

Introduction

Both *The Social Scientific Study of Religion* and its companion volume *Constructing Reality in Comparative Theology* begin by dealing with religions in the Axial Age. The Axial Age was the transformative period of the prophets and religious leaders in ancient time; for example, Confucius and Lao-Tse in China, the Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Iran, the prophets of ancient Israel, and finally the poets and philosophers of ancient Greece.

In these early movements, there is a common thread of promoting a political vision of peace, harmony and stability whether in Confucius or in the Buddha's challenge to the caste system and his message of non-attachment and non-violence; the prophets of ancient Israel denounced the corruption of the monarchy and the temple priests. The Axial Age was characterized by rising prosperity, as well as constant warfare between small states; occasionally powerful empires had arisen.

Given this, it is useful to incorporate Max Weber's remarks on the prophetic age while developing a comparative study of religion, ethics, and social life. For Weber, religious or charismatic movements for social change are riddled with conflict between secular and religious values or orientations. The idea of religious orientations to the world as being in conflict with dominant economic and political realms remains decisive in his analysis of the significance of world religion. The roots of an ethic of brotherly love stands in opposition to this-worldly greed, selfishness, and violence. This conviction, in which a historical breakthrough is made by religious ideas influencing material interests, is underlined in Weber's comparative sociology of religion.

But his theory of social stratification must be taken further in dealing with political power, the economic realm, religion, and the erotic sphere (sexuality) by including Michel Foucault's archaeology of discourse analysis, bio-political strategy, and sexuality of the desiring subject into

a sociological-hermeneutical framework. In this interdisciplinary approach to religion, society, and culture, constructive theology can be reformulated and expand the social horizon of religious being into cultural realms (gender, sexuality, and race).

This perspective advances a constructive theology of comparative religions, enhancing the gospel of reconciliation and faith in social scientific enquiry. If faith is in search of understanding, it requires that 'faith-understanding' epistemology engages in the mystery of God in the world of religion and culture, reinterpreting faith traditions and constructing a synthesis of new meaning in the study of comparative religions. Such comparative enquiry focuses upon the extent to which cultural, religious vision would find elective affinity with institutional formation, hence economic rationality and cultural dimensions would interweave with socio-structural construction.

Religious traditions serve as resources underlying modernity in a continual manner. Modernity is not merely one, or homogeneous, but many, which undergird reason and practical life with many forms and voices. The various forms of modernity were established in the early twentieth century through Western colonialism, but the dynamics of a continual diversification of multiple modernities make it hard for the non-West to emulate the Western model of modernity as the ideal type. Multiple interpretations of modernity remove from the West its monopoly on modernity, and in doing so make an attempt at de-Westernization.¹

My comparative enquiry seeks to investigate religious discourse and material interests in terms of elective affinity, power relations, and critical theory of social stratification in a materialist, symbolic frame of reference. It is concerned with developing sociological enquiry about world religions and their ethical significance, as involved in cultural issues such as sexuality, gender, or colonial violence in terms of body politic.

This sociological, hermeneutical enquiry helps me to articulate a new terrain in comparative theology. I expand its spectrum in dealing with the social significance of religion, economic justice, and its ethical orientation in better articulating religious source, theological stance, and cultural justice. Thus a comparative theology becomes a substantial part of constructive theology by elaborating interreligious solidarity for just relations in the study of Axial religions.

Liberation theologians and social scientists such as Ulrich Duchrow and Franz J. Hinkelammert provide an emancipatory analysis of Axial

¹ Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities,' in *Daedalus*, p. 24.

religions in their sharp analysis of Western modernity and the division of labour, as well as reviving religious sources of ethical solidarity, economic justice, and integrity of creation. They search for ways to move toward a new culture of life in just relationship by challenging and transforming the power structures in the political economy in our present time.²

Constructive Theology and Religious Experience

A sociological approach to religion does not undermine a phenomenological understanding of sacred power in human experience throughout the history of religions. The sacred implies 'a quality of mysterious and awesome power', which is assumed to reside in certain objects.³ One of the essential features in religious experience of the sacred is the manifestation of *totaliter aliter* lying at the heart of religious awe and fascination. This is the numinous dread of what is totally other, transcending all dimensions of the human. It refers to the position of a religious realist who maintains that religious beliefs are about transcendental realities existing actually outside of human language and conceptual frameworks.

Accordingly, the philosophy of phenomenology, which is concerned with a transcendent reality and its self-manifestation, may come to terms with a non-realistic, sociological approach to religion and its social function. The philosophy of religion refers to philosophical reflection on religious ideas through thoughtful analyses of ideas, terms, arguments, and evidences. Furthermore, religious ideas involve sacred texts, a system of belief, or narrative, ritual, or religious ethics and experience, or social practices. The divine reality provides ultimate meaning and purpose to life, and the religious ideas have been developed, changed and reinterpreted within the religious tradition throughout history.

This philosophical perspective does not necessarily eliminate the position of the religious non-realists, who belittle the proposition of a transcendent reality. They maintain that religious claims are about human inventions (social relations and institutions); reducible to psychological or sociological phenomena. Here a religion would be best understood by examining the function of its beliefs in the life of individuals and society, setting aside questions of the belief's content or truth.

Given the non-realist approach, it is possible to develop philosophical reflection on religion while dealing with sociological contributions to

². Duchrow and Hinkelammert, *Transcending Greedy Money*, p. viii.

³. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 25.

comparative religions, their ethics, and multiple forms of modernity. A constructive theology in the comparative study of religions involves philosophical reflection on religious ideas as well as dialogue with the social scientific theory of religion. It is important to consider the way in which social context shapes religion, while religion influences society; in other words, the reciprocal relationship between religion and society.⁴

Unlike the philosophy of religion as a branch of philosophy, however, constructive theology is a theological discipline concerned with God the *totaliter aliter* and divine self-manifestation; it focuses on faith/understanding epistemology in taking on the significance of the sociological enquiry of religion, as well as phenomenological, experiential approach to a critical and creative dialogue among religions. It correlates Christian symbols with other religious symbols in light of God the *totaliter aliter*, while considering divine manifestation in other religions. This perspective acknowledges the significance of a value-neutral standpoint through phenomenological suspension in taking on the methods of comparison and analysis, as well as the findings and results. The truth of the tradition of one's own region is engaged in other religious traditions for mutual clarification and benefit.

This task can follow the basic assumption of Francis Clooney's comparative theology. He begins with reading the sacred texts together with the religious other, seeking to understand the other tradition on its own terms and engaging in dialogue with the practitioners of the religious tradition.

A project of reading together, or com-reading, does not necessarily bracket the self-manifestation of the *totaliter aliter*, or the life-world of the religious source and tradition. Rather, it recognizes similarity in human experience of the sacred, without undermining the difference or discarding the incommensurability. Hermeneutical practice can be pursued as much as possible in bracketing one's own prejudice and value judgment over and against other religions.

The phenomenological suspension of one's own position is undertaken in crossing over to the sacred texts of the other tradition and then coming back to the home tradition, with enriched and transformed experience. This enquiry entails a semantic procedure in terms of the appreciation of the sacred texts, and of critical distance from questionable elements in the texts and religious practices by way of problematization, and immanent critique in light of the religious source. Finally, it gives rise to synthesis in the recovery of meaning. One's faith in its initial naiveté

⁴ Evans and Manis, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 149.

is gradually renewed, considerably enriched, and deepened through the fusion of different horizons for its mature attitude toward the Other.

This perspective does not support Peter Berger's bracketing of the phenomenon of religion; for him 'other worlds' are not empirically available nor analyzable within a sociological or any other scientific analysis.⁵ Certainly, Berger keeps his sociological concern with Christian theology, especially in regard to Friedrich Schleiermacher. Thus in *The Sacred Canopy* he recommends a value-free sociological plug for Schleiermacher, making his case for an inductive theology and interreligious dialogue.⁶

Berger's methodological attitude, however, seems not to appreciate the numinous experience of the sacred, with its feeling of awe, fascination and mystery for comparison with the home tradition. Faith comes with suspension of one's own values and prejudices or one's own natural attitude about the other religious tradition. In reading together the sacred texts of the home and other tradition, faith undergoes a stage of recognition, critical distance, and enriched knowledge and practice. Faith seeks understanding, while understanding reinforces faith in the semantic circle, avoiding its tendency toward exclusive fideism and religious fanaticism.

Constructive theology refers to an intellectual and spiritual struggle about the mystery of God the *totaliter aliter*, involved in the meaningfully enriching circle of religious semantics in com-reading, dialogue, and collaboration. It takes on explicating religious ideas, cultural formation, economic rationality, politics, and ethical contributions to religious humanism, morality, erotic life, and different forms of modernity. This perspective can critically complement a sociological study of religion, in which religion is comprehended as a human alienated projection grounded in infrastructures of human history: methodological atheism.⁷

In Emile Durkheim's account, there is a methodological atheism in which 'not all religious virtues emanate from divine personalities ... Thus, religion is broader than the idea of gods or spirits and so cannot be defined exclusively in those terms.'⁸

On the contrary, my comparative method comes along with phenomenological imagination, elaborating human existence as social

⁵. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 88.

⁶. Ibid., pp. 159–60.

⁷. Ibid., p. 100.

⁸. Durkheim, *The Elementary Form of Religious Life*, p. 33.

being (*Homo socius*) in terms of ethical being (*Homo ethicus*) under the illeity of divine *totaliter aliter*.⁹

Method, Scope, and Argument

What has been discussed becomes substantial in laying out a theoretical foundation and critical methodology in dealing with constructive theology and social scientific experiment. The social scientific study of religion and culture uses an interdisciplinary approach to theology and religions which facilitates developing a constructive theology of comparative religions in a critical, emancipatory manner. It comes to terms with gender-consciousness in a post-colonial and non-Eurocentric context.

Explicating the relation between religious beliefs, political power, and social stratification with its social economic structure requires the development of a sociological enquiry into world religions, dealing with their ethical significance and respective contributions to alternative modernities, which are involved in cultural issues of sexuality, gender, or colonial violence in terms of bio-politics.

Chapter 1 undertakes a sociological study of world religion in analyzing Weber's paradigm. Axial enquiry imbued with multiple interpretations of modernity (Shmuel Eisenstadt) can be critically added to the discussion of Weber's religious study and modernization thesis. This is followed by a discussion of Weber's interpretive sociology and type of meaningful action for critical revision through the social phenomenology of Schutz and Pierre Bourdieu. Schutz makes a rejoinder in discussing Weber's sociology and the problem of historicism. Weber's theory of social stratification can be revised and enhanced in terms of several important categories of reflexive sociology. Weber's sociological method can be appropriated in reference to Foucault's study of technological rationality and bio-politics. A critical synthesis of Weber and Foucault can be elaborated in a materialist, symbolic framework, and it is followed by discussion of Karl Marx's critical theory of religion and instrumental rationality.

Chapter 2 focuses on the significance of the theory of life-world (Edmund Husserl) in developing a sociological theory of religion, for an ethical approach to constructive theology in the comparative study of religions. It deals with Husserl's debate with Wilhelm Dilthey, and their difference and affinity in a post-metaphysical direction. It is important to articulate the importance of phenomenology and religious study in examining Husserl's reflection of Buddhism.

⁹ Chung, *Comparative Theology Among Multiple Modernities*, p. 13.

The chapter adopts a post-metaphysical stance along with the linguistic-material turn in integrating a historical approach to language (Hans Gadamer) with the cultural understanding of language (Ludwig Wittgenstein). Some limitations of Gadamer and Wittgenstein are analyzed and renewed through materialist, symbolic position, in which linguistic relations are embedded with social material conditions and the symbolic system of domination and violence. With this critical renewal in mind, a cultural-linguistic theory is used to characterize the significance of constructive theology in contrast to postliberal theology.

Chapter 3 attempts to feature a philosophy of life-world in its sociological context concerning Schutz and Weber, while articulating sociological hermeneutics in treating Foucault's theory of power relations and effective history in terms of Gadamer's theory of history of effect. A concept of symbolic power and capital can be developed in undertaking a conceptual clarity of power relations within multiple spheres in terms of the role of agents and structured reality. Seen in this perspective, a hermeneutical theory may come to terms with an archaeology of discourse.

Along with Foucault's theory of sexuality, it is important to call attention to Weber's analysis of the relation between religious discourse and erotic life, which can be furthered in reference to Buddhism and erotic life. This is followed by a theory of immanent critique (Max Horkheimer) along with Foucault's theory of problematization in the construction of sociological hermeneutics, in which a constructive theology of comparative religions takes up ethical significance in the comparative study of culture and religion.

Chapter 4 is a study of phenomenology and Berger's theory of social construction of reality. His theory is to be critically examined in dealing with a diverse theoretical background (such as the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical theory, Durkheim, and Weber) for his sociology of religion. Schutz remains one of the most important figures for Berger in overcoming the limitations of the old model of sociology of knowledge. Husserl's phenomenology shall be compared with Schutz's sociological direction. The chapter closes with Husserl's insight into language, which helps to refine the relation between language and the social stock of knowledge in the materialist, symbolic frame.

Chapter 5 deals with Berger's sociological theory of religion as sacred canopy. He entails a methodological atheism *à la* Ludwig Feuerbach, but paves a path to inductive theology in the fashion of Schleiermacher. There is a critical reflection of reification in the sociological context by laying out a theoretical configuration of Georg Hegel and Marx that

Berger has not managed to elaborate. Berger utilizes Lukacs' theory of reification in terms of human project and alienation, but Horkheimer's theory of religion is examined in reference to Lukacs and Walter Benjamin.

Schleiermacher is treated in a hermeneutical fashion, unlike Berger, followed by a critical reflection of Berger's definition of religion in anthropological consideration, elaborating phenomenology of religion (Van der Leeuw) in a historical linguistic sense.

Chapter 6 is a study of Weber's sociology of religion in India in which his comparative research is explicated on the caste system in connection with religious ideas and its mundane activities. In Weber's study of Hinduism religious leadership would find an elective affinity with popular mass religiosity in the context of the caste system, as well as in the process of Hindu restoration. After dealing with Weber's sociology of Hinduism, Comparative theology is examined in its textual engagement with Ramanuja and Schleiermacher. The chapter modifies and revises Weber's limitations in its Eurocentric mode of representation, while appreciating his insight into religious ideas (karma and samsara) in connection with caste system.

Finally, the Epilogue outlines the methods, arguments and proposals in the discussion of philosophical and sociological methodology and social scientific study of religion. It characterizes the basic features of the constructive theology in the comparative study of religions in terms of social scientific experiment.