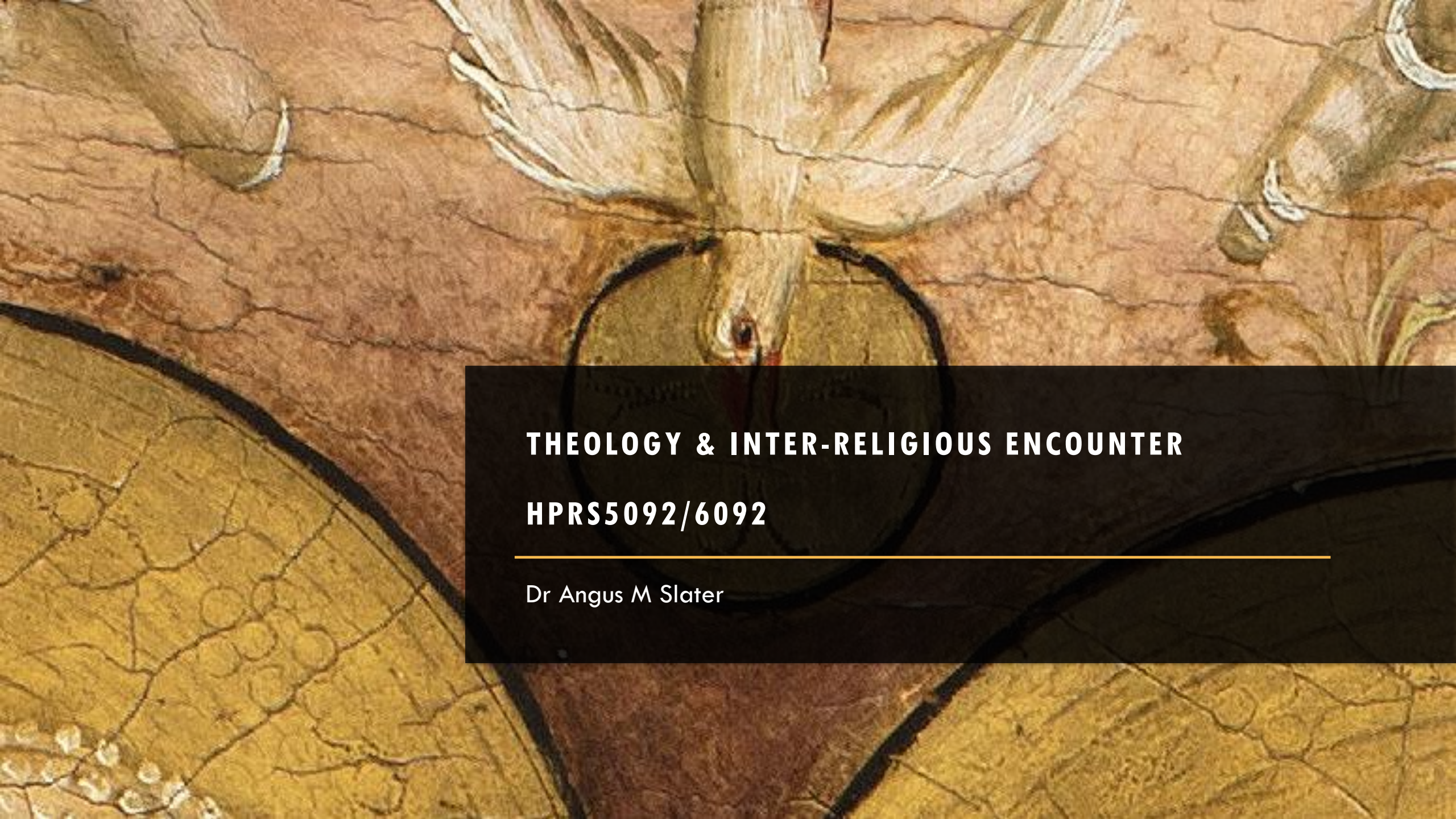




THEOLOGY & INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

HPRS5092/6092

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the last section, we introduced the methodology of comparative theology, a central aspect of contemporary interfaith studies.

The previous section aimed to introduce you to the kind of subjects covered by comparative theology, but also to introduce you to the method by which Comparative Theology is done – it is this methodology that forms the core of comparative theology.



REVISION

You also had four readings (Winkler, Clooney, Hedges, & Bernhardt) to complete and to discuss on the Moodle forums.

Two of these readings (Winkler & Clooney) were more focused on providing greater depth to the definition of Comparative Theology were had explored, while the second two (Hedges & Bernhardt) looked in greater detail at the application of a comparative theological approach.





LET'S DO SOME COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY!

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One of the best ways of becoming more familiar with a methodology is to examine the way in which others have gone about using it.

A useful location to find good quality examples of comparative theology is the Journal of Comparative Theology, based at the Harvard Divinity School. The journal website appears to be undergoing updates at the moment, but it offers a trove of free-to-access examples of comparative theological thinking - www.comparativetheology.org



LET'S DO SOME COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY!

Take the time to read through the two example articles given in the readings folder for this section (Ro on comparative approaches to sacred space & Archer on notions of time in Islamic and Catholic thought).

Remember, you are reading not just the content of the two articles (as interesting as it hopefully is!), but also reading for the method that the two scholars are using — how are they examining these areas and what methodological choices are they making.

Once you have read both pieces, I would like you to engage in sketching out your own example of comparative theological practice.



LET'S DO SOME COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY!

I would like you to identify a theme that you think offers scope for a useful point of comparative theology between your tradition (or a tradition you identify with) and another religious tradition that you are somewhat familiar with.

Sketch out why you feel this area offers potential for an instance of comparative theology, and the broad outlines that you believe offer an interesting comparison. By doing so, hopefully you can focus on the aims and objectives of comparative theology as a method for interfaith study.

As students of interfaith studies, there must be some reason you are interested in the overlap between religious traditions — use this!





LET'S DO SOME COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY!

Reflect on some of the following questions:

What sources and resources does your religious tradition draw on to address the identified area?

How are these sources brought into a narrative – what are the conceptual bases?

Are these sources, resources, and uses of them different in the other religious tradition? If so, how?

How might the differences in approach and the different conceptual bases result in a different outcome? Do the religious traditions differ in outcome?

LET'S DO SOME COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY!

Remember – comparative theology is not just a comparison of the outcomes religious traditions come to in question, but also HOW they come to those conclusions.

What is there about the process undergone by the other religious tradition in producing their opinion that could inform your approach?

Sketch out your answer and engage in some discussion on the Moodle forum with your fellow students – perhaps they are members of the tradition you are aiming to engage with!



READINGS

Brandon Ro: “(Re)interpreting the Cosmic History of the Mormon Temple Experience: Theological Connections between Jewish and Catholic Sacred Space”

George Archer: “The Hinterlands of the Qur’ān: The Edges of the Eternal and the Temporal in Early Ḥanbalite Thought with Analogs to Catholic Theology”





CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

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In this section, I want to highlight four commonly made forms of criticism of comparative theology as a practice and methodology.

Your reading for the previous section should hopefully have given you a solid understanding of the nature of comparative theology, but often our understanding can be best sharpened and focused by engaging with criticisms of the position – they illuminate weaknesses or specificities we would otherwise miss!

These four criticisms largely tackle the purpose and objective of comparative theology – make up your own mind if you find them convincing!



CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

An example criticism might be the following:

“As comparative detail accumulates, and we realise the ever-multiplying shades of difference between religious concepts, we drift towards mere description and gradually reduce the meaning we ascribe to the aspects of the other and our own traditions”

This critique arises, as I hope you recognise, from a particularist approach to matters of religion.

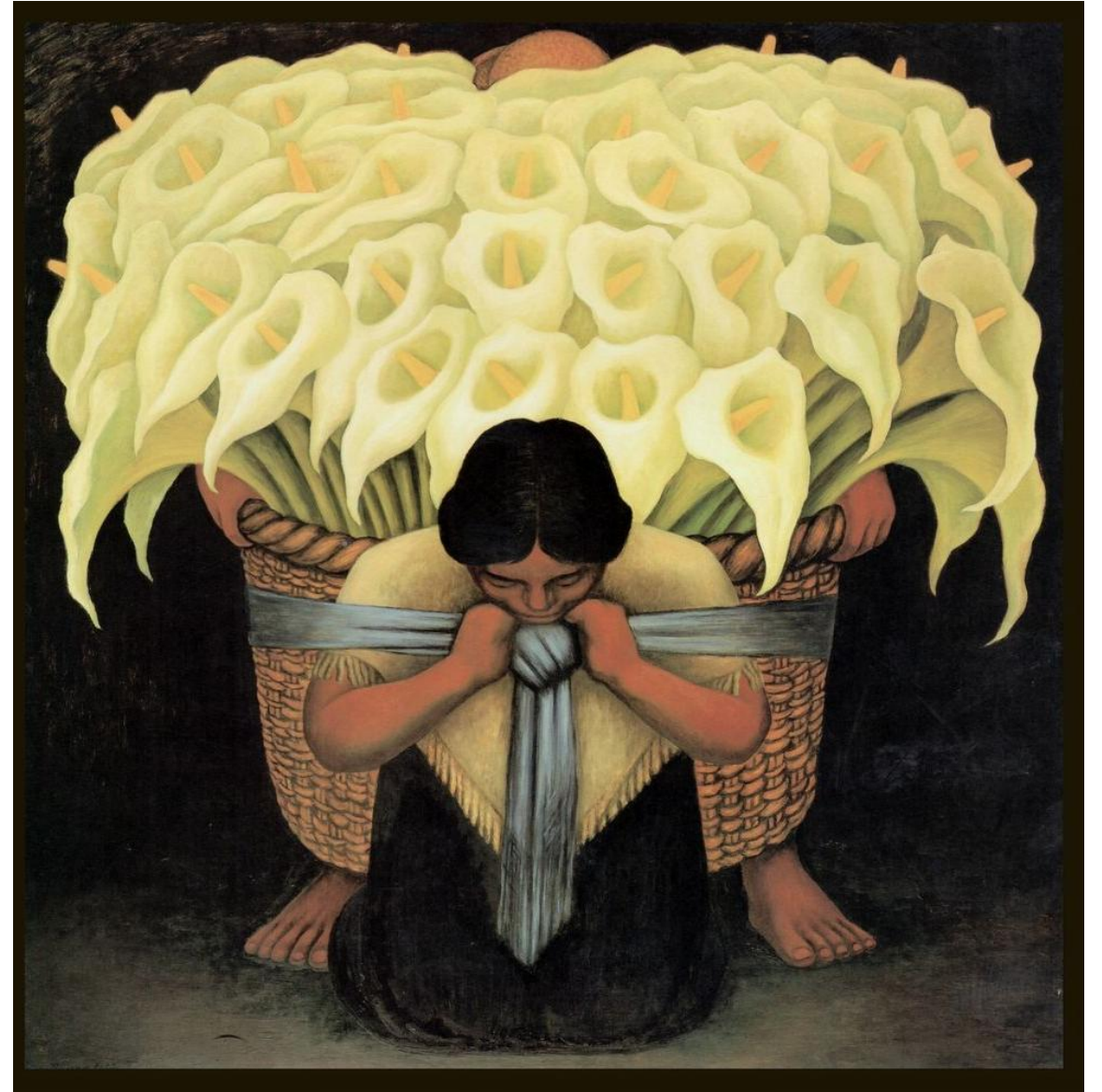


CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Comparative religion relies on there being intelligibility between traditions – yet often we are hesitant to suggest we “understand” something at all. How can we avoid that impasse?

Does comparative theology require understanding of the other religious tradition? To what extent can comparative theology be done without it?

How might a more developed form of interfaith learning guard against non-understanding?

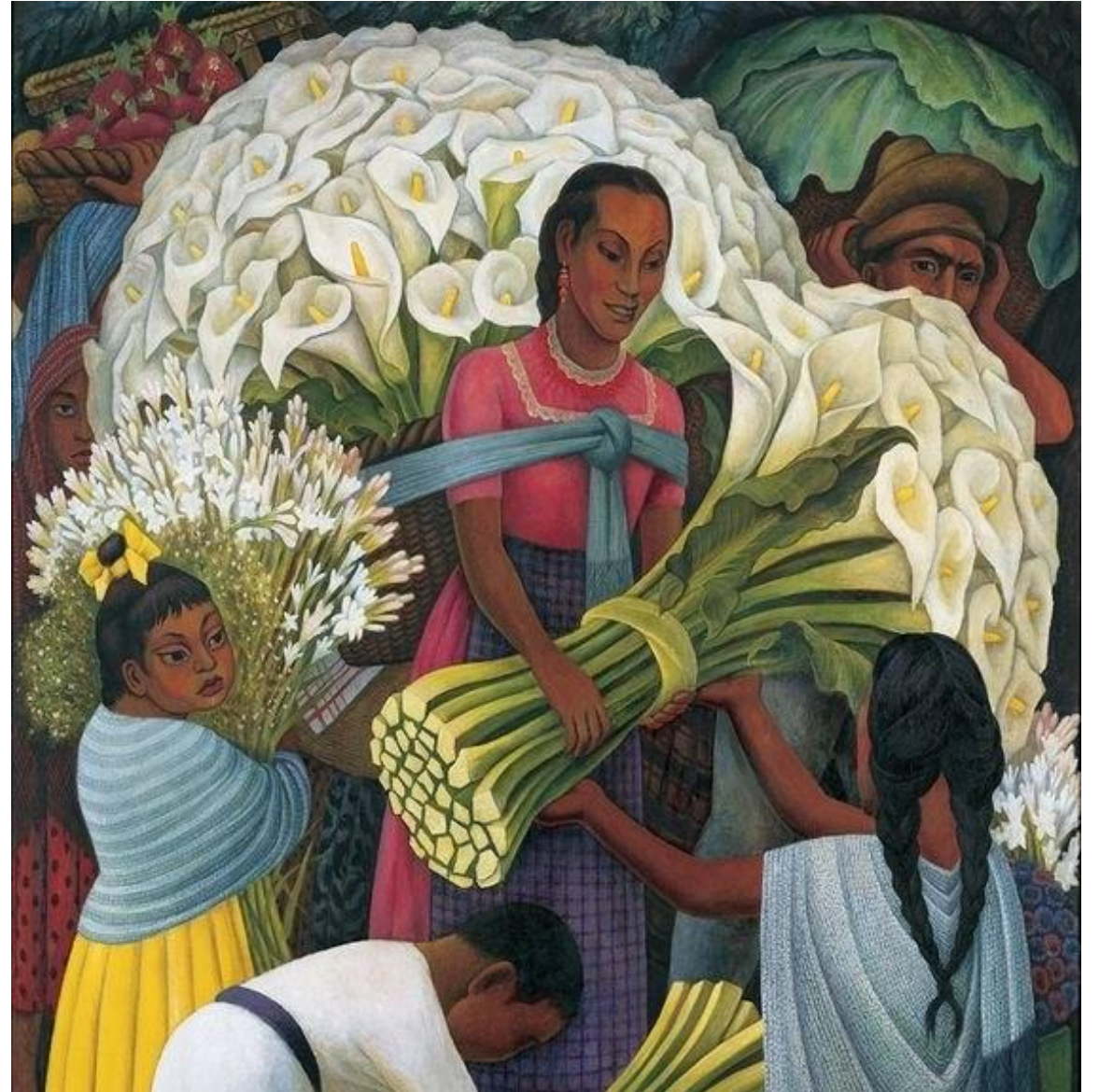


CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Another example criticism might be:

“Comparative theology relies on using the insights of the other tradition in order to develop the insights of one’s own. This shows an appreciate for the other – but only as a tool to use, a resources to exploit. This is just (Christian) religious imperialism all over again...”

This may be framed as a post-colonial critique of the practice of comparative theology, where it’s intentions towards the other are questioned

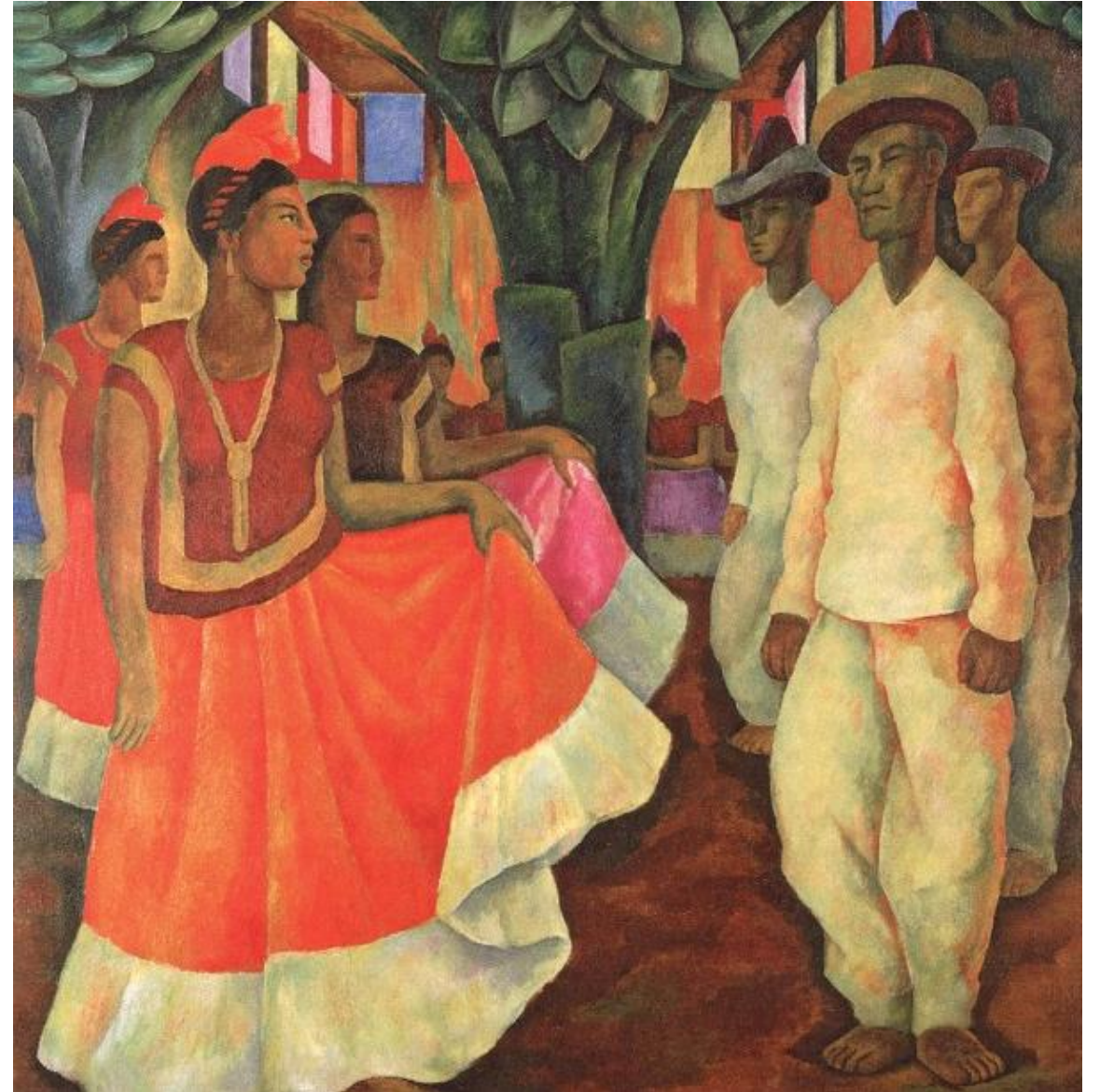


CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Is this a fair reflection of comparative theology? Or merely a reading of one way of doing comparative theology?

How might a comparative theologian respond to this form of critique?

Is any attempt to understand or categorise the other intellectual imperialism?



CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Another critical example is as follows:

“Comparative theology has, generally, been a largely text focused exercise — attempting to understand the religious other through the lens of the sacred scriptures and theological texts associated with it.”

This is an example of a critique of the practiced methodology of comparative theology, that highlights some assumptions within it.



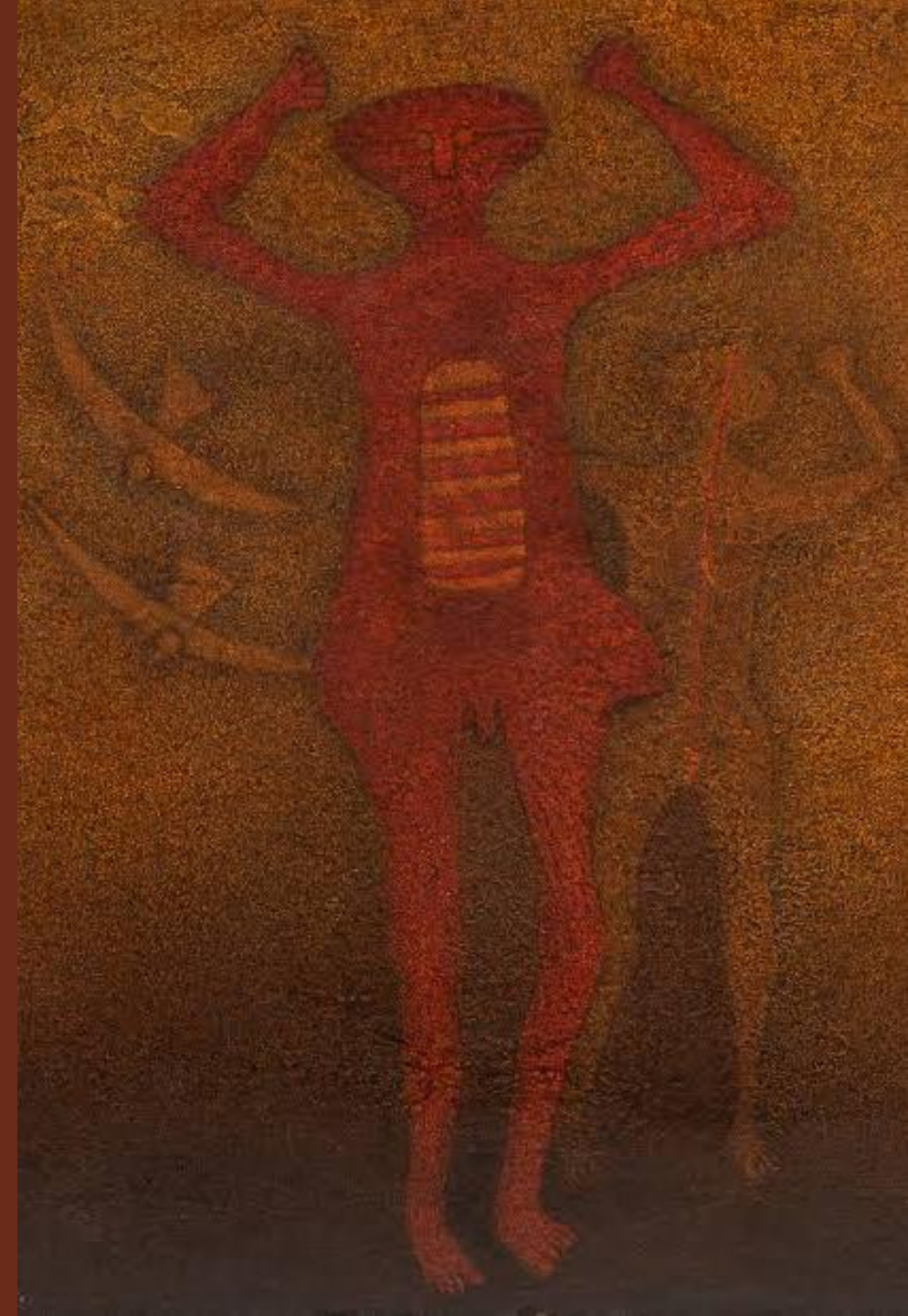
CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

Why might comparative theology have generally dealt with textual and scriptural matters? How might this relate to the genesis of comparative theological thinking?

What are some of the benefits of this approach for comparative theology?

What might be some of the issues that a predominantly text-based approach raises?

What does this focus tell us about comparative theology?



CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

The fourth criticism I want us to examine is as follows:

“The purpose of comparative theology is a better understanding of our own tradition.

The role of the religious other is ultimately passive and does not require detail.

We merely find whatever it is we are seeking”

This criticism questions both the purpose and reliability of comparative theology as a methodology.



CRITICISMS OF COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

What is meant by the role of the religious other being “passive” in comparative theology?

Why is the inclusion of the religious other necessary? Is it?

Is comparative theology really dialogical in nature?

Does this critique take aim at comparative theology specifically, or theology as an internal enterprise entirely?





COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

Only one joke, I promise



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

In this next section, I want to turn our attention to the interrelation of comparative theology with hermeneutics, the process and practice of reading texts.

This draws on the third critique offered before, but also highlights the connections between the methodologies we have looked at so far and the hermeneutical turn this module now makes.

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

Suppose you're traveling to work and you see a stop sign. What do you do? That depends on how you, the exegete, interpret the stop sign.

A serious and educated Catholic rolls through the intersection because he believes he cannot understand the stop sign apart from its interpretive community and tradition. Observing that the interpretive community doesn't take it too seriously, he doesn't feel obligated to take it too seriously either.

An average Catholic (or Orthodox or Coptic or Anglican or Methodist or Presbyterian or whatever) doesn't bother to read the sign but she'll stop the car if the car in front stops.

A New Testament scholar notices that there is no stop sign on Mark street but there is one on Matthew and Luke streets, and concludes that the ones on Luke and Matthew streets are both copied from a sign on a street no one has ever seen, called "Q" street.

A fundamentalist, taking the text very literally, stops at the stop sign and waits for it to tell him to go.

A post-modernist deconstructs the sign (knocks it over with the car), ending forever the tyranny of the north-south traffic over the east-west traffic.

Similarly, **a Marxist** refuses to stop because she sees the stop sign as an instrument of class conflict. She concludes that the bourgeois use the north-south road and obstruct the progress of the workers in the east-west road.

A "prophetic" preacher notices that the square root of the sum of the numeric representations of the letters S-T-O-P (sigma-tau-omicron-pi in the Greek alphabet), multiplied by 40 (the number of testing), and divided by four (the number of the world - north, south, east, and west) equals 666. Therefore, he concludes that stop signs are the dreaded "mark of the beast," a harbinger of divine judgment upon the world, and must be avoided at all costs.

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

Comparative theology generally works with two types of religious sources, internal and external. While rooted in one tradition, comparative theology has its foundation also in at least one additional religious tradition, as this is what allows for the comparative aspect to come to the fore.

This means comparative theology is involved in the reading of another tradition and in the processing of the meaning delivered by that reading. This process is often critiqued, as we have seen, but is central to the method of comparative theology.

Comparative theology is necessarily a **dialectical** practice and a **hermeneutical** practice





COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

As Clooney notes:

“Comparative theology is a “truly constructive theology, distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its foundation in more than one tradition (although the comparativist always remains rooted in one tradition), and by reflection which builds on that foundation, rather than simply on themes or by methods already articulated prior to comparative practice.”

Clooney, 1995, “Comparative Theology”, *Theological Studies*, 56(3), 521

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

It is worth taking some time to tease out the implications of the connection between comparative theology and the process of reading, or hermeneutics, as so much of our practice depends upon it.

So, how is comparative theology related to hermeneutics?

The first steps obviously include some of the following necessary qualities:

Immersion in the other tradition – a knowledge and understanding of the alternative tradition

Hermeneutical openness – a commitment to the possibility of multiple and complex meanings

Bracketing of subjective commitments – an acknowledgement of the difficulty and separateness of subjective commitments

Vulnerability to transformation – comparative theology requires an openness to change of the self, based on learning about the other.



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

As part of the second step of comparative theological practice, we also see a strong connection to the practice of hermeneutics:

Internal conversation – the reading of the practice of the alternative religious tradition requires a concomitant internal dialogue within the ‘home’ tradition.

Correlation between differing traditions – both similarity and difference in sources and processes

Return of normative judgements – examining the other *within* one’s own tradition, exerting normative judgements about the practice of the other

An expansion of the horizon of understanding – the *horizontverschmelzung* of Gadamer



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

I want to round up our consideration of comparative theology with some pertinent questions for you to consider:

In seeking to understand the other, what aspects of our own traditions might it be difficult to “bracket”?

Why might this “bracketing” not be enough?

Comparative theology requires a “hermeneutical openness” — what does this mean? What are its dangers?



COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

What is the role / point of the other within comparative theology?

Is the use of the other in this way a fair use?

How might the interaction of the other be promoted / involved in the process of comparative theology?

Is comparative theology doomed to always be purely self-reflective?



READINGS

Heim, S. Mark. “Comparative Theology at Twenty-Five: The End of the Beginning” in *Modern Theology*. Jan2019, Vol. 35 Issue 1, p163-180.

MOYAERT, M., 2018. Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems. *Harvard Theological Review*, 111(1), pp. 1-23.

Brandon Ro: “(Re)interpreting the Cosmic History of the Mormon Temple Experience: Theological Connections between Jewish and Catholic Sacred Space”

George Archer: “The Hinterlands of the Qur’ān: The Edges of the Eternal and the Temporal in Early Ḥanbalite Thought with Analogs to Catholic Theology”