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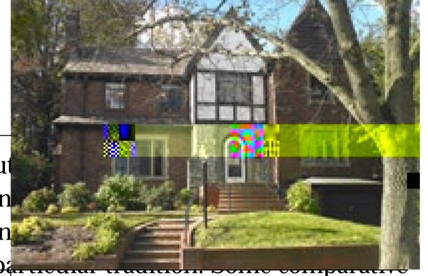

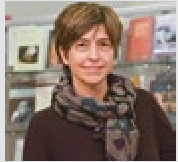

OWENS: Can you distinguish comparative theology from other ways of doing theology and also from what's sometimes known as comparative religions?

CORNILLE: That question is really on people's mind now because it is indeed a new field. People have been doing comparative theology for the past twenty years without always calling it compara

Insofar as it's theology, it's a normative discipline. In that regard, it's different from comparative religions, which, at least ideally or in terms of its goal, is a neutral or non-normative or purely social scientific approach to the study of religion. Comparative theology is a normative discipline, starting from a confessional perspective and then engaging the other traditions. Comparative religion is being focused mainly on understanding, whereas comparative theology is focused on advancing truth.

There are many different ways in which that's done. My interest has really been in mapping those different approaches to

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a particular tradition. Some comparative theologians use the data of different religions to create or to discover a truth that is beyond every religious tradition. I call this philosophy of religion rather than comparative theology, though insofar as they use the data from different religious traditions, it has a comparative dimension to it. I would classify people like Raimon Panikkar and maybe even Robert Neville as doing comparative theology in this way.

There's also comparative theology that starts from the data of a particular religious tradition and tries to advance its self-understanding. While the first type wants to discover truth, the second type is more confessional; it wants to elucidate truth that is already given within a particular religious tradition.

I also distinguish the two types of doing comparative theology as being meta-confessional or confessional. When it's confessional, it starts from the normativity of a particular tradition. It recognizes the authority of established figures of hierarchy in matters of theology and so on, so it tries to do theology as everyone does it but with an openness to what might be learned from other religions.

OWENS: Are there people—scholars, practitioners—who identify as comparative theologians outside of the Christian tradition?

CORNILLE:

come out as areas in which women may have something distinctive to o er.

But again it was very interesting, at the conference: nobody wanted to put their foot down and say "this is what women can bring" or "this is a distinctive contribution of women," but at the same time everyone was sort of feeling around it and still sort of o ering, by way of examples, ways in which women have really been very instrumental in dialogue.

OWENS: You've written important work on the concept of double or multiple religious belonging. This is something that stretches many faithful people's minds a bit. Can you say what you mean by that concept and what you don't mean by it?

CORNILLE: It's a category that started to come into academic discourse and dialogue mostly in the early 2000s. (I actually published a book that I think is partly guilty of spreading that word around.) What we see in the past ten to fifteen years is more and more people who claim to be, in particular, Christian and Buddhist. There are also JewBus—people who are Jewish and Buddhist—and more limited a liations between Christians who claim also to be Hindu.

What's interesting is that, in the 1960s, people didn't want to belong to any religion. Now they want to claim that they actually belong to more than one tradition. That's an interesting shift, I think, that may be reflective of a greater sort of respect for religious identity and belonging in the past 15 years.

It's easy, of course, to say that you identify with or belong to di erent religious traditions. I see my work as sort of a critical reflection on the possibility and limits of multiple–religious belonging. I love patterns and ideal types and classifications, so what I try to do first is show how many di erent types of multiple-belonging there are.

There are also a lot of people who belong to di erent religions not out of their own will—involuntary multiple-belonging versus voluntary multiple-belonging. If you happen to be born in a family where your parents are from di erent religions, you will somewhat belong to each. Or if you're born in a culture where the religion is shaped by di erent religions, you will somewhat belong to many.

The more problematic, or challenging, situation is one where people voluntarily belong to more than one religion. This is something that has happened throughout history. When people are sick, they go and find solace wherever it's o ered. In Japan, for example, people may be Buddhist primarily or Christian, but when they're sick they go to a new religion that o ers miraculous healing. That also goes on in Africa, where Christians go to Muslim faith healers; or in India, where Muslims go to Hindu temples that have goddesses who can promise all kind of goods. That's usually a temporary multiple-belonging.

But some people say that they fully belong to Christianity and Buddhism. This, I think, is a much more problematic situation. But those who make such claims are adamant about it. I try to point to the problems—theological or practical—of that reality and also try to advance another theory for why religions might have the ideal of single belonging. Now we're sort of in a culture where any claim to absoluteness or any claim to absolute control or belonging is seen as sort of exclusive and jealous, but I also have tried to show that there might be sort of deeper spiritual reasons for a single religious identity or belonging.

My latest work in that regard is developing di erent ways of negotiation of multiple belonging, so people who claim to belong to more than one religion have di erent ways of rationalizing this or claiming that it's possible. I've tried to map out how that's done.

OWENS: How, if at all, does this—what you described as kind of a growing group of people who are identifying with multiple traditions—map on to the simultaneous sort of rise of what is called the American "nones"—the una liated in the United States? Are these some of the

full self-understanding of religion. In that sense I think it's part of the same phenomenon. At the same time, I see the nones more as a continuity of the New Age movement of the 1960s, whereas multiple-belongers are now trying to turn back and claim seriousness or respectability for their religious identity.

OWENS: As someone born in Belgium who travels frequently in a professional capacity, lecturing and researching all over the world, what can you say about the di erences in interreligious dialogue between the American context and other contexts around the world?

CORNILLE: The initiative for interreligious dialogue is really something that is most prevalent in the North Atlantic sphere and is often rightfully regarded as a Christian initiative. I just spent some time in Nepal, for example, where there are large groups of Buddhists and Hindus, and they've all lived together peacefully for a very long time, but they're relatively uninterested in each other. So I think it's really a western enterprise that tries to deal with questions of truth, I think, from the perspective of realization of the reality of religious diversity.

For interreligious dialogue to be possible, there are a number of theological and social and political conditions that need to be fulfilled, which I try to develop in [The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue](). It is quite a tall order for all of those conditions to be there, and I think the North Atlantic sphere is really where that's mostly in order right now. In most of the rest of the world—even in countries that have long traditions of religious plurality—the di erent religions are just sort of living side by side, and dialogue isn't really that important or desirable.

OWENS: One of your central arguments in *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* is that the sole su cient condition for interreligious dialogue is a posture or a stance or a sense of hospitality in a theological sense or in an epistemological sense. What's interesting to me is that a lot of other cultures around the world have a much deeper cultural tradition of hospitality—in the traditional sense of opening their doors to other people—than Americans do. Yet you're saying that, in other traditions outside of the North Atlantic context there's a lack of epistemological hospitality. Is there something paradoxical about that or noteworthy about that di erence?

CORNILLE: I don't think so. I think interpersonal hospitality is something that is given with a more humanistic or religious tradition that doesn't have to be related to real interest in what other people believe or receptivity to the possibility of them bringing something new and insightful to one's own religious tradition. Maybe the term "hospitality" was a bit misleading in that sense because, as you say, it really is epistemological and about receptivity to the idea that there is truth in another religion. If your religion allows for the recognition of truth in other religions and that truth is di erent from your own
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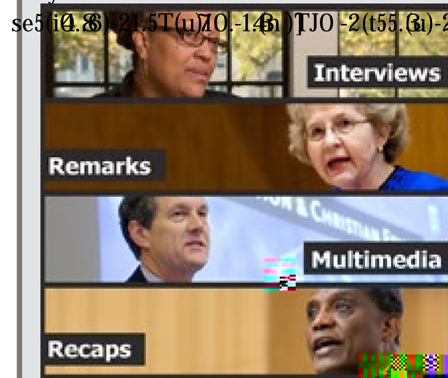

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