swarthy Indian, who bowed down to wood and stone; many a grim-faced Calmuck, who worshipped the great God of Storms...yes, many a savage with his hands smeared all over with human sacrifice, shall come from the East and the West, and sit down in the kingdom of god, with Moses and Zoroaster, with Socrates and Jesus, - while men, who call daily on the living God, who pay their tribute and bowed at the name of Christ, shall be cast out, because they did no more (Parker, 1875: 70).

Parker exemplifies the cutting loose of the term religion from its moorings in the monotheisms of the Abrahamic faiths, wherein *religare* – to re-bind, and thus anchor,

loose or broken bonds with God – describes a natural desire for closer union with God our creator. In contrast, Hardwick is anxious to refute the spiritualism of Parker’s Absolute Religion, which he sees as “carrying men afresh to paganism” (Hardwick, 1885, I: 23): his intention in his three-volume *Christ and Other Masters* is to re-anchor religion as Christianity increased, and to counter religion as Christianity transcended.

However, notions of generic religion, cut loose from its Christian origins, are carried forward in the development of religionist and social scientific theories of religion. I turn to social scientific theories in my next section. Here, Paul Griffiths’ observations about “nontheological natural-kind construals of ‘religion’” (Griffiths, 2006: 69) are pertinent to my discussion.<sup>7</sup> Griffiths highlights the tension within religious studies between theories that allow for religion to be “natural” – generated by the order of things – and theories that assume religion is solely “artifactual” – a human construction. He argues, persuasively, that “nontheological natural-kind construals of ‘religion’” necessarily collapse into *theological* natural-kind construals. This is because historical attempts to construct nontheological natural-kind construals of religion “perhaps always” abstract from theological, “usually Christian-theological and even more usually Protestant-Christian-theological” understandings (Griffiths, 2006: 69). Griffiths emphasises this – disputable and axiomatic – Christian theological understanding of religion as conceiving human desire for God who brought us into being as “a fact about us that depends solely on the God who made us and not upon our own interests or makings” (2006:68). He charges non-theological construals of religion that hold to use of natural, as opposed to artifactual, sortals of a “coyness”, leading to the veiling of disputable axiomatic understandings [derived from theology] by appealing to the authority of “science” or “history” of religion (2006: 72-3).<sup>8</sup> Griffiths’ argument can be seen to trace the process by which religion

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<sup>7</sup> Griffiths argues that every academic discipline has a formal object: for theology this is God, for anthropology it is the human being, for religious studies it is “presumably” religion. “Sortal terms” provide categories for sorting relevant “things into kinds”. The two fundamental kinds are “natural and artifactual”: in religious studies there is disagreement as to whether religion is a natural (generated by the order of things/belonging to the nature of the cosmos) or artifactual kind (generated by human activity or thought) (Griffiths, 2006: 66-68).

<sup>8</sup> Griffiths explains the motivation of this move within religious studies scholarship as being as a determination to do “not theology”: “...the study of religion as an academic discipline came into being with theology as its constitutive other, that which it was determined at all costs not to be” (2006:73 + 72). Griffiths makes his case by engagement with the work of Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln (2006:71-4).

as Christianity transcended emerges from Christian theology and is continued in religionist theories of religion, with their recourse to categories assuming the “natural” to be infused and informed by the supernatural.<sup>9</sup> Within Christian discourse, concepts of natural theology, then natural religion, attest the possibility of knowing God through engagement with the natural order. But, as Griffiths comments, the concept of “religion” is merely of “peripheral significance” for Christian theology: all work done by “religion” can be done in other ways (Griffiths, 2006: 69). However, my argument in this section is that, once loosed from its moorings in Christian theology, “religion” begins to do a different work, as the example of Parker demonstrates. Religionist theories of religion do this different work while bearing the marks of their Christian origin.<sup>10</sup> This particularity in their origin may well reduce their effectiveness as generic tools for understanding religious traditions outside – or even within – the trajectory of the Abrahamic faiths.

At this point, it is useful to revisit, from the perspective of Christianity transcended, Nicholson’s argument for continuity between comparative theology and comparative religion, due to their shared roots in liberal theology. His observation highlights the continuum between liberal theologies and broader religionist perspectives in which Christian particularity is obscured, making visible a grey area between liberal theology and religionist theories, with both reflecting Christianity transcended. Thus the form of Christianity that remains continuous with religionist theories is those versions of liberal theology which are more drawn to the creative potential of encounter at and beyond the boundaries defined by orthodox theology, than to the core of Christian particularity. Such irenic openness is repeated in the pluralist theologies of religions that emerge in the latter twentieth century. Such pluralist theologies, I argue, mirror religionist theories of religious studies, in their desire to search for what is common between (and within) religious traditions, and in their

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<sup>9</sup> In contrast, theories of religion that rely on “artifactual” categories rest on secularising assumptions, congruent with Christianity diminished, rather than on veiled Christian grounds. However, it could be argued that “artifactual” categories also carry traces of the exclusions of Christian theology, so bringing forward the assumption underlying the perception of “natural” religion outside Christianity as necessarily in error: given that natural religion does not rest directly on Christian revelation, it therefore has an “artifactual” quality. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue this case in full, Christianity re-centred has the potential to divest itself of this tendency to rush to judgment concerning other religious traditions.

<sup>10</sup> Thus Parker’s Absolute Religion simultaneously reflects and exceeds Christianity.

tendency to envision a complementary relationship between the disciplines of non-“dogmatic and antagonistic” Christian theology and religious studies.<sup>11</sup>

### “Religion” As Christianity Diminished

Discussion in the previous two sections concerns the rise and expansion of the category religion, whether in the form of a Protestant Christianity as absolute religion, or in the form of an absolute religion transcending Christianity – with its reflection in religionist theories of religion. This section turns to the European counter tendency of secularism, with its spectre of the demise of religion as a necessary – and welcome – consequence of modernity. In this narrative of the necessary secularism of modernity, religion is portrayed as a diminishing, archaic and redundant separate sphere, irrelevant to the brave new secular world of modernity and destined to wither away: to the secularising mind, Christianity is but one more antiquated vessel anchored in the stream, of no further relevance to modern civilisation. Late nineteenth century social scientific theories of religion assumed this secularising trend,<sup>12</sup> while the twentieth century secularisation thesis interpreted available evidence as supporting its actualisation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Nicholson’s assertion of a continuity between comparative theology and comparative religion, explicable in terms of the rooting of both in liberal theology (see FN 6), fits more comfortably with Christianity transcended, as reflected in religionist theories, than with Christianity increased (though fulfilment approaches may drift away from their affirmation of Christianity as *pleroma* towards Christianity transcended). This is coherent with Nicholson’s judgment that exclusivism has no content, being constituted as the other of liberal theology of religions or comparative theology. See FN 28. Nicholson refers to the kinship between *Religionwissenschaft* and liberal theology being ‘even more evident in the ‘phenomenological tradition of Söderblom, van der Leeuw, Otto and Heiler’, all of whom endorsed a complementary, cf exclusionary relationship between the two disciplines (616, FN 13). I make two comments: while ceding the case re the phenomenological method of van der Leeuw and Heiler, their liberal theology approaches Christianity transcended, rather than Christianity increased; Otto I would site as a religionist, and thus as also comfortable with Christianity transcended; Söderblom is more complex, as, in his episcopal and ecumenical commitments, he worked for Christian unity, but, according to Charles Curtis (cited in Haberman, 1972), Söderblom upheld the uniqueness of Christian revelation, thus “incorporating the study of non-Christian religions into the discipline of Christianity”. I would suggest therefore, that he is better sited – alongside F.D. Maurice – as advocate of Christianity increased. His use of comparative method is one that religious studies scholars of subsequent generations have worked to repudiate. This difference exemplifies an outworking of my ceding exclusivist Christianity increased with content, over against its position in Nicholson’s dialectic.

<sup>12</sup> Nineteenth century social scientific theories of religion – as phenomenon performing a social function in pre-modern societies (Durkheim, 1975), or building on Feuerbach’s notion of religion as a psychological projection or Marx’s charge that religion is an opiate and so a distraction from the problematics of material reality – look to the future possibility of the demise of religion.

<sup>13</sup> Berger’s subsequent “recantation” (Bruce, 2001) is one marker of the “return of religion”.

In this long ongoing debate, it is Protestant Christianity that is in the dock defending its specific version of religion against the charge sheet brought by modernity. In this contest, the secularist notion that religion is a premodern phenomenon, destined to wither away, is confronted by the form of Christianity that was most intimately connected with the emergence of modern consciousness. As an outcome of this conflict, the incorporation of modern historico-critical methods has become the hallmark of Protestant Christianity, together with, on the one hand, engagement of modern rationality through analytic philosophy of religion, and, on the other, an emphasis on religious experience within the Christian tradition in pietist “religion of the heart”. Twentieth-century Protestantism has been lent new impetus in directions that refuse to allow secularism to dictate the terms of Christian engagement with the world: the rise of evangelical fundamentalism and Pentecostalism on the one hand, and Barth’s neo-orthodoxy and, latterly, postliberal and conservative postmodern reassertions of the integrity of Christian theology and ecclesiology on the other. These initiatives share in common a commitment to reinscribing a firm boundary between Christianity and the world. Meanwhile, post Vatican II Catholicism has made its own – late – form of accommodation with modernity. The trend towards decline in Christian churchgoing as a widespread communal practice – the datum explained in terms of the secularisation thesis – has thus been accompanied by a reordering of Christian theology and Christianity in the face of modernity.<sup>14</sup>

This survival of Christianity in late modernity contradicts the projected demise of religion: thus the survival of Christianity is one notable aspect of the wider “return of religion”. While Christianity may be diminished in the west, it has not disappeared. Yet the secularity of social scientific theories of religion remains, and these theories, no less than the religionist theories considered above, carry within them the trace of this particular returned religion.<sup>15</sup> As Cabezón puts it:

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<sup>14</sup> My discussion here is limited to the European context. Consideration of the contemporary global emergence of dynamic forms of Christianity beyond the established denominational traditions is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>15</sup> See Asad, 2003 for an in depth discussion of this point in relation to both the modern West and the Middle East.

Since our notion of the secular emerges principally through the repudiation of Western Christianity, the latter lives on in the ideology of secularism. In this sense secularism carries within it the trace of – and to that extent is constituted by – (a very particular form of) religion (2006: 32).

From social scientific theories of religion stems that resolute determination to root out all trace of Christian influence from religious studies. But the attempted expulsion of Christianity only serves to highlight the Eurocentric universalism that rushes in to take the place of the excluded Christian version. Not only is Christianity difficult to expel, given its symbiotic relationship with European secularism, but shared complicity in Eurocentrism is brought into focus in this attempted exclusion of the religion that has dominated the emergence of religious studies. The intertwining of Christian universalism with the totalising politics of colonisation and its metaphysical justification is too deeply embedded in European modernity to be easily rooted out. Though this is the agenda set by the postcolonial postmodern: European Christianity and secular modernity alike are challenged to relinquish their assumed entitlement within Eurocentric global hegemonies, as these are simultaneously reinscribed and dissolved through change in the economic global order.

### **“Religion” and the Religions**

Before turning to the postcolonial and postmodern “return of religion”, it will be helpful to clarify the relation between the religions beyond Christianity and the tripartite options in modernity. In my discussion so far, there has been little reference to the religions beyond Christianity, excepting my reference to Clarke’s distinction between “natural” or “ethnic and local” religions, and the “universal” religion of Christianity. Given that the tripartite emerged in the centuries of European expansion, it emerged at a time when increased contact with religious cultures and traditions was generating a wealth of new data on the religions, supplementing the travellers’ tales of early modernity. Religion understood as Christianity increased, transcended or diminished, furnished three distinct kinds of discourse about the religions. Yet, in each discourse, the religions are used as ammunition in contests with opposing views and factions, rather than being the subject of investigation in their own right.

Where the religions feature in contests about religion as Christianity increased, they are found wanting according to the true religion of (Anglican) Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Thus Samuel Purchas, in his nine volume *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (1617), draws on a range of classical and contemporary sources to examine “the Soul of the World, RELIGION” (1617: 2a). Purchas brackets together the “Irreligious Religions” of “Asia, Africa and America” (1617: 2a) and “the Paganism of AntiChristian Poperie, and other Pseudo-Christian heresies”, contrasting both with the Truth of Christianity (1617: 4) found in the Church of England alone. Purchas demonstrates his commitment to religion as (Protestant) Christianity increased when he exhorts his readers to pray for “heathen” salvation in Christ “to the ends of the world” (1617: 4). His major preoccupation, however, is to assert his own variant of Christianity against all others. The religions without Christianity serve as ciphers for the unnatural pluralism within; they are viewed through an Anglican Christian lens.

Moving to the latter nineteenth century work of Clarke, a distinct softening in attitude towards the religions beyond Christianity is evident.<sup>17</sup> Yet his comparative theology contrasts decaying religions, destined for incorporation into the *pleroma* of Christianity, by means of Christian foreign missions: Clarke’s notion of religion, like that of Purchas, is one of Christianity increased. Wordsworth refers to One Religion of Christian Truth, mapping all deficient variants of Christianity and other religions under the two headings, Pantheism and Deism, in distinction to the single truth of Anglican orthodoxy (1881:67).<sup>18</sup> For Hardwick and Wordsworth, and even Maurice, only orthodox Christianity was capable of satisfying the yearnings of natural religion alive in the hearts of all “men”; religion as Christianity increased was the only destiny of the religions.

Herbert of Cherbury’s “universal providence” contributes to notions of religion as Christianity transcended, but once more his extensive reference to the religions not only asserts available salvation for all through universal providence, but also uses data from the religions in his attack on priestcraft and clerical power within Christianity. Thus the religions are seen through the lens of a pre-existing negative judgment on

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<sup>16</sup> Thus reflecting my research base in mainly British sources during the modern period.

<sup>17</sup> In terms of Nicholson’s thesis, Clarke clearly represents liberal comparative theology defined over against Purchas’ dogmatic antagonism.

<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth’s thesis is neatly summarised on a table given on this page.



Christianity, and they are deployed to support this judgment. De Cherbury's concept of universal providence is a European rationalist invention, more a careless extrapolation of European concerns than a serious engagement with religions of the wider world. The same judgment may be made on Parker's talk of absolute religion two centuries later. Religion as Christianity transcended bears the mark of its place of origin, and is careless in its analysis of religious traditions beyond Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

Religion as Christianity increased asserts (a variant of) Christianity as true religion, with other religions placed alongside other Christian variants as false religion, whose destiny is to be incorporated within the true. Religion as Christianity transcended seeks to incorporate all religions, including Christianity, within true religion, albeit a true religion shaped from selected aspects of Christianity, frequently including escape from clerical control. Within the secularising arguments of religion as Christianity diminished, instances of all religions, including Christianity, are criticised to expedite the decline of all religion, including Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

To sum up my argument in this first part of the article, the tripartite (of religion) starts trajectories that are recognisable in contemporary exclusivist and inclusivist Christian theologies of religions, in liberal theologies, and in religionist and social scientific theories of religion respectively. Early comparative religion, built first on generations of European orientalist textual scholarship, and subsequently on interpretation of data collected through ethnographic work in anthropology, was infused with the founding assumptions of liberal comparative theologies, which straddled Christianity increased and Christianity transcended, and did battle with the spectre of Christianity diminished.

In the polemical exchanges giving rise to the tripartite, other religious traditions are – like Catholicism – seen as appropriate targets of modernist critique: Protestant Christianity alone is deemed capable of withstanding the secularising acids of modernity, albeit sometimes by making compromises that contribute to Christianity

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<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the later religionist theories of religious studies are based on more careful collection and interpretation of ethnographic material, showing greater attention to reflexivity.

<sup>20</sup> See Pailin (1984) for a nuanced discussion of the deployment of the religions to support arguments on all sides in the range of intraChristian and Christian/secular debates.

transcended. With the inception of religious studies, religious traditions were treated with a new seriousness, while the influence of the tripartite undoubtedly remained. Orientalist scholarship embodies sometimes Protestant Christian, sometimes secularising presuppositions; but it consistently and unavoidably reflects also both the Eurocentric preoccupation with the inescapable tussle between these two forces, and belief in the superiority of European modernity, which is shared by contestants on both sides of this debate.

Despite growing western orientalist fascination with eastern religion, as recent critique suggests, western categories of religion, and religionist and social scientific theories alike, have tended towards widespread misunderstanding of non-western religions in their respective particularities. These categories are equally complicit in the imposition of western-conceived essentialist and colonialist notions of religion – the object of relentless recent critique (Asad, 1993; King, 1999; Masuzawa, 2005).<sup>21</sup>

My analysis so far concerns the Christian past of religious studies, with some reference to Christian theological attitudes to religion and to the religions beyond Christianity. My argument is that, in each of its tripartite manifestations, religion is flawed by its modernist Eurocentric universalism. With the postmodern troubling of confident modernity, and the related postcolonial challenge to European hegemony, this fundamental flaw has been thrown into stark relief: both religious studies and Christian theology are grappling with the consequent destabilising of Eurocentrism, including the calling into question of the category religion.

The “return of religion” is set within this postmodern and postcolonial shift. It represents the marginalisation of the Eurocentric Protestant Christian/secular modern exchange discussed above, partly due to the dissolving of the modernist secular/sacred boundary, and, ironically, partly due to the reverse migration which has been the inevitable postcolonial effect of the prior era of colonial expansion. Into the public arena cleared for regulated expressions of civic (Christian) religion alone, have erupted the religious practices of diasporic communities who are unused to the notion of religion being relegated to the personal and private sphere. And this has generated

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<sup>21</sup> This critique does not, of course, go uncontested. As a notable example, see Segal (2006).

a more robust reassertion of Christianity, too, in western public life. Thus religious studies and Christian theology are simultaneously grappling with a deep problematisation of the tripartite, and with the return of religion. Christian theology of religions includes perspectives which perpetuate notions of Christianity as the one true religion, destined to increase as it exclusively displaces or inclusively fulfils all other religions; but newer pluralist, particularist and comparative theological approaches to religions beyond Christianity seek paths beyond Eurocentric hegemony.

In the second part of this article, I turn to the shared predicament and respective opportunities of Christian theology and religious studies in postcolonial postmodernity. I suggest the disciplines are making compatible responses to their common complicity in Eurocentrism – responses that work to close the gap between their respective endeavours. With regard to Christian theology, the focus here is on Christian theology of religions and its counterpart, comparative theology, from the latter decades of the twentieth century, given that it is in these theologies that the implications of the Eurocentric problematic become most clear. In reaching beyond this problematic, and its associated tripartite, a particularist turn invokes Christianity re-centred, while liberal theologies maintain an open boundary with Christianity transcended.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE “RETURN OF RELIGION”: RESPONSES IN THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Nicholson’s dialectical account of the formation of nineteenth century liberal comparative theology over against an un-defined dogmatic, antagonistic and exclusive theological other, allows him to conjoin liberal comparative theology and emergent religious studies within a wider project of liberating the discourse on religion from dogmatism, antagonism and exclusion – “in short, from the political”; though the political eternally reappears in subtle and unacknowledged theological hegemonies (2009:616 + 617).<sup>23</sup> However, in a useful discussion of recent developments,

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<sup>22</sup> The struggle against Christianity diminished persists, and Christianity increased is now a minor theme, detached from its former Eurocentric connections. It is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue these trajectories.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholson’s evacuated political relies on Schmitt’s notion of liberal “depoliticization” of the friend/enemy relation (2009:613).

Nicholson identifies explicit attention to the political in recommended moves in comparative religion away from foundationalist presuppositions, to approaches seeking to acknowledge and defend scholars' commitments while maintaining openness to corrigibility.<sup>24</sup> For Nicholson, this (political) acknowledgement of their comparative work as situated, interested and corrigible is matched by the stance of new comparative theologians, as exemplified by Clooney and Fredericks (2009:633), albeit – as I will discuss below – the latter work is vulnerable to the self-deception that bedevilled its nineteenth century namesake. Thus there is a convergence between new models in comparative religion and comparative theology, and this convergence represents a move beyond the hegemonic failures of liberal depoliticization, evident in the “ineluctable advance of the political” (Nicholson, 2009:634 + 622).<sup>25</sup> Nicholson hereby crafts his own distinctive version of a “brighter future” for the relation between Christian theology and religious studies.

In terms of my analysis, Nicholson's thesis is helpful in clarifying the place of the political in the outworking of the tripartite, and moves beyond it. Christianity increased includes both antagonistic/displacement and irenic/fulfilment elements, with the latter working against the former and in a similar direction to both Christianity transcended (in theological and religious studies forms), and Christianity diminished (where the anticipated decline of Christianity, along with all religions, will bring interreligious antagonism to an end). Clearly, liberal depoliticization accompanied the Eurocentric colonial project, and can be deployed to depoliticize continuing Eurocentric hegemonies. I suggest that moving beyond Eurocentrism, in Christian theology (and religious studies), invites a form of politics that resists depoliticization, by cooperating in the dismantling of lingering notions of Christian, European and modern superiority in a respectful engagement with difference. As I argue below, this new kind of politics already has expression in the forms of interreligious theology that have emerged as the tripartite comes into question – including the new comparative theology that Nicholson upholds as exemplary.

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholson upholds Hugh Urban – and in contrast to Griffiths – Bruce Lincoln as exemplars of this new approach to comparative religion, following Urban in applauding Lincoln for making explicit his Marxist political commitments (2009:631-4).

<sup>25</sup> Though Nicholson does acknowledge that the “theoretical reticence” of comparative theologians may both be subject to wider critique of postmodern “nominalism”, and be devoid of the bold and imaginative theological revisioning that is the best feature of pluralist theologies (2009:627, in the context of 624-8).

Nicholson issues a warning that contemporary comparative theology risks repeating “the same pattern of self-deception” as that found in emergent religious studies, when it “dichotomizes its relationship with the theology of religions” (2009:609). The self-deception he refers to, on the part of nineteenth century comparative theology, issued in blindness toward the effect of presuppositions concerning the superiority of Christianity to religions scientifically compared with it – a blindness that subsequent generations of religious studies scholars have laboured to expose. However, Nicholson chooses to vindicate contemporary comparative theology, by arguing that its methodology avoids both the *a priori* methods, and the global totalizing perspectives on the religions, that characterise exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches to theology of religions (2009:618-9).<sup>26</sup> In my analysis, both these characteristics arise from Eurocentric privileging of embedded philosophical, modernising and colonising traditions, which have become intertwined with Christianity, and then religious studies, during modernity, but which are now capable of disentanglement.

There are, then, two points where I part company with Nicholson. First, where Nicholson portrays dogmatic exclusivism more as a projected theological other than as a recognisable theological position, I find it helpful to locate the renewed “neo-orthodox” other to theological liberalism, as productive for theology of religions, in opening a particularist path that both represents Christianity re-centred, and has affinities with particularist method in religious studies. Thus, as I argue below, I find there is more than one way out of theology of religions being perceived as an enclosed loop, founded upon and trapped within Eurocentric *a priori* and totalizing methodology. Comparative theology is not the only way beyond this vicious circle.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> And thus breaks free from the dialectic in which the political is (unsuccessfully) occluded, together with the attempted occlusion of continuities with the repudiated position: for comparative theology – exclusivism, then inclusivism, then pluralism; just as the parallel and thus convergent move in comparative religion repudiates exclusive, then inclusive, Christian *theology*.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholson might argue this is entirely consistent with his own project, though beyond its scope. Thus he affirms that from a present perspective, alert to the continuities between inclusivism and pluralism (ie a post-pluralist perspective), “the distinction between ecumenical and confessional theology appears more a matter of degree than a matter of kind” (2009:630). In other words, Nicholson critiques the dialectic he reveals as locating contemporary comparative theology, and argues that comparative theology exceeds the dialectical logic whereby previous theses/antitheses are occluded in construction of the new synthesis. He argues *against* comparative theology eschewing theology of religions, (summarised 2009:628). Whereas Nicholson’s main project is to resite comparative theology in relation

Second, as indicated above, I suggest an alternative political strategy, namely attention to incommensurable difference conjoined with commitment to peaceful relations. Such serious attention to difference necessarily exceeds depoliticised liberal tolerance, and is alert to the ineluctable advance of unacknowledged hegemonies: it points to a possibility of irenic politics. To argue the case summarised here, I turn to re-articulations of Christian theology after religion.

### **Christian Theology and the Return of Christianity after “Religion”**

If Schleiermacher, beginning with religion, initiated the modern liberal theological trajectory of Christianity increased – and unwittingly, Christianity transcended – Barth surely sought to block this path with his critique of religion, and his return to Trinitarian Church dogmatics. Here Nicholson’s dogmatic and exclusive theological other takes on a recognisable (neo-orthodox) shape.<sup>28</sup> Barth instigates a counter-trajectory in Christian theology and ecclesial practice, in which Christianity is re-centred, a counter-trajectory which is continued in postliberal and conservative postmodern modes,<sup>29</sup> through theologians such as Frei, Lindbeck, Milbank and Hauerwas. Christian religion is thus reconceived as, potentially, a robust and effective practice, expressive of an orthodox Christian theology.<sup>30</sup>

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to shifts in method in comparative religion (2009:628-37), this is entirely compatible with my figuring of Christianity re-centred expressed within a post-pluralist turn to particularity in theology of religions.

<sup>28</sup> A debate as to whether Barth is thus antagonistic to religious traditions beyond Christianity has ensued. Certainly Kraemar’s appropriation of Barth in order to reinstate an exclusive, displacement theology of religions, coupled with aggressive mission, provides a prime example of this reading of Barth in his *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, and his paper given to the 1938 Tambaram world missionary conference. Conversely, Trevor Hart argues that Barth’s ‘attitude toward religious alternatives, far from being dismissive or arrogant, is one characterised by respect and humility’ (1997: 139). Similarly, David Lochhead argues that Barth’s theology is compatible with a dialogic approach to those of faiths beyond Christianity, while warning that dialogue needs to be faithful, or it runs the risk of becoming a mere monologue between liberals of many faiths (1988:31-9). Such readings of Barth, which counter Kraemar’s exclusivism, are compatible with the particularist theologies of religion, which I endorse in this article.

Despite my argument for the compatibility of Barth with the particularist understanding of Christianity re-centred which I advocated in this paper, I take issue with Nicholson’s position that exclusivism is the other to the discourse of theology of religions, so is not a viable theology of religions in its own right (2009:617 FN14).

<sup>29</sup> See Ward (2005) for a useful distinction between ‘conservative’ and liberal postmodern theologies, following the two trajectories distinguished here.

<sup>30</sup> My concern in this article is with interreligious Christian theology, rather than with the continuing engagement of Christian theology with secularism, but it is interesting to note that, for postliberal and conservative postmodern theologies, such robust and effective Christian practice presents a re-enchanted enclave, reclaiming secular modernity, which it considers to be almost parasitical upon Christian theology, having appropriated theological terms while failing to empty these of theological

It is certainly the case that theology of religions is not a major preoccupation of this renewed dogmatic orthodoxy.<sup>31</sup> However, I consider it is useful to recognise the emergence of a particularist theology of religions, expressive of Christianity re-centred on its Trinitarian core, as starting point for Christian theologians engaged in interreligious relations: this particularism differs from exclusivist perspectives in the irenic commitments it shares with pluralist approaches. Gavin D’Costa’s work (1990) is one notable example of this (post-pluralist) Christianity re-centred. Where twentieth century exclusive and inclusive methods in theology of religions continue the contrasting elements within modernist Christianity increased, the pluralist method can be seen as a continuation of Christianity transcended. I suggest that the turn to particularity in Christianity re-centred has a similar potential to that identified by Nicholson in comparative theology: namely, to exceed the problematics of *a priori* and totalising method – which compromise pluralist approaches, no less than earlier exclusivisms and inclusivisms – through attention to incommensurate difference.<sup>32</sup>

It is significant that a major contribution to the emergence of a particularist approach to theology of religions has been made by S. Mark Heim, a self-styled inclusivist (2001:8). While, for Heim, the Trinity is a “map” finding room for concrete truth in other religions (2001:167), his explorations of traditions beyond Christianity in terms, first of distinct “salvations” (1997), then of particularist religious ends (2001) moves beyond exclusivism, and expands inclusivism through his respect for the abiding specificity of these traditions.

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content. See Ward (1999) as an example of theological reappropriation of theological terms from “secular” discourse.

<sup>31</sup> Thus, for example, Lindbeck clarifies in the second edition of *The Nature of Doctrine* that his chapter on interreligious relations is included “not for its own sake” but to test the “nonecumenical plausibility of a theory of religion and doctrine developed for Christian ecumenical reasons”. He declares the book was not intended as a theology of religions, and that he “definitely [does] not intend to write” such a volume (2009:138).

<sup>32</sup> Thus, for example, the following statement by D’Costa mirrors Nicholson’s characterisation of comparative theology’s empirical method as implying “a willingness to revise theological judgments in light of the particular teachings of other traditions” (2009:619): “A Trinitarian Christology is open to the world religions in refusing to make either a priori critical judgments or a priori positive affirmations...[and] in that it fully acknowledges and looks forward to hearing the voice of God, through the Spirit, in the testimonies of peoples from other religions. ...Such testimonies may also be the vehicles of judgment upon Christian theology and practice ... Christians must be attentive to other religions in order to be faithful to their own” (1990:27).

Asian Catholic theologies of religion make a parallel move to Heim's (Protestant) intervention. Thus Peter Phan follows the Belgian Jesuit, Jacques Dupuis, in developing an "inclusive pluralism", as appropriate method for Christian theology of religions in Asian contexts (Phan, 2004: 67).<sup>33</sup> *Inclusive* pluralism allows Phan to work within the post-Vatican II authorised inclusivist approach towards religions beyond Christianity; inclusive *pluralism* allows him to consolidate a broad range of Asian Catholic writings to incorporate elements from a pluralist methodology, without compromising Catholic particularity.

Nicholson's dialectical method leads contemporary comparative theology in a similar direction. While siting comparative theology as the third move of Christian liberalism over against dogmatic exclusivism – each move responding to a revealed problematic in the previous one (2009:621-2),<sup>34</sup> Nicholson counters the argument that many comparative theologians are – in similar vein to Heim – self-styled inclusivists, by stating that their form of inclusivism is "quite distinct from the classic inclusivism associated with the older theologies of Christian fulfilment" (2009:622). Defined over against pluralism's Christianity transcended – which reiterated the nineteenth century Eurocentric extension of Christian-derived notions to religious traditions beyond Christianity – Nicholson asserts inclusivist comparative theologians "acknowledge and affirm the particularity of their own – typically Christian – perspective" (2009:623). He thus describes a similar expansion of inclusivism beyond the assumed impasse in theology of religions, to the one I have sketched in relation to Heim and Phan.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dupuis also uses the alternative term 'pluralistic inclusivism'.

<sup>34</sup> To clarify, the previous two moves are classic fulfilment theory (ie inclusivism) then pluralism. So fulfilment theory moves over against displacement, then when hegemonic tendencies are revealed within inclusivism, the pluralist move is made, only to be met with further critique of its hegemony; by its focus on the local and particular, comparative theology attempts a move beyond hegemony – which can, however, itself be subject to postmodern critique – see FN 30.

<sup>35</sup> Drawing on Jameson, and Hardt and Negri, Nicholson addresses a possible postmodern critique of comparative theology. In its attention to the local and particular, comparative theology can be seen to elide boundaries between the compared traditions, in a way that runs in parallel with the elision of national boundaries by global capitalism (2009:624-7). "...localized reading of texts leaves the doctrinal superstructure of the compared traditions, with their typically absolutist claims, safely intact" (2009:627). Nicholson muses as to whether the method of localised reading may discourage the imaginative theological revisionings that characterise pluralist theologies, so undercutting the synoptic vision that grounds the interreligious liberative practice advocated by Knitter (2009:627-8). My suggestion is that inclusive positions, such as those of Heim and Phan, respect the particularity of religious traditions, without reducing these to the local, thus undercutting the absolutism that founded Christianity increased. Irenic politics strives to recognise the problematics of singular synoptic vision, namely that it is necessarily situated. Local dialogue partners within religious traditions situate their



It is important for my thesis to clarify how particularistic theologies of religions succeed in breaking out of the impasse Nicholson describes. How does this particularism differ from earlier Eurocentric forms of exclusivism or inclusivism? In turning away from the “Christianity transcended” pluralist method, particularist approaches return to Christian tradition, and thus represent Christianity re-centred. My suggestion is that in turning towards the particular, the connection between the tripartite and the universalising impetus of European modernity is undone, releasing the Trinitarian universalism that inheres within Christian theology from its Eurocentric moorings, and relocating this Christian universalism within one incommensurable religious tradition among others.

One corollary of the turn to the particular is the focus on the local, which is situated both in its cultural context, and within the synoptic vision of its specific religious tradition. One marker of the turn to the particular is the serious engagement of postliberal and conservative postmodern neo-orthodox theologies with culture, so undoing the stark contrast between, on the one hand, neo-orthodox preoccupation with the revelation of the Word of God in the world, and, on the other, liberal engagement with agendas set by the cultured despisers of (Christian) religion. A good example of this shift is found in postliberal/postmodern attention to lived religion of Christian faith communities, which necessarily involves taking culture seriously, while repudiating the methods of liberal theology. Thus, writing as a postliberal theologian, Kathryn Tanner sets “a new agenda”, where the relationship between contemporary Christian theology and the category of culture is re-envisaged (1997). Tanner emphasises the fluidity in cultural exchange between any ecclesial community and its cultural context. The ecclesial boundary is “one of use that allows Christian identity to be essentially impure and mixed, the identity of a hybrid that always shares cultural forms with its wider host culture and other religions...” (Tanner, 1997: 114), though borrowed materials must lose their fixity; they “must be transformable to the

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own local within a traditioned synoptic vision that is incommensurate with alternative synoptics. Irenic interreligious politics seeks ways of faithfulness and witness to particularity while negotiating incommensurate synoptic visions.

service of the Word” (1997:150).<sup>36</sup> Christian theology and practice is constantly made anew with materials borrowed from ever-changing cultural contexts.<sup>37</sup>

Tanner’s attention to Christian theology as related to diverse forms of lived Christian ways of life is reiterated in Ward’s anticipation that faith communities will increasingly “define themselves over against those who consume religion as a special effect”, by defining their practices and belief systems more tightly (2006: 186).<sup>38</sup> To turn to practice is to turn to what is distinctively Christian, so sharing neo-orthodox concern, while understanding this distinctiveness, following Tanner’s postliberal intervention, as a contested and creative use of borrowed cultural materials. Such attention to cultural embeddedness and thus variety within Christianity, in the context of World Christianity where the Eurocentric is displaced, is intrinsic to the particularist turn in Christian theology of religions. Where modern Christianity increased was entwined with European colonialism and the rhetoric of white superiority, Christianity re-centred frees Christianity from such Eurocentric entanglements.

While particularism is continuous with earlier inclusivism – even exclusivism – in asserting the unique particularity of the Christian tradition, it is radically discontinuous in acknowledging Christianity’s diverse cultural situatedness, diachronically and synchronically, and thus acknowledging also diversity within as well as between traditions. Such attention to incultured religion brings theological method closer to strands of religious studies that similarly focus on lived religion. My final task is to return to the relationship between the disciplines of Christian theology and religious studies in light of my portrayal of particularism within Christian theology, in order to clarify this convergence in method.

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<sup>36</sup> “The only privilege Christian social practices have themselves is the privilege of humility; their own claim to fame is always the ironic one of knowing their own full humanity and therefore their distance from the purity of the Word they witness to (Tanner, 1997: 114).”

<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that Nicholson (2009:635) applauds the historicism of a theological trajectory represented by Kaufmann, McFague, Brown and Davaney – which in my terms must be located as working across open boundaries of Christianity and thus tending towards Christianity transcended – with no reference to postliberal/conservative postmodern work that exhibits the same qualities. My brief discussion of Tanner, and reference to Ward (one example cited above), are testimony to the attention to the cultural embedding of theology and ecclesial practice in neo-orthodox Christianity re-centred.

<sup>38</sup> The undisciplined and eclectic consumer spirituality that borrows from traditions, so eliding commitment to their communities and disciplinary practices, in my view is a direct descendant of religion as Christianity transcended.

## **Christian Theology and Religious Studies: a Brighter Future?**

A special issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in March 2006 invoked a series of insightful reflections on the subject of “The Future of Religion in the Academy”, which provides a case study in exchanges between the disciplines. While a seemingly “interminable academic debate” about “religious studies vs. theology” (Ochs, 2006: 125) was partially reinscribed, the issue is of greater interest for its signs that the logjam of this entrenched intractability shows signs of moving. Robert Segal made an impassioned defence of the continuing need for generalising theory at “[t]he heart of the modern study of religion” (2006:157), asserting that the theories arising from the social sciences of anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics give the scholar an expertise that the religious adherent lacks. However, it is possible that scholarly categories forged in religious scepticism misinform. Segal’s foray feels like something of a rearguard action, in the face of Cabezón’s contrasting argument for the data of non-western religions to be respected as “source of theory”, not merely as raw material to be manipulated by [social scientific] theory (2006: 30).<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Gavin Flood took a different tack, in advocating the social scientific study of religion be continued alongside a hospitality within religious studies towards traditions’ self-enquiry (2006: 47), so providing a “forum for ‘passionate’ study and argument: the argument of traditions within themselves, with each other and with social science” (2006: 55).<sup>40</sup> Flood’s approach was effectively endorsed by Peter Ochs, in Ochs’s criticism of the tendency of religious studies to remove “religious phenomena” from their contexts and resituate them within “conceptual universes of our own devising”, and his constructive proposal for enquiry into “comparative religious traditions” as a means of moving beyond the seemingly interminable debate between religious studies and theology (2006: 126). As in Flood’s proposal, the aim

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<sup>39</sup> In terms of my argument re the tripartite, social scientific theories emerged as a form of Christianity diminished: scepticism towards Christianity is then extended towards all other religious traditions. Cabezón is envisaging the emergence of theory which is neither religionist (Christianity transcended) nor social scientific (Christianity diminished) but enables thinking *with* cherished concerns of a religious tradition beyond its bounds. This is precisely the outcome of interreligious encounter in the spirit of Heim, Phan or contemporary comparative theology.

<sup>40</sup> Although Flood does not discuss this point, there might well be scope here – as advocated by Cabezón – for intratraditional arguments to give rise to theories of religion of equivalent heuristic potential to western social scientific – or religionist – theories which emerged historically in relation to intratraditional Christian arguments.

of this approach is to “[afford] each community to speak in its own voice” (Ochs, 2006: 127), and in so doing to address the error that disconnects religious studies thinking from everyday religious practices (2006: 125). Thus, a parallel tension is found between forms of Christian theology that embrace or ignore lived Christian religion, and religious studies methods that valorise theory or religious traditions as lived.

In this paper I have tried to argue that attention to the diversity of lived Christianity in the making of constructive Christian theology works to reduce the gap between theology and religious studies; this gap is further reduced when religious studies attends to lived religion within the traditions in their own terms, rather than in those of imported western theories. However, these various intrareligious and interreligious investigations benefit also from the continued outsider view that theory provides; heeding Cabezón’s call for the religions beyond Christianity to act as source of theory, would facilitate the boundary between religious studies and theology becoming “one of use”, with each discipline sharing the cultural forms of the other and acting as host culture for the other.

Christian theology, in the wake of its long struggle with secularism, is sometimes included within the secular university, where the discipline of religious studies has pride of place, and sometimes excluded: get thee to a seminary! This paper is a plea for a renewed and committed engagement between both forms of scholarly enterprise, and for the inclusion of Christianity re-centred in neo-orthodox postliberal/conservative postmodern theologies in this engagement, alongside liberal theologies with their tendency towards Christianity transcended. Christianity re-centred has already manifested its own particular contribution to the refiguring of the sibling disciplines of religious studies and theology in this fashion. In the century to come, we might hope to see a consolidation of equivalent institutional bases within non-Christian religious traditions, to those established by, for and over against Christian theology. Such a consolidation might facilitate their articulation in categories of their own, eventually transforming academic scholarship in religious studies rooted in the modern western tradition, as well as urging further transformation in Christianity re-centred. The truism that Christianity is one religion among others will then be

reflected in scholarship in the theologies of a range of traditions, in religious studies, and in the institutional bases enabling such scholarship.

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