



2017

Book Review: *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*

Stephanie Corigliano
Humboldt State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Corigliano, Stephanie (2017) "Book Review: *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 30, Article 27.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1679>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

***Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection.* Edited by Michelle Voss Roberts, Bronx, New York: Fordham University Press, 2016, 304 pages.**

COMPARATIVE theology, in its current expression, is a burgeoning facet of theological studies. At the heart of this new volume is the question of how the comparative study of two or more religious traditions relates to the broader project of theology. In order to eschew superficial generalizations and cultural stereotypes, scholars of comparative theology are expected to be versed in the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts of the multiple traditions that they study. This endeavor, unfortunately, risks creating a niche where only other comparativists are equipped to read and respond to each other's work. At the same time, exposure to religious diversity is a part of contemporary religious life and *learning to learn from the other* may be one of the more vital challenges of religious education today.

Comparing Faithfully integrates the work of specialists into the broader fold of systematic theology. As such, Voss Roberts draws the title of the volume from Anselm of Canterbury's classic definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding." Yet, because the collection of essays draws from multiple traditions and various perspectives from within different traditions, the book also connects theology as a religious discipline to the field of religious studies and the important work of interreligious dialogue.

According to Voss Roberts a central premise of comparative theology is that "Deep understanding of another religious tradition can fruitfully inform the understanding of one's

own faith." (4) The book tests this premise by engaging five major theological topics comparatively.

The five parts of the book are: Divinity, Theodicy, Humanity, Christology, and Soteriology. Two scholars, with different expertise and foci, write on each topic and a third scholar responds to each set of essays. The respondent to each set of essays engages the writers directly and also relates their work to both the developing field of comparative theology and to the meaning of this work for particular traditions. This format demonstrates the vast diversity of perspectives that comparative theology introduces. The response essay also allows the reader time to process the ideas presented in the initial two essays and to think creatively alongside the respondent. This multivocal approach brings the text alive and makes the process of comparative study accessible.

Part one, on the topic of Divinity, includes an essay by Jon Paul Sydnor that compares the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann's writing on the social Trinity with the Mahayana Buddhist, Nagarjuna and his doctrine of emptiness. This essay is set alongside Elaine Padilla's comparative study of teotlizing in Aztec theology and Karl Rahner's notion of God as "holy mystery" and "infinite horizon." Kristin Beise Kiblinger responds to both of these essays by introducing John D. Caputo's phenomenological view of God as unavoidably conditioned, a point Kiblinger encourages both

148 Book Reviews

Sydnor and Padilla to give more attention to. Kiblinger further suggests that the broader field of comparative theology could benefit from engaging with Caputo's understanding of God as "perhaps" and as an event that we partake in realizing.

Part two, on Theodicy, begins with an essay by Klaus von Stosch that looks at the problem of evil in Christianity using a combination of free will theodicy (God unconditionally allows for free will, thus evil exists) and natural law theodicy (the evolution of free will results in the current, complex reality of evil). He then compares this with the German, Muslim scholar Navid Kermani and his understanding that the beauty of God cannot be understood without its contrast. A second essay in this section by Jeffery D. Long examines the Hindu theodicy of Sri Ramakrishna. Written from the perspective of a Hindu theologian, this work looks to two prominent Christian writers, John Hick and David Ray Griffin, to unpack and challenge Ramakrishna's evolutionary view of theodicy and spiritual perfection. Wendy Farley responds to von Stosch and Long by first highlighting the turn each author takes away from grand theories towards particular ideas and authors, a turn that ultimately supports better dialogue between individuals. Farley's own response to the two essays challenges the metaphor of sovereignty that is often aligned with the divine and pushes back against theologies that attribute violence and cruelty to God. As she states, "Perhaps we should, like many of the authors explored in these chapters, use the revelation of divine goodness to inspire our own goodness and to critique those elements within religion and theology that conspire with the dynamics of evil." (142)

Part three, on Humanity, opens with an essay by Holly Hillgardner that reconsiders the value of desire or longing by comparing work by the medieval Christian Hadewijch with the sixteen-century Hindu, Mirabai. A second Hindu-Christian comparative essay, by Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, considers "humanity" from a feminist perspective. Tiemeier probes the papal teachings on women and the mother, virgin Mary in the Roman Catholic Church and contrasts these with a fifth century South Indian Tamil epic, the *Cilappatikaram*. In response, Amir Hussain brings a Muslim perspective to the Hindu-Christian work of Hillgardner and Tiemeier and points out similarities, such as the veneration of Mary and Jesus found in both Christian and Muslim traditions and specific contrasts, such as the value placed upon ascetic life in Christianity, which differs from the Muslim emphasis on married life for religious leaders. Hussain's response is, beautifully, infused with poetry and song lyrics that help to underscore the central themes touched upon by the authors in this section.

Part four, on Christology, begins with the essay by Bede Benjamin Bidlack that compares the birth narrative of Lord Loa from a sixth-century Daoist text with the birth narrative of Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Luke. In this, Bidlack raises the provocative question, "What happens when similarity evokes in the reader not a sense of common humanity gazing at a single Ultimate Reality, but a sense of competition?" (196) The subsequent essay, by Marianne Moyaert, examines Christian anti-Jewish trends through a comparative study of Christian and Jewish commentaries on Isaiah 53. Moyaert advocates for a Christology that emphasizes personal and communal responsibility, especially in light of Jewish

suffering in the Holocaust. Hugh Nicholson responds to Bidlack and Moyaert by first pointing out the methodological differences between the two essays and proceeds to respond to each on its own terms. Bidlack, starting from a point of similarity between Christian and Daoist texts goes on to show that careful study of two texts and traditions belies first impressions. Moyaert, starting from a point of tension between two religious traditions, shows how the interpretation of particular doctrines can shape a community.

Part five, on Way(s) of Salvation, features an essay by Joshua Ralston that, building upon the work of Mark Heim, suggests that there are multiple understandings of salvation that are, in fact, in competition with each other and that cannot be categorically lumped together. The essay goes on to compare the specific “ways” or “laws” presented in the work of Protestant reformer John Calvin and the Sunni theologian, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. The second essay here, by Sharon V. Betcher, considers the soteriological promises presented by the Hindu “spiritual but not religious” guru figure, Deepak Chopra. Chopra turns away from traditional categories of the eternal and transcendent towards the embodied individual and the power of positive thinking. This analysis is then compared with the work of theologian Catherine Keller, who

insists on the spiritual centrality of “com/passion” as communal and other oriented. Shelly Rambo responds to Ralston and Betcher by rightly pointing out that both authors focus on the “path and process of salvation,” such that “salvation is about a broader orientation to the life of faith.” (297) This approach, Rambo suggests, reaffirms peacemaking as a central goal for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology.

This volume is the result of a conference held at Wake Forest University School of Divinity in 2014. As a whole, it would be a very interesting companion volume for a course in systematic theology or a world religions course that wants to emphasize dialogue. As noted by Voss Roberts in her introduction, there are also patterns of thought that stretch across the sections, such as divine immanence, and the need for ethical and ecological responsibility. The five sections of the book also make accessible the possibility of introducing a comparative element into a more specialized course. In addition to being a fine teaching tool, this is a masterful collection of essays from some of the leading scholars in the field of comparative theology.

Stephanie Corigliano
Humboldt State University

***The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue: Plurality, Conflict, and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations.* By Muthuraj Swamy. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, xvi + 230 pages.**

BASED on fieldwork conducted in the Kanyakumari district in India (2007-2008), Muthuraj Swamy offers a critique of

interreligious dialogue in India focused in three principal areas. His critique is based on a distinction between the interreligious dialogue