

## Comparative Theology: More than Comparing Theologies

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The birth of a new discipline, and in this case a new way of doing theology, brings with it a series of challenges, one of which is ‘what to name the thing.’ The encounter with other religious traditions and the ready availability of their texts, teachings and practices has led to various types of interreligious theological engagement, all, or many of them using the term “comparative theology.” However, those who call themselves comparative theologians often approach the discipline from very different perspectives and with different goals.

The term comparative theology has a long and checkered history. It was used in the eighteenth century as an attempt to develop an alternative to traditional apologetic approaches to other religions.<sup>1</sup> While claiming objectivity and scientific neutrality, it was still profoundly colored by religious presuppositions and “firmly determined by a settled conviction in the unparalleled superiority of Christianity,” as Tomoko Masuzawa put it.<sup>2</sup> When the scientific study of religion emerged in earnest in the course of the nineteenth century, pioneers such as Friedrich Max Muller, originally favored the term comparative theology to refer to the new discipline.<sup>3</sup> However, others, such as Louis Henry Jordan, expressed preference for comparative religion because the category of comparative theology “would seem to limit inquiry to the purely dogmatic teaching of the several Faiths that chanced to be compared” and because “Comparative Theology, in truth, is only a department of Comparative Religion.”<sup>4</sup> In the course of the twentieth century, the terminology of comparative religion, the comparative study of religions, or the history and comparative study of religions became firmly entrenched to refer to the scientific study of religions, which aimed to describe and compare religions according to the scientific ideals of objectivity and neutrality.

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<sup>1</sup> Its earliest reference, in a 1700 book by James Garden, *Comparative Theology: or the True and Solid Grounds of Pure and Peaceable Theology* speaks volumes.

<sup>2</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Max Muller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, p. 21. Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, vol I, p. 3. Also the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Henry Jordan, *Comparative Religion*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1905, p. 27.

This made room for the term comparative theology to be re-appropriated in the second half of the twentieth century to refer to a more strictly theological or normative discipline in which theological insights are gained through a process of inter-religious comparison. The basic difference between comparative religion and comparative theology thus lies in their respective aims or goals. While the comparative study of religions seeks to gain a deeper *understanding* of a religious phenomenon, or a particular text, teaching or practice by studying similarities and differences across two or more religious traditions, comparative theology aims to discover or advance theological *truth* by constructively engaging the data of other religious traditions. Comparative theology is thus more than the comparison of theological systems. Not only is it not limited to textual, theological, doctrinal or philosophical systems, but it also seeks to represent more than a cognitive exercise. But is here, in the question of what this ‘more’ entails, that there is some debate among comparative theologians.

Some comparative theologians may take issue with the idea that there is such a clear distinction between comparative religion and comparative theology.<sup>5</sup> While the difference is generally framed in terms of non-normative versus normative approaches, it has been argued that it is impossible to attain to a purely objective, or non-normative approach to the study of religions, and that the difference is thus a matter of degree, rather than nature. Part of the confusion also lies in the fact that early, so-called non-normative approaches to the comparison of theologies displayed obvious normative and apologetic intentions, and that current approaches to comparative theology do not always go so far as to draw clear or explicit normative conclusions.

Among comparative theologians who recognize the fact that comparative theology is a normative discipline that is oriented toward advancing theological truth and spiritual transformation, there is disagreement about how to conceive of and discern such truth. Some comparative theologians remain firmly grounded in a particular religious tradition, while others seek to move beyond the confines of any given tradition. I have framed the difference in terms of confessional versus meta-confessional approaches to comparative theology.<sup>6</sup> Each of these broad types or approaches, however, may be further nuanced in terms of more particular aims or

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<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Winkler, “On Creativity, Participation and Normativity: Comparative Theology in Discussion with Arvind Sharma’s Reciprocal Illumination” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology* (P. Schmidt-Leukel and A. Nehring, eds) London: Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 191-203.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, pp. 9-42

goals, which also affect the methods employed. It may be therefore useful to reflect on the possibility, or the necessity of developing a different names or terms for the different forms of comparative theology.

### *Comparative Religion and Comparative Theology*

It has become common to distinguish the old and the new comparative theology, the former referring to the precursor of the scientific study and comparison of religions and the latter to the heir of the history and comparative study of religions. In between the two types of comparative theology, the history and comparative study of religions has gone through major shifts and mutations, from grand ambitions to collect and catalogue all of the religious data in the world to highly detailed studies and comparison of very specific and limited religious data. And from confident claims to absolute objectivity, to scrupulous awareness of historical location and subjectivity. For much of the history of the comparative study of religions, the normative or theological interests of scholars remained barely disguised. Though comparativists such as Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade no longer pursued explicitly apologetic interests, their choice and treatment of the material revealed their own religious commitments and orientation.

This is what precipitated the crisis in the comparative study of religion in the late twentieth century. The work of some of the major protagonists of the discipline, such as Mircea Eliade, was vehemently critiqued, and the very possibility and utility of engaging in the scientific study and comparison of religions questioned.<sup>7</sup> In the course of time, the very use of the term religion was also put into question, and the whole discipline subjected to postcolonial and postmodern critiques.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Segal, "in Defense of Reductionism" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1983) 3, pp. 591-605. Ivan Strenski, "Mircea Eliade: Some Theoretical Problems" in *Religion in Relation* (R. Segal, ed.) Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993, pp. 15-40. Christian Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger, *Hermeneutics, eds., Politics and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald, "A Critique of Religion as a Cross-Cultural Category" in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997), pp. 91-110.

While the discipline has gone through a period of self-doubt and uncertainty, the comparative method is slowly reclaiming its place within the study of religion. Scholars again assert that comparison forms an intrinsic element of all human thought and understanding, and that it may come to illumine aspects of religious life and culture.<sup>9</sup> And it is said to be disingenuous to argue that there are no common patterns or threads between religious traditions, and that the naming of such patterns always involves a form of hegemony or imposition.<sup>10</sup> There is thus a new confidence in the comparative method and a new reflection on methodological questions.

The modern discipline of comparative theology is firmly grounded in and indebted to the discipline and methodology of the comparative study of religions. Every scholar engaging in comparison must have a firm grasp or control of the traditions and the material studied. This presupposes extensive study of the history, the languages, the texts, teachings and practices of the traditions involved. As a result, scholars engaged in comparative work are rarely able to study and become experts in more than two traditions. Sometimes comparisons evolve from chance discovery of interesting or illuminating similarities and differences between particular texts, teachings or practices, and sometimes they are the result of a more deliberate search. For example, study of the figure of Krishna within Hindu devotion may point to some striking parallels with themes in infancy stories of Jesus in the Bible. Or one may set out to look for and compare more universal religious or generic themes in various religions, such as “the human condition,” “the origin of suffering,” “the role of women,” “ultimate realities.”

All comparison presupposes a so-called “tertium comparationis,” the aspect or question with regard to which two things are being compared. This notion has been the subject of much recent methodological reflection in the comparative study of religions. While the very idea of subjecting certain religious ideas and practices grounded in very different religious contexts to generic religious categories has been subject to critique, current proponents of the comparative method such as William Paden and Michael Bergunder have emphasized that the tertium comparationis functions as a heuristic device that remains constantly open to clarification,

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<sup>9</sup> The first important collection of articles advancing this argument was *A Magic Still Dwells*, edited by Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> A more recent collection of articles defending comparison in the study of religions is *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

problematization, and correction.<sup>11</sup> Comparative categories focus on only one aspect of a particular phenomenon,<sup>12</sup> and they serve to light up similarities as well as differences, allowing for deeper insight into both the particularity of religious expressions as well as more universal patterns. For example, in *Splitting the Difference*, Wendy Doniger focuses on the theme of splitting in Greek and Indian myths and notices patterns across the traditions such as the fact that while mythical women tend to split or double in order to avoid trauma, mythical men tend to split in order to multiply pleasure, ending with the bold conclusion that “gender trumps culture” when it comes to the roles of women and men in the myths of different traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Comparison and the use of a “tertium comparationis thus involves a redescription of indigenous terms into broader categories. As Hugh Nicholson points out, “The point of comparative redescription is to transform one’s understanding of the former term for a particular purpose. This purpose may be either to overcome the incomprehensibility of an unfamiliar phenomenon or alternatively it may be to unsettle a sense of familiarity that has dulled one’s perception of a phenomenon.”<sup>14</sup>

Scholars engaged in comparative religion have distinguished various forms or modes of comparison. Philippe Bornet, for example, distinguishes genealogical and analogical forms of comparison, the former focusing on historical connections and borrowing, and the latter on connection by virtue of analogical themes.<sup>15</sup> Oliver Freiberger speaks of illuminative versus taxonomic modes of comparison, the former being used “for illuminating a particular historical datum, especially assumed blind spots, by drawing on other cases” and the latter for creating and defining taxonomies or classifications.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> William Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism” in *A Magic Still Dwells* (K. Patton and B. Ray, eds.) Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 186. Michael Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of History: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology* (P. Schmidt-Leukel and A. Nehring, eds.) London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> “Two objects can belong to the same reference class in one stipulated respect, but differ from other objects in that class in every other way and for every other purpose.” (Paden 188)

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference. Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Bornet, “Comparison as a Necessary Evil: Examples from Indian and Jewish Worlds” in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, pp. 72-94.

<sup>16</sup> Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison. A Method in Religious Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 126-131.

The ultimate goal of the comparative study of religions is thus purely intellectual and scientific: it has to do with enhancing one's understanding of a religious phenomenon by placing it within a wider religious context. As William Paden puts it, the comparative study of religion is "an exercise in understanding what recurs, what is different, and why."<sup>17</sup>

Much of the work of a comparative theologian follows the same scholarly steps as the scholar of comparative religion. It involves painstaking study of texts, teachings and practices, and the organization and analysis of the material around a particular comparative theme or a "tertium comparationis" such as the status of doctrine, the role of loving surrender, the theme of divine absence and presence, of fluidity, of the human condition, of divine infancy, or divine providence, of creation and freedom, etc. These themes are compared in particular chosen texts, thinkers or rituals. The possibility for comparison in comparative theology, as in the comparative study of religions, is sheer endless. This is where a difference presents itself: while the choice of themes and material in the case of comparative religion is driven mainly by intellectual interest and promise, in the case of comparative theology, it is based on a desire for theological understanding, or for deepening and developing one's understanding of religious truth. The choice of traditions, texts, or practices in comparative theology still includes a certain degree of arbitrariness, since it is dictated by the traditions and the material one happens to know. But it is also governed by a desire to shed light on particular theological and religious questions and to advance theological truth, which would be anathema to scholars involved in the comparative study of religions. The ultimate goal of comparative theology thus involves learning from another religious tradition or from combining the teachings of different religions. The process of learning may take various forms. It may involve the intensification of the truth of one religion by juxtaposing it with that of another religion. The focus is here thus on religious similarities or analogies and the way in which they mutually reinforce one another. A second type of learning may take the form of rectification, or correction of one's misrepresentation of the other, which also affects one's own self-understanding, or the overall relation between religions. The process of learning may also take the form of recovering certain neglected or forgotten aspects of one tradition by using the other as a catalyst. A fourth type of learning involves the reinterpretation of one tradition through particular categories, or through entire philosophical

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<sup>17</sup> William Paden, "Elements of a New Comparativism," in *A Magic Still Dwells. Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (K. Patton and B. Ray, eds.) Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 190.

frameworks developed within a different religious tradition. In the fifth place, religious development and growth may also occur through the borrowing or appropriation of elements belonging to various traditions. And finally, religious learning may also take the form of reaffirming the superiority and truth of particular teachings of one tradition in light of those of another tradition. In all of these cases, the ultimate goal is thus to deepen and enrich religious teachings and practices through engaging in a constructive theological exercise.

Besides in the choice of topics and the goal of comparative theology, its difference from comparative religion also manifests itself in the subjectivity of the scholar, and the way in which it is engaged in the comparative process. While personal interests and commitments may play a role in both cases, the religious identity and grounding of a comparative theologian is fully embraced as a tool in comparative theology, while the personal religious identity and motivation of the scholar of comparative religion are confessed in order to minimize their impact on the comparative process and conclusions. Acknowledging the methodological similarities between comparative religion and comparative theology Reid Locklin and Hugh Nicholson also note that “whereas recognition of normative commitment remains a methodological problem for most scholars in religious studies even today, it belongs to the very nature of the comparative theological project.”<sup>18</sup>

While grounded in the methodology of the comparative study of religions, in terms of its aims, comparative theology is thus more closely aligned with systematic theology or philosophy of religion. However, it is here that the difference between approaches to comparative theology becomes clear. Some view comparative theology primarily as a means of advancing the truth of a particular religion, while others are oriented toward discovering or developing more universal theological truth. And while some seek to develop a universal truth beyond any particular religion, others seek to derive universal truth from within religious traditions and while remaining faithful to their self-understanding. Besides these approaches to comparative theology, the term has also been used to refer to the effort to deconstruct hegemonic practices in which the self-understanding of one tradition is built upon the misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the other. While this latter approach to comparative theology may be more closely aligned with the comparative study of religions, its ultimate goal is to overcome all forms

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<sup>18</sup> Hugh Nicholson and Reid Locklin, “The Return of Comparative Theology” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2010): 490.

of religious hegemony, and thus for religious traditions to develop a more authentic or true self-understanding, which may thus also be regarded as a form of constructive theology.

### *Comparative Theology as Decolonial Theology*

One approach to comparative theology that focuses almost exclusively on the process of learning through rectification may be found in the postcolonial or decolonial approaches to the discipline. Here, the focus is primarily on deconstructing false dichotomies that have served to shape or reinforce the identity or belief system of one religion over against others. This approach presumes that the differences between religions are much less pronounced or more fluid than traditionally presupposed, and that the main purpose of comparative theology consists of exposing this fact. It thus consists of revisiting and critiquing the ways in which religious identities have been formed and solidified in the course of history, but also in critiquing contemporary forms of comparative theology that presume and reinforce such boundaries. In what he calls a dialectical approach to comparative theology, Hugh Nicholson seeks to expose the ways in which religious otherness has been used – or construed -- to advance one’s own religious interests, from the doctrines of No-self in Buddhism and the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son in Christianity,<sup>19</sup> to Rudolph Otto’s use of the Hindu figure of Shankara in order to vindicate the Christian figure of meister Eckhart.<sup>20</sup> Nicholson believes that all forms of dichotomous typifications of religion include an element of hegemony which must be dismantled. Comparative theology here thus becomes of mode of “critical self-consciousness”<sup>21</sup> in which the “naturalness” of opposing religious identities is radically questioned, and in which “cross-cultural comparison can bring to light parallels that cut across established cultural boundaries, thus revealing the latter’s arbitrariness and contingency.”<sup>22</sup> The ultimate goal is thus a “non-hegemonic form of interreligious theological discourse.”<sup>23</sup> This deconstructive or decolonial approach to comparative theology may be regarded as a precursor to the more

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<sup>19</sup> Hugh Nicholson, “Rhetorics of Theological One-Upmanship in Christianity and Buddhism. Athanasius’ Polemic Against the Arians and Vasubandhu’s Refutation of Pudgalavada Buddhism” in *How to do Comparative Theology* (Clooney and Von Stosch, eds.) New York: Fordham University Press, 2018, pp 72-97.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.



constructive forms of comparative theology, insofar as there are still particular religious ideas, texts and practices to be engaged constructively.<sup>24</sup>

### *Comparative theology as Confessional Theology*

As the term suggests, confessional comparative theology involves a process of engaging in constructive theological reflection with other religions from within the religious framework of a particular religious tradition. This tradition provides the impetus, the theological questions or problems to be probed, and the guiding norms for discerning truth in other religions. It also represents the ultimate goal and arbiter of the comparative theological work. Theology is here thus understood as reflection on the faith and practice of a particular religious community, and comparative theology is done at the service of that community.

This form of comparative theology first of all requires some form of theological permission for engaging the religious other, or openness to the possible presence of theologically relevant teachings and practices in the other religion. This may take different forms within any single tradition, depending on the sources used and on the interpretation applied. The religious attitudes toward the truth of other religions have often been captured in the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, but each of these categories encompasses important internal nuances, which are relevant for the way comparative theology is conducted.<sup>25</sup> I will not here go into the tired discussion of the relationship between theology of religions and comparative theology other than to say that some degree of at least implicit openness toward the truth of other religions is presupposed and that the practice of comparative theology may shift and change one's theological views of the truth of the other. When applied to the question of truth (rather than salvation), theological presuppositions may also differ depending on the religion engaged. One may thus develop an exclusivist attitude toward some religions, and a very open and inclusivist attitude toward others.

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<sup>24</sup> Some forms of decolonial comparative theology go so far as to deny the very existence of distinct religious identities.

<sup>25</sup> I discuss the relationship between theological conceptions of the truth of the other religion and their impact on how comparative theology is conducted in chapter two of *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2020.

One of the distinctive characteristics of confessional comparative theology is that it starts with a theological question or problem relevant for a particular religious tradition, or deriving from within one's own theological sources. To be sure, this starting point may only surface in the process of engaging another religion, as this draws renewed attention to certain texts, teachings or practices in one's home tradition. James Fredericks describes the process of choosing a focus for comparison as happening "dialectically":

Comparison begins with the critical study of another religion, sometimes by means of the reading of classic texts, sometimes by means of personal dialogue with the practitioners of the other religious paths, and optimally by taking both routes. The conversation with the other tradition eventually becomes a conversation within the home tradition in which its classic texts, art, rituals, ascetic practices, etc. are reinterpreted in light of the other tradition. The critical correlations established in the work of comparison can be positive or negative – sometimes the correlation will be a recognition of similarity, sometimes of difference.<sup>26</sup>

The series "Christian Commentaries on non-Christian Sacred Texts" illustrates the dialectical process involved in the choice of material for comparative theological engagement.<sup>27</sup> In this case, authors may be drawn to a particular text partly due to their Christian background and predispositions. But reading the sacred text of another religion in turn brings them back to their own tradition and to a recovery or reinterpretation of their own texts or ideas in light of the other. In his Christian commentary on the Hindu *Narada Sutras* Daniel Sheridan speaks of the sacred texts of other religions as "catalysts" which "can help to grasp afresh our own tradition and to make it our own in a way adequate to the demands and challenges of the modern culture that we live in. The catalyst will function to reinvigorate our imaginations and our enthusiasm, to re-

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<sup>26</sup> James Fredericks, "Introduction" in *The New Comparative Theology* (F. Clooney, ed.) London: T&T Clark, 2010, p. xi.

<sup>27</sup> Volumes in the series are Catherine Cornille, ed. *Song Divine. Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavadgita* (2006), Daniel Sheridan, *Loving God: Krishna and Christ. A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras* (2007), Francis Clooney, *The Truth, the Life. Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaishnava Hindus* (2008), Leo Lefebure and Peter Feldmeier, *The Path of Wisdom. A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapada* (2011), Reid Locklin, *Liturgy of Liberation. A Christian Commentary on Shankara's Upadeshasahasri* (2011), John Keenan and Linda Keenan, *I Am/No Self, A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (2011), Joseph O'Leary, *Buddhist Nonduality . Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on the Teaching of Vimalakirti* (2017), Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkosky, *The More Torah, The More Life. A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot* (2018), and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddha Mind-Christ Mind. A Christian Commentary on the Bodhicaryavatara* (2019).

stimulate our jaded perception of the beauty of God so that we may respond with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength to the lovable and personal reality of God.”<sup>28</sup>

Even when starting from within a particular tradition, the options for comparative theological reflection are still endless. Insofar as comparative theology is meant to enrich the broader theological reflection within a tradition (and not remain a marginal or idiosyncratic exercise), I have emphasized the importance of focusing on topics that are alive and pressing within a particular tradition. For example, the mystery of atonement remains one of the most crucial and challenging questions within Christian theology. In the volume, *Atonement and Comparative Theology*, Christian theologians engaged with various other traditions reflect on how other religions might contribute to the Christian understanding of the vicarious suffering of Christ.<sup>29</sup> Depending on the tradition engaged, some focus on the question of sin and guilt, others on vicarious suffering, others on blood sacrifice, etc. Different religions may thus light up different aspects of the Christian understanding of atonement, thus both broadening and deepening various dimensions of Christian self-understanding.

In a confessional approach to comparative theology, the home tradition represents not only the starting point, but also the point of reference in engaging the other religion. It determines the focus for comparison as well as the relative importance of certain similarities and differences. It also provides the hermeneutical lens for understanding the other tradition. One tradition thus inevitably becomes redescribed in terms of another. While this may be considered to be a form of hegemonic imposition on the other, it may also be regarded as an expression of humble awareness of one’s own hermeneutical location and of the inevitably situated framework from within which members of different religions understand one another. It is obvious that comparative theology aims at going beyond one’s given hermeneutical framework in order to understand the other as much as possible from within their own self-understanding. The ultimate goal of comparative theology is to expand one’s hermeneutical horizon and learn from the other tradition.

In addition to providing the starting point and the hermeneutical framework, the home tradition also provides the norm or criterion for determining the validity or truth of the teachings

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Sheridan, *Loving God: Krishna and Christ. A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras*. Leuven: Peeters Press, 2007, pp. 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Cornille, ed., *Atonement and Comparative Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020.

and practices of another religion is derived from one's own tradition. Only those teachings that are in continuity with, or at least not in contradiction with the core teachings of one's tradition will be considered as possible sources and occasions for learning. Though this principle seems clear and coherent, the question of how to engage in such normative judgment and which norms apply to a particular phenomenon is often less evident, and itself requires careful discernment.<sup>30</sup>

The third characteristic of confessional comparative theology is its answerability to a larger community. This means not only that the comparative theologian might consider the burning questions of a particular community in his or her work, but that it is also subject to the reception by the community. The ultimate arbiter of the truth and validity of the work of the comparative theologian thus lies in the broader community, or its representatives. I do not mean to limit this to magisterial approval or disapproval. As we know from history, the truth of theological insights often takes a long time to germinate and to find its way into a tradition. But the salutary element of confessional comparative theology is that the process of discernment of theological truth is not limited only to the personal judgment of an individual theologian.

### *Comparative Theology as Transreligious Theology*

Besides the confessional approach, the term comparative theology has also been used more broadly to refer to forms of constructive engagement with the teachings of different religious traditions without any clear or consistent identification with the teachings and practices of a particular religion. While theologians engaged in this type of comparative theology may have been formed predominantly within one tradition, this no longer plays a normative role in engaging the reality of religious diversity. J.R. Hustwitt describes this type of comparative theology succinctly when he states that “involves a theologian encountering the other and, rather than applying the fruits of that encounter to her own tradition, proceeds in a process of collaborative inquiry that transgresses the boundaries of what can be accommodated by the tradition. Coherence with any particular tradition is not strictly necessary.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In the volume *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue* (C. Cornille, ed.) it becomes clear that theologians belonging to the same tradition may not always agree on the hierarchy of criteria in a particular religion, or on which criteria may apply to a particular case of discernment.

<sup>31</sup> J.R. Hustwitt, “Myself, only Moreso: Conditions for the Possibility of Transreligious Theology” in *Open Theology* 2 (2016), p. 236.

Here, there is still a commitment to advancing religious truth, but this truth is to be attained “at the end of the inquiry, not at the beginning,” as Robert Neville puts it.<sup>32</sup> Whereas confessional comparative theology seeks to elucidate or enrich a truth that is given, transreligious comparative theology seeks to, as John Thatamanil puts it, “*determine* the truth of theological matters through conversation and collaboration.”<sup>33</sup> Thatamanil here adheres to Gordon Kaufman’s dynamic and dialogical understanding of truth as always “in the process of becoming” and as “emerging (quite unexpectedly) in the course of conversation.”<sup>34</sup>

Keith Ward also draws a sharp distinction between confessional theology as “the exploration of a given revelation by one who wholly accepts that revelation and lives by it” from comparative theology “not as a form of apologetics for a particular faith but as an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions.”<sup>35</sup> Neville distinguishes this type of theology as “understanding seeking faith” rather than the classical understanding of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Jerry Martin also approaches transreligious theology as an alternative to confessional comparative theology. While the latter “looks beyond their traditions, but keeps intact sufficient elements to provide compasses and rudders”<sup>36</sup> he sees transreligious theology as a way “to go further and to consider the total spiritual resources of humankind, every source of revelation and enlightenment and insight anew, without dragging our traditional anchors behind us.”<sup>37</sup> Though Wesley Wildman admits that transreligious theology has its roots in comparative theology, and though he recognizes the necessity of religious traditions to nourish transreligious theology at this stage, he also envisions a state beyond such dependency when “its parasitic relationship with positive religious traditions falls away.”<sup>38</sup> He describes this type of transreligious theology as a “postreligious theology, or nonreligious theology—that is, theology that makes intellectual sense with no specific religious

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Neville, “On Comparative Theology: Theology of Religions or a Trans-Religious Discipline,” p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> John Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine. God, Creation, and the Human Predicament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Thatamanil here quotes from Gordon Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 199.

<sup>35</sup> Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Jerry Martin, “Introduction to the Topical Issue ‘Is Transreligious Theology Possible?’” in *Open Theology* 2 (2016), p. 261.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley Wildman, “Theology Without Walls: The Future of Transreligious Theology” in *Open Theology* 2 (2016), p. 243.

tradition at its root and remains socially viable with no living religious institution for support.”<sup>39</sup> Wildman is especially concerned with the place of theology in the secular academy and with the need to divest it from any sectarian basis or biases while still allowing for the “highest level thinking about ultimate reality and the human condition.”<sup>40</sup>

Meta-confessional comparative theology thus moves toward a philosophical, rather than a traditional theological understanding of truth. Neville acknowledges that “my theology is a systematic philosophical theology that I turn back on the comparative base to line up new comparative perspectives to investigate.”<sup>41</sup> The goal of this type of comparative theology is the development of a “World Theology,” a “Global Theology” or a “Universal Theology.” It is profoundly indebted to the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who in his *Toward a World Theology*, sought to develop what he called a “Theology of Comparative Religion” in which “the material on the basis of which a theological interpretation shall be proffered, of the world, man, the truth, and of salvation – of God and His dealings with His world – is to be the material that the study of the history of religion provides.”<sup>42</sup> When engaging in this type of work, Raimon Panikkar uses the term “imperative philosophy,” rather comparative theology, describing it as an “open philosophical attitude ready to learn from whatever philosophical corner of the world, but without claiming to compare philosophies from an objective, neutral and transcendent vantage point.”<sup>43</sup> With regard to the role of tradition or community in developing or assessing theological insights, Panikkar points to his “refusal – as a Christian – to belong to a simple religious sect that has existed on its own for only two thousand years.”<sup>44</sup> The practice of what he calls a “diatopical hermeneutics” also moves away from identification with one specific tradition toward an attempt to speak a more universal language:

I am attempting to speak a language that will make sense for the followers of more than one philosophical tradition – a risky task perhaps, but necessary if one is to do justice to a cross-cultural investigation.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Toward a World Theology*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981, p. 126.

<sup>43</sup> “What is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?” in *Interpreting across Boundaries*, G. Larson and E. Deutsch, eds., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 127.

<sup>44</sup> *Christophany*, p. 168. His work never did receive either approval or condemnation from the teaching hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

<sup>45</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 381.

There is no conformity among meta-confessional comparative theologians regarding criteria of truth. Without heteronomous basis for truth, the process of discernment of truth in comparative theology is less obvious, and often left to the personal judgment of the theologian. Though sympathetic to the overall project of transreligious theology, J.R. Hustwit remarks that the absence of given criteria for intelligibility represents the greatest challenge for meta-confessional comparative theology, since:

no matter how many experts agree, or how elegantly a theological hypothesis coheres, in the end, truth claims can never be verified with finality. I suspect that the best we can do are “better” and “worse” judgments, cobbled together from various indirect and worldview-contingent truth criteria.<sup>46</sup>

He suggests elsewhere that criteria of truth may here derive simply from the inner coherence of the theological insights or else from “the relative consensus of a community of experts.”<sup>47</sup> He does not specify, however, how such community might be constituted.

This meta-confessional approach to comparative theology has found a home in the “theology without walls” scholarly group and a forum and in the *Open Theology* journal. The audience of meta-confessional comparative theology does not limit itself to any particular tradition. Just as the theologians themselves do not identify with a particular religious tradition, their theological insights are geared toward individuals with no particular or singular religious identification. John Thatamanil speaks of the relevance of this work for those who belong within the category of “spiritual but not religious” or “nones.”<sup>48</sup> This type of meta-confessional comparative theology may offer theological inspiration or guidance for such seekers.

### *Comparative Theology as Interreligious Theology*

One approach to comparative theology that may be situated between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology focuses on the possibility of enrichment and

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<sup>46</sup> J.R. Hustwit, “Myself, only Moreso: Conditions for the Possibility of Transreligious Theology” in *Open Theology* 2 (2016), p. 241.

<sup>47</sup> J.R. Hustwit, *Interreligious Hermeneutics and the Pursuit of Truth*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014, p. 115.

<sup>48</sup> In “Transreligious Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom” in *Open Theology* 2 (2016), p. 362. However, he distantiates his approach from the “market-driven hybrid spiritualities now so much in vogue” by developing an in-depth study of the two traditions and thinkers which may come to “critically evaluate” such spiritualities.

illumination of both of the traditions involved in the comparative theological exercise. Like transreligious theology, it is not limited to enhancing the truth of only one tradition. But like confessional theology, it remains faithful to the basic normative teachings of both religions involved. Here, a single theologian who is competent in more than one tradition may determine what both traditions involved in the comparative theological exercise may learn from one another. Or a theologian may also be intent on discovering religious compatibilities and a common ground where both religions might meet. Perry Schmidt-Leukel uses Arvind Sharma's term "reciprocal illumination" to describe the goal of this particular type of comparative theology.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of interreligious theology, the theologian may still confess adherence primarily to one particular tradition. Such an approach may then go back and forth between discussing what one's own tradition has learned from the other tradition while also pointing to what the other tradition may learn from one's own. This is, for example, the case in the work of Aloysius Pieris' *Love Meets Wisdom*, John Makransky's "A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,"<sup>50</sup> and John Cobb's, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*. Theologians with expertise in another religious tradition will inevitably have ideas about what both religions might learn from one another. This approach to comparative theology in which one does not limit oneself to what one may learn from the other, but also suggests what the other may learn from one's own tradition may be regarded as a form of witness or evangelization. John Cobb makes this clear when he states:

When we have been attentive to the ambiguities in the situation of others, when we have been transformed by the truth they can teach us, then it is also time to try to show them how faith in Jesus Christ can creatively transform their traditions in such a way as to free them from bondage.<sup>51</sup>

Comparative theology here thus maintains a strong confessional element. This need not be regarded as imposition. Just as any religious tradition might humbly acknowledge the possibility of learning from the other, it might also be delighted in the possibility of offering something of

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<sup>49</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Christ as Bodhisattva: A Case of Reciprocal Illumination" in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology*, p. 214. In his discussion of Christ as Bodhisattva, for example, he

<sup>50</sup> *Theological Studies*, September 2014.

<sup>51</sup> John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, p 141.



value and insight to another tradition. It will of course be up to the other tradition to determine whether or not it accepts this offer.

However, interreligious theology may also be practiced from the perspective of religious hybridity or dual belonging. Here, theologians no longer identify exclusively or predominantly with one or the other tradition but move back and forth between religious traditions, adopting the normativity of one or the other depending on the topic at hand. This is the case, for example, in the work of Paul Knitter, who generally recognizes the normativity of Christianity in questions of social justice, and the normativity of Buddhism in the areas of philosophy and spirituality.<sup>52</sup> In his approach to interreligious theology, Perry Schmidt-Leukel argues that the different criteria of different religions may themselves be complementary, rather than hierarchical:

The question, however, is how such mutual illumination is achieved, or how this form of comparative theology is conducted. If theologians of two traditions each find inspiration in similar categories in each other's religions, this represents a form of confessional comparative theology simultaneously conducted, or registered by a theologian who may or may not belong to either. For example, a theologian may study how the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ and the Buddhist understanding of the Bodhisattva have been a source of mutual enrichment in the past. However, this may go further into one theologian determining what the two religions could or should learn from one another. One may find it to various degrees in Paul Knitter's *Without Buddha I would Not Be a Christian*), and also to some extent in.

Besides or through exploring what both religions may learn from one another, interreligious theologians are often searching for commonalities between religious traditions, or for a synthesis beyond or before their religious differences. Unlike transreligious theologians, interreligious theologians are still for the most part concerned with remaining faithful to the self-understanding of the religious involved. In his approach to interreligious theology Joseph O'Leary is in search of a "pre-denominational faith,"<sup>53</sup> prior to the doctrinal affirmations of different religions, but not in conflict with them. His focus is thus on the "universal elements in particular religious beliefs and events."<sup>54</sup> As Schmidt-Leukel puts it, the goal of interreligious

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Knitter, "Comparative Theology is not 'Business-as-Usual Theology'," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 35 (2015), pp. 185-91.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph O'Leary, *Reality Itself. Philosophical Challenges of Indian Mahayana*. Nagoya: Chisokudo, 2019, p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph O'Leary, *Reality Itself. Philosophical Challenges of Indian Mahayana*, p. 176.

theology is “seeking compatibility” between religions that both affirm their own identity but move toward a common truth.<sup>55</sup>

Similar to the theologians engaged in interreligious theology, the target of this type of comparative theology may be individuals belonging to either of the traditions involved, or, more likely, individuals on the fence between religions, and identifying with both. Perry Schmidt-Leukel speaks of interreligious theology as directed to “people with different degrees of multireligious identities” who “represent on a micro level a development which on the macro level of our global society indicates the overall future of theology.”<sup>56</sup> Some interreligious theologians still aim their work primarily for the benefit and discernment of one or the other religious community. O’Leary, for example, uses a Mahayana philosophical framework mainly for the purpose of enhancing and transforming Christian self-understanding. And in the introduction to his *Without the Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, Paul Knitter states explicitly that “the ‘orthodox question’ I’m asking in the chapters that follow is directed to the Christian community, not the Buddhist.”<sup>57</sup> This is where interreligious theology moves closer to a confessional approach to comparative theology.

### *Conclusion*

Though all comparative theology is grounded in comparative religion, it cannot be reduced to the scientific study and comparison of religions. The “more” of comparative theology manifests itself in its motivation, method and goals. The motivation for engaging in comparative theology lies not merely in intellectual curiosity and a desire for deeper understanding, however valuable those may be, but in a thirst for religious or ultimate truth and spiritual meaning. This shapes the choice of topics entertained by comparative theologians. While the possibilities for comparison are endless, comparative theologians will typically focus on topics that have a deep spiritual or religious meaning for them personally and/or for the religious tradition to which they belong. The third area in which the “more” of comparative theology manifests is in the goal and the target audience of comparative theology. While comparative religion aims to bring clarity to

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<sup>55</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017, p. 138.

<sup>56</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009, p. xiv.

religious phenomena and thus satisfy the intellectual interest and curiosity of other scholars or of the interested public, comparative theology aims to deepen and advance religious truth and thus enrich the self-understanding of religious traditions and the spiritual thirst and transformation of religious seekers.

This is where the difference between the various approaches to comparative theology become evident. Some focus on deconstructing false or artificial dichotomies between religions while others engage in a more constructive theological exercise. Some focus on enhancing the self-understanding of one religion, others on advancing the truth of the two religions involved in the comparative theological exercise, or of religious truth in general. Some are thus focused on particular communities, while others are speaking from and for an experience of religious hybridity, or for religious seekers in general.

The various approaches are not always clearly distinguished in the work of any particular comparative theologian. Meta-confessional comparative theologians who aim or claim to go beyond the borders of any religion tend to still be shaped predominantly by the conceptual or symbolic framework of a particular religion, whether consciously or not. And confessional comparative theologians at times push the boundaries of their respective traditions so far that they challenge or test the self-understanding of particular religions. Interreligious theology often goes beyond or beneath the particularity of traditions to become transreligious theology. And the lines of confessional identities may shift, and comparative theologians may speak for different publics at different times.

All forms of comparative theology may have something to learn from the critique of theological hegemony, confessional comparative theologians may remain open to hearing what theologians of other religions may believe they might be able teach or offer theologians of other religions. And meta-confessional comparative theology may, as Hans Gustafson puts it, “nudge religious and interreligious theology and dialogue out of their usual secure comfort zones and possibly oversimplified view of religious identities and pull them into the liberative and imaginative growth-filled spaces of transreligious theology.”<sup>58</sup>

Though the various types of theological engagement across religious traditions may be called comparative theology, it would make sense to use different names for different approaches

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<sup>58</sup> Hans Gustafson, “Is Transreligious Theology Unavoidable in Interreligious Theology and Dialogue” in *Open Theology* 2 (2016), p. 259.

to various forms of normative theological engagement between religions. Besides their emphasis on serious study of more than one religion, the methods used and the strictures imposed on the different approaches are quite different. Scholars engaged in the different types of comparative theology have themselves spontaneously come to adopt the terminology of comparative theology for the confessional approach, transreligious theology for the metaconfessional approach and interreligious theology for the approach that focuses on mutual transformation. This nuanced and diversified terminology may bring some methodological clarity to the various possible theological engagements with religious diversity and also advance critical reflection on how to conceptualize the various gifts, or types of “more” that this discipline, or these disciplines might bring to theological reflection in general.