
Reviewed by Earle Waugh, Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta.

Despite its title, this book is less about a step-by-step introduction to the methodological orientation of comparing theological systems, than about demonstrating how various scholars who self-identify with it go about their work. Thence the novice may well find it difficult to follow the complexities that the method offers while the religion specialist will find much of challenge. Gone are the legacies of phenomenology, with its bracketing mechanisms and presumption of neutrality when confronting difference. Gone are the simplistic notions of parsing out common elements across religious traditions that were the hallmark of the early comparative religion school. And submerged is the perception that scholars can divorce themselves from the cultural milieu when analyzing religious data as is common in religious studies.

The book takes up its orientation through three main organizing sections: the first addressing how studies rooted in a theological tradition, such as Catholicism, can fruitfully see what another theological tradition can offer in the way of insights into their common task; the second explores some of the critical issues encountered in applying the method; the third demonstrates some of the more problematic results of applying the method to widely accepted religious phenomena that lack a clear textual-theological base. While there is no doubt that Christian theologians dominate the field, the selections feature perspectives drawn from studies in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, including, interestingly, several from advanced students at the University of Paderborn in Germany.

The guiding light in this analysis has been, of course, Francis Clooney from Harvard, and both his incisive approach and his breadth of knowledge in the field is evident throughout. His seminal paper (Difficult Remainders) here argues for a more organic interpretation of theology and demonstrates an acute awareness of the pitfalls of the method: assumption of a permanent textual meaning (e.g., literal) in another traditions’ theological expression, whereas the scholar knows her own tradi-

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tation is anything but (e.g. allegorical interpretations strikes one as being almost universal in religious texts). Beyond that, Clooney notes that some religious realities, and even texts, simply do not resolve themselves into comparable instantiations for the intrepid comparative theologian. One can think of many examples in world religions that just do not blend with the theologian’s intent. What is evident from this book is that the practitioners are aware of the potentialities as well as limitations of the activity.

Another issue open for debate is learning translatability, that is, when the theologian from one traditions, let’s suppose Catholicism, seeks new knowledge for his own theology from another religion, what constraints does lack of specific knowledge impose on the encounter? A text’s important may shift in time; its interpretation may be encrusted with a dogma that no longer moves people; its role may be effective only for some limited type of ritual or no ritual at all; the text’s theology may be a historical relic. The existential place of viewpoints is not endemic to the text, so one would think prior judgments of textual equivalents has been tacitly made by the theologian. And, of course, the theologian’s own tradition asserts a control over what can be seen and learned. Some or all of these issues are addressed in one way or another by the writers of this volume and if there is a consensus among them it is that the process of comparing itself deepens the awareness....that the encounter itself teaches a humility and an engagement strategy.

Lay readers may well be mystified as to the payoff for their spiritual journey in this complex method. It strikes me that one area not touched on here might assist them. Non-committed professional hospital counselors (chaplains) now work the wards of many Europe and British hospitals, dealing with representatives of religions from all over the world. These non-religious chaplains engage theologies of various sorts. Comparative theology, at the very least, offers them a way of dealing with a multi-religious world at need in hours of considerable difficulty. A lively engagement with comparative theology might well help them to deal with a very complex reality hardly broached by the well-known methodologies. As cultures meld and re-shape, there are helpful lessons to be learned from this approach, despite its shortcomings.