

Article

## Comparative Theology and Religious Studies in a Non-religious Environment

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Received: 22 August 2012; in revised form: 9 October 2012 / Accepted: 12 October 2012 /

Published: 17 October 2012

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**Abstract:** The intellectual landscape of Europe bears the marks of a long history of cultural perceptions of, and scientific approaches to, religions. The sciences of religions had to establish their autonomy from churches and theologies. However, the cultural context and the institutional set-up of ‘laïcité’ did not foster the development of comparative religion, much less comparative theology. However, this situation may have an advantage: it should discourage the exercise of comparative theology as a sectarian endeavour apart from broader anthropological perspectives and concerns. Comparative theology should not become the last refuge for religious nostalgia. In Europe, interreligious relationships (and hence comparative theologies) should not be isolated from simple or more sophisticated forms of indifference, agnosticism, or atheism. The active presence of a non-religious environment as well as the growing interest in Buddhism, are challenges to comparative theology: its contents, its approach, its intended audience.

**Keywords:** comparative theology; Europe; *religio*; comparative method; historicity; intra-religious dialogue; Buddhism; non-belief; authority; Western reception

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### 1. A Lack of Experience and a Lack of Expertise

Through many, long centuries Europe experienced the rather homogeneous society and culture of Christendom. From the Mediterranean shores up to Scandinavia, the indigenous religious traditions had been pushed back or somehow integrated into the dominant Christian universe. Willy-nilly, Jewish communities were to be more and more contained within the walls of their ghettos. From southern Spain to Turkey and the Caucasus, the Muslim dominions cut off Europe from the rest of the world.

Most Europeans however had little contact with and scant knowledge about Islam: indeed, it was widely considered as a sort of Christian heresy rather than a distinct religion in its own right.

Children growing up in the Near East or in India, for instance, soon become aware of the presence of other communities in their neighborhoods. They may know little about the beliefs and practices of those others. They may not care to know. But they are aware of other calendars and feast-days, of different dietary rules and perhaps dress-styles, of other places of worship. From their parents and elders they learn the subtle art of avoiding interference and preserving communal peace. For many, long centuries most Europeans had little or no experience in this field. No wonder if upon the arrival, after World War II, of other believers, with their customs and mores, Europeans were unprepared: ‘Muslim scarves’ and other such items soon generated endless controversies. This lack of experience and the resulting lack of expertise could be quite understandable, were it not for the Europeans’ itch to act as teachers to the rest of the world.

## 2. Europe’s Religious Landscape

The age of homogeneous Christendom now belongs to the past: the quiet birth of comparative theologies may be just one indication of this development. In this perspective, it may be useful to provide a rough sketch of the new religious landscape and the promises it holds for comparative reflection.

The religious traditions of pre-Christian Europe ceased long ago to play any active part, except perhaps for the Greek or Greco-Roman heritage. Its influence however is felt at the level of philosophical thought rather than religious beliefs, indeed of philosophies that have been duly pruned and divested of any living religious inspiration. Of late, though, there has been a surprising (or perhaps not so surprising) revival of interest in the wisdom and ethical traditions of the Stoa and other ancient schools, including a new appreciation of their ‘spiritual exercises’.

From the very start, from New Testament times, Christian-Jewish relations have been a special case, indeed a unique instance of some sort of ‘theology of religions’ and also of ‘comparative theology’. After a long history of contempt and aggressive apologetics, the post-World War II generations have seen significant improvements in dialogue and theology. Selected areas of Jewish thought and spirituality have become a source of inspiration to many Christians<sup>1</sup>.

Sadly enough, the contribution of Islam to Christian thinking appears to have lost since ages much of its potential. On issues where agreement or convergence seems possible, the similarities or greater proximity may have dulled theological interest. On issues where disagreements loom large (for example, christology, the Trinity), a negative type of both defensive and offensive apologetics led into a dead end. In a paradoxical way, the fact that Christian faith in Europe does not thrive anymore under the regime of Christendom may prove a hindrance to mutual understanding, due to the lack of correspondence or parallelism between the respective social and political situations of the Christian and the Muslim communities. However, the rapid pace of change in these fields may open new avenues to fruitful encounter.

Except for a short period of romantic enthusiasm at the beginning of the 19th century, Hinduism has not evoked much response in Europe. To be more accurate, it did not strike roots in coherent and

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<sup>1</sup> The relevance of Christian-Jewish relations for a Christian theology of religions and even for comparative theology may be illustrated by the 10-volume *Dogmatique* of Gérard Siegwalt [1], esp. vol. I/2.

structured ways among the European populations; it actually never earnestly attempted to do so. This did not prevent more diffuse influences on Western thought and values.

While the European 18th century witnessed a wonderful appreciation for Chinese teachings in the fields of ethics and polity, it remains to be seen whether our century, with growing freedom inside China and a more assertive presence abroad, will develop an interest in traditional Chinese wisdom and spiritual practices.

For the last fifty years or so, Buddhism, more than any other tradition, has attracted the attention of a growing and significant minority of Europeans. It is at the intersection of Buddhism and Christianity that much interreligious dialogue, philosophical debate and comparative theology develop and are likely to further develop across our continent. In the European context at least, it is not insignificant that a number of sketches or essays in comparative theology resort to the resources of a tradition to which, in the eyes of many, labels such as ‘religion’ and ‘theology’ are rather ill-fitting<sup>2</sup>. It is meaningful as well that Buddhism, in the West and particularly in Europe, is present at the levels of philosophy and psychology as much as theology. European philosophers, not all of them Buddhists, include Buddhist thought in the making of what may be called ‘comparative philosophy’; and Buddhist philosophers, both Japanese and Western, deal with European thought. In all likelihood, the philosophical dimension of the encounter will impact comparative theologies as well.

### 3. Towards New Types of Religion?

Each religion or tradition exhibits distinctive characteristics. In several respects, Buddhism, including its several branches or ‘Vehicles’ and numerous schools, may be seen as furthest away from Christianity (and other forms of revelation monotheism); yet, the universal claim of its wisdom, as well as an ancient history of adaptation to very different cultures and languages, single it out, if not as *the* spirituality of tomorrow, at least as one of the major spiritual paths for the next generations. When taking into account its appeal to quite a number of Westerners, we are invited to consider, from the perspective of a Christian practice of comparative theology, some characteristics which are not usually included in our understanding of ‘religion’. Among those that appear more significant in the Western reception of Buddhism, let us mention briefly:

its individual *and* global or cosmic dimension, while less attention is paid to intermediate rungs of the ladder, such as family or state: this suits rather well the individualism and the political ‘weightlessness’ of many Europeans today;<sup>3</sup>

its pragmatic approach rooted in the experience of the (phenomenological) subject, with relatively little concern for metaphysical problems;

a rather horizontal or ‘immanent’ type of transcendence or realization;

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<sup>2</sup> Some Buddhist authors however do not hesitate to use ‘theology’ in an analogical way. See the volume of essays edited by R.R. Jackson and J.J. Makransky [2].

<sup>3</sup> See several contributions to the special issue of the French journal *Esprit* [3]. For insightful commentaries and interpretations from a sociological angle, see for instance Le Qu éau [4].

a measure of affinity with several philosophical and spiritual schools of the Western (Greco-Roman) Antiquity (before or apart from the Jewish or the Christian heritage);

a mobility and fluidity allowing individuals to break free from religious bonds to space (Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Rome...) and to chronological time or salvation history. If not ignored altogether, such religious bonds to space and time are played down: they become mere 'skillful means' or optional ways divested of any authoritative or compulsory nature. The essential core is the 'here-and-now', in other words, whatever happens to be, to any mobile and autonomous individual subject (but not a self, not a Self!), always and everywhere available and so to say, 'portable'. An apt illustration of this is the usually strong emphasis on meditation, for lay as well as monastic disciples.

#### **4. The Comparative Study of Religions**

'Comparative theology', as the label of a recent development and a fledgling discipline, may look a little awkward, especially if one remembers how, about 150 years ago, the young comparative study of religions struggled to break free from denominational theologies considered as static, dogmatic and parochial. No need to go here into the details of a rather complex intellectual and institutional history. One should remember however that the comparative method in the History of religions, particularly in its phenomenological school, attempted to include, in the documentation to be gathered and analyzed, if not all religions past and present, at least a representative sample of the empirical diversity of religions or, to be more accurate, of the diversity of religious types and forms: a rather ambitious program, but a necessary condition if one intends, through the comparison of empirical data and perhaps the method of 'free variation' or the simulation of models, to bring to the light general patterns and deeper structures, distinct and contrasting types of religions and even, in the case of scholars with a more speculative bend of mind, some 'essence' of religion.

As a matter of fact, the available documentation, from prehistorical times up till now, in spite of its gaps and silences, keeps growing day by day. It exceeds by far the strength and resources of any single scholar or team of scholars. Besides, the scientific disciplines and methods which claim to make significant contributions to those ambitious programs of inquiry and analysis, have multiplied and become more differentiated. Even disregarding a number of short-lived and superficial fashions, the intellectual history of rival schools and trends through some 150 years leaves us with a bewildering, sometimes chaotic landscape. Each school or discipline, while offering some new or not so new light, questions or at least relativizes by its very existence the promises and achievements of the others. More than any other, the sociology of knowledge considers all interpretations and conclusions with suspicion or at least with critical caution.

The built-in limitations of any research in the field of social sciences or humanities, as well as the growing awareness of the historicity of both data and scientific tools and theories, contributed to the flowering of various postmodern (or 'late modern') philosophies and ideologies. Even scholars little concerned with such theories came to acknowledge the virtues of prudence and modesty. Most dedicate themselves to monographic studies of a well-demarcated field. Others apply some comparative method to a few items which they feel confident to study with some mastery. These modest approaches usually evoke little response from the public, while more ambitious theories and bold syntheses are welcomed by a broader readership but meet with the skepticism of most scholars.

## 5. Comparative Theology—Personal Engagement—Intra-religious Dialogue

The present intellectual landscape in the scientific studies of religion may to a certain extent explain the modest style, indeed the spirit of craftsmanship of several pioneering contributions to the new field of ‘comparative theology’. While individual factors remain significant, the contrast is impressive between, for instance, the ample syntheses and the synoptic tables of Jacques-Albert Cuttat’s *Expérience chrétienne et spiritualité orientale* (1967) [5] and, some thirty years later, the explorations published by Francis X. Clooney [6].

However, other, more specific, factors have played their part.

As was pointed out several times already, the exercise of comparative theology may have provided a welcome opportunity to scholars tired of or puzzled by and somewhat skeptical about the current state of the (mostly Christian) theologies of religions: their global approach, the vague tone of their discourse, their a priori methodology, the absence of concrete data. Tackling limited, discrete issues could be a way to start afresh, to proceed from the bottom up. It would also remind one how important and fruitful it is to build on personal relationships of encounter and dialogue. The in-depth study of the data and (whenever possible) the courteous meeting with other believers require a patient, modest and rather selective or sectorial approach.

Comparative theology, more so than the comparative or other methods in use among historians of religions, requires personal commitment. The believer-cum-theologian, rooted in a particular tradition and community, is expected to go through a process of ‘crossing over’ and ‘coming back’ (or ‘coming home’), a process of discernment and integration, which demands more time and maturing than the ‘mere’ comparison undertaken by an external, detached and ‘objective’ observer. One might even consider comparative theology, at least in the last stage of its process, as a form of ‘intra-religious dialogue’ if, following Raimon Panikkar’s suggestion [7], one understands this as the quiet echo and the continuation or further maturing and elaboration, in the heart and mind of each believer, of her experience of *inter-religious* encounter and dialogue.

## 6. Comparative Theology: Too Narrow?

If practiced on the narrow base of familiar concepts of religion, comparative theology is liable to suffer from several defects or shortcomings. These would affect its contents, their perception, and the intended audience.

### 6.1. Contents

Comparative theologians should remain alert to the risk of developing their reflection against the background of some vague ‘religious’ anthropology or some ideology of the ‘sacred’. The danger or temptation, which is sometimes allowed to remain unattended, would be to pay exclusive attention to items that are common or alleged to be common to all religious cultures, thereby ignoring other dimensions and potentialities of human beings and societies. In order to avoid or reduce the danger of too narrow a base, it may be advisable to use some broader categories, such as Tillich’s ‘ultimate concern’. But such devices will have a merely cosmetic effect unless they call our attention to concrete manifestations of this ultimate concern outside the area of what is spontaneously and traditionally

considered as 'religious' or 'sacred'. All sorts of anthropological issues, themes, values and symbols are likely to fall through the 'religious' sieve and get lost or be discarded as irrelevant to the comparative theologian's endeavor.

It may be useful, in this context, to remind briefly that the very word and concept 'religion' are far from being universal: several scholars called our attention to the genesis and development of '*religio*' in the Latin language and the Roman culture, as well as to the impact, somewhat later, of Jewish and above all of Christian thought upon its further evolution [8,9]. There is no adequate correspondence between 'religion' and axial terms and concepts in use in other civilizations, for instance *d ñ*, *dharma* or *jiao* [10]. Even if some clear and precise standard definition of 'religion' or 'sacred' could be coined and adopted by convention, one should not expect that a particular phenomenon considered as 'religious' in the ambit of a given tradition would necessarily be interpreted as such in other contexts. Even within the boundaries of a single cultural world, phenomena which for centuries have been deemed 'religious' or 'sacred' may come to lose this qualification.

## 6.2. Perception

The point at issue is not the mere fact that items (notions and images, patterns of behavior, norms and values) may fail to appear under our searching 'religious' light. It will not be a simple case of absence or of incomplete documentation. Whatever their relationships may have been in past centuries, religion and the absence or denial of religion nowadays are correlative. Belief grows and thrives or decays in a context of non-belief; in other words, belief appears against a background of (at least, possible) non-belief; indeed, in a number of present-day societies and in many social, professional and other circles, belief is less plausible than its opposite.

The non-religious backdrop against which particular religious traditions appear is not neutral or innocuous. It affects every religious aspiration, its exercise and its manifestations. It questions what religion and religions are likely to claim as obvious, as a matter of course: for instance, the links between cosmology and religious narrative, between political power and its religious foundations, between cure and prayer or atonement. The non-religious background or the non-religious dominant culture impacts, often in unsuspected ways, the perception religions shape of themselves. Is it (was it ever? is it still?) possible for them to offer keys opening an access to reality as a whole, to the whole of reality?

Actually, when atheism, agnosticism, absence of God or silence about God are taken into consideration as the context in which discourses on religion (including comparative theologies) may, at the dawn of the third millennium, take shape in Europe, it will soon become evident that versions of atheism or agnosticism are as numerous and diverse as the forms of religious conviction and confession. The growing interest in Buddhism and other Far Eastern teachings, as well as the rediscovery of some wisdom schools of Western Antiquity, add diversity to the landscape; these traditions may also function as bridges or open new perspectives beyond the familiar binary confrontation between Christian faith and modern Western types of atheism. The exercise of comparative theology becomes more complex but also more promising. It remains however to be seen whether and how representatives of these atheistic or agnostic traditions will join the conversation.

Buddhism, once more, may have here a particular role to play. Monotheistic religions built upon a revelation do experience a weakening or decline of the monopoly they at one time claimed on the European populations. This is already clearly the case for Judaism and Christianity; European Islam or Islam in Europe may not remain forever immune to that trend. Certain forms of ‘scientific’ atheism and materialism do not fare much better. On the ground left free by the ebb tide, there is plenty of space for other images of the world, new types of interiority, new forms of spiritual quest. A selective interest in Buddhist teachings helps fill the gap. In turn, as in a spiral movement, a growing familiarity with Buddhism and a few other schools opens our eyes to neglected dimensions or underexploited resources of culture and spirituality. While the range of options is fast growing, the temptation to monopolize the history of religions or comparative theologies as an exercise in apologetics should recede.

### 6.3. Audience

If ‘religious’ matters, in the usual sense of the word, constitute the exclusive basis of comparative theologies, if the denial or absence of religion is not acknowledged as possible, plausible, indeed probable in large sections of the public, comparative theologians may have to lecture in front of empty seats. Comparative theology will lose or never regain much of its audience. It is hard to see how it could be of interest to persons and even circles where religion, especially religious—and even more Christian—doctrines and theological debates seem irrelevant.

In countries such as France and most of Central and Eastern Europe, the spirit of *laïcité* or a historical heritage of state atheism reduced the place of religion in most universities to almost nil. Even such disciplines as history of religions or comparative religion are rather underdeveloped. There is a lingering suspicion that they do not meet scientific standards or, worse, that they may cover up some sort of religious, confessional and parochial apologetics. Theology as a matter of course has been relegated to private, denominational institutions outside the University. No wonder comparative theology is almost unheard of, with the rare exception of a few Church faculties. While the general public is unaware of its existence, even most believers do not realize its relevance and potential, not to mention those who are afraid of syncretistic drift. As a consequence, believers are left without resources in the face of a growing pluralism at the philosophical and religious level. A broader, more inclusive approach to comparative theology may meet the interest of a larger public. And addressing new audiences may in turn foster new ways of doing comparative theology.

### 6.4. Authority—Creativity—Reception

The weakening hold of religion on large sectors of the European population makes it all the more urgent to tackle the question of authority in comparative theology. The authority of a text (or a practice, a norm, a model figure...) is at stake both on the side of the ‘lending’ tradition and of the ‘borrowing’ one. The weight of authority of a borrowed element has to be ascertained. To put it less forcefully, determining its level and mode of authority should help understand the meaning and significance of that element in the context of its own tradition. But that weight of authority will not necessarily dictate its value or importance in the eyes of the borrowing or receiving tradition. It all depends on the main objective aimed at. If the comparative theologian values lasting and global

relations of exchange and dialogue, she will give priority to elements acknowledged by the lending tradition as important and authoritative. And she will take seriously the ways of reading indigenous to that tradition.

This concern, however, may have to do with interreligious relations rather than comparative theology as such, where interests and priorities are to a larger extent determined from the point of view of the borrowing tradition. To the ‘borrower’, a religious item (text, teaching, ritual, symbol) may appear significant and worthy of interest in spite of the fact that the lending tradition considers it less important, marginal, or even unorthodox and unacceptable. In many cases, its value will depend on its capacity to give expression to and transmit a spiritual experience or a wise teaching. From the point of view of the borrowing tradition, even elements that cannot be integrated or assimilated may be appreciated for their potential to surprise, stimulate, and renew: they give food for thought. This happens frequently, for instance, in exchanges between Christianity and Buddhism.

Now, when we come to the second stage of the comparative theology process, the constructive phase where elements discovered in the lending tradition are welcomed by the theologian intending to use them in a creative way as a resource to deepen and further elaborate her own reflection, the weight of authority granted to these new developments does not remain a purely individual issue but becomes the concern of a believing community. The ‘reception’ by the community—in ways that differ in accordance with the principles of each religious tradition—plays a decisive part. This reception may well undergo evolutions and revisions, but it is one essential condition of the theological value and validity of the whole enterprise.

Our present postmodern or late modern situation, however, bears the mark of a great fluidity and of the individual nature of initiatives, encounters, experiences, and reflection. It is then to be expected that reception by a community will be deemed less important or even negligible. The interest, value and fruitfulness of a reflective and spiritual process involving ‘foreign’ resources will rather be measured against personal aspirations and changing expectations. This fluidity and weightlessness make it ever more difficult to foresee the outcome of contacts and exchanges between religions or wisdom traditions, between communities.

Mobility and fluidity impact the style and method of theological work: they lead either in the direction of extreme porosity and eventual dilution or in the line of defensive assertions of identity, culminating in traditionalist or fundamentalist postures. It remains to be seen how each particular tradition (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity) will muster the necessary intellectual and spiritual resources to avoid both pitfalls. Wisdom teachings based on personal experience are likely to be less disturbed, while monotheistic faiths based on some form of divine revelation may experience more destabilizing jolts.

## **7. Is Comparison Outdated?**

In other words, does comparative work have a future? The following pessimistic hypothesis could be formulated: the ‘comparative age’ is (has been?) but a brief intermezzo, a transitional phase in the history of culture. According to such a scenario, the story unfolds in three stages:

First, the age of identities, of cultural, religious and other forms of ethnocentrism, usually accompanied by a feeling of superiority—whether naive, quietly unassuming or full of contempt. As

we know from experience, even a message claiming universal validity and aiming at reducing discriminations, may consciously or unconsciously carry some imperialistic urge to spread an exclusive model, one single reference, till the ends of the world. This is sometimes the impression left, for instance, by Western or Western-inspired manifestos on behalf of the ‘human rights’. Far from being open to difference, to the different ‘other’, such moves tend to reduce and assimilate the other to the self. The model advocated, sometimes under the guise of some utopia, may be but the extension of my (our) own identity, an identity brandished as the secret key of history or the basic law of reason.

After the long era of identities, humankind entered the age of difference, the discovery and appreciation of otherness. This may be illustrated by intellectual and cultural ventures such as ethnology, anthropology, the comparative history of religions; that is also where interreligious dialogue draws inspiration from. Comparative study may manifest a genuine openness to the other as such, to her difference and singularity. But it also happens that the image of the other is used as a device at the service of the self: the representation of the other is then nothing but a tool for the critique and improvement of one’s own society. This was probably the main objective of 18th-century French writings such as *Lettres persanes* or *Lettres chinoises*; a number of Utopian novels and even ‘science fiction’ stories have similar aims.

In the age of difference, contrary to the French saying “*Comparaison n’est pas raison*”, comparison puts reason to work: it gives food for thought or challenges entrenched forms of reason. When long-distance travel and trade are common fare, when planet Earth seems to be shrinking, knowledge about the other(s) becomes unavoidable: comparison belongs to reason.

The comparative age, however, seems to lead, by some iron law, beyond stable identities, into a mobile and fluid world. We have come under the spell of some postmodern subtle mood suggesting that identities and differences are elusive and rather irrelevant. When pushed to the extreme(s), individualism and the worship of the singular (values which paradoxically may be shared by a large majority of the population...) make comparison almost an impossible task. More importantly, comparison becomes useless and meaningless: why on earth take the trouble to compare autonomous singularities which may prefer not to expect anything from one another?

Yet it is to be feared that the lack of interest in the other, even if laced at the beginning with polite, non-aggressive benevolence, may eventually lead to violent confrontation. In our globalized, crowded and complex world, the art of living together demands the patient practice of conversation and the readiness to learn from our differences. In our world, comparative theologies have a role to play, even at the level of culture, society and polity.

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