

Editorial

Editors' Introduction to "European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology"

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This thematic issue of *Religions*, "European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology," asks how comparative theology—an old discipline that has been infused with new energy in recent decades and merited new attention—has been received, understood, and critiqued among theologians and scholars of religions in Europe today. How does comparative theology look in light of current understandings of theology, the study of religions, and comparative studies, and the politics of learning in the churches today? In taking on the project, we were eager to open up a new conversation on comparative theology with a wide range of European scholars. These essays vindicate our hope, as they make the case that comparative theology needs to be situated in relation to the study of religions and comparative religion on the one side, and the mainstream of theological discourse on the other. For the sake of cohesion in the conversation, at the start we suggested to the invited authors that they take Francis Clooney's 2010 *Comparative Theology* as a reference point, with reference not just to his ideas but also to the authors he reviews in his third chapter. The point was not to agree or disagree with Clooney, but to take his view of comparative theology as a starting point for the project. Aware that our own work as editors was likely to be under scrutiny in the essays, we agreed from that start that our job was not to sway the authors one way or another, but simply to give them a fair space in which to express important ideas deserving the attention of us all. We therefore very much appreciate all that is said in the essays, even when we ourselves might put the matter rather differently. Moreover, even after the work of these essays, we readily admit that no single understanding of comparative theology in Europe emerges here; our authors do not speak with a single "European voice." Nevertheless, certain questions about presuppositions, method, and the theology of religions repeatedly arise and a careful study of these contributions will help us to shape the field more coherently.

Pluralism raises questions not only about the content of theology, but also about the institutional support of theological education and research. In question too is how deeply theology, comparative or not, should or will remain a denominational discipline rooted in a specific (Christian) community or, particularly if comparative, will move away from such roots. If disciplines like comparative theology blur the boundaries among Christian communities and between the Christian and non-Christian, such as theology is no longer a uniquely Christian discipline that can be divided into its Protestant and Catholic portions, then the institutional effects too will be large. In the German context in particular, there is clearly a sharp sense of what is at stake as theology's institutional supports are shifting, and state and even ecclesial sponsorship of Christian theology is diminishing. (Winkler, Salzburg)

In the German-speaking academy, for instance, there is still rivalry between theology and religious studies; comparative theology may from one perspective seem less than theological, but from another, too theological. Whether a judicious compromise can be worked out is at issue in these essays, such that the actual work of comparison belong to the world of religious studies, and evaluation to the realm of theology, is an interesting challenge but still an open question. (Bernhardt, Basel)

As for substance, one might argue that comparative theology is in fact one of the best fruits of liberal theology and of a Wittgensteinian interpretation of transcendental philosophy; as such and even apart from what is learned in actual comparisons, it is already opening new perspectives for confessional theology (von Stosch, Paderborn). Or one might see comparative theology as an alternative to pluralist theology, and one that enables a more responsible engagement with other religions (Dehn, Hamburg). Yet caution is wise, since claiming that today's comparative theology is "new" may be unfair to earlier instantiations of the comparative project, and may also conceal continuities that make today's comparative theology possibly, for better or worse, simply a continuation of older evident and implicit Christian theological reflection on other religions (Hedges, Winchester).

Several contributors accentuate what comparative theology seems to leave undone with respect to disclosing its own underpinnings, particularly the suspected theology of religions that it is supposed to presuppose if it is to justify the work of comparison. One might even assert that comparative theology implies some version of a pluralist theology of religions. So why don't the comparativists spell out their theology of religions? This may be due to a certain stubborn practicality—you will know my theology by observing how I do it—but there may also, here too, be ecclesial dynamics at work. Thus it may be that the currently understated—under-theorized—nature of comparative theology has much to do with the position of practitioners of it, such as Clooney and Fredericks, within a Catholic Church where authorities seem ever suspicious of ways of engaging pluralism that actually make a theological difference (Drew, Glasgow).

In any case, it is worthwhile to consider more closely the distinction, directly or indirectly addressed in many of the essays, between the theology of religion and comparative theology. To put it simply: the older study of theology of religion based its methods and modes of evaluation on the doctrines and the teaching of the various churches. In this sense its subsequent attention to other religions tended at times to be an *a priori* enterprise even when its practitioners were determined to treat partners in dialogue with complete respect. Today's comparative theology is more tentative, for it works with the view that before any normative theological statements can be made, there is need for an extended engagement with the texts and/or praxis of those other religions. Hence, comparative theology is an *a posteriori* approach to the intercultural study of religion and declines to make any

normative judgments prior to an extended and deep reflection on the texts and practices of the religions under comparison. Ironically—or by a kind of symmetry—it may at times seem that just as the theology of religions postpones actual engagement with other religions, comparative theology postpones the explication of some expected, allied theology of religions. More to the point, one may also observe that only if comparative theology maintains, and appears to maintain, theological rigor, will it hold its own in the larger theological conversation. For that rigor, those interested in comparative theology must pay attention to the philosophical underpinnings of comparative work; without a strong enough sense of comparison as a discipline with philosophical implications, what is at stake in comparative theology may remain less than fully understood even by its practitioners (Bickmann, Köln).

Marianne Moyaert addresses a different dimension of comparative theology by asking about the kind of learning exemplified in Clooney's comparative theology. Vulnerable learning seems to be an inner requirement of this kind of theological comparison, its true inner measure. However, if one stresses too strongly the attitudes and acts of empathy and vulnerability and sees as comparison's primary goal a fostering of mutual understanding, then responsibility to Christian communities and Christian theology may be attenuated and neglected, and the Christian intellectual challenge to other traditions blunted. Comparative theology may then seem to erode distinguishing features of theology itself, attenuating bonds to authorities and communities. It would indeed be disappointing were comparative theology to become the last refuge for religious nostalgia, a way of evading the challenges of indifference, agnosticism, or atheism (Scheuer, Louvain-la-Neuve). Comparative theology therefore needs robust theological explanation, explicit in its debt to and continuity with tradition, if it is to hold its place in theological conversations (Ganeri, London).

Mouhanad Khorchide and Ufuk Topkara (Münster) write from a Muslim perspective. They do some of the necessary foundational work for thinking through comparative theology in Islam tradition. Moreover, getting particular, they offer a constructive example of an Islamic contribution to comparative theological study, by reflections on divine compassion. In this way they engage a topic central and familiar in the Jewish and Christian contexts, and invite further comparative study on the part of Muslims and by Jewish and Christian theologians likewise wishing to understand God's compassion more deeply across religious boundaries. More broadly, their contribution signals the necessary work of hearing from scholars in other religious traditions, about whether and how they see comparative theology as relevant to their own distinctive religious communities too.

In closing, we again express our gratitude to our authors. Their essays are invaluable in raising substantive questions and opening new possibilities while at the same time urging those of us interested in comparative theology to explain and defend more fully the practices we already employ. The essays—in the end just a sample of what is potentially a much larger body of authors and reflections—aid us in moving forward in a wider theological conversation that reaches beyond local contexts such as North America or Western Europe. In the end, we are all the more convinced that theology in the 21st century needs to be comparative theology, and that comparative theology itself needs to be intercontinental, global, and interreligious, if these are to remain vital disciplines.