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# For Comparative Theology's Christian Skeptics: An Invitation to Kenotic Generosity in the Religiously Pluralistic Situation

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On strictly theological grounds, the fact of religious pluralism should enter all theological assessment and self-analysis in any tradition at the very beginning of its task.<sup>1</sup>

O you who have sound intellects/ Look at the doctrine which hides itself/  
Beneath the veil of the strange verses.<sup>2</sup>

In present-day North America, with mosques and temples springing up a few streets from synagogues, cathedrals, and steepled church houses, a state of religious plurality is becoming undeniably more pronounced. In the wake of 9/11, the tensions ushered in by this shifting landscape are also increasing—not least for Christian believers who have shadowy notions of the religious “other” and are concerned about the realities of a pluralistic, post-Christian American society. Meanwhile, Christian scholars and practitioners engaged in the burgeoning field of comparative theology view this pluralistic situation not as a daunting challenge; rather, they view it in terms of its constructive potential. For them, religious pluralism is not an obstacle to be overcome but an opportunity for rich theological inquiry and

<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, “Comparative Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Lindsay Jones; 15 vols.; 2nd edition; Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) 13:9125.

<sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* IX. 61–63, quoted in William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 84.

practice. Thus, these comparative theologians<sup>3</sup> urge their fellow Christians to take up a distinct form of conversation with the religious newcomer, guided by peaceful interreligious dialogue and the understanding that interreligious learning is a worthy aim.<sup>4</sup>

For those considering taking up the comparative theological venture, it is worth emphasizing how far its goal of interreligious learning extends, as evidenced by its unabashed theological impetus. David Tracy notably identifies this characteristic when he describes “comparative theology [as] refer[ring] to a more strictly theological enterprise” than that of “comparative religion”—the former being a discipline “which ordinarily studies . . . two or more [traditions] compared on *theological* grounds,” while the latter looks closely at two or more traditions without the intention of investigating dogmatic faith proposals for the sake of renewed doctrinal construction.<sup>5</sup> In short, one might best characterize comparative theology as a discipline driven by a unique impulse for faith-seeking interreligious understanding,<sup>6</sup> undergirded by the conviction that one may encounter theological truth outside of one’s home tradition. Given this commitment, it seems unlikely that comparativists will be able to “sell” their discipline to Christians disconcerted by religious pluralism or, for that matter, to any skeptic who finds comparative theology’s requisite convictions synonymous with the abandonment of Christian truth-claims as authoritative.

Francis X. Clooney insists that such abandonment need not occur. A devout Catholic and seminal comparative theologian, Clooney believes that comparativists in fact ought to remain faithful to their home traditions, turning only temporarily from the home tradition’s texts<sup>7</sup> to those of the religious neighbors for the sake of

<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I deploy the term “comparative theologian” in the broadest sense, signifying all of those who would self-identify as scholars and/or practitioners engaged in theological inquiry across boundaries of religious belonging.

<sup>4</sup> This paper grew out of a course dedicated to the consideration of healing in theological/practical contexts. Spurred by my interest in the wounds left by fundamentalist Christian interpretation, I initially took up this project so as to address the wounding and healing of those left disabled by fundamentalist interpretation in terms of their inability to encounter the religious newcomer as “neighbor” rather than as “threat.” The evolution of this essay has moved beyond this scope. My current audience is comparative theologians, particularly those who are mindful of Christian communities that have commitments leading either to their evangelizing the religious neighbor or simply withdrawing from him, either of which responses could be void of a sense that one has anything to learn from that neighbor.

<sup>5</sup> David Tracy, “Comparative Theology,” 9126 [italics added].

<sup>6</sup> One may understand this descriptor an extension of Anselm’s long-standing maxim with a sharp eye to Tracy’s assertion that “on strictly theological grounds, the fact of religious pluralism should enter all [contemporary] theological assessment and self-analysis in any tradition at the very beginning of its task” (ibid.). I acknowledge that Tracy’s claim evokes an inclusivist theology of religious pluralism, the development of which is beyond the scope of the present essay.

<sup>7</sup> This is using the term “text” loosely. Although comparative theologians find written texts highly fruitful loci for comparative work, and the written text will be the focus of this paper, the “religious texts” for comparison may also be rituals, oral traditions, etc.

bringing “borrowed wisdom”<sup>8</sup> back to the base community. However, there is some risk involved for comparative readers. Clooney suggests that instead of reading at a cold, objective distance while seeking to dissect and understand an unfamiliar text’s disparate parts, comparativists should engage in an imaginative entrance into that text, leaving them inevitably altered for the trip home. For Clooney, this is a life-giving process of learning to “read through”<sup>9</sup> the text of an unfamiliar faith tradition imaginatively, gaining a sense of new affective possibilities from the experience. Essential to this experience is the employment of a hermeneutic of “loving surrender,” granting that text provisional authority during one’s time with it.

While Clooney’s methodological assertions may abate the worst fears of those resistant to comparative theology, he does not approach two questions that, arguably, ought to be addressed so that Christian skeptics might be compelled by the comparative theological enterprise. First, one might ask, what foundational confessional commitments might Christians have that could<sup>10</sup> drive them toward interreligious theological susceptibility as opposed to taking up a discipline like comparative religion, which does not warrant such vulnerability? Second, even given the compulsions such a believer may have for surrendering by “reading through” the foreign religious text, what resources does one have for doing so responsibly, preserving distinction rather than flattening it falsely, during the imaginative venture?

I endeavor to answer these two questions in this essay. In doing so, my primary hope is to provide resources for comparative theologians to invite Christian skeptics to see that when they take up the comparative theological endeavor, they join the company of those who believe fundamentally that in order “to hear God’s Word” one should “listen to the world.”<sup>11</sup> I suggest that Christians properly listen to the

<sup>8</sup> Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanra Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> I use the tentative language of “might” and “could” so as to allow that, alongside any traditional Christian commitments that would encourage interreligious learning, there are certainly elements in the tradition that would not advance the comparative theological project. A primary example would be the *fids ex auditu* soteriological principle, which holds that God’s salvific action accompanies a person’s faith in Christ, which is made definite by her hearing and obeying the preached gospel via repentance, baptism, and Christian discipleship. My purpose in this essay is not to promote a reading of the Christian tradition that would flatly jettison such elements. Rather, I aim to mine the comparative theological endeavor for compelling opportunities for Christian discipleship, particularly for those believers whose commitments would typically lead to their renouncing religious neighbors as persons from whom they have something to learn. See n. 4.

<sup>11</sup> See William E. Reiser, *To Hear God’s Word, Listen to the World: The Liberation of Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997). Reiser’s thesis is that Christians pray most faithfully by living in active solidarity with all other human beings. Another example might be Jürgen Moltmann, who argues that, “above all,” the church “exists wholly in its receptivity for the Spirit’s coming . . . . That makes Christianity alive to the operation of the Holy Spirit *extra muros ecclesiae*—outside the church as well—and prepared to accept the life-furthering communities which people outside the

world in an epistemic mode characterized as an interpretive *via media*, or “middle way.”<sup>12</sup> In the *via media*, the interpreter embraces the interdependence of being and knowing in her ongoing pursuit of God’s revelation in the strangest of places—even within the pages of a foreign religious text. I further propose that commitment to this pursuit is difficult, necessitating an ongoing, agenda-emptying search for truth in a manner honoring distinction between self and other. This essay’s trajectory finally rests upon my advancing a construal of christological kenosis as a tendency not toward self-annihilation, which results in a spiritually dangerous oversight of the self-other distinction, but rather as a tendency toward self-offering, wherein the “other” is understood as “neighbor.” I will argue that such a “generous kenosis” is a primary desideratum for Christians interested in inhabiting the *via media* in a distinction-preserving search for God’s revelation.

In what follows I endeavor to offer such a vision of comparative theological readership as an invitation to generous kenosis in the act of Christian discipleship. First, I propose that a Christian believer should find interreligious vulnerability compelling when that believer is formed by the proclamation that authentic existence is shaped by the eschatological movement of Christ’s mission—a formation which, arguably, includes the believer embracing a *via media* epistemology. Here I draw upon the visions of contemporary theologians Louis-Marie Chauvet and D. L. Jeffrey and upon Renaissance poet Dante Alighieri, each of whom affords key insights into the eschatological epistemic imperative for Christian thinkers. Second, given these epistemological parameters, I return to Clooney’s notion of “reading through” a text by way of “loving surrender.” Thematizing a generous kenosis of christological self-offering rather than of self-annihilation, I outline a hermeneutic approach to Clooney’s comparative reading as a process that preserves distinction rather than resulting in an evacuation of identity for the Christian reader or her religious neighbor.

### ■ Christiform Existence and *Via Media* Epistemology

When considering what it might mean for Christian believers to seek truth beyond the normative sources of their tradition, it will first be helpful to identify theological parameters for their seeking truth within them. From a New Testament perspective, particularly in the Corinthian epistle’s “love chapter,”<sup>13</sup> Christians are called to a primary awareness that human understanding—manifest in the transitory gifts of prophecy, ecstatic expression, and knowledge—is outlasted by the qualities of faith, hope, and the greatest of these: love. Moreover, with Bernard Cooke, they

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church expect and experience. This does not mean that the church is giving itself up. It is simply opening itself for the wider operations of the Spirit in the world.” Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992) 231.

<sup>12</sup> I will explain this concept in section one, below.

<sup>13</sup> See 1 Cor 13.

can identify the dramatic form of such qualities by attending to Jesus Christ's action and teachings, including, in a sense, his own understanding of the Triune God's activities. Cooke explains:

[Christ's] parables reflect his *awareness* that the healing/saving power, God's Spirit, to which he bore witness in word and deed was that of love, unconditional divine love. Furthermore, his own compassion and concern for those he encountered . . . were the sacrament in which he experienced his Abba's love for those people. . . . In his 'kingdom' the power to be exercised was not that of the rulers of this world but the mysterious power of self-sacrificing servanthood.<sup>14</sup>

Cooke thus reminds us that God the Son's awareness of the activity of God the Father and God the Spirit was bound up in his own actions of compassion and servanthood, which were sacramental mediums ushering in the reality of a divine love whose strange power resides in service to others. Taken together, these biblical resources indicate that Christian persons in search of truth ought most fundamentally to rely upon the relational, forward-looking qualities of love, which are most fully defined by Christ's compassionate acts and proclamations.

However, even given the primacy of a sacrificial ethos in loving action, the question remains: on what terms ought the Christian seek epistemological authenticity—that is, what might Christians appeal to as an epistemic norm or foundation—under the proclamation that humankind reaches its fullest epistemic potential within Christoform existence? After all, Christ's knowledge is never one of full doctrinal or philosophical visions of transcendent realities; then again, neither is his knowledge expressed as solely ethical action without definition by divine revelation. This dialectical dynamic points us toward the recognition that Christoform knowledge is at heart eschatological, fully embracing God's revealed presence in the "already" while keenly preserving the "not yet" character of human understanding. Christian thinkers confident in having encountered God's revelation do well to emphasize both poles of the "now" and "not yet" quality of their doctrinal assertions, employing an epistemology grounded in the New Testament assertion that we now "see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now [we] know only in part; then [we] will know fully, even as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12 NRSV).

Looking to this passage, one could assert confidently that the wisdom in the canon of Christian scripture pushes us toward a critically realist ontology. Such an ontology remains critical, admitting that our best efforts at knowledge production are always refractory and not yet complete; even our scriptural canons do not offer a universally authoritative epistemic foundation. At the same time, scriptural wisdom asserts that we do now know "in part." Thus, even without guaranteed epistemic groundwork, our approach is not anti-realist; rather, we have reason to hope that our

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 170 [italics added].

theories do describe, albeit imperfectly, an external reality that we encounter in the sacramental mediations of our words and deeds. A critically realist ontology allows us to embrace the “now” of revelation in our efforts associated with theological metaphysics, philosophical theology, and theological ethics. However, it presses us to do so with the eschatological leanings of the “not yet,” noting the futility of such efforts unless primarily ordered by a theological imagination continually reaching beyond itself toward encounter with God. In what follows I will identify the potential spiritual obstacles to our taking such an epistemic posture, which merit our seeking to inhabit a “middle way” of interpretation. I will then consider the practical implications of this *via media* approach, concluding by reflecting on how it encourages interreligious learning.

*A. The Challenges of Adopting an Eschatological Epistemology: Anticipating the Via Media with Louis-Marie Chauvet and D. L. Jeffrey*

Foundational theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet helps us think in depth about the normative implications of an eschatological epistemology that is tied to a critically realist ontology. One might say that Chauvet operates within such a framework, for he asserts that something absolute, beyond our symbolic nexus, makes itself known to us but that this belief is always necessarily undergirded by faith. For Chauvet, we cannot rationally deduce what goes beyond human signification, for our vision is always already “given” in the world in which this system is constitutive of human perception. He thus promotes a way to truth that is “inseparable from us,”<sup>15</sup> thinking the entire corporeal realm as an “arch-sacramental” medium of grace, understanding that divine revelation only ever expresses itself in the mediating spaces of our historically, ethically, and symbolically constituted and constituting embodiment. Chauvet accordingly resists any theological approach to human signification that construes it wholly in terms of its lack, while also resisting any assumption of a natural capacity in the sign to signify reality, for both of these approaches fail to appreciate humanity’s essential constitution inside the medium of language.

Chauvet also warns his audience that understanding human signification as an arch-sacramental medium of grace is a difficult position to hold. Appealing to Martin Heidegger’s philosophical stance that any presence we encounter within the system of signification always operates in tandem with absence—that is, its constant withdrawal, or what we might call its “otherness”<sup>16</sup>—Chauvet describes the signifying nexus as the space where “the real” never reveals itself to us in any measurable way. It is simply where the real as we encounter it is always unfolding for us, as we continually order it within our operative epistemological frameworks.

<sup>15</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 54.

<sup>16</sup> For another interpretation of Chauvet’s thought in terms of “otherness,” see Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) 116–118.

Chauvet points out that our recognizing the real's absence, as well as language's mastery over us, is troubling. We are thus tempted to secure our position within the system in various ways. However, because the sign and its signified never have an easy link available to the human subject, Chauvet warns us that imagining that we can approximate any "fixed" nature, even of this withdrawal, easily renders our theories idols of speculation.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Chauvet highlights the thorough difficulty of our taking up an eschatological epistemology; he also identifies the spiritual danger of our refusing to do so in quests for fixed understanding of signification's relationship with the absolute. To consider further Chauvet's suggestion that the latter tendency is an idolatrous one, we may turn to the work of literary theorist and Christian theologian David Lyle Jeffrey. In *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*,<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey specifically investigates the epistemic movement toward fixity in the sphere of interpretation. On one end of the interpretive spectrum, literary critic Harold Bloom posits logocentrism, the idolatry of language, which Bloom identifies with the practices of many Gnostics, Jews, and Christians. For Bloom, logocentrists are those who believe in univocal meaning available in language, ascribing to language a "'plenitude' of meaning" which is "totally overdetermined."<sup>19</sup> At the opposite end of the spectrum, Bloom posits "linguistic nihilism," a deconstructionist view that only "sees in language a 'dearth of meaning' and 'absolute randomness.'"<sup>20</sup> Bloom portrays these poles as irreconcilable in any way, hospitable to one another only as host and parasite. In this figuration of host and parasite, Jeffrey identifies a "symbiosis unto death,"<sup>21</sup> pointing out that Bloom, in accepting these extremes as diametrically opposed and seeking no means for their rectification, is also caught up in this death-dealing symbiosis.

For Jeffrey, the problem with idolatrous logocentrists, nihilistic deconstructionists, and cynical observers like Bloom is that each is searching for means to control or locate truth in language. On Chauvet's terms, in all three cases interpreters have tried to "fix" the relationship between truth and signification, failing to appreciate humanity's constitution inside language as a medium of grace. Hence, logocentrists claim to have arrived at finality of meaning, while deconstructionists recognize this impossibility but react by claiming that no lasting meaning can be found via

<sup>17</sup> Chauvet notes Heidegger's point that such a metaphysics "believes itself to have produced an explanation of being, when in fact it has only ontically reduced being to metaphysics' *representations*, utterly forgetting that nothing that exists 'is'" (*Symbol and Sacrament*, 26–27 [italics in original]).

<sup>18</sup> D. L. Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form" in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 1–38, quoted in Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 3.

the signifying matrix.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, others like Bloom are content to act only as pessimistic onlookers, declaring that there is no way for the poles to converge. Jeffrey thus offers a vision of our spiritual culpability when our theological constructions facilitate the “symbiosis unto death” of Bloom’s paradigm, resulting from an idolatrous desire to control truth in a language that always refers beyond itself to truth it cannot contain.

In his response, Jeffrey points out that a theory conceiving interpretation as an offering to God “cannot responsibly be formulated from either polar view about the nature and properties of language . . . either idolizing language (logocentrism) or repudiating it as useful means to understanding (nihilism).”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, argues Jeffrey, in the realm of human signification Christians ought to inhabit a *via media* between these extremes; the believer ought to seek the enduring connections of immanence and transcendence, temporality and eternity, by submitting interpretive acts to God. Moreover, Jeffrey notes that this *via media* is more faithful to the actual work of prominent Jewish and Christian hermeneuts in history, few of whom “would have been content to be described as ‘logocentrist.’”<sup>24</sup> While these theorists acknowledge the reality of an ultimate Logos, they have also affirmed that human language is unable to contain God’s truth in more than a splintered fashion. Jeffrey explains, “In both ancient Jewish and modern Christian poets, what remains at the center is not the word but the person; words are but a *means* of centering, philology but a love of words transcended by a higher love.”<sup>25</sup> For these thinkers, words—even in Scripture—function primarily as a means for leading humans into personal relationship with each other and with God’s Logos.

### *B. The Via Media’s Practical Implications: Gleanings from Dante Alighieri and Mayra Rivera for Interreligious Learning*

Jeffrey notes that Dante Alighieri, one of the Christian writers he upholds as being faithful to the *via media* wherein one submits interpretative acts to God, “suggests in his discussion of the polysemous language of his *Commedia* . . . [that] practicality is of the essence in such a theory of poetry.”<sup>26</sup> This is to say, in the *via media*, interpretation and speech will lead to a certain kind of behavior, producing Christoform relationship with God and others. The work of William Franke allows us to look more closely at Dante’s investigation of this ethical responsibility

<sup>22</sup> To clarify, this is not to say that this is how all deconstructionists proceed; rather, this speaks specifically of the nihilistic deconstructionists in Bloom’s paradigm. As I will make evident below, a healthy dose of deconstruction is necessary for proper Christian knowledge construction. Bloom’s paradigm simply serves as a grim reminder of what happens when either the “now” or the “not yet” of Christian understanding is absolutized. Totalizing the “now” leads to idolatrous logocentrism, while totalizing the “not yet” leads to nihilistic deconstructionism.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 [italics in original].

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

through his protagonist's adventures in the *Divine Comedy*. In particular, Franke explores what he entitles "Dante's Hermeneutic Rite of Passage,"<sup>27</sup> which occurs in *Inferno IX* while Dante (the protagonist in the poem) is being led through Hell by the poet Virgil.

Franke explains that *Canto IX* begins with the progress of Dante and Virgil being impeded by "obstacles [that] crop up in their communication with one another, hermeneutic obstacles."<sup>28</sup> Dante seems to write with a didactic purpose, for the interpretive problematic extends beyond Dante-protagonist's journey to include the reader of the *Inferno*. Franke identifies the import of this inclusion in what he calls "the poem's most imperious hermeneutic injunction,"<sup>29</sup> which is addressed to the reader at the beginning of the canto: "O you who have sound intellects," says Dante, "Look at the doctrine which hides itself/ Beneath the veil of the strange verses" (*Inferno IX*. 61–63).<sup>30</sup> Franke notes that this directive in the text interrupts the dramatic build-up of the narrative, effectively drawing the reader away from the literal action of the story and into the posture of one peering through the dense surface of a poem, into its depths of potential meaning.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the reader may understand one of the didactic purposes of Dante's work in *Inferno IX* as urging us to read carefully, remembering to seek out the wisdom that potentially "hides itself beneath the veil of strange verses."<sup>32</sup>

Franke also notes that this imperative given to the reader is coupled with one immediately previous in the poem, which Virgil gives to Dante: "Turn yourself around and cover your eyes;/ for if the Gorgon should appear and you see it/ never more would you return above" (*Inferno IX*. 55–60).<sup>33</sup> Franke comments upon the significance of the pairing of these verses with the directive given to the reader, explaining that the same dangers face both Dante-protagonist and the reader: Dante will literally be petrified if he gazes directly at the Gorgon rather than "turning away and suffering various sorts of mediation figuring the detour of interpretive procedures."<sup>34</sup> In the same manner, if the reader were to choose the direct gaze of literal reading—tempting in its apparent ease—over the complicated maneuverings of interpretive awareness, "the poem would become the tombstone of mere writing as dead-end-in-itself." There would be "no hermeneutic access to the doctrine beneath the veil of the verses and hence no progress beyond the 'scritta morta.'"<sup>35</sup>

Offering further insight into the nature of "scritta morta," Franke cites John Freccero's consideration of the Gorgon's function in the *Inferno*. Freccero argues

<sup>27</sup> Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 84.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* "Scritta morta" is "the letter that kills."

that the Gorgon's threat is one that "constitutes for Dante a temptation to return narcissistically and nostalgically to his past," instead of moving forward through the difficulties of the underworld.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, for Dante to give in to this temptation would leave him no longer capable of progress, for "the love involved would be terminal and idolatrous, refusing to pass beyond into the infinite love of Christian caritas, toward which the trajectory of the *Commedia* . . . is directed."<sup>37</sup> Dante-writer thus suggests that self-indulgence and clinging to the past are interconnected with the love of literalism and are antithetical to the forward-looking posture of caritas, the self-offering love of God in Christ that Christians are called to imitate.

Drawing from Franke's insights, the Christian interested in inhabiting the interpretive via media finds Dante highlighting the practical difficulty of adopting an eschatological epistemology. That epistemology warrants an ongoing movement, ever peering beyond the surface of texts in the forward-looking posture of Christ-like love, oriented beyond the self toward God and neighbor, and beyond previously-discovered truths toward new ones. Such a reading will be challenging because the interpreter must willingly suspend control in order to deal with what is indirect, working to find the meanings that do not present themselves on the literal, surface level. Though difficult, Dante asserts that this movement is necessary for our passage beyond narcissism into love of God and others.

Franke reads Dante's work through a Heideggerian lens akin to Chauvet's, situating it "within a tradition of existential and hermeneutic (and metaphysical!) philosophy that calls to mind the dependence of being on knowing, that is, the interpenetration of the two."<sup>38</sup> For Franke, Dante's "apotheosis of interpretation" is closely connected to this Heideggerian framework, particularly in Dante's emphasis on the interpretive process "involv[ing] one's whole way of being," making interpreting "ontologically consequential."<sup>39</sup> Franke explains:

This [apotheosis of the interpretive process] must not be misunderstood . . . as an exaltation of the agency of the human subject, the author, since in interpretation *the subject only lends itself to an event it does not control*. In fact, when Dante stubbornly and willfully interprets, he is only trying to apprehend things as they really and truly are (in the sight of God), beyond the ineluctable distortions of whatever we are able to perceive as objectively real, that is, as already deformed by being figured into our framework or field of objectivity (the perspective of a finite creature). To reach this goal, *interpretation must abandon subjectivity to its own fluidity so as to let it flow into the event of truth it does not comprehend, but is rather comprehended by*.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. [italics in original].

Franke thus helps us see how we might reside in the *via media*, as does Dante: neither positing in language a logocentric fullness of revelation nor a vacuum of meaning that springs from unavoidable subjectivity in interpretation. Instead, Dante's vision has a trajectory extending beyond human understanding of the linguistic sign into the transformative pursuit of God's way for our seeing. Essentially, this pursuit demands a certain way of life, for the "choice does not lie between sense and nonsense," as Jeffrey says of Dante's interpretive framework. "Rather, it lies more profoundly between life and death (Deut 30:19), truth and denial of truth (Rom 1:25)."<sup>41</sup> In the interpretive posture and process, one has the opportunity to embody the outward, self-transcending Christoform movement of *caritas*, "the motion of the soul toward enjoyment of God for his own sake and the enjoyment of one's neighbor for the sake of God."<sup>42</sup> In this fashion, the interpretive act is not deified but rather becomes an avenue for relationship with God and neighbor.

Jeffrey convincingly argues that entering into a caritic relationship with one's neighbor warrants resisting any hermeneutic tendency to situate "transcendence *against* immanence, [the] eternal against time-locked sense,"<sup>43</sup> because it does not facilitate spiritually responsible interpretation. In *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*,<sup>44</sup> Mayra Rivera identifies one such tendency as tied to dichotomizing moves undergirding reductive readings of the "other." Rivera points out that, in long-standing epistemic binaries, certain qualities, things, or persons considered less powerful (for instance: materiality, dependence, Woman, or Nature) have been defined as the negative image of those attributed power (immateriality, independence, Man, God); thus, the former is "confined within fixed boundaries," as the object of that which is capable of transcendence.<sup>45</sup> For Rivera, we most readily suppress the transcendence of others when we "deny the influences that others have" upon us, refusing "the vulnerability of intimate connections, interdependence, and mutuality."<sup>46</sup>

From the *via media* perspective, to refuse the "vulnerability of intimate connection" with other human beings (or material reality) is to deny the Christoform movement of *caritas*. In such a posture, we ought to strive not to situate "others" within fixed boundaries but rather to recognize their status as neighbors: persons with whom we are interconnected and who are capable of mediating the transcendent. This recognition should compel us to read our religious neighbor's sacred works with the conviction that we may truly learn from them, rather than refusing the vulnerability of mutuality by dominating their texts with our exegetical schemas. And, returning to Clooney's insights, such a hermeneutic will surely

<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> See Jeffrey's discussion of St. Augustine in *People of the Book*, 88.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey, *People of the Book*, 3 [italics in original].

<sup>44</sup> Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

require from us an intimacy with the text, an imaginative move, wherein readers suspend interpretive frameworks and submit to its “provisional authority”<sup>47</sup> as a medium for interpreting experience.

In the second primary section of this essay I will take up the *via media* ethical imperative of agenda-emptying love to expound upon Clooney’s notion of “reading through” the foreign religious text imaginatively. Chauvet warns that this agenda-emptying posture will be difficult to adopt because it means resisting the intense, idolatrous temptation to fix upon some speculative understanding of how the truth is revealed. Dante further cautions us that our idolatrous tendencies become manifest in the stagnation of literal, finalized, or self-imposed readings, all of which highlight our proclivity to distort some imaginative understanding of the truth as it is revealed. With Dante’s warning in mind, I endeavor to consider how one might read through the foreign religious text with imaginative surrender that is truly loving; that is, I will argue, with surrender that does not fail to honor the self-other distinction.

### ■ Loving Surrender in Comparative Theology as Generous Kenosis

In God’s reign revealed in Jesus Christ’s mission, Cooke aptly recognizes that “the power . . . exercised was not that of the rulers of this world but the mysterious power of self-sacrificing servanthood.”<sup>48</sup> Cooke’s point is punctuated by Christ’s own provocative statement: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24 NRSV). Thus far I have argued that, for those believers who accept the epistemological parameters of the *via media*<sup>49</sup> as consistent with Christ’s invitation to self-denying discipleship, they should cultivate a caritic posture of submission to God and neighbor rather than to (artificially) secured epistemic agendas. Such Christians would be driven past what is already accepted in Christian scripture and theological method in the search for life beneath the veil of all signification, not least in that of the religious newcomer whom we seek to understand as our neighbor, capable of mediating the transcendent.

In his search for such transcendence beyond Christian tradition, Clooney emphasizes the particular advantages of simultaneously engaging with two written texts from different traditions. In *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* Clooney explains, “By a close reading [of two texts], we are trained in a double set of complex skills, afforded a richer register of affective possibilities.”<sup>50</sup> This register of affective possibilities may also be understood as the transformative nature of the comparative theological enterprise,

<sup>47</sup> I explain Clooney’s use of this term in the next section.

<sup>48</sup> Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Including Chauvet’s, Jeffrey’s, and Dante’s insights (as I have outlined them) into what taking up those parameters would entail.

<sup>50</sup> Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 133.

which is, indeed, its aim. “At stake,” Clooney elaborates, “is a transformative process grounded in receiving and appropriating texts written with that process [of intensified devotion] in mind.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, for Clooney, no theologian will properly practice interreligious comparison who does not do so for the sake of “intensified devotion” and who does not undergo some transformation of theological import. If one decides to accept this invitation to seek fresh experience of worship outside one’s tradition, Clooney believes that one’s understanding of God will be intensified and transformed, as will oneself as a devotee to God.

For the sake of describing the transformative nature of the comparative process, Clooney draws from the work of Charles Altieri, who examines the affective potential that fictional works have in their readers’ lives. Clooney finds Altieri’s insights helpful because of Altieri’s focus on canonized texts, which he argues have retained their canonical status due to their long-standing capacities to “[help] readers to reimagine their own life choices in accord with imaginative and affective energies that are deeper and more enduring than overt reasons that might be given to justify behavior.”<sup>52</sup> Clooney points to this quality as a similarity between canonized works of fiction and works of lasting importance in religious traditions, which also draw readers into distinct ways of imagining experience and making behavioral choices. As believers, Clooney explains, we not only learn of the cultural and religious worlds that these texts inscribe; when we imaginatively adopt these texts’ claims (albeit in various ways), we learn to interpret our own lives accordingly, opening space for new choices. Clooney cites Altieri’s reflections here:

By reading *through* the text, we can gain a rich grammar for interpreting particular experiences or projecting self-images that have significant resonances in how we make decisions in the present. . . . We better fit the ideals about reading developed by those writers whom we take the time to read if we imagine ourselves as reading *through the text*. By submitting ourselves to the text’s provisional authority as an integrated work, we can hope to construct the best possible case for the text as a window on possible values in our own experience.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, reading “through” the text essentially means submitting to its “provisional authority,” using it as a lens for examining experiential values and undergoing transformation as a result. However, Clooney emphasizes, our attempt to read through a text is not a matter of simply discovering and obeying the religious text’s “directives” or adopting its scheme of rationale. Instead, this process invites us into an authentic imaginative entrance into the text that will leave us inevitably altered by the experience of submissive reading. By “forcing us to extend our

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Altieri, *Canon and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990) 45, quoted in Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 134–135 [italics in original].

imaginations,” says Altieri, the process of reading “through” a text “keeps authority within an imaginative dialogue with great minds, rather than placing it in some contemporary interpretive practice.”<sup>54</sup>

In summary, Clooney’s imaginative move demands that we become vulnerable to the text, temporarily suspending our interpretive schemas to submit to its “provisional authority,” and enter its truth world as a medium for interpreting experience. In this fashion, Clooney reminds his readers that they have been transformed by reading their own traditions’ texts and, thus, may become transformed by reading others. Regardless of our decision concerning whether or not to adopt the new text’s truth claims as normative, the submissive encounter with its truth world will leave us altered.<sup>55</sup> Clooney describes his own experience of this sort as he reads the texts of Hindu theologian Desika through an “adverbial” lens. He says:

Even if I, a Catholic, remain intellectually and affectively committed to my own Catholic tradition, reading Desika affords me new insights, desires, and impulses to action that cannot be neutralized or conveniently left aside simply because I am a Catholic. If I actually learn from my reading, then going forward and coming to terms with the new ideas, images, affective energies, and persons to be encountered and imitated will be easier than retreating into a religious world where the other barely exists, as if I might forget all that I have read.<sup>56</sup>

Clooney thus substantiates his foundational claim that, when reading interreligiously, the comparativist may encounter in the text new theological paradigms while still remaining faithful to her home tradition. However, as with the interpretive via media, it is worth noting the potential difficulties of Clooney’s endeavor to suspend judgment in order to read adverbially. In the following sub-sections, I suggest that

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 135 [italics in original].

<sup>55</sup> Because my present purpose is to delineate responsible comparative engagement with a text’s “truth world,” it falls beyond the scope of this essay for me to work to outline criteria for critical discernment when engaging the neighboring text’s truth claims. However, critically realist epistemological commitments press us to remember that, though our assessment is never complete, we do now know “in part”; and so making tentative yet normative judgments regarding the neighboring text’s truth claims is the telos of theological comparison. Marianne Moyaert helpfully engages this issue in her article “On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology” *Religions* 3 (2012) 1144–1161. Moyaert draws upon Clooney’s work to establish that, when comparative engagement with neighboring texts yields fresh hermeneutical and theological possibilities, “the basic question will be about how to make sense, as a Christian, of a set of Christian experiences and texts and theologies that now includes certain non-Christian texts that remain vital and creative” (Francis X. Clooney, “When Religions Become Context,” *Theology Today* 47 [1990] 30–38, at 36, quoted in Moyaert 1156). For Moyaert, this evaluative endeavor must be “preceded by a pledge to justice” (Moyaert, 1156). Then, in keeping with this pledge, particularity (rather than grand systematization) should orient truth assessment within the comparative enterprise, which is eschatological at heart: “particular comparisons yield particular insights,” says Moyaert, “insights that might be revised in the future under the influence of other particular comparisons” (1152).

<sup>56</sup> Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 140.

the comparative theologian would be well served to this end by the insights of Alan Jacobs's *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*,<sup>57</sup> particularly as he draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's "I-for-myself"/"I-for-another" standard of interpretation.

*A. Resources for Adverbial Interreligious Reading in Alan Jacobs's Hermeneutics of Love*

In *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*, Jacobs establishes how one might interpret fictional works in a manner that demonstrates *caritas*, framing his discussion with the Christian tradition's "greatest commandment," issued by Christ in Matt 22:37–39: "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' . . . And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (NRSV). Thematizing a hermeneutic of *caritas*, Jacobs asserts that loving persons should attend not only to persons but also to texts as neighbors, arguing that "the hermeneutics of love requires that books and authors, *however alien to the beliefs and practices of Christian life*, be understood and treated as neighbors."<sup>58</sup>

For this task, Jacobs suggests that the movement of charitable interpretation ought to be that of a Christ-like kenosis, a claim he bases on Paul's urging in Phil 2:5–7: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (NRSV). In this way Jacobs argues that Christ shows us how to approach not only "others" but also alien texts as neighbors: with loving kenosis, relinquishing privilege in order to serve. Jacobs is careful to point out that this kenotic activity ought not amount to a desire to annihilate the self, for in becoming man, Christ did not eliminate his identity as divine. Rather, Christ renounced the rights of equality with God, shedding the ostensible prerogatives of lordship in order to take on the form of a servant. Jacobs draws a connection between this kind of self-emptying and Mikhail Bakhtin's "I-for-myself"/"I-for-another" ethical and aesthetic standard, which Bakhtin works out in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*.

Jacob's use of Bakhtin on this point bears close examination. The prominence of the mysterious power of self-sacrifice in the Christian economy of salvation has led to various theological construals of Christ's self-sacrificing movement, or kenosis, as a tendency toward a state hardly distinguishable from self-annihilation. Such doctrines have been rightly identified as dangerous misreadings used as weapons of domination, bolstering the oppression of groups like women, children, slaves, disenfranchised workers, and non-Christian peoples urged to imitate Christ in self-emptying submission to the colonizing master. Jacobs joins this school of

<sup>57</sup> Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Cambridge, MA: Westview, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 [italics in original].

ethical critique, only pointing to a different type of danger that might accompany an understanding of Christ's kenosis as a tendency toward self-annihilation, the imitation of which could lead to hermeneutic distortion in imaginative reading. I will extend his insights to include a distinct account of the alternative, which might be called a "generous kenosis of self-offering." I believe that this type of self-giving should be understood as a crucial desideratum for Christians interested in inhabiting the *via media*—in this instance, for taking up comparative theological readership in loving surrender.

*B. Mikhail Bakhtin's "I-for-myself"/"I-for-another" Ethic of Interpretation in Comparative Theological Readership*

Jacobs believes that Bakhtin's framework serves as an apt means for imagining kenotic self-sacrifice without irresponsibly equating it with self-annihilation. When Bakhtin "refers to 'I-for-myself,'" Jacobs explains, "he does not mean 'living for oneself' but rather 'living from within oneself.'"<sup>59</sup> In this schema, living for oneself means "selfishness, egotism; it involves treating others as objects and oneself as the only subject."<sup>60</sup> As Rivera points out, such a perspective fixes the other in rigid boundaries, taking no interest in the neighbor's transcendent potential but rather is content to deny the vulnerability of mutuality. Jacobs also speaks to more subtle dangers of mutuality, endemic in the reader misunderstanding an "I-for-another" principle in a tendency toward self-annihilation. Drawing upon Jacob's insights, one can see how imaginative readership demonstrates the impossibility of actual self-annihilation when interpreting, for one always reads from a perspective shaped by distinct experience and a particular understanding of reality. The assumption of self-annihilation in interpretation will, instead, very likely lead to one finding the self too much in the other. Jacob's reading of Vladimir Nabakov's novel *Pale Fire* shows how this might occur.

Jacobs describes how Nabakov's protagonist, Kinbote, finds similarities between himself and a poem and so becomes convinced that the poem is written about him. Jacobs explains that Kinbote thus unwittingly seeks mastery over the text by superimposing himself onto it, "absorb[ing] it into his own being."<sup>61</sup> For Rivera, this consuming of the text is a trait of what Catherine Keller calls "the separative self," wherein the subject (here, Kinbote) controverts his dependence on the object (the poem) "only by subduing and possessing the Other" so as to feel "truly in possession of [him]self."<sup>62</sup> As a result of his superimposition, Kinbote dominates the poem and wipes out the encounter with the text on its own terms, thus eliminating any genuine communication between himself and the text.

<sup>59</sup> Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 60.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>62</sup> Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), quoted in Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence*, 7.

On the other hand, the “I-for-myself”/“I-for-another” standard constitutes “authentic living,” the “answerable act” wherein one fully recognizes one’s individuality as well as others’ while affirming mutuality and interconnection; this awareness includes acknowledging one’s responsibility in the face of the Other and “act[ing] upon it — whether in conversation with a friend or in reading a novel,” Jacobs explains. “Here we see one of the first appearances of that characteristic Bakhtinian notion of an ‘open unity,’ of that which coheres without being fixed, schematized, or finalized.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, Jacobs warns readers to be humble in interpreting texts, wary of an easy “I-for-another” practice. Such over-ease will lead us to eliminate difference, forcing connection by making the text more accessible to our own interpretive frameworks. Thinking responsibly in terms of “I-for-myself/I-for-another” means striving not to find myself in the other, but rather to appreciate that which makes the Other not me, seeing myself as interrelated to the neighbor in an open unity of conversational answerability.

Of course, this appreciation warrants one cultivating an appropriate sense of one’s own self-identity as well. Jacobs finds this action is modeled in Christ’s kenosis, which calls for “an ascetic self-discipline that does not eradicate the self but chastens it.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, a Christian should retain his sense of self<sup>65</sup> in the face of others so as to chasten it, making it more like Christ’s, the one who did not even consider equality with God a “thing to be grasped.” Jacobs’s explanation aligns with one of the central tenets of comparative reading that Clooney sets forth: to fruitfully engage in comparison does not mean that one must abandon pre-held convictions, but rather, the comparativist should read with confidence “about the possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition.”<sup>66</sup> This conviction is not equivalent to self-annihilation but rather self-chastening: taking the Christiform posture of a servant, we cease to assert preemptive epistemological rights over our religious neighbors and thus should expect to be surprised—and even informed—by the epistemic assertions about transcendent reality that we find in the neighboring text. What will remain consistent is our devotion to God in Christ.

Moreover, in Bakhtin’s “I-for-another” terms, we can expect that a self-affirming yet caritic posture will render surprise in the neighboring text productive of imaginative delight in it. This fondness may be understood as that of *philia*, the love of friendship, which will occur when we grow fond of a particular text in a particular way. Arriving at *philia* for the text will result from our erotic searching for and appreciation of the beauty and truth we find unique to the text. For example, in his reading of Desika, Clooney finds himself appreciating the loveliness of Desika’s

<sup>63</sup> Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 62–63.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>65</sup> As I note above, this means having a sense of one’s own particular perspective shaped by one’s distinct experience and understanding of reality.

<sup>66</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 14.

work, developing a philia-like love for the “new ideas, images, affective energies, and persons to be encountered and imitated” that he would not have discovered had he not read Desika.<sup>67</sup> Philia for the text will be tied to a healthy proclivity towards surprise, which allows us to receive the text as a gift; it may be spurred by the import of sociality in comparative practice, revealing our desire to become friends with religious neighbors as conversation partners.

If we extend Bakhtin’s “open yet ‘constant unit of answerability’” to our neighbors, then “in return we receive from them the gift of their otherness, the ‘outsiderness’ that makes it possible for us to understand and to achieve ‘self-activity,’ ‘answerability,’ the ‘incarnated deed.’”<sup>68</sup> It is vital, then, that we acknowledge the philia aspect of reading alongside that of caritas on the *via media*. This love, Cooke points out, is not free of eros, but contains “an element [of] genuine affection for another. Such amorous desire flows from perception of the beloved as almost irresistibly attractive and is rooted in human creatureliness and the incompleteness of isolated existing.”<sup>69</sup> Such an intermingling of loves leaves us in a position of surrender before the neighbor; but, this sacrificial posture should be understood as an emptying of interpretive agenda and a grasp for self-security by way of dominance over the other. It is not the self-annihilating emptying of desire, for in the embrace of our creatureliness, it is good that we desire an enhanced connection with the neighbor, honoring the gifts both of us may offer one another in the reciprocal delights of philia.

In summary, loving surrender merits our formulating a generous kenosis of self-offering rather than self-annihilation, which would lead to false readings of the text. Generous kenosis in interpretation will be of utmost importance for an eschatological epistemology of seeking, privileging a way of life motivated by obedience to God’s Great Commandment rather than expectation of self-advancement. This renders comparative theological interpretation another practice in deliberate vulnerability, with one’s own religious identity important as a medium for kenotic interaction with the neighbor. Employing Bakhtinian “I-for-myself/I-for-another” terms, this vulnerability takes shape when comparative interpreters strive to retain an “open unity” with the religious neighbor in the ongoing conversation characteristic of travelers on the *via media*.

## ■ Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered comparative theologians resources for convincing Christians resistant to interreligious vulnerability that comparative theology’s call is not an invitation to theological relativism. Rather, I have argued, the Christian believer should hear that call as a compelling invitation to renewed faithfulness to Christ in the religiously pluralistic situation. As opposed to taking up disciplines

<sup>67</sup> Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 140.

<sup>68</sup> Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God*, 167.

like comparative religion that do not warrant interreligious theological vulnerability, when we Christians live by the script of the eschatological “now” and “not yet” of understanding, we should participate in the sacramental drama of the *via media*, re-examining truths already established, as well as looking for the doctrine which hides itself beneath the veil of strange verses. This will lead us to relinquish interpretive rights over one another, entering the truth-worlds of our neighbors’ texts to experience new operative possibilities for devotion to God. Such a movement does not mean abandoning our convictions regarding the salvific nature of Christ nor the import of relationship with him. Rather, it frees us to enter the foreign religious landscape in a posture of wonderment without fear of a godlessness that may seize us there. Instead, we may experience what is unfamiliar as part of the astonishing diversity of the cosmos that God lovingly sustains in existence; we should possess the Augustinian confidence that wherever the Christian may find truth, it is her Lord’s.<sup>70</sup>

The Christian believer’s primary resource for doing this responsibly—preserving distinction rather than flattening it falsely—is reading in the Christoform kenotic posture of self-offering, blending *caritas* and *philia* by celebrating the gift of reciprocity in relationship. After all, in the “now” and the “not yet” of our understanding, our most authentic knowledge of truth occurs in lived relation to God’s Logos, which we experience in the sacramental mediums of loving interaction with neighbor. Believers should proceed with confidence that Truth is ultimately comprehended by the One we have believed, and that we do not live in deconstructive nihilism but as participants in God’s salvation event, by listening to the world to hear the Word. In the end, the generous kenosis of self-offering should help the church check its self-idolizing tendencies as it strives to remain the communal body of Christ in the world—not of it but for it—by becoming responsibly vulnerable when encountering religious devotees, practices, and texts from different traditions. These different traditions may be considered collectively as religious “others,” whom we now embrace in *philia* love, as neighbors.

<sup>70</sup> See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.18.28.