

Spirituality and the Spirit of Comparative Theology

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Abstract: The abundance of spiritualities and the decline of traditional religious thought raise problems for people's spiritual perception because the ground and conditions of perceptual formation are eclectic and hence complex. This article proposes comparative theology as a theological foundation to engage with this eclectic and complex context. After introducing comparative theology as background, this article discusses the confessional nature of comparative theology and its role in constructive engagement for theological and spiritual growth and learning. The discussion will conclude with reflections on relating comparative theology to spirituality and spiritual perception.

Keywords: Spirituality, Comparative Theology, Francis X. Clooney, Religious Diversity, Confessional Theology

Values and spirituality are timely topics in our pluralistic world, where religions, their traditions, and theologies are getting less and less relevant to human life. This state of less relevancy, particularly in the West, has historically been explained by socio-cultural, economic, and political realities such as enlightenment, individualism, modernity, and secularism. While some of these realities are still in effect in today's globalized world, technology and the opportunities it brings increase interaction and mutual learning between different cultures and geographies, yet they push the unique spiritual understandings of diverse cultures into a personal spiritual uniformity independent of religious traditions and theologies. Nevertheless, some religious traditions and theologies have always been central to spirituality, and provided people with definite tools and aims in their spiritual perception and training. A few years earlier, Dan Chitoiu discussed the risks and danger of such subjective spirituality and called us to reconsider the

value of religion in spiritual inquiry.¹ In this vein, many scholars and institutions today urge newly developed theological inquiries and discourses that offer spiritual aims and means for human life.²

In what follows, I propose comparative theology as a theological thinking responsive to spirituality. Comparative theology is a developing discipline of theology aiming at theological, spiritual, and intellectual growth and learning through theologically informed comparison. The aforementioned realities magnify the effect of another reality in our time and world, that is religious diversity in us and around us. It can be argued that individual quests to make sense of us and the world theologically, spiritually, and intellectually is partly a result of this magnified religious diversity.³ Therefore, it would be necessary to address religious diversity for it to provide a framework for people's search for spirituality. In this context, through theological and spiritual practice of comparison, many comparative theologians seek to see the richness in each of what they compare and find pathways that deepen spiritualities. Francis X. Clooney, a leading theologian and widely recognized as the founder of the discipline, says, "... as a theological and necessarily spiritual practice (and, in my use of it, a way of reading), *comparison* is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other."⁴ In this sense, a human spiritual quest is enriched and deepened in the comparative encounter with diverse spiritual traditions.

This essay will begin with a critical exploration of comparative theology. It will address some basic question regarding the nature and task of comparative theology. Then, it will discuss the confessional nature of comparative theology and its role in constructive engagement for theological and spiritual growth and learning. Some examples from the work of major comparative theologians particularly Francis X. Clooney, will be the focus of attention. The discussion will conclude with reflections on relating comparative theology to spirituality and spiritual perception in the pluralistic context.

¹ See Dan Chițoiu, "The Role of Spirituality Today: Between Tradition and Novelty," *Prajñā Vihāra: Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 19, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

² "Christ & Flourishing," Yale University's Christ & Flourishing, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://faith.yale.edu/initiatives/christ-flourishing>.

³ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1–8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10–1.

What is Comparative Theology?

Catherine Cornille, in her book entitled *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, asserts that comparative theology forms an integral part of every religious and theological tradition.⁵ Even though it is not always conscious and immediately explicit, she implies, borrowing teachings, practices, and doctrines from other religions is a basic characteristic that can be seen in almost every religious and theological tradition. In this sense, religious traditions are not novel religions in terms of the beliefs and practices they have developed throughout their history. Through a process of adoption and rejection, they drew upon the material from other traditions. Although this basic recognition of borrowing is not a necessary qualification for any tradition to be engaged in comparative theological work, it can make comparative theology a natural and reconcilable mode of theological and spiritual perception of God, self, and others within and beyond religious traditions.

Cornille describes comparative theology as an academic discipline, characterized by “the conscious, open, and systematic engagement of other religions in the process of theological development.”⁶ This engagement lies on an explicit or implicit recognition of truth in other traditions.⁷ In other words, it demands an openness toward others and a degree of humility in truth claims within one’s own tradition. Through such engagement, theologians seek theological and spiritual growth within or beyond a specific religious tradition.

The development of this discipline over the last decades has been marked by the expansion of choices among the traditions, texts or themes to be compared, and the diversity of approaches in engaging with other traditions.⁸ Today, there are two main approaches in comparative theology, namely confessional and meta-confessional. These approaches vary according to their conception of truth as the crux of the starting point and aim of comparative

⁵ Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43. Cornille’s notion of truth refers to the origins and contents of certain teachings, and the efficacy of certain practices, or the evocative power of certain symbols or form. Note 3. 71.

⁸ Catherine Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 19.

engagement. While the confessional approach locates the truth of a specific tradition as the starting point of comparative work,⁹ the meta-confessional approach takes its starting point from a broader conception of truth not limited to any tradition.¹⁰ The end of comparative work in both approaches is an advanced theological and spiritual understanding of truth whether within or beyond a particular tradition. To the extent that a comparative theological work abides by the conception of the truth of a particular religious tradition, the confessional theology of that tradition plays a definitive role in the basic structure of the comparative work. Although the same role is not evident in meta-confessional approach, Cornille, hinting at some comparative works of meta-confessional theologians, contends that “comparative theologians are always consciously or unconsciously shaped by a particular religious tradition.”¹¹ Comparative theology, whether confessional or meta-confessional, then embodies a) a particular mode of faith seeking understanding; b) an intuitive, rational, and spiritual comparison; c) and a pursuit of theological and spiritual growth through learning from other traditions within or beyond a particular tradition, respectively. Thus, comparative theology emerges as a distinct area of theology, which Cornille calls “a synthesis of religious studies and theology.”¹²

⁹ A few examples of confessional comparative approach include: Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008); S. Mark Heim, *Crucified Wisdom: Theological Reflection on Christ and the Bodhisattva*, First edition., *Comparative Theology--Thinking across Traditions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019); Muna Tatari and Klaus Von Stosch, *Mary in the Qur'an: Friend of God, Virgin, Mother*, trans. Peter Lewis (S.l.: Gingko Library, 2022).

¹⁰ Some examples of meta-confessional approach in comparative theology are Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddha Mind - Christ Mind: A Christian Commentary on the Bodhicaryavatara* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2019); J. R. Hustwit, *Interreligious Hermeneutics and the Pursuit of Truth* (Lexington Books, 2014); John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation And the Human Predicament: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament*, 1st edition (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2006).

¹¹ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 152.

¹² *Ibid.*, 153; There is a conceptual confusion with older comparative theology as to what is meant by comparative theology. For the distinction between the Old Comparative Theology and the New Comparative Theology, see; Paul Hedges, “The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions,” *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 3, no. 4 (2012): 1120–37.

Comparative theology also has a constructive nature that is equally relates to the sources and method of comparative theology. Clooney writes: Comparative theology is truly constructive theology, distinguished by its sources and ways of proceeding, by its foundation in more than one tradition (although the comparative theologian remains rooted in one tradition), and by reflection which builds on that foundation, rather than simply on themes and methods already articulated prior to the comparative practice.¹³

This understanding of comparative theology as constructive theology is also supported by other scholars, such as James Fredericks, who has described comparative theology as “a constructive project in which theologians interpret the meaning and truth of one tradition by making critical correlations with the classics of another religious tradition.”¹⁴ Likewise, Catherine Cornille has noted that any particular theology can be regarded as constructive “insofar as it is oriented toward discovering, elaborating or advancing religious truth.”¹⁵

Four distinctive characteristics that are evident in both approaches determine the nature and task of comparative theology: the identity and starting point of the comparativist, the choice of topics, the criteria of discernment, and the stated goal of the comparative exercise. Francis Clooney's work includes all these characteristics. For the purpose of this essay, therefore, Clooney's work is significant to comprehend the role that his confessional theology and spiritual inquiry explicitly and consciously plays in comparative theology.

Confessional Comparative Theology

When comparative theology is characterized by its confessional nature, it is neither a mere confessional theology nor solely a scientific comparison, but a particular act of faith seeking understanding built on an unlikely material and method. This confessional nature also brings comparative theology grounding in a particular faith tradition, helps shape the ways and elements of engaging with other traditions, and determines the goal and target

¹³ Francis X. Clooney, “Comparative Theology: A Review of Recent Books (1989–1995),” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (September 1, 1995): 522.

¹⁴ James Fredericks, “Introduction,” in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), xi.

¹⁵ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 151.

audience for comparative work.¹⁶ In this sense, there is an essential link between confessional and comparative theology, in which confessional theology plays a formative role in the basic structure of comparative theology and, in return, comparative theology promotes theological and spiritual growth through learning from other religious traditions. Learning interreligiously and aiming at disclosing the truth of one's own faith tradition in light of others then becomes the ultimate aim of confessional comparative theology.

Clooney's comparative approach is a major example of such a confessional comparative theology. He describes comparative theology as more confessional and spiritual than philosophical and argues that comparison carries a confessional dimension.¹⁷ His work empirically reflects the confessional and spiritual nature of comparative theology,¹⁸ through which the conscious and explicit connection between confessional and comparative theology becomes obvious. In other words, his comparative theology takes its starting point in a particular tradition and aims at interreligious learning from and through the sources of other traditions. In fact, this approach is very similar to Rumi's metaphor of living like a drawing compass. Rumi says, "I am like a drawing compass. While one of my feet stands firmly in the tradition, the other travels through seventy-two nations."¹⁹ Analogously, Clooney is concerned with studying other religions and theologies while still being rooted in his faith tradition.

Clooney succinctly defines comparative theology with two consecutive sentences: acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is done for the sake of fresh theological

¹⁶ See Catherine Cornille, "The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (2014): 9–17.

¹⁷ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 2010, 45.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013); *Beyond Compare: Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries Between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); *Theology after Vedānta an Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Bediuzzemân Furûzanfer, *Mevlana Celaleddin*, trans. Feridun Nafiz Uzluç (Konya, 2005), 4.

insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.²⁰

Here, Clooney points to three constitutive elements in the basic structure of comparative theology: theology, comparison, and learning. For him, a theological inquiry informed by the confessional commitment to a particular faith tradition serves as the starting point of comparative work. *Venturing into learning from other faith traditions* amounts to the practice of theological and spiritual comparison,²¹ which leads the confessional inquiry to the stated goals of comparative work. And *fresh theological insights through learning across religious borders* point to what comparative theology aims in the end within a particular faith tradition. Ultimately, Clooney's firm stance in a particular tradition at the outset, his pursuit of interreligious learning from other traditions, and his aim at contributing to the theological and spiritual reflection within a particular tradition are confessionally driven.

Clooney traces his notion of theology back to its traditional characterization as faith seeking understanding and adds, "theology is an inquiry carried on by believers who allow their belief to remain an explicit and influential factor in their research, analysis, and writing."²² He argues that it is still possible to be committed to a particular tradition and seek new theological and spiritual insights outside that tradition.²³ It is in this understanding that Clooney's engagement in other traditions is explicitly informed by his confessional theology and commitment to the Catholic Church. Therefore, he has expressed his Christian, specifically Catholic identity²⁴ not only to point out that his research is not divorced from this identity but also to emphasize that the theological and spiritual inquiry informed by this identity is the catalyst for his interreligious learning.

Clooney's method is intuitively comparative in the sense that "comparison is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other."²⁵ Such an understanding of comparison helps Clooney

²⁰ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²² Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta an Experiment in Comparative Theology*, 4.

²³ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

²⁴ Clooney, *Seeing through Texts*, 46; *Hindu God, Christian God*, 21; *Comparative Theology*, 70; *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, x.

²⁵ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

discern it as “a theological and necessarily spiritual practice,”²⁶ rather than a mere comparison to determine the similarity or an analysis to comprehend the essence of a theological theme. He seeks to gain new theological and spiritual insights by reading interreligiously the texts side by side through such an intuitive and spiritual practice.

These two elements of the basic structure of comparative theology, theology and comparison, are not only relevant to how to compare, but also what to compare in comparative theology. This means that the choice of topics to be compared is a significant part of the theological and comparative task of comparative theology. Clooney asserts that one’s intentions in comparative theology shapes the choice of topics.²⁷ In other words, the topics to be compared are chosen based on the theological inquiry and the stated goals one seeks. In this sense, the choice of traditions and the focus of comparison relates to the theologian’s preferences and intentions. In his work, Clooney turns to the similarities with his home tradition because, for him and many confessional comparative theologians, those similarities stimulate the initial theological questioning in “home” tradition. For example, in *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God*, upon recognizing the resemblance regarding the loving surrender found or implied in certain Christian and Hindu texts, Clooney intends to read the former in light of the latter. Such an approach relying on the similarities puts Clooney’s intention at the center of choosing the topics.

The intention of a comparative theologian also determines the focus of comparison because the choice of topics is also closely acquainted with what is aimed at the end of comparative theological work. Catherine Cornille describes six major modes of interreligious learning operative in comparative theology: intensification, rectification, recovery, reinterpretation, and reaffirmation.²⁸ Each of these modes generates a mode of learning that determines the focus of comparison in comparative theology. Clooney lends his work to the first mode, intensification. By focusing on similarities, Clooney intends to intensify and magnify the meaning of a particular theological theme in his home tradition through a focused comparison based on the possible analogues in the other

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10–1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁸ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, chap. 4.

tradition.²⁹ Since the process of comparative theology begins with the intuition of intriguing similarities between traditions, such a comparative reading, Clooney notes, is intuitive, spiritual and rational, but also arbitrary because “we see ourselves differently.”³⁰ For others, the focus of comparison can be different modes of learning such as rectification (Hugh Nicholson),³¹ recovery (Michelle Voss Roberts),³² reinterpretation (John Keenan),³³ appropriation (John Thatamanil),³⁴ and reaffirmation (Klaus von Stosch.)³⁵

Comparative theology involves a set of criteria of discernment to decide which texts, teachings, doctrines, themes in other traditions are proper to compare for the stated goal of comparative work. As Catherine Cornille has recently pointed out, any constructive engagement with other traditions lies on an explicit or implicit recognition of truth in them.³⁶ For this reason, the recognition of the presence of truth in other religions is operative in the practice of comparative theology. In most cases, including Clooney, the proper elements in the other traditions are the ones that are the most analogous to or not contradictory to the truths in the home tradition. In some cases, recognizing the difference as the truth of other traditions may also serve the purpose of comparative engagement. Klaus von Stosch’s work regarding Jesus and Christology in the Quran may hold the best example of such interreligious learning aimed by comparative theology.³⁷ Once a degree of openness and humility towards others

²⁹ Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 183. Also Clooney, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, 126.

³⁰ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

³¹ Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³² Michelle Voss Roberts, *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

³³ John P. Keenan, *Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1989).

³⁴ Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*.

³⁵ Klaus Von Stosch, “Developing Christian Theodicy in Conversation with Navid Kermani,” in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, ed. Michelle Voss Roberts (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 89–106.

³⁶ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 43.

³⁷ Klaus Von Stosch, “Reflecting on Approaches to Jesus in the Qur’ān from the Perspective of Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus Von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 37–58.

regarding the presence of truth in their traditions is achieved, they lay the groundwork for constructive theological engagement, whether the focus of comparison is either similarities or differences.

The aim and target audience of comparative theology are not disconnected from each other, even if the audience is implied. Cornille points to the centrality of the targeted audience in comparative theology and contends that the confessional approach targets particular religious communities, and therefore provides decent accountability for the comparative theologian.³⁸ In this sense, Clooney rightly carries concerns for his aims of comparative work as befitting and admissible by the believers of his Christian, specifically Catholic faith.³⁹ Compared to the meta-confessional approach, the confessional approach is aimed at a relatively particular target audience. Nevertheless, by referencing to Arvind Sharma's notion of "reciprocal illumination," Cornille asserts that it has a broader relevance because comparative theology involves more than one tradition and their communities.⁴⁰ Yet, she also warns against the temptation for imposition of home tradition's insights to the others and argues for the necessity of reciprocity from within one's own tradition.⁴¹ And this very last point regarding the aim and target audience of confessional comparative shows the restraint role that confessional nature plays in comparative theology.

Comparative Theology and Spirituality

Comparative theology does not end in comparison but always aims at theological and spiritual growth through learning new theological insights from the sources of other traditions, even if that learning is implied. In fact, one of the key factors that distinguishes comparative theology from other disciplines is this identification of learning as the goal of comparative theology. Clooney explicitly expresses his goal as learning from one or more faith traditions, and maintains, "comparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith."⁴²

³⁸ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 166.

³⁹ Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 27.

⁴⁰ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 167.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 168; Cornille, "The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology," 15.

⁴² Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 15–6.

Lamin Sanneh once sufficiently noted, “for all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design.”⁴³ This universal design by God lies at the heart of comparative theology. By conceptualizing and perceiving religious diversity in such a pluralistic way, comparative theology seeks to enrich and deepen theological, spiritual and intellectual quests through comparative encounter with diverse religious and spiritual traditions.

Comparative approach is ultimately about *understanding the self through others*.⁴⁴ In this understanding, the recognition of the alterity of others is very crucial for the constructive engagement within comparative theology. Therefore, the others in comparative theology are not reduced to the binary categories of religions and traditions such as revealed versus natural, universal versus national, or Abrahamic versus polytheists. Nor are they stripped from their particularities through a universalizing melting pot of an encompassing conception of truth. Although recognizing the presence of truth in other traditions is an inclusive approach to religious pluralism, it must not follow that there should be an encompassing, universal truth binding for everyone. Such an overarching understanding often neglects the particularity that had been formed by beliefs and convictions, historical and cultural conditioning as well as hermeneutical preferences. If so, it would not be possible to speak of religious diversity, and the world would be *Ummah Wahidah*, one single community theologically, spiritually, and intellectually.

For comparative theology otherness rests *per se* in the alterity of others. Therefore, the primary way of comparison in comparative theology does not rely on a priori method, instead, it requires an actual and concrete empirical and spiritual engagement with the others. Ultimately, the emphasis on such engagement in comparative theology demands a pluralistic understanding of religion and spirituality. As it is stated above, any constructive engagement with other traditions within the framework of comparative theology requires an openness towards others and a certain degree of humility in home tradition. Considering this, Clooney further writes about comparative theology as follows: This is an “including theology,” not a theory about religions; it draws what we learn from another tradition back into the realm of our

⁴³ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 1989), 27.

⁴⁴ This phrase “understanding the self through others” is borrowed from Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 89.

own, highlighting and not erasing the fact of this borrowed wisdom. Done honestly and with a certain detachment that chastens grand theories, such acts of including need not be seen as distorting what is learned or using it for purposes alien to its original context.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 16.

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