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# **Comparative Theology in Singapore’s Religious Landscape: Some Notes on Methods and Approaches**

BRP

Comparative  
Theology

*A Critical and  
Methodological  
Perspective*

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Theology

BRILL

# Overview & Introduction

- Introduction
- Is there CT in Singapore?
- What is CT?
- What is religion?
- Post- and de- colonial perspectives
- Subalterns – those who can and cannot speak
- Hermeneutics in Asia
- A brief summation

*Interreligious  
Investigations in Asia  
and the West:  
Methodology,  
Comparative Theology,  
Hermeneutics, and  
Christology in  
Intercultural Context*

(A work in progress)

# Is there comparative theology in Singapore?

- 1. Political and social
- 2. The actual practice of CT
- 3. Myself and Singaporean CT?



# What is comparative theology?

- “Theology in a comparative mode” or CT
  - Ref: Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives*, Leiden: Brill, 2017.

# What is religion?

- The World Religions Paradigm (WRP)
  - First, religions are bounded territories of belonging. Therefore, each religion is a distinct and discrete unit to which sole allegiance is required.
  - Second, religion is primarily about belief in a set of principles. Therefore, you cannot adhere (coherently) to more than one set of beliefs at a time.
  - Third, every religious tradition has its own set of meanings leading to a clearly defined set of beliefs and practices. Therefore, you can only practice as an “insider” of one religion (at a time).
    - Ref: See Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Method and Theory for Studying Religiously Plural Societies*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2020 (due).
- Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape
  - Ref: Paul Hedges, “Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model,” *Open Theology* 3.1, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’ special edition, 48-72.

# Post- and de- colonial Perspectives

- Walter Mignolo: Partha Chatterjee, Frantz Fanon, and Gloria Anzaldúa:
  - “So it is the colonial subaltern that carries on its shoulders the global colonial difference, the racialized colonial wound. They are what Frantz Fanon identified as “les damnés de la terre” (“the wretched of the earth”). What is the colonial difference and the colonial wound? To put it simply, it is the authority and legitimacy of Euro-centred epistemology, from the left to the right, assuming or explicitly declaring the inferiority of non-Christian, colored skin, of those not born speaking modern European languages or who were born speaking a surrogate version of a European language, like in British India, Spanish America, the French Caribbean, etc.”
    - Ref: Walter Mignolo, “Subalterns and Other Agencies,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8:4 (2005): 381-407.
    - Ref: See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

# Subalterns – those who can and cannot speak

- Ref: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988): 271-313.
- Ref: Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History & Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).
- Ref: Hedges, *Comparative Theology*.
- Ref: Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

# Hermeneutics in Asia

- Musa Dube via Boyung Lee:
  - ▶
    - “This dynamic often results in unhealthy relationships between the marginalized as they compete with each other to be a more important partner of the dominant group. This mode of engagement thus helps the dominant group to keep the status quo, while putting other groups at odds with one another.”
- Nagarjuna “Fourfold Negation of Opposites”:
  - Nothing comes into being, nor does anything disappear.
  - Nothing is eternal, nor has anything an end.
  - Nothing is identical, or differentiated,
  - Nothing moves hither, nor moves anything thither.
- Keenan:
  - “A philosophy of religion employing Mahāyāna understandings would hold that no single viewpoint can ever encompass accurately the world’s plurality of religions, for no single viewpoint has a vantage point (an advantage) from which it can experience all traditions.... No single perspective is ever capable of rendering judgment about other religions.”
    - Ref: Boyung Lee, “Toward Liberating Interdependence: Postcolonial Intercultural Pedagogy,” *Religious Education* 105.3 (2010): 283-98.
    - Ref: John Keenan, *Grounding Our Faith in a Pluralist World: With a Little Help from Nagarjuna*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008.
    - Ref: Hedges, *Comparative Theology*.
    - Ref: Paul Hedges, *Interreligious Investigations in Asia and the West: Methodology, Comparative Theology, Hermeneutics, and Christology in Intercultural Context* (a work in progress).



# A brief summation

- First, I have raised the question of what it means to do comparative theology in Singapore, which while addressing my own unique position may raise some wider questions about how we locate ourselves as scholars.
- Second, by employing the phrase “theology in a comparative mode”, I have suggested that not all comparative theology in Asia may necessarily look like the Western academic conceptualisation of that discipline.
- Third, I have stressed the notion of East Asian religiosity as concerning strategic religious participation in a shared religious landscape, as I believe we need to see how we need to think “religion” differently in Asia.
- Fourth, I have highlighted Mignolo’s usage of Chaterjee, Anzaldúa, and Fanon concerning colonial difference, the colonial wound, and the wretched of the earth to help theorise the decolonial basis for challenging Western hegemonic norms in terms of modes of knowledge and knowledge production. I have also raised the issue of the subaltern and the question of whose voices are heard.
- Fifth, in addressing hermeneutics, I have suggested that we need to use Asian theory to help supplement and extend Western theory, while noting Dube and Lee’s admonition to be aware of seeing multiple contextual traditions in dialogue with Western theory. We need to decentre Western hegemonic norms. I have also briefly indicated some ways I will use Nagarjuna in this.