Editorial

So goes a story. A centipede was moving around briskly in a forest. An elephant stopped the centipede and said, “How come, my friend, you are moving so fast, manoeuvring deftly all your one hundred legs. You don’t seem to stumble. I am not able to match your speed even with my four legs. What method do you follow?” The centipede started ruminating on what method henceforth it should follow for synchronizing the movements of its one hundred legs. And that was the end of all its movements!

Religion in the Global South is an everyday experience for most people, like the air they breathe, and they move about in this world so very naturally and spontaneously. We have today a plethora of religious studies that want to encapsulate lived religions into conceptual boxes, methods, and pre-fabricated theories for consumption in the academia. They are mostly de-historicized exercises in religious ethnography with little reference to the socio-political context of the practice of religions. One wonders whether Orientalism has metamorphosed itself fashionably into the discipline of Religious Studies – a new avatar.

Against this backdrop, we cannot but positively welcome the contemporary efforts to break loose of the religious studies stereotypes, and lead us to the fertile land of comparative theology. What happens here is not merely an academic exercise of description and interpretation of religious phenomena, texts and traditions, but mutual learning, new realizations, and transformation through sharing of religious experiences, symbols, beliefs and practices, and reading of one another’s scriptures. Comparative theology distinguishes itself also from traditional theology. The latter often amounts to exposition and interpretation of doctrines for the benefit of one’s own religious community, drawing on from internal resources. For the past couple of decades, comparative theology has found great appeal among scholars in the West and has undergone a remarkable development in a relatively short span of time.

Asia is known through millennia of its history for mutual give and take among religious traditions. Through a process of osmosis, they kept on changing mutually and their own traditional heritage, thanks to their porous identities. In modern times, thinkers like Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, Keshub Chandra Sen developed their own theologies in a comparative mode. Brahmosamaj became a laboratory of Hindu-Christian mutual interpretation and learning. Western Christian thinkers who got themselves immersed in Hindu tradition like Jules Monchanin, Bede Griffiths, and Abhikshitananda could read and interpret comparatively Christian Scriptures in the light of Hindu Scriptures – a process that led to reinventing and refashioning their Christian identity. Christian ashrams provided the milieu for such creative experiments. A lived comparative approach in the context of a community of seekers offered fresh and original insights also for the development of an experience-based theology of religions, whose import is not sufficiently investigated and studied. The case of India is an example. I mean to say that it is crucial to trace the roots of comparative theology in each context to be able to grow further. For, no creative theology can emerge from borrowed identity.

Professor Francis Clooney is an avant-garde representative of the new comparative theology, pushing it to new frontiers. His quite impressive knowledge of Tamil and Sanskrit, and the ability to work with original texts add greater credibility to his endeavours as a comparative theologian. Remarkably, he has also mentored a new generation of scholars engaging themselves with the warp and woof of comparative theology that is in the making in different contexts, each one with its own unique contours. The present special issue gathers together the fruits of his interaction with a group of young scholars in Asia and Australia. Each scholar explores with examples the prospects of comparative theology in his or her own Asian or Australian context. The introductory article by Clooney tells us about the gestation of this project, and brings out succinctly the spirit of each contribution. In the name of IJAC, I wish to thank him. For me, it was, as ever, a pleasant experience to work with Professor Clooney to bring out this special issue. I also thank all the authors for their valuable contributions.

We hope that the readers will find this special issue helpful, and that it will generate among scholars and all those interested in the study of religions greater interest in furthering comparative theology in Asia, Australia, and in the rest of the world.

Felix Wilfred

Editor-in-Chief