Book Review: Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology. By Catherine Cornille

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BOOK REVIEWS


Catherine Cornille's recent book adds to a burgeoning literature on the discipline of comparative theology, specifically as the field has developed in the last couple of decades. Her stated aim in the volume is to stimulate critical reflection on some fundamental methodological questions, and in this she surely succeeds. I found myself stopping repeatedly throughout the text to ponder where my own work would sit within the conceptual landscapes she maps out, and was especially stimulated by her frequent applications of theoretical distinctions to particular texts and practitioners. As well as providing the impetus for this sort of constructive and creative reflection, Cornille's Meaning and Method offers an extremely lucid survey of the whole terrain of comparative theology and points towards various routes down which the discipline might travel in the future. As such, this book will be a valuable resource both for experienced scholars (by inviting them to reflect on their own work) and for those new to the discipline who want an overview of what comparative theology is all about.

Cornille sees comparative theology as a synthesis of religious studies (due to its appreciation of the complexity and diversity of religious traditions, and its focus on particular texts, teachings, and practices) and theology (since it is concerned with questions of ultimate reality and truth). Indeed, she contends that "...the reality of religious growth and change through engaging the teachings and practices of other religions is as old as the history of religions" (1), and, in this sense, comparative theology "...forms an integral part of every religious and theological tradition" (1). What motivates Cornille's book (and others like it in recent years) is the variety of different conceptions of the nature and goals of comparative theology evident in the work of its practitioners and, increasingly, in their meta-reflections on what the discipline is (or should be) about.

While not seeking to offer a strict set of necessary and sufficient conditions, Cornille attempts in Ch.1 to define comparative theology. She does this, first of all, by loosely distinguishing it from (comparative) religious studies (she has in mind figures like F. Max-Müller and J.F. Clarke) in terms both of approach (descriptive and secular in RS versus normative and committed in CT) and goals (supposedly disinterested scholarship in RS versus a search for theological truth in CT or – perhaps less controversially, a greater understanding of religion versus a greater understanding of God). While she shows that the boundaries between these disciplines are often more porous than their practitioners might like to pretend, the basic difference she highlights is between the ostensible neutrality/objectivity of the ‘old’ CT/RS, and the explicit acknowledgement in the ‘new’ CT of its normative commitments precisely as the means of avoiding the bias of its 19th century predecessor (even if the actual methods – accurate historical understanding of

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other religions in their diversity and development - are similar).

She then distinguishes within comparative theology between ‘confessional’ CT (which is practised from within a tradition and oriented toward the self-understanding of that tradition – seen pre-eminently in the work of Francis Clooney) and ‘meta-confessional’ CT (which uses the teachings and practices of different religions to pursue a more universal truth – as in, for example, Jerry Martin’s ‘Theology Without Walls’). I think it is fair to say that Cornille’s preference for confessional CT comes through in the volume, but the reasons for this – clearly explained – will in themselves stimulate discussion with those who favour a more meta-confessional approach. In any case, she concedes that this difference is often one more of degree than kind.

In Ch.2, Cornille addresses the vexed question of the relation between comparative theology and theology of religions, and suggests that CT “…presupposes an implicit or explicit conception of the presence and the status of truth in other religions in general or in a particular religion,” (43) even if some practitioners of CT claim to set the question of theology of religions to one side. She helpfully draws the links between this chapter and the previous one, by pointing out that what divides confessional and meta-confessional comparative theologians is quite likely to be their (stated or unstated) epistemological stance – usually ‘inclusivist’ for those operating within the context of a particular tradition and ‘pluralist’ for those working outside confessional boundaries.

Ch.3 is about the hermeneutics of comparative theology, which Cornille sees as “a complex interplay between seeing the other through oneself and seeing oneself through the other...” (80). Much like interreligious dialogue, there are potential risks and rewards to this dialectical endeavour, but Cornille offers a bold defence of CT against the dangers of hegemony and colonialism, as the patient, attentive learning involved means that (ideally), “the comparative theologian...approaches the other religion not from a position of power, but from a position of vulnerability, and with an openness to recognizing the superiority of the other religion in certain areas of religious thought or practice” (105). Indeed, her mention of practice here is an important reminder that one area where CT could develop in interesting ways is by moving beyond its hitherto predominant focus on texts to a participatory engagement in the religious life of the other.

In the penultimate chapter, Cornille delineates the different sorts of learning which may arise in the comparative process – from ‘intensification’ and ‘reaffirmation’ of the meaning and truth of one’s own religious ideas and experiences, to ‘rectification’ of misunderstandings of the other and ‘recovery’ of neglected or forgotten aspects in one’s own tradition. This conceptual survey is sure to stimulate just the sort of critical reflection on one’s own practice which Cornille sets out to provoke.

The book closes with a chapter which might be of particular interest to emerging scholars of comparative theology as they seek to find their place within faculties and departments, and within the academy as a whole. Here, Cornille explores the relation between CT and ‘mainstream’ (i.e. biblical, historical, systematic, philosophical, etc.) confessional theology, and addresses practical (e.g. how should comparative theologians organise themselves into research clusters and under what sorts of conference headings) as well as theoretical (e.g.
is CT a distinct discipline or merely a particular approach) questions. Her conclusion, in brief, is that CT shares the same goal of ‘faith seeking understanding’ with other ‘classical’ areas of theology, but differs in the material it engages – i.e. the textual and ritual data of other religious traditions.

Readers of this journal may be especially interested in Cornille’s reflections on why CT as it has developed so far is predominantly Christian (though she sees no particular reason why it should be in the future) and in the important implications of postcolonialism for CT – not least as this relates to the contentious category of ‘Hinduism’ in ‘Hindu-Christian’ comparative theology. In summary, Cornille has done a great service to the discipline by writing a book which will stimulate reflection and discussion amongst experienced practitioners, as well as offering a ‘textbook’ introduction to the field (the detailed endnotes to each chapter and extensive bibliography are extremely helpful) for those less familiar with it.

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The phrase “holy envy” has long been part of a standard trope in the narratives of spiritual seekers describing their attraction for aspects of doctrine, ritual, or experience found in the “religious other.” Part of the phrase’s appeal is in its wistfulness. It expresses the desire for another religion ineluctably destined to remain “other;” yet there is in that desire a real encounter with that very dimension of otherness in the search for religious wholeness and completion. Hans Gustafson, Director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning, edited a volume of essays to thematize this category more explicitly and articulate how “holy envy” draws scholars and practitioners beyond the limits of their own religious traditions. The late New Testament scholar and Lutheran Bishop Krister Stendahl’s coinage of the phrase, dating from a public statement issued in support of the construction of a Latter-Day Saints temple in Stockholm, provides historical context and rootedness for the evocative metaphor. In the foreword, eminent scholar of inter-religious theology Paul Knitter ties Stendahl’s use of the term within the latter’s epochal project of overcoming Christian supersessionism in Christian-Jewish relations, and by extension, other religions. Knitter offers a suggestive and compelling attempt to systematize Stendahl’s vision of non-supersessionism and the more positive concept of “holy envy” to contemporary Christian theology. It is unclear, however, whether such a “Rubicon-crossing” paradigm shift is necessary for those whose experience is best described by “holy envy,” or whether Stendahl’s use of the term is most aptly tied to his ground-breaking work in Christian-Jewish relations. There, the priority was exegetical exploration and contemporary social-historical consciousness and praxis, rather than a felt sense of connection to a dimension of contemporary Jewish synagogue worship, for example. Both may have emerged from a consistent spiritual