



EPISTEMOLOGY IN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Epistemologia na Teologia Comparada

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ABSTRACT: Comparative theology involves the systematic theological engagement with the teachings and practices of another religious tradition. This raises numerous epistemological questions, which may focus on the possibility of genuine understanding of other religions, on the status of truth in other religions, on the process of discernment of truth in those religions, and on the changes occurring in the contents of teachings and practices when transposed from one religious tradition into another. Addressing these questions requires engagement with the methods and approaches of religious studies, theology of religions, as well as critical engagement with examples of comparative theology. This article touches upon these questions by focusing on developments within Christian comparative theology.

KEYWORDS: Comparative theology. Inclusivism. Empathy. Truth. Discernment. Transformation. Appropriation.

RESUMO: A teologia comparada envolve o engajamento teológico sistemático com os ensinamentos e práticas de outra tradição religiosa. Isto levanta numerosas questões epistemológicas, que podem incidir sobre a possibilidade de uma compreensão genuína de outras religiões, sobre o estatuto da verdade noutras religiões, sobre o processo de discernimento da verdade nessas religiões e sobre as mudanças que ocorrem nos conteúdos dos ensinamentos e práticas quando transpostos de uma tradição religiosa para outra. Abordar estas questões requer o envolvimento com os métodos e abordagens das ciências da religião, da teologia das religiões, bem como o engajamento crítico com exemplos de teologia comparada. Este artigo aborda estas questões, centrando-se nos desenvolvimentos da teologia comparativa cristã.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teologia comparada, Inclusivismo, Empatia, Verdade, Discernimento, Transformação, Apropriação.

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Introduction

One of the fruits of the growing awareness of religious diversity is the development of the discipline of comparative theology, which involves the constructive theological engagement with the teachings and practices of another religion. Francis Clooney, one of the pioneers of the modern discipline describes it as:

Acts of faith seeing understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is done for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition (CLOONEY, 2010, p. 10).

The goal of comparative theology is to advance theological reflection and expand one's theological understanding by learning from the ways in which other religious traditions have dealt with particular theological questions. Though a relatively new discipline, it has taken different forms, some grounding theological reflection in the theological presuppositions of a particular religion (confessional comparative theology) while others searching for religious truth untethered to the a priori normative beliefs of any religion (meta-confessional comparative theology). Because of the vast diversity of religious traditions, the field has also developed into various subfields, aligned with the particular traditions engaged (Christian-Muslim, Hindu-Jewish, Christian-Buddhist, etc.). From an original focus on the major, so-called world religions and on texts, the field has also expanded to include a focus on rituals, and to include engagement with oral traditions and with smaller religious traditions.

In comparison with classical forms of theology, the sources of knowledge are here vastly expanded, encompassing all of the religious traditions, scriptural and oral, old and new, large and small. This raises a host of new epistemological questions, from the general religious studies question about the possibility of knowing the other or the emic-etic debate to more specific theological questions about the epistemological status of other religions, the process of discerning truth in other religions, the relation of particular truths in other religions to one's own settled body of religious truth, and the impact of integrating extraneous religious elements into one's own coherent body of religious teachings and truth claims. Though these epistemological questions and challenges present themselves for any tradition engaged in comparative theology, we will here focus mainly on Christian comparative theology.

1 *Knowing the Religious Other*

Though comparative theology is decidedly different from the comparative study of religions in that it aims at advancing not only religious *unders-*

tanding, but also religious *truth*, the first step in any comparative endeavor involves proper understanding of the religious other. In contrast with the way in which in the history of religious encounter other religions have often been distorted and caricatured to serve one's own religious purposes, comparative theology is adamant about the need to engage in a properly scholarly study of other religions, to study their languages, texts, histories and practices so as to come as close as possible to the self-understanding of the other. In this, comparative theology uses many of the same methods as those employed in the history and comparative study of religions.

These latter fields have gone through major developments in the past century, from broad and sweeping statements about the nature of religion, the types of religion and the classification of religious phenomena to very detailed and microscopic historical studies, and from an optimistic trust in the possibility of understanding the religious other to a greater awareness of the alterity of the other and the difficulty of penetrating into the self-understanding of the other. Whereas phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw boldly stated "*homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto*" (VAN DER LEEUW, 1986/1933, p. 672) postcolonial studies have laid bare the blatant projections and misconceptions that have colored the study of religions for centuries (SAID, 1978). Scholars have thus become much more reserved and humble in their pretenses to know the religious other and in their abilities to fully understand another religious traditions.

Neither the early optimism nor the later timidity, however, do justice to the complexity of studying another religious tradition. The very notion of religious knowledge and understanding contains various layers. There is the layer of historical and conceptual understanding, which is based on the study of languages, texts, philosophical traditions, ritual practices, etc. Though it requires time and effort, and though it is evident that no single individual can attain a mastery of any single tradition, it is clear that it is possible to gain a deep understanding of the history and tenets of another religious tradition, the evolution and meaning of its texts, the development of different philosophical schools and ideas, the inner coherence of their teachings, and the relationship between teachings and practices. In this regard, scholars (including theologians) with the necessary training may at times gain a better understanding of another tradition than insiders to that tradition. Any religious phenomenon derives its meaning from its place in a larger whole and a solid understanding of the whole may give access to an understanding of the particular. As such, in attempting to understand phenomena of spirit possession and exorcism in a particular religion, one needs to mainly understand the broader religious and metaphysical context which supports such phenomena as well as the broader etiology of possession and its relation to personal problems or cures that inform such phenomenon. However, what will likely escape the outsider is the experience of possession itself and its particular meaning for the one

undergoing it. To be sure, there are many types of religious experience that recur across religious traditions: intense devotion and love of a particular god, severe asceticism, fasting and feasting at the beginning or end of it, etc. One might thus use one's own experiences to gauge to some extent what the religious other may be experiencing in such moments. But most religious experiences are strongly colored by the particular object of devotion and the broader religious context such that the fullness of the experience inevitably escapes any outsider.

Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the attempt at experiential understanding of the other or interreligious empathy (CORNILLE, 2007, p. 137-176). Even though I may never claim to fully enter into the emic experience of the other, the effort to enter into the experience of another may expand one's imagination and experiential repertoire with new ways of being religious. Participation in the ritual life of the other forms an important conduit to such experiential expansion, if not knowing. Thus, in participating in Yom Kippur celebrations, a Christian may gain an entirely new sense of the transcendence and majesty of God inspired by the Jewish ritual. This does not mean that a Christian may claim to experience God in the same way as Jews. But the attempt to do so may expand Christian understanding and correct facile projections.

All this raises the question of who or what represents the proper epistemological object or the object of knowledge in comparative theology, and how the comparative theologian might check or verify their understanding? Each religious symbol, ritual and teaching is by its very nature polysemic, and individuals within any religious tradition may develop very different and at times an entirely idiosyncratic interpretation of elements of their tradition. The question of who may be regarded as an authoritative representative of a tradition has long been a preoccupation in the study of religion, where the self-understanding of the other tradition remains the ultimate epistemological goal. While comparative theologians also seek to avoid misunderstanding and attempt to come as close as possible to the self-understanding of the other, the ultimate goal is the expansion of one's own religious horizon and the broadening or deepening of one's own religious tradition. The question of the validity or truth of a particular insight is thus less whether it corresponds exactly to the way an insider in the other religion would understand it than whether it forms a source of enrichment for one's own religious life and one's own tradition. The process of epistemological verification lies thus not so much with the other tradition than with fellow believers, theologians and/or the religious authorities in one's own tradition.

This is undoubtedly a controversial claim as modern comparative theologians have tried mightily to avoid the conscious or unconscious distortions of other religions that have characterized engagements between religions

in the past. It is also only by recognizing and appreciating the alterity of the other that comparative theology might open itself up to new insights and experiences. But it is ultimately what they themselves make of the reading of a text or a participation in a ritual of the other tradition that will determine whether and how it will be used in their own tradition. Texts, teachings or practices that leave them cold or indifferent will probably not generate much constructive theological effort, whereas those that stir the heart and the imagination of the theologian may lead to creative learning from the other tradition.

Here the question of the subjectivity of the comparative theologian comes into play. Is the question of truth in understanding the religious other merely a matter of the personal inclination and interpretation of the individual theologian? This is thankfully not the case. As the numbers of theologians with expertise in a particular other tradition is increasing, different comparative theologians may correct and complement one another. For example, a good number of Christian comparative theologians have been fascinated by the Buddhist notion of emptiness, at times as a way to deal with the impasses of classical metaphysics and dualistic thinking (KEENAN, 1989 and 2011) and at times as a way to overcome the self-absolutizing of religions (O'LEARY, 2019). Collaboration among such theologians may lead to mutual verification and corrections as comparative theologians attempt to come as close as possible to the self-understanding of the other while establishing the relevance of a particular thought or practice for one's own tradition.

Since it takes a lifetime to master one, let alone two religious traditions, the number of comparative theologians who are able to collaborate in the process of engaging particular texts, teachings or practices in another religion is still relatively small. The impact of comparative theology thus remains largely in terms of individual comparative theologians who have been able to integrate elements from other religions into a personal synthesis that has in turn inspired others within (and at times beyond) their own religious tradition. A telling example of this is Raimon Panikkar. A Catholic priest and theologian, he immersed himself deeply into the tradition of *Advaita Vedanta*, or Hindu non-duality, eventually reinterpreting much of Christian faith through this philosophical framework (PANIKKAR, 1983, 2004, 2010). His work has garnered great attention and popularity, with yearly conferences of experts reflecting on his work into more than a decade after his death. One measure of the authenticity or veracity of comparative theological work may thus be the impact it has on others and the degree to which it might inspire further theological reflection, both critical and constructive.

The question in comparative theology as it relates to knowing the religious other lies somewhere between a subjective and an objective epistemology.

One advantage of comparative theology (over against religious studies and comparative religion) is that it is clear that the scholar-theologian approaches the other religion from within her or his faith perspective and with all of the religious experiences and tools that may help (and at times hurt) in understanding the other. While the subjectivity of the researcher also plays a role in the comparative study of religion, it has to always be carefully scrutinized so as to avoid its possible distortion on the proper understanding and representation of the data. Oliver Freiberger suggests “combining two activities, reflexivity and controlled decision-making, can bridge the situatedness of the individual scholar and scholarship in general” (FREIBERGER, 2019, p. 101). However, it belongs to the nature of comparative theology that one approaches another religion from a faith perspective and with all of the religious insights and experiences that may at times help and at times hurt proper understanding of the other. The aim of comparative theology is to give as much latitude and credence as possible to the self-understanding of the other. But the ultimate epistemological norm of comparative theology lies less in the other tradition than in one’s own.

2 The Epistemological Status of Other Religions

One of the central epistemological questions for comparative theology involves the status of truth of other religious traditions. Most religions attribute little or no truth or value to the teachings and practices of other religious traditions as they tend to be in direct competition, and often in contradiction with one’s own teachings and practices. Early Christian apologists as Tertulian regarded other religions as the fruit of “fornicating angels” and religions that emerged later were simply labeled heretical or deluded. Far from being exceptional, this negative predisposition toward the contents of other religions may be regarded as common, since most religions consider themselves as self-sufficient or even exclusive with regard to questions of religious efficacy and truth.

However, constructive comparative theology requires openness to the possibility of discovering at last some truth or validity in other religious traditions. It is this possibility that motivates comparative theologians to engage in serious study of the other religion. This thus requires a fundamental change in the perception of other religious and in the epistemological status of their teachings and practices. Such change has come about within the Christian tradition partly as a result of the ever expanding knowledge of other religious traditions. As the sacred texts of other religions have become translated in the past two hundred years, and as the teachings of other religions have become readily available, theologians have had to revisit their attitude of blanket denunciation of other religions. One may

often find in those religions teachings that are not only quite similar to one's own, but that at times also contain inspiring religious insight. This, in combination with a stark awareness of the harm that had been caused by a radical denunciation of other religious traditions has led within Christianity to a revision of traditional attitudes with regard to the truth of other religions. The Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* speaks for the first time in positive terms about other religious traditions, and states that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (2). This has thus opened the way for comparative theologians to search for those elements of truth in the teachings and precepts of other religions.

Within Christian theology of religions, the focus has generally been on the question of the salvation of non-Christians and the salvific status of other religions. This has given rise to the familiar paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, each with their own internal variations. I have in the past suggested to bracket the question of salvific efficacy of other religions (which cannot be answered on this side of eternity), and to apply these paradigms instead to the question of whether there may be elements of truth in other religious traditions (CORNILLE, 2017, p. 201-215). Though the questions of truth and salvation are intimately related in Christian theology, they do not completely coincide: one may recognize certain elements of truth in another religion without making a claim about the religion as a whole as a way to salvation. And while some have argued that one may (or must) engage in comparative theology without any theological or epistemological prejudices (FREDERICKS, 1999, p. 166; and 2010, p. xiv), some degree of presupposition about the possible presence of truth is always implied and guides the way in which one practices comparative theology.

The attitude of epistemological exclusivism may be grounded in the theological claims of a particular tradition or in the more general philosophical presupposition that every element within a religion derives its meaning and truth from its place within the larger whole, and that the teachings of different religions are thus ultimately irreconcilable. Hendrick Kraemer thus argues that:

Every religion is a living, indivisible unity. Every part of it – a dogma, a rite, a myth, and institution, a cult – is so vitally related to the whole that it can never be understood in its real function, significance and tendency, as these occur in the reality of life, without keeping constantly in mind the vast and living unity of existential apprehension in which this part moves and has its being (KRAEMER, 1938, p. 135).

Combined with a belief in the full and exclusive truth of one's own tradition, this attitude can lead at most to an apologetic approach to comparative theology, demonstrating the inconsistencies of the other religion, or the greater coherence of one's own. John Milbank therefore suggests that the most that can be aimed for in the encounter of religion is the cultivation of "mutual suspicion," challenging the other religion to live up to its own ideals and "subverting other discourses at the very point of their denial of otherness" (MILBANK, 1990, p. 185). If comparative theology is about the pursuit of truth, apologetics forms a legitimate expression of it. But such defense of the truth of one's own religion in comparative theology will occur not a priori (as was often the case in the course of history), but after a serious study and a fair representation of the other religion. This may then lead to a reaffirmation of certain teachings within one's own tradition, reclaimed (and at times reinterpreted) in light of the other (GRIFFITHS, 1991, p. 83-108).

A position that is often seen to align with epistemological exclusivism is George Lindbeck's postliberal or cultural-linguistic approach to religious difference. Since religious doctrines are seen to derive their meaning and truth from their place in the overall grammar of a particular religion (LINDBECK, 1984, p. 80), "nothing can be translated out of the idiom into some supposedly independent communicative system without perversion, diminution, or incoherence of meaning" (LINDBECK, 1997, p. 429). This may mean that all that can be aimed for in comparative theology is for each religion to perfect its own internal grammar and practice, for "Jews and Muslims to become better Jews and Muslims, and Buddhists to become better Buddhists" (LINDBECK, 1984, p. 40). However, Lindbeck also states that "partly false religions may contain truths of an important though subordinate nature that are not initially present in the highest religion and that can therefore enrich it" (LINDBECK, 1984, p. 35). This position may thus more properly be classified as epistemological particularism as each religion will evaluate and learn from other religions from within its own particular worldview or grammar.

This position moves close to epistemological inclusivism, which engages the truth of other religions explicitly from within one's own religious framework and set of epistemological and theological norms. Here, other religious traditions may be seen to possess elements of truth, but that truth is ultimately seen as derived from, indebted to, or dependent on the truth of one's own religious tradition. This is the approach adopted implicitly or explicitly by confessional comparative theologians, who seek to remain faithful to the self-understanding of religious tradition as claiming the ultimate or highest truth, while also acknowledging the possible presence of truth outside of one's own religious tradition. It may be based on a simple recognition of similarities and compatibilities across religious traditions and/or on a theology that recognizes the possible presence of truth

beyond the confines of one's own religion. Christian theologians typically find recourse in Trinitarian theology or in pneumatology to support this view (D'COSTA, 2000, and LANE, 2011). Since most religious traditions regard themselves or their ultimate reality as the ultimate source of all truth, whatever truth is found in other religions is here seen as related to one's own source of truth. This is expressed, for example, in Karl Rahner's controversial concept of "anonymous Christian" when he speaks of "someone on the way toward salvation, and someone who in certain circumstances finds it, without being reached by the proclamation of the Church's message – and if it is true at the same time that this salvation which reaches him in this way is Christ's salvation, *since there is no other salvation* – then it must be possible to be not only an anonymous theist but also an anonymous Christian" (RAHNER, 1966, p. 132. My italics). Other Christian theologians (Gavin D'Costa, Dermot Lane, Amos Yong, Jacques Dupuis) focus mainly on the Holy Spirit as the source of truth in other religious traditions. Epistemological inclusivism may express itself not only in terms of claiming one's own ultimate reality as the source of truth but also as the norm for discerning truth in other religious traditions. Jacques Dupuis thus refers to Jesus Christ as the "norma normans" adding that it is "a dynamic norm, not a static one" (DUPUIS, 1997, p. 294). And Roger Haight also points out that "insofar as Jesus Christ is the central medium for Christianity's conception of ultimate reality, it is impossible by definition for Christ to be less than normative for a Christian appropriation of ultimate reality" and for discerning truth in other religions (HAIGHT, 2000, p. 407). This is the most common religious approach to the truth of other religions. Buddhist thinkers will thus also affirm the validity and truth of Christian elements insofar as they conform to their own worldview and set of teachings. While epistemological inclusivism thus limits the recognition of truth in other religions to that which is reconcilable with its own, one may still make a distinction between closed and open inclusivism, the former focusing only on finding truth in teachings and practices similar to one's own, and the latter allowing for the possibility of finding truth in what may be different but not in contradiction with one's own teachings.

Unlike epistemological inclusivism, which grounds the source and the norm of truth in one's own tradition, epistemological pluralism involves the presupposition that truth may be found in any religious tradition, and that this truth is autonomous or independent from the truth claims of other religious traditions. It is generally based on the idea of a common transcendent source of truth that manifests itself in various ways in different religious traditions. John Hick, one of the main proponents of theological and epistemological pluralism, calls upon religions to "move emphatically from the confessional to the truth-seeking stance in dialogue" (HICK, 1980, p. 126) focusing not on the criteria of any particular tradition but rather on more universal or generic criteria, such as the capacity of

certain teachings or practices to bring about a “transformation of human experience from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” (HICK, 1981, p. 463). This epistemological pluralism forms the basis for a meta-confessional or transreligious approach to comparative theology that seeks to develop “a theology that makes intellectual sense with no specific tradition at its root and remains viable with no living religious institution for support” (WILDMAN, 2016, p. 247). Here, comparative theologians thus approach different religious traditions as in principle equivalent as regards questions of religious truth, or without privileging the truth of one or the other religious tradition. According to Jerry Martin, one of its leading proponents, it aims “to consider the total spiritual resources of humankind, every source of revelation and enlightenment and insight anew, without dragging our traditional anchors behind us” (MARTIN, 2016, p. 261). Though drawing from the teachings and practices of different religious traditions, this approach thus rejects any ultimate religious claims to truth, and thus the self-understanding of any particular religion.

3 Discerning Truth in Other Religions

One of the more inscrutable moments in comparative theology involves the process of discerning truth in another religious tradition. Not only are there many religious traditions, but each tradition contains a wealth of texts, teachings and practices that present themselves for comparative theological engagement and discernment. As such, comparative theologians must inevitably be selective in their theological work.

This selectivity starts with the choice of tradition or traditions to engage (CORNILLE, 2018a). There is a certain randomness in the focus on a particular religion, often based on the chance encounter with members of a certain tradition and on the teaching of certain religions at one’s academic institution. While there is no a priori reason to exclude oral religions, new religious traditions, or smaller scale religions from containing elements of truth, these have not as yet been much part of Christian comparative theological engagement (A notable exception to this is PADILLA, 2016, p. 46-65). This has partly to do with college curricula and which traditions are being taught, and with the growth and development of scholarship in certain areas of comparative theology. In spite (or because) of their historical and theological differences, Buddhist-Christian and Hindu-Christian comparative theology seem to have drawn most attention since the late twentieth century. In my series “Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts,” four volumes have focused on Hindu texts, four on Buddhist texts, and one each on a Jewish and a Muslim text. Among the vast selection of texts, teachings and practices in each tradition, comparative theologians will focus on those that speak to them personally and that

allow for some critical or constructive connection with their own tradition. Whereas comparative theologians have focused mainly on sacred texts and philosophical ideas, there has been an recent attempt to also include rituals and practice in comparative theology (MOYAERT, 2022).

Though exclusivists might deny the presence of truth in other religious traditions, they may still study other religions in order to reaffirm the truth of their own tradition. Discernment will thus here take the form of finding elements in other religions that might represent a threat to one's own claims, or that allow for a vindication of one's own truth and tradition. In *Mysticism East and West*, for example, Rudolph Otto compares Meister Eckhart with the famous Hindu philosopher Shankara, mainly using the latter as a foil in order to vindicate Eckhart (OTTO, 1962). In his critical study of Otto's work, Hugh Nicholson also points out that "the Christian comparative theologians who reflects critically on his or her choice of materials is apt to discover that apologetic interests have shaped the reception history of those aspects of non-Christian religions that he or she finds theologically significant" (NICHOLSON, 2011, p. 110).

For pluralist or meta-confessional comparative theologians, the process of finding truth in different religions is guided mainly by personal questions, or the discovery of general patterns that then give rise to theory formation. In the three volumes of the Religious Ideas Project, Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman thus harvest ideas from specialists in the particular religions in order to offer more general ideas on *Ultimate Realities*, *The Human Condition* and *Religious Truth*. John Thatamanil, for his part, focuses on the work of Paul Tillich and the Indian philosopher Shankara because he believes that "each has resources for resolving problems internal to the other's theological problem" (THATAMANIL, 2006, p. 172). Here scholars may thus focus on any theological topic and draw from the teachings and practices of any religions tradition, judging them according to their own criteria. This absence of given criteria is one of the challenges of meta-confessional comparative theology because, as J.R. Hustwit also notes, "no matter how many experts agree, or how elegantly a theological hypothesis coheres, in the end, truth claims can never be verified with finality." Though sympathetic to the project of transreligious theology, Hustwit admits that "the best we can do are 'better' or 'worse' judgments, cobbled together from various indirect and worldview-contingent truth criteria" (HUSTWIT, 2016, p. 241). Elsewhere he suggests that criteria of truth may here be derived from the inner coherence of theological insights, or else from "the relative consensus of a community of experts" (HUSTWIT, 2014, p. 115).

Grounded as they are in a particular religious tradition, the teachings and practices of this tradition will provide for inclusivist comparative theologians the basic criteria for discerning truth in other religions. As the aim is theological development and growth, they will focus primarily on those

elements that they find personally inspiring and that may deepen or broaden their theological understanding and enrich their own tradition. Closed inclusivists will use the teachings and practices of their own tradition as the maximal (or positive) norm, discerning truth mainly in those teachings and practices that are the same or very similar to their own (HAIGHT, 2000, p. 409). The process of learning in comparative theology will then mainly take the form of reinforcing or intensifying the truth of their own teachings and practices, or of recovering elements in one's own tradition that were forgotten or marginalized in the course of history through focusing on its centrality in another religion. Open inclusivists, on the other hand, may use the teachings of their own tradition as a minimal (or negative) norm, which would allow for the discovery of truth in teachings and practices that are different, but not in contradiction with their own. As different religions develop a focus on and expertise in differing areas of religious life, some of their views and practices, though differing, may not necessarily be irreconcilable. For example, Buddhist thinkers often claim to have learned much from Christian social teaching and emphasis on community, while Christian theologians have been drawn to Buddhist techniques of meditation and analysis of the working of the mind. Certain ideas and practices that are less developed in one tradition may thus complement another.

The process of discernment of which elements may actually be complementary and a source of enrichment for one's own tradition may occur in various ways. Any individual theologian may engage in any material and topic of choice, hoping that his or her insights and comparative work will eventually bear fruit in their own tradition. The process of discernment may however also be a more collective one, where comparative theologians with different expertise focus together on a topic that is alive and relevant for their own tradition, bringing together insights from other religious traditions. It may also be collective in the sense that comparative theologians offer a second-order reflection on more common and popular experiences of religious hybridity, or spontaneous integration of elements from other religious traditions. In the engagement with Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, many Christian theologians are considering the possibility of integrating the philosophy of non-duality, and since the practice of yoga has become so popular, comparative theologians are reflecting on its compatibility with Christianity. This is how a more communal process of discernment might occur.

4 Truth and Transformation in Comparative Theology

While the identification of elements of truth in other religions, whether in similarities or differences, forms a crucial epistemological step in comparative theology, there is still another operation that occurs in comparative

theology: the integration of that truth within one's own religious framework, or reflection on truth in one's own religion in light of the other. In *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, I discuss the different types of learning that may occur through serious and constructive engagement with other religious traditions (CORNILLE, 2020, p. 115-148). Each of these types also directly involve epistemological questions.

A first type of learning which characterizes the work of Francis Clooney, SJ, one of the founders of the modern discipline of comparative theology, takes the form of the *intensification* of texts, teachings or practices of one's own tradition by placing them side-by-side with similar elements in another tradition. This doubling of religious ideas and expressions may thus lead to a reinforcement of their truth. Second, comparative theology may also take the form of *rectifying* one's understanding of the other tradition. Since one's claims to truth may at times be built on a misrepresentation of the other, this will inevitably affect one's own tradition. A common type of learning in comparative theology involves the *recovery* of forgotten or marginalized figures, teachings or practices. It is often through the appeal of certain teachings in another tradition that one comes to rediscover similar elements in one's own tradition that for various reasons may not be part of mainstream. The process of learning may also take the form of explicit appropriation of elements of another tradition. In some cases, this may involve *reinterpreting* one's own basic teachings through the philosophical framework of another. This tends to be justified by pointing to the contingency of any philosophical system and the importance of affirming the universality of religious teaching by demonstrating their adaptability to alternative philosophies. But it may also take the form of explicit integration or *appropriation* of teachings or practices that are compatible with the basic tenets of one's religion. A final type of learning involves the *reaffirmation* of one's own beliefs and practices in light of the other. This is a form of apologetics that is however the result of a serious engagement with the other, and that may also involve some degree of hermeneutical enhancement by way of detour through the other religion. In his article, "Who Needs It? Atonement in Muslim-Christian Theological Engagement", Daniel Madigan reaffirms the Christian teaching of original sin through serious engagement with Muslim critiques (MADIGAN, 2021, p. 11-39).

In the process of learning and borrowing from other religions, the meaning and truth of particular religious elements inevitably shifts and changes. This inevitably raises the question of the propriety of such borrowing and the validity of such changes. It must first be acknowledged that interreligious borrowing forms an integral part of the history of religions as each new religion reinterprets preexisting religious forms and ideas to fit its new religious claims. What characterizes comparative theology is greater respect for the original epistemological context of particular teachings and practices and an attempt to preserve as much as possible their original

meaning in order to generate a genuine process of learning. It also respects the continued integrity of their meaning in their original context. Thus, Christian comparative theologians engaging Islam are also more receptive to engage with Muslim understandings of Jesus Christ and of the figure of Mohammed, rather than flatly denouncing them, as was the case in the past (BONTA MORELAND, 2020).

Though there is thus room and effort to respect the epistemological self-understanding of other religions, it is clear that all religious borrowing involves some change, which may be considered as a distortion or deformation on the part of the religion of origin. Believers may feel hurt or insulted by seeing their cherished religious symbols or practices used in a different way in a different context. While it is clear that religious symbols and practices are multivalent and have been interpreted in different ways within a particular religion, their completely different use in a different religious context may be regarded as sacrilegious. But the attention and interest in elements of one's own tradition by outsiders may also be regarded as a compliment, as their validity and truth is recognized even beyond one's own religion. Hindu reformers in the nineteenth century often lifted up the person of Jesus Christ as the greatest moral exemplar in the history of religion, while rejecting the idea that he was the only son of God. While Christians may regret the fact that they do not affirm the unique divinity of Christ, they may also be flattered or affirmed by the recognition of the importance of Jesus in the history of religion.

Conversely, on the part of the tradition that is the recipient of elements from other religious traditions, there may be a worry that this will dilute the integrity of the tradition or confuse believers. This is why the term syncretism has a long history of negative connotations. However, it is also clear that the conscious or unconscious integration of elements from other religious, cultural and philosophical traditions has led to the infusion of great vitality and that religions have always benefited from learning from one another (CORNILLE, 2021b).

Conclusion

The new discipline of comparative theology raises a series of broadly speaking epistemological questions, many of which are still in the process of being worked out. These questions do not so much involve classical epistemology as the science of knowledge of reality per se, but rather questions of validity and truth as understood in religious or theological terms, and insofar as religious identities shape one's understanding or truth. As comparative theologians are also historians and scholars of another religious tradition, they are confronted with the many questions

regarding the possibility and limits of knowing another religious tradition. Though their own religious life may go some way to gain empathic understanding of the religious other, it remains an open question whether, as Raimon Panikkar has argued, “we cannot understand a person’s ultimate convictions unless we somehow share them” (PANIKKAR, 1999, p. 34). For most comparative theologians, some degree of personal affinity with a teaching or practice of another religion is often the very reason for engaging in comparative theology. It is undoubtedly prudent to presume some degree of subjectivity in the understanding of other religions. But it remains the goal of comparative theology to remain as faithful as possible to the original meaning and intention of religious teachings and practices.

This historical understanding of religious others has gone hand in hand with a greater theological openness toward the possibility of finding elements of truth in other religions. While greater knowledge about other religions has moderated traditional negative prejudices, greater theological openness has in turn encouraged more serious historical study of and engagement with other religions. One may still find within most religions various degrees of openness toward recognizing truth in other religions. The classical theological paradigms of inclusivism, particularism, exclusivism and pluralism are still serviceable to distinguish these various attitudes and to anticipate the way in which comparative theology will be conducted: exclusivism, particularism and inclusivism aligning with a confessional approach to comparative theology and pluralism generally reflecting a meta-confessional approach.

The various approaches toward the truth of other religions also lead to a further distinction or differentiation in the processes of discernment in comparative theology, and the degree or the way in which the other tradition is engaged. Though comparative theology is mainly associated with constructive engagements with other religions, apologetics also forms a part of any systematic search for truth, and exclusivist focus on studying another religion in order to prove the superiority of one’s own is also part of the process. Inclusivist confessional theologians tend to be open to learning from other religions, while using the norms or criteria of their own tradition in order to judge or discern elements of truth. Some may here focus mainly on truth in similarities, while other may also focus on truth in difference, each leading to particular types of learning. Pluralist or meta-confessional comparative theologians tend to avoid judging the truth of one religion on the basis of the criteria of another and attempt to develop more neutral or generic criteria.

The process of learning from other religions in comparative theology ultimately aims at advancing theological truth, either as understood within a particular religion or beyond the confines of any existing religion. For confessional comparative theologians, the elements of truth found in

another religion tend to undergo a semantic shift as they are integrated within a new religious horizon. Meta-confessional comparative theology also tends to bring about changes in meaning as the religious elements are integrated into a new overarching system. These epistemological changes or shifts are part and partial of the history of interreligious borrowing. However, comparative theology effects such borrowing with a clear understanding of the difference between the original and the new meaning and with a respect for the integrity of the other tradition and its particular self-understanding.

As comparative theology is still in its infancy as a discipline, all of these epistemological questions are still in process. Since the field of investigation of comparative theology is so vast, covering any and all religious traditions, and focusing on texts and teachings, as well as rituals, ethics and material culture, the various methods for studying the materials and the various epistemological questions are likely to differ. But at the core of comparative theology is the realization that truth and meaning are closely intertwined and never static or fixed, but constantly evolving through an interplay of internal religious shifts and engagement with the world of religious diversity where elements of truth generously present themselves for constructive theological engagement.

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