Article

On Vulnerability: Probing the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology

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Abstract: Though the notion of vulnerability regularly pops up in Clooney's reflections on comparative theology, he does not develop a systematic account of it. What precisely vulnerability is and how it influences interreligious dialog do not receive enough theoretical grounding. In this article I will probe the complexity of this notion and how it plays out in comparative theology. This will not only enable us to grasp the true originality of Clooney's project, it will also allow us to uncover its deeper ethical dynamics. For, as I will seek to show, at its core, comparative theology is moved by an ethical concern to enable a just relation between the *one's own* tradition and the *foreign* one. It is my intention to unfold the deep moral dynamics of this particular interreligious approach and to conceptualize the ethical conditions for interreligious learning as present in comparative theology.

Keywords: comparative theology; vulnerability; ethics of interreligious reading

1. Introduction

Vulnerability is one of the key words in Francis Clooney's comparative theology project. By placing this notion at the center of his approach, he wants to propose an alternative to the classic theology of religions, which he criticizes for putting up a wall between believers belonging to various religious traditions. Unlike both liberal and postliberal theologies, Clooney wants to question defense mechanisms that obstruct the possibility of being touched and affected by the other tradition. If both

liberal pluralism and postliberal particularism can be seen as exponents of a desire for control, comparative theology can be regarded as a form of vulnerable theology. Clooney refrains from the (perhaps typical Western) desire to stand above the action and replace the real diversity with neat schematic interpretations of religious plurality. Instead of searching for some philosophical and/or theological vantage point above that messy reality, he operates within a fragile hermeneutical and theological space in the midst of the complexities of interreligious encounter. His engagement with the religious other begins with reading and comparing "non-Christian religious texts" whose wisdom he appropriates through submission. New theological insights emerge from this practice of "inter-texting" that can challenge, interrupt, and transform the home tradition. Becoming vulnerable is the crux of this theological approach. According to Clooney:

> [This] reading practice … should make it more difficult for us to enjoy the securities that oddly envelop people who talk about surrender to God *within* their own tradition and yet continue to cherish their tradition's intellectual and affective safety net. Here, instead [the two texts] work powerfully together, even as the relevant communities may be disturbed by these texts' being read together and their being taken to heart … and all without letting new affinities shatter original commitments and loyalties ([1], p. 204).

Though the notion of vulnerability regularly pops up in Clooney's reflections on comparative theology, he does not develop a systematic account of it. What vulnerability is, precisely, and how it influences interreligious dialog do not receive enough theoretical grounding. In this article I will probe the complexity of this notion and how it plays out in comparative theology. This will not only enable us to grasp the true originality of Clooney's project but will also allow us to uncover its deeper ethical dynamics. For, as I will seek to show, at its core, comparative theology is moved by an ethical concern to enable a just relation between both *one's own tradition* and the *foreign* one. It is my intention to disclose the deep-lying moral dynamics of this particular interreligious approach and to conceptualize the ethical conditions for deep interreligious learning present in comparative theology.

In order to fully understand the novelty of comparative theology as vulnerable theology and how this notion of vulnerability points to a web of moral concerns, the concept needs further theoretical elaboration. What precisely is vulnerability? How does it relate to its opposite, invulnerability? How do both notions affect the ethical relation between *one's own* tradition and the *foreign* one*?*

2. The Complexity of Vulnerability: Some Preliminary Theoretical Reflections

Vulnerability is usually connected to notions such as fragility and frailty. Something that is vulnerable is not strong or powerful but is weak and breakable. This notion recalls the always present possibility of harm, hurt, fracture, and pain and also evokes ideas such as loss, grief, distress, and even discomfort. As Erinn Gilson remarks in her article 'Vulnerability, Ignorance and Oppression', "the conventional and tacitly assumed understanding holds that to be vulnerable is simply to be susceptible, exposed, at risk, in danger. In short, it is to be somehow weaker, defenseless and dependent, open to harm and injury" ([2], pp. 309–10). Vulnerable people are needy people who require aid or care. They are dependent on others.

In this reading, vulnerability is understood as a privative term: it is a shortcoming. In the classical sense, it is a *privatio boni*, *i.e.*, the lack of something that ought to be there. The "good" is *invulnerability*,

which is connected to the ideals of being strong, independent, and in control. The invulnerable person dominates every situation he finds himself in; he does not get thrown off-balance when confronted with unforeseen events, nor does he waver when questioned, challenged, or criticized by others. He knows who he is, where he comes from, and where he is heading. There is no stopping him. Invulnerability is seen as a desirable character trait, and vulnerability is projected onto others with whom he cannot identify ([2], p. 312). This rather negative understanding of vulnerability tends to function as an unquestioned prejudice in both everyday discussions of ethical dilemmas as well as in more theoretical approaches to questions of ethical relevance, such as the encounter between people belonging to various social, cultural, and ethnic groups.

In the context of interreligious encounters as well, this understanding of (in-)vulnerability can be seen to be operative when believers are warned to engage in dialog only if they are absolutely certain about their faith. The fear is that believers who are preoccupied with questions and wrestle with certain tenets of their own tradition can begin to doubt their own faith commitment when engaging religious others in dialog. Therefore, steadfastness and certainty are seen as preconditions for interreligious dialog. Only when one believes unwaveringly, is absolutely committed, has incontestable convictions, and accepts certain religious truth claims as non-negotiable does it become interesting to participate in interreligious dialog [3]. Believers who are vulnerable in their religious identity are cautioned to refrain from becoming engaged in the complexities of religious diversity.

This ideal of invulnerability is also implied in the difficulty experienced in recognizing the interdependency between religions. A propensity towards affirming and reaffirming religious traditions as homogenous matrixes and impermeable worlds that constitute their own meaning clearly exists ([4], p. 250). The contribution of other religions to one's own tradition is downplayed or denied. Intended or unintended forms of interreligious "borrowing" and "sharing" are rarely looked upon positively [5]. In extreme cases, this may even lead to an ideology of purification ([6], p. 4).

Still, the idealization of *invulnerability* is nourished by a somewhat oversimplified and unilateral understanding of vulnerability. A more nuanced definition that does justice to its complexity and to its commonality is needed. First, vulnerability is the common human *capacity* to be affected and affect in turn. It is akin to receptivity, which points to the *ability* to be touched, interrupted, challenged, and even changed and transformed. It is a capacity that marks the human condition: all human beings are vulnerable. Because of this primary ability, we are physical and social beings capable of interaction and responsibility. In this reading, vulnerability becomes the basic condition of reciprocity. From this perspective, we can imagine that to be *invulnerable* is to be *indifferent, irresponsible, inaccessible, inapproachable*. There is something inhuman about being invulnerable.

Second, vulnerability is an ambivalent notion: it is the condition of potential that makes both positive and negative experiences possible. It can bring about loss and pain, but it also points to the possibility of creativity. In this sense it is an ambiguous term: "Being vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. Vuln*erability* is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn" ([2], p. 310). From this perspective, we can understand vulnerability as the basic condition to any real encounter, an encounter that can be experienced both positively and negatively and sometimes both at the same time.

This also holds true for interreligious encounters. Postcolonial theology especially has shown that religious traditions are vulnerable: they are receptive to what comes from strange religious traditions. The interdependency of religious traditions is an undeniable reality: religions are affected, interrupted and challenged by symbols, rituals, prayers, and religious meanings belonging to other religions. Meaning from one religious tradition can and does penetrate another and plays havoc with everything there. It can bring about a shift in meaning, even to the extent that the original intention becomes lost ([7], p. 5). However, it is also possible that this play of religious interpenetration brings about a gain in meaning. Vulnerability can bring about innovation, which is so necessary for a tradition to remain a living one, but it can also undermine age-old customs.[1] This explains (in part) why the course of interreligious encounters is not self-evident.

As expounded above, the problem with focusing unilaterally on the negative is that vulnerability then becomes a condition that affects some people (e.g., people with weak and feeble faith convictions), and this is a condition that is to be avoided by all means. To avoid *vulnerability* and the possible pain, discomfort, and distress involved, various defense strategies are activated, the first of which is that of ignoring vulnerability as a common human condition. Indeed, people who empathically claim to be strong, certain, and stable are actually *in denial* ([9], p. 146). Behind the invulnerability that they claim to possess lies a deeper incapacity to deal with the fundamental human condition of vulnerability (see also [10]).

> The denial of vulnerability can be understood to be motivated by the desire conscious or not—to maintain a … the prototypical, arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject. Invulnerability is a central feature of masterful subjectivity because it solidifies a sense of control, indeed an illusion of control. The achievement of full mastery, complete control, utter impenetrability, is an impossibility (one would have to be a god) ([2], pp. 312–13).

Whereas vulnerability, understood as the openness to being affected and affecting in turn, implies the willingness to refrain from domination, people claim that invulnerability points to a desire for control and command, resulting in a closure to interruption, change, and transformation. The latter not only inhibits authentic encounter, but it can also give way to doing real harm. People who are unable to bear their own vulnerability and deny this human condition can seek to compensate their discomfort by claiming to be in charge. This clearly also affects the relation between religious traditions and their adherents:

> People wrestle with the question as to how their age-old traditions can survive in a context of secularization and pluralization. In the midst of change, they may look for something that is permanent, unchanging and ahistorical. They may search for a cultural essence, a core of values that must remain untouched or something that is indisputable and non-negotiable. … As a result to their insecurity, believers act as "security

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[1] I have explained this elsewhere via the metaphor of the body, which symbolizes human vulnerability, understood as receptivity. The body feeds on "strange meanings" to stay alive. But that does not mean that all meanings are equally nourishing and compatible. Some meanings are easily digested whereas others are indigestible. Some meanings go down easily, while others lie heavily on the stomach. Some meanings hurt, cut deep into the skin, leave traces. Some meanings are nourishing, breathe life into one's "own cells," and give strength, but other meanings make one ill. The body develops a resistance to some meanings and the immune systems kicks in. What comes from outside is sometimes rejected, discharged, and spit out. See ([8], pp. 282–83).

guards who stand at the door of their religion to make sure that its identity and integrity are not violated by another religion." Because of this fear, many people find it particularly appealing to withdraw behind the closed doors of their own symbolic community ([11], p. 102).

If vulnerability points to openness to the unexpected, invulnerability points to being closed to change and challenge, thereby also inhibiting innovation. Creativity and responsibility originate in the courage to accept our vulnerability as that condition of potential from which both the positive and the negative emerges. Only those who learn to live with the possibility of loss and pain can learn to appreciate the enrichment of being interrupted and challenged. From this perspective, we can understand that not only is vulnerability a *human condition*, it is also a *choice that exhales power and courage.*

In what follows, I will first analyze how this desire for control works in theological approaches to religious diversity and the dialog between religions. The second section analyzes how comparative theology moves beyond the classic theologies of religions towards a specific form of vulnerable theology, thereby also highlighting the originality of this project. In the last section I seek to show how Clooney's cultivation of vulnerability actually points to the ethics of comparative theology.

3. Theology of Religions and the Domination of the In-Between Space

Much reflection on the possibilities and difficulties of interreligious dialog happens in the so-called theology of religions. Alan Race defines it as "the attempt, on the part of Christian theologians, to account theologically for the diversity of the world's religious quest and commitment" ([12], p. 3). How can the challenge of religious diversity be understood in light of the Christian tradition, and how can the Christian tradition be recontextualized in light of the experiences of believers in the context of religious plurality? It is up to theological reflection to clarify why Christians must or, conversely, should not be open to those of other religions. It is theology that sets out how far that openness extends and if there should be limits to the openness for the religious other. The questions of if Christians should open themselves up, *why* this openness is appropriate (or not), and how this openness for the faith of another is related to one's own faith commitment are answered, one by one, through theological reflection on and the interpretation of religious diversity.

The fundamental issue in the theology of religions today is the ongoing discussion between liberal pluralism and postliberal particularism on both the possibility and desirability of interreligious dialog. This debate in which understandings of other religions under the tropes of respectively, "similarity" or "difference" are contrasted has reached an impasse ([13], p. 9). Pluralists ground their argument for interreligious dialog in a philosophy of religion that traces all religions back to a common ground: there is one ultimate Reality and many historico-cultural expressions. Or, as the British philosopher John Hick puts it, the different religious traditions "constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it" ([14], pp. 235–36). The other religions are not rivals but "fellow travelers to the Ultimate" ([15], p. 165). From this perspective, pluralism claims to be the natural partner of interreligious dialog.

The main criticism of the pluralist model is that its focus on commonalities brings about the undermining and removal of the specificity of particular religious traditions in general and of Christianity especially. Pluralists are so eager to promote dialog that they tend to forget the irreducible differences that exist between the religious traditions. Michael Barnes sums up this criticism in a very

sharp way by stating that particularity is "all too easily subsumed under an ethic of openness which quickly becomes rigidly ideological" ([16], p. 13). From this perspective, we can understand why pluralism is associated with the mistake of reductionism. David Tracy explains this as follows:

> The official pluralist too often finds ways to reduce real otherness and genuine differences to some homogenized sense of what we (who is this "we"?) already know…. [S]ome pluralists, the vaunted defenders of difference, can become great reductionists—reducing differences to mere similarity, reducing otherness to the same, and reducing plurality to my community of right-thinking competent critics. In this light, there is truth in Simone de Beauvoir's bitter charge that "pluralism is the perfect ideology for the bourgeois mind" [17].

The reaction to this homogenizing tendency is a growing emphasis on the particular nature of religious commitments and on the tradition-specific character of religious meanings and practices. Postliberal theologians especially have resisted the universally colored theological agenda of pluralism. Under their lead, the theological pendulum swings from the virtue of openness to the value of commitment. Their basic assumption seems to be that Christians have to be rooted firmly in their own tradition before embarking on a dialogical journey. Religions are viewed as particular, untranslatable and incommensurable language games. The whole idea of a common ground to which all religions refer is rejected. As Douglas Pratt puts it, "[T]here is no reasonable ground to assume a link across religions: their individual, or particular, identities militate against any such linkage. The difference between them is of such a nature that, strictly speaking, it is illicit even to consider that there is any point of meaningful conceptual contact among the religions" ([18], p. 8). The question is whether this postliberal particularistic approach still allows for interreligious dialog and does not, in the end, lead to a retreat in symbolically closed communities.

The debate between pluralists and postliberal particularism remains too easily at the level of "isms", thereby also downplaying the complexities and dynamics of interreligious relations and inhibiting profound reflection on the dialogical space between the self and the other. Jeanine Hill Fletcher especially has criticized the oversimplified nature of both approaches. Whereas pluralism upholds a logic of sameness that, pushes troublesome, changeable religious realities into a procrustean bed of unrestricted homogeneity, postliberalism affirms a logic of difference that presents religions as "indissolubly distinct entities that thoroughly shape adherents to a radically different understanding of the world, reality and ultimate reality" ([19], pp. 9–10). In both approaches the religious other is seen as a problem that can and should be solved, either by retreating to the security of sameness (pluralism) or by distancing otherness (particularism). The pluralistic discourse on openness turns out to be a "strategy": it constitutes order and thus gives a sentiment of comfort, because it takes away the interruptive and confrontational, even discomforting, character of the encounter with the religious other. The outcome of postliberal particularism is a dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. In recognizing the other in his irreducible otherness and in "granting the other his homeland; [the postliberal particularist] can rest assured and turn his back on him" ([20], p. 91). In any case, the problem of the other is "solved" as "controlled, categorized, schematized…" However different these theological approaches may be, both seem to be marked by a temptation to counteract the *vulnerability* of interreligious encounters as to calm our fears ([21], p. 9).

When vulnerability is counteracted, receptivity for what comes from elsewhere diminishes and interreligious dialog loses its religious significance. The neutralization of vulnerability impacts on the relation to the religious other in a negative way: the religious other is either *harmonized* into the overarching pluralist scheme or the religious other becomes *so strange* that she disappears from our radar. Once the other has been "understood and categorized," it is no longer as necessary to demand a deep knowledge of the other in her particularity. The neutralization of vulnerability also affects the way believers relate to the divine and especially the way revelation is understood. By counteracting vulnerability, receptivity for (O)therness is also ruled out: postliberal theology on the one hand seems to confuse faithfulness to tradition with faithfulness to the divine, thereby forgetting the *Deus semper maior* dictum. The pluralist hypothesis on the other hand situates the encounter with the divine in the private sphere of personal religious experiences, which become the criteria for judging traditions. This hypothesis actually conceals a turn to the self that sets the norm and is in control. Excluded is the possibility that the encounter with the religious other is recognized as an interruptive, disruptive event that may actually put us on God's way.

The question is: Can there be a theology that testifies to the fragile space in which authentic interreligious dialog occurs? Is there a way to theologize about religious diversity that does not neutralize vulnerability from the outset? Can we formulate a theological response to the religious other that resists the all too human desire to construct and control her, thereby limiting the conversation from its very start? Can we make room for surprise, for the unexpected, for the unfamiliar? Are we prepared to change in light of what we learn from other religious traditions? Can there be a fragile space rather than a space controlling the other.

4. Comparative Theology as Vulnerable Theology

In my reading, these questions form the leitmotiv of *comparative theology*. According to Francis Clooney, the project of comparative theology is an original form of faith seeking understanding directed at a deep learning from other religious traditions. Continuing the theological tradition of Anselm, Clooney (along with other comparative theologians) emphasizes the *seeking* dimension of faith, rather than focusing on faith in terms of what is *certain, non-negotiable*, and *absolute.* Though faith can be simple and stark, the truth all believers long for is never a possession that believers can appropriate for themselves. Believers are, in a sense, pilgrims on the way to truth, knowing it will always elude them to a certain extent. As comparative theologian Scott Steinkerchner puts it, "[t]his side of heaven, the seeking never ends. None of us individually, nor all of us collectively, possess a complete understanding of our faith. That fullness of truth lies forever in the future" ([22], p. 149). The only way to move forward is to ask questions, to study and learn, to seek understanding, and to gain insights that only evoke new questions in a search for more nuanced answers.

In the search for understanding, comparative theology turns to religious texts belonging to different traditions. Its focal point is reading and comparing strange and familiar texts in order to understand the other so that new theological insights will emerge, those which can challenge, interrupt, and transform one's own tradition. Texts from other religious traditions are recognized and appreciated as rich sources for imaginative and possibly constructive theology. This constructive element is realized when the meaning, value, and truth of the similarities and differences discovered through *inter-texting* are

assessed ([23], pp. 170–71). In summary, in the *classical* understanding of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, the comparative theologian aims at "knowing a loving God more completely and intelligently," ([24], p. 7) but she does so in a *non-classical way* by pondering the truths of other traditions as resources for deepening her faith understanding [25]. In this sense, comparative theology derives its particular nature not from its object but from its sources and methodology ([26], p. 522).

Comparative theology took root in a certain dissatisfaction with theologies of religions that erect unnecessary walls between religious traditions and their adherents and thereby also inhibit real and authentic interreligious encounter. The theological process of constructing religious others is, in the end, a process of suppressing otherness. *A priori* theologies of religions—both liberal and postliberal—are regarded as especially problematic, since they tend to set the interreligious agenda beforehand, thereby immunizing Christians against the otherness of the (o)ther and diminishing the chance of *surprise*, *interruption*, and *unsettlement*. Here, theology becomes fixated on traditional Christian meanings handed down from the past instead of welcoming what comes from elsewhere as food for thought and as a possible source for semantic innovation. Comparative theologian James Fredericks has expressed his dissatisfaction with the "classic candidates for Christian theologies" in a particular sharp way, saying that they "usually lead to systemic distortions in the reception of the Other. Moreover, these distortions succeed in … the 'domestication of difference', in which the threat of the Other, as well as its transformative power, are muted" ([27], p. xiv). If we want to attend to the religious other and his traditions we must, so Clooney claims, "deny ourselves the easy confidences that keep the other at a distance" ([28], p. 7).

Instead of trying to "solve the problem of religious diversity" in a theological meta-narrative, comparative theologians engage in crossing borders, moving back and forth between one's own tradition, and the strange religious tradition, allowing themselves to be truly immersed in both. Instead of circling around the doctrinal heart of Christian tradition, trying to find definite answers to the theological meaning of religious diversity, comparative theologians practice theology in a marginal area. Instead of trying to protect the tradition from the possibility of contamination that goes together with encounter, comparative theologians intentionally move to the borderland of tradition. As go-betweens, they invest in learning from the other, accepting that this also entails disturbing experiences of alienation, disenchantment, and friction ([24], p. 165). In this sense, comparative theology seems to be all about leaving the theological *comfort zone* of the centralist approach to theology.

Comparative theologians will sometimes argue that what they propose is not all that new. As Clooney puts it: "Interreligious and comparative learning has always been an inescapable dimension in the life of every community" ([28], p. 24). From this perspective, what they are proposing is *merely* making more explicit, more visible what is in a sense the fundamental vulnerability of religious traditions. Religious traditions are not constituted by sharp boundaries but are rather marked by a certain fluidity, permeability, and hybridity from the outset. Religious traditions were never pure in the first place: they have always been affected and influenced by other religions. Because their boundaries are much more porous than is often acknowledged, religious realities are "messy," they simply cannot be contained in neat categories and boxes [29]. In other words, religious traditions are *vulnerable*, whether they "like" it or not. From this perspective, the whole idea of erecting walls around our "tradition" and investing in "defense mechanisms" is an illusory undertaking. It always comes too late. There is no such thing as a pure tradition nor does there exist some "religious" core, common to all

religious traditions, that remains unaffected by the messiness of interreligious encounters. In his article *Comparative Theology after Religion*, John Thatamanil remarks that,

> It would be possible to craft a history of Christian thought and practice written as a series of interactions and transmutations of movements and traditions that Christians have come to demarcate as non-Christian. Such a history would demonstrate not only that many of the central categories, practices and symbols of Christian life are borrowed from Hellenistic philosophical schools, mystery religions, and, of course, most vitally from what we now call "Judaism," but that for long stretches of history, no clearly defined and rigid boundaries existed between "Christianity" and those traditions we now take to be Christianity's others. … Alongside such a history, a companion work could be written that would take note of tremors within (especially Western) Christian self-awareness when such profound entanglements come to surface. I suspect that such a companion history would unearth moments of widespread anxiety among custodians of tradition at just those junctures when "the unbearable proximity" of those whom Christians customarily regard as other is most keenly felt [4].

However, comparative theology is not *just* about noting that traditions—whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not, whether they intend it or not—are from the outset always also constituted by other religious traditions and thus inherently vulnerable. This project aims at a *cultivation* of vulnerability as the crux of doing theology. That is why Clooney not only records that crossing borders has always been part of the history of religious traditions, but he actually creates a liminal space in the form of scriptural intertextuality. Indeed, Clooney emphasizes especially the experimental, creative, and constructive nature of this work, acknowledging thereby the role of the comparativist "who forges a link which was not previously there, a link which (usually) cannot be justified on the basis of historical connections or of similarities so striking that they compel comparison" ([30], p. 154). Placed, studied, and read together, these texts begin to interact, influence, and affect one another (which also has an effect on the reader). These texts begin to move and shift, losing their familiar (perhaps sometimes even predictable and stale) meaning. The underlying assumption is that theologians who are able to sustain experiences of alienation, disenchantment, and friction brought about by this textual juxtaposition can also learn to enjoy the pleasure of discovering new hermeneutical and theological possibilities.

Comparative theology is a never-ending conversational process: particular comparisons yield particular insights, insights that might be revised in the future under the influence of other particular comparisons. The theological reflections that follow from detailed comparisons "can only be tentative and should not be taken as precluding what will be learned in further experiments" ([24], p. 164). In this way, comparative theology remains "pre-systematic and pre-dogmatic." It does not aspire to lead to a "definite theology of religions" ([31], p. 176). On the contrary, those who are looking for clear-cut answers to clear-cut questions are likely to be disappointed by this approach, for many questions will be left open after in-depth study, until "more commentarial work has been done, by more theologians, over a much longer period of time" ([31], p. 184).[2]

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[2] In his article "Comparative Theology: Between Identity and Alterity," Bagus Laksana refers to the metaphor of pilgrimage to evoke the wandering journey of the comparative theologian. He regards pilgrimage as a "privileged *locus* in which a creative negotiation of religious identity in the proximity and intimacy with God, the Other, as well as with the religious other, occurs in all its complexity" ([6], p. 2).

5. On the Ethics of Comparative Theology

> The careful reader engaging the two texts in their own two traditions comes to know more than expected, and in a way that cannot be predictably controlled by either tradition.… As we learn more about religious traditions in their depth than has been possible before, we know more deeply the possibilities of several traditions and where they lead us, while yet we also lose the intensity and devotion possible for those who know only their own tradition. We are then left in a vulnerable, fruitful learning state, engaging these powerful works on multiple levels and paradoxically, learning more, while mastering less; we have more teachers and fewer masters ([1], p. 209).

Clooney's plea for *vulnerable theology* is not self-evident. It requires us to withstand the (all too human) inclination to flee from vulnerability; it asks us to abandon the (natural) desire for purity, calls for a renouncement of the strong wish for a stable and seamless identity, demands that we give up the ideal of a clearly delineated identity that can be placed in a binary scheme with otherness, and asks us to refrain from grand theories that solve the problem of the religious other and the implied discomfort ([27], p. xiii). In brief, the belief in the fecundity of interreligious co-reading has to compete with the ideology of invulnerability.

But what motivates Clooney? Why travel via such unusual paths from which inconvenient, unsettling truth may stem? In a first response, Clooney would probably say "why not?" All these texts are readily available, translated or otherwise. They are public classics, sold in bookshops, on the Internet, or in the market. Anyone can read these texts. He even makes the claim that "it is hard to justify not reading the theologies of other traditions when they are pertinent and available" ([32], p. 14). A great curiosity and intellectualist desire to study and learn is without doubt one of the driving motivations behind this project. The human desire to know *more*, he points out, does not stop at the borders of one's own religious traditions.

At a deeper level, of course, Clooney's desire to understand is faith-driven. Comparative theologians believe that their practice of deep learning across religious borders is theologically valuable since it allows them not only to learn from the religious other but also to hear God speak anew and to receive his truth in a different way so that they can learn to know God better ([28], p. 8). Learning from other religious traditions is a theological responsibility: understanding religious others better in all their complexity will allow us to understand our relationship with God better. The detailed study of other traditions follows from a commitment to God. Comparative theologians believe that in opening up to the religious other in and through a detailed study of his texts one realizes a fuller knowledge of God ([24], p. 7). This imaginative appropriation of the strange or different text can be a creative theological source that warns the faith community that God cannot be fixed or reduced to the familiar—just as, by way of a humbler analogy, the text cannot be fixed or reduced to the familiar. It is a way of giving form to the notion that it is not up to theology to determine the limits of God's activity *a priori*. Or, as Clooney would put it, being taught by a strange text entails undergoing a spiritual process that changes the reader and perhaps reveals God in an unexpected way.

> While it would be a bit dramatic to say that God desires that theology be comparative—just as it would be to way that God desires more or less of any particular theological discipline—we do well to see our effort to learn across religious borders as in harmony with God's plan. To suggest that God has not envisioned the

actual world in which we live, where neither faith nor religious diversity will vanish at any time soon, would also be a strange thing for a theologian to propose. Knowing God today requires a retrieval of faith, tradition, scripture and practice—precisely as we open ourselves to learning other traditions, in their own comparable complexities ([28], p. 37).

However, next to his intellectual and theological investment, comparative theology creates also an ethical problem since it affects the relation between what is familiar and foreign. A deep moral dynamic underlies Clooney's project, which finds its expression in an *ethic* of interreligious reading: reading understood as an intrinsically relational, and thus reciprocal, act. The foreign religious text is an *other* and to engage in a practice of interreligious reading is to engage in a relationship with something that is other to us. Hence, interreligious reading is analogous to a *conversational* act and comparable to a face-to-face encounter.[3]

Approximating a foreign religious text appeals to a form of reader-responsibility, intended to avoid falling into the twofold trap of (1) making generalizing and stereotyping claims pushing recalcitrant religious phenomena in a neat scheme of commonality (cf. liberal pluralism) (2) or of making the other so other that he becomes completely alien and thus he disappears from our radar and becomes utterly meaningless (cf. postliberal particularism). The challenge is to respect a certain degree of irreducibility inherent in the foreign religious text, while at the same time refraining from succumbing to the idea of a radical and absolute otherness ([6], p. 3).

In the last part of this article, I want to point to three ethical "conditions" proper to comparative theology: (1) encountering otherness, (2) reticence and hermeneutical openness, and (3) appropriation through disappropriation. These three ethical conditions lead to the concluding section, in which I elaborate on comparative theology as a specific form of interreligious hospitality.

5.1. Encountering Otherness

Comparative theology, understood as religious *inter-texting*, begins with engaging a strange religious text, which is of course part of a larger religious tradition. According to Clooney, reading a "non-Christian" text "initiates an encounter of religions, and involves the reader in hearing and understanding a specific other voice, not just the generic "world religions" ([33], p. 35). The religious text is the other who does not fit into our familiar religious framework and transcends what is known.

A strange text is an exponent of an entire religious tradition, rich in wisdom. A tradition that is practiced in a religious community via a prayerful, ritual, and moral way of life, which molds the identity of its religious believers in a way very different from ours. In this tradition, believers find inspiration, wisdom, and truth. The strange religious text, even though it is only a minor part of a larger religious whole, nevertheless evokes the beauty, vitality, complexity, and richness of the religious life of another. It has the strength to catch our eye, precisely because what it expresses,

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3 For his understanding of *reading religious texts*, Clooney is inspired by Paul Griffiths, who dedicated one of his books to the theme of religious reading, even though Griffiths did not concern himself with the specific challenge of interreligious reading, According to Clooney, his project "seeks to exemplify the dynamic that Griffiths has in mind but to do so in the practice of an (inter)religious reading, one that demands vulnerability to both texts, a practice that is intensified by the spiritual power generated in reading them together repeatedly and that refuses to reduce either to a component of some later and settled 'higher' viewpoint." ([28], p. 63)

symbolizes, and enacts is so different from the way we try to live our (religious) life. There is something fascinating, perhaps even beguiling and seductive about a religious other, also when she takes the form of a strange text.

This attractiveness has its root in its recalcitrance: The textual other resists, interrupts, and questions the obviousness of what fully commits us and challenges the naturalness by which we regard our own perspective as the measure of all. The textual other reveals and challenges our natural inclination to control and domination. We are brought out of balance, we become unsettled. This is not necessarily a *pleasant* experience. One should recall the ambiguous nature of *vulnerability*: being affected can be experienced as positive *and* negative. Indeed, there is no need to romanticize being interrupted by the other—the other brings about a disturbance of order. That is why the other is not always the welcome other, especially not when he approaches us in all his beauty, radiance, and brilliance. Put differently, the other's beguilement can also become his destruction: the fear is that what is fascinating, tempting and alluring can lead to a loss of faith. Clooney acknowledges this risk:

> [T]he first problem always to be faced in such an encounter is fear: a fear of the loss of God, of Christ; a fear of the dangerous 'other' and of a future one cannot fully predict; a fear of a God who is completely free. To experience another religion, however one meets it, is to awaken at a double twilight of dusk and dawn where God comes but also goes. We should not be surprised if we are vulnerable, afraid, in love-and also alone, angry, annoyed ([33], p. 37).

This unease, brought about by being vulnerable, is where the ethical structure of interreligious dialog takes root. In a Levinasian way, we could say that the textual other makes an appeal, asking to be recognized in its otherness. This is the basic ethical condition for any interreligious encounter: to recognize the "intractable otherness of other religions" ([34], p. 254). The textual other "expects" us to be willing to be addressed and interrupted by an unfamiliarity that does not meet our prejudiced patterns of expectation ([35], p. 64). But the textual other can do no more than make an appeal, asking to be recognized in her otherness, demanding not to be reduced to "sameness". It is always possible to ignore this appeal since the other does not have the force to compel recognition. It is always possible to put aside the appeal of the other and resort to "violence," which can take two forms: either we distance ourselves from the other, turning him into a complete and utter stranger or we reduce him to our own familiar categories. In the end, the religious other depends on our responsibility.

5.2. Reticence and Hermeneutical Openness

What is required is not an enthusiastic embrace of the other but a form of "hesitation" that expresses the fear of inflicting violence on the other.

> [R]eal dialogue begins with the inclination or the temptation to exclude the other than ourselves … or to reduce the other to ourselves *and* at the same time—at the same origin—realizing that this exclusion or reduction is not allowed.… The ethical '*faith primitif*' of the dialogue is neither magnanimity nor sympathy or empathy, but a dynamism of "restraint" and "shuddering,", namely utter cautiousness and carefulness, fearful in all our advancing self-certainty of doing injustice to the other ([36], p. 236).

In comparative theology, this ethical reticence is expressed in the rejection of *a priori* theologies of religions (either liberal or postliberal) that are too quick, too hasty in categorizing the other. An

authentic encounter with the textual other begins with holding back out of fear that one could inflict violence on the other. This restraint enables the other to speak for itself, to become other, to become a subject with a proper voice.

This reticence is the basic condition for becoming vulnerable and receptive to the other. If both liberal and postliberal theologies of religions tend to control the space in-between because they are too quick either with "filling up" the space between the different religions with presupposed commonalities or inflating the in-between space with the presumption of incommensurability, comparative theology is patient, willing to wait, and to listen and learn. Instead of seeking a grand narrative in which the religious other is grasped and contained, comparative theologians allow themselves to be challenged by the often unsettling religious reality and belief of the other. Instead of "solving the problem of religious diversity" in a theological meta-narrative, comparative theology accepts that learning from the other entails experiences of alienation, disenchantment, and friction ([24], p. 165). There is no haste to come up with definite answers. Clooney emphasises time and again the importance of not jumping to conclusions because theology should avoid over-hasty theological judgments. It requires a long and patient engagement with the textual world of the other. Before judging, before assessing, before appreciating—either positively or negatively—the religious other deserves to be heard and understood.[4] The search for truth is preceded by a pledge to justice ([38], p. 62).

> *After* one has read and re-read, thought back and forth from text to context—one can *then* review the questions posed in the theology of religions. "What are we to make of these religions?" "Is Christ unique?", "Are Hindus save by Christ alone?", "Is there revelation outside Christianity?"… The Christian who *first* reads and *then* asks the theology of religions questions will not be asking about what is entirely strange or alien, as if she or he were a gate-keeper who has to decide about whether to let the other in at all; nor will she or he be dealing with what is entirely predictable, once inside. Rather, the basic question will be about how to make sense, as a Christian, of a set of Christian experiences and texts and theologies that now includes certain non-Christian texts that remain vital and creative ([33], p. 36).

This pledge to justice is expressed positively in what I have elsewhere termed hermeneutical openness, *i.e.*, the responsibility to understand the other in the most objective and fair-minded manner possible. As Clooney puts it comparative theology ideally gives way to "a viable understanding of the 'other' in which the encountered 'other' is not manufactured to the comparativist's prejudices and expectations" ([30], p. 7). Its intention is to *understand* the other in his or her otherness and to avoid reading one's own presuppositions into the religious world of the other. This turns interreligious dialog into a hermeneutical challenge, involving the question of mutual understanding or the degree to which individuals belonging to one religion can grasp the meaning of symbols, teachings, and practices of another.

5.3. Appropriation Through Disappropriation

Moving beyond the requirement of hermeneutical openness, Clooney's ethics of reader responsibility also entails the cultivation of certain humility as the appropriate attitude by which to approach a religious text. Clooney sees the religious text more as a subject speaking to the reader and challenging

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4   On the criteria of judgment in interreligious dialogue see [37].

him. It is a poetic whole, constructed by its author to address, challenge, and interrupt the reader ([39], p. 368). Gifted with an "excess of meaning," it has the capacity of intruding on the world of the reader that it intends to transform. To do justice to the specific nature of religious texts and their inherent purpose to bring about transformation, the religious nature of reading these texts should prevail. Religious reading revolves around giving up control and surrendering to the domination of the text.

From this perspective Clooney reacts against a "consumerist… mining of texts in service of a preconceived agenda neglectful of the text's own purposes" ([31], p. 8). The interruptive and transformative power is immunized from the grasping approach of the master reader. But he also criticizes readers who limit their role to that of the neutral investigator, examining the texts from a distance as objectively and impartially as possible. The text is not an object to be analyzed or even dissected. It is not a carrier of information to be discussed or a depository of interesting ideas to debate. Here too, Clooney objects that, by placing the text at a distance as an object to be analyzed and dissected by the reader, the reader becomes immune to its message. "[Religious] texts expect and invite a humbler, less self-confident reasoning, even off-balance, that draws the mind into a situation it cannot control and that illumines and ignites the heart" ([1], p. 79). Submission rather than control is the appropriate attitude by which a *responsible reader* approaches religious texts.

The possibility of transformation requires an attentive reading, the crux of which is that the reader surrenders to the influence of the text and thereby becomes vulnerable to the possibilities projected before the text, even to the extent of inspiring a radical life change ([1], p. 208). This implies that the reader places herself under the authority of the text: the text takes on the role of teacher; the reader, that of student. The text asks of the interpreter to take a distance from the known and the familiar and to walk into the world of the unknown. Drawing on the reflections of Paul Griffiths, who wrote a book on the habit of religious reading, Clooney claims the following:

> To learn, we must… be vulnerable to possibilities we can probe only to a modest extent, and ready to surrender ourselves to the mysteries latent in what we read… This humble practice changes readers, as they are inevitably drawn into the worlds brought to life in their reading. Readers who are willing to take the risk become competent to read religiously and, upon receiving the riches of the great texts, they also become able to speak, act, and write with spiritual insight and power ([28], p. 59).

This reminds me of what the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, known especially for his textual hermeneutics, calls the dynamic play between appropriation and disappropriation. According to Ricoeur, a responsible reader can appropriate the world of the text only to the extent that he disappropriates himself. Appropriation is thus inextricably linked to disappropriation. Appropriation is not a matter of imposing our finite capacity for understanding on the text but of exposing ourselves to the imaginative possibilities projected by the text. In this way, hermeneutical appropriation is not the expression of imperialism or colonization but an expression of detachment and of letting go. Thus, understanding is quite different from a constitution whose key the subject possesses; on the contrary, it is the process by which the reader is constituted by the text. Ricoeur puts it as follows, "as a reader I find myself by losing myself. The movement toward listening requires giving up (*désaissement*) the human self in its will to mastery, sufficiency, and autonomy" ([40], p. 224). Ricoeur also speaks about "la dépossession du soi narcissique." Understanding means to understand oneself before the text and in submission to it as reader and student.

6. Conclusion: Reciprocal Hospitality in Response to Invulnerability

In my reading, the comparative theology project embodies the virtue of hospitality, which reaffirms and strengthens its ethical dynamics. It does this in a very specific way, since the comparative theologian wants to be both host and guest at the same time. In this reciprocal form of text-oriented interreligious hospitality "the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming home" ([41], p. 10). Over against reducing the other to sameness (cf. pluralism) on the one hand and alienating the other (particularism), comparative theology seeks to build bridges between two text traditions while always recognizing that both are irreducible to one another. It concerns an attitude of "active receptivity: it is making room for the stranger in one's own space—it is the strange other received into one's home in a way that does justice to the otherness of the other." Comparative theology actually teaches that interreligious relations are not exhausted in attempts to defend one's identity against the unfamiliar, nor is it appropriate to try and reduce what is other to sameness. This intertextual hospitality refuses, on the one hand, to distance the other—this would lead to indifference—and, on the other, to attempt to dominate the other. The other is received in its otherness. What we learn from this intertextual practice is that happiness can also be found precisely in reciprocal hospitality, in becoming vulnerable to each other.

Dwelling in the realm of the other and returning home to one's own religious community with meanings received from another tradition, Clooney argued and illustrates how Christian believers can enrich their understanding of Christian texts and doctrines by re-reading them after deep learning from non-Christians texts. It is a learning in the proximity of the other. This practice of reciprocal hospitality is a form of reaching out to the other, rather than keeping her at a distance, as well as returning home with fresh, challenging, and interrupting insights. Here one values the other for leaving his trace in "our" identity.

The main challenge confronting comparative theology is not merely theoretical in nature, but ethical. The challenge is to overcome all sorts of resistance emerging from a certain fear of otherness that leads to desire to control the in-between space (the ideal of invulnerability). These resistances come from both the "home" and the foreign tradition (see [42]). The resistance on the side of the home community is related to a strong desire to sacralize the mother tradition out of fear of contamination. Hence the empathic claim is that one's tradition is incommensurable, untranslatable and incomparable. But the refusal of comparison equals the refusal to recognize what is foreign as a challenge and source of nourishment for one's own religious identity. One sets out to keep one's own language pure, though this self-sufficiency has secretly nourished "numerous linguistic ethnocentrisms, and more seriously, numerous pretensions to the same cultural hegemony" ([43], p. 4).

The resistance on the side of other tradition flows especially from a certain conceitedness: the foreign religious text is so exceptional that it is beyond comparison. But the recognition that traditions cannot be reduced to one another, the affirmation that religious texts are always also *beyond comparison*, with reference to their uniqueness and the acknowledgment that their meaning can never be exhausted in comparison, does not amount to a denial of the possibility of comparison. Rather, it points to the continuing *asymmetry* between traditions that cannot be removed by comparison. But this is no reason to dismiss the validity of comparison. Speaking about the *incomparability of religious*

texts expresses the irreducible value and uniqueness of texts. This is a precondition to comparison rather than an insurmountable obstacle.

Reciprocal hospitality, which implies mutual affection, contradicts the ideal of invulnerability and the illusion of self-sufficiency, and uncovers its underlying xenophobic dynamics. Beyond the fear of contamination and loss of meaning, the textual other is no longer seen as a problem to be solved but as a possibility given to us ([33], p. 38). Here, the genuine attitude of hospitality is realized: recognizing that another tradition may be a source of enrichment for one's own. Comparison is, indeed, always and inevitably a matter of balancing between fidelity and betrayal. To compare and interpret religious texts belonging to different traditions is not possible without loss of meaning. But it is a one-sided view of comparison to focus solely on the loss of meaning. Comparing texts is also a way of giving new life to one's own religious tradition and uncovering new truth dimensions. Comparing seemingly incomparable texts is also an opportunity, for it opens up the possibility of creativity and innovation. From this perspective, we can conclude by paraphrasing a saying from 2 Corinthians 12:9: "Power is made perfect in weakness."

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