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The Hermeneutics of Comparative
Theology

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The general situation in which any theologian does theology today may also provide some warrants as to why one would want to take up comparative work. Though richer, the world of religion is now smaller; the encounter with other religions is not the special experience of those who travel to far-off places; the problems facing the human race are increasingly global. If religion is to contribute to their solutions, it is unconvincing to suppose that only one religion will make this contribution, or that religions best make their contribution in isolation from one another.¹

This statement from Francis X. Clooney's *Theology After Vedanta* provides a window into the overall methodological approach and ethical character of the emerging school of comparative theology. The viewpoint espoused by comparative theology's proponents emphasizes care, caution and respect of the religious traditions and elements thereof undergoing comparison, along with an effort to recognize one's own cultural and religious contexts as important factors in pursuit of the mutual understanding which is the goal of comparative work. This realization of one's own contextual "biases" further necessitates the humbling realization that one's own point of view, traditionally religious or otherwise, is not the only important voice in the increasingly diverse theological conversations of the contemporary world.

Comparative theology is also quick to distinguish itself from former academic and theological attempts to understand and appreciate religious diversity. The difference between comparative theology and its own perceived reading of these former attempts is succinctly and articulately framed by James Fredericks in his *Faith Among Faiths*.² Fredericks places these attempts into three categories: exclusivism, which effectively sees

¹ Clooney, Francis X. *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 202-3.

² New York: Paulist Press, 1999.

one's own religion as true and all others as false or otherwise inadequate; inclusivism, which understands one's own faith to be the reality behind all other religious paths (although these paths are conceded to be meritorious in the sense that they are veiled expressions of the "true religion"), and pluralism, which sees all religious traditions as manifestations of or responses to a common underlying reality (one ocean, many streams).

Each of these models, which Fredericks takes great pains to render in the terms of its own advocates, is found to be inadequate—primarily in terms of its ability to understand another's religious tradition, but also in the ways in which each loses touch with its own traditional and religious roots. Comparative theology is proposed as a remedy to the impasse generated by exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism; it is depicted as a genuinely adequate way to understand and appreciate the diversity of faiths without losing sight of one's own identity.

It is the purpose of my paper to explore how comparative theology, as expressed in the work of Clooney and Fredericks, articulates its identity over against the above schools, and to move toward identifying and sketching the hermeneutic tools and strategies comparative theology employs toward this and its own comparative ends. I will argue that the hermeneutics employed by comparative theologians also carry implications for interreligious dialogue and offer hints and guides for public policy in multifaith societies. The hermeneutical moves necessary to the type of comparative work suggested and undertaken by Clooney and Fredericks, in other words, carries a distinct trajectory aimed at an understanding of the relationship between self and other, author

text, and reader, and parts to whole that carries implications beyond the academy and into the sphere of ethical conduct in its broadest and most concrete realizations.

For purposes of presentation I will focus less on the academic background and context and more on the hermeneutic and ethical considerations of this investigation. I will undertake this task through an exploration of the hermeneutical presuppositions expressed in the work of Fredericks and Clooney as compared with various hermeneutic theories whose elements, I will argue, can be teased out from analysis of the aforementioned authors' comparative work. Some of the hermeneutical "fingerprints" which seems to be distinguishable are those of H.G. Gadamer, David Tracy, and Wolfgang Iser. I will argue that no single hermeneutic theory can be read as definitive of the hermeneutics of comparative theology, but that each of the sources mentioned has had a direct influence.

After my attempt to expose the hermeneutic understructure of comparative theology as an academic discipline, I will then analyze the conceptual framework within which comparative theologians operate, and move toward its application and appropriation as a methodological and ethical resource in interreligious dialogue and multifaith societies. My analysis and questioning is not intended as comprehensive, but rather as a call to further reflection aimed at stimulating the reader/listeners' own interpretation(s). If there is an ulterior motive to my own work, it is the hope of imparting a sense of the overall importance of understanding comparative theology's conceptual roots. I feel strongly that such a reflective basis is necessary if comparative theology is to succeed in overcoming the impasse Fredericks and others have identified in theologies of religions.

The Context of Comparative Theology in the Academy: James Fredericks’ Assessment of Theologies of Religions.

It may be helpful at this point to examine the mechanics of Fredericks’ proposal. Theologies of religions are at an impasse because the former attempts all fail to meet what he argues are two essential criteria for determining the adequacy of a theology of religions. The first of these criteria is respecting the tradition doing the comparative work. In terms of the Christian tradition, this would mean that a theology of religions must uphold the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior while at the same time acknowledging God’s will to save all human beings. The second criteria is whether or not a given theology meets the need for adherents of the tradition in question to live “creatively” with their neighbors of other faiths.

Understanding Fredericks’ use of the term “creative” is key to unlocking his theological and ethical agenda. To live creatively with another goes far beyond tolerance and peace. It is a genuine wish to understand and share in another’s life as a friend, and to embrace the dynamics that such a relationship implies. It is a personal, interested commitment to care and respect, and to grow together while understanding and appreciating each other’s uniqueness. Fredericks gives several examples of this interreligious friendship; perhaps the most well known of which is the friendship between Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama. This example of mutually interested *phililos* between religious others is rendered in *Faith Among Faiths* as paradigmatic, and it is safe to assume it is programmatic in terms of its application on a social scale.

Fredericks carefully and meticulously undercuts exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist theologies on both criteria, charging that none of the three does justice to either its own or to the other's tradition. Comparative theology differs from these former attempts in that it satisfies both criteria (which is to say it is a method which does justice to both traditions) by "looking upon the truths of [other] traditions as resources for understanding [one's] own faith."³ Comparative theology is thus pictured as a creative, experimental process in which the dialogue partners are mutually enriched by a conversation in which each remains committed to her/his original tradition while becoming open to the truth expressed in the other's tradition.

This balance between commitment and openness creates a very real tension for those engaged in this type of comparative work, but such tension is understood not as a burden to dialogue. Tension is, rather, crucial to open communication. The challenge is not in overcoming tension, but in how to keep it creative in an ongoing process whose "deepest aspiration is spiritual transformation" of the character described in the concept of interreligious friendship.⁴

Comparative Experiments and Hermeneutic Fingerprints

Clooney's work puts the criteria described by Fredericks into concrete comparative examples between his own Christian tradition and that of Hinduism.⁵ His *Theology After*

³ *Faith Among Faiths*, 139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵ Both "Christian" and "Hindu" need to be heavily qualified; "Roman Catholic" and "Advaita Vedanta" are a start in this particular context, but I have omitted these in the

Vedanta is proffered as comparative work “that is more practical; more engaged in texts and in the concreteness of multiple theological traditions.”⁶ As an example of the character of this comparison, Clooney sets up the following dilemma: “We may find ourselves compelled to ask which of the following declarations is true: 1. The historical event of the Passion of Christ is the most fitting, and ultimately the only, source of the salvation for the world; or, 2. Knowledge of Brahman is all that is required for salvation.”⁷ Clooney’s own response is that these statements cannot be compared as contradictory or competing truths; that neither can be properly understood apart from its context since “both are rooted in the set of interpretive and communicative acts which constitute the faith lives of their communities, the choice cannot be an immediate, stark either/or.”⁸

After working through a careful comparison and witnessing each statement in the full context of its tradition, the Christian, for example, may indeed retain a belief in the unique efficacy of salvation in Christ. But in the process of coming to know the Hindu context, the Christian “will lose...the capacity to make claims such as ‘knowledge of Brahman does not save.’”⁹

Understanding the historical context of a religious tradition, in other words, is key to understanding that tradition’s perspective and appreciating its importance as a truth for the lives of its adherents. It is also important to be open to the possibility that this reality will help to enrich one’s own spiritual outlook. This perspective resonates with the

body of the presentation for considerations of space. Fredericks also works out of the Roman Catholic tradition.

⁶ Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

concept of *Horizonverschmelzung* articulated in H.G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.¹⁰

This concept translates as “fusion of horizons,” which is Gadamer’s notion of the transformative power of classic texts; an interaction between the text and reader in which the reader is, quite literally, taken into the text’s reality to be transformed and enriched by it.

What is perhaps most telling in this example is that Clooney himself alludes to Gadamer through the medium of David Tracy, who

draws our attention to the advantages of conversation as a model for the way we appropriate texts, as we learn from an “other” who stands near us in an ongoing conversation, an other with whom we converse, and who is neither the same as us nor entirely different.¹¹

Clooney, in the works referenced, understands the patient, close reading of texts as a type of conversation. It is through these texts that one sees the theological truths of another’s tradition.

The text itself, quite naturally, is also never far from the reader’s experience of it. “Such truths make their claim on us first of all as theological readers, whose comprehension will depend in large part on the kind of readers we turn out to be.”¹² The skill of the reader is determined by attention to context, by care and patience in coming to the text. There is thus a rather circular relationship between the reader and text-centered hermeneutical leanings of Clooney’s comparative theology. In line with Gadamer, the reader who is able to become “immersed” in the text experiences the text in its fullest sense. The distinction is not neat, but the hermeneutical character expressed by Clooney

¹⁰This refers to Weinsheimer and Marshall’s translation, Second Revised Edition (New York: Continuum, 1960, 1975, 2003).

¹¹ Clooney, *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Srivaisnavas of South India* Albany: SUNY Press, 1996 pp.12ff.

¹² Clooney, *After Vedanta*, 191.

seems weighted towards a text-reader dialectic relationship over against a more author-centered approach.¹³

The character and importance of the reader to Clooney's hermeneutical approach is perhaps best illustrated by his treatment of Wolfgang Iser. Iser's work is referenced in both *Theology After Vedanta* and in *Seeing Through Texts* as a model for textual comparison. Iser is portrayed as something of a guide for "boundary crossing" between traditions, and his emphasis on "play space" between discourses is a crucial concept for understanding the character of the comparative conversation.

Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Dialogue

The notion of "play space" brings to mind Fredericks' emphasis on creative tension and the space for dialogue which this tension opens. Iser's hermeneutic of conversation and reader interaction is a textual model for this same sort of tension. But this is as far as comparative theology takes Iser, or any other single hermeneutic theory. Even though Iser, Gadamer and Tracy provide useful guidelines and tactics for negotiating the space between self and other and coming to understand texts and other traditional materials, Clooney and Fredericks always seem to treat these hermeneutic theories with suspicion.

Comparative theology attempts to shun theories, frameworks and other constructs in the interest of genuine dialogue. As far as such concepts help connection and conversation, they are useful tools—but they must be understood only as means in a far

¹³ Clooney describes the author as "the most important contextual fact" of a given text (*Seeing Through Texts*, 12). Although this emphasizes the importance of the author, an author is still relevant only in context and not as an isolated agent of meaning.

greater effort. The ultimate motive of comparative “conversation,” whether with a text or a “reader” from another tradition, is understanding aimed at transformation. It would be a mistake to assert that comparative theology has no hermeneutical presuppositions, but perhaps an even greater mistake to suppose that it operates on any one hermeneutic paradigm.

Even though comparative theology is not frozen under the auspices of one interpretive model, it does seem to have some readily identifiable character traits—a sort of dispositional outlook—which can be sketched and which lends itself to applications in dialogue and in multifaith societies. Comparative theology, in terms of its intellectual character, is an effort either to understand another religious tradition through relationship with it, or, conversely, to relate to another religious tradition through understanding.

Mutual understanding and creative, enriching transformation are the benefits, signs and seals of the comparative process, but these must be arrived at slowly, patiently, and with absolute care and respect of the uniqueness of both conversation partners. Comparative theology wants to describe and understand the other’s situation in its wholeness, but not at the expense of its particularities. While this uniqueness is paid the utmost respect, each partner must also remain open to the new ideas and possibilities the other presents. Commitment to identity and openness to transformation are the poles between which the surface tension of comparative conversation is maintained.

This surface tension is really an open contextual field. It is a new horizon based upon the tension between the individual horizons coming to dialogue. Comparative theology makes the effort to attain and maintain the openness and tension required for dialogue with other texts and traditions, including the neutralization of intellectual

blockages that would interfere with this space. Identity can and must be maintained (which excludes any syncretistic tendencies), but ideological elitism cannot be allowed. Conversational space must remain open if the communication between partners is to be genuinely respectful and creative.

The application of this overall conceptual attitude in interreligious dialogue is not distant from its conceptual machinery. One simply takes the goals of listening to the other and honestly expressing one's own views as primary, and attempts to develop and retain an atmosphere of comfort and mutual respect while engaging in dialogue. It is also realistic to expect that such an application is plausible and feasible. The chief difficulty in such an application seems to be in getting the partners to maintain this balance between honesty about one's own traditional context and openness to respect, accept, and ultimately see how one's own view is challenged and enriched by contact with other, possibly conflicting and even apparently contradictory views. Both sides must maintain this type of space in order for comparative conversation of the character described to take place.

The flexibility of this comparative hermeneutic also lends itself well to applications in social policy. Although conceived in a Christian context, the methods of comparative theology can be used by inquirers from any tradition—or even by non-traditionally religious, adamantly secular, or atheistic people to understand any other religious perspective. A secular governing body could readily employ comparative theology in public education due to this flexibility and its lack of proselytizing tendencies. If applied creatively, comparative theology could be of tremendous benefit in multifaith societies by helping develop stronger bonds between members of religiously

and culturally diverse communities through education and conceptual tools for conversation. Its promise and goals, to repeat, go beyond tolerance and peacefulness—into the realm of genuine understanding and friendship; friendship based upon diversity and not in spite of it.

Concluding Questions

Exposing the hermeneutic roots of comparative theology allows for the opening of such perspectives on the discipline as the foregoing. When stripped to its essential elements, comparative theology's flexibility and applicability in contexts other than academia are thrown into relief. Comparative theology is not wanting in terms of its own intellectual heritage, but as it is a relatively new approach (although it does have roots extending into the late nineteenth century) its conceptual background is open for exploration and enrichment.

Even though its methods may be readily adaptable in dialogues and social contexts other than the academy, further exploration and elaboration of its conceptual grounding is needed if comparative theology is to overcome the impasse in theologies of religions. Acceptance of other faith traditions leaves questions about the nature of Divinity as well as the God-world relationship, to say nothing of anthropology. What kind of human beings inhabit the play spaces described? Certainly people who challenge the traditional philosophical categories of self/other and subject/object. As a method for building community through dialogue and education, the benefits of comparative theology and of a quick tour of its interpretive groundwork have hopefully been made

apparent. It is not yet clear how comparative theology will respond to the space it has created in theologies of religions; but what does seem clear is that the space has indeed been created.

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