

Article

## Reasons for and Contexts of Deep Theological Engagement with Other Religious Traditions in Europe: Toward a Comparative Theology

Ulrich Winkler

Center for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions, Paris Lodron University Salzburg, Universitaetsplatz 1, 5020 Salzburg, Austria; E-Mail: Ulrich.Winkler@sbg.ac.at

*Received: 6 November 2012; in revised form: 13 December 2012 / Accepted: 17 December 2012 / Published: 18 December 2012*

---

**Abstract:** The different contexts of America and Europe have a significant impact on the development of comparative theology, especially in the German-speaking countries. The latter have found other solutions to the problem of religious pluralism that are not really conducive to comparative theology. Hence, the double responsibility of Catholic theology in particular toward the university and toward the Church is a part of the discourse policy of theology, which affects the theology of religions and comparative theology. On the one hand, theology is under the protection of the state, and on the other hand theology is threatened by the risk of unreliability due to ecclesiastical paternalism. But the theology of religions and comparative theology do not evade into science of religion or neo-orthodoxy, rather, they take a risk in a theological engagement with other religions, bringing one's own faith into a deep encounter with other religions and their faiths while delving into points of detail. After giving short descriptions of these tasks, this article shows some examples of practice in comparative theology and gives a prospect into potential further developments of comparative theology in theories of difference and spaces.

**Keywords:** theology of religions; comparative theology; Second Vatican Council—Nostra Aetate; postcolonial studies; German catholic theology; church-state relations; spirituality; apologetics; third space; theory of difference

---

## 1. Reciprocations, Attributions, and Constructions

Comparative theology in Europe can only be described as a host of individual and personal perspectives. This lies in the nature of both comparative theology and “Europe”. It makes a big difference whether one is addressing a German-speaking community, scholars in the USA, or a primarily Muslim audience as I did two years ago at Gadjra Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. When addressing such groups, we try to correlate the different contexts and to respond to our dialogue partners.

This sounds like a truism not worth mentioning. However, the matter becomes more complex if we ask: What is the source of our knowledge about the context of our dialogue partners or our listeners and readers? The simplest problem is the inevitable and abiding narrowness of our knowledge. The lessons we learned from postcolonial studies, after Edward Said’s deconstruction of the invention of the Orient, are much more serious. Our view of the other issues, attributions of identity, and constructions of the *other*’s identity, marked by our blindly presupposed and only more or less consciously assumed power constellations and rankings. Our cultural maps guide our epistemic pre-decisions, and the choice of the parameters we regard as essential for our understanding of the *other* is informed by these attributions.

Therefore, it is to be expected that my experiences in the American context and my choices about what I want to explain to my American audience and international readers about the European context deliver more insights about my epistemic pre-decisions and about my cultural matrix. We cannot shake off this matrix, but we can analyze and understand its blind dynamics, and by deconstructing it we can diminish its impact on the process of our cultural construction. We may begin to see through our implicit apologetics. We cannot escape our mapping procedures or attributions, but we can be attentive to them and cast some light on their hidden dynamics.

This introduction would still be trivial, and no more than a briefing on the commonplaces of cultural and postcolonial studies, if this epistemological problem were not essential to comparative theology. This is because, however praxis-oriented and interested in details comparative theology may want to be, it is always caught in this methodological and epistemic maelstrom, struggling not to get drawn into the depths and drown. What are the attributions and identity constructions of the *other* with which comparative theology views the other traditions? Does it acknowledge its hidden dynamics and can it elucidate them? I find the best way to avoid this danger is to honestly and humbly disclose one’s own horizon and the narrow field one cultivates. This is what I want to try here: to give a very brief look at my work, theory, and view of comparative theology from a European, especially German-speaking, and Catholic perspective. I will conclude this introduction with the following thesis: *The exchange between the continents as well as that between religious traditions must be sensitive to the issues of postcolonial studies and attentive to the mutual attributions of identity, which are marked by constellations of power and implicit—perhaps apologetic—conceptions of their relationships.*

## 2. The European and the American Contexts of Comparative Theology

The driving force behind Europe was, and is, its great diversity of cultures, which also brought about very diverse forms of religion to the public sphere: modernity, secularization, a radical decrease in the importance of established religions, laicism and atheism of the state on the one hand, and

postmodernity, postsecularism, a new interest in religion and spirituality on the other. What role can comparative theology play here? After the great religious unity of the past, it can keep up with the growing religious diversity today. But there are also critical questions to be posed: Why should we study traditional religions at this time and expend a lot of energy in comparative theology on languages and detailed studies? Do we want to slow the rapid pace of postmodernity toward more and more plurality, individuality and an ever greater complexity (“Unübersichtlichkeit,” Jürgen Habermas), by at least concentrating on the great world religions, if Christianity and our churches can no longer take refuge in their claim to uniqueness? Is it about mitigating the loss of religion’s importance in the secular world of the almighty economy? Are we looking for new resources of salvation in the kaleidoscopic colorfulness of the religions, far away in the more distant land of authenticity? Are we not, indeed, merely taken in by the dynamics of exoticism (Tzvetan Todorov) and Orientalism with comparative theology? Are we then not in danger of repeating the power strategies of dominating and instrumentalizing the *others*? These are very serious questions that call for a *theological* answer.

(Christian) religious diversity is formative for the United States. The modern history of Europe, and therefore of the USA, cannot be understood without understanding religious violence—the *Mayflower* sailed to the new continent at the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War when nearly half of the population in Central Europe was about to be wiped out by a religious war. The pathos of liberty and religious freedom in the USA cannot be understood without attention to the confessional and religious constraints in Europe. So, I am already doing what I just described—applying a cartography of the *other*, the USA, in order to construct my own Europe. I am mapping the field by attributing what I believe to be important information on Europe to American and international readers. I can observe myself in the process of constructing the *other*. This process is irreducible and inevitable, which is why I think it is essential to bring it into the light and reflect on it, and thus disclose one’s own constructing principles. I will now continue.

The comparison is tricky: (a) On the one hand, one meets a fascinating diversity of religious voices in the USA, as I encountered them, for example, at AAR conferences, where groups marginalized in Europe like gays and lesbians are represented in religious discourses as a matter of course. (b) On the other hand, a strict official separation between church and state is anchored in the American Constitution, although this does not prevent religions from exerting influence in politics. The personal belief of a presidential candidate has great importance in the public eye. In most European countries it would be rather awkward for a journalist to report and write about a topic of that kind. Religion in Europe is more of a private affair, whereas religion in the United States is something public but officially separate from the state. (c) In Europe and in the German speaking countries, *i.e.*, Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, in particular, the separation is combined with state privileges by so-called concordats, treaties between a state and the Vatican or other forms of church leadership.

These different contexts have an enormous impact on the specific development of comparative theology in Europe and especially in the German-speaking countries. The latter have found other solutions for the problem of religious pluralism that are not really conducive to comparative theology.

### 3. Theology in German-Speaking Countries

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these German-speaking states realized—unlike laicist states, like France—that the program of the Enlightenment and the displacement of religion to the private sphere underestimated the religions. Therefore, the states became interested in bringing religious discourse into the public sphere while, through concordats, contractually committing to fund the education of clergy in public university faculties. Religions cannot eke out an existence as arcane disciplines in back alleys but must enter the light of the public sphere and prove themselves to the academic community of universities. Inherent in religions is an immense potential for good and for violence, and therefore religion continues to be a public affair. We theologians profit immensely by this outcome, and in the three countries mentioned above—to which I will limit myself here—we have excellent and excellently equipped state-run theological faculties.

At the same time, the states conceded to the churches the right of sharing in the decision about the appointment of professors. The Catholic Church must give its *nihil obstat* (“no objection”) and the refusal to do so bars a candidate. In case of conflict, the Church can withdraw the candidate’s ecclesiastical license to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian (*missio canonica*) while exercising his or her profession.

Thus, Catholic theology in particular has a double responsibility: toward the university and toward the Church. On the one hand, theology is under the protection of the state—up to now the majority of professors have either been public officials with tenure or had quite solid contracts—with the commitment and freedom to truth even if it is uncomfortable. On the other hand, because of the responsibility toward its own faith community and the possibilities of interference by the Church, theology is threatened by the risk of unreliability due to ecclesiastical paternalism. At the universities, theology wants to appear to be committed solely to rationality, science, and truth, but in practice each theologian is dependent on not losing his or her ecclesiastical teaching license. In order not to betray itself theology has to be able to parry this suspicion in a decisive way.

This is a part of the discourse policy of theology, which affects in particular the theology of religions and comparative theology. It is a discreet part of theology that is gladly kept shrouded in mist in the public sphere. Fierce conversations about it take place only in private; public debates are rare [1].

Up until now, there have been at least two strategies for resolving the tension of this double responsibility: (a) On the one hand, there is the strategy of liberating theology from the Church while still having it be protected by the state. This led in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, to an independent, very anti-theological and anti-ecclesiastical science of religion. Also, after the Second Vatican Council, there was a group of theologians critical of the church that lost their ecclesiastical license to teach and who would go on teaching independently from the Church at state universities. The most famous is Hans Küng. (b) On the other hand, one can find growing opposite strategies—an unbidden neo-orthodoxy and an overzealous ecclesiastical obedience. One could call them strategies of ecclesiastical ingratiation. Only those discourses believed to be ecclesiastically beyond suspicion are honored. The best known example is the exclusion of some sensitive questions in sexual ethics by many Catholic moral theologians.

Both strategies can be observed in the field of theological engagement with other religions. First, attempts to force theologians who are close to the pluralistic theology of religions out of ecclesiastical

teaching positions are causing a stir [2]. Yet, there are also theologians who distance themselves from the Church. Second, and more discreet, however, are the procedures of marginalization and ghettoization.

#### 4. Consequences for Comparative Theology

Comparative theology is caught in these constellations, with the following consequences.

(a) *Governmental* sponsorship is providing liberty and security for comparative theology as well. The *institutional* confessionalization of theology emphasizes the ecclesiastical perspective of theology. The above-mentioned escapist strategies in favor of only one side are not viable paths for comparative theology because comparative theology profits from both sides. It can be creative and outline entirely new issues while also, as practiced from a faith perspective, respects the authority of the church. It does not just remain an irrelevant academic hobby. Only when this tension is not suspended—by having its freedom taken away through ecclesiastical paternalism or by comparative theologians fleeing the church—only then can comparative theology be a good answer to both an insular neo-orthodoxy as well as a science of religion that is both critical of theology and anti-ecclesiastical. Then it will also be an advocate for religious diversity and respect for other religious traditions.

(b) The *institutional* confessionalization of theology in the form of theological faculties is mainly limited to Protestant and Catholic theologies, and thus does not represent the multiplicity of religious traditions. The few Jewish theologians are intensively engaged with dialog projects. Great efforts are being made at select universities to establish Islamic theology. It remains to be seen if the monolithic and hermetic situation of theology can be dissolved. The situation in Germany now has gone so far that Catholics cannot study Protestant theology and Protestants cannot study Catholic theology. Comparative theology, however, requires internal knowledge of other religions. The German-speaking countries still have a long way to go before students of Catholic theology, for example, are able to study Buddhist theology at the same time and thereby acquire interreligious theological competence.

Comparative theology, in contrast to comparative religion, is a *theological engagement with other religions*, bringing one's own faith into a deep encounter with other religions and their faiths while delving into points of detail. The results cannot be anticipated *a priori*. Theology has to take a risk in these encounters; otherwise they are not real encounters. Does this venture go directly against one's own faith, or are there good reasons for that faith to take this risk? I think this is the decisive question that lies ahead for comparative theology. The stakes are high for comparative theology as well as for the Catholic Church.

Many are looking anxiously to the pope, expecting a dramatic decision concerning the Society of St. Pius X and thus the validity of the Second Vatican Council and especially the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) and relations with the other religions (*Nostra Aetate*). We have to keep the consequences of such decisions for the Society of St. Pius X in mind and consider which positions would regain validity with a partial revision of the Second Vatican Council: there cannot be any truth, sanctity, and spiritual gifts in other religions, but everything that seems to be such could at the most be signs and preparation, at worst lies, deception and the deceit of the devil in order to divert souls from the true faith of the Catholic Church; it would be forbidden to recommend the salvation of the other to God [3] because they are excluded *a priori* from salvation; in short, all pagans, Jews, heretics and schismatics—as defined by the Magisterium—are condemned to hell (Council of

Florence). These are not just arbitrary decisions and issues of personal taste, but a decision concerning other religions that is centrally linked to the content of the Christian faith.

## 5. Deconstructing the Apologetic Tradition of the Church

It is not surprising that many Catholics, from laypeople to the Church leadership, are suspicious about positive relations with other religions and see their own faith as threatened. Those who only see a failure of Second Vatican Council's pedagogy here fall short. One must look rather for the subtext of Catholic identity construction. Although the pre-conciliar theological handbooks vanished from the lists of study literature, post-Tridentine theology and especially the concise didactics of neo-scholasticism still form the basis of Catholic self-conception. That is why it is worthwhile to look critically at the dynamics of these identity attributions.

The theological discipline called apologetics used to perform the task of describing and defending the identity of Catholic doctrine and the Church against outside relations in a systematic way. A *societas perfecta* should be completely safeguarded from the outside. This is not an unusual procedure for constructing identity. But here attitude is crucial. In this system one's own truth and superiority were certain from the outset—before any *a priori* experience—and could be substantiated by cogent proofs.

Apologetics is composed of three parts: (a) The *demonstratio religiosa* argues for the possibility of religion and the possibility of a natural knowledge of God and supernatural revelation. This part secures the identity of faith *against* the Enlightenment and atheists. (b) The *demonstratio christiana* argues *against* other religions via the revelation in Jesus Christ. Christianity is proven to be the true religion. The fulfilled promises are quoted against the Jews, the miracles and the empty grave against the heathens. (c) Finally in the *demonstratio catholica* or *ecclesiae* the legitimacy of the *Catholic* faith *against* other churches and denominations is proven through the arguments of the foundation of the church and the miracle of the global presence and holiness of the Catholic Church.

Both comparative theology and apologetics have chosen a theological view of the outside. The big difference lies in the signature of both disciplines, describing the *attitude* in which they engage in the argument: (a) one's own truth and superiority applied *a priori*; (b) the outside was not a source of truth; (c) the interest in and study of the others was aimed at knowing their weaknesses. (d) This form of apologetics was condescending and entertained mutual suspicion; (e) the arguments seemed aimed at compelling assent (f) an epistemology of a faith informed by mercy was missing, and (g) there was no reconnection to dogmatic theology and spirituality [4]. Apologetics of this kind is an iron suit of armor. In times of change, there is a desire for fixed identities, and comparative theology has to reckon with this. It is therefore important for comparative theology to argue convincingly for a reversal of the suspicion of other religions toward an attitude of truth assumption. This is the task of theology of religions.

## 6. Theology of Religions

The assumption of the presence of truth cannot be based on the research findings of comparative theology itself because these findings are subject to interpretation. To this day, many examples can be cited from the field of missiology in which the painstaking study of other religious traditions only served to demonstrate the superiority of the gospel and Christianity.

Allow me to cite an example of my visit to the predominantly Catholic St. Mary's County (Maryland, USA). Susan, a pious Christian owner of a bed & breakfast there, recently tried to convince me with great consternation to return to the right path because all my Muslim and Hindu friends will surely show their true natures by luring me to destruction. She was not impressed when I told her about my enriching encounters and my theological work in the field of Judaism. For her, all this only confirmed that Satan exercises a highly sophisticated art of infatuation.

Underlying such positions are the dynamics of apologetics, of suspicion, and downgrading that inscribe themselves, like original sin, into all our relations with other religions to this day. The crude stories of guilt hopefully belong to the past, but the subtle stories of guilt are still operative. Theology of religions has to perform this postcolonial task of deconstructing traditional or at least neo-scholastic attributions of Catholic identity and show how theological pre-decisions mold one's view of other religions fundamentally.

In my view, the genitive in "theology of religions" or "theology of religious pluralism" is—this is *the first part of my definition*—is to be understood in the sense of a *genitivus obiectivus*, *i.e.*, theological reflection *on* other religions. But this reflection is done on the basis of the self-understanding of the religions and their "theologies," *i.e.*, in the sense of a *genitivus subjectivus*, the theology that other religions have. Since theology is the reflection of one's own faith, theology of religions inquiries into one's own faith for the attitude and the relation to other religious traditions. In this case, there is the essential question as to the reasons in one's own faith that argue for a positive relationship and an attitude of the assumption of truth toward other religions. The Second Vatican Council, for example, speaks explicitly about issues of attitudes toward other religions in *Nostra Aetate* under the term "de habitudine."

But some exponents of comparative theology, however, maintain strong reservations regarding theology of religions for quite different reasons. Theology of religions can have quite different levels of discourse, *e.g.*, systematic, philosophical, practical, and discourse political dimensions. To me, it seems important to identify which discourse level the different arguments against theology of religions are to be allocated to. It may then show that some reasons can be respected on one level without affecting all dimensions or theology of religions as a whole. (a) In most criticisms, theology of religions is confined to a model competition between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. This, however, is only one area of theology of religions that has in the meantime found sufficient treatment. (b) Or, theology of religions is regarded as futile theory, whereas comparative theology is fertile praxis that should not be impeded by the theoretical work of theologians of religion. But history gives ample lessons on how a good praxis can result in unwanted or dangerous consequences because of a bad theory; therefore, there is always the need for resilient theories. Theory and praxis must not be separated. Comparative theology itself produces many theoretical premises [5]. (c) Another objection against most theologies of religions is that it is abstract, giving the impression that nothing much needs to be known about other religions before judging them. (d) Again, other causes might be connected to the tenuous ecclesiastical discourse-political situation mentioned above in theology of religions. It could be a respectable strategy not to lead comparative theology up the garden path and save it from the limelight or shadows of this dispute. (e) This is so because, assuming that it is just a competition of models, only very little theological research is done in the field of theology of religions, and because the *aporia* between one's own positionality of faith and the appreciation of others cannot be solved

satisfactorily. (f) Finally, it should not be concealed that there are naturally grave problems in the prominent approaches of pluralistic theology of religions that comparative theologians are not very eager to adopt.

Therefore, I want to list a few of these objections to the pluralistic theology of religions that are relevant for comparative theology. (a) Does it really make sense to want to compare religions and their truth content? (b) Can truth claims be compared, or do creeds work like grammatical sentences or rules that can be adopted and adhered to but cannot be argued, whereas truth can be tested only within these rules [6]? (c) Are not religions far too complex entities with the multiplicity of their expressions and their believers, if we consider too their vast historical changes from their millennial past to an open future? These judgments must be very vague and in any case open. (d) A related topic is the discussion as to whether judgments made here are empirical or hypothetical. The misunderstanding or allegation of an empirical judgment is rampant. It is clear on methodical grounds that such a judgment cannot be made. (e) The pluralistic theology of religions is searching for models of unity in order to understand multiplicity, thus demanding serious alterations in the self-understanding of the religions. (f) In conjunction with this is a tendency to grade confessional positions. (g) Many objections against the pluralistic theology of religions identify pluralism with John Hick's variant, and especially his epistemic premises of *noumenon* and *phenomenon*. (h) An objection that is rarely raised and on which I elaborated is the lack of a theology of Israel. From a Christian perspective, a theology of religions must take Christianity's uniquely close relationship to Judaism into account. It is unacceptable that both mega discourses of theology of religions and the theology of Israel are isolated from each other. (i) The next objection is popular, but reflects a certain ignorance and unacceptable: the pluralistic theology of religions holds that all religions—indiscriminately—are equally valid, often resorting to the German pun that, due to the pluralistic theology of religions, all truth claims are *gleichgültig* (a reference to both their equal value and meaning and thus ho-hum insignificance). I do not know any pluralistic theologian who sees all religions as equally valid, true, and salvific. (j) I see a serious problem in the fact that theories that cover all religions tend to draw attention away from differences between religions. I could word my critique like this: the pluralistic theology of religions is not pluralistic enough; it has too narrow a concept of the incredible plurality of religions, their mutual differences and contradictions. In contrast, for comparative theology, the differences must be viewed as the assets of the religions to be worked with copiously.

In spite of the many objections to theology of religions and especially its pluralistic version, I hold the theology of religions to be indispensable. Therefore, I will supplement the first part of my *definition of the theology of religions* as follows: theology of religions thus deals with assessing the relationship toward other religions and it conceives of one's own faith and constructs one's own self-understanding in terms and conditions of religious pluralism. Furthermore, a choice has to be made. I hold that the option of a partial and potential pluralistic theology of religions is an indispensable pre-condition for comparative theology. (a) Theological inference from my own belief in the Trinitarian God make me think it is possible to invest in an assumption of truth in other religious traditions because God's history of salvation is universal and at the same time multiple. From the beginning, from creation until consummation, God is the source, the way, and the goal of our salvation. (b) Therefore, I think it is possible to find truth, holiness, and spiritual gifts in other religious traditions [7] from which we can learn. (c) It is impossible, unnecessary, and senseless to define the

relations among religions in a general way. Rather, we should, in the sense of comparative theology, focus on particular issues. That is why I call the definition of relations *partial*. (d) And it is *potential* because the results of the comparisons and encounters are not clear *a priori*, despite the assumption of truth. So I am not reversing the apologetic *a priori* assumption of the inferiority of other religions into an *a priori* assumption of their superiority. I remain open for surprises. (e) Comparative theology must take the *pluralistic* option, if its goal is not to learn from the mistakes of others but instead yearns to learn from the surprising treasures that “a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth” (Vat. II, AG 11). Comparative theology believes there may be things to discover in other religious traditions in which salvation, revelation and truth can be found in a form *equally valid, successful, or superior* to that in one’s own religion because the equal validity or superiority of one or more faith traditions constitutes the definition of a pluralistic theology of religions. At the same time, it reckons with a history of guilt in one’s own and likewise in other religious traditions. It is possible to learn from one another. (f) Comparative theology cannot be neutral toward theology of religions. Even if it is intended to include much more than a discussion of models, it cannot avoid taking a—*pluralistic*—option. There must be a discussion regarding which worldview, which theological epistemic premise, one presupposes before one deals with detail issues. It makes a difference whether I engage with other religions on the basis of an exclusivistic, an inclusivistic, or a pluralistic view, whether I feel there is no truth in them at all, only to be exposed, or that the other faith can automatically only be deficient and inferior, or if I think it possible that it can have equally valid or superior truths on certain points that challenge me, that there can be faith I can encounter at eye level and appreciate. We are not serious about learning from others if we do not take that into account. (g) The strongest attempts at persuasion in favor of comparative theology need to be made in advance by the theology of religions. In times when clear orientation and definite identities are called for, opening hearts for the experiences of other faith traditions is one of the larger challenges facing churches, religions, and theology. That is why the issues of theology of religions must not be concealed but pushed courageously. (h) Comparative theology will be limited to a small circle of experts. It will have its impact on society, churches, and faith communities through theology of religions through which it can exert its influence on changing attitudes and general convictions about other religions. Its research findings may encourage people in widely different fields to meet other believers with openness and a willingness to learn.

## 7. Features and Projects

(1) Beyond the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions I want to list some features of my understanding of comparative theology. (a) Theology is the reflection of faith bound to the perspective of one’s own religion. Since a living faith can only exist in conjunction with faith content and a personal life of faith (*fides quae* and *fides qua*), one’s own faith praxis plays an important role—or, in other words, one’s own spirituality. That is why I place the role of spirituality as first for comparative theology. Spirituality flows into the work of a theologian. Although the theology of religions option can be supported by good arguments, it is ultimately a stance of faith or a spiritual stance. It is a spiritual stance of mindfulness and appreciation. (b) Comparative theology does not carry out objective outside analyses of other religions but tries to enter into dialogue with the inside

perspectives and self-understandings of other religions. Comparative theology is the dialogue of participant perspectives. Therefore, one has to look for ways how faith attitudes can meet one another and how comparative theologians can enter into the inner spaces of religions, how theologians can participate in the faith of others. For example, purely philological studies will not suffice. Creative ways are needed, which also include spiritual encounters. (c) In addition to the most diverse legitimate methods of comparative theology, I find biographies of people who were or are living on the threshold of two religions especially enlightening. (d) Theologians, and therefore also comparative theologians, usually write texts. There are, however, other forms of theology, oral theologies like personal encounters and discussions, for example, or common academic courses. (e) For a Christian, no matter what tradition one focuses on, dialogue with Jews should—in my opinion—never be completely absent.

(2) This leads me to my second point in which I give a brief selection of projects in which comparative theology is relevant.

(a) Every year for the past 20 years, the Center for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religion at the University of Salzburg [8], of which I am one of the founding members, has invited guest professors from other cultures or religions to teach and do research at the theological faculty within the theological curriculum. Theological dialogue with colleagues of other religious traditions and friendships that have developed belong essentially and centrally to the pillars of the Center and the study of theology. Here we practice mutual exchange at eye level.

(b) As director of the University Study Program "Spiritual Theology in the Process of Interreligious Dialogue and Encounter," I am in charge of a 3-year Master's program offered by the University of Salzburg, both in Salzburg and in Switzerland. Participants study in closed groups, and most of them have full-time positions in their professions. In these programs, academic study is combined more intensively with personal encounters and spiritual maturing processes. It is quite extraordinary that professors from different religions are not only willing to present their expertise but also bring their own personality into this study program. Teaching their religion and representing their course in a different environment and setting of communication from regular classes at university can be sometimes surprising and challenging at times. Relating religious knowledge in religion to spiritual participant's questions can encourage a new attitude toward teaching and thinking about their own approaches toward their own tradition through these encounters. The success of this study program shows that spirituality is not limited to wellness but can also be connected with a high intellectual standard. Comparative theology emerges within the creativity of these settings.

(c) The following example is quite another format. I am a board member of ESITIS, the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies [9] that was formed in northwestern Europe. There is a wide variety of approaches among the board members reflecting the different European traditions. Our biannual meetings bring together about 100 or more scholars. In addition to a major focus on the sociology of religion and the present shape of religions in Europe, we emphasize the study of concrete detail issues of religious traditions and the actual practicing of their religious life today. Though comparative theology does not fall under the main tasks of ESITIS, it is nonetheless a framework in which such a theology arises. More and more young scholars are responding to the call for papers and bringing perspectives of this research into this kind of community.

(d) Finally, here is an example of a practical regional interchange between academic theology and the concrete life of faith communities: Occurso—Institute for Interreligious and Intercultural

Encounter. [10] An initiative of Martin Rötting, [11] the institute is intended to facilitate and academically chaperone dialogue between people of different religions and cultures in a way that is close to actual life by creating spaces for encounter. Its work includes dialogue praxis, the training of dialogue facilitators, and education in academic research. Practical experiences are reflected upon theologically, and, in return, theological research and studies in the science of religion flows back into educational and dialogical practice [12]. Comparative theology arises in these small contexts.

## 8. Perspectives: Theories of Difference and Spaces

It would be presumptuous to want to propose future perspectives for comparative theology in Europe. I would like to touch on only two questions here that I intend to pursue further.

(1) The fundamental methodical works of the Cross-Cultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project [13] in Boston 1995–1999 and especially the works of Robert C. Neville show that the creative methodology of comparative theology aims at common ground. On its journeys of discovery comparative theology wants to be surprised by similarities and analogies. What about the differences? Are they a challenge for comparative theology? Will they be a cause of embarrassment for comparative theology? Will it be upset by them? Is comparative theology successful only when it bridges differences? This would be a misapprehension of comparative theology, since it would establish the epistemic presupposition that all differences can be negotiated and resolved in the end. Thus, comparative theology would once more be a strategy of uniformity. But it is not. Comparative theology attempts to note differences that show up especially in the study of details. Here comparative theology reaches the limits of understanding and interpretation because the differences may be unbridgeable or because there is no longer any language for naming the differences. Differences can make us clueless and speechless. Is the collapse of theology, of God-talk, hence inevitable or is there also a theology that can be done in the midst of this speechlessness? This is where theories of difference come into view.

There are real differences between religions and they are not explained away. These spaces between religions are not only a problem; they can be viewed as *loci* of theology. This is not a postmodern invention but a grammar of differences that is in fact inscribed deeply into the doctrine of ecclesiastical tradition.

(a) By way of example, I refer to Christian religious differences from and special relation with Judaism. The differences cannot be resolved, yet Judaism is constitutive for Christianity as an abiding *other*. Jesus was a Jew, he was born as a Jew, and he believed, lived, and died as a Jew. He never had the intention of leaving Judaism.

(b) In its Trinitarian and Christological theology, the Church opted for a relational grammar of difference. Trinitarian thought states: unity in essence, difference in persons; and Christology holds: unity in person, difference in the two essences. Both grammars have in common the fact that a difference is made between relation and blending in unity, differentiation, and division. A grammar of difference is inscribed into the identity logic of an unrelated single divine essence and the identity logic of a Christological single essence.

(c) The above displays the nature of theological language. Its symbolizations no longer aim at the establishment of an identity and at fixation. Rather, the history of theology and dogma must be read

and critically analyzed with regard to *openness to the ungraspability of the ungraspable* and with respect to *new but ever revisable understandings*. Moreover, signs never just declare themselves but do so always in relation to other signs and only in a process of a continual updating and engrafting of the signs.

(d) Comparative theology assumes difference hermeneutically in that one's own faith is never given in a fixed logic of identity but is set up with respect to the most diverse figures of difference. Therefore, it need not remain stuck in identity logic when it engages other religions.

(e) Differences are not just challenges to be overcome by learning; differences also name the spaces of the unspeakable. The unspeakable differences between religions can be a signature of God-talk in religiously pluralistic times. Perhaps they have to be kept open as empty spaces, free, still, silent, and speechless so one can hear the indeterminable totally *other*. The differences from other faiths and other believers are no longer under the pressure of the identity logic of unification or the alternative between truth and lie, but become the place of a theology hermeneutically conscious of difference listening to the infinite silence. Comparative theology is the art of subtle nuances.

(2) Hence, comparative theology opens up new spaces, spaces of understanding and mediation, spaces of surprise as well as diffuse spaces and empty spaces. A standard polemic against so-called postmodernity from the church governing body is that individual religious freedom of choice leads to arbitrariness and non-commitment. Following a consumerist model, people choose the most popular products to compose a colorful and comfortable shopping basket. These misgivings also affect comparative theology, if it is seen as a self-inventing haven of arbitrariness. These self-made spaces of faith are said to lack religious commitment and people avoid the demands of religions. People supposedly construct a *third space as a place of escape beyond the traditions* for themselves. Are private esoteric churches and conventicles really emerging? Then what about the space opened up by comparative theology?

(a) There are many answers to these questions. I already mentioned the confessional commitment of comparative theology and the differences inscribed in one's own identity. Other answers could also be added. Here I will only suggest a perspective.

(b) The question about the new spaces [14] can be misunderstood if one tries to comprehend it via inappropriate theoretical instruments. If we conceive of space as a three-dimensional container, as was done in antiquity, we imagine that we can set up many subspaces. But modern physics already teaches us that there is no space as such—rather, spaces are relational entities determined by their mutual relationships and the variables of time and movement. In the cultural studies approach we understand spaces as constituted by human action [15].

The geographical notion of space has also been changed from definition by topographical borders to that of cultural spaces: Spaces are affected by social practice, by lingual and visual representations [16]. We experience spaces as discursive constructions [17] of our cultural memory, which is inscribed in texts and images, and which governs the awareness of self and others in different cultures. These spaces are not the inventions of individual persons or indications of individual arbitrariness, but instead endowments of our cultural, economic, social, *etc.* treasure of memories.

(c) Postcolonial cultural geography and theories of mapping have abandoned the dichotomies of center and periphery, deconstructed the orientations of space toward the overriding north of the colonial powers, and revealed the sphere of interest of Orientalism (Edward Said). The partitioning of public space in citadel and cathedral, and the division into national spheres of governance of the

confessions (*cuius regio, eius religio*) and religions (e.g., Pakistan, India) have become obsolete. The briefly hinted at *spatial turn* in cultural studies and the turning toward a “Thirdspace” (Edward Soja) and “Third space” (Homi K. Bhabha), especially Bhabha’s version, reveal the turning of the category of space toward discursivity and epistemology.

(d) Symbols can be understood only by means of a “third” (Charles Sanders Peirce). A sign finds its meaning only in the triangle of signifier, signified, and interpreter. Furthermore, semiotic communication can never be closed down because signs receive their meaning through the designation with the help of other signs. This process modifies their meaning. A sign thus functions only in difference and in relation to other signs (“semiosis,” Umberto Eco; “difference,” Jacques Derrida). Making a critical connection with that, Homi K. Bhabha understands the *third space* as an epistemological term. Spaces cease to have unalterable meanings and do not accommodate fixed representations. The thought of pure cultures is rendered impossible. The notion of hybridity becomes central: “[T]he theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the *diversity* of cultures but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. .... by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space’, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.” [18] In multiculturalism there is a competition between identities, thus the word becomes either a threatening phantom or a *fascinosum* of exoticism. The hybridity of the “third space” inscribes discourses of difference into identity, not just of plurality.

Against this background, comparative theology could take on a significant meaning through responsibly and competently leading these discourses. Ever existing discourses are implemented and deepened. No new imperiums of third spaces will be established as places of refuge beyond the traditions according to antiquated theories of space established. With the help of comparative theology, the Church could step out of the nightmare of retreat and defense and bring its faith to light again under the conditions of hybridity and religious pluralism.

## References and Notes

1. For example, I have no knowledge of any bibliography of all the publications—they are numerous—that were demanded from many prospective theologians by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Catholic Education to establish their orthodoxy. The epistemic status of this genre of theological literature is not discussed anywhere. These contributions are silently indexed under regular theological research without posing the questions of power constellations, *etc.* of postcolonial studies. I do not challenge the right of the Church to request information from theologians about the ecclesial status of their theology, but I do ask that these discourses be held openly and transparently on both sides. Power constellations cannot be eliminated, but it is possible to contribute toward deconstructing them and making them somewhat more transparent.
2. The majority of doctrinal complaints in the recent past were linked to the topic of other religions and the plurality of other faiths: Anthony de Mello SJ (1931–1987) from India, 1995 posthumously posted; Tissa Balasuriya O.M.I. (b.1924) from Sri Lanka, condemnation and excommunication 1997, rehabilitation 1998; Jacques Dupuis SJ (1923–2004), Belgian Jesuit and

professor of dogmatics at *Vidyajyoti College of Theology*, Delhi, and at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome: investigation 1998, rehabilitation with notification 2001; Roger Haight SJ, b. 1937, Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA; now at Union Theological Seminary / New York, 2000 investigation, condemnation 2004 with a ban on writing and speaking; Peter C. Phan, b. 1946, Georgetown University in Washington, 2004 investigation, 2007 doctrinal complaint by the US Commission of Doctrine; Perry Schmidt-Leukel, b. 1954, now at the University of Münster, Germany, was refused the *nihil obstat* in 1997. His most important opponent at the University of Munich was Professor Gerhard Ludwig Müller, who has just become the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The problem of religious pluralism and the theological examination of other religions lies in the focus of attention within the Catholic Church.

3. In the *Syllabus errorum* of 1864 Pope Pius IX condemned the following sentence (no. 1) 7. “Good hope at least is to be entertained of the eternal salvation of all those who are not at all in the true Church of Christ.” (DS 2917). To entertain good hope for Christians means to pray to God for one’s eternal salvation. The church states: this is forbidden in view of the conviction *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the Church there is no salvation”).
4. See Ulrich Winkler. *Kniende Theologie—Eine religionstheologische Besinnung auf eine Spiritualität komparativer Theologie*. In *Wagnis der Freiheit. Perspektiven geistlicher Theologie. FS Paul Imhof*, edited by Friedrich Erich Dobberahn and Johanna Imhof. *Strukturen der Wirklichkeit* 4. Scheidegg: Via Verbis Verlag, 2009, 162–198.
5. The whole of F.X. Clooney’s last book talks quite rightly and most clearly about these theological, theoretical, *etc.* premises: Francis X. Clooney. *Comparative Theology. Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
6. Cf. Klaus von Stosch. *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen*. Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie 6. Paderborn et alii: Ferdinand Schönigh, 2012.
7. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* 2: “that is true and holy in these religions,” “the good things, spiritual,” in Latin: “bona spiritualia.” goods things given by the Holy Spirit.
8. Center for Intercultural Theology and Study of Religions. “Statement.” <http://www.unisalzburg.at/ztkr>.
9. The European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies. <http://www.esitis.org>
10. <http://www.occurso.de>. The Latin *occurso* means “to encounter.” I myself recently joined as a board member.
11. Martin Rötting. *Interreligiöses Lernen im buddhistisch-christlichen Dialog* [Interreligious Learning in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, PhD-thesis]. St. Ottilien: Eos Verlag, 2007; Martin Rötting. *Interreligiöse Spiritualität. Verantwortungsvoller Umgang der Religionen* [Interreligious Spirituality. A Responsible Encounter of Religions], St. Ottilien. Eos Verlag, 2008.
12. For example, one recent study conducted by Martin Rötting examined by interviews various experiences of people involved in interreligious dialogues by interviewing them. The results of this research flow back into the very sort of dialogue that we are encouraging people to engage in and that we are organizing by making them sensitive and aware of what’s going on in dialogue processes in particular in the case of different kinds of partners, circumstances, social and life period contexts *etc.* Therefore new dialogues will profit from former experiences. Martin Rötting.

*Religion in Bewegung. Dialog-Typen und Prozess im interreligiösen Lernen.* Interreligiöse Begegnungen, Studien und Projekte 9. Berlin et alii: Lit-Verlag, 2011.

13. Cf. Robert Cummings Neville, ed. *The Human Condition*. Foreword by Peter L. Berger. The Comparative Religious Ideas Project 1. New York: Suny Press, 2001; id., *Ultimate Realities*. Foreword by Tu Weiming. The Comparative Religious Ideas Project 2. New York: Suny Press, 2001; id., *Religious Truth*. Foreword by Jonathan Z. Smith. The Comparative Religious Ideas Project 3. New York: Suny Press, 2001.
14. In the following I am referring to lectures of Birgit Wagner: *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaften*, Vienna 2010 [Introduction to Cultural Sciences].
15. Cf. Michel de Certeau. "Walking in the City." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During. London/New York: Routledge 1993, 151–160.
16. Cf. Henri Lefebvre. *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos, 1974. Engl. *The Production of Space*. Malden: Blackwell, 1974.
17. Cf. Harvey David. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. Cambridge, MA/Oxford: Blackwell 1996.
18. Homi K. Bhabha. "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences." In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin. London: Routledge 1995, 206–09, here 209; see: Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. London/New York: Routledge, 1994.

© 2012 by the author; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).