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The last few years have seen an expansion of studies dealing with methodological questions in comparative theology as well as texts exploring its pedagogy, wider relevance to theology, and place in academia. Amongst these, Catherine Cornille’s book sets itself out as, according to its blurb, “The first systematic overview of the field of comparative theology” (back cover). This book has many merits, but in this review, I will primarily address its suitability as a main introduction to comparative theology. In these terms, written as an introduction for undergraduate students, the current reviewer does not find that it fulfils its potential. In my opinion, Francis Clooney’s standard work from 2010, Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders, remains a better all-round introduction. I will outline below what I see as this book’s many strengths while also noting why I do not believe it is not the best introductory textbook to the field.

This text has five chapters. The first, “Types of Comparative Theology,” provides an overview of the various forms of comparative theology. The primary distinction Cornille makes – which permeates the entire text – is between “confessional comparative theology” and “meta-confessional comparative theology.” While this introductory chapter sticks generally to comparative theology as centred around the work of Clooney and others, throughout the book we find many different forms of theological encounter across religious borders being discussed. Cornille’s definition of comparative theology therefore appears amorphous, flaccid, and ill-defined. This could be confusing for introductory students for whom it will seem that any theologian who has addressed two religions does comparative theology, a point addressed further below. Certainly, as the current author has argued, what may be termed “theology in a comparative mode” has been prevalent in many periods and forms of theology; however, it is problematic when an introductory text gives no clear directions of what it sets out to describe. An introductory reader may not be clear if comparative theology stands, or is typically used, for a particular approach or field, or whether the term is of such a generic character that it becomes almost meaningless to employ it.

The second chapter, “The Status of Other Religions in Comparative Theology,” is primarily concerned with the relationship between the
theology of religions and comparative theology. Cornille here provides some interesting discussions, in particular suggesting that exclusivist theologies may also be engaged in comparative theology. This is a point she reaffirms in her conclusion, though at other points Cornille seems to suggest that the dynamics she sees as inherent in exclusivisms are incompatible with comparative theology (pp. 169 and 176). Further, her discussion of the significance of postcolonialism, which she presents as another approach alongside the theology of religions typology, seems to lack a full grasp of its significance. In addition, it may be mentioned as indicative that, while Cornille notes critiques of the usage of “world religions” as a category, she seems to gloss such criticisms as not particularly significant. The problematics of colonialism and the implied conception of religion related to this need, in this reviewer’s opinion, far more attention than they receive here. These issues have certainly been the subject of a number of recent studies and are only becoming more prominent. Indeed, recent discussions around the Black Lives Matter movement and decolonising academia have surely made this even more pressing.

In “Comparative Theological Hermeneutics,” Cornille’s third chapter and one of the stronger ones, we get a good sense of an important range of issues. There are points which some authors would quibble about, but these do not take away from its overall usefulness. Sections such as “Understanding the Self through the Other” and “Dynamics of Interreligious Borrowing” raise key questions which are well discussed for the beginning student of comparative theology.

Cornille then moves to “Types of Learning in Comparative Theology,” where she addresses a range of learning styles she labels as: intensification, rectification, recovery, reinterpretation, appropriation, and reaffirmation. This is potentially a useful chapter, but by engaging such figures as Bede Griffiths, Paul Griffiths, and Paul Williams, this highlights the query above that almost anything seems to be classed as comparative theology in this text. If outright Christian apologetics is equated to comparative theology, then recent discussions about distinctions between the so-called new and old comparative theology seem not to be given due weight, while further opening up Cornille’s usage of the category as problematic in terms of its scope and meaning.

Chapter five, on “Comparative Theology and Confessional Theology,” raises directly how comparative theology relates to confessional theology and apologetics. Alongside this, she raises questions about hybridity and discernment. All these questions were already raised, to a greater or lesser degree, in previous chapters. This is not necessarily a critique, and certainly after reviewing what comparative theology is and what it does, it may well
be pedagogically useful to return to review these questions more fully. Given the questions raised in this chapter, however, I was surprised to see that the issue of, for instance, the relationship of mission and comparative theology was not covered.

A short conclusion brings the book to a close. Overall, while there are some useful chapters and discussions, I am unable to recommend this as a standalone textbook to introduce comparative theology. I would, as noted, refer students and instructors to Clooney’s 2010 book as a first stop for beginners. For more advanced students and scholars, this reviewer’s own more critical approach in *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives* (2017) will likely be of benefit, especially alongside Clooney’s text. Some chapters or sections of Cornille’s work would be useful additional reading in courses alongside a number of other works. I would not, though, want this review to be read as essentially a critique of Cornille’s text. I was stimulated by the way that some questions and issues were presented, which helped me see certain questions in a new light, and some discussions are excellent in their clarity. It is a useful and welcome addition to the literature; however, my caveat is that instructors should use it judiciously with their students. Even those already well acquainted with the field may read it with some benefit, but it generally lacks the depth to significantly move questions on for more seasoned students and scholars. It is a welcome addition, but I had expected and hoped for more.