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Article

Comparative Theology as Liberal and Confessional Theology

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Abstract: For most European scholars, the scope of Comparative Theology is not very clear. They see big differences between the notion of Comparative Theology among its protagonists, e.g., between Keith Ward or Robert Neville and Francis Clooney or James Fredericks. That is why I will try to define a certain understanding of Comparative Theology which can be defended in accordance with strong European theological traditions. I want to show that Comparative Theology can be understood as one of the best fruits of liberal theology and of a Wittgensteinian interpretation of transcendental philosophy—and that it opens new perspectives for confessional theology. The current development of Islamic theology in Germany is especially challenging for Comparative Theology and the best opportunity to develop it into a project undertaken by scholars of different religions and different intellectual traditions. I will argue that Comparative Theology is not a new discipline within the old disciplines of theology, but that it can give new perspectives to all theological disciplines and thoroughly change their character.

Keywords: liberal theology; postliberal theology; comparative theology; global theology; confessional theology; German theology; Kant; Wittgenstein

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1. Comparative Theology and the Dispute between Liberal and Postliberal Theologies

Christian Theology in Germany is highly influenced by philosophers from the enlightenment era, such as Immanuel Kant, as well as certain aspects of German idealism, in particular the philosophy of free will. The basic idea underlying this philosophy is to provide insight into the senselessness of the traditional metaphysical debates on both the nature and perceptibility of reality. Kant explains that there is no scientific possibility of solving the debate between empiricism and rationalism within a metaphysical framework. Thus, a continuation of traditional metaphysics in line with Plato or Aristotle

would lead to the end of metaphysics as science; it is therefore necessary to reshape metaphysical inquiry in a way that allows for the achievement of results which can be falsified. In this vein, theology has to change its outlook from metaphysical doctrine to considerations *sub specie humanitatis* [1] and critical engagement [2].

I call this a critical theology, which understands human free will and human rights as the basic principles underlying all theological considerations. In essence, such critical theology posits a positive relationship to modernity as liberal theology. Characteristic of liberal theology as such is the universal struggle for the liberation of humans.

This liberal, critical and public theology seems, however, to have two different branches. One branch understands its own approach and theories as universal, at times driven to establish a sort of world or global theology [3]. It is revisionist towards many traditional parts of Christian belief and thus highly disputed. The overwhelming majority of contemporary Catholic theologians in Germany do not agree with this tradition because they insist on the denominational or creedal character of theology. This liberal theology is based on philosophers and theologians like Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher and Ernst Troeltsch.

The other branch of liberal theology has at once a universalist character combined with an acceptance that people in different cultures, times and denominations have varying approaches to theology. Unlike postliberals, these theologians believe that these differences do not consequently lead to incommensurability among religious language games. They avoid any kind of relativistic or pluralistic movements without establishing one global theory or super language game in theology. They understand their theology as public theology, not because they think that everybody has to share it, but rather because they want to provide evidence pertaining to all contexts. The public character of liberal theology as such consists of the claim to translate theological ideas in all kinds of language games without using only one method or one language in realizing this task. Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner are two of the most important theologians engaged in such a form of liberal theology, or "contextual theology." In contemporary intellectual thought, Wolfgang Huber (who has developed concepts of communicative freedom and public theology [4]) and Jürgen Werbick (who has outlined an idea of non-foundationalist foundation of Christian belief [5]) seem to continue this tradition. One could argue that this is the most influential type of theology in Germany today.

There are also postliberal and postmodern thinkers who criticize the universalist tendencies of both kinds of liberal theology, armed with the belief that theology must first and foremost express the belief of the church, shaping our world by the message of the Bible. Postliberals perceive a gap between the world and the church, and find that it is decisive for theology to adopt the perspective of the Church and the Bible. In the Catholic tradition, postliberals have established a sort of coalition with anti-liberal, neo-conservative, sometimes neo-scholastical thinkers. In the Protestant tradition, they share much with the Evangelicals. Postliberals are an increasing minority in the German academic context.

If we are looking at the attitude towards the emerging field of comparative theology espoused by these various groups, according to a postliberal perspective, it does not make sense for theologians to contribute to comparative studies. This arises from their position that any form of theological reasoning must arise from the Bible, which they perceive as the first (and most important) Christian theology [6]. Although the Bible also deals with people of other religious paths and although postliberals draw on a wide range of Western philosophical, literary and theological resources, they

always want to use the Bible as the starting point to debate religion. Of course it is also possible to establish a comparative theology of sorts from a postliberal standpoint, which allows Christians both to explain Christianity and to speak with adherents of other religions who explain their theologies. In the end, however, any attempt to establish a postliberal comparative theology will end up in apologetic movements or in relativism, since a postliberal framework cannot provide the criteria that allow theologians to modify their own theological insights in the light of other religions or philosophical theories. At least in this perspective such a modification cannot be grounded in reason. A postliberal movement tends to think that other religions are inferior to the religion of the scholar or that they simply cannot be understood.

Both ideas—the claim to incommensurability and the lack of possible appreciation of other religions—contradict the basic principles of comparative theology and the attitudes that Catherine Cornille recommends for interreligious dialogue. Cornille invites theologians to search for a way to welcome the differences of the other and to find a common ground for understanding [7]. As comparative theology seems to be in a sort of tension with postliberal thinking, it can be explained in the tradition of liberal theology. This is why it is so important to decide which branch of liberal theology should be distinctive for comparative theology. The key question underlying this task is whether comparative theology is another term for world, global or interreligious theology, or instead a movement within confessional theology/theologies?

2. Comparative Theology and the Dispute between Global and Confessional Theology

In the U.S., Robert Cummings Neville is one of the most important proponents of comparative theology as a global theology and as a public theology without the necessity of denominational attachment. Neville believes that basic theological ideas can be defended from a purely philosophical perspective. If you consider Neville's *Cross-Cultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, which was organized in the late 1990s at Boston University [8], it is striking that religious insider perspectives are usually avoided, in order to prevent any kind of apologetics, although some of the participants of the project like Clooney argued within the volumes for the necessity of insider views. Neville himself seems to think that truth is found in avoiding insider views and searching for neutral and objective perspectives. This directly connects to the first branch of liberal theology.

The problem with religious convictions from the perspective of contextual liberal theology, however, is that they cannot be adequately understood from the outside, and they experience shifts in meaning if they are translated into secular contexts or outsider views. They have not only a cognitive, but also regulative and expressive dimensions, *i.e.*, they express values and attitudes of religious believers and they highly influence their form of life and have to be understood within this context [9]. It is thus imperative to include religious believers as theologians who explain their own theologies in any project of comparative theology.

Of course, Neville knows how diverse and differing religious worldviews are and how difficult it is to translate them across cultures and strands of thought. Yet he thinks that we all have 'to operate within a public that integrates reflections from as many of the world's philosophic traditions as possible' [10]. The problem with this idea of a globalized theology or philosophy, which integrates all kinds of theological and philosophical systems, is that it ignores the impossibility of translating all

language games in one system of reference. Although each religion has a possibility of finding ways to understand others' worldviews, the ways of understanding can be very different; they have to be found in different ways within different cultural and philosophical contexts. Each world religion can identify numerous commonalities and differences with other world religions, and thus there is no way of integrating all of them into one theory or perspective. This is the truth of postmodernism. However—and this is why modernity cannot simply be replaced by postmodernism—different ways of establishing comparative theologies that integrate diverse theories and worldviews can always be found—albeit one can never engage all of them at the same time.

Wittgenstein employs the metaphor of 'family resemblances' to explain this point (PI 65-71). This metaphor explains that while you can compare every member of a family with any other member because of certain resemblances, there is no single characteristic shared by all members of a family. Some will have the same nose, others have some similar movements, others share an accent. Thus, there is always a way to know that somebody belongs to a certain family. Returning to the theological applications of such relational understanding, the bridges to this knowledge are very different across cultures and perspectives—and, even more problematically, are not necessarily even comprehensible from other perspectives. This underlies why we need so many different approaches to theology, which cannot be harmonized in one super language game. The quality of a comparative theology is not dependent on the number of internalized theories, but rather on its capacity to create networks and to enter into dialogue with other perspectives, *i.e.*, to search for truth in different contexts.

If we avoid understanding comparative theology as global theology, we can begin to appreciate the attention to particulars characteristic of the comparative work of Francis X. Clooney or James L. Fredericks. In this branch of comparative theology, theologians try to 'do theology' in dialogue with one other religious tradition while maintaining a particular framework aimed at answering key questions. The goal is not *one* coherent theology that integrates all strands of comparative work. Nor is the aim a global theology that integrates as many worldviews as possible. The aim is simply to deal with case studies in order to produce a preliminary survey of a certain kind of problem. This type of comparative theology seeks to create a dialogue between different theologies in diverse contexts. This concept is, however, inevitably in danger of postmodern relativism or theological irrelevance if it does not explain convincingly the choice of its subjects. It is important to connect it with the central research tasks of theological inquiry of today. The challenge of the next years will be to develop this 'micrological' kind of inquiry in a more systematic way, without turning to postmodernism or liberal theology characteristic of classical 19th century German liberal theology. European comparative theology provides the opportunity to reflect through the second branch of liberal theology, which I explored above.

3. Challenges for Comparative Theology

A European perspective, in particular the German tradition of confessional theology, could help comparative theology strike a balance between the temptation of (supra-denominational) global theology and a postliberal language game approach. Three challenges remain at the core of comparative theology:

3.1. The Challenge of Non-christian Theologies

One challenge is quite obvious. It consists of the emerging field of non-Christian theologies, in particular that of Muslim theology in countries like Germany. After many years of ignorance towards the sizable Muslim community in Germany, the federal government has recently established (and funded) the discipline of Islamic Theology at German universities. This has led to a burgeoning attempt to connect this new, developing theology with comparative theology, most strikingly evident in the Center for Comparative Theology and Cultural Studies at Paderborn University. It will be decisive for the future of denominational theology in general whether Muslim and Christian theologies will succeed in finding ways to cooperate fruitfully, thereby transcending religious borders without losing their respective religious identities. The methods of comparative theology can undoubtedly contribute significantly to this endeavor.

3.2. The Challenge of the Orientation towards Problems and Needs

My second point is related to the question of the selection of examples within the concentration on particular case studies in comparative theology. It seems important in this respect that comparative theology succeeds in giving orientation to actual, posed questions and that it remains—in the words of the Second Vatican Council—concerned with the 'the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted' [11].

Although comparative theology unites and contrasts, the selection of cases is not arbitrary. It must instead be geared to anthropological and theological problems. And it must engage questions about sense, salvation and truth, as well as critical challenges. Without the careful selection of cases, comparative theology could become a playground for detail-loving eccentrics who meticulously compare irrelevant subjects. Just as comparing random linguistic details is not analytic philosophy, comparing religious traditions is not automatically comparative theology. As time is finite and as not all problems can be solved, it is also important to reflect on which questions should be first on the agenda of comparative theology. Thus, theologians of different religions have to decide together on the problems on which their work should focus.

In comparative theology as in other branches of theology, it is important that intellectual questions are addressed from different viewpoints of religious and non-religious traditions. The critique of religion is meaningful in this discipline. Of course, there does not exist as a uniform canon of questions to be universally addressed by all comparative theologies in the world. And yet through concrete research, one should identify shared problems as both belonging to—and perhaps existing beyond—a certain cultural context.

Thus, I am not sure whether, in comparative theology, it is really sufficient just to 'go forward by intuitive leaps, according to instinct' [12]. Perhaps this appearance of arbitrariness is one of the reasons why comparative theology is still regarded suspiciously by mainstream theology in Europe [13]. Instead of following one's own intuition it may be useful to build on current theoretical strands and to try to get fresh insights through comparative work. This is already occurring in the field of comparative theology—for example, in an article by Jim Fredericks, which deals with the doctrine of trinity in the context of Buddhism [14]. However, even in Fredericks's expansive work, his insights could be

connected more closely to recent discussions in the different areas of theology. On the one hand, the aim should be to struggle with the main challenges of theology as a whole through comparative theology. On the other hand, work should be carried out on current social problems, as well as religious conflicts—including the potential of violence between religions [15].

As some younger scholars in comparative theology have pointed out, comparative theology has much to learn from theological movements like liberation theology or feminist theology. Such theological movements can help comparative work demonstrate and address the distress of the marginalized and become aware of hidden consequences of their own reasoning [16]. When focusing on classical texts arising out of different theological traditions, for example, it is important to keep in mind what these texts mean not just for insiders, but also for outsiders—and the marginalized, in particular. Feminist theology could provide guidance in this area [17]. Clooney is right in emphasizing our need for a mutual process of critique at this point; in other words, feminist theology also has to seriously engage interreligious and intercultural strands of intellectual thought, which could be accomplished through dialogue with comparative theology [18]. Nonetheless, the key point here is that comparative theology needs an ideologically critical process in determining both its research areas and methods. The systematic development of a large variety of methods and theological approaches in the different sub-disciplines within theology can help to better pinpoint necessary areas of study, and thereby help to initiate emancipatory processes [19].

The orientation of theology towards the problems and needs, the grief and anxieties of humans, does not mean that the micrological method or the attention to detail in comparative work must be relinquished. Comparative theology must consist of a large variety of case studies, rather than be engaged as a meta-theory. These case studies are not independent from human needs, but instead have to care for them. They are not value-free, but rather engaged for the sake of humankind. Comparative theology—from my perspective—wants to empower people to orientate their lives and to set them free. In order to participate in such liberating processes, it has to begin from a certain creedal perspective or a certain worldview; and it has to become increasingly sensitive to the needs and the possibilities of world development. The aim of theology should not be a competition among different theological approaches, in order to determine which account or which religion is best at solving a problem. The aim should rather be to solve problems together and to encourage people to solve them. Ecology is the best example of a pan-human problem beyond the range of any one or even two religions to solve. It needs everyone, religious and non-religious as well. If religions can understand that they have certain tasks to fulfill in and for the world, they can find a way out of an orientation, which seeks for the weaknesses of the other. Instead of showing the strength of one's own religion against others, it is important to empower the strengths of the other religion to solve our common problems [20].

The Muslim scholar Farid Esack, for example, explains in a moving way how the shared commitment of Christians, Muslims and atheists against the apartheid regime led to a new appreciation of others [21]. In a similar vein, Dietrich Bonhoeffer realized that non-Christians, e.g., communists, were some of his most important combatants against the terror of the Nazis [22]. Obviously, there are commonalities between different worldviews, which at times reflect religious commonalities and which can be both understood and enacted through united actions. Sometimes on a deeper level of understanding, that Wittgenstein calls the level of depth grammar (PI 664), reconciliation and

existential understanding across religious borders becomes possible. This too can be reflected in comparative theology. In order to achieve such a constructive, common attitude beyond the borders of different worldviews, a lot of work has to be done in comparative theology; many theoretical problems seem to impede such an engagement. Perhaps the most important step in this context is the insight in the above-mentioned regulative and expressive dimension of worldviews and of religious beliefs [8] and the willingness to give up any essentialist understanding of religion. This general attitude can only be a first step. The decisive points are detailed case studies showing new possibilities of relating religious worldviews and revealing their common challenges.

If comparative theology really concerns the recent problems of people, however, and intends to deal with current theological questions, there is always the danger of projection. Some of the greatest problems of humankind have been caused by people who wanted to solve the problems of the world. There is always the danger of imposing an individual perspective on the other. Furthermore, even if comparative theology is developed in dialogue with other positions and worldviews, there is always a third position that is not taken into account.

3.3. The Challenge of the Third Position

In Europe, theology is very much accustomed to developing its theories in dialogue with secular, agnostic and atheistic people [23]. Every argument is examined from ideologically critical perspectives, but for many years Christian theologians did not adequately take the contributions of non-Christian theologians into account. Thus, the perspective of non-Christian or non-Western-theologies did not contribute to the initial development of theology on the continent. However, European theology informed by atheism can help remind comparative theology not to forget the importance of secular questions and ideas. As it is not possible to integrate all perspectives, we always have to reflect which perspective is ignored in the setting of a research project. The instance of a third position can help us to avoid blind spots in theology. The integration of such third positions therefore presents the third great challenge for comparative theology.

Mutual-including processes of understanding fundamental to comparative theology bear the threat of making reciprocal arrangements and agreements in order to disguise certain problems. If two confessional inner-perspectives focus on a particular problem, there exists an increased risk of trivializing the problem on the basis of shared convictions. As Franz Kafka puts it, those that engage in this process run the risk of becoming a „community of scoundrels“. For instance, conservative Muslims and conservative Christians can easily agree on condemning sexual relationships of gays, and it is very important that they take into consideration the perspective of aggrieved parties in their judgements.

Modern theology tends to underestimate this threat with reference to autonomous philosophical reason and the attempt to develop religion-external criteriology. However, since the linguistic turn, this endeavour has been challenged. Metaphysical and transcendental-philosophical oriented attempts to develop such a criteriology are often considered rather unhelpful, with the whole idea of religion-external criteriology highly disputed. Nonetheless, I recommend that such a criteriology can and needs to be developed on a formal level. At least to some extent, the instance of a third position could be established by the position of a philosophically autonomous, critical, external perspective.

Unfortunately, two opposing problems appear in attempting to engage the third perspective or third way. On the one hand, this criteriology is necessarily too pluralistic, since it cannot answer orientation problems and must comprehend contradicting truth claims as equally rational. On the other, this criteriology is not pluralistic enough, since it is based on a reasonable understanding within a certain philosophical tradition and therefore rejects religious positions from a philosophical point of view.

The third position cannot therefore simply be an abstract philosophy or criteriology, but must instead be concrete and be able to observe and control, the dialogue of the other two positions in play. To avoid an 'expanded community of scoundrels', it seems essential that the third position holds a continuing moment of critique on the processed problems. This third position could thus be atheistic or agnostic. Depending on the dialogue context, a follower of a third religious tradition can also (or instead) be consulted if: (1) the religion espouses a sufficiently different basic idea of the question at hand, and (2) the follower is able to confront the issue with respectively critical, skilled arguments. For example, it can be a decisive progress for Christian-Muslim dialogue if the Jewish perspective is taken into account on certain issues [24].

If theologians of two religious traditions manage to find a common grammar or a common set of assumptions, they always have to remain open to the perspectives of theologians from other religious traditions, because otherwise the new commonality can produce injustice towards others. In all comparative work—not only in theology—it is important to look for a third point of reference to avoid any kind of one-sidedness or bias [25]. This third point of reference does not hint at a privileged point of view from a sort of supervisor of comparative processes, which could be adopted by a highly critical philosopher. Rather, the aim of the third position to consult scientific processes external to the movement of dialogue and mutual exchange. This position can help to illuminate the blind spots of reasoning and critically review all results.

At this point, Robert C. Neville is speaking of a 'great cloud of witnesses' that can consist of very different approaches [26]. Only all witnesses together can fulfill the task of creating a critical comparative theology. Neville admits that it is not possible to satisfy or even to hear all witnesses at the same time, but he insists, quite convincingly, on the necessity of always being prepared to answer to a witness. As I explained above I am not convinced that comparative theology can be formulated in a way to integrate all questions of such third positions. Nonetheless I think that it is decisive to take into account at least a concrete third position in the comparative movements.

Finally, the third position also has to integrate the diversity not only between, but also within religions. Comparative theology has to be an ecumenical endeavor with different insiders from each denomination, if it wants to achieve representative results [27]. Only the participation of different actors of various denominations can show at the same time the possibility of reconciliation among religions and the vulnerability of all achieved results. As the possibility of direct participation cannot be given to everybody, it is very important that in different countries and different universities the idea of the third position is fulfilled in varying ways, which will effectively stimulate and strengthen this field.

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