

Article

Comparative Theology and Hermeneutics: A Gadamerian Approach to Interreligious Interpretation

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Abstract: This paper employs the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as a tool to underpin the methodology of Comparative Theology. Acknowledging limitations in Gadamer's framework, it argues these can either be overcome or bypassed in this context. The paper initially sets out Gadamer's own understanding of the relationship of his hermeneutics to theology and its reception within theology. It then outlines Francis Clooney's Comparative Theology using other theologians as needed to supplement this, notably Paul Knitter and Michelle Voss Roberts. The third part shows how Comparative Theology's methodology can be grounded in principles coming from Gadamer's hermeneutics which provide a philosophical rationale for the discipline, making particular use of the concept of translation. It makes reference to Marianne Moyaert's deployment of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical model for interreligious understanding. Various directions for further research are suggested at the end of the paper.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Hans-Georg Gadamer; Comparative Theology; Francis X. Clooney; Marianne Moyaert; Interreligious Studies

1. Introduction

Comparative Theology is seen by many as one of the potentially most interesting and productive ventures in contemporary constructive theological endeavor. However, a number of potential criticisms of the venture may arise, both from those hostile to it as well as many who may be in sympathy. A key argument of this paper will be that Comparative Theology would find its position strengthened by aligning itself with hermeneutical philosophy. It is suggested that there would be two central benefits to this. First, it would help solidify the perceived robustness of Comparative Theology's methodology, and help to show a rationale for this. This would help answer potential critics who are worried about it being a somewhat haphazard enterprise that cannot justify its methodology. Such critics include Marianne Moyaert who has argued that a more robust philosophical and hermeneutical underpinning is required ([1], pp. 157–88), Paul Hedges who has suggested that it more closely resembles a practice than a methodology [2], Kristin Beise Kiblinger who has argued that it has not fully laid out its theological underpinnings [3], Ulrich Winkler who suggests that the distinction of confessional theology and Religious Studies needs further clarification [4], and Hugh Nicholson who argues that it potentially perpetuates aspects of a depoliticisation of older forms of Comparative Theology and Liberal Theology and needs a more robust explanation [5]. Notably, all these critics are not averse to Comparative Theology, and indeed see themselves as theorists or practitioners within the broad field, however, they express concern that it needs a more robust methodology in various ways; within this paper it is primarily the concerns of Moyaert and Hedges which are addressed rather than

the other methodological queries, although there is overlap with some of these concerns. Second, hermeneutics can help elucidate the way in which speaking between religious worlds is justified. This, again, answers potential critics who may argue that the entire enterprise is illicit and religions exist as essentially distinct worldviews which cannot be reconciled, or that seeming comparisons are too superficial to be given weight. Such a criticism is aligned with what is often termed the particularist stance in the Theology of Religions, and on which more will be said in due course (for an overview, see [1], pp. 129–30; [6], pp. 109–45; [7]; see also footnote 4). Of course, other criticisms may arise, and further benefits may accrue from the employment of hermeneutics, but for the purposes of this paper we will focus upon this limited sphere, although both are important parts of the argument.

To proceed, I shall briefly discuss how this paper situates itself in relation to other theoretical and methodological work in Comparative Theology. The argument will then proceed in three main parts. First, I will address the possibility of using Gadamer's hermeneutics for this undertaking, looking at the way it has been used in theology and interpreted as a tool for dialogue, especially interreligious dialogue and encounter, and briefly noting some key points about his aims. I will also say a little more about Gadamer's hermeneutics as a whole and address the key text drawn from here, *Truth and Method*. As Gadamer sees theology resisting hermeneutics, and much of the employment of his work in theology has utilized hermeneutics for rather different ends, it is important to show how it can be used both in theology and interreligious contexts. Second, I will give a brief working definition of Comparative Theology as understood by Francis Clooney, whose Comparative Theology will be the principle type addressed. Notably, in basing my understanding of Comparative Theology on Clooney, who Winkler has described as its "most important spokesperson" ([4], p. 240), his understanding of the discipline as aimed not at truth seeking but rather as aimed at increased understanding and opening up new boundaries will be fundamental. This should help explain why I employ hermeneutics, not just because it has usefully been employed in this area previously, but also because its exploration of interpretation accords well with his approach. Therefore, third, I will draw out some themes from Gadamer's hermeneutics to show how they may help underpin and provide theoretical support for Comparative Theology. Importantly, given the length of the paper, I by no means understand myself giving a full or comprehensive outline of Gadamer's hermeneutics within the course of this paper. Rather I will be selectively taking tools from his system which are useful for the purpose in hand. Having said this, I believe that I am not simply picking and choosing unrepresentative aspects of his thought, nor selectively taking only those bits which work alongside Comparative Theology, and I will venture to suggest why I believe a Gadamerian approach works as a whole for this end. It would take several papers, if not a monograph, to do this comprehensively and therefore this paper presents itself as a contribution to the field. Nevertheless, as the paper proceeds, I set out many of Gadamer's key principles and explain my use and understanding of them. A further important caveat, while employing Gadamer I do not wish to defend all parts of his theory or approach. I would note that many critics have set out legitimate problems which would need to be dealt with in any attempt to build a new hermeneutical system based upon his thought, for instance his defence of tradition which may be androcentric [8]. Space does not permit me to elaborate here, although some aspects of this critique will emerge below. Suffice it to say that my strategic deployment of aspects of Gadamerian hermeneutics to support Comparative Theology within this paper is only highlighting how it may be beneficially used in ways which I believe potentially avoid or overcome the issues with Gadamer's approach.

The worry that Comparative Theology does not have a strongly developed theoretical structure has recently been expressed by a number of authors with sympathies for the project (e.g., [1,2]). Others have spoken about a confusion over the different types of Comparative Theology which exist [4], while others still have spoken about its need to clarify its relationship to both confessional theology and also Religious Studies [9], especially in relation to phenomenology [10]. Certainly Comparative Theology is not one thing with figures like Keith Ward, Robert Neville, and Francis Clooney having put forward their own particular systems and understandings (see [4,6]; it should also be considered that we are considering here what is termed the "new" Comparative Theology, rather than the

“old” Comparative Theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see [5,11]). However, amongst these it is arguably Clooney’s which has become the most prominent and has the widest following, it is certainly commonly referenced as a source of inspiration (e.g., [1,5,6,10,12–14]). As such, some of the concern about the methodological underpinnings of Comparative Theology comes from a consideration of his work; although not as criticism of his work or the project, but in a desire to strengthen the theoretical rigour. In this regard it is notable that Clooney himself has described his approach as being driven by an intuitive approach as well as often taking an “*ad hoc*” approach to method and subject ([15], pp. 20–21). Despite this, many authors suggest that Clooney’s work is notable for its attention to detail and robustness of discussion and research. Indeed, it is not the purpose of this paper to suggest that Clooney’s work is other than useful and exemplary in many ways. Nevertheless, it may be felt that in academia claiming intuition as a method and taking an *ad hoc* approach lacks sufficient rigour. This paper will therefore seek to show how the kind of approach that Clooney has taken may be justified by an appeal to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In particular, looking at the way that hermeneutics looks to issues in language and translation. In some sense this may be seen as adding the horse after the cart (if I may rework this saying); but if we take it that Clooney has usefully opened up a successful tradition in Comparative Theology then seeking a rationale for that does not seem ungrounded. Particularly given that a further generation of scholars will seek to follow in his footsteps and may be asked to justify their research methodologies and approach (such work is already ongoing, see [16]) such a clarification of methodology is arguably imperative.

Amongst proposals that have been put forward to help bolster the intellectual basis of Comparative Theology’s methodology, I would argue that the most notable is that of Marianne Moyaert ([1], pp. 157–88). Her approach has been to employ Paul Ricoeur as a hermeneutical theorist who can help better ground Comparative Theology as a discipline with a strong philosophical rationale. Certainly, at the very least, she has shown that Ricoeur is a useful ally to Comparative Theology. Building from her work, this paper will employ another hermeneutical philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, to see what further insights and methodological sustenance can be given to Comparative Theology through his thought. Certainly, I suggest that Moyaert’s work shows that hermeneutical philosophy and Comparative Theology can be complementary disciplines. Further, I argue that additional insights can be gathered from looking at other thinkers besides Ricoeur, and certainly for many, such as David Tracy (see especially [17]), Gadamer is seen as the most significant thinker in this tradition, and so turning to his work seems justified in principle. While some may argue that Gadamer resists method and so this seems an odd endeavor, what Gadamer resisted was the imposition of the method of the natural sciences onto the human sciences and sought instead the basis for the latter, which could be termed its own method (I address this further in the next section). Indeed, it can be argued that Gadamer more than any other hermeneutician sets out a rationale and philosophical basis for the nature of our knowledge. As such, employing his theory will add depth and richness beyond the technical epistemological aspects that Moyaert mines from Ricoeur. For the purposes of this analysis I will draw upon what is generally considered to be Gadamer’s magnum opus, *Truth and Method* [18], where he most fully sets out his hermeneutical principles, only citing other works by him as is needed to elucidate issues that come to the fore. In terms of Comparative Theology, as noted, Clooney’s understanding of this discipline is the primary focus, drawing upon other interpretations as needed.

2. Gadamer’s Reception in and for Theology and Interreligious Encounter

In *Truth and Method* ([18], pp. 5ff), Gadamer seeks to advance a methodology that is proper to the “human sciences.” We may note that while some have argued he was not advancing a methodology he himself uses the term for the human sciences, for example: “Thus hermeneutics is, as we have seen, a universal aspect of philosophy, and not just the methodological basis of the so-called human sciences” ([18], p. 433). As noted above, while he opposed the employment of the particular method of the natural sciences to the human sciences, which he believed skewed the understanding of this area,

it does not mean that he disavowed methodology altogether. On the debate see, for instance, Barthold, who shows that he does not distinguish “truth” from “method” (as some have supposed based on the title of his magnum opus) but rather seeks a method in the human sciences ([19], p. 66). His argument is that over the previous few centuries the physical sciences have become so prominent that they have become taken as a norm for any credible intellectual endeavor. This, however, he suggests has meant that studies in the humanities and creative endeavors have lost their proper dignity, and have also become judged by methods nor proper to their study. The whole text therefore, taking in several thousand years of intellectual history, offers a rethinking of the Western intellectual tradition to show an alternative to the natural science methodology. Therefore, in his thought a high position is given once again to a different way of thinking and knowing as he endeavors to “... seek the distinguishing feature of the human sciences in the artistic element (artistic feeling, artistic induction)” ([18], p. 9).

Central to all of this for Gadamer is language, which gives us the significance of interpretation or hermeneutics. Fundamental in this linguistic shaping of our world is what Gadamer sees as the fact that everything expressed and understood comes through what he terms our “prejudices”. These are our pre-understandings embedded in our culture and language (I will address what he means by this term more fully in the main commentary below).

Given the complexity of the book and its argument it is impossible to offer an adequate synopsis here, but as we proceed I will offer an outline of many of Gadamer’s important ideas and show how they can be applied to Comparative Theology in ways that deepen its methodology and approach. Certainly, I would argue that what Comparative Theology does is akin to the kind of “human science” that Gadamer sees himself as addressing. However, before we look at Comparative Theology, I will now turn to the way that Gadamer has been used and understood in theology more widely. This is significant because, as noted above, it is arguable that Gadamer’s own understanding of his work, and his mainstream reception in theology, would be antithetical to the employment of hermeneutics I endorse here. We must therefore address such a perception.

Gadamer’s hermeneutical project has been argued to be, in part at least, a rehabilitation of religion within philosophy, such that against what he saw as a reductionist and mechanistic enlightenment standpoint “the possibility of supernatural truth can remain entirely open” ([18], p. 246; see ([20], p. 288). It has been noted that Gadamer himself was not intensely religious. Indeed he has been described as a “closet Lutheran”, a “nominal Protestant”, but most likely agnostic ([20], p. 286). Nevertheless, he took faith seriously. Gadamer had strong views on religion tending towards what we may term a conservative traditionalism, although he apparently lamented his own lack of faith ([20], p. 285). This traditionalism was expressed as a strong sympathy for Karl Barth’s Dialectical Theology. Meanwhile he opposed liberal theology and its heritage, stating quite categorically: “It is, however, a factual necessity not simply to deny the heritage of liberal theology, but to master it” ([18], p. 463). As such we should find it no surprise that he has been taken up by theologians, especially those in what may be termed post-liberal schools and also by evangelicals (see the discussion by Philippe Eberhard—perhaps Gadamer’s most notable theological proponent (see [21], p. 207). The usage that I therefore want to make of Gadamer, to some extent at least, runs contrary to the mainstream theological employment of him where he has been taken up because he is seen, explicitly, to defend tradition and its prejudices (Gadamer’s term, which as noted above we can see for now as pre-understandings) against what may be seen as secular, liberal, or progressive strands. To briefly explicate, Gadamer insisted that all we know of the world is bound up with our worldview and interpretation of this. Importantly, though, he insisted that we never come as a blank slate. Rather, we interpret the world through what we already know, which accords with the now commonly accepted concept that there is no neutral or objective worldview. For more conservative theologians, therefore, this provides a potential way to legitimate their position. Gadamer is used to argue that they must/should interpret the world through their own already formed theological judgements. Such conservative theologians further argue that liberal or secular critics are equally embedded in their own worldview. Therefore, they claim, such standpoints simply replicate an existing bias: it is not neutral criticism but already

a “prejudice”. Having said this, Clooney himself and many other Comparative Theologians would no doubt wish to designate themselves as traditionalists standing firmly within the center of their tradition. However, from the standpoint of post-liberal or evangelical theologians, I think it fair to say they would categorise Comparative Theology as “liberal”. (Space does not permit me to follow this up, and I would certainly concede the inadequacy of terms like “conservative” or “liberal” as descriptors of theological standpoints, however, this rather crude rendition helps set out a broad brush stroke picture of some typical perceptions around Gadamer and his employment within theology. For a further discussion of these problematic terms see [22]). Gadamer may, therefore, seem an odd choice of conversation partner, while at least one scholar has suggested that his thought cannot be applied to interreligious dialogue [23]. Contrary to this, however, other scholars have argued that his thought is highly applicable to interreligious dialogue ([17,24]; [25], pp. 206–8). Further, he is seen as important by a number of figures within the new field of Dialogue Studies (e.g., [26]). Indeed, the fact that he has been seen as unsuitable for interreligious dialogue by Krieger can be argued to be based on a misunderstanding of his concept of horizons. For Krieger this very term means that for Gadamer no dialogue can take place (because a horizon denotes a limit). However, this appears to be a blatant misunderstanding of how Gadamer uses the term “horizon” as Vessey [27] has noted in reply to the same misunderstanding in other critics (e.g., E.D. Hirsch). It would be useful here to briefly explain the concept of the fusion of horizons further. For Gadamer, it is always the linguistic nature of our being and knowing that allows us to open up beyond the immediate nature of our horizons, a matter we will discuss further below. Here we may note his words: “All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is within it an infinity of meaning to be elaborated and interpreted. This is why the hermeneutical phenomenon also can be illuminated only in the light of this fundamental finitude of being, which is wholly linguistic in character” ([18], p. 416). In his terms, we are opened up to an infinity of possibility through the finitude of our words. To describe this he adapted the term “horizon” from Husserl who explained, contrary to ideas of it being the limits, that simply by walking a short way we gained a new horizon. As such, we can always see beyond our own (limited) horizons; see [18], pp. 217, 269; ([27], p. 527) on acknowledgements to Husserl). Hence we have what Gadamer terms the “fusion of horizons” ([18], p. 350). Importantly, though, for Gadamer not all horizons are equally open, a point we return to below (see [27], p. 531).

Given the way that Gadamer sees us as having open horizons, one of the most prominent contemporary theologians who has discussed this, David Tracy, suggests that Gadamer’s hermeneutical model is the most compelling of all contemporary theories in the area. The hermeneutical system always poses the issue that true dialogue means the possibility of change, the very act of openness to the Other places one’s own self “and one’s tradition(s), or the fragments of a tradition, at risk” ([17], p. 4; see also [28]). Moreover, in one of his later writings, “Dialogues in Capri” [29] Gadamer explicitly argued that the West could learn much in its dialogue with “Eastern” thought, *i.e.*, traditions like Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Daoism. While I am not sure, given his overall work, that he seems to have advocated an interreligious dialogue with Christianity *per se*, it is certainly implicit in this notion of cultural and civilizational conversation. For Gadamer, Christianity seems to remain a distinct system and so always to resist hermeneutical interplay ([30], p. 93). It is worth mentioning here that it has already been suggested that Gadamer has a potential place within Comparative Theology: John Allison has suggested that his notion of the horizon of meaning accords particularly with Marianne Moyaert’s notion of it as “hermeneutically open” ([31], p. 4); while Richard Hansom has suggested that Gadamer’s “fingerprint” can be seen in Clooney’s work through the use he makes of Tracy ([32], p. 7). Neither author, however, elaborates these ideas at length and so they just remain tantalizing suggestions. Contrarily to the more conservative employment of Gadamer, it can therefore be argued that his understanding of prejudice insists that we are always open to new interpretations; hence, we do not simply stay within the old horizon/prejudice, but must always be at least potentially open to new understandings. Indeed, for Gadamer, this is the basis of all knowledge and understanding. For Comparative Theology, therefore, it can be argued that its aim to open up new insights for Christian

theology through looking at other religious traditions finds a firm basis in Gadamer (see [15]). Indeed, this is one area where I believe that hermeneutics, especially Gadamer, can bring immense benefit to Comparative Theology for while Clooney may enact such thinking, his theological method does not necessarily explicate the reasons as to how and why such new learning should be seen as possible, certainly not in philosophical terms. I may note here that while I have referred above to Gadamer's much discussed notion of the fusion of horizons which many see as central, and noted how it allows the openness which Comparative Theology seeks, I purposefully do not discuss it in the explication of concepts which are useful for the discipline, although I will return to it to help explicate other ideas. This is partly because I have explored its significance as a background concept here. However, also because I see it, certainly as Gadamer speaks of it, as more directly relevant to dialogic encounters of individuals and Comparative Theology is not directly a form of Interreligious Dialogue itself even if related (see [33]). In this I would note that I do not see Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue as diametrically opposed, indeed, as noted it may be seen as a related discourse or even a form of it. However, for the moment I will define Interreligious Dialogue as involving direct personal encounters, while Comparative Theology is primarily a textual exercise, notwithstanding that the theologian undertaking it may dialogue with adherents of the other religions she explores in the course of her work.

Although Gadamer's own theological predilections, as Eberhard has convincingly argued, run counter to his own hermeneutical principles [20], I agree with Francis Schüssler Fiorenza that they can be applied to theology [34]. In fact, I argue in this paper that the hermeneutical principles which he advances are not only compatible with but also entirely in accordance with Comparative Theology. Arguably, an even wider argument could be made that an alternative reading of Gadamer's hermeneutics for theology (countering both his own views on theology and that of the mainstream reception of them by theologians) is not only possible but also highly credible. Even that it makes a more consistent understanding of them. Such a reading would see theology not as an exception, as Gadamer argued ([18], pp. 295, 330–31; for a commentary see [20], p. 287). Gadamer says that, at most, it can come close: "Theology here almost becomes hermeneutics, since—following the development of modern biblical criticism—it does not take as its object the truth of revelation itself, but the truth of the statements or communications that are related to God's revelation" ([18], p. 478). Rather, an alternative approach would see theology as equally open to fresh interpretation and renewal through a hermeneutical approach, which I believe accords with Tracy's [17] and Fiorenza's [34] readings of him. Such an argument is beyond the scope of this paper, but (in as far as I believe it points towards this) it is an issue I shall raise again in the conclusion as an area for further research.

While noted above, it is worth emphasising here that while employing Gadamer for hermeneutical insights and as a rationale for Comparative Theology, this paper is not seeking to argue for a Gadamerian Comparative Theology *per se*. As observed, Gadamer would appear to be averse to the idea that Christianity can be hermeneutically interpreted, and saw Christianity as standing apart from other religions; even though he welcomed an East-West dialogue. Further, there are quite legitimate criticisms of his thought, whether this be about his andocentric presuppositions, or as others have suggested the seemingly too central place he has given to prejudices as a basis from which we start; this may seem to counter our ability to ever overcome or transcend them. However, at the same time I do not see this paper simply taking *ad hoc* principles from Gadamer, nor distorting his approach fundamentally. Rather it draws and builds from a Gadamerian infrastructure as is useful for our purposes, and in a way that largely accords with his hermeneutical philosophy. Further, it does not attempt to use *Truth and Method* [18] as a blueprint, and so is not a commentary on that work, nor drawing directly from it—as a text it has too many sidetracks and issues raised to see it directly as a systematic outline of hermeneutics. Certainly Gadamer's task there was grander to argue for the method in the "human sciences" not simply to outline a method. Therefore readers will not find herein a close reading of that text applied to Comparative Theology, nor a dutiful imposition of all aspects of Gadamer's thought on Comparative Theology. Rather, while employing Gadamer, I will also seek to see in what ways Comparative Theology may prove instructive for rethinking hermeneutical philosophy.

3. Current Methodology in Comparative Theology?

Having discussed the potential applicability of Gadamer's hermeneutics to Comparative Theology, the next question we need to address is whether Comparative Theology itself has a methodology? While some have suggested that there is a method for Comparative Theology, my belief is that there is actually no clear methodology.¹ Certainly, Moyaert makes clear that there is a lack of engagement with much deep philosophical literature in the field generally, making the claim that:

... when entering the scholarly domain of interreligious dialogue, it became immediately clear that 'everyone' seemed to agree that the fundamental challenge was that of finding the 'right' balance between openness for the other and preservation of identity. But, when delving deeper into this so-called dialogical tension, I found almost no profound literature exploring the nature of (religious) identity and the relation between self and other.

([1], p. 189)

While here she speaks about the engagement with literature on self and other, it is a point she seems to make more generally. Indeed, in *In Response to the Religious Other* Moyaert sets out to ground Comparative Theology in Ricoeur's hermeneutics simply because she sees it lacking a clearly articulated philosophical rationale ([1], p. 160). Nevertheless, it does not mean that Comparative Theology is an arbitrary and undisciplined exercise, as such I will examine how such studies have been conducted. Our guiding light in this discussion will be what is seen as Clooney's masterful survey of the field, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* [15], making reference to Clooney's other work and that of other Comparative Theologians as needed.

For Clooney, a stated "operative principle" of his Comparative Theology, *qua* an act of theology, is *fides quaerens intellectum*, "faith seeking understanding", Anselm's famous definition ([15], p. 11). Of course, this is very far from a methodology. His own explanation around this gives us much more a sense of an ethos than a method as such, when he speaks about it as being understood generously and crossing over to another tradition "for the sake of fresh theological insights" ([15], p. 10). This notion of border crossing is an important one within Comparative Theology, and is picked up by Paul F. Knitter who employs the work of John Dunne [36], especially his phrase of "passing over and coming back" which Knitter uses throughout his book on Comparative Theology, *Without the Buddha I Could Not be a Christian*, as a method ([37], pp. xiii, 217). He does this by a threefold writing of each chapter, where firstly he outlines a specific Christian doctrine or concept, such as the transcendence of God, he then "passes over" to Buddhism to look at what this issue looks like within another tradition, and then "passes back" to see how the insights of that other tradition can illumine and reinvigorate his Christian belief and practice. For instance on the concept of the transcendence of God he first offers an analysis of what the Christian tradition has to say ([37], pp. 1–8), he then discusses what the Buddhist tradition says about transcendence ([37], pp. 8–14), which is the act of "passing over", finally he returns to see how Buddhist ideas of transcendence can illuminate Christian thought on the transcendence of God, his act of "passing back" ([37], pp. 14–23). Knitter's close scale reading of specific doctrines across a range of chapters provides a very clear indication of this process; although it is also seen, perhaps not so clearly demarcated, on a larger scale in many works of Comparative Theology by Clooney as well as figures like John Thatamanil.² Such "passing over and coming back" may mark out Comparative Theology as distinctive within theological methods, yet while providing something of a framework it does not give a clear method for the practice of what and how to compare.

¹ The thesis that a methodology exists for Comparative Theology is advanced in Byrne [35], and disputed in a review of this text [2].

² As an example, Thatamanil [13] begins by setting out a framework then explores Tillich and Shankara on related issues across four chapters, two each, before coming to a concluding chapter. Such a pattern is fairly common. See also Clooney's work (e.g., [38], pp. 14–15).

There is a very important note to make here which is implicit in what has just been said but can be spelt out explicitly. This is that, for Clooney, Comparative Theology is always Christian theology; an activity grounded and based within his own Catholic tradition (e.g., [39], p. xviii). Other scholars have brought their own methodological preferences to the study as well. Although, and in contradistinction from Clooney, Ward has argued that Comparative Theology need not be confessional, and as such may even be undertaken by a non-Christian—even from a non-religious perspective ([40], pp. 36–49). Ward’s notion of the comparative project suggests that the comparative aspect makes it something other than a “faith seeking understanding” theology. In some ways, a similar feature may be said to appear in Neville’s Comparative Religious Ideas Project where the act is more of comparing ideas within the context of the academic study of religion than in creative theology, which, perhaps, contrast with his own more personal studies of Christianity and Confucianism.³ Whether this is Comparative Theology or Comparative Religion is a debate we need not enter into here, because either way it is not what Clooney and others like Michelle Voss Roberts or Paul Knitter understand Comparative Theology to be (respectively [37]; [43], pp. 147ff), which forms the basis of the analysis here.

Returning to Clooney, he sets out what he sees as the twin poles which have guided his own work, and are, I believe, fairly typical of Comparative Theology in general. These poles, or two guiding principles are: “intuition” and “rational insight”, which he sees as indicative of the “comparative” aspect ([15], p. 10). Noting that “faith seeking understanding” defined it as theology, I may suggest that the “passing over and coming back” is a mediating principle between these two. For Clooney this leads into deep tradition specific studies ([15], pp. 20–21). Considering the intuitive aspect, Clooney admits employing an *ad hoc* system, which is to say that based upon an intuition that it might be fruitful to read two theologians together or that a particular area is worth exploring is what has inspired much of his work [44]. This is then the object of study, which is worked through with rational exploration. Whether this is entirely “intuition” I am not sure given Clooney’s own comprehensive knowledge of the Catholic Christian and Sri Vaishnava Hindu systems with which he tends to work (e.g., [39,45,46]), nevertheless, something more of a rationale needs to be given to make such choices more clearly grounded within a system that is philosophical justifiable to a wider audience. Indeed, I am not clear that the proposed system, as Clooney describes it, allows us what may, in a more scientific sense, be spoken of as a methodology. Picking up on Clooney’s “rational insight” a bit further it should be mentioned that his method is concerned primarily with the close reading of texts. Indeed, he suggests that this should be the preferred method, although allowing that non-textual sources may be used ([15], pp. 57, 163).

In terms of Clooney’s discussion about his Comparative Theology, a few more points can be picked up. First, there is the notion of “creative tension” which is related to the crossing over and returning motif discussed above, where the comparative and theological come together ([15], p. 11). Notably he sees this as a third way beyond the idea of “theology” and “comparison” as two distinct areas which he sees reflected in Tracy’s work ([15], pp. 42–43). As I understand it, the concept of “creative tension” refers to the development of bringing together two things, texts, conceptions, or whatever it may be, that do not at first seem natural partners. In the case of Comparative Theology, this is because they are ideas from different religious worlds which are held within their own context and rationale. This is particularly well articulated in Clooney’s essay “Learning to See” ([15], pp. 87–108). It raises the issue, which we will discuss below, of whether it is legitimate to let this creative tension arise and how Gadamer’s hermeneutics explains such interreligious reading as possible.

Another key aspect of Clooney’s Comparative Theology is that he comes to it, as he sees it, in relation to his life journey ([15], pp. 17–19). Such is also true of someone like Raimon Panikkar whose life brings him to a place where the conversation between two traditions is one that happens within him ([47], p. 82). Again, we see such matters in many figures who do theology in comparative mode

³ See Neville [41] for an example of his comparative religious project and Neville [42] for a more “theological” exploration of how Confucianism can be used across cultures.

or engage in some form of dual or multiple religious belonging or identity (see [48]). As such, it is autobiographical to some extent. Indeed, this may be said of all theology and all scholarship. A matter which has become clear as intellectual trends have led to an increasingly reflexive attitude within academia, where it is realized that methodology and participation, and even observation to some extent, create and determine the outcomes of the study (see [49]; [50], pp. 36–38). Of course, this is not, I would argue, to advocate a relativistic approach, nor to abnegate the duties of the scholar to classify and seek towards “truth” in some form. This latter point, which may be contentious, will be addressed again in relation to Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

Another aspect of Clooney’s comparative method which we can mention is about the way that the religious Other, whether it be a text, statue, or motif appeals to us and draws us in. We see this when he talks about his experience of standing before a statue of Lakshmi in an old Hindu temple. As he gazes upon it he is entranced, but says: “I was already there, as it were seeing and being seen. But Christians do not worship Goddesses, so I did not. I just stood there looking” ([15], p. 88). Describing a set of evocative verses to the Goddesses he describes them as beautiful but hard words, saying that for him and others “it may be impossible for us to utter such verses as Christians” ([15], p. 89). Nevertheless, he strongly brings out the appeal, or fascination, with the Other. The notion of the way we are charmed by the religious Other in Comparative Theology is most clearly developed by Roberts, where she speaks about “wonder” within an aesthetic framework as we discuss below ([51], pp. 192–94).

4. Gadamer and Comparative Theology

It is now my intention to draw out a number of Gadamer’s hermeneutical principles and show explicitly in what follows how they may relate to and help build a philosophical rationale for Comparative Theology. As mentioned already, this is by no means meant to be a systematic survey of Gadamer’s hermeneutics nor even exhaustive on how it may relate to Comparative Theology. In the space of this paper my aims are more modest, to develop an argument to show that drawing upon the core of Gadamer’s hermeneutical system we can show that it both sustains and supports the kind of Comparative Theological project undertaken by Clooney and others. In particular, this relates to the two concerns we noted above: to help bolster the robustness of the methodological system; and, to help show how the basic aim of seeking a meaningful learning exchange across traditions is possible and may be conceived. To this end we will cover five main issues or areas that are central to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, looking at some different aspects of each. These are, firstly, the question of prejudice and grounding in a tradition. Secondly, the art of interpretation and translation between cultures. Thirdly, the question of the intuition and good sense needed within the human sciences. Fourthly, issues around art and beauty as part of the quest for truth and the act of interpretation. Finally, we will briefly mention the autobiographical nature of work in the human sciences.

Firstly, one presumption of Comparative Theology is that we start within a specific religious tradition as the basis from which we will move to another tradition, which for Clooney and most others is the Christian tradition (of whichever denomination). This can be expressed through Gadamerian terms in various ways which will help show the applicability of his hermeneutics to Comparative Theology. For Gadamer it may be said that language has life over and above any individual speaker, because we are—and here we are in agreement with the basic thesis of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model if not the excesses to which it can be taken, which in the particularist model suggests that communication between different religious traditions is not possible⁴—part of

⁴ Such a position is often termed a particularist one within the literature on the Theology of Religions, and suggests that each religion is its own particular language game which cannot, even should not, talk to other religious traditions. While the particularist position comes in a variety of forms (see [6], pp. 146–74), its main rationale is that every religious tradition is essentially distinct and incompatible ([7], pp. 115–17). Such a position is open to critique from many angles including philosophical, theological, historical, and ethical. While a full account and discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper there are a number of useful analyses and critiques, see ([6], pp. 174–96; [7], pp. 120–31; [52]).

a linguistic community. Indeed our (religious) language has no life apart from that community ([18], p. 401). Drawing upon Heidegger, he even speaks of this as being “the fundamental linguistic quality of man’s being-in-the-world” ([18], p. 401). That is to say, Comparative Theology, at least normally, takes place from the positionality of an adherent of one religious tradition whose cultural world is shaped by the language of that tradition looking out from it to other traditions. This shapes the starting point, as Gadamer says: “To have a ‘world’ means to have an attitude towards it” ([18], p. 402). I will address below some philosophical implications of what language means within a comparative context, but first we must address the corollary of this capacity for understanding, or “an attitude” towards the world. With this come “prejudices”, a term which Gadamer’s argues need to be rethought so that we do not simply look at them in a negative light. Prejudices may be termed beneficial in that they are the social, cultural, and religious formation which allow us to understand and interpret the world; however, we need to beware of Jürgen Habermas’ critique that living solely inside them makes it impossible to judge how accurate or delusional they may be ([53], it may be noted though that Habermas himself offers no way to solve this dilemma). Nevertheless, we will have them and they will shape our perceptions of the Other. They can also, Gadamer suggests, be classified as either “good” or “bad”, with the latter being those that limit our vision and fail us in our attempts to approach and understand others—they come with an inbuilt, a priori, condemnation or positioning of the Other. The good are those which allow us to question our preconceptions and other prejudices and seek to move beyond them. It may be argued that, certainly on a religious basis—or even many cultural ones—that this comes with an inbuilt “prejudice” from Gadamer that favors certain attitudes: an attitude of openness to the Other. In response, I would counter, firstly, that numerous arguments have been made from solid theological foundations that an openness to appreciate and learn from the Other is foundational to the Christian tradition itself, arguments rehearsed elsewhere and so need not be entertained here (see e.g., [6], pp. 109–12, 133–43, 230–53; [54], pp. 123–38). Secondly, moreover, we are employing this hermeneutics towards Comparative Theology which has its own rationale for such an attitude, with both Clooney and Fredericks arguing that it is necessary to understand and dialogue with the Other before we can reach any final judgement upon them. Therefore, in these terms, Gadamer’s prejudice is useful pragmatically ([15], pp. 14–16; [55], p. 8).⁵ Notably, while Comparative Theology suggests we should understand these Others, it does not provide a philosophical rationale for this which as I have argued we may find in hermeneutics, an issue addressed in the following section.

One aspect of Gadamer’s thought as we have noted above is the fact that all understanding is embedded in language. This is seen as both the means by which we can understand anything but also shapes the “prejudice” we have in our understanding. The question therefore becomes how can language help support comparison? This is not a question directly addressed in *Theory and Method* [18]. However, Tracy usefully helps us reflect on it, and his thought in this regard appears to draw heavily on Gadamer (for a sense of Tracy’s usage of Gadamer, see [57], pp. 73–75; and for his explicit usage in interreligious contexts, see [17]). If the role of the interpreter is not to enter the mind of an initial reader nor his audience, then our task is changed. As Tracy says: “recent development in contemporary linguistic and hermeneutic theory allows the prospective interpreter to understand that a written text, precisely as written, is distanced both from the original intention of the author and from its original reception by its first addressees” ([27], p. 50; for Gadamer on this, see [18], pp. 159–63). Here, Tracy suggests, we must usefully distinguish between semantics, which may tell us what specific words or phrases mean, and the referent of the text, that is to say what does it say about “the mode-of-being-in-the-world” ([27], pp. 51–52). Only in the latter, he suggests, do we enter the hermeneutic task. Here prejudice enters, for to determine the referent of the text we are interpreting,

⁵ While Clooney and Fredericks argue Comparative Theology bypasses theological judgements of the type found within the Theology of Religions typology (e.g., exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms-particularities) it has been convincingly argued that the openness to engage in Comparative Theology actually already presumes such a prejudgement (see [6], pp. 53–55; [56], pp. 90–104).

which can only be done within language and that has already shaped our pre-understanding. As we will discuss in what follows, for Gadamer this is the very means, even if in some sense paradoxically, by which language becomes the source for comparison. This is because it exists as part of our common human-ness, or “mode-of-being-in-the-world” which links all members of all societies—our prejudices come from what we may term the “givenness” of things.⁶ This will be discussed further in what follows. However, for Gadamer we should note the possibility to be open to the understanding of the Other lies within the nature of our prejudices. He notes that a prejudice in favor of the old, or what we already know should be rejected ([18], p. 246), however, he is equally critical of a prejudice against the old and in favor of the new ([18], p. 247). This is usefully linked to the concept of the fusion of horizons which we explored previously. As noted there, for Gadamer, our horizon is not a limit but also expands as we move on, as such the danger is not our limits, prejudices, or horizons, but rather the failure to seek to move beyond such prejudices: “A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him” ([18], p. 269).

Second, we need to understand Comparative Theology as an act of interpretation and translation of the Other. A fundamental point for Gadamer is that: “Interpretation is not an occasional additional act subsequent to understanding, but rather understanding is always an interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding” ([18], p. 274). We do not therefore come with a pre-built understanding of our own tradition, but with an interpreted tradition, and so the act of Comparative Theology builds upon this. Indeed, taking a point inherent in what we have said already but not explicitly stated; because of the fact that all religions, as any other cultural system, are part and parcel of the inherent human expression of understanding the world through language, we see a link—rather than a blockage—to the act of engaging others. As Gadamer puts it: “Thanks to the linguistic nature of all interpretation every interpretation includes the possibility of a relationship with others. There can be no speech which does not bind the speaker and the person spoken to” ([18], p. 359). This is similar to the usage that Moyaert makes of Ricoeur through her language of “fragile” and “vulnerable” human/religious identities. She argues that “self” and “other” do not stand apart but always in potential connection as human beings ([1], p. 96). In Ricoeur’s own words: “the strangeness of man [sic] is never total” ([58], p. 282). We may note here that to some degree this sense of common human understanding grounds hermeneutics. For instance, Gadamer observed that understanding for Schleiermacher was possible because we all carry a little of all others within ourselves ([18], pp. 166–67).

In terms of translation, this dialectical tension between self and other, which is also a dialectical harmony, means that in the act of Comparative Theology, “the translator must respect the character of his own language, into which he is translating, while still recognizing the value of the alien, even antagonistic character of the text and its expression” ([18], pp. 348–49). Interreligious understanding is therefore always negotiating between, what Moyaert following Ricoeur describes as the tension between the impossibility of translatability but the possibility of translation ([1], p. 146). As humans involved in language we are always open to the other, but because of the boundaries of our traditions and the luggage that we carry we can never entirely leave our own world behind. We may relate this aspect to two concepts. First, that of crossing over and returning, and second to Clooney’s notion that there is a rational process of integrating his intuitions, although he provides no systematisation for this. Arguably at least, hermeneutics provides the rationale for what Clooney articulates, while also

⁶ I would like to thank one of my anonymous reviewers for raising the issue of “Critical Idealism” as a proposed alternative approach to hermeneutics. However, I do not see the two as distinct or incompatible. If, from a Critical Idealist stance, we accept that as human beings (or other sentient creatures I might posit) we do not experience and know what is “out there” but always add to it by relating it to our already formed understanding we come to have representations of things rather than knowing things directly. In Gadamerian terms we could term this as prejudice and interpretation. On this basis the two are capable of being held together. However, whereas some expounding Critical Idealism would proceed to ask what I would find more metaphysical questions about how we may come to have any experience, the hermeneutical turn would suggest that we deal more directly with the act of mutual engagement between traditions rather than relating it to speculative pursuits.

providing a framework that can conceptualize the process by which the Other becomes taken over and integrated into one's own system, *i.e.*, crossing and returning.

Opening up a further aspect of what Gadamer has said about translation we should remember that, especially in the act of Comparative Theology, while the Other may always be strange this does not mean we are delimited in understanding it for ourselves: "It not only has its own truth in itself, but it also has its own truth for us" ([18], p. 400). In relation to Gadamer's exposition of hermeneutics this relates to his discussion of Schleiermacher's psychological views of hermeneutics, and the fact that "[t]he idea of the original reader is full of unexamined idealisation" ([18], p. 356). As Clooney and others have made clear, Comparative Theology is not simply about taking an idea within another tradition and bringing it back to one's own as it is. This is because while the art of crossing over and returning means that one returns changed an exact match of terms of ideas is simply not possible. Therefore, the person (and concepts) become changed in the process of returning ([15], pp. 83–86). It can be described as the process of reading one's own tradition through the lens of another ([45], p. ix). We have seen above that, for Gadamer, the act of hermeneutics, and so interreligious translation, does not limit us simply to the intentions of the author or the intended audience. If that were so, it limits us and engages in unwarranted essentialism regarding the true meaning of a text and its authorial integrity. As such we are led to defy what may seem common sense:

It sounds at first like a sensible rule, generally recognized as such, that nothing should be put into a text that the writer or the reader could not have intended. But this rule can be applied only in extreme cases. For texts do not ask to be understood as a living expression of the subjectivity of their writers. This, then, cannot define the limits of the text's meaning.

([18], p. 356)

The act of interreligious interpretation or translation as practiced within Comparative Theology is therefore free to extend and develop the text and its meaning. We can see new things the author or original audience did not. That is to say, the Comparative Theologian may as she employs a text or concept in her own tradition come to new insights that extend it beyond the original meaning ([39], pp. 295–99; see also ([1], p. 174) where, in addition to Ricoeur, Moyaert engages both Clooney and Gadamer on this point). Nevertheless, this is not to ignore the original, and due precedence is accorded to the original meaning and understanding of the context from which the text or idea derives ([15], p. 69). If we think not simply in terms of single texts (as discussed below this term is understood widely to mean more than written artifacts) to whole religious traditions, it becomes clear that the ideas of one tradition are not hermetically sealed within that system, against the particularist or strong Lindbeckian hypothesis. Rather hermeneutics suggests that any "unexamined idealisation" and the interactive character of religious identities means we can cross the borders between religions as we do other borders.⁷

Continuing the significant theme of translation, we may note that in her employment of Ricoeur, Moyaert does not just see translation as a significant aspect of interreligious understanding in general, but also an important tool to ground Comparative Theology ([1], p. 165). In particular, she uses the concept of interreligious hospitality derived from Ricoeur's reflections on the possibility of translation as hospitality ([1], pp. 159–61). The notion of hospitality is useful here and is one much employed in discussions of interreligious encounters (see ([6], pp. 231–37); [61]). Although Gadamer does not use this term it provides a useful supplement to his thought. Indeed, hospitality means we need not follow him in suggesting that such meetings are seeking, as an end, "a common language and a common statement" ([18], p. 348) achieved as some form of ideal translation situation where each has inhabited the other to such a degree that this is seen as possible. Rather, I think we need to keep in mind Gadamer's concept of the "agony" of translation ([18], p. 363), which speaks of

⁷ We have referred already to the system of particularities and criticisms of it. Further, on the issue of how identity plays into these discussions, suggesting that identity theory allows us to transcend borders, see the seminal work of Jeannine Hill Fletcher [59] and Paul Hedges on this ([6], pp. 33–44, 56–57, 63–64, 83–87, 239–41; [60]).

the difficulty, but also the possibility of interpreting between cultures. This can relate to Clooney's concept of "creative tension", the problem of bringing two things together in ways that may seem difficult or painful but may be both necessary and possible. The rationale for this possibility can be grounded through the hermeneutics of interpretation and translation. Here, Gadamer's vision, supplemented by Ricoeur's, helps place our understanding within a broader hermeneutical theory that takes our linguistic groundedness centrally, and which in turn helps explain the problem and the possibility of translation between traditions. As such, I would suggest, Gadamer helps us understand in philosophical terms the process by which the mutual interpretation of religions may take place. Nevertheless, this is, in turn, supplemented by Clooney who helpfully sees this as a "creative tension", whereby it is actually constructive while also fraught as hermeneutics suggests.

It may be worth expanding at this point on how a hermeneutical approach treats the understanding of difference. This is already implicit in what has been said, and so I simply wish to draw it out more explicitly. It is useful to draw upon Tracy's thought further here because we have to understand that difference is neither treated as absolute alterity, such that we see antithetical systems as found in religious terms in a particularist system (see the discussion above, *cf.* [6,7]). Neither is it entirely negated, and Cornille uses Gadamer and Tracy to note that we must recognize to some extent the plausibility of the Other's position in dialogue, such that it may be an option we could even embrace ourselves ([62], p. 92). As such, difference as Ricoeur avers is "never total" ([58], p. 282), but through language and shared humanity is something which can always be related to. Rather, as in translation, we deal with Gadamer's "agony" wherein although difference is not entirely alien we cannot always fully express it in a different language, or find the equivalent in another religion. Nevertheless, this is the significance of difference for Comparative Theology in hermeneutical terms, that we can rethink our traditions in the light of that of Others. If wholly alien we could not employ it, but if thoroughly assimilated into one's own system or found to be identical it would not engender new insights. Hermeneutically speaking, therefore, we can say with Cornille that "the very attempt to engage the other generates new insights that may become a source of enrichment for both" ([63], p. xv).

Comparative Theology, as Clooney has described it, is more of an art that relies on intuition rather than an exact science ([15], pp. 20–21). However, this very act of transference, the new interpretation is, as not just Gadamer but also Ricoeur affirm, not simply about loss but also gain (see [1], p. 112). Gadamer, employing Chladenius' words,⁸ tells us that our reading of texts may be very different from anything intended by the original author or receiving community. Instead, "... unfruitful passages can become fruitful for us", as they 'encourage many thoughts'" (Chladenius quoted in [18], p. 162). Indeed, we may understand more than the author's meaning, so we are not limited to just seeing what they meant. As Gadamer avers: "since men [sic] cannot be aware of everything, their words, speech and writing can mean", we may discover "something they themselves did not intend to say or write" (Chladenius quoted in [18], p. 162). Leaning upon Chladenius again, Gadamer tells us that it is about a "point of view", a notion borrowed from optics by Leibniz, which is why we see things in one way and not another ([18], pp. 160–61). We come anew to the interpretation, arguably with two opinions separated into epistemology *versus* ontology; that is to say whether we think our use of the other text is about the methods of our interpretation (our epistemology) or the being and essence of that text (its ontology). Do we stress our theory of knowing, which via Gadamer means we assimilate the new through interpretation in relation to our existing prejudices and so inevitably reshape it? Or, do we stress the need to emphasize the original and foundational ontological truth and character of that which we are seeking to interpret? If we stand with Gadamer on this then we would negate any views, often labelled as particularities ([6], pp. 146–96), that each religion represents its own worldview and is, as a distinct language game, entirely (ontologically) distinct. (Such a view is associated with

⁸ Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–59) has been described as the "grandfather of German historicism" and is seen as one of the founders of the modern art of hermeneutics (see [64], pp. 27–62).

what I labelled Lindbeck's "problematic" interpretations above, whether such a view is inherent in what he said is another matter of course⁹). This latter point is again a place where hermeneutics can assist us. This is because, as argued by Tracy and as noted above, Gadamer's hermeneutics lets us see that all of our interpretations are partial, and therefore always "open". We can never have a closed understanding, as such a philosophical hermeneutics will also make us reject a particularist and closed view of religion as distinct and separate worldviews which cannot communicate (for further commentary on this see [17,52]).

The last point provides something of a bridge from the issue of interpretation and translation to the third area we turn to which is concerning intuition and judgement. Amongst other principles we may gain from Gadamer for underpinning Comparative Theology comes some of his basic approaches to the human sciences. One of these, given that it is not a natural science, is a certain attitude of approach which he terms "tact". It is expressed this way: "By 'tact' we understand a particular sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations, and how to behave in them, for which we cannot find any knowledge from general principles. Hence an essential part of tact is inexplicitness and inexpressibility" ([18], pp. 16, cf. also Gadamer's reference to Helmholtz's notion of "psychological tact" as part of the method in the human sciences, p. 9). Further Gadamer says about this "sense" that "the tact which functions in the human sciences is not simply a feeling and unconscious, but at the same time a mode of knowing and a mode of being" ([18], p. 17). Apart from noting that this includes an approach to "formation" (*bildung*) Gadamer is quite vague. We may posit, though, that it may be something akin to the methodology of empathy that is found within Religious Studies, the ability to, employing Ninian Smart's well known adage, walk a mile in another's moccasins before judging them (see [50], p. 34). The relationship to Comparative Theology, and especially Clooney's methodology, we may suggest is therefore a somewhat intuitive sense/feeling/empathy for the Other ([15], pp. 20–21). However, while we may be generally inclined to such well intentioned sentiments, it leaves a lot open. Indeed, we may suggest that such sentiments are perhaps always dangerous as who is to judge, or determine its limits and prescriptions. Like defining a virtue, who is to say what is a virtue and who is virtuous? Citing a well know example, "... it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:50 RSV). In relation to the question of an interreligious engagement and its own set of notions of tact and virtue we may ask what is aimed at. For some the argument may be that we should preserve the tradition, and so dialogue can be understood primarily as something which keeps us within our own tradition and affirms our sense of rightness within it while respecting others. Such, for instance, is the argument of Mara Brecht who takes virtue as a specific aspect of the interreligious encounter ([65], p. 215). On the other hand, should we see the virtue being in the openness to the encounter such that we are willing to transcend our tradition or transform it by the encounter with the other? The latter is the position of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, who argues that intellectual integrity will lead us to transform our tradition in the face of the Other [56]. Nevertheless, if we follow Gadamer, Clooney's notion of "intuition" may not seem so vague and woolly, especially as I have suggested it is not simply whatever comes to mind but based in expertise and a certain knowledge and skilfulness. As with *bildung* it is about the formation of virtues which may be improved with practice, even if we may differ on what exactly they are. Indeed, Clooney seems to agree that a certain development of virtuous skills needs to be developed: "Comparative Theology is fruitful primarily in practice; doing it will require wise practitioners ... " ([15], p. 154).

A similar issue arises with another of Gadamer's basic approaches which is the development of judgement or good sense (he uses the German *Gesunder Menschenverstand* and *gemeiner Verstand*) ([18], p. 29). Describing such judgement, *judicium*, as "a basic intellectual virtue", he tells us that it "cannot be taught in general, but only practiced from case to case, and is therefore more like a faculty like the senses. It is something that cannot be learned, because no demonstration from concepts is able to guide

⁹ See note 4 for a some references discussing this.

the application of rules" ([18], p. 30). While it is hard to disagree with Gadamer that good judgement is beneficial and that anyone within the human sciences (or any discipline I would argue) should have it, we have little in the terms of criterion upon which to base it. Despite my reservations, I would concur that it is something which is of absolute necessity to the practice of Comparative Theology. While it may seem that Clooney and Gadamer fail to ground these notions sufficiently in a formally scientific method, I would suggest that we see two things as important. First, that hermeneutical theory sees such things as an important aspect of the business of the human sciences helps justify its employment within Comparative Theology. Second, Gadamer's aim is seeking an alternative to natural science methodology for the human sciences where a different skill set is needed. As such, we may have to accept that the method and theory builds upon what may seem "softer" approaches, but ones attuned to making meaning within human contexts. Perhaps also the practice of Comparative Theology may help flesh out Gadamer's rather underdeveloped notions around such things as "sense", "formation", and "good judgement". If, as Clooney suggests, Comparative Theology must be practiced in relation to a community, this may help to ground the practice within the norms and values of that group. Although we must beware and critical, I suggest, of simply fitting into prevailing norms and established practices; although the act of Comparative Theology as a border crossing discipline will presumably always retain an element within it which challenges these norms. In this sense also, a point I will return to in the conclusion, Comparative Theology may also be a paradigmatic discipline which mediates the potential weakness some have noted in Gadamer's system of privileging the home system, the prejudices, as the basis from which we know the Other. For, in Comparative Theology, it is always the aim to rethink the known in the light of the new.

The fourth issue we will develop here concerns art and beauty. While Clooney suggests that texts are the best sources for Comparative Theology, he admits that it can extend beyond it to looking at areas like art or ritual. Likewise Gadamer's hermeneutics, although stressing language as its basis, is for him applicable to all areas of life. This is to include the interpretation of rituals or art, while he suggests the notion of "text" is to be understood widely ([18], p. 146). He further notes that: "hermeneutics must be so determined as a whole that it does justice to the experience of art." As such, while both focus upon textual studies, and may seem geared primarily towards this and linguistic understanding, it would be a mistake to see them simply in these terms. Certainly Gadamer can help us see that the kind of methodology and system Clooney has employed in his textual Comparative Theology may also be profitably turned to the analysis of art, rituals, and symbols because the focus is not language as words per se, rather it is about systems of human understanding and interpretation across myriad cultural forms (on the issue of interreligious engagement in ritual crossing and sharing, see [66]).

Related to this, another area where Gadamer can give us insightful methodological reflection is when he speaks about what is charming and beautiful. His discussions dwell in some depth upon Plato's notions of the beautiful and its relation to the good and the true. However, what is important here is Gadamer's discussion of the way that a particular text appeals to us, stating: "When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it charms us just as the beautiful charms us. It has asserted itself and charmed us before we can come to ourselves and be in a position to test the claim to meaning that it makes" ([18], p. 446). For him, this is one reason why we need to move beyond the methodology of the natural sciences because "the certainty that is imparted by the use of scientific methods does not suffice to guarantee truth" ([18], p. 446). That is to say, what is imparted through such an aesthetic experience may be of an entirely different order to what we know in physical scientific investigations. It may be useful to think here of Tracy's discussion of the Classic as a case in point where some textual artifact (whatever that is actually a written text, a work of art, or ritual) makes a demand upon us ([57], pp. 99–229, for a discussion of this in relation to interreligious interpretation, see [67]). Gadamer therefore suggests that we need to question and research not simply apply a fixed methodology as applicable to the physical sciences to come to "truth" ([18], p. 447). Therefore, we find the hermeneutical methods applicable which as noted do not give us a single fixed set of rules to follow but deal with interpretation and other factors, and so are geared towards the human sciences. Taking Gadamer's concepts about

the charm of the beautiful we may relate this to Clooney's reflections of the appeal of the other tradition, something picked up in other Comparative Theologians too. Perhaps Roberts is the most apt example as she has discussed the aesthetic as a concept within Comparative Theology in the interplay between the Christian and Hindu traditions at length, in particular the notion of *rasa* [51]. In her work she explores peace, love, and fury as *rasas* encapsulated with different parts of both the Hindu traditions (respectively Kashmiri Shaivism, Bengali Vaishnavism, and Dalit thought). She then argues compellingly for analogues within the Christian tradition (Indian Christian Ashramite traditions, Bernard of Clairvaux, and while not explicitly taking a Christian comparison here it works into her discussion of Liberation Theology traditions). Her creative work, however, is in the development of a theology of a ninth *rasa*, which is wonder ([51], pp. 181–94). Here she develops at length the notion of how wonder plays a role in us discovering the religious Other and being (in Gadamer's terms) "charmed" by its "beauty" which has clear resonances with Gadamer's work ([51], pp. 183–87). While Clooney does not develop this at length it is an area where Interreligious Theologies in general, following Roberts, could develop a particular line of thought I would suggest.

The final aspect to mention is the question of autobiography as an aspect of Comparative Theology and hermeneutics. While much Western theory has prized the neutral and detached observer (see [49]), both Clooney and Gadamer wish to move us away from this. For Clooney, to do Comparative Theology means to be changed by the process, and so the act of theology is part of the shaping of the self's story ([15], pp. 83–84). As he puts it: "If my theological instincts shaped how I have thought of Hinduism, in turn Hinduism has reshaped how I think theologically as a Christian" ([15], p. 184). Looking to his studies of Hinduism he uses the example of the term *Manipravala* which means "jewel and coral" (and is found in both Sanskrit and Tamil) to talk about reading cultural worlds together ([15], pp. 85–86). In Gadamer's terms though, it relates to the fact that we can never abandon our own prejudices or horizons, but always grow out of these ([68], p. 104). While Habermas criticizes Gadamer for putting too much emphasis, as he sees it, on established tradition, and makes that a basis for knowing [53], it seems hard to get away from Gadamer's basic point that our background and prejudgements shape how we come to all other knowledge. Indeed, in relation to how Gadamer has been interpreted here (and I think inherent in his thought which explains why many in dialogue studies appreciate his work, but against as noted some mainstream theological reception) he is not necessarily supportive of tradition per se. Rather, he sees us as able to overcome those prejudices which keep us locked within our tradition. Certainly his Capri Dialogue writing suggests that he sees our Western tradition as in need of being radically overhauled by a new encounter with the East [29]. This relates both to how we conduct hermeneutics and is autobiographical because such development is part of the narrative story of the self.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that contrary to what seems to be the thrust of Gadamer's own understanding of the relationship of his hermeneutics to theology, and against a certain mainstream theological reception, that his hermeneutics can be employed in ways which lead to progressive and innovative renewal of tradition in theology. Further, I would argue that my reading is actually inherent in his work, because interpretation must always be about renewing our understanding in fresh contexts. Indeed, within our own contemporary context, Comparative Theology shows, many would suggest, the need for the kind of reworking of Christian tradition that Clooney and others have called for. I place my account in relation to other theological interpreters of both Gadamer and hermeneutics (notably [1,17]; [25], pp. 206–8; [34]); but develop it most especially in relation to Clooney's [15] interpretation of Comparative Theology as a discipline of faith seeking understanding which engages in border crossing to bring insights from other religious traditions into creative interpretation with the Christian tradition. Moreover, I argue that the, what may appear, somewhat unsystematic and philosophically underdeveloped methodology of Comparative Theology can find a rationale and justification for much of its practice within Gadamer's hermeneutics. This hermeneutical philosophy

can, for instance, help show not only how and why such border crossings are legitimate, but also how the venture may be theorized. This paper is not, however, presented as a definitive presentation of a hermeneutical methodology for Comparative Theology. It is intended as part of a still young and ongoing conversation that seeks to develop further the rationale for what is a growing and vibrant theological movement. Indeed, it may be suggested that Comparative Theology is still in something of its infancy as regards its place within the wider field of theological enquiry.

It is worth noting that I have not suggested that hermeneutical philosophy leads us to take Comparative Theology in a new direction. Rather, it often provides an undergirding and support for existing practices, but in doing so makes it more methodologically robust. The method can be used not just because Clooney appears to have used it successfully, but also there are good hermeneutical justifications that can support it. Importantly, though, for those who may question whether such border crossings are legitimate—to which Comparative Theology's answer would primarily be, "we do it and it seems to work"—a rationale for seeing such cross-tradition learning as not just theoretically sound, but even an inherent part of human meaning making, can be found in hermeneutics. Such an argument is inherent in Gadamer's work and this paper, but a fuller exploration of the issue could usefully be expanded on as another project.

As has been indicated above, it is possible that rather than seeing this as a one-way street, we can also ask what does hermeneutics have to learn from Comparative Theology? I noted some aspects of this above, and would suggest the following points. Firstly, Gadamer's notions around areas like intuition and good judgement while commendable in many ways may seem somewhat vague, and the practice of Comparative Theology may help show how such concepts may be grounded within a specific tradition. While referring to *bildung*, indicating "formation", or "culture", it was hard to know what exactly this would mean. Whereas in the practice of figures like Clooney, Roberts, Thatamanil, and others a sense of how the role of the Comparative Theologian as combining being a theologian within, or relating to, a church, but also someone with scholarly skills in Religious Studies, and a comparativist may come together. Of course, within the academy, Clooney's appeal to intuition may seem suspect or unscholarly. Therefore, this is also strengthened by an appeal to Gadamer's notion of the human sciences having room for such a methodology. Secondly, as noted, one reason why Gadamer has appealed to certain conservative theologians is because it seems to justify as a legitimate prejudice the insistence on interpreting through your own worldview. However, following Tracy and others I have suggested that Gadamer actually leads us to an attitude of more radical openness. Certainly this goes against Gadamer's own attitude towards Christianity and theology, but this was because he made it an exception to hermeneutics. However, such a stance seems untenable: there is no unmediated and culturally pure "theology" or "Christianity" (for a discussion around this issue, see ([6], pp. 30–44). As I suggested, against what may seem strong tendencies within theology and religion to insist upon its own prejudice as foundational, Comparative Theology leads us to see tradition anew. Therefore, Comparative Theology can prove a corrective to Gadamer's own thinking in this area. It can also help to show how hermeneutics as a whole may be a performative interpretative act which while founded (inevitably) in initial prejudices may also transcend them. As noted, this is an area where Habermas has criticised Gadamer for not being able to solve this quandary. Thirdly, I would also tentatively suggest that the act of interreligious conversation and learning provides a clear example of the kind of act of translation which Gadamer suggests. Clooney's notion of "creative tension" may help us to see in a specific instance that which is detailed in theoretical terms in Gadamer's thought. As we saw, Gadamer spoke of the act of translation as "agony" and spoke of an "antagonistic" relationship with the text, whereas Clooney's phrasing while keeping the tension may portray it in a different, even more positive, light. As such, the focus does not become the problem of translation (seen also in Ricoeur's language of the possibility yet impossibility of the act) but the new growth and insights that may arise. Of course, this may partly be about the difference between considering the theory and the practice. The former emphasizes the struggle and problems of the act, the latter the fruits that may come of it. Either way, Clooney potentially sheds new light on this area in hermeneutical philosophy.

In terms of further research the following themes may be noted. First, Gadamer's overall theory is not seen as a perfect system, however, it is possible that the faults with it can be overcome to help ground a wider hermeneutical system for theology and Comparative Theology. Such development will need further systematisation, but I have noted some potential aspects above. Second, although not discussed here, as a discipline which engages traditions beyond the Western and Christian world, Comparative Theology should seek sources for hermeneutical engagement which build from other religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions. Third, Habermas' critique as well as feminist critique has noted the way that Gadamer's system can be seen to favor an androcentric and fixed tradition. While I have argued that it provides the tools for overcoming these prejudices within itself, more reflection upon the relation between tradition and the Others which are excluded or marginalised within the traditions needs attention. Fourth, Gadamer's relation to theology as a whole may need to be rethought, if as suggested his hermeneutical system actually moves towards openness and a challenging of our horizons rather than being always embedded in fixed prejudices. Fifth, because hermeneutics, as Gadamer has shown, is about the mediation of tradition and the Other within the contemporary lived experience this means that the methods and practice of such hermeneutics, as well as the mediation in contemporary experience, will always be an ongoing project. As such, it needs to be recognized that the quest is not therefore for a final system or a set of answers, but is part of an ongoing and ever changing field of interpretation.

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