Introduction: Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion

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Cross-cultural philosophy of religion has recently emerged as a new field in both philosophy and religion. It offers fresh ways of thinking about and doing philosophy of religion and constructive religious thought. The essays in this volume illustrate these new ways of thinking by addressing such foundational topics as the definition and justification of cross-cultural philosophy of religion, criteria of truth across religions and cultures, models for doing cross-cultural philosophy of religion, and the hermeneutics of Asian-Western interaction in philosophy of religion.

I

Cross-cultural philosophy of religion has recently emerged as a new field in both philosophy and religion. Its story begins with the planting of a pioneer seed in the 1950s, cultivation in the 1960s, a blossoming forth in the 1970s, and the mature fruit of the 1980s. It is the story of a number of thinkers from different disciplines who have come together to define and develop a new field of research: philosophy of religion done in a cross-cultural perspective.

In 1958 the philosopher and historian of religion Ninian Smart published a pathbreaking work in philosophy of religion, *Reasons and Faiths*. Drawing on both Western and Asian traditions, his book was a call for philosophy of religion to work in close collaboration

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with the history of religions. It was a pioneering example of how philosophy of religion could and should be done in the emerging pluralistic or global civilization of the late twentieth century. For a more than a decade, however, this book was to stand alone in philosophy of religion.

Meanwhile, in the 1960s, with the publication of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's equally groundbreaking study, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), and Frederick Streng's important book, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (1967), there came the first answering works showing what the history and phenomenology of religions could contribute to a cross-cultural philosophy of religion. In rejecting a view of the world's religions as conceptually closed systems in favor of a view of humanity's religious life as a dynamic historical continuum, Smith opened the way for a new formulation of the problem of understanding across cultures and religions. Streng showed how structural analysis could further mediate between the particularity of religious traditions and the philosopher's quest for universal categories and criteria of cross-cultural understanding and truth.

The results of this early call and subsequent support for collaborative work between philosophers and scholars of religion began to be seen in the first extended efforts at cross-cultural philosophy of religion that appeared in the 1970s, beginning with William Christian's analysis of the logic of *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* (1972) and the contributions of philosophers and historians of religion to the volume edited by John Hick, *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (1974). This was continued in the work of Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (1978), and reflected in the later, revised editions of John Hick's introductory text, *Philosophy of Religion* (1973, 1983, 1990).

Finally, in the 1980s there appeared the fully developed reflections of some of these same authors: Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *Towards a World Theology* (1981); Ninian Smart's *Worldviews: Cross-Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (1983); and John Hick's *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985) and *An Interpretation of Religion* (Gifford Lectures, 1986–87).

While these individually authored works were appearing in the 1970s and 1980s, the philosophers and historians of religion mentioned above, along with others, were also meeting annually at sessions of the Working Group in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion of the American Academy of Religion to continue shaping this emerg-

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ing discipline. The current volume, a partial record of their collaborative effort, is their further contribution to this new field in philosophy and religion.

II

Cross-cultural philosophy of religion offers fresh ways of thinking about and doing philosophy of religion and constructive religious thought. As noted, the thinkers who helped develop and set the agenda for cross-cultural philosophy of religion have come from both philosophy and religious studies. On the side of philosophy they are indebted to traditional Western philosophy of religion as well as to Asian and comparative philosophy. On the side of religion they have been informed by the history and phenomenology of religions and comparative studies in religion based on the social sciences. Nevertheless, cross-cultural philosophy of religion has distinctive features of its own.

As a cross-cultural approach to philosophy of religion, while frequently originating out of, it neverthless differs from what is traditionally and usually understood in the West as philosophy of religion. In the range of data it takes into account and in the plurality of perspectives it entertains, it goes beyond the boundaries of Western philosophy and religion to draw on the methodological and spiritual resources of the world's other cultural and religious traditions.

As a cross-cultural philosophical discipline focusing on religion in particular, it also differs from what might seem to be the same enterprise under a different title, namely, comparative philosophy Asian-Western. While benefiting from the work of comparative philosophers (indeed, the scholars are often one and the same individuals), in its concern to develop criteria for the cross-cultural justification of religious truth-claims and models for constructive thinking across cultures and religions, it goes beyond the tendency of comparative philosophy to limit itself to descriptive comparison of concepts, thinkers or traditions. Use of the term "cross-cultural" (or "global") rather than "comparative" is intended to indicate the normative-constructive, not simply descriptive-comparative intent of this enterprise, above all its concern, as a mode of philosophizing, with the question of truth.

Similarly, while cross-cultural philosophy of religion would not be possible without the empirical and theoretical contributions of

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comparative religious studies, it differs, as normative philosophy, from the descriptive or phenomenological approach that characterizes the history of religions and other comparativist approaches to the study of religion.

Thus, the thinkers who defined this enterprise chose to avoid alternative paradigms that were (and still are) available. They did not conceive cross-cultural philosophy of religion as a species of philosophical or religious debate between proponents of conflicting first-order truth-claims. Again, it was not a matter of comparison or sharing of such first-order claims with one another as in comparative philosophy or interreligious dialogue. Nor, finally, was it their task to describe similarities and differences, or develop conceptual and structural typologies, of first-order beliefs or belief-systems among different religious traditions. These matters, as indicated, were already being dealt with by comparativists in religious studies.

Their vision of cross-cultural philosophy of religion was and is a different one. To see the distinctive character of this field we may look at the positive agenda and requirements that have shaped and continue to shape work in cross-cultural philosophy of religion and that are reflected in the structure and content of the present volume.

From its outset cross-cultural philosophy of religion has placed emphasis on the second-order or meta-issues, methodological and substantive, that arise in the attempt to do philosophy of religion or religious thought in an interreligious or cross-cultural setting. This in turn has provided the basis for developing models or paradigms for first-order projects of constructive philosophical or religious thought. Needless to say, such reflections also make possible greater theoretical sophistication in traditional comparative or phenomenological studies in philosophy of religion and religious studies as well as in the theory and practice of interreligious dialogue.

To pursue such work cross-cultural philosophers of religion have had to satisfy several criteria:

1. They have had to be philosophically sophisticated, with training either in the analytic or pragmatist traditions where philosophers are accustomed to asking such second-order questions, or in one or more of the nonanalytic traditions such as phenomenology, existentialism or poststructuralism which have sensitized philosophers to second-order questions of a hermeneutical sort.

2. They have had to subscribe to Ninian Smart's dictum that in the future philosophy of religion should be done with constant refer-

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ence to the history of religions, or more broadly, phenomenological and comparative studies in religion.

3. They have had to have scholarly expertise in one or more religious traditions, including the Asian traditions, since most analytically trained philosophers of religion in the West have usually been familiar only with the Christian or Jewish traditions and not necessarily on the basis of scholarly study.

4. Finally, they have had to be dissatisfied with the way philosophy of religion traditionally has been done—not drawing on non-Western traditions or, where it has, falling into either the "conflict" or "comparison" models mentioned above.

Thus the establishment of such a discipline has required the joint efforts, on the side of philosophy, of traditionally trained Western philosophers of religion or philosophers and religious thinkers operating primarily within individual Western religious traditions as well as comparative philosophers familiar with the Asian traditions and, on the side of religious studies, historians, phenomenologists, and comparativist scholars of the world's religions and cultures.

III

The essays in this volume illustrate these new ways of thinking about and doing cross-cultural philosophy of religion by addressing such foundational topics as:

1. The definition and justification of cross-cultural philosophy of religion in a setting of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue (part I).

2. The possibility, nature and validity of criteria of truth across religions and cultures (part II).

3. Models or paradigms for doing cross-cultural philosophy of religion (part III).

4. The hermeneutics of the interaction of Asian and Western traditions in cross-cultural philosophy of religion (part IV).

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In part I, "Religious Pluralism and Cross-Cultural Truth," essays by Ninian Smart and Raimundo Panikkar address the implications of religious pluralism for the redefinition of philosophy of religion, while the essay by Harold Coward explores the implications of religious pluralism for interreligious dialogue and constructive religious thought.

Ninian Smart leads off the volume with an essay on "The Philosophy of Worldviews, or the Philosophy of Religion Transformed." Western philosophy of religion has been cut off from both modern interpretations of the Christian tradition and studies of other religions by historians and phenomenologists of religion. But while philosophy of religion needs to open out to other religions, it should also extend to other existential but non-religious ideologies and become a "philosophy of worldviews." A main task of such a philosophy is to clarify the criteria of truth as between worldviews. Smart provides an inventory of considerations relevant to the truth of worldviews, but notes that such criteria do not dictate sharp decisions. Though not forced into epistemological relativism, cross-cultural philosophy issues in a toleration of differences among worldviews. It thus assists in developing ways of thinking that are more consciously planetary. In summary, Smart argues that the philosophy of religion should be extended to the philosophy of worldviews, building upon the historical and comparative study of religions and ideologies and the phenomenology not only of religion but of the symbolic life of humanity as a whole.

Raimundo Panikkar in his essay, "Philosophical Pluralism and Plurality of Religions," focuses on the "hermeneutic of philosophies of religion." There is not just one philosophy of religion but a plurality of philosophies of religions. An attempt to overcome this multiplicity by finding an underlying unity can only lead to a loss of identity. Therefore, between a plurality *de facto* and a unity *de ratione* there must be room for a pluralism *de jure*. (By "pluralism" Panikkar means the legitimate coexistence of worldviews which are nevertheless incompatible among themselves.) After providing a typology and critique of four views of philosophy of religion, Panikkar questions whether any philosophy can ever break out of its hermeneutical circle to serve as a bridge for the encounter of religions. Panikkar suggests instead the model of "dialogical dialogue," in which truth is found not in either party but in what emerges from their encounter. In short, Panikkar argues that cross-cultural philosophy of religion is not any one philosophy of religion but an ever-open process of encounter with and philosophizing about the rel-

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igious experience of humankind in its totality, truth consisting in the hermeneutic process itself.

Harold Coward, in his essay on "Religious Pluralism and the Future of Religions," notes that historically pluralism has been a catalyst in the development of religious traditions. Thus while pluralism may seem to portend crisis, it might also occasion the spiritual growth of religions. Coward examines the similarities of traditional approaches to religious pluralism and difficulties confronting religious pluralism today. If rival viewpoints proceed from starting points so disparate that little or no common ground can be established, there may be no basis for comparative understanding or judgment. But the desire for mutual understanding is too deep for this impasse to be the final word. Spiritual growth in the past has always occurred in the context of religious pluralism, not religious isolation or exclusivism. Coward therefore suggests some presuppositions and guidelines for interreligious dialogue of the future. He warns, however, that scholars should not try to formulate philosophical foundations or criteria for interreligious dialogue before it takes place. Echoing Panikkar, he argues that such will emerge, if at all, only through the process of dialogue itself. In such dialogue lies the future of religions and religious thought.

IV

The essays in part II, "Criteria of Cross-Cultural Truth in Religion," address the possibility, nature, and validity of criteria of truth across religions and cultures. Ninian Smart outlines several normative approaches and criteria of cross-cultural truth in religion. William Wainwright then focuses on criteria of truth in religion drawn from the field of metaphysics, while Mary Ann Stenger examines criteria of truth taken from various fields in religious studies.

Ninian Smart, in his essay on "Truth, Criteria and Dialogue between Religions," assesses several approaches to the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and judgment—that only within a religious system can that system be understood; that each religious system is a total worldview by which all other systems are to be evaluated; that there is no neutral arena in which competing religious truth-claims can be settled; that, on the contrary, religious systems can be verified or falsified by appeal to public facts; that public facts together with "less public" ones can make religious systems more or

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less plausible; that faith is a personal reality transcending religious systems; or, finally, that all religions point to the same truth. He then evaluates various criteria of truth which might render one system more (or less) plausible than another. He concludes that while such criteria are cross-culturally applicable, they offer few conclusive arguments or proofs. Epistemological certainty is elusive in cross-cultural philosophy of religion. This recognition is an important step toward enabling religions and philosophical reflection upon them to come to terms with the plural religious and ideological world that confronts them today.

William Wainwright, in an essay on "Doctrinal Schemes, Metaphysics and Propositional Truth," reviews several arguments against the importance of propositional truth in religious contexts—that oppositions between religious beliefs are only apparent; that propositional truth is relatively unimportant in religion; or that it is inappropriate to use the category of propositional truth at all in religious contexts. Wainwright replies that since some forms of religious truth presuppose propositional truth, questions of propositional truth properly arise when religious doctrines are compared and that such questions are subject to standards of rational adjudication. He then evaluates various criteria of metaphysical truth—formal, explanatory and pragmatic—concluding, with Smart, that while there is some agreement about them, they are vague, indeterminate and difficult to apply. However, though reason alone may be insufficient to resolve doctrinal disagreements, it does not follow that it is unnecessary or that it should not play an important role in one's cross-cultural judgments. Rather than conclude that there is no (propositional) truth in such matters, it might be wiser to broaden our conception of reason.

Mary Ann Stenger begins her essay on "Religious Pluralism and Cross-Cultural Criteria of Religious Truth" by citing examples where cross-cultural judgments are in fact made (Jonestown, sexist religious language, conflicting doctrinal claims), pointing up the need for cross-culturally valid criteria to justify these judgments. Turning to religious studies rather than metaphysics, Stenger considers criteria employed by scholars from four areas of religion: sociology (Peter Berger), theology (Gordon Kaufman), philosophy (John Hick) and history (Wilfred Cantwell Smith). Their criteria include rational assessment and moral evaluation, personal and historical experience, power of transformation, humanization, and acceptability to insiders and outsiders. Stenger argues that such criteria provide a way of judging some truth-claims to be more valid than oth-

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ers and that, though their concrete application may reflect particular cultural traditions or historical situations, their scope is universal, making them cross-culturally applicable. An important feature of Stenger's essay is her claim that such criteria can themselves undergo further development as a result of changed historical, cultural, or religious circumstances.

V

The essays in part III "Models of Cross-Cultural Truth in Religion," offer several paradigms for thinking about truth in a cross-cultural or interreligious context. William Christian sketches the logic of oppositions of religious doctrines, Joseph DiNoia analyzes the logic of religious doctrines about other religions, Norbert Samuelson explores the difference between internal and external evaluations of religious truth-claims, and Mary Ann Stenger presents Gadamer's hermeneutics as an alternative model for interreligious dialogue and cross-cultural truth.

William Christian, in his essay, "The Logic of Oppositions of Religious Doctrines," gives a pithy statement of what philosophers can contribute to the cross-cultural understanding in religion. In addition to a logical analysis of the internal structure of doctrinal systems, their more important contribution might be an analysis of contrasts and connections between doctrines. On the former point, there is often more to the logic of a body of doctrine than a religious community notices, so that even a philosopher outside that religion, by providing a logical analysis of the structure of its doctrinal system, can contribute to intra- and interreligious understanding. As to the latter point, it is highly implausible that logical analysis of the doctrines of various religions would lead to the conclusion that they are all saying the same thing or all logically isolated from one another. It is more likely, as arguments between religions assume, that there are logical connections between one religion's doctrines and those of another. Oppositions are more interesting cases than consistencies because they are more informative. They constitute at least prima facie evidence that two religions are not, after all, saying the same thing.

Joseph DiNoia, in his essay "The Doctrines of a Religious Community about Other Religions," analyzes the logic of traditional and recent positions that religions have adopted in response to religious pluralism and their encounter with other religions. Such responses

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must meet several criteria. They must be consistent with the doctrines of their own tradition but must also evaluate the proposals and adherents of other religions and adopt appropriate attitudes and policies. For example, they might recommend study of the doctrines of other communities, consideration of them as serious religious alternatives, or rethinking of their own doctrines as a result. This might also develop principles of cross-cultural judgment beyond the criteria internal to their religion. This could involve appeal to data about other religions and claims from nonreligious fields like metaphysics. The result might be the formulation of a general theory of religion as such. DiNoia gives a close and detailed analysis of the logic of a number of such traditional and reformulated doctrines about other religions. He cautions, however, that this should not be understood as an argument on behalf of a particular theory or theology of other religions.

Norbert Samuelson, in his essay "The Logic of Interreligious Dialogue," argues that truths of interreligious dialogue are not truths of philosophical debate. He bases this claim on a distinction between propositions and speech acts. The former, if true, are true in an absolute sense, whereas the latter are true relative to a speech community. Interreligious dialogue is concerned primarily with the truth of speech acts and only secondarily with propositional truths. Thus criteria drawn from tradition, as well as those based on reason, may be appealed to in judging religious claims. Such evaluation can be either internal or external. "Internal" means the rules of judgment are set within the context of a particular religious community. "External" evaluation involves factors independent of such a context. Since the meaning of religious claims depends upon their linguistic context, none can be judged only externally. Internal evaluation takes precedence. Though one religion may pass judgment on the claims of another, what constitutes a legitimate judgment of truth will not be a simple matter. There are several options (rejection, modification, translation, conversion) in cases of conflicting religious truth-claims.

Mary Ann Stenger, in her essay on "Gadamer's Hermeneutics as a Model for Cross-Cultural Understanding and Truth in Religion," argues for an alternative to models focused on the logic of conflicting truth-claims or the differentiation of internal and external criteria. Gadamer's concepts of the horizon of understanding as open-ended, the dialectical structure of experience, and the conversational or dialogical structure of the hermeneutical process imply openness to the truth-claims of other religions and the possibility of evaluation

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and change through encounter. The universality of language, its infinite capacity to transcend the horizons of any particular world, makes possible the development of criteria of truth that, while respecting the differences of religious traditions, are cross-culturally valid. Such criteria are not posited a priori before a dialogue occurs but emerge through the hermeneutical process of encounter itself. Instead of being fixated on doctrinal conflicts, we should interact with them, recognizing the limits of our own perspectives and being open to possible truth from opposing views. This fusion of horizons is never absolute or final but constitutes the starting point for new cross-cultural and interreligious reflection.

VI

The essays in part IV, "Hermeneutics of Cross-Cultural Truth in Religion," offer concrete examples of the hermeneutic interaction of Asian and Western horizons. From the side of epistemology, Conrad Hyers sees the mystical/prophetic dichotomy as arising from the ambiguity of religious experience itself, while John Fenton attacks the use of mystical experience as offering a bridge between East and West. From the side of metaphysics, Frederick Streng argues for the pluralism of Asian and Western ontologies and structures of transformation, while Ashok Gangadean builds a comparative hermeneutics drawing on Western and Indian traditions of logic and ontology.

Conrad Hyers, in his essay on "Rethinking the Doctrine of Double-Truth: Ambiguity, Relativity, and Universality," sees religious pluralism as arising from the fundamental ambiguity, hence "double-truth," of religious experience itself. Conflicts among religious interpretations arise from the ambiguity between the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* as bipolar modes of experiencing the religiously ultimate. The difference between prophetic and mystical interpretations is the basic axis of this ambiguity in religious experience. Differences between prophetic and mystical traditions result from emphasis upon one or the other side of the polarity. Recognition of this ambiguity provides a basis for accepting and resolving conflicts between the two interpretive traditions, both of which are meaningful and valid responses but partial and incomplete apart from each other. The ambiguity of religious experience and the hermeneutical "double-truth" that arises from it are what are universal, not some common experience or transcendental unity. Criteria for cross-cultural justification of religious

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truth-claims based on this hermeneutic require that such claims therefore be neither absolutized nor reduced to cultural relativities.

John Fenton, in his essay on "Mystical Experience as a Bridge for Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion: A Critique," attacks the claim that mystical experience is the ineffable essence of religious experience, transcending all linguistic and cultural differences and serving as the common or universal bridge for a cross-cultural hermeneutic. Fenton's counter-thesis is that the language of mystical traditions about mystical experience entails weak rather than strong ineffability, that language about mystical experience discriminates valid from counterfeit mystical experiences, that there is a pluralism of kinds of mystical experience and language, and that such differences are not accidental but intrinsic and constitutive of the mystical path and its goal. Phenomenological similarities among mystical experiences are often incidental to their more basic differences, appearing significant only when abstracted from their respective contexts. The attempt to bypass metaphysical or theological differences among mystical traditions by appealing to a universal or transcultural "essence" of mystical experience is thus false to the data. The "bridge" for a cross-cultural hermeneutic of mysticism must be plural and complex, not single and simple.

Frederick Streng, in an essay on "Structures of Ultimate Transformation and the Hermeneutics of Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion," argues that religious worldviews function not only to describe the ultimate nature of things but also to express the ultimate value of existence. Moreover, they are not grounded in any single type of religious experience but constitute a complex or family of different and overlapping ontologies and structures of transformation. Understanding both the plurality and double function of such worldviews is central to a cross-cultural hermeneutics. Streng supports this claim with a comparative analysis of three representative Western and Asian ontologies and their correlative structures of spiritual transformation. Focusing on the dialectic of positive and negative terms in each, he shows how similar terms, such as being and nonbeing, function differently in different ontological and soteriological contexts. This irreducible pluralism in religious ways of thinking and valuing means that cross-cultural philosophy of religion should take into account the differences not only in modes of doctrinal speculation among religious ontologies but also in the modes of spiritual transformation which they shape and reflect.

Ashok Gangadean, in his essay on "The Hermeneutics of Comparative Ontology and Comparative Theology," argues that the in-

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commensurability of religious worlds appears to make cross-cultural understanding impossible, whereas the transcendental unity of religions reduces interreligious dialogue to monologue. He turns to comparative ontology to find a basis for comparative theology. Comparative ontology is not itself an ontology but a metadiscipline which attempts to understand transitions between first-order ontologies. The categorial principle of Western logic—that what makes sense in one ontological world does not make sense in another—results in a hermeneutical impasse: multiplicity of incommensurable worlds and systematic ambiguity of basic terms. This disqualifies traditional Western logic as a hermeneutic for comparative ontology. Indian logic, especially that of Nagarjuna, recognizes that natural language is already trans-categorial, neither hermetically sealed nor hermeneutically bound, perpetually ready for transformation, ready to liberate reason itself. Thus, a hermeneutics of comparative theology is not only an intellectual discipline; it can also be a path toward spiritual liberation.

VII

As an overview of the essays in this volume shows, cross-cultural philosophy of religion is as pluralistic in its approaches and concerns as the variety of religious and cultural worldviews with which it deals. Its unity is to be found, as indicated before, in shared assumptions concerning the theoretical agenda and areas of scholarly expertise that have shaped and continue to shape the discipline and that are reflected in the structure and content of the present volume.

The unity of this volume may be found in certain recurring themes, questions raised, and solutions offered. The central thematic concern is the nature, possibility and criteria of hermeneutical understanding and/or epistemological truth across boundaries of religions and cultures. This leads to a consideration of such related questions as the nature of pluralism and dialogue, cultural particularity versus transcendental unity, internal and external criteria of truth, propositional versus nonpropositional modes of truth, relativism and rationality, relative and absolute truth, the ineffability or, alternatively, systematic ambiguity of religious experience and language, and finally, multiple concepts of reason and even of logic itself. Methodologically, perhaps the most striking and important difference is that between a logic-based or "conflict" model and a hermeneutically based or "dialogue" model for formulating the cen-

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tral themes and answering the fundamental questions of a cross-cultural philosophy of religion.

As stated at the outset, this volume of essays is the result of the collaborative deliberations of philosophers and historians of religion who have helped to establish the discipline. It may thus serve as an introduction to cross-cultural philosophy of religion. However, since this field is still in its formative stages and since, in keeping with its nature, it is a pluralistic not a monolithic one, the following essays also constitute an invitation to join in its further development.

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