

What is Comparative Theology?

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... that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue
what treasures a generous God has distributed
among the nations of the earth.
(Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* 11)

Reflection and Experience

Bringing reflection and experience together is a matter of central importance for Michael von Brück. In my introduction I would like to use the occasion of his 60th birthday to discuss briefly this theologian, religious scholar, and Buddhism expert, well known beyond the borders of German-speaking areas, since his work opens up a perspective for a *progressive* comparative theology that I will profile in this presentation. At 26 years old, von Brück had already begun to develop his model of a theology of religions in his dissertation (1975; see von Brück 1979), putting it to the test in his life-long, personal journey within the encounter of religions.

Von Brück did not adopt the neutral, observing position of religious studies, nor did he become a Buddhist. Rather, he brought both discourses onto the solid ground of Christian theology right at the centre of his Lutheran church. This was the case from the very beginning, as his dissertation shows, in which he attempts to show a complementary connection between Karl Barth's and Rudolf Otto's views of religion. Karl Barth is usually considered the *antithesis* of the appreciation of religions. Michael von Brück, however, could make his approach fruitful for the theology of religions by placing his concerns in a new context and through dialectic extrapolation. The

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developments in Barth's notion of the Word of God and of religion offered starting points for the question of experiencing the Word of God as being governed by the Totally Other, which he develops further on the basis of Rudolf Otto.

On this solid ground of his theology of religions, von Brück set off on the path of experience in Japan and India with the aid of his teachers Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle and Bede Griffiths and became involved in dialogue, not only on an intellectual level but also on a personal one. He never placed his bets on the basic ground of a mystical unity of all religious experience but instead always emphasized that all understanding of experience is culturally conditioned. He did not follow the enlightened spiritualists found in certain spiritual groups who ridicule theology and the institutionalized shape of religion. Instead, he held on to the irredeemable multidimensionality of religions. Institutions, ethics, mysticism, and theology all offer resources for an understanding between religions. The unity of reality (Brück 1986, 1991) has its religious theological basis in trusting the goodness of creation, which entails reverence for the pluriformity of all history and the overall salvific presence within it.

On the one hand, theology of religions thus substantiates and accounts for approaching other religions, including in terms of personal experience. On the other hand, as a complementary force, the mystic dimension offers an incentive for theology to move forward in this process. Von Brück derives encouragement from his experiences and his theology;² courage is desperately needed in view of the challenges facing Christianity and other religions in our world.

Reflection and experience are not just the equipment for an individual adventure but also for theology and the Church. The referential framework for the Church's claim to truth has become radically pluralistic. These changes, however, are nothing new for living religion. In fact, a religion's core operations in-

² Concerning these statements see this small sample of his bibliography: Brück 1994b; 1994a; 1996a; 1996b; 1999; 2002; 2006; see also Brück and Werbick 1994; Brück and Lai 2001.

clude the ability to assimilate and dissimilate, as opposed to rigid ideologies that refuse to accept reality. Religions can critically accommodate various cultural contexts. The viability of religions is secured through ongoing transformational processes. Today, tepidness and chaotic amalgamation are not the necessary consequences. The assertion of identity under pluralistic conditions shows courage.

Each understanding is accompanied by a change in one's own position. Thus the unavoidable encounter of religions further propels the continuous process of transformation. The pluralization of the frames of reference and the overall presence of other religious claims to truth within these frames severely challenge religions and make returning to identity construction through violence and exclusion instead of delineation often seem attractive to the various forms of fundamentalism. At the same time, understanding and encounter can also prove themselves to be spiritually exploitative, as postcolonial studies (see Nehring 2003a, 2003b) like those E.W. Said showed (Said 1978). This is why von Brück argues for a *partnership* of identity: delineation with equal status, identity under the conditions of pluralism, mutual self-interpretation through the eyes of the other, relational differentiation and not amalgamation, etc. Other religions are part of one's own frame of reference; the others do not become strangers or adversaries. Differentiating and respectful relationships with other beliefs form one's own identity (Winkler 2005).

Michael von Brück has worked for precisely this in his church and beyond. Theology in the form of theology of religions gave him a starting basis for his academic career as well as for his argumentation. His confidence in the process of interreligious encounter is based mainly on insights in theology of religions. At the same time he confronts theology with a sharpened awareness of relativity – not arbitrariness – and the provisional nature of its statements. He has a clear view of the cultural and temporal conditionality of every dogmatic and institutional conceptualization of religion. False attachment to exclusive teachings must be checked for idolatry. Beyond that, dogmatics itself is – this is my theory – a form of discourse that can and must establish a partnership of identity. Theology must not only accompany this process of encounter but can also re-

sult from it. *Comparative theology* sets the stage for the rehearsals (Winkler 2007d) for this challenging process of transformation for Christianity in which doctrinal theology plays a central role. Comparative theology is not a new variation of an academic theological field with new materials from other religions but presupposes both theological reflection and religious experience – in one's own and other religious traditions, intellectual discourse, and existential encounter or, as von Brück often described his own existence of combining religions, descending into a *mine shaft* with the help of two opposing walls.

The Historical Roots of Comparative Theology

To answer the question of the origins of comparative theology one must first understand what is meant by the term "comparative theology." What can be considered the root? Do we understand "comparative theology" to be a newly emerging discipline in theology comprising recognized protagonists and works? Or should a similar method be found in history? This question comes too early for a comprehensive answer, and only the beginnings of historical contours can be drawn. I distinguish between three historical approaches: 1) intercultural theology, 2) older and 3) more recent comparative theology.

All of religious history can be described as a history of difference and interaction between religions and cultures, and Christianity is no exception. Based on a comprehensive concept of culture, I call a theology that developed in communication with outside references *intercultural theology*.

Comparative theology is not so much a field of theology as an attribute of theology and, thus, in the case of Christianity, as old as Christian theology itself. Patrology established the term apologist for the first representatives of this theology. The invention of heresy as an internal safeguard of dogmatics against infusions from outside discourses³ became formative for the entire history of theology. Apologetics become constitutive for

³ See Irenaeus of Lyon's two-part main work: first the polemical writings *Adversus Haereses* and then the dogmatic elaboration *Epidexis*. See Altaner and Stuiber 1980: 110-17; Drobner 2004: 154-58.

Christian theology and developed an impressive systematic up until the time of *Neoscholasticism*. The tract of *demonstratio religiosa* was developed with atheistic worldviews in mind, the *demonstratio christiana* with other religions in mind, and the *demonstratio catholica* or *ecclesiae* with other churches and denominations in mind. This type of theology was also designed comparatively and interculturally, as it were, however shaped it might be by an inevitable comparison from the standpoint of one's own superior position and therefore by strategic interest. It was clear that one's own truth was greater; the outside world held no relevant answers or even bothersome questions in store. This epoch of Catholic theology sank in isolation, robbed of the possibility to learn, and became self-contained behind thick walls until John XXIII opened the windows with the Second Vatican Council and secured a new permeability.

A comparative nature can therefore be found for the largest spectrum of outside discourses. Michael von Brück not only developed a scheme or, in fact, a rationale for an *intercultural theology* in collaboration with religious studies in a more specific way in his 1991 Munich inaugural lecture (Brück 1992); he also introduced a prelude to a theological mastery of *religious plurality* that is currently enjoying increased awareness. He analyses the basic patterns of these interactions substantiated by four examples of the encounter between religions across the history of religions. For him, it all comes down to the basic pattern of cooperation after isolation, confrontation, and tolerance. Forms of cooperation start much more concretely in specific history and the theological comprehension of differences, prepared by, and at the same time in contrast to the Enlightenment's attempts at tolerance and the nineteenth century, which had the *humanum* or essentialist concepts of unity in mind. This is why the history of guilt will become a topic in the encounters and claims to truth and the assertion of identity by different traditions of belief will be – not dissolved – but rewritten. Consensus cannot be achieved easily but must be found through a common process. The Christological principle of the

*relative Absolute*⁴ and thus the *absolute Relative* leads von Brück to express the categorical claim of the absolute in concrete and relative form. Theology is already denied mere self-referentiality through the perspective of religious studies.⁵ Today more than ever, theology can show its legitimacy only “in communication and communion with other modern living religions” (Brück 1992: 246). Based on this, religions are on the threshold of renewing their religious values. With its focus on the concrete, the existential anchoring, theological discursivity, and the enrichment through religious studies, von Brück’s design of “intercultural theology as a Christian theory of interreligious dialogue” (von Brück 1992: 258) can be understood as a justification of comparative theology, even if he does not use the term himself.

David Tracy (1987a) sets up a similarly fundamental approach. He presents, on the one hand, a method of comparing theology within *religious studies* and, on the other, a *theological* discourse on the basis of many belief traditions. Other historical approaches are more interested in the *notion* or a distinguishable *method* of comparative theology and unearth traditions of what we here call an *older comparative theology*.

The current, perhaps most prominent representative of comparative theology, Francis X. Clooney, shows a vital interest in not allowing his field and theological accomplishments to be viewed as a meddlesome innovation of theology but to place it in a tradition of research, showing terminological continuity. Thus, in his 2007 article in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Clooney 2007a: 654ff.), he lists a wider range of authors who have explicitly used the term comparative theology since the nineteenth century. A wide field of research is waiting, since the overview leads one to suspect that these terminology finds by no means constitute an excavation of re-

⁴ See the Christological principle of the *universale concretum* in Balthasar 1960: 183.

⁵ See the comprehensive exemplary study in von Brück and Lai 2001.

search history. The borders between missiological literature and religious studies approaches are fluid.

Thus, Clooney attempts to examine the intentions and methods of these approaches. The most enlightening study so far was submitted by Norbert Hintersteiner (Hintersteiner 2007a; cf. Hintersteiner 2003: 845ff; 2001: 316ff.), who, despite all reservations, identifies distinct criteria for classification in older comparative theology surrounding the *World Parliament of Religions* held in Chicago in 1893. On the one hand, it is committed to a *theological* standpoint and on the other deals with other religions comparatively. Of course, these works were subject to a Western colonial discourse of dominance, so that their results were not dissimilar to those in a denominational-apologetic vein. Only Christianity could fill the criterion of universal significance of a so-called world religion and accordingly became the measure of a world religion.

The traditions of these ventures reach as far back as German philosophy of religion and evoke Hegel’s Christianity as the absolute religion. Thus Keith Ward, one of the most influential pioneers of recent comparative theology, localizes *Friedrich Schleiermacher* as the origin of comparative theology within the history of theology (Ward 1994: 46f.), since he, with the aid of his notion of religion, distinguished it from a purely confessional theology and wanted to account for his own tradition’s doctrine of faith within the context of the history of religion.⁶ He called for a shift toward the positive religions and refrained from ecclesiastical ignorance and purely subjective piety as well as from abstract, rational speculation on the nature of religion with a claim on objectivity.

The reference to both theology’s intercultural methodology and older comparative theology exhibits considerable problems in view of a genealogical definition of comparative theology. The points of reference are either too general or too closely related to the traditional forms of apologetics. In contrast, the *newer comparative theology* has developed a rather uniform profile despite the formidable diversity of opinions.

⁶ On Ward’s reception of Schleiermacher see Winkler 2009a.

I would like to highlight the work of Oxford emeritus and Anglican Keith Ward (Ward 1987, 1994a, 1998, 2000).⁷ His primary comparative theological frontline position is aimed against those confessional theologies that are nothing more than a mouthpiece for the magisterium, do not prove themselves in the court of reason, only impart their own tradition, and only accept their own truth. For Ward, comparative theology is above all a counter-programme to denominational apologetics. In contrast, he wants theology to be held accountable in the face of the entire history of religions. It is important to him that other religions be portrayed as fairly as possible, thus showing an affinity with the methodology of phenomenology. His studies are guided by the overall themes. Thus, his comparative theology results in an idea-historical comparison. Out of respect for other religions he classifies his own tradition in a universal context of salvation history and looks for a deeper understanding of both his own and other answers. Having said this, Ward still understands his comparative theology as being denominational and linked to a certain perspective: the studies by Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine (1991) and Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1993),⁸ and the historically oriented works of

⁷ On methodology see Ward 1994: 3-49, and for biographical notes see Ward 2003. For the discussion see Ward 2003 and Vroom 2001. In November 2008 Ward took up a quite critical discussion for the first time in the German-speaking part of the world; see my response to Keith Ward: Winkler 2009a.

⁸This Islam scholar and one of the founders of the pluralistic theology of religion developed his own program for a world theology comparable to this generation of comparative theology. As early as the 1950s he made a point of Muslims and Christians studying together at what was then his McGill Institute of Islamic Studies in Montreal, Canada, just as he set it up later as director of the inter-religious discussion forum of the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions. An important prerequisite for him was not just knowledge in the field of religious studies, but also exchange between the participants. See Smith 1989. For a critical appraisal see Nehring 2005.

University of Notre Dame emeritus David B. Burrell (Burrell 1986, 1993) have a comparable approach.

As a second example, I would like to cite the probably most interesting collaboration, the *Cross Cultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, which was conducted at Boston University from 1995 until 1999. This collaboration between scholars from five different world religions and worldviews resulted in a trilogy (see Neville 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). The project leader was Robert C. Neville, who, along with Francis X. Clooney, is probably one of the most important and leading theoreticians of comparative theology and has contributed decisively to the development of the field and presented an extremely differentiated concept of methodology (Neville 1991, 2006, 2008; Yong and Heltzel 2004). Neville is a Methodist and a qualified and renowned expert on Confucianism. One can observe the developments of the project and the participants in the three volumes of the Boston project – especially in Neville's closing words and Wesley J. Wildman's project journal. The methodology (Neville 2000a), the selection of scholars, the project setting, everything was – not unlike Ward's concern – designed to be objective and authentic portrayals of other belief traditions as free of prejudice as possible (Neville 2000b) and also to reach comparisons between them progressively. The project is one of a kind so far, distinguished by the concentration and discipline of the scholarly and personal discourse and by a high degree of methodical reflexivity. Considerations on methodology already made it clear that just the choice of topics and appraisal of their representative relevance bring normative components into the equation. The normative and therefore consequential theological nature of comparative theology needs further reflection.⁹

The newest initiative goes back to Francis X. Clooney, a Jesuit and expert on Tamil Hinduism. In 2006 he founded the *Comparative Theology Group* at the *American Academy of Religion* (Clooney 2007b; Winkler 2008c: 132ff.), which has since been used as a discussion forum worldwide. The group is a much

⁹ See Neville's contribution to the Basel Conference 2008 and my response in Winkler 2009a.

looser unit than the Boston project but offers the space necessary for an open and creative process which is thus exposed to a discerning audience. About a hundred scholars worldwide have participated in this process of research and exchange in the last three years. The chair and mentor, Francis Clooney, can personally look back on an enormously productive creative phase in the last two decades¹⁰ and is now considered the most important spokesperson of comparative theology. Clooney has a well-thought-out methodology that he continuously refined in the course of the monographs. In comparison to Smith, Ward, Neville, and others, Clooney's central approach has less to do with freeing one's own faith from the narrowness of apologetics and less with the objective and fair portrayal of other religious traditions than it does with the creative process of the interaction of texts from the participants' perspectives.¹¹ Clooney's hand will be recognizable again in the following systematic section of this paper. In addition to the representatives and groups mentioned there is, of course, a whole range of individual studies and authors who have rendered outstanding services to comparative theology.

Parameters of a Systematic Description

It has become apparent through the structure of the historical survey that I place the very different forms of the approaches mentioned in relationship with one another and allow a specific concept of comparative theology to guide me. This concept will be systematically exemplified in the following third section. By this I understand the defining characteristics both descriptively, in that they include the widest possible profile of finished works, as well as normatively, in that I also want to chart the contours of comparative theology research.

¹⁰ See his most important studies, beginning with his dissertation: Clooney 1990, 1993, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2008a, 2008b.

¹¹ For a concise summary of the development of Clooney's methodology see Hintersteiner 2007a and 2007b.

Confessional Theology, but not Depreciating Apologetics

On the one hand, the intercultural and interreligious reference belongs to the earliest of theological discussions and in this respect theology has always been done comparatively. On the other hand, this very reference was so often characterized by polemic apologetics that the central thrust of both comparative theology and religious studies was in reaction to it. Comparative theology is an *anti-apologetic programme against the self-aggrandizing and self-immunization of one's own faith*, directed against the degradation of other religions through a hermeneutic of suspicion, which one can study in the exemplary early Christian *Adversus Judaeos*¹² writings, and against the isolationist rhetoric of uniqueness, ignorance and blindness. But not every theology that deals with comparisons to other religions is already comparative theology. (1) Comparative theology relates to other religions with a *benevolence, a willingness to learn, and critical appreciation*. (2) According to David Tracy's differentiation (see above, p. 236), the *theological nature* of comparative theology consists in the fact that, materially, the theologies of religion themselves belong to their field of research and thus their claims to truth are taken seriously and, even more, that formally comparative theology is *normatively reflexive* and does not try to avoid the question of truth. Comparative theology is *denominational* and has its place in the sphere of creed and church, even if the details of the relationship may be laden with tension.

Theology, not just Religious Studies

Along with older comparative theology, religious studies go back to a common date of origin. It became a true alternative to theology, which gave itself a bad name in the case of religion through its distortions, while religious studies were thought capable of objectivity. Why should one not just continue to do religious studies and still give theology credit?

¹² For an example of the strategy of immunization see Winkler 2008a.

Theology is reflection from the inside perspective and advocates claiming validity for one's own truth. Because of this, it is in danger of only relating to other religious traditions out of apologetic interest. In contrast, according to its founding aspirations, religious studies chooses an outside perspective for observing religions, not judging but rather describing and classifying. But it has suffered several upheavals and posed grave problems concerning its own subject. How can a religion be grasped and understood, when one only knows it from the perspective of the observer? The search for an essentialist concept of religion could neither remove the unavoidable fixed standpoint of the observer nor attain an appropriate approach to the concrete historical and existential realities of religions up to today when the notion of religion is in the process of dissolution after the cultural turn.¹³

The contribution of religious studies and its rich empirical material are of great value for comparative theology. Religious studies is indispensable for theology. The only point of contention is that there is no methodical sufficiency for religious studies, and the claim to sole representation for religions and thus the delegitimization of theology. Theology has developed a sense for the importance of participant perspectives, since it is necessary to submit oneself to a religion's demands in order to understand it. Religions are parameters of meaning that ask not just to be observed and reflected upon but also to be existentially tried out and experienced. Although it is true that observers can usually grasp the grammar better than participants, religious studies has also carried out significant amendments to their ideal of objectivity, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has done, for example, through a constitutive incorporation of the self-interpretation of participants (see Smith 1963; Schmidt-Leukel 1997: 85; 2005: 56f., 167; 2009; Tworuschka 2001: 132, 136).

It is not possible to figure out either the problem of the originating point of view, the position from which one carries out the observation, or the problem of the consecutive point of view, since research has its consequences, which is especially

¹³ See my discussion in Sabbatucci 1988 and Winkler 2008c.

true for reflections on religion. Because of this, the question of the authority of representation is intensified, if it is not just about fair depictions but about giving an opinion, taking responsibility, confronting history as well as guilt, and, finally, making modifications.¹⁴ This is something only participants can do. Here comparative theologians get down to work when they insist on being theologians and consistently bearing responsibility in their own churches.

Discourse on the Rationale of a Theology of Religions, not a Blind Alley

What enables theology to act not only partially and oriented toward participants – in other words polemically and apologetically – but also respectfully toward others and yet without abandoning its standpoints as in religious studies? Theology of religions responds to these questions. It accounts for Christianity's stance toward other religions and thus for its own self-understanding. Comparative theology does not assume a depreciatory but rather a positive relationship to other religions. This fundamental prerequisite needs a thorough *theological rationale* and – in the face of the overwhelming counter-traditions – a convincing theological justification. The *theology of religions* must carry out this rational discourse.

Theology has gone through a change in this respect and the church has gone through a conversion. It has moved away from *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (see Beinert 1990; Bernhardt 1990: 53ff.; D'Costa 1986: 52ff.; Sullivan 1992). This was originally a paraenetic call to imperiled Christians but then mutated to a theological axiom of a Catholic claim to absolute truth and the theorem of damnation in hell for pagans, Jews, heretics, and

¹⁴ John Paul II lucidly recognized that the new relation to other religions confronts the Catholic Church with its own guilt, which, although they are lectured about it from the outside, can only be authoritatively and representatively confessed on the inside. See John Paul II 2001.

schismatics,¹⁵ for whom not even hope was allowed,¹⁶ i.e. putting their destiny into the hands of God through prayer.

But the Catholic Church made a discovery.¹⁷ The Second Vatican Council now calls on Christians to “learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth” (*Ad Gentes* [AG] 11). The Council has brought about a revolution in the position of the Catholic Church toward other religions and especially toward Judaism¹⁸ with its declaration *Nostra Aetate* (NA) (see Siebenrock 2005; Sinkovits and Winkler 2006) which has withstood the crossfire to this day.¹⁹ Yet the Second Council did not engage in diplomatic concessions to the spirit of the times, which one could easily dismiss afterwards, but anchored its theology of religion to the center of its own faith and identity by means of a Trinitarian theology.²⁰ At the same time, the declaration does not begin condescendingly with a co-opting concept of God (Sander 2006) but with the universal solidarity of all humans (NA 1.1), which is based in the “one ... origin” and leads to the “one ... final goal” (NA 1.2). Religions serve the dignity of human’s questioning spirit. They are a place of truth and holiness, which they have received: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions ... [their] ways of conduct and of life ... precepts and teachings which ... often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (NA 2.2). The truth and holiness is a gift from the *logos*-like ray of

¹⁵ In the Decree for the Copts from the Council of Florence (1439-1445): ND (Neuner and Dupuis) 1351.

¹⁶ Pope Pius IX in 1864 in the “Syllabus of Modern Errors” ND 2917.

¹⁷ Thus the quotation at the beginning of this article; see Winkler 2007c: “More than Tolerance.”

¹⁸ For more on systematic theology see Winkler 2009c.

¹⁹ Cf. the controversy surrounding the Jewish mission in reaction to the reinstatement of the Pius X brotherhood: Discussion group “Jews and Christians.”

²⁰ For more detail see Winkler 2007a: 179ff.; Winkler 2009b: 175ff.

truth. The Catholic Church urges its believers to the recognition, preservation and promotion (!) of the “good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values” (NA 2.3) that one can accordingly find in other faiths. The gifts of God, the *spiritual* goods (*bona spiritualia*) are also given to other religions, the gift that He Himself is. God reveals Himself to them through the *Holy Spirit*. Their life in truth and holiness is a life from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the following sentence with the proclamation of Christ as the way, truth, and life (NA 2.2) is by no means a contradiction of this *Magna Carta* for theology of religions but the logical context of a *Trinitarian* theological²¹ argumentation!

God as source and goal, the Christ *logos* as the fountainhead of truth, and the gift of the Holy Spirit form the Trinitarian criteria of a Catholic theology of religions. They are the measures of a theological appreciation of other religions and constitute strong grounds for the legitimacy of comparative theology.

Comparative theology is not the alternative to a theology of religions fallen into difficulties because the theology of religions is an explanatory discourse for comparative theology (Winkler 2009b). Comparative theology and the theology of religions have different tasks and are mutually related. The theology of religions must be able to argue the potential equality of religious traditions and the constitutivity of religious differences for the portrayal of one’s own respective faith. Comparative theology ventures, with this encouragement, into the concrete and detail-oriented field of reflection and experience of religions: the formations of discourse on the one side influence those on the other, and vice versa. Because of this, both fields have the obligation to interconnect and not to become separated.

²¹ See a summary of Trinitarian theological essays with a comprehensive bibliography in Bernhardt 2005: 219ff.

Intrareligious Dialogue: A Spiritual Stance

Vatican II did not just affirm the discovery of the Holy Spirit in other religions and file this with the tradition's dogmatic materials. The Church also entered into a new, qualitatively different realm. *Nostra Aetate* has the Latin title "de habitudine," meaning the new *position* that the Catholic Church was adopting toward other religions. A spiritual response to other religions and not just a change in the theological argumentation corresponds with the *bona spiritualia*, the spiritual life in these religions. A spiritual stance is now needed (Winkler 2008b)! With a spiritual attitude, it is possible to conduct a *discretio spirituum*, i.e. a spiritual discrimination, and it is no longer necessary to entrench oneself behind apologetic prejudications or take refuge in indifference.

The option of respect for others in theology of religions calls for a "new spirituality" (Schmidt-Leukel 2004). It does not simply emerge from a theoretical decision, deductive, as it were, but can only be nurtured by concretely encountering other religious faiths in very diverse ways, beginning with research in religious studies, interreligious dialogue, friendships, through rituals and art, to experiences in another religion's spirituality and spiritual praxis. As indispensable as these external encounters are, they remain on the outside if they are not supported by an internal stance and an inner dialogue. Only in this way is internal participation in the experience of others possible (Dupuis 2006, 2004).

Raimon Panikkar coined the phrase *intrareligious dialogue* to describe this (Panikkar 1978). Given the impossibility of establishing a doctrinal synthesis between two religions – Hinduism and Christianity in Panikkar's case – or that there are indeed actual incommensurabilities separating two traditions, Panikkar builds on this inner dialogue. His model of interpretation, gained from an intuitive and mystic level of experience, is the triune cosmotheandric principle (Panikkar 1973, 1993, 1999) expressed in the Christophany (Panikkar 2006: 191ff.) of the whole universe. Dialogue results in an inner trans-

formation,²² but it first of all presupposes this willingness, at least implicitly, which is indispensable for comparative theology.

Interreligious Dialogue from Communion to Affiliation:
Double Belonging

Comparative theology lives from the fact that theologians engage with other religious traditions respectfully and participant-oriented and with a clear idea of their standpoint, solid theological reasoning and a spiritual stance in order to practice theology in dialogue with it. Diverse social forms are used for this exchange. One of these is the intense personal dedication that some individuals have when they anchor themselves in a second religion so far that one can speak of a double belonging. Such biographies of individual interreligiously gifted people from whom theological reflections have arisen are exceptions, which should not disguise the fact that the subject has become widely relevant, because intra- and interreligious dialogue are inseparable from each other and are mutually intertwined. I have emphasized the aspect of the first as the prerequisite for the second. Whoever enters into one of the most diverse forms of interreligious dialogues or interreligious theological debates will not be able to avoid questions of their own personal transformation and modification of their own position of faith.

The well-known examples, Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, Henri Le Saux/Swami Abhishiktānanda, Bede Griffiths, Raimon Panikkar, and Frithjof Schuon, bear witness to the existential struggle for their calling. They are not only and primarily founding fathers of comparative theology; they are, despite the extreme singularity of their biographies, rather models for a very funda-

²² The limits of Panikkar's approach are, in my opinion, where understanding and acceptance are too close to each other and too little space remains for incommensurabilities and the *discretio* mentioned above. One can easily underestimate the cumbersome differences of *beliefs* under the impression of a common *faith*.

mental question of religious belonging²³ that a large number of people and scholars doing comparative theology are currently asking themselves. The key concept of hybridity in cultural studies has reached religious belonging and has been observed in the sociology of religion and religious studies for years. The churches have difficulties with the phenomenon, especially in the case of a theologian or other representative from their own ranks. For this reason, the emerging discourse can contribute to objectification.

Catherine Cornille of Boston College has published a highly regarded volume²⁴ in which she uses her critical analysis to sort, organize, and classify the phenomena and thus increase awareness of the highly diverse realities subsumed under the terms double and multiple religious belonging on the one hand and to hone the term systematically on the other. 1) Strictly speaking, she finds the term self-contradictory, since it assumes that religions see themselves as comprehensive horizons of meaning and therefore insist on undivided belonging from their followers. It follows that there can only be varying degrees of drawing near, and in the narrower sense there can be no multiple belonging. 2) A subjective statement and personal experience of belonging to an additional religion are not sufficient for belonging; rather, belonging depends upon mutuality and thus objective recognition. Selective sympathy does not establish belonging by a long shot. 3) Another reduction is adopting the other religion primarily in its functional or ritualistic aspects and putting the doctrinal dimension last. 4) Multiple religious belonging harms spiritual ripening because it prevents complete surrender to one religion and instead raises the ego as the criterion, which counters spiritual growth.

²³ Instead of the currently abundant literature I point to the conference transcript: Bernhardt and Schmidt-Leukel 2008; see Winkler 2009b: 182ff.

²⁴ See Cornille 2002, 2008a, 2008b. Cf. Gort *et al.* 1992; Gira and Scheuer 2000; Phan 2003, 2004; Schoen 1996, 2000.

Besides Cornille's illuminative analyses,²⁵ the last thesis harbors considerable problems. One can admittedly agree with Cornille that there is the danger of endlessly searching and avoiding the intractable and challenging aspects of every faith. Getting to know another religion does not permit using it as a quarry to be mined.²⁶ However, her ideal view misses two other phenomena. First of all, her thesis suffers from too high an identification of religion and transcendent reality, which calls for undivided surrender, and, second, she disregards convincing evidence of experiences of practiced belonging (Le Saux 2005; Hackbarth-Johnson 2003). The reflections of a comparative theological methodology in particular have developed a sensibility for how these paths in two or more religious traditions can be undertaken responsibly.

Order of Discourse, More than Comparative

The term *comparative* suggests that comparative theology is a theology that compares religions, similar to *comparative religious studies*. Since comparing belongs to our everyday activities and the basic operations of all sciences, it is assumed to be a simple process. However, that which sounds trivial and is used daily is of considerable methodological complexity. I will state the seemingly simple prerequisites for a comparison. Considerable questions are raised in applying this to theological proceedings (Schenk 1990; Schenk and Krause 2001). 1) The entities to be compared (*comparata*) must be defined, since a comparison can exist only if the *comparata* show both common aspects as well as differences; thus those aspects that are incomparable and opposites are excluded. That is, a comparison is impossible if the *comparata* only have either opposing or common characteristics. 2) A comparative relationship (*tertium comparationis*) must be in-

²⁵ See also the most recent study by Cornille (2008b) with the provoking title, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, which is directed against assumptions taken with all too much levity.

²⁶ Bettina Bäumer, who has lived for over four decades in India in faithful continuity and has found belonging in Hinduism, emphasizes this. See Bäumer 2007.

licated. 3) Then the comparison can be carried out. Comparisons result from the *interplay* of an analytic (description of *comparata*, empirical) and synthetic procedure (finding common qualities and differences, ideational). 4) The logic of comparison is influenced by science, in my opinion, and assumes that the cognizing and comparing *subject* is opposite the object to be compared with it. 5) A comparison is result-oriented: *something new emerges*. 6) Epistemologically, both *comparata* need not be equated on the same scale, but instead, according to Leibniz, comparisons have the purpose “that from the knowledge of the one the other can be known” (Schenk and Krause 2001: 667). 7) Comparing does not follow any syllogistic mechanism but falls into the realm of esthetics (*aisthesis*) and therefore calls for “*wit and acumen*” (Schenk and Krause 2001: 679) in finding similarities.

Like a whole range of academic fields (comparative literature, comparative philosophy, etc.) the scientific study of religion and especially the phenomenology of religion are devoted to comparing. With the crisis of their methodology and their entire research design, practically all classic *topoi* in religious studies have been discussed because of the cultural turn. The border between religious studies and theology has remained unchanged. Despite complex interferences, the *comparata* are clearly separated and differentiated from the subject of understanding in the scientific study of religions.

This is different in comparative theology. It is distinguished not only by the comparison of theologies, but its subject is also by definition involved in at least one of the *comparata* and involved in others in varying degrees. Moreover, the *tertium comparationis* is not determined by but takes on form during the process. For this reason the logic of comparison is subject to such formidable modifications that elucidation of a possible order of discourse in comparative theology is necessary.

The pioneers of the newer comparative theology mentioned above followed the methodological considerations of religious studies of their time for the most part and accordingly worked on its development personally. Keith Ward, W.C. Smith, Ninian Smart, and others wanted to relativize the predominance and autarchy of Christian occidental theologizing that was taken for granted by looking with fascination at the

large incidence of related ideas in the history of religion. The discussion on methodology first became intensified in the younger generation, first and foremost through *Robert Cummings Neville* (Neville 2000a, 2000b; Clooney 2007b, Winkler 2008c: 132ff.). His main focus in his threefold concept of *logic of comparison* is to find the point of comparison through process (Neville 2007, 2009). The first *identification of a comparative category* must be vague and comprehensive and must be open to modification. The contents of the comparative category first become increasingly defined in the following *specification*, which in turn leads to further adjustments of the comparative category. For this he developed a detailed analytical method in order to achieve as fair a portrayal as possible of other theological concepts. Finally, the comparative correlations are described by *comparative judgments* in the form of hypotheses.

Neville arrived at these three steps through his competence as a religious studies scholar. The key theological point becomes visible where he brings the category of importance into the equation as a selection criterion for both the comparative content as well as for the comparative questions asked. For Neville, importance zeros in on both the representativeness of a selection or question with regard to the religious tradition being studied – i.e. the fairness of the portrayal and research – as well as on the relevance that anchors identity in an outer reference, i.e. the topological character of a theology and its capacity to solve problems. The role of the participant perspective was not sufficiently reflected upon, in my opinion, in either the identification or the specification of a comparative category, which is noticeable in the further question of the connection between the starting constellation and the goal, thus between the category of importance and the comparative judgment's claim to truth. In what sense do comparative judgments have a normative character? Only when this is clarified can it be asked what goals and consequences comparative theology has for the starting situation of denominational theology, so to say how denominational theology will be changed by comparative theology.

Neville's work does have merit for the following reasons. 1) He arms comparative theology with his methodology against the charge from religious studies that it lacks *objectivity*. It can

withstand such charges, not least of all because the same substantial questions were put to religious studies in the postcolonial discussions after E.W. Said's book on orientalism (Said 1978). 2) Furthermore, it has been clear at least since Neville that comparative theology cannot continue with the theme of the phenomenology of religion²⁷ and substantiating and refining the tables of parallel positing with studies on contents. The order of tracts of Christian theology is also only of limited use as an instrument for classification.²⁸ 3) Comparative theology, however, finds unique and innovative orders of discourse with "wit and acumen." Clooney's lifework provides an eloquent testimonial to this. Each of his books contains reflections on and continuations of this exploration. Doing comparative theology is a process of *creativity and spontaneity*, which can be reflected further in the spirit of Neville with the help of Charles Sanders Peirce's abduction (Neville 2008).²⁹ Comparative theology's discoveries cannot be inferred or gained by a process of re-inference, thus neither deduced nor induced, but they can very well be abductively comprehended and reviewed. An "epistemic instinct" (Schärfl 2006: 146) for establishing such creative relationship develops through diving deeply into another religious tradition. 4) Neville's methodology shows something of the interminability of the process. It preserves a crucial hermeneutic and thus theological knowing of the basic *skepticism* regarding the *translatability*³⁰ of religious traditions and beliefs that often self-critically accompanies Clooney's work.

²⁷ Exemplarily and comprehensively worked out in Van der Leeuw 1977.

²⁸ The only German language dogmatic so far that consistently responds to other religions in terms of content and should therefore not be underestimated follows the nature of the genre in its systematic structure: Barth 2001. See my review: Winkler 2003.

²⁹ See also the recent study by Deuser (2009: 236ff., 471ff.).

³⁰ See the fundamental study by Hintersteiner (2001). For further information see note 6 above.

Purpose and Goal Time Signature

Why comparative theology? This question is usually answered implicitly, and one can distinguish the following answers:

- 1) One's own intellectual history and theology should be led beyond the confinement to Western and Christian traditions.
- 2) Other religions should be freed from the inferiority of Christian paternalism by showing that they have produced equally high standing contributions to the human history of ideas.
- 3) Other religious traditions should be honored/acknowledged not just by religious studies and empirical descriptions but rather by studying and discussing their theology.
- 4) One can get to know one's own belief better and enrich it through the dialogue with other religious belief traditions.
- 5) The doctrines formed in the traditions are answers to enduring human questions, so that one can no longer afford the luxury of limitation to just one tradition.
- 6) The dialogue between religions and a common theological discourse are, in the face of religions' susceptibility to violence (see Hoff and Winkler 2010), the order of the day for strengthening the religions' resources for peace for the sociopolitical handling of violence scenarios.
- 7) The global situation of world communication also calls for a global theological discourse.
- 8) The comeback of religions diagnosed in the Western industrial nations should be met with a serious theological discourse on the basis of concrete religions.
- 9) The interfaith exchange of spiritualities should be critically accompanied by a theological grounding and recontextualization in the respective tradition and a theological discourse on the traditions.
- 10) As a respiritualization and social acceptability of personal professions of faith progress, it is no longer taboo for religious scholars to come out as believers and to also engage in theological deliberation.

Some of the answers occur alone, some in combination. They can be simplified again by division into objectives that are

predominantly directed toward broadening one's own horizons and those that want to raise the issue of the foreign. The question must be asked of the first group if the other religious traditions are not thus instrumentalized, if this approach is really able to acknowledge the other and to grasp it in its intrinsic value and its own world, if the epistemic interest of use is instrumentalized for oneself. The second group must be asked why one should be concerned with another religion, and if that is mainly answered positively, why this particular religion, and not another, is now indicated. Is there such a thing as a purely museum occupation with a religion or an interest as a means unto itself? Is it not a misjudgment of religions from the very outset to view them as pieces in a museum, without claims or the intent to interpret?

If comparative theology does not want to be exposed by such questions it must proceed not just with respect to having more material but also be more detail oriented while clearly stating its goals. Just as the time of dogmatic handbooks is coming to an end, the great religious histories of ideas also belongs to the past. Comparative theology must orient itself to real problems and specify its interests and expectations of solutions as a starting point for discourse and not as fixed axioms. 1) In this way one's own interest in learning can be modified into a true interest in the other, or those who study other religions can return to the question of their own standpoint. 2) Those theologians who take the signs of the times seriously will also be able to offer theories of social relevance, assuming responsibility in the face of their own and other religious traditions. 3) A problem-based approach helps to prevent mystification of one's own or precisely another tradition. The challenges experienced and mastered by the Catholic Church in the presence of these signs of the time, especially in Vatican II, also take place analogously in the dialogue between religions. They likewise cause speechlessness and thus an incentive for finding a new language in the face of "joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time" (*Gaudium et Spes* 1). Both the signs of the time as well as the earnest and intensive encounter of religions give them the ability to speak up in the present world. 4) A future dogmatics will be molded by comparative theology. New orders of discourse will emerge alongside the usual tractates. Voices from

other religious traditions will be worked into the discussion on the history of doctrine and differentiated answers will be found. 5) The text-oriented research design of a Christian comparative theology must be expanded to include oral traditions and ethical, ritualistic, esthetic, and other practices. Through this enlargement of the basis of discourse, comparative theology becomes, on the one hand, more just toward other religious traditions, in which reflections find different focal points. On the other hand, the story of encounter and learning becomes considerably broader. (6) Religious pluralism, as it can be experienced today, and the pluriform orientation of contemporaries is also a current signature problem that theology can face up to and thus show its rationalism. Ecclesial dogmatics must portray its faith under pluralist conditions and enter into partnerships of identity with other religions, because it is capable of critical and respectful discourse at the level of reflection and experience, which calls for the diverse spectrum of religious and cultural human experiences. Herein lies the truth of the life work of Michael von Brück up to now.

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