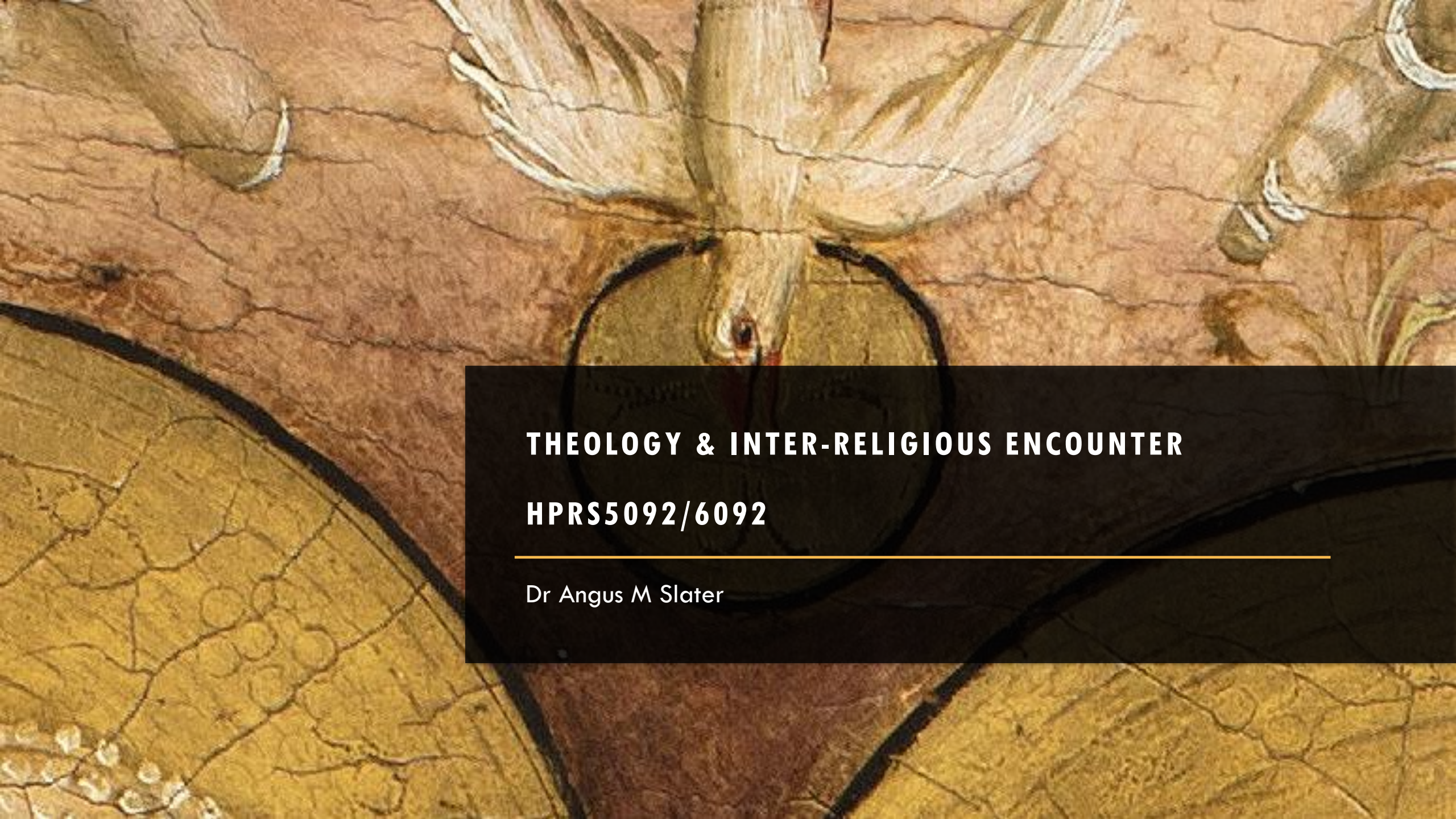




THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

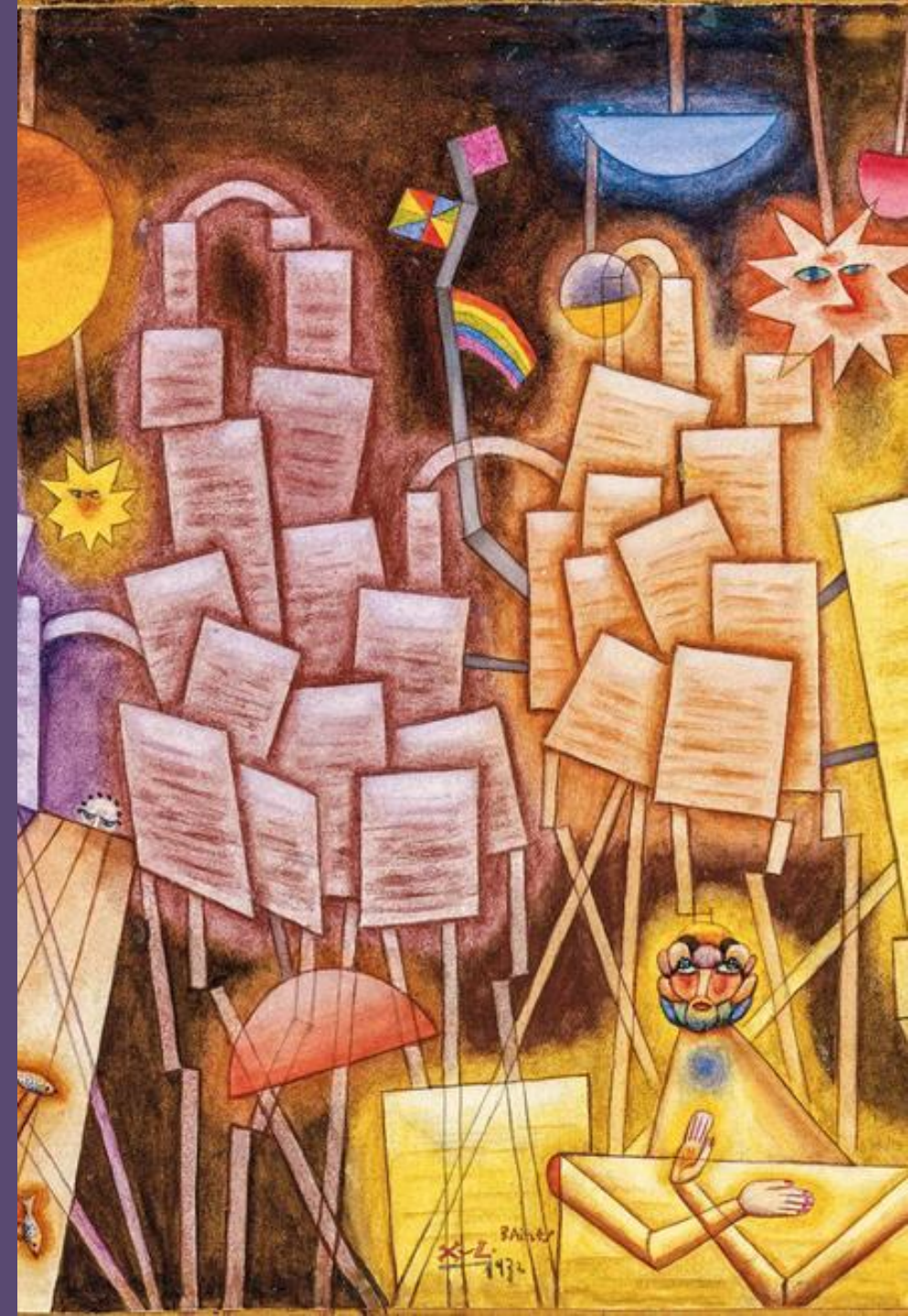
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Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the last section, we finished off our examination of the typology that the Theology of Religions rests on, looking at some of the key critiques offered of it. This has hopefully deepened your knowledge of the paradigm itself, but also the central location it occupies in much interfaith discussion and practice

In this section and the next, we examine another operative paradigm in interfaith studies, that of Comparative Theology. This will give us an awareness of an alternative model of dialogue.



REVISION

You also had four readings to complete all from *Twenty First Century Theologies of Religion* which should have given you a useful start to your first assessment.

Each reading attempted to offer a description and analysis of a different wide-ranging critique of the theology of religions typology as a whole, as well as their relation to specific positions within it.





COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

We have had the opportunity over the last few sections to engage with the typology of the theology of religions, a feature that influences a great deal of current discussion in the field of interfaith studies and practice in instances of interfaith dialogue.

During the rest of the course, I want us to become familiar with other, alternative, approaches that offer up different ways of approaching the issues. One of these is the methodology of Comparative Theology, which has become a prominent academic practice over the last 20 years or so.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Comparative Theology is particularly interesting for us at this juncture because it represents a distinct methodology (a way of doing things) in the field of interfaith studies, and produces stimulating inter-faith content through its methodology.

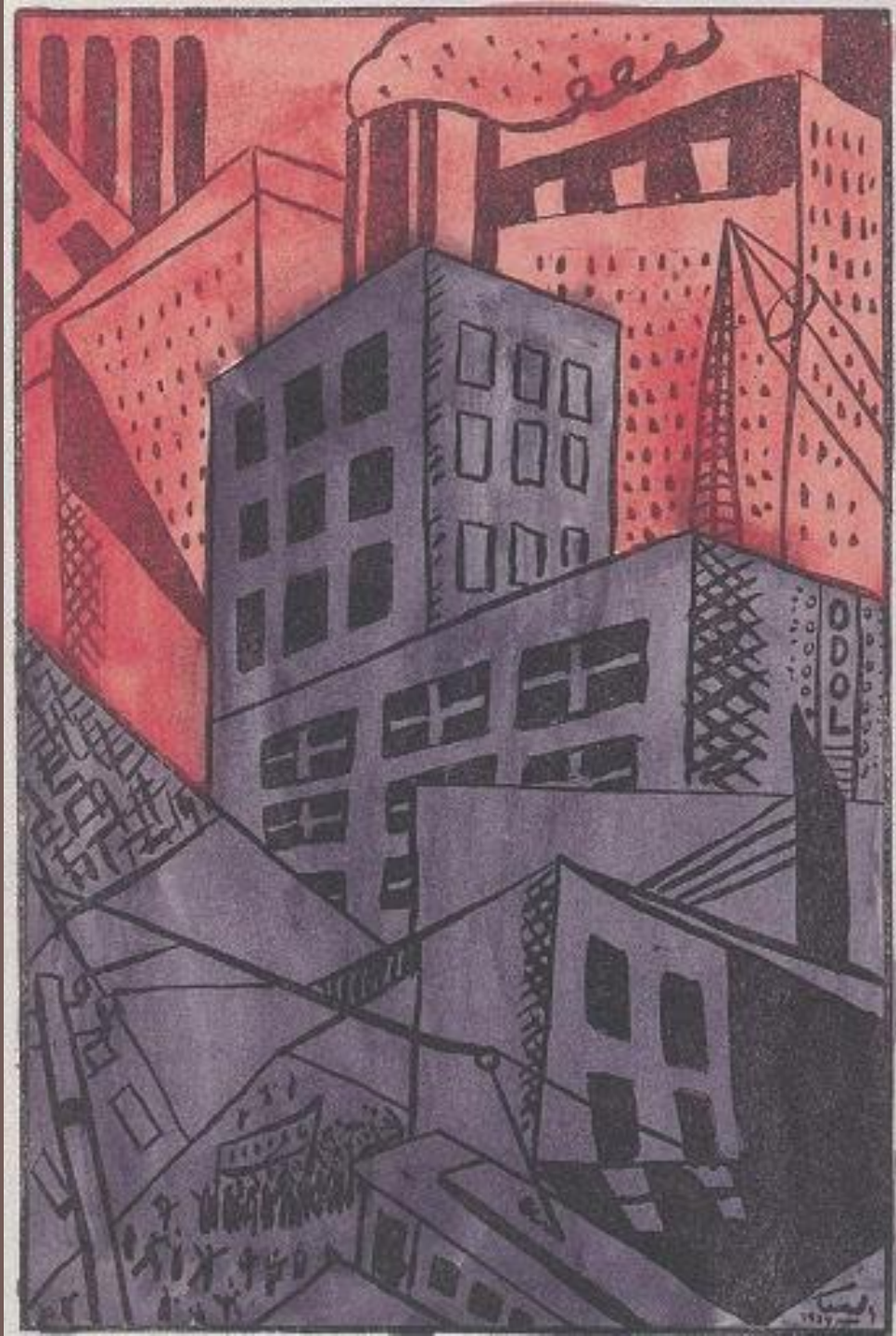
To be precise, Comparative Theology is a way of doing theology, rather than a way of understanding the fact of religious difference.

This makes it rather different to the theology of religions.

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

It contains within it both the internal reflection apparent in the theology of religions typology (what my tradition thinks of others) and also external reflection about how the other influences and shapes our own traditions.

It also seeks to avoid many of the seeming dead-ends within the use of the theology of religions as a foundation for dialogue, moving the conversation on from a consideration only of salvation and truth, towards religious practices and beliefs.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

So having said all that, what is Comparative Theology?

Comparative Theology holds in tension the divergent positions of comparison (with another) and theology (thinking about one's own tradition).

It seeks to develop both an appropriate methodology for interfaith discussion and to provide useful internal tradition discussions through learning about the other.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

It emerges in the 1980's onwards, alongside much of the work in the Theology of Religions in the academy, and comes to greater prominence over time, especially through the work of Francis X Clooney.

Two particular definitions follows this slide – take the time to consider and dissect them carefully. Comparative Theology stresses method – so it is important to be clear on its aims and objectives before passing judgement!



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

“Comparative theology – comparative and theological beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking 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 sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.”

Clooney, 2010, Comparative Theology, p.10



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

“In comparative theology, faith and practice are explored and transformed by attention to parallel theological dimensions of one or more religious or theological traditions, examined historically or in the contemporary context. As a discipline within the academy, this communal and intercommunal faith and practice are open to the analyses, comments, and questions of insiders to the involved traditions, and to scholars not necessarily defined by any such commitments.”

American Academy of Religion, Comparative
Theology Board





COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Take some time to read the two definitions offered and work through the implications of the various approaches taken.

Then answer these questions – they will help us to ground our later discussion of comparative theology.

How does comparative theology differ from current and normative forms of interfaith “dialogue”?

What is the identifiable aim of comparative theology – is this aim useful?

How is the comparative theological approach different from religious studies – the phenomenological study of religious practices and beliefs?

What do we think drives the interest / need for comparative theology? What role does it fulfil?

A painting of a white dove with its wings spread, perched on a dark, circular object, set against a cracked, brown background. The dove is white with a red beak and a red eye. The background is a textured, brown surface with visible cracks. The dove is positioned in the upper center of the frame, with its wings spread out to the sides. The dark, circular object it is perched on is in the lower center. The overall composition is centered and balanced.

WHAT COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY IS NOT...

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & COMPARATIVE RELIGION

I want to take a little bit of time to ensure the clarity of difference between comparative theology and some other, similar approaches that you may come across in your reading. An example of this is the field of comparative religion.

Comparative theology and comparative religion obviously share a desire to compare different aspects of religious faiths. However, the use of the term “theology”, instead of religion, is important as it designates the position from which this comparison is to be done – a subjective and faith-defined one in the case of theology and a “neutral” point of view in the case of religion.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Rather than emphasizing a religiously-detached position, comparative theology is deeply rooted *within* a particular religious tradition

Comparative Theology and Theology of Religions are both interested in the relationship between one faith and another – for example the relationship between Christianity and other faiths.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & COMPARATIVE RELIGION

However, they differ over **why** they are interested in other faiths – the theology of religions seeks to understand how other religious fit into Christian theological claims e.g. salvation, while comparative theology seeks to understand other religions in order to better understand its own tradition.

As Clooney states:

Comparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith

Clooney, p. 15-16



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Comparative theology shares with interreligious dialogue a commitment to engage in dialogue and listen carefully to the religious other.

It must, however, go further than just listening – the methodology of comparative theology requires reflection on the meaning of the other, and its meaning for our own tradition.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Similarly, comparative theology is not necessarily about coming to an agreement, or about truth claims, or about social action. It is more about reflection, understanding, and self-awareness of the processes and structures of religious traditions.

As Clooney again states:

The comparative theologian must do more than listen to others explain their faith; she must be willing to study their traditions deeply alongside her own, taking both to heart

Clooney, p.13





COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

So, comparative theology is about the study of another faith in order to learn from their insights, theologies and stories, to deepen our understanding of our own traditions

The theology aspect of this is important – a religion may, in its scriptures, tell us a story about the nature of Creation and how man and woman came to be, but the task of theology is to tell us **what this means** and **how this fits** into other aspects of faith. In doing so, theology attempts to explain belief – to offer up the meaning of the stories and traditions that make up religions.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

For all religious traditions, theology is both the **subject** and the **object** of comparative theology.

The subject – comparative theology investigates the method by which other religions have theologically explored their own texts, traditions, and practices, and how their theological systems have brought out meaning and connections within them.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

The object — the purpose of engaging in learning about other faith traditions in comparative theology is so that our understanding of our own faiths is expanded and improved. This is us doing theology in our own traditions, by learning about other traditions.

Thus, comparative theology is a classic example of St Augustine's definition of what theology as a whole is:

“faith seeking understanding”

or

“fides quaerens intellectum”



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Some examples of this can be seen in the various ways in which alternative religious approaches can illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of our own traditions. For example:

Gender – How do Hindu approaches and understanding of matters to do with gender roles and divinity illuminate Christian theological discussions of women priests?

Race – How do Christian and Jewish theological approaches to shared scriptural references to the 'Curse of Ham' differ in their understanding of race?

Sexuality – How might liberal Christian approaches to matters of sexuality and scripture be a useful source for methods of approaching similar passages of scripture in Islam?



KEY FIGURES

FRANCIS X. CLOONEY

As we have already seen, Clooney is a central figure in Comparative Theology – he is often seen as the originator of the comparative theological approach in the 1980's (although he dates its inception to a much earlier point)

His background is as a Roman Catholic priest and a scholar of Hinduism.

His publication, *Hindu God, Christian God*, in 2001 gave an insight into the form of Comparative Theology – looking at the way in which the Hindu concept of the divine can illuminate Christian concepts of God.



KEITH WARD

Keith Ward received a BA from the **University of Wales**, is an Anglican priest, and was eventually the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford.

Ward describes comparative theology as a way of doing theology in which scholars holding different world-views share together in the investigation of concepts of ultimate reality, the final human goal, and the way to achieve it.

Ward is a massively prolific writer, with scores of books exploring almost every aspect of Christian theology.



ROBERT NEVILLE

Robert Neville is a scholar of Taoism and Confucianism who has written comparative theological pieces looking at topics like Creation in these and the Christian tradition.

He is most prominent for his notion of “vague” comparison – comparisons that do not aim for exact matches, but make enough sense for mutual comprehension

e.g. *all swans are coloured* is a vague description that allows for both *all swans are black* and *all swans are white*.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

In this section, we have examined the structure and aims of the comparative theological approach, hopefully providing a solid foundation for reflection in this area.

In the next section, we will examine some common critiques of the comparative theological approach, before moving into the application of the comparative theological method to aspects of hermeneutics (the reading of texts) – in preparation for the third theme of the module as a whole.



READINGS

Winkler U, “What is Comparative Theology?” in Cheetham D et al (eds)(2011) *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe*, Leiden: Brill, p. 231-264.

Clooney F, “Comparative Theology” in Tanner K et al (eds) (2007) *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hedges P, (2016) “Comparative Theology and Hermeneutics: A Gadamerian Approach to Interreligious Interpretation”, *Religions*, Vol.7 No.7

Bernhardt R, (2012) “Comparative Theology: Between Theology and Religious Studies”, *Religions*, Vol.3, pp. 964-972