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Author Response

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I am humbled and honored by the engagement of these four scholars, all of whom have significantly influenced my thinking. Francis Clooney's pioneering work first interested me in the practice of comparative reading. Lance Nelson's reflections on the ecological implications of non-dualism provided a springboard for much of chapter three. Laurel Schneider's radical push toward multiplicity has challenged my constructive thinking. Conversations with Brad Bannon, a new dialogue partner, have generated new springs of insight. I am grateful to each of them for the gift of their response to *Dualities*. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Society of Hindu-Christian Studies, and especially to John Thatamanil, who was the impetus behind the panel and also presided at it.

Clooney's response invites me to do something that he does so well in his own books, which is to articulate my position as a comparativist *vis-á-vis* these two traditions. Which came first—the texts or the constructive agenda? My initial answer is, "the texts." As I undertook a series of readings in medieval women's texts from the Christian and Hindu traditions, I was intrigued by the imagery of fluidity in Mechthild of Magdeburg. It was everywhere, and it saturated my imagination. When later I arrived at Lalleśvarī's poetry, her images of lakes, oceans, ice/snow/water, and breath resonated with this symbolism and invited me to consider how such images function in the two women's texts. I began the comparative process of reading back and forth to find where they would take me. In the dissertation that provided the foundations for this book, the constructive moves are quite minimal. They emerge only in an inchoate way, in a brief concluding section. That is to say, the constructive fruits in this book emerged only after quite a prolonged period of inter-textual reading and reflection.

The texts came first in the genesis of this project, but—as I suspect is the case with most comparative projects—the "which came first" question proves to be something of a chicken-and-egg situation. No comparativist comes to her texts with a blank slate, and my feminist interests surely impelled me to read these women in the first place. So, how does one tell the story of a hermeneutical circle? If I were to enumerate influences on my reading, I would have to acknowledge the widespread modern theological critique of dualism that is articulated in a particularly pointed way by feminist theologians. Mechthild's text is not an obvious place to look for an anti-dualistic resource; but Caroline Walker Bynum's rereading of ascetic practices among medieval Christian women, which I discovered around the same time as I was first reading Mechthild, undoubtedly

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encouraged me to take a second look. I was similarly open to rethinking the categories of duality with Lalleśvarī, though she surprised and challenged me at several turns. At key junctures she directed the constructive project away from whatever feminist orthodoxy I brought to the table, as when her valuation of the teacher-student relation helped me eventually to appreciate something of Mechthild's deference to the church hierarchy.

In asking me to claim my location, Clooney also asks whether *Dualities* is a work of Christian theology. His question shows how constructive comparative work can run the risk of being dismissed for what might be perceived as insufficient commitment to a single tradition. I vigorously resist such dismissals of constructive comparative theology. Here, I want to argue for a broad concept of Christian tradition based on the fluidity of religious identity. Traditions are in flux. They always have been. Christianity's relation to other cultural and philosophical strands has been negotiated from its very first Jewish and Hellenistic contexts. This kind of negotiation happens within individuals as well. Laurel Schneider's work troubling the "logic of the One," along with Jeannine Hill Fletcher's work on hybrid identity,[1] has helped me to come to terms with my own multiply located identity: marginal within Christianity in some ways, yet positioned with some institutional privilege; embodying a yoga practice, and deeply persuaded by some Hindu ways of thinking. In many ways, this book emerges from intellectual and embodied participation in both traditions, even if I don't have the *adhikāra* to claim full "belonging" to one or either of them. These two women, from very different historical and cultural settings from my own, have become my "tradition," in the sense that traditional writings are a major source of theology alongside scripture, reason, and experience. I bring all of this to my Christian identity and to the identity of Christianity in a fluid, hybrid world.

It remains to be seen whether *Dualities* will be recognized by others as a work of Christian theology. I hope that it will. My primary formative location is Christianity, and I wrote the book primarily for a Christian audience. *Dualities* articulates a vision consonant with ways of thinking that are embedded in the Christian tradition, even if they are not currently the dominant patterns. Yet I must say that "I *hope* it is Christian theology," because of the contested nature of what counts as theology and who counts as a theologian. For example, in my tradition of origin, the Christian Reformed Church, I don't qualify as a theologian. After all, for most of Christian history, the theologians have been priests, pastors, or members of monastic orders. I could shout Calvin's *Institutes* from the rooftops, but because the apostle Paul says that a woman must not teach a man, I might as well spew heresy. A person can be both traditional and on the margins: though I teach theology (previously to undergraduates, and now to Master of Divinity students), in the process of my education and employment in the academy I have not had the temerity to pursue ordination. This has been my "outsider within" position as a Christian theologian, a term I have borrowed for this project from Patricia Hill Collins.[2] Mechthild and Lalleśvarī's boldness in their teachings, despite institutions that didn't want them to teach, inspire me to claim a *Christian* theological voice and to claim my work as Christian theology.

In the book's concluding paragraph, which Clooney quotes, each of the statements is comprehensible from either a Christian or Kashmir Śaiva perspective. There is room for the mystery of the Trinity and of the Void, as well as for different ways of naming and fleshing out these dynamics. The systematic implications for Christian theology do not lie far beneath the surface of the text. In a word, I find a fluid metaphysic a persuasive and revealing way of describing reality. The radical permeability of beings flows into new possibilities for the loci of Christian doctrine. God, who is not a "being" but Being itself, is the source of this relationality. The Spirit breathes the love that connects divinity, humanity, and nature in relation. Creation results from the erotic flow of divine love and consciousness to the other. Jesus Christ was maximally open to the flow of divine love to him and through him, and salvation is participation in this flow. Although we erect obstacles that impede it

through egoism, unjust structures, and the cumulative residue of history, divinity is always breaking down these impediments. The church is the community that works together with divinity to remove these obstacles to the movement of the divine flow. Individuals can also access the divine flow through practices of meditation and acts of love. The normative move that Clooney identifies as "the more universal ethical norms about respect for the environment and inclusion of hitherto excluded voices" is but the ethical crest of these systematic underpinnings. Yet these ethical norms are worth emphasizing, since to me they appear far from universal. The norm is much closer to the unsettling preferential option for the poor (I would say, the marginalized) of liberation theologies than to what passes for normative in mainstream American discourse.

When Lance Nelson interrogates my "hermeneutic of suspicion *qua* retrieval" (as Brad Bannon felicitously puts it), he too puts his finger on the point where marginality and ethics meet. Do these women's contributions arise from their marginalized position, or does their theology not differ much from the men in their traditions at all? I do seem to want it both ways – for the women to be both traditional and marginal to their traditions. The paradox of the "outsider within" can elucidate this problem in relation to Lalleśwarī, whose relation to her tradition Nelson has helped to elucidate.

Lalleśvarī is "within" the Kashmir Śaiva fold insofar as she taps into the *tattva* system, the *mala*s, and the fluid metaphors of Utpaladeva and others. Nelson's essay is an excellent exposition of the ways in which her verses draw upon these deep currents. Unfortunately, most of the intertextual resonances were cut in the process of revising *Dualities*, so I am happy that Nelson has pointed the *Journal*'s readers in this direction. A retrieval of Lalleśvarī is thus also a retrieval of Kashmir Śaivism, a system that deserves more attention because of its potential to break down Western stereotypes with its highly nuanced cosmology. My reading of the traditional commentaries has helped me to understand Lalleśvarī's allusions to bodies of water in relation to her more-frequent references to the breath, which (I would note) is another fluid that she values in accordance with her tradition. The old trope of the ocean of *saṁsāra* functions negatively for both Lalleśwarī and her tradition. The main thing that sets her apart from the elite males is that her experience of materiality as an obstacle to spiritual progress seems so much more protracted than those who can easily celebrate the overflow of divine consciousness in the world. Even here, however, she is still squarely in the midst of a debate internal to the tradition.[3]

Lalleśvarī is an "outsider" insofar she cannot find a place within the Kashmir Śaiva householder and *guru-śiṣya* systems. Nelson says, "even if—during her life—she was displaced sociologically, the Kashmiri saint is very much within her tradition theologically." The same could be said of Mechthild, who is quite within the bounds of Neo-Platonically inflected Christian orthodoxy. I don't want to minimize the sociological exclusion, though, because if we dig for its ideological underpinnings, it proves to be theological as well. The most orthodox utterances sound heretical when said with authority by people whose bodies rudely trouble religious hierarchies. Lalleśvarī's religious setting is designed to accommodate male householders, and she clearly does not fit. Reading her with this context in mind helps the reader to understand her temptation to transcend rather than to play in the worldly ocean, and it adds significance to the liberation she finally finds. Insofar as her context grounds her as a traditional thinker, it also helps us to avoid the ill-fitting categories that have been placed upon her, such as monism and bridal mysticism. "Women's wisdom" need not be utterly unique to belong to them or to be instructive for others on the margins.[4]

Clooney troubles the relation between theology and sociology as well. Must a just and mutual society be ontologically grounded? It is not necessarily the case that holding a strict separation between God and other beings leads to sexism, racism, and ravaging the environment; and persons inhabiting a fluid ontology might very well oppress others. But because I do believe that symbols both function in the world and arise out of experience—they

are relational in that way—I want to attend to the ontological metaphors.[5] I contend that at this point in our social experience, moral exhortations for mutual and just relation are simply not enough. Many Christians give ontological grounding to their exclusion of women and gay and lesbian persons from full participation in their communities. They cite the maleness of Christ, the fatherhood of God, the "nature" of males and females, the strict separation between divinity and humanity. Feuerbach was onto something: we *do* project our own values onto the divine screen. But at the same time as I think so much of our views of reality are socially constructed (and I want to contribute to that construction), I actually do believe that the fundamental nature of reality is relational and, as Mechthild says, that divinity flows downhill to empower the lowly. Moreover, I believe that such a vision is essential for contesting exclusionary appeals to ontology.

Laurel Schneider extends the comparison to include Native North American traditions in order to press the question of a relational ontology even farther. How relational is reality, really? Does fluidity go all the way up? On the one hand, for both Lalleśvarī and Mechthild, the fluid nature of divinity is a given. The Trinity overflows in love. Śiva and Śakti interact dynamically. Individuals can experience and participate in that liberating or redemptive flow. On the other hand, neither medieval thinker believes that humans or other beings can bring about (or alter) the relational structure of reality. The introduction of Native American ontology into the conversation suddenly clarifies their assumption of the "ontological externality or givenness to reality." To what extent are the relations between divinity and humanity truly reciprocal? In Native American settings, ritual participants "tell the world into being and out of being." Can creatures also bring reality into being, or is that the unique activity of the divine Creator?

If we continue with Mechthild and Lalleśwarī for a moment, we can go partway down this path. We do influence divinity through the structures of love and consciousness. Mechthild says that God *risks* being wounded by the soul: she is created to return love, but she often turns away (*Flowing Light* 3.9). We also shape our world both individually and collectively. We can open ourselves to the divine flow, channel it outward, and block it with obstacles of all kinds. When we "harden our hearts," as the Hebrew prophets might say, we receive divinity in the form of hard precepts, and we then structure society in rigid hierarchies. Kashmir Śaivism allows for world-making to the extent that human activities mirror divine activities: in our perception and knowing, we cognize the world into being for ourselves. At very advanced levels of practice, yogis can influence the external world by harnessing this creative power.

To travel farther down this path—to the point at which creatures can influence the general character of reality, or can make it more or less fluid—we need additional perspectives such as those Schneider introduces here. To develop possibilities more familiar to me, I would turn to the insights of process theology.[6] What process thinkers call God's *primordial nature* is always open, fluid, and relational; God desires deep relation from responsive creatures. This is still a given. God's *consequent nature* develops and emerges in relation to our response: we not only participate in the flow of liberative love but also contribute to the shape it takes in the world. We can create mutually responsive relationships amidst the dualities we encounter, or we can block the divine flow and reify our relations into rigid and harmful dualisms. In either case, there is a very real sense in which we human beings create the world we have to live in. Another way to put this is that our shared reality depends on the interaction of all of us. Native American ontology asks us to consider whether even the primordially relational character of the world can be forfeited, and perhaps it is this trajectory that will be necessary to break finally out of a logic of the One.

Schneider offers a helpful notion of *poiesis* that lends a "co-creative and co-constitutive dimension to the divine-world duality." The poetic nature of Lalleśwarī's and Mechthild's texts can be seen as a barrier to theology conceived of linear, rational exposition. Indeed,

as the present discussion has revealed, when my own prose gets caught up in the rhythms of fluid relation, it is most vulnerable to the suspicion of lacking systematic rigor. However, thinking along with Native spiritualities, Schneider urges us to recognize the "sacramental agency that understands the ontic significance of speech, poetry, and stories." When we bend the genres of theology, we bend the shape of the worlds we can imagine and inhabit. As Don Saliers has put it, "the notion of theological significance must be broadened to include more than theology as statements about the divine life. Perhaps there is something about the ancient conception of theology as prayer, as liturgy, as poetry and song that we must recover today."[7] In my view, fluid theological imagery breathes, sings, and even evokes holy mystery particularly well.

Brad Bannon's essay enacts such an *eros* of language as he constructively riffs on the book's central imagery of fluidity. He notes that my chosen term *duality*, with its emphasis on the fact of difference in its many relations, might do very similar work as non-dual-*ism*, which strives not to reify reality into two things, or (even better) to avoid becoming an essentialized "ism." He develops this shared intent through several beautiful images: the mutuality and "potential for infinity" of the tide, the ethical investment of tears, and the creativity and delightful excess of *līlā*, or play.

Bannon's call for a comparative theology of play is an invitation for me to return to some of the interests that fed into this book project. My graduate work on Rāmānuja's Hindu notion of *līlā* helped me to witness the dynamism, delight, and risk in the Christian tradition. The aesthetic dimensions of this theme continue to compel me. My current research investigates religious emotions through the lens of *rasa* theory, which (in the Indian context) posits that our delight in drama and art is a taste of the divine. The prominence of suffering in the Christian tradition (as I have explored in Mechthild) prompts me to wonder about the relation of the delightful and playful aspects of religious experience to the many dimensions of human suffering. Do we risk trivializing or ignoring injustice by taking a playful approach? For Mechthild, the playful flood of the Trinity always flows downhill, to the lowliest among us. But so often ludic theologies ascend in the other direction. The powerful may be the most tempted by the lure of a transcendent beauty that minimizes the painful realities of embodied oppression. Bannon's methodological note that dominant voices, too, can be read with a hermeneutics of suspicion *and* retrieval can help with this tendency. Like Schneider, he moves toward an image of co-creation with his notion of life as a game in which we co-construct the rules along with other divine, human, and natural players.

The confluence of constructive moves in this set of responses illustrates just how generative comparative theology can be. As their various lines of questioning indicate, the work of comparison, always relational, is never finished. Multiple markers of difference (in method, discipline, religious tradition, and style) create new channels of possibility as the textual circle widens, deepens, and flows into new spaces. I thank the four contributors for this invaluably rich conversation.

Notes

[1] Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), chapter four.

[2] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 5.

[3] Gavin Flood frames this debate as a tension between what he terms emanation and pervasion cosmologies. Gavin D. Flood, *Body and Cosmology in Kashmir Śaivism* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993), 90-94.

[4] As Yvonne Zimmerman has pointed out to me in this vein, marginality is always in relation to some center. It is not an absolute "outsiderness," unrelated to anything. There is a certain danger to the valorization to the search for the perfect marginalization, as when relatively privileged readers of liberation theologies dismiss the insights of those who are poor but white, racial minorities but middle class, female but straight, and so on. This search for the utterly marginal position becomes akin to the old search for utter objectivity, a view from nowhere.

Yvonne Zimmerman, e-mail to the author, August 27, 2011.

[5] On the function of symbols, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1996). For rootedness of symbols in embodied experience, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980]).

[6] Process thought has been developed in comparative contexts by John Thatamanil and Monica Coleman. See John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); and Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

[7] Don E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 29.