

IS COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY CATHOLIC?

Introduction

In my view, comparative theology is a typically Catholic enterprise in spirit and orientation. But that does not mean that comparative theology can only be done by Catholics. To the contrary—comparative theology lives by virtue of the fact the people of other faiths and beliefs do comparative theology from their perspectives. But even if comparative theology is not an exclusively Catholic undertaking, it is especially suited to catholicity in the original sense of the term as well as to Catholic Christianity in particular. In this paper I would like to substantiate and clarify this claim, explaining why the Catholic faith does not in any way contradict the aims and concerns of comparative theology and—even more—why it is precisely Catholic Christianity that contains an impulse toward comparative theology within itself.

Thus, in this short paper I would like to show, first, some typical Catholic arguments for undertaking comparative theology and that, second, there is no tension between comparative theology and Catholic beliefs. But because there are so many different forms of comparative theology today, I can explore these areas and develop my thesis only if I first clarify what I mean by comparative theology. Thus, it seems best to look first at the aims and fundamental concerns of comparative theology, as I have already discussed them in various publications (cf., most recently, Von Stosch 2012) and as they have been developed in similar ways by James L. Fredericks and Francis X. Clooney. Because of the brevity required by this paper I will limit myself to three points that can be distinguished in accordance with their different subjects as follows: the concern with God, with oneself, and with others.

The Three Fundamental Concerns of Comparative Theology

The first concern of comparative theology is reflection on God. Therefore, comparative theology is also theology and is to present and witness to the mystery of the Word. In my view, comparative theology is not only focused on developing an interreligious hermeneutic or gathering knowledge of other religions but is a theological undertaking at heart. Its exciting and moving promise consists in the fact that I can come to understand God more deeply and discern the divine mystery in new ways if I seek to understand my own faith in the context of other accesses to faith and reality. Comparative theology is first of all a theological discipline that explains theological problems and is defined by a theological agenda. It goes to work in the same way that confessional the-

ology does¹ but at the same time also takes other theologies seriously as constructive dialogue partners in its search.

The second concern of comparative theology coheres closely to the first. It is not a supraconfessional or interreligious theology, believing itself capable of collecting knowledge about God in neutral ways that are not connected to any religion while bringing together approaches to God from as many religions as possible. Rather, the practitioner of comparative theology is concerned with his or her own approach to God, his or her own perspective on reality. This will be broadened and enriched by interreligious dialogue and sometimes changed in significant ways. But it remains one's own perspective on reality, one's own confessional witness to God who has revealed his approachability and love for humans in Jesus Christ. Comparative theology thus has to do, on the one hand, with a deeper understanding of the word of promise by the Unconditioned that confronts us in a historical way in Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, it also has to do with a deeper understanding of one's own perspective on this Word. It thus involves a deeper acquaintance with one's self and one's access to reality. One cannot discern God without coming to understand oneself better, and thus the impulse to do comparative theology is also always the impulse to gain a new understanding of one's own tradition. Or, as Jim Fredericks puts it:

Comparative theology is the attempt to understand the meaning of Christian faith by exploring it in the light of the teachings of other religious traditions. The purpose of comparative theology is to assist Christians in coming to a deeper understanding of their own religious tradition. (Fredericks 2004b: 139-40).

Thus, comparative theology is a search for truth, a search whose central presupposition is that we understand ourselves and God again and more deeply when we expose ourselves to the religious other and allow ourselves to be enriched by him or her.

Finally, the third and most obvious concern is that comparative theology is intended to provide us with a better understanding of the religious other in his or her otherness. That is why it involves actually learning from them, understanding their peculiarities and thus their otherness. It is important that this learning from and with the other be an end in itself, and that it preserve this being an end in itself and the dignity of the other, and ultimately be directed at the recognition of the other. Comparative theology seeks paths of friendship/*philia* that can discover otherness as otherness and is capable of valuing it. Or, to quote Fredericks again:

¹ For the significance and profile of a confessional theology, cf. my remarks in Von Stosch 2001: 277-99.

The religious solidarity called for today requires Christians to go beyond tolerance in order to look on their neighbors who follow other religious paths with the esteem and gratitude reserved for faithful friends and cherished teachers” (Fredericks 2004a: xi).

Thus, if that concern is taken seriously, friendship/*philia* can become a bridge between cultures and religions that can promote true esteem and appreciation across the abysses of all difference.

Catholic Arguments in Favour of Comparative Theology

Having discussed the concerns and aims of comparative theology, I now want to make clear why these concerns are also typically Catholic concerns. I will begin with the third of the concerns mentioned above because it is there that the relation to Christianity is especially evident. The command to love one’s neighbour is one of the central foundations of Christianity and is essential to every Catholic approach to this religion.² A quick examination of what constitutes love can, moreover, make it clear that love is also capable of granting esteem where understanding ends. Indeed, it seems to me to be perfectly essential to be inspired by love to want to give the constant otherness of the other its own space. The love of parents for their child is proven when the child does not fulfil their expectations and goes in a direction that one can no longer understand. Erotic love is often sparked by that which is not understood, what is mysterious, and it can survive only if it respects the continuing mysterious character of the partner. If I understand my partner down to the last detail, so that I no longer find her irritating or offensive in any way, then the love is dead. The love of a friend already displays its particular strength when one can no longer indicate why what one does is good and correct and his friend sticks by him. The love for lepers does not expect that the other merits recognition but loves the leper in his untouchability. Love can enter into darkness and also give meaning in continuous darkness.

But, from a Christian point of view, love is also what is demanded in the contact between people. That command to love one’s neighbour requires not only tolerance but true esteem for the one who has fallen among thieves. According to the life and teaching of Jesus, my neighbour is the one who needs me—regardless of his religion or worldview. At the same time, many people identify strongly with their religion. Many people feel neglected if I do not respect and love them in their faith, for “[t]o despise the gods of other people means to despise these people themselves, for they and their gods belong together” (Radhakrishnan 1961: 42).

That is why it is not enough to assert, as inclusivists do, that one can love the religious other and at the same time view his religion as deficient. If I view

² What follows is partly taken from Von Stosch 2012: 97f.

something as objectively deficient that another holds to be most sacred and do not find any way to value it positively, my love for that person cannot reach the devotion Jesus exemplified. Of course, love also includes criticism and should not esteem everything the other holds to be true. But if, for reasons of my faith, I am not a priori in a position to view the other with respect to what is most important for him in any other than a negative way, then my love is seriously threatened. Love should perhaps not have to, but it can and may find ways to grant that esteem where it no longer acknowledges what is peculiar to the other and can no longer understand it either. For that reason, it is a matter for concern if I am only able to recognize the other a priori in that in which we are like each other and not also in that where we differ. That is why Catholic theology has always been interested in understanding and valuing the other in his or her otherness, and that is why Catholic theology should also be interested in comparative theology.

We will now turn to the other two concerns of comparative theology and ask if they are things that, from a Catholic point of view, are worth striving for. Can one, from a Catholic perspective, also experience something decisive about God and about oneself through non-Catholic traditions? Can Catholic theology value non-Catholic traditions and seek to make them fruitful for the Catholic striving after knowledge? Or is the Catholic tradition to be understood as a tradition for certain group, a tradition that is relevant only for Catholics—that is, as far as truth and meaning are concerned, only accessible and relevant within these groups?

It seems to be a fatal misunderstanding for the Catholic tradition if it is viewed as a special tradition to which the traditions of other confessions and religions are equal. The original meaning of the Greek *kat-holos* was “all-embracing” or “for all” as well as “with all.” Catholic theology is thus something that is addressed to all people and thus takes everyone into account and includes all. Thus, it can never, by definition, settle for describing matters of faith for only one group. The first meaning of “catholic” is, as Cardinal Kasper explains, completely correctly, is “wholeness in the sense of fullness” (Kasper 2011: 254). “Catholicity thus means the opposite of restriction and bigoted narrow-mindedness, of a polemical and apologetic demarcation mentality; it means comprehensiveness, holism, plenitude, and universality [Weite, Ganzheitlichkeit, Fülle und Universalität]” (Kasper 2011: 260). That is why Catholic theology ought to approach non-Catholic views and worldviews and enter into a constructive exchange with them. By definition, it does not, in any fashion, represent particular interests but is open to the concerns, needs, and insights of all people.

For Catholic fundamental theology, since Melchior Cano, it has been widely viewed as indispensable to include non-Catholic views as well in constructive and dialogical ways for its own striving for knowledge. Cano speaks here of

the *loci alieni* as sources of knowledge for theology—language that led very early to Catholic theology trying to understand the thinking in autonomous philosophy and history. In the current interreligious and intercultural context, a theology that represents the Catholic claim to embrace the whole world cannot therefore avoid including the religious and cultural view of the self and the world in other religions as a possible *locus alienus* in its own striving for knowledge.³

Dominus Iesus does not compel us either to hold the view that everything that people can know about God is contained in Christ or even expressed by the church. The church does not claim that everything that bears on the salvation of the human being has been understood and taught by it (cf. Coffey 2008: 868). Or, as Paul Griffiths puts it:

The Church, however, does not think of herself as already explicitly teaching all religious truth; she has not, to put it a bit more theologically, given explicit formulation to all the religiously significant truths implied by the revelation she preserves and transmits. (Griffiths 2001: 63)

The basis for this possibility is simply the fact that a finite being can never completely comprehend God. Even if Christianity alone contained the revelation of God, the church can never completely understand what has been communicated to it by God. It is always possible that, in his limited powers of comprehension, the human being testifies only inadequately to the divine Logos, so something decisive can be revealed to me anywhere in the world and, to that extent, in other religions as well. Because the Christian truth will be known in its fullness only at the eschaton, it is also possible for the church—which even in a conservative understanding of Christianity is still on its way to completion—to learn something about its own truth in a discussion with the world and its religions. The Christian faith thus appears in this view to be a preliminary form of the confession in Jesus Christ, that can be changed through the confrontation with others, so that the dialogue with the other can actually demand something genuinely new and unexpected today.

This fundamental possibility of esteem for difference does not yet comprehensively ground the possibility of comparative theology as Catholic theology. Interreligious dialogue is not only concerned with the differences between the religions but also with substantial contradictions. Is appreciation of non-Catholic views conceivable here? Or does positive appreciation eventually come to an end in the event of contradiction, leaving room only for tolerance? Here as well, it seems to me that the Catholic version of Christianity and its funda-

³ Cf. Hünemann's updating of modern *loci alieni* in Hünemann 2003. Edmund Kee-Fook Chia argues similarly in Chia 2008: 114.

mental trust in human reason provides a specific possibility that allows it to deal with the contradictions in a constructive way, as I will show below.

The Problem of Contradictions between the Religions

At first glance, the theory of comparative theology seems to have reached a limit here. The tradition provides examples of Catholic theology learning from *non-Catholic* worldviews as well, but it still remains to be seen if that obtains, for anti-Catholic aspects of non-Catholic thinking. Can contradictions of the Catholic faith truly lead one deeper into Catholic truth, or does such a view lead to relativism? Can the other also be taken seriously and true insights ascribed to him or her if he or she contradicts me? Or does this insight lead to the abandonment of one's own truth claims?

As already introduced elsewhere (Von Stosch 2012: 168-93), I believe that the the later Wittgenstein has an important lesson to teach on these points. If one takes Wittgenstein's insights into the unique nature of religious convictions seriously, it is clear that their meaning can be ascertained only via concrete language games and that one can thus understand the cognitive content of religious convictions only if one takes the praxis of that religion into consideration it is interwoven with. The point of this apparently trivial insight for the context of religion and theology is that the cognitive meaning of religious convictions depends on the grammar and the surrounding life-form in which it is articulated. For religious people, this grammar and life-form are always already religiously stamped. It is therefore also impossible to ascertain the meaning of religious convictions without looking at the life-form and the praxis of the people who articulate those convictions.

Religious convictions are thus so closely bound up with the worldview of religious people that their meaning becomes comprehensible only if it is clear how these matters of faith rule the life of the believer. This meaning of religious convictions do not become accessible only through semantic analysis but also through the observation of the way they correlate with their respective (language game) praxis or are embedded in it. The correlation between doctrine and praxis does not become clear until the end because there is no standpoint external to the language game that allows one to observe the relations completely. According to Wittgenstein, it is even so that we, for the most part, blindly follow the rules that guide our faith life and thinking (cf. Ward 1994: 14). I am thus not aware of many elements of my worldview, but they help determine the meaning of my religious language, without being able to be completely explained.

Only if I encounter other people who follow rules that are different from the rules I follow in completely self-evident ways do I become aware, at least in part, of this grammar or worldview I follow blindly. Thus, for example,

students who can discover after a long stay abroad how many things taken for granted in their own approach to the world now become questionable because of their having lived in a foreign culture. Their questionability also makes them conscious, however, and I can now place myself in a relationship of freedom to them and test their rationality. Accordingly, interreligious dialogue can be an important aid in not only understanding the other in his otherness but also in recognizing the significance of one's own religion more comprehensively—also because the rules of one's own worldview that one has blindly followed are now discovered and questioned.

The meaning of one's own religious convictions thus cannot often be established independently of the praxis of believers that those of other faiths challenge. Even more so, the meaning of the religious convictions of the other can be established only by looking at his or her praxis. Under certain circumstances, praxis can show that the certainties one actually trusts are entirely from those he said he trusted. Thus, in comparative theology much depends on discovering and correctly assessing the tacit, presupposed elements of a different worldview or one's own. This is often a difficult task, but it is, according to Keith Ward, constitutive for theology as such.⁴ In the theological reflection on religious faith, it directly concerns bringing unconscious elements to light and subjecting one's preconceptions about one's own faith to a critical examination in order to arrive at a coherent comprehensive position that analyses the depth-dimensions of one's own and the foreign faith and makes a discursive praxis and thus the question of truth accessible.

Of course, looking at the “depth grammar” of religious language and thus at what is hidden, the tacit cornerstones of religious faith set in praxis, does not present a patent remedy for settling interreligious conflict nor does it always lead to the appreciation of otherness or the resolving of contradictions. Doing comparative theology can very much mean that I have to keep my religious convictions that contradict those of the other. But often enough comparative theology also contributes to my recognizing why I can esteem the confession of the other that struck me as strange or offensive at first, even if I do not understand it on the cognitive level. Comparative theology can thus contribute to the softening of interreligious conflict through bringing inflexible positions to life. The new insights gained through confrontation with the others into the meaning of one's own and the other's faith can lead to the reconciliation of apparently irreconcilable differences. The foundation of this reconciliation can be hidden commonalities. But it is also conceivable that the differences remain.

⁴ Ward states that bringing such tacit beliefs into “focal awareness” is “a hard and fallible task” and defines theology in large part as “the articulation of tacit framework beliefs” (1994: 15).

Let us first look at the hidden commonalities. Things that appear to be irreconcilable on the surface level of grammar can sometimes be thought together on the depth level. If one thinks, for example, of the Muslim rejection of Jesus as the Son of God, this is not infrequently based on a biologicistic misunderstanding. Thus, the exciting but not yet adequately discussed question is if Christology actually represents the decisive difference between Islam and Christianity.⁵ In any case, major commonalities in both religions regarding the assessment of Jesus can be found beyond the conflict over specific concepts. This is even clearer in the theology of the Trinity, which is allegedly much less of an obstacle in Muslim-Christian dialogue than is often thought (cf. Tatari and Von Stosch 2013).

A comparison of various theologies can also show that apparent conflicts between the religions disappear upon closer inspection. This is not always the case, however. The activity of comparison can obviously also lead to the establishment of permanent differences. Often, it is even so that new, painful differences are found that were hidden under a superficial commonality.

In exactly the same way, there are thus differences, in view of what we no longer know, in how we should recognize the other in his otherness. But that should not be negative as such because it does not imply that every otherness should be negative. From a Christian point of view, one can say that I indeed recognize the other as he was intended by God—and that is decidedly different than what I imagine. Thus, the demand for a constant iconoclasm is certainly justified. But that does not mean that everything that is other in the other be negative. And in every respect my image is different than the reality of others.

To this extent, from the perspective of comparative theology, one can certainly not speak of an unconditional recognition of every otherness. And religious plurality cannot be asserted a priori to be a value in itself. But there is no cause for an a priori negative valuation of the other or of religious plurality. Rather, it becomes clear in the turn to the concrete other and in playing the strange language game how far appreciation and recognition are possible.

If these constantly new searches are not to end in a final, relativistic arbitrariness, it is important that they be done on the basis of criteria and that the criteria used be independent of specific worldviews or can be agreed upon across religious boundaries. Although it is not possible to properly substantiate the criteria that connect worldviews within the framework of these brief remarks (cf. Von Stosch 2012: 301-16), it seems to me to be specifically typically Catholic to grant such a criterial role to reason and to want to search, with its

⁵ For a first attempt at a Qur'anic christology, cf. Ayoub 2007: 111-83.

help, for criteria that transcends religions. Reason can help make clear why the position that deviates from my faith conviction—even the one that contradicts it on the basis of criteria that are independent of faith—merits recognition and can teach me.

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