

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AS CHALLENGE FOR THE THEOLOGY OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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In this article the author first gives an introduction to his own approach to comparative theology (CT). After some introductory considerations, an outline of the idea and foundation of CT is given and is contrasted with traditional approaches to other religions; the methods, goals, and also the limits of CT are discussed; CT is differentiated from religious studies and the theology of religions; finally, CT is defended against some of its most important critiques. All in all, the author presents an approach to CT that suits Christian confessional theology, yet is open to Islamic theology as well, and which is inviting to theology as a dialogical enterprise which should be performed by Muslims and Christians and other religious believers together.

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1. Introductory considerations

When I first began my academic studies in Catholic theology in 1991, my former professor in systematic theology had already asserted in his first lecture that, in twenty years at the latest, German universities would have overcome confessional theology. Thus, my academic beginning was marked by the feeling of belonging to an endangered species – and thus resisting the spirit of the time with a destined recalcitrance. I got the impression that I was – as a student of a confessional aligned theology – out of place. Nevertheless, I was sufficiently convinced of the truth of the Christian faith that I was willing to face all possible discrimination – indeed, any obstacle – in order to achieve a deeper insight into Christianity. If our time was not able to understand the Christian message, it had to be modified, and if there was no contemporary philosophy which could help to account for a reasonable faith, a new philosophy had to be developed or an old one had to be revitalized.

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Still there was a lurking doubt inside me which questioned this gratifying certainty, yet at the same time it became an important engine for my theological studies. I was absolutely glowing from the theological figures and systems which were introduced and inhaled every book with growing enthusiasm. On the other hand, I was sure that I probably would have delved into the writings of Advaita Vedanta with the same enthusiasm had I grown up in India or into Qur'anic studies or studies of Muslim philosophers had I been raised in an Arabic country. However, it appears probable as well, at least to me, that a different religion could have caught my attention that would have required understanding had I grown up in a different environment.

I lost sleep by the mere thought of this possibility. How could I trust in my own truth if different ways to the truth existed which I wasn't able to fully understand, or which contradicted mine but were at least similarly convincing and apparently successful? Besides enabling me to encounter other religious traditions, there might have been a crucial impulse within this anxiety propelling me to explore comparative theology.

I like to imagine how my professor still welcomes new students by pointing to the rapid disappearance of confessional theology without noticing that he has continued to insist on its loss, despite the passing of the prognosed twenty years, thinking that there isn't any kind of alternative to confessional structured theology. Even today, many theologians and religious scholars and leaders seek their salvation through opposing the perceptions and thoughts of the present-day. The church, for instance, declares herself to be in contrast to contemporary society by claiming that Christian identity "goes against the flow." Simultaneously, the tendency in all religions and confessions to affirm their own identity and faith by distinguishing themselves from other beliefs, or by devaluating different views, has increased – a phenomenon that is especially spotted on both sides of the Islamic and Christian divide. Ironically, this often violent urge of distinction has led to both a political and a social perception of how important theology actually is. Since September 11th 2001, religion has been understood as a factor relating to particular social developments, which must be considered seriously if one is interested in a positive future for mankind.

The only question is, then, how this can be realized. Up until now, confessional theologians have barely perceived an instance which could assist and accompany a peaceful religious coexistence. Nor have confessional theologians profited from the swelling debate about a

post-secular society. Although religion has begun to play a decisive role in our time, this neither means that churches or denominations have become more important nor does it imply that confessional theologies are accepted by the masses or even the scientific community.

Christian theologies have taken a more and more defensive position. It seems to be time that they face the challenge of a reorientation which includes two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, they have to provide a way which can enable them to activate the emancipatory, liberating, peacemaking potentials of their own religion and confession. They have to qualify their tradition in regard to critical distinction and posing the question of truth. Therefore, only confessional theology can demand identification with a certain point of view which appears to be the basic condition that enables one to negotiate a way through the colourful world of various religious traditions and orientation systems. On the other hand, as I have previously mentioned, they have to provide a reasonable, convincing answer to the experience of contingency within their own religious tradition and to the question of their relation to other religions and convictions. Such an answer will not be found by broad theological relationising on the level of theory and modelling since it does not seem convincing to claim from a superior point of view that truth and salvation can be found only within my own orientation system. On the other hand, it is equally not convincing to explain, as the pluralists have, that many other important orientation systems or world-pictures are as good as the one I entrust my life to. It is impossible to dedicate your life to a certain truth and at the same time admit that other contradicting alternatives to that truth are also true. Still, I cannot neglect that there is a truth within other religious traditions and orientation systems which motivates reasonable serious people to devote their lives to.

This ambivalence inevitably leads to the problem of slipping into relativism and risks the evaluating of decisions for a particular religion or philosophy as arbitrary. Thus this is why a rational handling of the issue is required. This implies a non-reductionary, attentive handling of the problem which emerges from the conflict of heterogeneous truth claims. Only a discipline which inquires about the truth and rationality of other religious traditions will be able to understand and relate to different claims concerning truth and validity. Therefore, not only religious studies, but theology as well, must focus on this topic. At the same time, this attempt has to positively absorb other religious truth claims into their own tradition. Thus it must be centered in comparative theology without restriction to a confessional inside perspective.

At that point theology has to provide both an orientation within a specific system which reflects confessional ways to the truth and a perception of heterogeneous orientation and relate them rationally. Therefore, it must be comparative theology which performs this effort because it is a theology which is able to perceive different religious traditions contiguously and encounter questions and problems from different points of view without ceasing to look for specific confessional ways to the truth. Only if theology, within all its disciplines, succeeds in transforming confessional inside perspectives into an intercessional, empathetic view of different inside and outside perspectives, will it be able to disperse the feeling of fear that follows from the insight of truth claim's contingency. And only if theology negotiates the fear of the contingency of one's own affirmation strategies will there be a way to meet the disorientation which results from that contingency and the fundamentalist developments which result from that fear. In the following explanation, after introducing the concerns, ideas and fundamentals of comparative theology, I would like to focus upon the methodological and organisational approach in order to master the aforementioned contemporary challenges towards theology.

2. The foundation, concerns, and definitional disposition of comparative theology

Many exponents of comparative theology consider it to be important in finding a way out of what James Fredericks rightly calls an "impasse of the theology of religions."² Comparative theology thus looks for a remedy to close the theological debate resulting from the effectless quarrel between inclusivism and pluralism.

They already assume that, within the theology of religions, the question is asked incorrectly: P. Schmidt-Leukel drafts the question as follows – "Is there P among religions?" – in which P is defined as the "salvific revelation of a transcendent reality."³ This question presupposes that religions are some kind of container for truth, reality and revelation so that one can test thereupon how much, and in which perspectives, they are filled. This notion goes astray for a couple of reasons.

To begin with, all religious traditions are versatile in such a way that it is impossible to appoint a uniform meaning to the most

2. Cf. J. Fredericks, "A universal religious experience? Comparative theology as an alternative to a theology of religions," *Horizons* 22 (1995), p. 67-87.

3. P. Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen* (Gütersloh, 2005), p. 66.

important credo and beliefs even within just one religion. It appears rather odd to speak about one religious tradition and her validity of truth when Quakers as well as Tridentine Catholics belong to it.⁴ Even more important is another point which refers not to the different beliefs within one religion but to the structure and status of religious beliefs.

Believers not only give statements about reality, but let their life be directed by such religious statements, symbols and norms. This apparently trivial insight is interesting since it makes clear that what is meant in religious belief often must be lived to be understood. What it means to believe in Jesus Christ as the son of God often becomes clear only if I see in which praxis it is imbedded. If He appears on a praxis level as a legitimation for violence and as a borderline for all dissenters, His meaning is different from one based on reason and thus the source of a peacemaking praxis.

The meaning of statements about reality, as well as the meaning of statements about God, depends upon the world-pictures which are rooted in our praxis. Moreover, it is this praxis in which the certainty of life-guiding and world-picture constituting beliefs is engrained. Meaning and certainty are rooted in a practical dimension which is culturally different and which has to be analysed if one is likely to understand the meaning of religious beliefs.

Similar to how Keith Ward has already reflected in his philosophical founding of comparative theology, you can refer to Wittgenstein's late philosophy for a closer look, especially in his notes compiled in the book *On Certainty*.⁵ According to Ward, Wittgenstein is able to convincingly highlight in his writings that certainty is to understand, not as a mental state, but rather as a basal course of action,⁶ thus the interpretation and certainty of religious statements only reveal their meaning according to the basal course of action. This is why one needs to observe other religious praxis before one can make a decision about convergences and divergences within the dialogue of religion. You have to see how a particular belief correlates to a particular praxis and how it is enrooted within it. Thereby the self-disclosure of others is not necessarily applicable in being able to picture the meaning of his or her belief adequately. Ward mentions rightly that, especially inasmuch as the so-called "hinge propositions"

4. Cf. K. Ward, "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," *Religious Studies*, 26 (1990), p. 4.

5. Cf. K. von Stosch, *Glaubensverant - wortung in doppelter Kontingenz* (Regensburg, 2001), p. 90-136.

6. Cf. K. Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford, 1994), p. 9.

apply, they are believed more or less unreflected and unconsciously and, although the act of thought might not even be perceived, they influence all our ideas and matters of belief.

It is possible that the praxis and action of a person is proof that he trusts in a different certainty than what he says. For instance, someone who gloats over his Christian belief, could, in reality, be an anxious, stressed person who mistrusts the liberating message of Christianity on such an existential level that he is not able to understand it fully. Within his world-picture, indeed within everyone's world-picture, these unconscious tacit operating elements exist which first become evident in the confrontation with different world-pictures. Just this confrontation, or better, the self-exposure to the world-picture of the other, is the basis for reflecting upon one's own blindly-obeyed world-picture elements and understanding their truth claims.

Within comparative theology, much depends on the rediscovery of the tacitly assumed elements of one's own world-picture and those of others. Often this becomes a challenging task, but this task is – according to Ward – virtually constitutive for theology.⁷ Within theological reflection, it is very important to disclose the unconscious elements rationally and proof preconceptions critically. Thus a coherent position is hoped for which will be able to analyse the deep dimensions of one's own beliefs and those of others and make them accessible to discursive praxis and thereby the question of truth.

Of course, analysing the “depth grammar” (PI § 664) of religious speech, and thereby pointing to what is hidden – in praxis tacitly setting the basics of religious belief – is not a patent remedy for a solution of interreligious quarrels nor does it always lead to the acceptance of alteration. Comparative theology's concerns can also result in the position of affirming the contradiction between diverse grammatical statements. Yet often the first strange or even seemingly repellent confession of a different religious belief might become valuable as soon as one understands its embedding in a particular religious praxis.

On the one hand, comparative theology can help to soften interreligious borders by giving fixed confessions a vivid, existential context. On the other hand, an appreciation for other religions is not practiced as an end in itself and must not be reduced to its theological dimension. Besides the pictured theological concern, comparative

7. Ward talks about “a hard and fallible task” to realize such “tacit beliefs” (ibid., 14). He defines theology in large as “the articulation of tacit framework beliefs” (ibid., 15).

theology is interested in a redefinition of the content of systematic theologies in general. The attempt to observe and appraise the basic writings and confessions of one's own religion in the light of other traditions and world-pictures⁸ constitutes an indispensable dimension of apologetic or fundamental theology. Correspondingly, F. Clooney designates the task of comparative theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* within a world of religious diversity⁹ thus according it within the tradition of fundamental theology. One could say that in a globalised world fundamental theology is not possible without laying claim to comparative theology.

3. Methods, goals and limits of comparative theology

What does comparative theology consist of? Is every theology that consciously arises within the variety of traditions and convictions to be seen as comparative theology? Is, in the end, every systematic theology a comparative theology?

Personally, I would not go that far. I would rather suggest deducing the methodological characteristics of comparative theology from the implied philosophical groundwork which allows for specifying that task. Thereby the methodological praxis in comparative theology developed within the last few years has to be regarded. According to this methodological specification, my intention is not to deny that, within a wider scope, there was some kind of comparative theology that existed beforehand.¹⁰ But in the sense of a *terminus technicus*, the

8. Compare Clooney's definition of comparative theology "as the rereading of one's own tradition in light of other traditions" (H. Nicholson, "A Correlational Model of Comparative Theology," *The Journal of Religion*, 85 (2005), p. 191; compare F. Clooney, "Reading the World in Christ," Gavin D'Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: 1990), p. 64: "I will describe the practice of comparative theology as the dialectical activity of reading and rereading the Bible and other Christian texts in a new context formed by non-Christian texts").

9. Compare F. Clooney, "The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology," *Theological Studies*, 56 (1995), p. 521.

10. For instance, R. Neville mentions that comparative theology is nothing new since it underlies all succeeded theological abstracts which issue interreligious enquiries – like the inclusion of Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian and Islamic concepts by Aquinas (Compare R. Neville, *Behind the Masks of God* (Albany: New York, 1991, p. 4). The theological concepts of Middle-East Christians in the 8th/9th century who lived in the Islamic world and began to articulate their Christian beliefs in the idiom of Islamic-influenced culture might be an even more convincing example of comparative attempts (Compare N. Hintersteiner, "Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)translatability and the Comparative Theology Project," N. Hintersteiner, ed., *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today* (Amsterdam, New York: 2007), p. 471, with reference to S. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, Princeton, 2007). Nevertheless, the first attempts to establish comparative theology as an academic discipline first began in the 19th century (Compare N. Hintersteiner, l.c., pp. 465-468).

term comparative theology, in my view, should be reserved for undertakings concerning the following basic principles.

A) On the methods of comparative theology

(1) Comparative theology is characterised substantially by its micrological approach and the attention to the particular respectively.

The understanding that the meaning of religious convictions depends upon a particular language game coerces the dialogue between different religious traditions into referring to concrete examples and interrelations. Since the sentence “God is love” can point to different meanings depending on whom and in what context it is said, one can understand it adequately only if perceiving it as embedded in particular language games and as integrating it in the dialogue. Therefore, comparative theology can never result in a universal theory about religions and truth.¹¹ Since the meaning of basic religious beliefs within particular traditions are heterogenic and can lead to advantageous discussions only if related to single cases and language games, comparative theology focuses on a cautious observation of select details within particular solitary cases.¹²

Also comparative theology is recognizable by a focus upon an interreligious and intercultural comparison of exactly-specified theological, literary or confessional writings, concrete rituals, defined beliefs, certain theological concepts within limited contexts and historical appointed eras.¹³ Every act of comparison follows an interior logic and provides theology with interesting insights by addressing the concrete.¹⁴

To respect people in their fears, afflictions and queries, it is virtually important to remember the question of truth even within this micrological approach. Considering this, the second basic principle follows:

11. Compare F. Clooney, *Hindu God* (Oxford, 2001), p. 14: “Working by examples also has the advantage of making it clear that I am not attempting a general theory about theology and religion nor about Christianity and Hinduism in order to explain everything all at once.”

12. Clooney talks about a “careful consideration of some details of a few particular cases” (ibid., p. 15). Respectively, he requires that every kind of critique on his ideas and statements are illustrated with examples (ibid.). Clooney’s critique on Dupuis’ strongly apriorically arranged critique of religion is symptomatic (cp. ibid., p. 23).

13. Compare P. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: 2004), p. 207: “They (comparative theologians; author) generally try to limit themselves to comparing specific texts, concrete rituals, focused beliefs, particular theologians, limited contexts, or historical periods.”

14. Compare Hintersteiner (s. note 8), p. 484, with reference to Clooney: “Each act of comparison bears its own internal logic and reveals intriguing insights into Christian theology.”

(2) Comparative theology is concerned with contemporary problems and intends to give an orientation on actual posed questions.

Although comparative theology has compiled different examples of contemporary problems, the selection of questions is not supposed to be arbitrary. It must be geared toward theological problems and concerned with lay questions about sense, salvation and truth in addition to critical challenges by specialists. Otherwise, comparative theology would then become a playground for detail-loving eccentrics, those who meticulously compare totally irrelevant subjects. Just as it is not analytic philosophy if one comments arbitrarily on some random detail of our language, commenting capriciously upon correct observations and subjects in order to compare religious traditions is not automatically comparative theology.

Therefore, it is important that, as a first step in comparative theology, problems are drafted according to the different viewpoints of religious and non-religious traditions and in so doing the critique of religion appears quite meaningful. Of course, this is not to expect that there will be a uniform canon of questions for all comparative theologies in the world. But at least at the point of concrete research one should identify shared problems and assess the given examples with a view to their competence of clearly arranged solutions.

(3) Comparative theology refers to the internal descriptions of religious beliefs, but, nonetheless, attempts to include one's own view from the position of the other into their own theology. It concedes the possibility that the other can include my perspective on his tradition into his own theology as well.

A precondition would thus be a detailed knowledge of one's own theological position in addition to those of others. This knowledge is opened up only if theologians not only try to understand another position from a (religiously examined) external perspective, but look at it from the dialogue partner's inner confessional theology. The ideal case would make available a comparative theologian who would have studied more than one theology and would be able to switch back and forth between confessional inner perspectives. At least he or she should live up to the ideas and rules of different religious traditions almost as well as his or her own tradition and should be able to develop an adequate inner perspective in dialogue with other beliefs.¹⁵ Since a factual statement of the other is only adequately understood

15. Compare Hintersteiner (s. note 8), p. 478, with reference to Clooney: "To understand and evaluate a religious text of another tradition requires a reader to become deeply and holistically engaged in that tradition."

within the context of his or her own world-picture, the meaning of the different elements of belief will remain indistinct if the theologian abstains from referencing an inner perspective.

Of course, it is difficult to put oneself in the theological position of the other and the result of this attempt will be unpredictable. But if comparative theology intends to appreciate the meaning of different religious traditions, this attempt remains indispensable. Hermeneutically it appears equally difficult to the problem every apologetic theology has to face if it is willing to make its claim understandable even beyond the borders of its own language game¹⁶ – a challenge that should not be neglected as long as theology is expected to look for the truth. Similar to Catholic apologetics, since Melchior Cano emphasizes the meaning of *loci alieni* as an epistemological source of theology and thus always made an effort to comprehend the thoughts and concepts of philosophy and the humanities within contemporary interreligious and intercultural contexts, theology as a whole cannot afford to forget to include the religious and cultural self and world interpretation of others as *locus alienus* into one's own epistemological concept.¹⁷

According to a statement from J. Fredericks, to practice comparative theology means to raise oneself from the armchair of one's own tradition, to find a way into the world of the other and to become elated and enriched by their discovered truths.¹⁸ At the same time one is supposed to remember that the other is equally legitimized to put him or herself in my position and appreciate my truth from his or her own perspective. Therefore, theologians must expose themselves to a mutual-including process of understanding by the continuing attempt to value the perspectives of the other with particularity and without neglecting to understand them from one's own position.

16. Compare von Stosch (s. note 3), pp. 307-320.

17. Compare the respective recordings to modern *loci alieni* at P. Hünermann, *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre: Glaube – Überlieferung – Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen* (Münster, 2003).

18. "Doing theology comparatively means crossing over into the world of another religious believer and learning the truths that animate the life of that believer. Doing theology comparatively also means coming back to Christianity transformed by these truths, now able to ask new questions about Christian faith and its meaning for today." (J. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians* (Maryknoll, New York: 2004), p. xii. The religious other would help to pose new questions and thus would enrich our way to Christ. Compare *ibid.*: "I propose that Christians get up out of the armchair and cross over into another religious tradition" (*ibid.*, p. xiii).

(4) Comparative theology needs the instance of a third position

The mutual-including processes of understanding bears the threat of making reciprocal arrangements and agreements in order to mothball certain problems. If two confessional inner-perspectives implement a particular problem, the risk to trivialize the problem on a basis of shared convictions grows. As Franz Kafka puts it, they run the risk of becoming a “community of scoundrels.”

Modern theology tends to underestimate this threat with reference to the autonomous philosophical reason and the attempt to develop a religion-external criteriology. Although I think of metaphysical and transcendental-philosophical oriented attempts to develop such a criteriology as rather unhelpful, since from my point of view they can be destroyed philosophically, I still would recommend that on a very formal level such criteriology can and should be developed. At least to some extent, the instance of a third position in fact could be established by the position of a philosophical, autonomous, critical, external perspective.

Unfortunately, two opposing problems appear thereby. One the one hand, this criteriology necessarily is too pluralistic since it cannot answer orientation problems and has to permit contradicting truth claims as being equally rational. On the other hand, this criteriology is not pluralistic enough, since it is based upon a reasonable understanding within a certain philosophical tradition and therefore rejects religious positions from a philosophical point of view which actually should be taken more seriously than the philosophical prospective would allow.

The third position therefore cannot simply be an abstract philosophy or criteriology, but must be concrete and able to observe the dialogue of the other two as a controlling instance. To avoid an “expanded community of scoundrels,” it seems essential that the third position is elected to hold a continuing moment of critique on the processed problems. This third position thus could be either atheistic or agnostic – and, depending on the dialogue context, a follower of a third religious tradition could be consulted if the first holds a sufficiently different basic idea of the processed question and the second is able to confront it with critical and skilled arguments.

(5) Comparative theology always needs a return to religious praxis

Comparative theology follows the idea that the cognitive content of religious convictions is understood fully only if debriefed for its “depth grammar.” A substantial part of the methodology of comparative theology is therefore to clarify the connection between

the regulative-expressive and the encyclopaedic level of religious convictions. That way comparative theology can point to functional equivalences and regulative homogeneity beyond semantic differences.¹⁹ For this, a return to the praxis of different religious traditions and a reflection upon further developments within the interreligious dialogue is needed.

The manifold and vivid dialogue among specific traditions, persons and theologies is a basis and corrective for comparative theology. Comparative theology is not a theology *for* dialogue, but a theology *of* dialogue, as M. Barnes states.²⁰ It is a cooperative concept wherein followers of other religious traditions are to be included.²¹ It is not simply reduced to writings and scriptures, but requires a concrete dialogue between people of other world-pictures in order to find and develop adequate access towards their own level of world-pictures along with those of others.²² This makes the consistent return and re-reference to the basic elements of religious praxis within different traditions indispensable.

(6) Already on the basis of this dialogical open-mindedness, comparative theologians are aware of their own vulnerability and the reversibility and fallibility of their judgements.

This vulnerability, which can be reasoned Christologically,²³ is basically related to the language game bondage of all speech and thought. It reaches beyond general hermeneutic self-relativization in the context of eschatology or the admission of an epistemically ambivalent reality reasoned by religious and philosophical coherences. According to Wittgenstein's previously mentioned notion, we follow the important parts of our religious "depth grammar" unconsciously.

19. This way, it is possible to find – despite the huge differences between Bhartrhari and Bonaventura – on the level of explicit revelation theories that both, according to their historical context, have similar reason and aim for the same intentions. Compare D. Carpenter, *Revelation, History, and the Dialogue of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: 1995), p. 176: "They are in fact *doing* some very similar things, relative to their own respective historical contexts."

20. Compare M. Barnes, "Theology and the Dialogue of Religions," *The Month*, 28 (1994), pp. 270-274; pp. 325-330. Also compare Clooney (s. note 7), p. 522.

21. Compare K. Ward, *Religion and Community* (Oxford, 2000), p. 339: "Comparative theology is a co-operative enterprise. It is a way of doing theology in which scholars holding different world-views share together in the investigation of concepts of ultimate reality, the final human goal, and the way to achieve it."

22. Compare Knitter (s. note 11), p. 210: "The comparativists want people to avoid working only with books. It's impossible, they say, into a deep comparison with another tradition without getting to know and appreciate and perhaps love some of the followers of that tradition."

23. "For to be *loyal* to Christ, one must be *vulnerable* to others." (Knitter [s. Anm. 11], p. 209, with reference to Fredericks and Clooney).

Furthermore, the relation between the regulative level which is presupposed within religious speech, and the cognitive level structured by that, is contingent in two ways and is thus exposed to human fallibility as well as human freedom.²⁴ Therefore, there is no end to comparative theology. As J. Fredericks correctly diagnoses, within this moment is not a weakness but a potency.²⁵ Of course, comparative theology is not only defined by its method, but by its goals as well. Thus, I would like to at least sketch these goals in the following paragraphs.

B) Goals of comparative theology

According to the previous analysis, it should be sufficiently perspicuous that comparative theology should not be reduced to its theological contents and that epistemology and the progressive enhancement of theology overall are important concerns as well. Its basic impact is the idea that often only by confrontation with other points and convictions can new aspects of their own points and convictions be conceived.²⁶ On the one hand, comparative theology concerns the better understanding and reasoning of its own theology by paying attention to the tacit level of its own grammar and making it conscious and discursive. Some theologians, like J. Fredericks for instance, even define the better understanding of one's own tradition as the actual goal.²⁷ In Fredericks' point of view, comparative theology's real goal is to gain a better understanding of the meaning of Christianity "by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions."²⁸ The best example of such a redraft of systematic theology from the perspective of comparative theology is the four-volume work on comparative theology by K. Ward. He gives an interpretation of Christian belief which is oriented within the mainstream of Christian tradition but is open to modification and enrichment by looking at non-Christian traditions.²⁹ According to J.

24. Compare von Stosch (s. note 3), pp. 268-274.

25. Compare J. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: 2004), p. 179.

26. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 143.

27. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 169: "The real goal of the exercises (comparative exercises on Hinduism and Buddhism; author) was to gain a better understanding of the meaning of Christianity."

28. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 139f.: "Comparative theology is the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition."

29. Compare K. Ward, *Religion and Community* (Oxford, 2000), p. 340, who calls his outline "an interpretation of Christian faith that remains recognizably mainstream, while being modified by its response to both critical and complementary insights from non-Christian traditions."

Fredericks, discussion with other religious traditions will enrich not only one's own thinking and belief, but, in the end, "the world will benefit."³⁰

To avoid the impression of instrumentalising other traditions, and that, within dialogue, only the perception and benefits for one's own tradition is prior, Fredericks emphasizes that his theological work not only focuses on tolerance, but interreligious friendship and appreciation of other religious traditions as well.³¹ Nowadays a historical point is reached where interreligious dialogue requires not only tolerance, but friendship.³² In fact, this seems to be the main purpose of comparative theology in my point of view. In the end, the appreciation of reality, and thus the adequate perception and appraisal of other religions, transpires.

To reach this goal, it becomes necessary to dispel one's own prejudices and incorrect pictures. That is why comparative theology also intends to explain and convey knowledge about the other tradition. Thereby it is linked to some kind of therapeutic interest since it wants to cure the aggression and sources of violation which result from incorrect thoughts and assumptions. Apparently F. Clooney selects his examples in the way that they correct common ideas about different religious traditions and lead to new insights about the other.³³

Another important goal of comparative theology points to the intermediation between inclusivism and pluralism in the theology of religions. Thereby the reconciliation of both intentions cannot be achieved on the level of models, but has to respect the basic claims of both concepts: the pursuit of appreciating the other and being faithful to one's own beliefs.

3. Differentiations

a) Comparative theology and religious studies

Unlike comparative religious studies, comparative theology does not

30. Compare J. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians* (Maryknoll, New York: 2004), p. 115: "Let Christianity be enriched by the truth and goodness of Buddhists and Muslims, Confucians and Daoists, Sikhs and Jains, Jews and Hindus. These religious believers have stories to tell. Christians have much to learn. The world will benefit."

31. Compare Fredericks (s. note 23), pp. 172-177.

32. Compare Fredericks (s. note 28), p. xi: "The religious solidarity called for today requires Christians to go beyond tolerance in order to look on their neighbors who follow other religious paths with the esteem and gratitude reserved for faithful friends and cherished teachers."

33. Compare F. Clooney, *Hindu God* (Oxford, 2001), p. 15.

emphasize the psychological, sociological or historical elements of religious convictions, but rather asks about their meaning and rationality and refers to the question of truth.³⁴ Admittedly, in modern religious studies the previously mentioned exclusion of the question of truth apparently has become disputable. Still, for religious studies to be considered as an empirical science, religious truth is usually historically involved and related to a particular religious system and therefore remains somewhat “relative,” which makes it impossible for religious studies to give “religious decision guidance.”³⁵

Comparative theology, on the other hand, focuses not on a description but on an evaluation of religions or of certain religious convictions in concrete contexts. It not only surveys standards of rationality and asks about meaning and competence but also about the truth of religious convictions. In doing so it exposes its work to philosophical discourse and simultaneously tries to adequately exert the inner-perspective of believers. Especially as the regulative function of religious speech is understandable only within the context of language games, comparative theology cannot give decision guidance on the meta-level of a philosophy of religion but has to make different insider perspectives become transparent to each other and comparable towards an externally reasoned criteriology.

b) Comparative theology and theology of religions

With that, the main difference with the common form of the theology of religions is appointed. In addition, comparative theology poses the truth question not as a question, however, for religions in their entirety, but rather with reference to a particular religious conviction within a concrete context of language games. Instead of constructing a “grand narrative” (Lyotard) about the relation of world religions towards each other or even in establishing a super language game on a meta-level,³⁶ comparative theology tries to increase comprehension

34. Compare Ward (s. note 4), p. 40: “Comparative theology differs from what is often called ‘religious studies,’ in being primarily concerned with the meaning, truth, and rationality of religious beliefs, rather than with the psychological, sociological, or historical elements of religious life and institutions.”

35. R. Flasche, “Vom ‘Absolutheitsanspruch’ der Religionen” in B. Köhler, ed., *Religion und Wahrheit. Religionsgeschichtliche Studien* (Wiesbaden: FSG Wießner, 1998), p. 20: Religious truth is “für eine empirisch sich verstehende Religionswissenschaft immer nur in ihrer historischen Bedingtheit und damit als Relation innerhalb eines Religionssystems gegeben und damit im gewissen Sinne, relativ,” weshalb es ihr auch unmöglich ist, “religiöse Entscheidungshilfe” zu leisten.”

36. For Lyotard’s critique of such processing compare von Stosch, “Zeugnis für das Undarstellbare als Zeugnis für den Gott Jesu Christi? Für eine Theologie jenseits vorschneller Oppositionen,” Ders./Peter Hardt, ed., *Für eine schwache Vernunft? Beiträge zu einer*

within a limited experiment of comparison.³⁷ This comprehension emerges from action rather than from a meta-theoretical communication.³⁸

Therefore, it is not actually correct that comparative theology and the theology of religions belong together like two sides of the same coin. Unfortunately, a basic philosophical difference of approaching religions is thereby trivialized. S. Rettenbacher, for instance, postulates their reconcilability, and alleges that, while comparative theology emphasizes primarily upon the practical aspect of theology and the theology of religions puts more of an emphasis upon its theoretical aspect, both are related and connected³⁹ as comparative theology, if precisely practiced, would lead inevitably to questions of the theology of religions.⁴⁰ Also P. Schmidt-Leukel claims this dependence of comparative theology upon the theology of religions when he insists upon the inevitability of the truth question implied by his propagandised modelling.⁴¹ Thereby, he, as well as Rettenbacher, misses the point that his requested decision about the truth claims of different religious traditions is simply meaningless since those truth claims and their meanings are embedded in a particular grammar. Schmidt-Leukel's almost dogmatically insistence on pluralism results from the fact that, on a philosophical level, he is not willing to step away from a metaphysical realism to an internal one.⁴² Thus, for philosophical reasons he obstructs every possibility to communicate his own orthodoxy and intentions consistently.

Theologie nach der Postmoderne (Ostfildern, 2007), p. 57-65, here 61f.

37. Compare Fredericks (s note 16), p. 99.

38. The traditional approaches of the theology of religion "think of religious diversity as a theoretical problem to be solved. Comparative theology, in contrast, is a process or practice, not a theory. Before Christians can fully understand themselves and the role of their religion in the history of the world's many religions, we must first learn *about* non-Christians. Even then, the job of comparative theology has only begun. After learning *about* non-Christians and their religions, we will then be ready to learn *from* them" (Fredericks [s. note 23], p. 9).

39. Cf. S. Rettenbacher, "Theologie der Religionen und komparative Theologie – Alternative oder Ergänzung? Die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Perry Schmidt-Leukel und Klaus von Stosch um die Religionstheologie" in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, 89 (2005), 192f.; S. Duffy, "A Theology of the Religions and/or a Comparative Theology?" in *Horizons*, 26 (1999), p. 106. R. Bernhardt's notion, which apparently is based on a harmonization of comparative theology and mutual inclusivism, sounds similar (R. Bernhardt, *Ende des Dialogs?*, Zürich, 2005, p. 279). Since he understands mutual inclusivism strictly hermeneutically and emphatically avoids fixating upon the basic models of the theology of religion, I would like to suggest that this form of mutual inclusivism and comparative theology do not exclude each other.

40. Rettenbacher (s. note 37), p. 193.

41. Compare Schmidt-Leukel (s. note 1), 91f.

42. Compare H. Putnam, *Vernunft, Wahrheit und Geschichte* (Frankfurt A.M., 1995, pp. 15-106; K. von Stosch (s. note 3), pp. 161-166.

As soon as he gives up his metaphysical realism – and especially his supposed theory of adequateness – it becomes obvious that a theological capacity of judgement cannot develop on the level of model since the meaning of the symbols which are used by religious speakers differ according to the language game context. Instead of a fundamental decision for one of the basic theological models, the contemporary pope approves of at least “a phenomenological survey...which doesn’t judge about a religion’s value for eternity right from the start and so encumbers a question only God can answer.”⁴³ Considering the aforementioned philosophical analysis about the meaning of religious convictions, it appears that the focus is not only on a contemporary – but a necessary – continuing aloofness in order to consequently reject a perspective, which, coming from the theology of religions, leads to modelling, and instead get different inner-perspectives by means of single cases in dialogue.

4. Critiques of comparative theology

(4-1) The main critique of comparative theology in the last few years says: Comparative theology all in all cannot escape the problems of the theology of religions and will sooner or later face its diagnosed dilemma. At this point it would be important to make a decision instead of clouding one’s own position. Furthermore, comparative theology would need to make a decision within the models of the theology of religion sooner or later.⁴⁴

As R. Bernhardt justifiably points out, the critique is right about the fact that “the totally dimmed question about the systematic religious relationising...will get back within evaluation and comparison on the elementary level.”⁴⁵ However, comparative theology does not deny this fact. Of course, with reference to the solitary cases which have been analysed by comparative theology, one could ask if one has perceived the different positions as equal alongside each other (pluralism), or if one can appreciate the other

43. Benedikt XVI, *Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 2005), p. 16; cf. *ibid.*, p. 44: “Do we have to find a theory, how God can save without derogating the uniqueness of Jesus Christ? Wouldn’t it be more important to understand this uniqueness from the inside and simultaneously assume the extensiveness of its impact without defining it precisely?” Of course, these quotes are not supposed to suggest that Benedikt is a supporter of comparative theology. But at least they suggest that he is sensitive to the problems of inclusivist theory modelling and leaves us hoping that the Catholic magisterium is open to the enhancement of the religious into a comparative theological question.

44. Compare Schmidt-Leukel, “Limits and Prospects” in Hintersteiner, ed., (s. note 8), p. 494; C. Danz, *Einführung in die Theologie der Religionen* (Wien, 2005), p. 106.

45. Bernhardt (s. note 37), p. 277.

only from one's own point of view (inclusivism), or if one has to reject the other position completely (exclusivism). But this evaluation is only possible after the interreligious meeting and is restricted to the individual single case. It is not to be expected that all evaluations will be identical.⁴⁶ And it is impossible to count single results and subsume them into a complete theological position. Therefore, the required decision of Schmidt-Leukel on the level of model will never occur since such a decision underestimates the language game reference of religious speech.⁴⁷

(4-2) Similar to the P. Schmidt-Leukel view are critiques which deny that comparative theology appears as an alternative to inclusivism and pluralism by subsuming it under one position or another. The critique by H. Hopping aims for that point when he claims that my position would be equivalent to pluralism since it would relativise the universal claim to truth of the Christian revelation. To me, Hopping's equation of my position on pluralism appears incomprehensible since I repeatedly and insistently distance myself from the pluralistic position.⁴⁸ He is basing his assumption on the idea that "language game relativism" knows as little as "common rationality...an ultimate sense."⁴⁹ Hopping probably alludes, with his "language game relativism," to my Wittgenstein-inspired position, although I have repeatedly distinguished Wittgenstein's position, as well as my own, from relativism.⁵⁰ I am not sure what makes him think that I am not familiar with common rationality and ultimate sense. He might hold the view that rationality and ultimate sense only exist within foundationalist philosophical concepts. In that case, I would like to point to my confutation of this position.⁵¹ His main critique seems to be that "within Wittgenstein's language game pluralism...religious sentences only have a regulative function for religious praxis."⁵² I rejected this limitation as fideism and in my interpretation of Wittgenstein repeatedly disassociated myself from it. This is why Hopping's critique

46. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 278.

47. If one claims that the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God leads to superiorism, one ignores that this confession, like all religious convictions, is affected by its regulative status on a semantic level. Thus, there is more room for interpretation than from pluralism conceded (Compare my ideas to Christology, which soon will be published in *MThZ*).

48. Compare von Stosch (s. note 3), pp. 334-345.

49. H. Hopping, "Die Pluralität der Religionen und der Wahrheitsanspruch des Christentums" in H. Münk/M. Durst, ed., *Christliche Theologie und Weltreligionen: Grundlagen, Chancen und Schwierigkeiten des Dialogs heute* (Freiburg/Schweiz, 2003), p. 132.

50. Compare von Stosch (s. note 3), pp. 117-125, 275f.; *id.*, "Grundloser Glaube? Zur Glaubensverantwortung nach Wittgenstein" in *FZPhTh*, 49 (2002), pp. 328-346.

51. Compare fully von Stosch (s. note 3), p. 167-201.

52. Hopping (s. note 47), p. 119.

does not match my position.⁵³

(4-3) More conceivable is the critique that comparative theology leads to inclusivism, especially as important representatives of comparative theology – like F. Clooney, for instance – acknowledge inclusivism. The core of the critique is the idea that comparative theology is also not able to totally appreciate the other as other. In the end, according to T. Schärfl, only the grammatically apparent identical will be accepted.⁵⁴

An allegation that within the single case only already existing grammar appears and thus genuine otherness cannot be appreciated misconstrues the fact that my grammar is partially concealed – even from my own perception – and that genuine otherness can be accepted equally only if the other grammar is functionally similar. The search for functional equivalence on a regulative level should not be mistaken as a hidden identity of cognitive-propositional contents, which I do not claim. Comparative theology does not intend to deny or repeal the difference of cognitive-propositional contents. It has in mind rather to leave it on an encyclopaedical level as possibly reconcilable as long as the difference is rooted in a different language game praxis and thus gives a chance to reveal possible grammatical equivalences.

On a grammatical level it cannot be intended to only detect equivalences or consensuses. It is also important to recognize differences by the insight of functional equivalences, which, despite their dissimilarity, nonetheless can be accepted on a regulative level. Since, as long as rules describe different aspects of reality and praxis, it is possible to follow different rules without facing a contradiction. Thus, I can leave the other and his rules without compromising the dignity of my own rules. Owing to circumstances, the encyclopaedical as well as the grammatical difference can be perceived as beneficial – the encyclopaedical difference can be useful if functional equivalences on a grammatical level can be disclosed and thus help to overcome seemingly definite contradictions or clarify different possibilities to meet the same intention while the grammatical difference can be advantageous if obeyed rules are perceived, not in a competitive situation, but in order to regulate different language game contexts.⁵⁵

53. Compare von Stosch (s. note 3), 274f. Hoping points to this statement to prove the opposite of what I say.

54. Compare Th. Schärfl, “Rez. zu von Stosch: Glaubensverantwortung in doppelter Kontingenzt” in *ThRv*, 100 (2004), p. 49.

55. Therefore, the goal of comparative theology is not always to trace covered family resemblances with the grammar of other religious language-games (H. J. Höhn, *Postsäkular*.

The last can be beneficial if dimensions of reality can be experienced which usually remain concealed within the context of my own rules and religious praxis.

(4-4) Another serious critique of comparative theology on a hermeneutic level leads to the idea that “it is an inperformable idea to take the perspective of another religion in order to understand one’s own tradition better.”⁵⁶ Indeed, it is correct that the other religious tradition is first perceived through the perspective of one’s own tradition⁵⁷ and that it is impossible to fully understand the perspective of the other.⁵⁸ It is not possible to see the other religion as a whole from the perspective of one’s own tradition as a whole.

But that is not what comparative theology is focusing upon. It is based upon the possibility to comprehend a different world-picture in the sense of retracing it. This means that study and research is sometimes not enough and that, in order to properly comprehend the other, one needs to live within the other’s world. Wittgenstein refers to a conjoint mode of action which enables one to comprehend across world-pictures, cultures and religions.⁵⁹ Sometimes only the lecture and testimony of such attempts can help to understand the other. Claiming an incommensurability of world-pictures, and thereby an impossibility of comprehension, leads to a hopeless cultural relativism which discredits human rationality and gives critics like H. Hoping space to unfold. I can try to at least understand the other’s claim in the context of his lifestyle and to interpret it from this point. If I return to my own way of living after this attempt at comprehension, I am at least resensitised to unreflected and unconsciously believed elements of my own grammar. Therefore C. Danz’ critique becomes objectless.

(4-5) A final critique of my statements on comparative theology takes issue with the fact that they remain very formal⁶⁰ and do not answer material questions. This accusation is warranted. I only can meet it by giving as many examples as possible which animate the concept of comparative theology.⁶¹ Excluded by the concern and spirit of

Gesellschaft im Umbruch – Religion im Wandel (Paderborn U.A., 2007), p. 186, Fn. 263.

56. Danz (s. note 42), 233f.

57. Compare Danz (s. note 42), p. 229: “Foreignness, and especially religious foreignness, is perceived by religions always in their own position. This results from the fact that religious systems are self-referential total interpretations of reality.”

58. Compare Nietzsche’s diktum, “Wonach man nur um die eigene Ecke sehen kann.”

59. Compare von Stosch (s. note 3), pp. 43-49.

60. Compare Rettenbacher (s. note 37), p. 190.

61. I would like to work on this kind of example collection in the next years. Compare as a first example K. von Stosch, “Der muslimische Offenbarungsanspruch als Herausforderung komparativer Theologie. Christlich-theologische Untersuchungen zur innerislamischen

comparative theology is Rettenbacher's question about the essence of Christianity.⁶² Against the background of comparative theology this essence has to be rediscovered and redefined with reference to situations and language games and has to be clarified differently in each case according to context and coherence.

Paying attention to the accomplishments of comparative theology overall – such as in the writings of F. Clooney and K. Ward – the accusation of being too formal can no longer be maintained and it becomes obvious how manifold, and in what different ways, comparative theology is able to perform. Although many problems still await processing, the basic idea appears to be sufficiently defined to attempt to prove practically the range of comparative theology.

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62. It seems similar senseless to answer the question about the character of religion ahead of comparative theology's undertaking (Against Danz [s. note 42], p. 107). To me the mentioned reflection on status and structure of religious convictions seems absolute sufficiently.

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