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# Comparative Theology: An Alternative to Religious Studies or Theology of Religions?

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the relationship between Comparative Theology, Religious Studies and Theology of Religions and questions whether Comparative Theology is an alternative to the last two. Comparative Theology, a faith seeking understanding practice, may be viewed as an alternative to the Enlightenment ideal of Religious Studies, which seeks “impartiality” and “scientific objectivity” in contrast to Comparative Theology’s enquiry into “truth” and “meaning.” I suggest, however, that the comparative method employed by both Religious Studies and Comparative Theology is not a neutral space. Hence, the new comparativism in Religious Studies reinstates its search for understanding and its political stand, which blurs the boundaries between Comparative Theology and Religious Studies. Likewise, while Comparative Theology is distinct from the Theology of Religions, it does not pose an alternative to it because Comparative Theology, too, often embodies either a pluralist or an inclusivist approach.

**Keywords:** comparative theology; Religionswissenschaft; religious studies; theology of religions

## 1. Introduction

According to Francis X. Clooney, one of the contemporary fathers of Comparative Theology (hereafter CT), this “is a practical response to religious diversity read with our eyes open, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with a willingness to see newly the truths of our own religion in light of another” (Clooney 2010, p. 69). Moreover, he notes that the objective of such a practice is the input it makes to its (his) home tradition, i.e., Christian theology (Clooney 2011, p. 143). James L. Fredericks, another significant name in CT, proposes that it “entails the interpretation of the meaning and truth of one’s own faith by means of a critical investigation of other faiths” (Fredericks 2010, p. ix). As Ulrich Winkler notes, CT “presupposes both theological reflection and religious experience—in one’s own and other religious traditions, intellectual discourse, and existential encounter” (Winkler 2011, p. 243).

Thus according to its foremost practitioners, CT may be depicted as a comparative undertaking that starts from faith in seeking meaning, truth, intellectual understanding, and/or spiritual-existential experience. Within the scope of this paper, which is primarily focused on Western and particularly Christian contributions to the study of religion, I will first introduce modern Religious Studies with reference to its background, context and comparative methodology. Next, I will delve into the relationship between CT, Religious Studies, and Theology of Religions, and question whether CT is an alternative to the last two.

## 2. Religious Studies

Friedrich Max Müller’s famous lecture series that he delivered at the Royal Institution of London in February 1870 marks the “formal” genesis of modern Religious Studies. However, we may find precedents for religious traditions evolving into the object of “scientific” research in the Enlightenment’s secularism, rationalism, humanism, religious tolerance, idea of progress, and emphasis on scientific

and empirical methods. What Müller tried to achieve in his lecture series and then in his book, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), was to bring that Enlightenment science to bear on religion and religious phenomena—which till then had been the object of only theology. This entailed an empirical approach, gathering as much data as possible on the myths, belief systems, rituals or other practices of various religious traditions, comparing them, systematizing them, and finally, uncovering some basic universal principles behind such particulars. Such “scientific” study of religion embodied a “neutral” or “objective” search for the origin(s) of belief systems, their meaning and function. It was an approach that sought to distance itself from any theological apologetics about Christian superiority or uniqueness. (We must bear in mind, however, that Müller was a religious person committed to a search for the sacred on a global scale, to which I shall be returning below.)

Although Religious Studies in the modern sense may therefore be considered to have been launched by Max Müller, there is a much longer history of seeking knowledge on and comparing religions other than one’s own that goes all the way back to Antiquity. Herodotus (484–425 BC), for example, noted that Zeus and Apollo were the Greek equivalents of Amon and Horus, whom he encountered in Egypt. Here Herodotus was taking a comparative approach, and as Sharpe also notes, evaluating another religious tradition by setting out from his own. For his part, Euhemerus (c.330–260 BC) was putting forth a theory about the origins of religion when he argued that gods were great men or heroes who came to be worshipped after their death (Sharpe 1986, pp. 4–6). Upon encountering other religious traditions, various biblical prophets and Church Fathers reacted differently. As in the example of Isaiah, some denied any truth they might contain. But others, such as Justin Martyr (d. 165), Irenaeus (d. 200) or Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), proposed inclusivist Logos theologies. In Medieval Europe not much was known about religions other than Judaism, Christianity or Islam. What circulated was mostly ancient, apologetic claims rather than more impartial information. Ultimately, an exclusivist Christian approach came to prevail whereby Judaism was qualified as an originally valid (monotheistic) religion which however had been surpassed by the New Covenant, while Islam was categorized as having borrowed but fundamentally deviated from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Then in the 16th century and after, the European Reconnaissance (including the discovery of America), the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the creation of colonial empires and the overseas travels of merchants or missionaries all led to a massive physical and cultural mobility in Europe.

The 16th and 17th century Wars of Religion corresponded to other developments. For example, Jesuit missionaries like Matteo Ricci (d. 1619) or Roberto de Nobili (d. 1656) tried to overcome earlier aggressive, polemical approaches by studying the native culture and traditions of the people they were proselytizing among, and comparing them with their own. Thus Roberto de Nobili tried to penetrate and understand Hindu culture while Matteo Ricci did the same with Chinese religion. In the 17th and 18th centuries, tiring of such religious wars or religions of war, European elites began to cherish examples of high morals and spirituality that they encountered in distant lands. From there they took a further step to seeking a remedy in “natural religion,” which was regarded as the common root of all systems of belief, rationally based and free from the “superstitions” subsequently added by institutionalized religions. According to Deism, God had created the world and left it to its own course and moral evolution. Hence mankind should strive to recover this original religious life. In turn, the 19th century witnessed a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism marked by the Romantic emphasis on feeling and intuition. At this point, if we return to Müller, we may find him hovering between first, rationalism, empirical and scientific knowledge, and the idea of universality; and second, feeling, intuition, and spiritual experience. This is because, as Daniel Pals also notes, Müller was simultaneously a German Kantian and a man of Protestant spirituality who believed that the sacred might be found universally (Pals 2014, p. 6). This was the drive behind Müller’s attempt to undertake his research into various “other” religious traditions in a neutral, scientific and empirical way. Although not “formal” in the Müller sense, we should also note the impact on modern Religious Studies of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who with his stress on universal religious feeling is regarded as a pioneer of modern liberal theology. Such ideas would find later echoes or parallels in Mircea Eliade,

who sought universal archetypes behind particular manifestations of the sacred; in Frithjof Schuon, who believed in a transcendental unity of religions; as well as Rudolf Otto, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and many others. What they have all had in common is a globalizing and often pluralistic approach within Religious Studies that regards all religious symbols, doctrines or phenomena as manifestations of an Ultimate Reality.

More recently, this universalistic view of religions has encountered criticism from Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad and George Lindbeck. Lindbeck's postliberal, cultural-linguistic theory of religion criticizes liberal theology on the grounds that it establishes a universal hegemony, ignores differences among religions, and leads to a sort of syncretism. Against the view that "various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate, and that therefore they must respect each other, learn from each other, and reciprocally enrich each other" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 23), Lindbeck's particularistic view of religion, inspired by Wittgenstein, opts for emphasizing differences. In lieu of intertextuality, Lindbeck proposes intratextual hermeneutics. He maintains that each religious tradition represents a unique experience and category. This is why each tradition is incommensurable and not translatable into any other. For example, "Buddhist compassion, Christian love . . . and French revolutionary *fraternité* are not diverse modifications of a single human awareness, emotion, attitude, or sentiment, but are radically (i.e., from the root) distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and cosmos" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 40). He further argues that religious traditions are asymmetrical and do not allow comparison; a cultural-linguistic approach "proposes no common framework . . . within which to compare religions" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 49). At this juncture, it would be fruitful to look further into the comparative method shared by both CT and Religious Studies before a hasty jump into exploring their relation.

### 3. Why Comparison?

A comparative methodology has been employed not only in Religious Studies but also in various other branches of the humanities—and for different ends. For example, while a traditional apologetic theology employs comparison in order to prove one tradition's "superiority" or "uniqueness" in relation to others, Mircea Eliade highlights the parallels between traditions in order to categorize them as individual manifestations of a universal archetype. Comparison may be "analogical" or "genealogical."<sup>1</sup> For example, a theologian who wishes to prove the uniqueness of the Christian revelation may conduct a genealogical comparison between Christian revelation and its covenantal antecedents to propose a progressive salvation history, while another may undertake an analogical comparison between two historically unrelated traditions such as Christianity and Buddhism.

With regard to its aims, a comparative enterprise can contribute to a person in a spiritual-existential manner by pointing to the parallels among various religious traditions. In this case, an inclusivist and/or a transcendentalist approach to a common wisdom will emerge. On the other hand, comparing traditions may serve to draw attention to the differences between them. For the comparative theologian, this will provide a different kind of food for thought. Comparison may also be helpful in demonstrating how parallel dynamics can lead to different results while non-parallel dynamics may lead to similar results within the specific theologies of religious traditions. This is because comparison, by means of theoretically deconstructing the development of a specific theological tradition, can reveal the various dynamics and phenomena that have gone into its construction. As Hugh Nicholson notes, this is what makes comparison an "anti-essentializing discourse":

[C]ross-cultural comparison represents a particularly effective critical method, particularly when it comes to those forms of cultural-religious identity that have been forged or reconstituted in the modern world with its transcultural, global horizons. The comparative juxtaposition of cultural-religious formations sets up resonances between the two whereby

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive survey on these two types of comparison, see (Smith 1990, pp. 47–52).

prominent features of the one bring to light parallel features of the other that may have been suppressed by various hegemonic discourses, whether those of indigenous orthodoxies or those of Western scholarship. In this way cross-cultural comparison can bring to light parallels that cut across established cultural boundaries, thus revealing the latter's arbitrariness and contingency. (Nicholson 2011, p. 95)

Is comparison indispensable? Although in one instance we might answer this question in the negative, we would do well to reconsider our answer after examining the reasons why a comparativist undertakes such a task. This is the point where the relation between CT and Religious Studies is worth revisiting. As noted above, modern Religious Studies initially aimed at establishing itself as an "autonomous," "objective" and "scientific" discipline. Through the past century it has tended to distance itself from theology over the latter's normative stand. However, as also noted, it has never been a purely descriptive, non-detached discipline since it has always sought an intellectual understanding, existential-spiritual experience or a moral engagement. This kind of "non-impartial" attitude manifests itself—whether implicitly or explicitly, but always distinctively—in its use of comparisons.

The postmodern approach is critical of comparisons, as well as concepts or categories based on comparisons, on the grounds that it is a reductionist, essentialist, universalist, imperialistic and anti-contextualizing enterprise. This is because comparison in the past century (and even earlier) focused on finding the "typical" or "classical" among the various manifestations of the "universal sacred." However, postmodern critiques of meta-narratives and essentialism may also lead to a certain sort of negativism. In his seminal work of 1982, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," the late Jonathan Z. Smith argued that comparison in the humanities had been focusing on superficial similarities while ignoring differences (Smith 1982). Hence for Smith such comparison was not science but magic. However, as a respondent in AAR in 1996 he alleviated his criticism, before which, in his *Drudgery Divine* that appeared in 1990, he provided a constructive theory of comparison. Against a simplistic discourse of the "same," he offered the "development of a discourse of 'difference'" (Smith 1990, p. 42). Smith argued that comparison does not tell us what things are in themselves, though it does say "how things might be conceived":

A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being 'like' in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which we 're-vision' phenomena as our data in order to solve our theoretical problems. (Smith 1990, p. 52)

Thus, it is the practice of the comparativist that will decide his/her own intellectual agenda. This is the intellectual operation in the mind of the scholar, which is to be applied to the scholar's subject of focus. In this way, comparison becomes a tool for the deconstruction and re-construction of a certain phenomenon in the light of other, similar or different data that will lead us to solving our own theoretical problems in addition to correcting earlier "classical" taxonomies. Inspired by Smith's work, the authors of *A Magic Still Dwells* resist reproaching comparative efforts; on the contrary they try to underwrite comparative method by proposing a "new comparativism." In the introduction, Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray argue that comparison needs to be employed not as a "science" but as an "intellectually creative enterprise," as an "art" and an "imaginative and critical act of mediation and re-description in the service of knowledge" (Patton and Ray 2000). Moreover, the authors of this volume argue against a "value-free" comparison, and suggest that moral or any other "ideological" relation between the scholar and his/her object of study is unavoidable.

Consequently, leaving aside the question of whether the objects of our knowledge are solely in the mind of the scholar or have a historical/ontological reality, I would like to suggest that comparison, insofar as it also focuses on differences, discontinuities and "power relations" between the compared, is an anti-essentializing enterprise. Moreover, each comparative practice and consequent category-formation represents its own choice of inclusion and exclusion. In addition to sameness and

continuities, since comparison serves as a heuristic and analytical tool in search of a certain “truth” or “meaning,” it also detects localities and singularities among the compared. Thus in the hands of a scholar, comparison is a method in the service of understanding—similar to a handy tool in the hands of a craftsman. Hence the ways in which a comparative practice functions in the hands of its practitioner are mostly personal. While some would employ comparison as a means to deepen their spirituality, some others might embark upon comparison purely out of intellectual curiosity. One of the most remarkable aspects of comparison is that it provides intellectual depth. This is because the genesis, development and dismantling of theological teachings within a religious tradition are likely to share many parallels and differences with another tradition. In this case, revisiting the dynamics of one’s own tradition in the light of the other will allow a comparativist to regard his/her own tradition as well as the other in a more critical, profound and nuanced way, thereby imaginatively reconstructing both in the service of understanding.

Comparison in general and CT in particular is often criticized on the grounds that one’s own tradition may be “polluted” by the other. Moreover, there is the danger of imposing one tradition’s concepts (such as salvation, ontology, etc.) or teachings on another tradition, and to view that other tradition from one’s own vantage point. To this there may also be added the distress of “using” another tradition for one’s own intellectual or spiritual-existential benefit, to the point of reducing the other to his/her own. This could also lead to a reactive belief in the incommensurability and untranslatability of his/her own tradition, and therefore to not proceeding with a comparative undertaking—perhaps not even giving comparison a chance, not even out of pure curiosity.

Such concerns, however, might be overcome once it is recognized that both traditions are unique in their own way, and that such uniqueness cannot be altered by comparison. Consequently, CT often criticizes Lindbeck’s postliberal hermeneutics over its exclusion of the reader and the outside world as interpreters of the text. This is because CT believes that the human subject and the community are not only the receiver(s) but also the creator(s) of a certain religious tradition. CT proposes that religious traditions are not closed, incommensurable units. Besides, today’s CT is not against translation between religious traditions (as in the case of postliberal theology), but nor does it seek an easy translation between them (as liberal pluralism proposes). Rather than translation, in its journeys between different religious traditions contemporary CT prefers to cross over and then return to the home tradition. At the same time, although it is argued that CT looks for and finds both difference and similarity, it is also true that today it mostly focuses on similarities in order to experience the spiritual-existential depth this provides in the quest for meaning and truth.

#### 4. Comparative Theology and Religious Studies

Clooney draws attention to the “theology” component or dimension of CT. According to him, theology “indicates a mode of inquiry that engages a wide range of issues with full intellectual force, but ordinarily does so within the constraints of a commitment to a religious community, respect for its scriptures, traditions, and practices, and a willingness to affirm the truths and values of that tradition.” (Clooney 2010, p. 9) Consequently, its practitioner’s adherence to a certain faith is often the premise that distinguishes CT from Religious Studies. CT employs both the faith aspect of theology and the comparative method of Religious Studies. The first dimension means that CT stresses belonging to a religious tradition, having a profound experience of it, and (rather than pure observation) pursuing a quest for the truth. While CT employs information provided by Religious Studies, history, micro-level case studies or other disciplines, it also rejuvenates the quest for truth. This enables the subject to affirm his/her faith, to be part of a faith community, indeed to reveal his/her religious self. In the end, CT is a practice of faith seeking understanding and/or existential-spiritual experience—rather than an intellectual search for pure “understanding.”

But it should be kept in mind that the “understanding” proposed by Religious Studies is also relatively subjective. This is because the concept of *verstehen* was introduced into the humanities and social sciences as an improvement on the purely rationalist, objective and descriptive approach of

the time (Waardenburg 1973, p. 53). It is as a “non-specific theology” that Wiebe, echoing Oxtoby, describes the kind of understanding upheld by Religious Studies—on the grounds that “it assumes the ontological reality of the religious phenomenon” (Wiebe 1999, p. 148). This is why I would like to argue that CT constitutes an alternative to Religious Studies (insofar as the latter transcends any concern for truth and meaning, instead trying to subsist as a “neutral” field). We must note, of course, that Religious Studies has also been distancing itself from the earlier apologetic theology. In this case, what strictly distinguishes CT from Religious Studies is that the former is a “religious” discipline. At this juncture, it becomes necessary to revisit the relationship between Religious Studies and CT with respect to their modern “genesis.”

As a contemporary comparative theologian, Hugh Nicholson argues that early Religious Studies developed as another name for liberal theology in the latter’s effort to go beyond a polemical, dogmatic, apologetic and *a prioristic* method by resorting to an experimental-empirical and so-called “scientific” approach (Nicholson 2011, pp. 23–26). In another vein, while James Garden’s *Comparative Theology* (1700), Frederick Denison Maurice’s *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity* (1847), and James Freeman Clarke’s *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) are often regarded as the earliest modern examples of CT, what we come across (in the works of Max Müller, Cornelius Petrus Tiele, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and even Joachim Wach) under the heading of Comparative Religion, *Religionswissenschaft* or Phenomenology of Religion is also a refined form of theology and another name for CT. Hence, all these names represent so many attempts to go beyond the polemical, dogmatic and apologetic approaches of an earlier theology. What is more, they tackled their theological task in a comparative way. What they were trying to achieve was proving the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity in relation to other religions, and/or deepening their own spirituality through comparison and by finding spiritual riches in other religious traditions. It is noteworthy that, according to Wach’s student and interpreter Joseph M. Kitagawa, *Religionswissenschaft* as propounded by Wach and his contemporaries, although “autonomous” is simultaneously “religio-scientific” and “does not claim to be a self-sufficient discipline” (Kitagawa 1987, p. 17). Furthermore, Religious Studies taking shape in the hands of Müller, Otto, van der Leeuw, Wach, Eliade or others was not a uniform discipline since it tended to cover and comprise various different approaches. Also worth mentioning at this point is the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (the History of Religion School)<sup>2</sup> launched at Germany’s Göttingen University. By the end of the 19th century, a group of scholars such as Hermann Gunkel, Hugo Gressmann, Wilhelm Bousset, Johannes Weiss, William Wrede and Ernst Troeltsch were trying to incorporate studies on Hellenistic, Babylonian or Persianate religious traditions into Christian theology. Their goal was to explore Christian history in the comparative light and context of other religious traditions. This was because, as per their understanding, Christianity emerged and was shaped in the context of other religious traditions. What these names undertook was not really a History of Religions approach or Religious Studies under another name, but a variety of the history of Christianity. They were therefore criticized on the grounds that they were Christian theology-centered, and were employing other religions to that end.

Returning to the main distinction between CT and Religious Studies, Clooney affirms that CT “marks acts of faith-seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition.” (Clooney 2010, p. 10). Likewise, for Keith Ward, it is the search for “truth” and meaning that underlies CT (Ward 1994, p. 50). In this case, the comparative theologian does not aim at learning *about* another tradition or traditions, but at learning his own self and tradition *together with* and *by means of* the other, i.e., at inter-related learning. Finally, CT’s search for truth and meaning, its adherence to a religious tradition or a spiritual way is what generally differentiates CT from, and constitutes it as an alternative to, modern Religious Studies (with its non-normative claims). Moreover, this is where CT crosses paths with Theology of Religions. However, as I have argued above, the new comparativism proposed

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<sup>2</sup> *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* is often translated as “history of religions.” However, as William Baird notes, such a translation is not accurate because the latter “s” of “history of religions” denotes not plurality but the genitive singular (Baird 2003, p. 222).

by scholars of religion in *A Magic Still Dwells* blurs the boundaries between CT and contemporary Religious Studies. This is because the contemporary study of religion no longer adheres to the so-called “impartiality” and “scientific objectivity” of its 19th and 20th century ancestors. In this sense, CT does not pose an alternative to Religious Studies since both adhere to understanding as well as some sort of “ideological” search for meaning.

## 5. Comparative Theology and Theology of Religions

If we consider the classic exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism taxonomy of Theology of Religions, it is obvious that CT does not have much to do with religious exclusivism. This is because exclusivism holds to the view that there is no truth or salvation outside one’s own religious tradition; hence there is not much to learn from others. A pluralist comparative theologian, on the other hand, will believe that truth and salvation are to be found equally on a global level. Otherwise, as in the case of Clooney, s/he will be an inclusivist who is in line with Vatican II and who holds to the view that truth also exists in other traditions:

My comparative theology is in harmony with those inclusivist theologies, in the great tradition of Karl Rahner, SJ, and Jacques Dupuis, SJ, that balance claims to Christian uniqueness with a necessary openness to learning from other religions. I do not theorize inclusion so as to imagine that Christianity subsumes all else, but prefer instead the act of including. I bring what I learn into my reconsideration of Christian identity. This is an “including theology,” not a theory about religions; it draws what we learn from another tradition back into the realm of our own, highlighting and not erasing the fact of this borrowed wisdom. (Clooney 2010, p. 16)

It is significant that Clooney is a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest who feels obliged to follow the Magisterium. As in the case of Clooney, and as with other comparative theologians, what matters is the religious community that an individual adheres to as a part of his religious tradition. Clooney explains his adherence to the Catholic Church as follows:

Comparative theology is theology for living religious communities: the church, the temple, and the many other ways in which religious communities may be configured in one or another tradition. I am very sensitive to this issue because of the history of modern Catholic theology and responses of the Vatican to particular Catholic theologians, and so on. Yet, if one is going to call oneself a Catholic theologian, then one has to be accountable to the Catholic Church, both the community of which one is a part, other theologians with whom one speaks, and even the Vatican, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and so on. It would be too easy to let myself off the hook and say, “Well, those people don’t understand what I am doing, and I am not responsible to them.” The concerns of the whole Church are my concerns, too, not constraints against which I am supposed to chafe. (Clooney 2011, pp. 133–34)

Clearly, the “faith” that underlies Clooney’s CT includes not only an individual’s belief in solo but also his/her adherence to a religious community. However, this religious community, in this case the Roman Catholic Church, is not a uniform but a complex entity. Additionally, for Clooney the “looser spiritual communities” that each individual belongs to would render his practice even more profound (Clooney 2011, p. 134). Consequently, CT trying to detach itself from pure phenomenological comparison will inevitably fall right into the middle of a Theology of Religions, whether pluralist or inclusivist. The main imperative of CT in differentiating itself from a “detached” Religious Studies is its adherence to value judgements, norms and doctrines, publicizing this normativity and prioritizing home tradition if and when necessary.

It would seem that today’s comparative theologians are often either inclusivist or pluralist. For example, the Anglican Keith Ward is a pluralist who pursues various manifestations of the “Ultimate Reality” on a global level. This is because for Ward, CT is “an enquiry into ideas of God and

revelation, of the ultimate reality and its disclosures to human minds, as such ideas arise across the full spectrum of human history and experience" (Ward 1994, p. 50).<sup>3</sup> In similar fashion Neville also advocates a globalist theology. But Clooney's and Fredericks's CT that focuses on specific micro-scale studies is different from that of Ward and Neville. Fredericks, who is a Roman Catholic, explicitly expresses his inclusivist stand (Fredericks 2010, p. xv). Likewise, von Stosch, too, who is another Roman Catholic, adopts an inclusivist attitude. It is fair to state that this inclusive approach on the part of Roman Catholic comparative theologians is in line with Vatican II and its stand toward other religious traditions.

Consequently, although CT and Theology of Religions are posited as two distinct fields, they can be shown to be closely interrelated. What is more, they often go hand in hand in the same setting. Although a comparative theologian may not primarily intend to delve into Theology of Religions, s/he may very well have an inclusivist or a pluralist stand, and reflect his/her discernments on his/her theology. In fact, according to Kiblinger, if a comparative theologian were to express his/her initial view of the religious tradition s/he is going to compare with his/her own, that would be a token of respect (Kiblinger 2010, p. 32). Thus, CT is not really an alternative to Theology of Religions, notwithstanding the fact that CT also differs from Theology of Religions in many respects. This is because CT is not primarily involved in the issue of truth or salvation as found in other faiths. We should also note that the old school type of inclusivism or pluralism do not stand still; instead, they have developed into more nuanced forms through recognizing the particularity and asymmetry of various religious traditions. Correspondingly, rather than looking into them for Rahner's "anonymous Christianity," those other traditions have come to be highly appreciated for their distinct teaching value.

Finally, contemporary CT may be criticized on the grounds that it is a mode of "Christian" theology and also because it is a form of global theology. With regard to the former point, this is mostly because many of its modern "founding fathers" or practitioners, such as Francis X. Clooney, Keith Ward, Robert C. Neville, James L. Fredericks and Raimon Panikkar are not only academics but also Christian clergymen. Besides, Roman Catholic identity of Clooney, Fredericks, Tracy, Panikkar and Boston College inevitably calls attention to itself. Lately, however, Muslim academics and/or Islamic themes have also been, in an explicit and self-proclaimed way, involved in CT practices. This is the case, for example, of Paderborn University's Center for Comparative Theology and Cultural Studies (ZeKK) in Germany, as well as the *Journal of Comparative Theology* issued by the Harvard Divinity School. As for the claim that CT is a type of global theology, we should note that while Neville and Ward have such globalist tendencies, Clooney and Fredericks focus on micro-level, specific studies and do not try to globalize their findings.

## 6. Conclusions

At the end of the day, I would like to submit that while Comparative Theology appears to present an alternative to the Enlightenment ideal of a detached, "objective" and "scientific" field or discipline of Religious Studies, it does not necessarily pose a substitute for contemporary Religious Studies insofar as the latter, too, seeks understanding and adheres to some sort of "ideological" stand. While contemporary CT begins and ends with faith in seeking meaning, truth, intellectual understanding, and/or spiritual-existential experience, comparison as employed by both CT and Religious Studies seems to bridge the gap between the two. This is because comparison is a non-neutral sphere shaped by its practitioner's intellectual search for understanding and/or spiritual commitment. Finally, I also suggest that neither is contemporary CT an alternative to Theology of Religions since first, it may go hand in hand with an inclusivist or pluralist approach, and second, both disciplines nowadays highly regard the particularity and locality of different religious traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Although a globalist, Michael Barnes argues that Ward's point of reference is Christian revelation (Barnes 2011, p. 394).



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