A Companion to Comparative Theology

Edited by

Pim Valkenberg

with

Marianne Moyaert
Kristin Johnston Largen
James Fredericks
Bede Benjamin Bidlack

BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

PART 7
New Perspectives in Comparative Theology

CHAPTER 30

Comparative Theology and Interreligious Studies: Embracing and Transgressing the Dialogical Relationships Among Religious Traditions

Axel Marc Oaks Takacs

1 Introduction

Late twentieth-century comparative theology first emerges within the Christian theological tradition as a response to, inter alia, a now *global* Christianity, the de facto *pluralist* world,[1] and a call for a moratorium on the theology of religions.[2] There was also a recognition that an a priori rejection of theological insights potentially discoverable in the encounter with the particulars of other religious traditions was theologically arrogant at best, and a reproduction of Western supremacy at worst.[3] The discipline draws from theories and methods from the study of religion (comparative, historical) and confessional theology (still predominantly Christian). It is typically not a form of interreligious dialogue, though scholarship from the field may be objects of discussion and learning in any ongoing act of interreligious dialogue.[4] The field

1 See Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3–9.

2 See James Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 9–11.

3 See Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll: New York: Orbis Books, 2017). See also the articles by Voss Roberts, Sayuki Tiemeier, Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, and Nicholson in Francis X. Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the next Generation* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010).

4 Clooney distinguishes comparative theology from comparative religion, theology, the theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, dialogical or interreligious theology in Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the next Generation*, 9–19. Paul Hedges has challenged some of these sharp distinctions in his "The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions," *Religions* 3, no. 4 (2012), 1120–37; Hedges, "Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective," *Brill Research Perspectives in Theology* 1, no. 1 (2017), 1–89. See also Francis X. Clooney, "Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 52, and Marianne Moyaert, "From

of interreligious studies, even younger, is still burgeoning as scholars seek to define the subject, objectives, and methods of the discipline. Eboo Patel's working definition of inter*faith* studies positions the discipline as the investigation of "the multiple dimensions of how individuals and groups who orient around religion differently interact with one another, along with the implications of these interactions for communities, civil society, and global politics."[5] More specifically, interreligious studies is

> a subdiscipline of religious studies that engages in the scholarly and religiously neutral description, multidisciplinary analysis, and theoretical framing of the interactions of religiously different people and groups, including the intersections of religion and secularity. It examines these interactions in historical and contemporary contexts, and in relation to other social systems and forces … [It] serves the public good by bringing its analysis to bear on practical approaches to issues in religiously diverse societies.[6]

Interreligious studies is thus a malleable discipline of which comparative theology may be a first-order instantiation, or which may study particular exercises in comparative theology in a second-order analysis thereof.

This chapter focuses on comparative theology qua instance of interreligious studies. Critical insights from interreligious studies are then constructively applied to comparative theology. Given that interreligious studies is "about studying the dynamic encounter and interaction between" religious traditions and involves "hermeneutics, dialogue, historical encounters, or other areas," Paul Hedges rightfully situates interreligious studies as an "interface between a more traditionally secular Religious Studies discipline, and a more traditionally confessional theological discipline."[7] The scholarly projects and products of interreligious studies often contain prescriptive and normative proposals

---

Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness. Recent Developments in the Theology of Religions," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012), 39.

5 Eboo Patel, "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies," *Liberal Education* 99, no. 4 (2013), 38.

6 Kate McCarthy, "(Inter)Religious Studies: Making a Home in the Secular Academy," in *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 12.

7 Paul Hedges, "Interreligious Studies," in *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, ed. Anne Runehov and Luis Oviedo (New York: Springer Reference, 2013). See also Deanna Ferree Wormack, "From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies: A Theological Educator's Exercise in Adaptation," in *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 16–17, 23.

that relate theory to praxis, i.e., there is an interest in social change, religious tolerance, mutual understanding, and being accountable as a scholar-activist to a religious or secular community broader than the academy.[8]

Critics within the field warn against the normative and thus hegemonic aspects of interreligious studies and encounters.[9] Kate McCarthy elaborates on the institutional, civic, and *religious* contexts that frame the relationship between interreligious studies and "what would seem to be its logical disciplinary home: religious studies."[10] As such, scholars assert a neutrality that is more often belied by "the power relations inherent in interreligious encounters, which remain dominated by white Christians and in which doctrinal and institutional conceptions of religion edge out those of practice, culture, and internal flexibility."[11] Comparative theology, too, is situated at the nexus of the study of religion and theology. The looming possibility that comparative theology merely subsumes the insights of other traditions into (usually) Christian theology and its systematic project[12] is paralleled in the concerns of hegemony regarding interreligious studies, viz.,

> that efforts valorizing cooperation may provide fertile ground for essentialism and generalization, fail to fully engage with histories of interreligious conflict, and unwittingly provide cover for the secular nation-state, hegemonic forms of Christianity, the globalizing capitalist order, and other systems and approaches that are in fact responsible for many of the tensions that the interfaith movement aims to address.[13]

---

8 See Hedges, "Interreligious Studies"; Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds., *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, n.d.), xii.

9 See, e.g., Anne Hege Grung, "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religions: Exploring the Term 'Inter-Religious in a Feminist Postcolonial Perspective," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 13 (2013),11–14; Michelle Voss Roberts, "Religious Belonging and the Multiple," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010), 43–62; Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 2 (2003), 5–24; Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 186–208.

10 McCarthy, "(Inter)Religious Studies," 4.

11 McCarthy, 11.

12 See the chapters by Voss Roberts, Sayuki Tiemeier, Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, and Nicholson in Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology.*

13 Amy L. Allocco, Geoffrey D. Claussen, and Brian K. Pennington, "Constructing Interreligious Studies," in *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 36.

Thus, both in theory and in practice, the benefits and pitfalls of comparative (especially Christian) theology are reproductions of any interreligious encounter in which asymmetrical power relations shape the discourse.

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer four sections to explore the resonances between comparative theology and interreligious studies at the nexus of the study of religion and confessional, *critical* theology. First, interreligious studies will be presented as a discipline that does explicitly what the study of religion has performed implicitly: study the relational dynamic not only among religious traditions, but also among cultural and social discourses. *When* has the study of religion ever *not* been interreligious? Second, comparative theology will be presented as a discipline that recognizes the relational dynamic in the development of theological discourses. *When* has theology (or analogous discourses in any religious tradition) *not* appropriated, accommodated, drawn from, or set itself against, other discourses it engages? Third, learning from critical interreligious studies and this relational dynamic, I suggest that comparative theology should not only embrace this relational dynamic, but transgress the confining tendencies of the dominant discourse, viz., move away from "fresh theological insights"[14]—however insightful and edifying—and towards the subversion of hegemonic representations of one's own theological traditions. Fourth and in conclusion, I aver that this subversion should not be for its own sake, but for the sake of constructing a liberating praxis that unmasks restrictive ideologies and prescribes action in solidarity with the multiply oppressed. Lest comparative theology reproduce 19th-century universalist discourse, sustain the theological status quo that subsumes the other as already the same,[15] or construct impermeable, essentializing boundaries between traditions, it should add to its *inter*religious venture an *inter*sectional praxis that

14 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10. Clooney offers several definitions in other works. See, e.g., Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Exercise in Comparative Theology*, Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religion (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 7.

15 In religious universalism, the immaterial *essences* of religions are identical, and sociopolitical differences are *accidental* and ultimately of no import. See Gregory A. Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ʾArabi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 177–179. This relies on the "traditional idealist dualism of essence/manifestation" Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92; this is part of a larger critique of universalism, which may ultimately be hegemonic in that "the other's voice is permitted entry only as the voice of sameness, as a confirmation of oneself, contemplation of oneself, dialogue with oneself." Ulrich Beck, "The Truth of Others: A Cosmopolitan Approach," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004), 433.

gives unequivocal preference to those marginalized and made vulnerable by kyriarchy.[16]

2 Interreligious Studies: Uncovering the Dialogical Relationships among Religious Traditions

Three interrelated points merit explicit mention. First, interreligious studies gives near absolute precedence to the relational approach to the study of religion, which "necessitates an awareness of how religions relate not only to each other, but also to internal plurality and ... to other social systems and society at large."[17] Second, the academic study of religion itself "emerges, in part at least, from an encounter with the religious Other."[18] Third, historically religious traditions have developed in constant conversation with other overlapping and surrounding religious, social, and cultural traditions. This section dwells on the first two points; the next two sections on the third.

The scholar of interreligious studies, in eminently postmodern fashion, aims to be radically aware of the ineluctability of one's positionality and multiple identities.[19] A confessional or non-confessional scholar of interreligious studies is already part of the field of study because she is situated within or between religions, cultures, societies, and so-called secularity.[20] For example, a Christian scholar studying contemporary Muslim-Christian relations is explicitly situated within the field and is keenly aware of her "stake" in the project. But both the Christian and even the agnostic, atheist, or unaffiliated scholar of interreligious studies is, still explicitly, part of the field of study because her positionality involves herself in other non-religious systems, ideologies, and/

16 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has coined kyriarchy the "socio-cultural and religious system of domination ... constituted by intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression" (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 118) which is akin to what feminist and critical race theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins term intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Crenshaw coins the term in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." For a thorough definition of intersectionality see Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 12.

17 Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 1.

18 José Ignacio Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006), 21.

19 See Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), xviii–xix).

20 Leirvik expands on this in *Interreligious Studies*, 10–12.

or discourses (e.g., Islamophobia and the surveillance state, racism, neoliberal global capitalism, unipolar Americanism, liberalism, etc.) that shape and are shaped by the very same contemporary Muslim-Christian relations under critical investigation.

Furthermore, it is now an epistemic given that "[no] religion can be studied meaningfully unless in relation to and interaction with other living traditions."[21] Both the 19th-century depoliticized, universalist vision of religion and the 20th-century essentializing critique thereof are challenged by the relational approach of interreligious studies, which has learned from the postmodern study of religion that boundaries of religious traditions are both porous and mutable. Interreligious studies therefore explores the dynamics of relationality among traditions and reaches theoretical and practical conclusions accordingly.

On the second point, it is a longtime consensus viewpoint that the study of religion emerges from the discipline of Christian theology and Christians' encounters with non-Christians, and is thus at first a Eurocentric, Christian project. Cabezón proffers three stages to the post-Enlightenment encounter of Christians with non-Christian societies and cultures. At first Christians assert, "they are not like us," and then "they are like us, but we are rational," and conclude with "they are like us, but …", with the ellipses' being completed with various other differences besides the rational.[22] The transitions from stage one to the final *stages* do not occur in a space free from sociopolitical and economic factors. Cabezón rightly points out that "instead of resulting in tolerance, [these shifts] have often resulted in marginalization and oppression, ending up as yet another instance of what Radhakrishnan calls 'Eurocentrism masking as authentic universalism.'"[23] In other words, the "but …" in the perpetually reproduced late stages of the study of religion is usually completed with what the Other lacks.[24] Nonetheless, as each difference/lack is critically challenged with each transition, the reductive "Self/Other" dichotomy is deconstructed (even if replaced with another facile distinction).[25] As such, the study of religion emerges from an implicitly interreligious project, even if earlier scholars assumed the pretension of objectivity and scientific neutrality.

Interreligious studies scholars, intending to be more self-critical and self-aware, study the perpetual instability of religious identities and the study of

21 Leirvik, 13.

22 Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other," 24–25.

23 Cabezón, 25; R. Radhakrishnan, *Theory in an Uneven World* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 6.

24 see Cabezón, 26–27.

25 see Cabezón, 25.

religion detailed above, but focus their scholarly gazes on the liminal spaces of interreligious encounters rather than on single religious traditions. McCarthy suggests that interreligious studies confronts this complex, constantly shifting context, especially given "not only the new prominence of nonreligious identities but also the degree to which all religious identities are plural, partial, and hybrid, the ways many religiously affiliated people might *not* belong to their religions, and the ways many nones may in fact *not* be not religious."[26] But those interreligious studies scholars who also seek critical, prescriptive, and activist proposals for (their own) religious communities and/or the civic, public good, are in a way responding to Cabezón's suggestion that the study of religion should cease to assume that it possesses a critical lens and theory while religious traditions do not. Such a methodological turn in search of interreligious theory would ask "what notions of theory are operative in the religions we study, and [seek] to establish a conversation with religious texts and believers at the level of theory rather than, as has heretofore been the case, being content with grinding the data that is the Other through the mill of our own theoretical apparatuses."[27] One cannot be critically prescriptive for a public of plural identities unless religious traditions are taken to possess theoretical and practical insights of their own.

This inter-theoretical turn in the study of religion suggests that interreligious studies is part of its future. An analogous theological turn occurred in Christian theology with the emergence of comparative theology, whereby theological traditions other than the Christian challenge and reshape constructive or systematic theology. As Schmidt-Leukel argues, comparative theology—what he terms interreligious theology—is bound to become the dominant method in theology in the increasing pluralist context of the postmodern world; it will "draw on other religions when reflecting on major questions of human life and will reconsider, and further develop, the answers that have been given in one's own tradition in a fresh comparative light."[28] Religious studies becomes (explicitly) interreligious studies precisely when, rather than relying on "generic (western) theories of religion,"[29] it acknowledges not only its Eurocentric but its Christocentric universalism and theoretical formation in terms of the discipline's Christian genealogy, and then ventures to engage

26 McCarthy, "(Inter)Religious Studies," 6.

27 Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other," 30.

28 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 8.

29 Jenny Daggers, "Thinking 'Religion': The Christian Past and Interreligious Future of Religious Studies and Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010) 963.

other religious traditions in their sui generis particularities. Likewise, Christian theology becomes (explicitly) comparative theology precisely when, rather than theologizing *about* the other in Christian theological terms, it engages other religious traditions in their sui generis particularities that challenge Christian "religious accounts."[30] Comparative theology and interreligious studies are thus both strategies and resources for critiquing the Eurocentrist methods of theology and the study of religion.[31] They have the potential "more effectively to understand the 'return of religion' in the postcolonial and postmodern world."[32] As Christian theology moves toward comparative theology and religious studies moves towards interreligious studies, theologies of religion, comparative theologies, and theories of religion may be developed "which respect the particularity of religious traditions, rather than assuming Christianity to be the destination of all religions."[33]

Comparative theology can thus learn from interreligious studies in the ways detailed above. For example, rather than theologizing about what other religious traditions lack, it may begin with the kenotic assertion that Christian theology is itself lacking, or itself produces oppression in some way, and that engaging in interreligious theology may reveal this lack and subvert these oppressive ideologies. Before exploring the intersectional, interreligious potential of comparative theology, I now turn to how the discipline embraces the relational dynamic of Christianity in explicit ways.

3 Comparative Theology: Embracing the Dialogical Relationships among Religious Traditions

Kathryn Tanner, in *Theories of Culture*, argues for the *essentially relational* character of Christian identity. Her argument is a constructive proposal against the two dominant conceptions of Christianity in modernity, viz., the liberal and postliberal (heir to the Neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth), the debates between

30 Paul Griffiths defines "religious account" as the interpretive framework through which a person makes sense of her phenomenal experience of the world. A religious account is comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central. See Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8–10). A comparative theologian, I suggest, (de)constructs a religious account interreligiously, and then reimagines the religious account for her own community *in the theological vocabulary of her home tradition*.

31 Daggers' article maps out parallel developments in the study of religion and Christian theology in this way. See Daggers, "Thinking 'Religion'," 978–979.

32 Daggers, 964.

33 Daggers, 964.

which she argues have reached an impasse. Christianity is essentially *relational* because the boundaries of Christianity always were and still are constantly shifting depending on its stance for or against certain cultural (or religious) discourses at any given moment in the development of Christianity's way of life (inclusive of doctrine and practices).[34] Christianity is *essentially* relational because, despite this theory's rejection of an essentialized conception of Christianity that is immutable and ahistorical, the only *unchanging* aspect of Christianity as it develops in history is that it is constantly *transmuting* itself in contradistinction to, or appropriation of (or some mixture of the two), cultural and religious alternatives within the socio-cultural field in which it is situated.

Given the relational conception of Christian identity in which "the Christian" is defined over and against "the non-Christian" over a period of theological formation from the so-called first-century Jesus movement to today, Hugh Nicholson argues that comparative theology enables that very same Christian identity to take on a dialectical character.[35] Comparative theology epitomizes the post-modernist approach to the comparative study of religion in that it denies the possibility of the "quixotic task of purging all traces of normative (read: 'theological') commitment from the academic study of religion."[36] Rather, comparative theologians can be seen as post-modernists who "believe that the future of the comparative study of religions lies in the open acknowledgement, critique, and defense of the inevitable normative presuppositions of the discipline."[37] Nicholson places comparative theology squarely in the study of religion, rather than as a uniquely *theological* enterprise.[38] Comparative theology neither depoliticizes religion, as 19th-century scholars of comparative religion did with their universalist vision, nor essentializes religious traditions, as early 20th-century scholars of comparative religion did in their critique of this enlightenment form of pluralism. Rather, comparative theology recognizes religious difference both intra- and interreligiously, and is considered a form of, what he terms, "cross-cultural comparison," which

> understood in terms of the metaphorical process, serves as an effective technique for deconstructing the oppositional contrasts formed [in the

34 For her extended argument, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 110–119. For Hugh Nicholson's use of Tanner's theory in his project, see Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 84–88.

35 See Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 83.

36 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, xiii.

37 Nicholson, xiii.

38 See Nicholson, 14.

> construction of essentialized religions]...Thus understood, interreligious comparison can be used effectively to circumvent the formation of essentialized contrasts between religious communities.[39]

According to Nicholson, cross-cultural comparison "can be used to 'de-essentialize' and partially deconstruct the oppositional contrasts constructed in the first, political moment of identity formation."[40] Accordingly, Nicholson argues that the discipline of comparative theology not only falls squarely within the field of the comparative study of religion, but also is a natural product of the postmodern critique thereof:

> Cross-cultural comparison represents a particularly effective critical method [for unsettling cultural boundaries and deconstructing the essentializing notion of identity that such boundaries typically sustain], particularly when it comes to those forms of cultural-religious identity that have been forged or reconstituted in the modern world with its transcultural, global horizons. The comparative juxtaposition of cultural-religious formations set up resonances between the two whereby prominent features of the one bring to light parallel features of the other that *may have been suppressed by various hegemonic discourses*, whether those of indigenous orthodoxies or those of Western scholarship.[41]

In other words, comparative theology is an essentially interreligious act that seeks to redraw the boundaries of Christian identity perpetually. Definitions are constructed, deconstructed in the interreligious act, and then reconstructed; the process has indefinitely repeated itself historically (at least implicitly), and continues to repeat itself (explicitly in comparative theology).

But what the study of religion, especially via interreligious studies, has demonstrated is that *all* religious traditions are *essentially relational*. Tanner's relational conception of Christian identity can certainly be extended to apply to, inter alia, the Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and various indigenous religious traditions across the globe. Indeed, when have religions, the study of religion, and theology ever *not* been interreligious? The only possible answer is "never." I thus wish to suggest that interreligious studies may be conceptualized as the apotheosis of the postmodern study of religion's epistemic given that all religious, cultural, and social traditions are dialogically relational and

39 Nicholson, 15.
40 Nicholson, 84.
41 Nicholson, 95 (*emphasis mine*).

mutually co-constituting. Comparative theology should thus embrace this dialogical relationship and explicitly explore an interreligious theology that constructs always provisional conclusions in the vocabulary, language, and tradition of one's home tradition (because a confessional theologian still writes for a community). Despite translating conclusions for one's own community, the comparative theologian should always question the conception of religious boundaries as immutable, especially given how "Christianity has never been pure and has continuously, from its beginning, adopted elements from different cultures," as Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan has argued.[42] However, lest conclusions from comparative theology subsume the other as already the same and thus reproduce the universalist subsumption of difference that is characteristic of totalizing ideologies, I argue that the self-critique of interreligious studies should also be applied to comparative theology; it should not only embrace this dialogical relationship, but transgress it.

4 Comparative Theology: Transgressing the Dialogical Relationships among Religious Traditions

Catherine Cornille proposes four goals or effects of an exercise in comparative theology. In increasing degree of transformation, they are (1) intensification, (2) recovery/rediscovery, (3) reinterpretation, and (4) appropriation.[43] In an earlier work on interreligious hermeneutics, she proffers four major approaches or goals to an act of interreligious, intertextual study: (1) the hermeneutical retrieval of resources for dialogue within one's own tradition, (2) the pursuit of proper understanding of the other, (3) the appropriation and reinterpretation of the other within one's own religious framework, and (4) the borrowing of hermeneutical principles of another religion.[44] The historical and comparative study of religion however suggest that these approaches and goals have taken place in all religious discursive traditions throughout history "in the widespread appropriation and reinterpretation of older beliefs within newer religions, and in the borrowing of local symbols and categories in the process

42 Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 161; see also Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide. Minneapolis* (MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 89–90.

43 See Catherine Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 29–31.

44 Catherine Cornille and Christopher R. Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), x.

of translation or adaptation of religions to different cultural contexts."[45] The difference—*allegedly*—is that in the past this interreligious study was either unconsciously performed or, if consciously acknowledged, it was done in the climate of supersessionism. *Allegedly*, because it is unclear whether or how this hegemony has ceased in the discipline of comparative theology.

By bringing together the critical insights of interreligious studies with comparative theology, comparative theologians, in this case particularly Christians, should move beyond "fresh theological insights"[46] that may subsume the other within Christian, Eurocentric conclusions. That is, they should not only embrace but also transgress the history of Christianity's dialogical relationship with alterity, a universalizing history that often marginalized the other as a function of supersessionsm.[47] Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier warned against the "new imperialism" occluded by the discipline's alleged openness to other religious traditions; the danger is that the discipline merely plunders the theological goods of other traditions.[48]

In other words, ever looming on the horizon of comparative theology and openness to receive theological insights from other religious traditions are either mere rewordings of hegemonic representations of one's own theological tradition (and thus no real subversion of dominant discourses) or disembodied spiritual, doctrinal, and individualistic theological conclusions. Regarding the former, when conclusions do not learn from the field of interreligious studies, they risk being continuously marred by Christian supersessionism; in other words, remaining unchallenged is the latent or even patent assertion that Christianity's "inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought" was "the providential plan of God" and therefore should not be abandoned (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 72).[49] Comparative theology should instead seek to subvert this hegemonic pseudo-dogma in creative ways; *Christianity* in this case *lacks* something that other discourses have, e.g., theories/theologies of, inter alia, the self, mystery, cosmology, community, relation, transcendence and immanence, language, justice, embodied praxis, and logic.[50] The first transgression

45 Cornille and Conway, xvii.

46 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

47 Voss Roberts, Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, and Sayuki Tiemeier have all proposed similarly in their articles in Clooney, ed., *The New Comparative Theology.*

48 Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, "Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation," in *The New Comparative Theology: Thinking Interreligiously in the 21st Century*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2010), 129, 139–42.

49 See Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*, 29–39, for her critical reading of this and other Church documents on this matter.

50 This would be a first step in challenging Christianity's "difference means deficient" (un)ethics of interreligious dialogue. See Hill Fletcher, 29.

of the historically relational dynamic of Christian theology is the dismantling of supersessionism and the critical challenge to the exaltation of Greco-Roman thought.

But this re-imagining risks using the other as a mere tool for one's own self-recreation. Solipsistic theological conclusions remain the second threat looming on the horizon of comparative theology, and thus the second outcome that comparative theology should transgress. The eminently *liminal* space that interreligious studies occupies, even outside or between confessional boundaries, can give critical correction to comparative theology in this vein. Theorists in interreligious studies have underscored the asymmetrical power relations at play in interreligious encounters, in which white, Christian, masculine, and Euro-North American concerns, doctrines, and institutions continue to dominate.[51]

> The spaces that the "inter" in "interreligious studies" bridge must include those between different religious institutions, texts, belief systems, and practices; between practitioners of those diverse traditions; between those affiliated with the same tradition who differ in culture, race, gender, sexuality, literacy, and so forth; between religious and other social systems; and, finally, between religion and secularity.[52]

This can be repurposed for comparative theology: constructive conclusions should concern not only the members of one's own tradition, not only the members of the other religious tradition, but more specifically the oppressed and marginalized members of both traditions, none of the traditions, and of groups at the intersectional oppression of, inter alia, race, class, gender, and sexuality.

This twofold transgression of the relational history of Christianity subverts the solipsistic, private and doctrinal concerns of some forms of theology and constructs interreligious theological conclusions in solidarity with the vulnerable; by keeping the concerns of the multiply oppressed, it mitigates the critique that comparative theology is an elite discourse that uses the other for the sake of self-enlightenment. By transgressing the history of this relational dynamic, it moves traditions beyond the normal patterns of self/Other encounters and toward a genuine re-imagining of one's own tradition. One way to imagine this interreligious project institutionally is for theology and religious studies departments to create environments in which non-Christian theologians and

51 See McCarthy, "(Inter)Religious Studies," 11.
52 McCarthy.

confessional, non-Christian theorists of religion work side-by-side not only with Christian theologians but also unaffiliated scholars of religion.[53] This would make comparative theology a truly *interreligious* exercise.

5 Conclusion: Comparative Theology as *Inter*religious *and Inter*sectional

However, given the confessional nature of comparative theology, it is likely impossible that other religious traditions can ever be encountered without *some* conception of "use." Cornille's call for a "proper choice of a problem for comparative theological inquiry"[54] suggests that comparative theology always seeks in another tradition an answer to an a priori problem in one's own tradition. But this anti-utilitarian critique can be addressed if the problem posed should dwell more deeply within the "inter-" space of interreligious studies. Comparative theology can subvert its own impending hegemony by emphasizing the latent *inter*sectional potential within both its own discipline and *inter*religious studies.[55] The (1) autobiographical, (2) multi-religious and multicultural, and (3) provisional nature of comparative theology each overlap with an intersectional theology that dwells within the liminal spaces and intersections of identities; indeed, Clooney early on gestured toward these features of the discipline; but his concerns were not necessarily intersectional.[56]

Learning from *inter*sectional theology, comparative theology can be even more *inter*religious.

> Rather than seeing theology as the pursuit of a single, consistent, and unified truth, intersectional theology embraces the theological multiplicity and indeterminacy that arises from diverse identities and social locations. Central to intersectional theology is a focused and humble cognizance of how one's own social location affects how one does theology … Intersectional theology [recognizes] that all theologies are contextualized and that contextualization matters.[57]

53 See Daggers, "Thinking 'Religion'," 987, for a similar argument.
54 Cornille, "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology," 34.
55 See Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology,* 2.
56 See, e.g., Francis X. Clooney, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 310–311.
57 Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 107.

First, comparative theology should embrace its autobiographical character for the sake of critically analyzing how all "people exist in different relations to social, economic, political, and religious power within the matrix of domination and that theologies from these various locations will offer us new, unexpected, and necessary viewpoints to move us toward a greater collective knowledge of God and work toward justice."[58] By delving into not only one's own religious, but also social, cultural, racial, sexual, and gender-based identities, comparative theologians endeavor to tear down the thin veil of false objectivity and neutrality that is characteristic of much traditional/systematic theology, which often proceeds as if these intersecting identities were impertinent to theologizing.[59]

Second, the explicitly interreligious nature of comparative theology can be pushed further by intersectional theology, which embraces "multiple theological perspectives as necessary and desirable in moving toward more inclusive theologies that capture the breadth and diversity of human encounter with the divine."[60] Indeed, the all but indissoluble alliance between Christianity and Greco-Roman thought has entrenched Christian theology into a scholastic dualism that precludes any "room for multiplicity or contradictions."[61] Interreligious studies, learning from intersectionality, approaches critical analysis with "both/and thinking," which "encourages an embrace of nuance, interconnections, complicated relationships, fluidity, and even contradiction."[62] Both/and thinking is theologically nondual thinking, which is perhaps why exercises in comparative theology have often challenged the hierarchical dualism of the Christian tradition with non-Christian theo-logics of nondualism or non-hierarchical dualism.[63] Both/and thinking produces an "openness to multi-religious thinking … [whereby] we are challenged to reach beyond Christian exclusiveness (as well as our social location within gender, race, sexuality, and other identities) to include the histories and insights of other

58 Kim and Shaw, 107.

59 See Kim and Shaw, 14.

60 See Kim and Shaw, 41.

61 See Kim and Shaw, 68.

62 Kim and Shaw, 113.

63 In addition to Clooney's extensive exercises in comparative theology with the nondual religious philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, see, e.g., Michelle Voss Roberts, *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010) as well as her *Body Parts*; John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine : God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006); R. Brad Bannon, "Apophatic Measures: Toward a Theology of Irreducible Particularity" (Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 2015).

religious traditions."[64] Just as intersectional theology and interreligious studies move beyond mere pluralism, comparative theology "[opens] possibilities for a God who is both/and."[65]

Third, exercises in comparative theology often conclude tentatively, with conclusions that, as Clooney avers, are always provisional "experiments" that "forgo utter clarity and precise answers"[66] characteristic of systematic, traditional theology. This aspect of comparative theology coincides with the destabilizing approach of interreligious studies, especially when exercised with a keen awareness of the multiply liminal, 'inter-' quality of intersectional theology, which is a "'theology of indeterminacy' … [that] does not seek to articulate ultimate truth claims but rather destabilizes fixed notions of theological truth by offering multiple and competing statements of experiences and understandings across and within differences and evaluating those statements through a lens of justice."[67]

A theology of indeterminacy is a more explicit elaboration of what Peter Phan underscored in his *Being Religious Interreligiously*: postmodern epistemologies and anthropologies share with Christian epistemologies and anthropologies "an epistemological modesty that accepts the finite (and in the Christian view, fallen and benighted) intellects that we are."[68] Complementing the intellect is the heart and the imagination, which together "do not make grandiose claims to absolute validity and universal normativeness, that do not produce an infallible *certainty* but anchor the mind and the soul in an unshakable *certitude* … that leads to decision and action."[69] Postmodern thinking, interreligious studies, and comparative theology return theologians to the apophatic assertion that God is known "by an inactivity of all knowledge" or "by knowing nothing."[70] To assert absolute, positive, and timeless knowledge of God and our relationship to God, self, and others in this phenomenal world is to arrogate the power of God to the fallen, broken nature of humanity.

Instead, the only certitude ("that leads to decision and action") established by a Christian interreligious and comparative theology should be a preferential option for the multiply oppressed that is characteristic of intersectional

64 Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology,* 54.
65 See Kim and Shaw, 67.
66 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 57.
67 Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 43.
68 Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, xx.
69 Phan, xx.
70 The Pseudo-Dionysius (fl. 5th to 6th centuries) in *The Mystical Theology*, in Colm Luibhéid and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 137.

theology, and that informs interreligious studies in its public, civic engagement. But this bias toward justice is also latent within the discipline of comparative theology, which should endeavor, like intersectional theology, to "set aside the structures of dominant theologies and theological methods … [and] to rupture them to be able to hear diverse and multiple voices."[71] Comparative theology as interreligious studies proffers tentative conclusions precisely because its own method is inherently destabilizing; and with an intersectional lens, it brings together disparate religious traditions for the sake of transformative wisdom *and* justice.

Interreligious studies and intersectional theology can thus reinvigorate the discipline of comparative theology by *pulling its goal away from* "fresh theological insights," which may occlude difference and subsume the other, and *pushing it toward* "a radical stirring of voices that disturbs, provokes, analyzes, and transforms"[72] theological method. Like intersectional theology, comparative theology should create "new ways of understanding theology that will not only liberate the subordinated but will also liberate the dominant, the colonizer, the privileged as all join together to seek to build an equitable and just world that values and affirms all people across differences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, national origin, ability, age, religion, or socioeconomic class."[73] Comparative theology as an instance of interreligious studies cannot be attentive only to the singular intersection of one religious tradition with another, but rather to the multiple intersections of all identities, lest, by occluding real difference, it collude with hegemonic ideologies in the intersecting oppressions of marginalized groups.

Bibliography

Allocco, Amy L., Geoffrey D. Claussen, and Brian K. Pennington. (2018). "Constructing Interreligious Studies." In *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, edited by Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman. Boston: Beacon Press, 36–48.

Bannon, R. Brad. (2015). "Apophatic Measures: Toward a Theology of Irreducible Particularity." Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard Divinity School.

Beck, Ulrich. (2004). "The Truth of Others: A Cosmopolitan Approach." *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3, 430–49.

71 Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 43.

72 See Kim and Shaw, 63.

73 Kim and Shaw, 76.

Cabezón, José Ignacio. (2006). "The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1, 21–38.

Clooney, Francis X. (1993). *Theology after Vedanta: An Exercise in Comparative Theology*. Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religion. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Clooney, Francis X. (1996). *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Clooney, Francis X. (2010). *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Clooney, Francis X., ed. (2010). *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the next Generation*. New York: T & T Clark.

Clooney, Francis X. (2013). "Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue." In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, edited by Catherine Cornille. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cornille, Catherine. (2018). "The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology." In *How to Do Comparative Theology*, edited by Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch. New York: Fordham University Press, 19–36.

Cornille, Catherine, and Christopher R. Conway, eds. (2010). *Interreligious Hermeneutics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Daggers, Jenny. (2010). "Thinking 'Religion': The Christian Past and Interreligious Future of Religious Studies and Theology." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4, 961–90.

Fredericks, James. (1999). *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*. New York: Paulist.

Griffiths, Paul. (1999). *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Grung, Anne Hege. (2012). "The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions." *Religions* 3, no. 4, 1120–37.

Grung, Anne Hege. (2013). "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religions: Exploring the Term 'Inter-Religious in a Feminist Postcolonial Perspective." *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 13, 11–14.

Grung, Anne Hege. (2013). "Interreligious Studies." In *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, edited by Anne Runehov and Luis Oviedo. New York: Springer Reference.

Hedges, Paul. (2017). "Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective." *Brill Research Perspectives in Theology* 1, no. 1, 1–89.

Hill Collins, Patricia, and Sirma Bilge. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Hill Fletcher, Jeannine. (2003). "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 2, 5–24.

Hill Fletcher, Jeannine. (2017). *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America*. Maryknoll: New York: Orbis Books.

Kim, Grace Ji-Sun, and Susan M. Shaw. (2018). *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide. Minneapolis*. MN: Fortress Press.

Kwok, Pui-lan. (2005). *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Leirvik, Oddbjørn. (2014). *Interreligious Studies : A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

Lipton, Gregory A. (2018). *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Luibhéid, Colm, and Paul Rorem. (1987). *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press.

McCarthy, Kate. (2018). "(Inter)Religious Studies: Making a Home in the Secular Academy." In *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, edited by Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman. Boston: Beacon Press, 2–15.

McCutcheon, Russell T. (1997). *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Moyaert, Marianne. (2012). "From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness. Recent Developments in the Theology of Religions." *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1, 35–52.

Nicholson, Hugh. (2011). *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Patel, Eboo. (2013). "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies." *Liberal Education* 99, no. 4, 38–43.

Patel, Eboo, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, eds. (2018). *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Phan, Peter C. (2004). *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Radhakrishnan, R. (2003). *Theory in an Uneven World*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. (2017). *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. (2005). *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Tanner, Kathryn. (1997). *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Thatamanil, John J. (2006). *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Tiemeier, Tracy Sayuki. (2010). "Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation." In *The New Comparative Theology: Thinking Interreligiously in the 21st Century*, edited by Francis X. Clooney. New York, NY: T & T Clark International.

Voss Roberts, Michelle. (2010). *Dualities: A Theology of Difference*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

Voss Roberts, Michelle. (2010). "Religious Belonging and the Multiple." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1, 43–62.

Wormack, Deanna Ferree. (2018). "From the History of Religions to Interfaith Studies: A Theological Educator's Exercise in Adaptation." In *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, edited by Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman. Boston: Beacon Press, 16–25.