MEANING AND METHOD IN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

CATHERINE CORNILLE

WILEY Blackwell

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in Comparative Theology

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For Wilfried Cornille, my father

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Introduction

Comparative theology forms an integral part of every religious and theological tradition. Throughout history, religions have developed their beliefs, practices, and overall sense of identity through a process of borrowing, refuting, and reinterpreting elements from other religious traditions. Any new religion builds on the materials of prior religions through a play of adoption and rejection that remains profoundly indebted to the other. And in the course of history, religions continue to consciously or unconsciously absorb ideas and practices of other religions even as they clash with one another or coexist in the same cultural sphere. As such, the reality of religious growth and change through engaging the teachings and practices of other religions is as old as the history of religions.

What is new about the modern discipline of comparative theology is the conscious, open, and systematic engagement of other religions in the process of theological development. While religious borrowing traditionally happened unwittingly or without revealing its source, comparative theology openly acknowledges and credits other religions as a possible repository for constructive theological insight and inspiration. This attitude of humility and generosity toward other religions is the result of both historical and theological developments, and of the remarkable scholarly advances in the study of religions in the course of the past century.

A synthesis of religious studies and theology, comparative theology draws from the methods of both disciplines. From the history and the comparative study of religions, it has inherited not only a vast amount of scholarly material, but also an understanding of the complexity and diversity of religious tradition and of the need to focus on particular texts, teachings or practices. It has also gained a keen awareness of the challenges and instability of applying "what the one thing shows me to the case of two things"[1] and of the fact that

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comparing religions is, as Kimberley Patton puts it, "like juggling torches; either we mishandle them and they will burn and wither us, or else our faces will begin to glow."[2] Comparative theologians are thus expected to engage in an in-depth study of another religion, of its languages and history in order to understand a particular religious text in its own historical and cultural context and in order to perform relevant and fruitful comparisons. Like theology, on the other hand, comparative theology is oriented to gaining not only greater understanding of a particular religious phenomenon, but of the ultimate reality and truth itself. It is thus an explicitly normative discipline that involves the comparison of religions from a faith perspective and/or for the purpose of advancing theological understanding.

Though the term theology may be seen to suggest a focus on teachings, texts, and purely speculative or philosophical understanding, comparative theology may be applied to ritual practices, ethical principles, spiritual practices, and institutional and artistic forms.[3] The absorption of elements from other religions on a popular level indeed generally occurs in the area of ritual practices, leaving speculative theology to the level of second order reflection. And artists are often at the forefront of comparative theological activity, expressing through sculptures, paintings or architecture a vision of reality which includes inspiration from various religious traditions and which may in turn become the basis for further reflection. To be sure, sacred texts form a relatively stable and accessible component of religious traditions, and often contain a blueprint or record of other forms of religious expression. They also tend to be more hermeneutically flexible and thus open to different interpretations within and across religious traditions. While it is thus not surprising that comparative theology often focuses on texts, it may involve any dimension of religions.

Though a relatively new discipline, comparative theology has taken different forms. Not only is there a natural diversity depending on the religions involved and the topics addressed, but even within one and the same religion, theologians have developed different conceptions of the nature and goal of the discipline. This is already reflected in the various definitions of comparative theology. While some emphasize the tradition-based or confessional origin and goal of comparative theology, others present it as a transreligious or meta-confessional discipline. David Tracy defines comparative theology as "any explicitly intellectual interpretation of a religious tradition that affords a central place to the fact of religious pluralism in the tradition's self-interpretation."[4] This broad definition attempts to avoid the particularity of the term "theology" while also including internal religious reflection on the very fact of religious plurality (often called "theology of religions"). Focusing more specifically on

the actual process of comparison, Francis Clooney defines comparative theology as:

> acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is done for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.[5]

This classical definition emphasizes the confessional nature of comparative theology while pointing to the possibility for theological change and growth through learning from other religious traditions. The constructive dimension is also in evidence in James Fredericks's definition of comparative theology as "not only a revisionist but also a constructive project in which theologians interpret the meaning and truth of one tradition by making critical correlations with the classics of another religious tradition."[6]

While these definitions thus approach comparative theology from within the self-understanding of a particular religion, others seek to move beyond the boundaries of any particular religion. John Thatamanil describes comparative theology as engaging "specific texts, motifs and claims of particular traditions not only to understand better these traditions but also to *determine* the truth of theological matters through conversation and collaboration."[7] Whereas confessional comparative theologians might seek to *elucidate* the truth of their own traditions, religious truth is here considered more open-ended, to be *determined* in the process of comparative theological engagement. Thatamanil still emphasizes the relationship between theological reflection and practice when he states that "Comparative theology in its constructive dimension seeks to do what theology has done always and everywhere: guide and orient faithful practice, especially when practice assumes forms heretofore unseen."[8] Here, however, faithful practice may or may not be understood in terms of traditional religious communities.

Keith Ward draws a sharp contrast between confessional theology as "the exploration of a given revelation by one who wholly accepts that revelation and lives by it" and comparative theology as "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."[9] Here, comparative theology thus draws from the teachings of various religious traditions without privileging or assuming the perspective of any one in particular. Perry Schmidt-Leukel speaks of interreligious theology as a process of reflecting on

one's own tradition "in order to see what possible contribution might be made to the issues on the agenda of a global interreligious inquiry." He believes that "theology, instead of being an essentially denominational enterprise, will become increasingly interreligious."[10] In the same universalizing vein, Ram-Prasad Chakravarthi similarly conceives of comparative theology as "a global discourse beyond cultural hegemonies."[11] Though these comparative theologians still acknowledge a home tradition, and draw from the material of various religions, they thus seek to move beyond the confines of any particular tradition. Chapter 1 elaborates on this basic distinction between confessional and meta-confessional approaches to comparative theology.

There is an ongoing debate – at least among Christian comparative theologians – about the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions, the latter referring to the religious conceptions of the status of other religions. While some argue that comparative theology should be conducted without prejudices as to the presence of truth in other religions, others insist that the very engagement with other religions already reflects an implicit theology of religions.[12] In Chapter 2, I will discuss various religious views of the status of other religions and their direct impact on the ways in which comparative theology is conducted.

Though comparative theology, like comparative religion, presupposes in-depth study of the other religion and an effort to understand the religious other on its own terms, it also is particularly attuned to the historical and cultural shaping of all understanding across religious and cultural borders, and to the hermeneutical shifts that occur when teachings from one tradition are brought into the framework of another. Chapter 3 discusses some of the particularities of comparative theological hermeneutics, and addresses the critiques of religious hegemony or domestication often leveled against comparative theology.

The ultimate goal of comparative theology involves "deep learning across religious borders."[13] This learning, however, may take different forms, ranging from the rediscovery of certain forgotten or neglected elements of one's own tradition, through the appropriation of relatively new teachings and practices, to the reaffirmation of one's own teachings or practices in light of the other. In Chapter 4, I identify and discuss six possible types of comparative theological learning.

Though a solitary and demanding theological pursuit, comparative theology, like all theology, is ultimately in the service of the truth and of the faith and understanding of others. This raises various questions, discussed in Chapter 5, regarding the relationship between comparative and confessional theology. What is the place of comparative theology among the other traditional disciplines of theology? How might the insights of comparative theologians become part of a broader process of theological discernment and

reception? A fairly new discipline within theology, comparative theology still faces a number of methodological and procedural challenges which need to be addressed not only within the community of comparative theologians but also with other theologians and with the communities that are ultimately the beneficiaries of comparative theological efforts.

The book draws mainly on examples from Christian comparative theologians. This inevitably raises the question whether comparative theology is a distinctly Christian discipline and whether the methodological issues raised have any bearing on other religious traditions. It is true that the modern discipline of comparative theology has developed mainly in the context of Western and Christian academic theology. There are various reasons for this. Considering the number of Christian universities where theological teaching and research are being promoted and institutionally supported, it is not surprising that it is here that new avenues for theological reflection are being explored. It is also here that the discipline of religious studies has taken flight, with departments of theology in some cases becoming departments of religious studies, and the boundaries between the two disciplines at times fading or leading to new approaches to theology. The establishment of scholarly groups, PhD programs and academic positions in departments of theology has led to a further acceleration of this field of study within Christian institutions of learning.

But these practical circumstances do not address the more fundamental question of whether comparative theology is a uniquely Christian theological discipline. This question has been answered in different ways. Though Marianne Moyaert admits that it may be in theory possible to engage in comparative theology from within different religions traditions, she suggests that, at least in its current state, it is "Catholic/Christian through and through." She believes that this has to do with its textual focus and argues that "comparative theology would fare well through critical reflection on its own genealogy and how some of its Christian biases may limit this project when it comes to transfer to other traditions."[14] Though Klaus von Stosch admits that comparative theology is "grounded in the Western academic tradition" and that its focus is mainly on the rational understanding of the faith,[15] he sees no reason why Muslims should not "want and be able to participate in the project of comparative theology."[16] Reinhold Bernhardt states more unequivocally that comparative theology "is to be regarded as a method which can be applied to every religion. The method remains the same while the frame can change."[17]

Theologians from various religious traditions have indeed been actively engaged in comparative theology. The Buddhist scholar John Makransky, for example, has drawn from Christian social teaching in developing a more communal Buddhist understanding of liberation.[18] Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Brettler edited a Jewish commentary on the New Testament.[19] Anantanand

Rambachan and Ram-Prasad Chakravarthi both explicitly use the methods of comparative theology to develop Hindu Thought.[20] And Reza Shah-Kazemi has engaged in comparative theological dialogue from a Muslim perspective with both Buddhism and Christianity.[21] And a host of examples can be given of conscious or unconscious, spontaneous and deliberate forms of interreligious borrowing and learning. The systematic and constructive engagement with other religions is thus by no means a prerogative of the Christian tradition.

Insofar as comparative theologians situate themselves within a particular religious tradition, they will need to draw from their own religion the rationale and motivation for engaging constructively with other religious traditions. As Paul Griffiths points out,

> different communities of practice will have different methods of proceeding here. Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists who work as deep readers of alien texts or practices with a view to seeing what can be learned from them about the LORD have different constraints upon what they do and what they hope to learn from doing it than do Christian theologians in general, or Catholic theologians in particular.[22]

The reasons for learning from other religions as well as the types of learning may thus differ from one religion to the next. But most of the methodological questions and approaches discussed in this book apply to comparative theologians from any religious tradition. Even though the institutional structures may differ from one religion to the next, as well as within religions, the challenges of injecting comparative theology into the mainstream religious discourse and practice, and of reaching a broader community of faith are pertinent to all comparative theologians, regardless of their religious background and commitments.

Notes

1. Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 35.
2. Kimberley Patton, "Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion," in *A Magic Still Dwells*, ed. K. Patton and B. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 168.
3. See Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof, eds., *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
4. David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. L. Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 13: 9126.
5. Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

6. James Fredericks, "Introduction," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. F. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), x–xi.
7. John Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 3, emphasis added.
8. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*, 7.
9. Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 40.
10. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 8.
11. Ram-Prasad Chakravarthi, *Divine Self, Human Self: The Philosophy of Being in Two Gītā Commentaries* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xiii.
12. For a critical reflection on this debate, see Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. F. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 21–42.
13. This is the subtitle of Francis Clooney's *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, which he himself attributes to my colleague and Buddhist comparative theologian John Makransky.
14. Marianne Moyaert, "Response to Klaus von Stosch," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 24* (2014): 69.
15. Though Klaus von Stosch does not deny that people from other religions may practice their own form of comparative theology, he states that "it is especially suited to catholicity in the original sense of the term as well as to Catholic Christianity in particular." Klaus von Stosch, "Is Comparative Theology Catholic?" *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24 (2014): 59. He mentions in particular the Christian command to love one's neighbor, its conception of its own comprehensiveness and universality, its age-old openness to non-theological sources of knowledge (*loci alieni*) as resources for theological reflection, and its awareness of the contingency of its theological categories and insights.
16. Klaus von Stosch, "Understanding and Appreciation: A Reply to Marianne Moyaert," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 24* (2014): 75.
17. Reinhold Bernhardt, "Comparative Theology: Between Theology and Religious Studies," *Religions 3* (2012): 971.
18. See John Makransky, "A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies 75*, no. 3 (2014): 635–57.
19. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation (JANT)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
20. Anantanand Rambachan, A *Hindu Theology of Liberation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014); Chakravarthi, *Divine Self, Human Self*.
21. Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010); and "Light upon Light? The Qur'an and the Gospel of John," in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Cornille and C. Conway (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 116–48.
22. Paul Griffiths, "What Are Catholic Theologians Doing When They Do Comparative Theology?" *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue 24* (2014): 42.

1

Types of Comparative Theology

In the centuries since its first use – which has been traced back to 1700[1] – the term "comparative theology" has been used in various ways, or applied to different types of engagement with religious plurality. It has been put forth as a counterpart to apologetic approaches to other religions, as proto-comparative religion, as a means to develop a universal or world theology, and as a new form of constructive systematic theology. It may involve any two or more religions and any schools or denominations within larger traditions. There is thus a natural proliferation of different types and expressions of comparative theology.

In one of the early systematic discussions of the modern field of comparative theology, David Tracy developed a basic distinction between comparative theology as "a comparative enterprise within the secular study of the history of religions in which different 'theologies' from different traditions are being compared" and comparative theology as "a more strictly theological enterprise (sometimes named 'world theology' or 'global theology') which ordinarily studies not one tradition alone but two or more, compared on theological grounds."[2] Though the difference between the secular or historical and the normative or theological approaches to the discipline seems clear, there is in the actual practice of comparative theology often less of a marked differentiation between the two. Historians of religions have come to duly recognize their own normative biases, while comparative theologians at times refrain from explicit normative statements or conclusions.

There are, nevertheless, still important differences between historical and theological approaches to the comparison of religions. These differences are manifest in both the starting point and the goal of the comparativist. While the comparative theologian and the scholar of comparative religion alike may declare their particular historical and religious or other identity and location,

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scholars in the history and comparative study of religions generally disclose their personal biases in order to minimize their impact. In contrast, comparative theologians fully embrace their religious presuppositions as constitutive of their work. Though recognizing the continuity between comparative theology and comparative religion, Reid Locklin and Hugh Nicholson highlight this important difference:

> Comparative theology can therefore be regarded less as an alternative to comparative religion, running alongside the latter in a parallel track, than as one of a range of critically self-conscious approaches to the study of religion after "religion," albeit with at least one important difference: whereas the 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.[3]

In addition to its starting point, comparative theology is also distinguished from the comparative study of religion by its goal. While the scholar of comparative religion may be driven primarily by intellectual curiosity and the desire to understand a particular phenomenon in light of a larger whole, the comparative theologian seeks to deepen and advance theological truth. The ultimate goal of comparative theology thus involves comparison not for its own sake or only for the sake of greater scholarly insight, but for the purpose of enriching and enhancing the self-understanding of a particular religion, or theological truth more broadly conceived. While comparative religion is oriented to a deeper understanding of the nature of religion or the meaning of a particular religious idea or phenomenon, comparative theology is more interested in their meaningfulness or validity. It is this normative question which ultimately separates comparative theology from comparative religion.

Within the field of comparative theology itself, different types or approaches to comparative theology have developed rooted in varying conceptions of theology and of theological truth. While some view theology as a reflection on the faith and practice of a particular community, others view it more generically as a discourse on the gods, or as the study of divine realities. And while some conceive of theological truth as based on a body of revealed or received teachings and practices, others do not limit theological truth to any particular religion. I mark the difference between these two approaches by distinguishing between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology. The term confessional is here thus used to denote a tradition-specific type of comparative theology. It may be practiced from within any religion and it is oriented to advancing the self-understanding of that particular tradition. Meta-confessional comparative theology, on the other

hand, uses the teachings of different religious traditions to pursue a more encompassing or universal truth. The difference between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology is at times only a matter of degree. Meta-confessional comparative theologians are often still shaped primarily by a particular religious tradition, and confessional comparative theologians often test and push the boundaries of the revealed teachings of a particular religion. But the two approaches still use slightly different methods that also warrant different nomenclatures.

Both confessional and meta-confessional comparative theology themselves arose from the checkered history of the comparative study of religions, and remain grounded in some of its basic methodological principles. The term comparative theology was originally used to designate an attempt at a more neutral and scientific approach of religious differences and as a counterpart to the apologetic and normative approaches to other religions. Adding to the confusion about terms is the occasional discrepancy between the stated and the actually apparent goals of the work of some comparative theologians. Whereas early forms of comparative theology claimed to offer a neutral and scientific comparison of religions while being in reality profoundly biased, more recent forms readily admit their normative and religious presuppositions without always drawing out the normative conclusions of their work. In basic terms, comparative theology involves comparing theologies from a normative starting point and/or with a normative goal.

1.1 Comparing Theologies

The origins of comparative theology and the comparative study of religions are intimately intertwined. Early attempts to develop a more historical and descriptive approach to other religions often used the term comparative theology to distinguish it from the explicitly normative and apologetic approaches to other religions. As Louis Jordan points out in his early history of comparative religion (1905), there was some debate among scholars about what to call the new science of religion. Historians of religions such as Friedrich Max Müller and James Freeman Clarke favored the term comparative theology, but since "the designation in question would cover only a part of the field which has to be surveyed" and since "it would limit inquiry to the purely dogmatic teaching of the several Faiths that chanced to be compared," it was decided that the designation comparative religion was "decidedly to be preferred to that of Comparative Theology."[4] Within this framework, comparative theology was thus to be seen as "only a department of Comparative Religion."[5] Clarke spoke of the "science of Comparative Theology" and stated