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Comparative Theology As an Alternative to the Theology of Religions

The Dilemma of a Theology of Religions

In what follows, I offer a critical response to Perry Schmidt-Leukel's paper "Limits and Prospects of Comparative Theology," in which he attempts to reveal the mistaken efforts in the pretension of comparative theology to find a "way beyond the current impasse in the theology of religions." Schmidt-Leukel's "bad news" for comparative theologians is that "comparative theology" will not lead out of the impasse of theology of religions but straight ahead into it. Schmidt-Leukel tries to console comparative theologians with the "good news" that the theology of religions (and especially his pluralist option) "is not at all an impasse," but "a promising path into the theological future."

My bad news for adherents to the theology of religions, as it is understood by Schmidt-Leukel, is that no theoretical solution of this dilemma is possible within their current philosophical framework. My good news is, pace Schmidt-Leukel, that comparative theology is a "way beyond the current impasse in the theology of religions."

Before elaborating on this second point, let's look for a moment at Schmidt-Leukel's "promising path into the theological future." I do not think that religious believers can accept a pluralist answer to the problems of a theology of religions. One simply cannot insist on the truth of one's beliefs while accepting that the opposite of one's beliefs is equally true. One must hold that one's own beliefs are at least closer to the truth than the beliefs of those who disagree with those beliefs — otherwise one should change one's beliefs. In Keith Ward's words: "It may sound arrogant to say that a particular view that I happen to hold is more adequate than another, but it is an inescapable claim for anyone who reflects on what truth claims logically require."

Within the philosophical framework of traditional realism, there is no coherent possibility for claiming that contradicting religious beliefs have equal value. Hick’s and Schmidt-Leukel’s claim of a Real an sich is not a convincing solution, because, after Kant, it is nonsense to investigate the nature of a Ding an sich or to compare and evaluate different manifestations of it. As Armin Kreiner relates:

Das Postulat eines „Real an sich“ erscheint wie eine (im schlechten Sinn) metaphysische Adhoc-Hypothese, die das pluralistische Grundanliegen angesichts der Tatsache divergierender Wahrheitsansprüche retten soll, aber kaum überzeugend retten kann. Denn es bleibt letztlich unbegreiflich, wie ein transzendentes Wesen α authentisch als φ erfahren werden kann, obwohl α an sich nicht φ ist. Darüber hinaus bleibt ebenso unbegreiflich, wie die Beschreibung von α als φ eine adäquate Handlungsdisposition gegenüber α evokieren soll, obwohl doch α an sich gar nicht φ ist.

Thus pluralism is no coherent solution to the problems of the theology of religions. Moreover, inclusivism provides no acceptable answers to the questions of the theology of religions either, because it fails to appreciate difference without transforming it into identity. The command of charity requires that I not devalue the beliefs of my neighbor. For, as Radhakrishnan states, “to despise the gods of other people means to despise these people themselves, for they and their gods belong together.”

To summarize, there is no solution for the dilemma of a theology of religions that upholds religious believers’ contradicting truth claims while it attempts to appreciate difference and diversity in the field of religions.

I would now like to turn to Schmidt-Leukel’s “bad news” for comparative theologians that “comparative theology will not lead out of the impasse of theology of religions but straight ahead into it.” I do not agree with this statement for the simple reason that comparative theology, as I would like to interpret it, has a philosophical framework that excludes the possibility of a theoretical comparison of religions.

The Philosophical Framework of Comparative Theology

The philosophical framework I would like to propose for comparative theology is the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein in the interpretation of internal realism. For our context, the central point of Wittgenstein’s investigations is the insight that the meaning of religious beliefs is not accessible without reference to practice. And practice is not accessible separate from our “language-games.” In this view, we can only understand the meaning of the religious elements of our world pictures by referring to their embeddedness in our language-games, which are the instances in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy wherein our ways of acting and the understanding of them are originally connected. This is why religious beliefs cannot be understood without reference to concrete “language-game-practice.” And it also explains how people who use the same terms sometimes cannot contradict each other when these terms take on different roles within their language games, especially when these terms are embedded in specific (often tacit) levels of grammatical propositions (regarding our world pictures).

Moreover, concerning religious beliefs, insight into the language-game-praxeological foundation of their meaning reveals a further problem. At least in the tradition of Western philosophy, “God” must be defined as a “being than no greater can be conceived,” or at least as something “unconditional.” But humans, as conditional beings, can only express their faith in an unconditional being in a conditional way. It is therefore not possible to express the belief in such a being in a conditional way without leaving room for doubt and misunderstanding. Humans can doubt (from an internal or external perspective), for grammatical reasons, whether a conditional way of expressing belief is really an expression of the belief in an unconditional being. And they can doubt whether a contradiction, on the cognitive-propositional level, as regards such an unconditional being, remains a contradiction when considering its praxeological roots.

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4 A. Kreiner, “Philosophische Probleme der pluralistischen Religionstheologie,” in R. Schwager (ed.), Christus allein? Der Streit um die Pluralistische Religionstheologie, QD 160 (Freiburg / Basel / Vienna, 1996), 118-31; here 129; cf. Ward, Divine Action, 198: “How, then, since my view is known to be false, can I be sure mine is an authentic way to salvation? I conceive salvation as knowledge of the Real (of God); but the Real is unknowable; so I must be mistaken. If I am wrong about what salvation is, how can I coherently claim to achieve it by the path I follow?”


They can always ask whether their form of life is really regulated by their belief in God because there is (for internal reasons) no intrinsic correlation between their actions and the corresponding regulative/grammatical propositions. The claim, then, to the universal validity of a regulative proposition expressing the belief in God cannot, as a “hinge proposition,” be realized in all one’s actions. That is why one cannot eliminate the contingency of the regulative status of religious belief, and that is why one must furnish reasons for it. And—in our context—that is why one cannot compare the truth claims of different religions in general.

Different believers within one religion and in different religions are not merely playing different language games. The meaning of their grammatical propositions, which are the basis of all possible argumentation, may differ among them. Or, at least, they can differ to such an extent that persons unwittingly speak of different things while using the same terms. The lack of sensibility for the regulative role of religious belief can lead to complete darkness in the theological or philosophical inquiry. According to the later Wittgenstein, ignoring the difference between grammatical or regulative propositions on the one hand, and encyclopedic or empirical propositions on the other, is not only the “congenital defect” of metaphysics, but it is also and especially the main cause of error in the philosophy of religion and—I would like to add—in the theology of religions.

Comparative Theology as Way Out of the Impasse of Theology of Religions

The attempt of the theology of religions to provide a pluralist or inclusivist interpretation to the differing truth claims of different religions is mistaken because one cannot construct a general interpretation of these truth claims at all. One must investigate truth claims within their language-game-practice. Attention must be turned to specifics, and one must search for the meaning of religious beliefs by turning to their concrete embedding. Theological investigations must be developed as a collection of examples that consider individual meanings in representative language games according to differing types of religious belief. And it makes no sense at all to establish a theory evaluating the amount of “mediation of a salvific knowledge of ultimate / transcendent reality in different religions.”

The impossibility of such a theory is the reason why Schmidt-Leukel’s claim that comparative theology is no alternative for the theology of religions is wrong. Pace Schmidt-Leukel, the systematic and consistent pursuit of comparative theology does not lead to a general theory of religion and to an exclusive option of a theology of religions. Nevertheless, it may be true that comparative theology will sooner or later lead to a juncture where the question of the relationship between non-Christian and the respective Christian beliefs becomes unavoidable. But this question only arises concerning those concrete beliefs investigated by comparative theology. It does not arise concerning Christian or non-Christian beliefs in general.

Thus Schmidt-Leukel is right in asserting that only “comparative religion” can avoid the question of truth concerning the diversity of religious beliefs. Although comparative theology has to deal with the question of truth, it—in contrast to a theology of religions—does not assay to compare religions in general. Such a general comparison would lead to complete darkness. Comparative theology focuses on particularities, and at this micro level, it evaluates believers’ truth claims while considering their pragmatic and regulative role. This restriction of theological attention to the individual case allows the appreciation of diversity without the need for relinquishing one’s own religious perspective.

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee for the comparative theologian that her engagement with another religion will not lead her to conversion to that other religion. As she continues to discover the richness of another religious tradition, she may find herself attracted by the other way of believing, by the new language-game-practice laid open to her through the enterprise of comparative theology. Equally possible, she could learn something new about the tacit level of her own beliefs. Revisions of the comparative theologian’s world-picture could become necessary. Or, as Schmidt-Leukel puts it, “comparative reflection may very well lead to a point where some of one’s own religious presuppositions are seriously drawn into question, so that revision and change of these presuppositions may seem to be unavoidable.” I do admit that the comparative approach may predispose one toward revising one’s own cognitive frameworks.

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12 Schmidt-Leukel, “Limits and Prospects.”
for religious belief. I even admit the possibility of conversion. But, for grammatical reasons, I cannot admit that a revision of the constitutive basis of a religious tradition is possible without admitting that, by this revision, one thereby leaves the tradition. One simply cannot contradict the central claim of a religious tradition and at the same time remain a religious believer within it.

Concerning the Christian tradition, the crucial question is whether or not the belief in Jesus Christ is compatible with a pluralist account. On the micro level, it is possible to ascertain whether the rejection of, or relativizing of, belief in Christ is rooted in a language-game-practice equal in value to my own. I may discover that a Muslim must renounce this claim because he cannot secure an adequate grammatical role for it within his world-picture. And a Christian may disavow his own belief in Christ on the same language-game-praxeological level (just think of the new crusades in our days). Comparative theology thus permits the traditional claim of uniqueness in Christology without devaluing any rejection of this claim. However, this possibility does not intend to give up the Christian claim of uniqueness, as it is proposed by the pluralist option in the theology of religions. As far as I can see, such a pluralist revision is not possible without leaving the framework of Christianity. Surely this evaluation is fallible and reversible. But I do not see any good reason for such a revision.

Nonetheless, in the perspective of comparative theology, one can try to renounce claims to absolute certainty and to learn to respect difference. One can also try to deepen the understanding of one’s own beliefs by paying attention to other traditions, and by reformulating one’s own principles in light of the criticisms other traditions may make. Francis Clooney gives an interesting demonstration of such a possibility by showing, impressively, how comparative practice can lead to a widening of theological vision. Such attempts provide an alternative to the theology of religions in the same measure as they renounce any attempt to adopt God’s point of view. As perspectival beings, we cannot compare world-pictures as comprehensive; we can only compare specific elements of our world-pictures without ever being able to finalize our evaluations of their relationship to the question of truth. What we can do is widen our horizons through interreligious dialogue and comparative practice. Yet we will never establish a rationally based theory that is capable of evaluating different religions or the diversity of religions in general. This is my bad news for any theology of religion. My good news is that such a theory is not necessary for an appreciation of diversity. In the attention we give to particulars, we can learn to appreciate difference as difference by becoming aware of the regulative dimensions of the meaning of difference.

Robert Cummings Neville

The Role of Concepts of God in Crosscultural Comparative Theology

Concepts of God in Comparison

The obvious problem with concepts of God as crosscultural comparative categories is that some religions do not have them, or conceive gods in relatively trivial ways. To appreciate why this is a problem, however, it is important to see why concepts of God are so attractive for comparative purposes. The main reason is that, at least for the monotheistic religions, the categories spelling out divinity refer to what is religiously most important. God is the center around which all other religious elements move. Whether conceived in metaphysical ways as creator or in existential ways as judge, savior, lover, goal or eschatological finisher, God is conceived in the monotheistic religions to be the most important reality for human life, concepts of which determine more of all the other religious notions than any of them directly affects the concepts of God. So naturally comparative theology ought to be able to recognize what at least some religions take to be the most important reality and compare religions in respect of it. If a religion cannot be compared to others with respect to what it takes to be most important, the comparisons that are left seem trivial. Religions can be compared on their respective attitudes toward eating popcorn, but so what? Religions can be compared with respect to their moral codes, but, without connection to the concepts of God, moral codes fail to be religious for the monotheistic traditions. The same is true regarding many other things in respect of which religions can be compared: without connection to God, the comparisons seem to distort the heart of religion, for the montheisms.

1 Although some of the comparative points to be made in this essay are in need of much justification, the expository points about individual religious or theological traditions are commonsensical. Encyclopedias or introductory text books can be consulted if necessary. The comparisons themselves come from a richer ground than can be explained with particular citations, however. I had the privilege to direct the Crosscultural Religious Ideas Project at Boston University which engaged a collaborative team of scholars in a self-corrective process that ran from 1995 to 1999, the public results of which were published in three volumes: The Human Condition, with a foreword by Peter Berger, Ultimate Realities, with a foreword by Tu Weiming, and Religious Truth, with a foreword by Jonathan Z. Smith, all edited by myself (Albany, 2001). Many of the comparative points made in the present essay arose from that collaboration, and some are to