Passion and Fog: The Impact of the Discussion about the Theology of Religions Typology on the Epistemology of Comparative Theology

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Introduction

I must confess that I stopped following the discussion on the typology in the theology of religions many years ago, even working on developing a model of my own that was distinguishable from all the other trees in the forest. Such Olympic sports are widely practiced in the discipline of the theology of religions. Moreover, one can sometimes have the impression that the discussion on typologies is the only issue in the theology of religions and that this discussion is a synonym for the theology of religions. But this is not the case.

If this typology and the theology of religions are to be understood in their own right and according to their distinct purposes, we need to clarify the terms and concepts used. We need to do this not only for the sake of the typology or the theology of religions as such; rather, these clarifications are important with respect to the epistemology of comparative theology. Due to the complicated situation in the field of the theology of religions, there is a tendency on the side of comparative theology’s proponents to avoid any relation to and dependence on the theology of religions. But this is not advisable because this decision compromises comparative theology when it tries to make a case for its own project.

Therefore, in this chapter I will argue that looking at the typology’s epistemology will encourage a broader discourse in the theology of religions and reinforce comparative theology.

Passion and Fog, or Some Reasons for Discomfort with the Typology

In addition to those who find the typology developed by Alan Race (1983) and reinforced by major representatives such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick and Perry Schmidt-Leukel helpful, there has been a wide variety of counter-arguments and further suggestions for going beyond or amplifying this threefold typology. According to a very rough distinction between opponents
and supporters of pluralism in the theology of religions, the former try to establish the aporia or dead ends to which the typology leads, whereas the latter want to make a more precise survey of the interreligious field. But both are inclined to work with similar insinuations and misinterpretations.

Inappropriate conceptions can be divided into two groups. The first group is relatively harmless—the misconception sees the typology as a description of the actual relations between religions. Therefore, scholars in this group add many other distinctions within the threefold typology or go beyond it in order to arrive at an exhaustive list. But, drawing on Schmidt-Leukel’s groundbreaking work (1993, 1996, 1997, 2005), I argue for a strict logical distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The first (i.e., exclusivism) claims truth and salvation for only one—that is, one’s own—religion. The second (i.e., inclusivism) claims truth and salvation for more than one, but only one incorporates truth and salvation in the highest degree. The third (i.e., pluralism) claims that truth and salvation can be found at the same level in more than one religion. According to Schmidt-Leukel, this typology entails that one make a decision between them. This is a very uncomfortable situation for someone who wants to avoid making a decision and being classified as belonging to one party. Therefore, one proven remedy for escape is to produce a fog by creating a series of other types. I do not want to imply that this is the sole motivation for all these suggestions, but I suspect this might be true in some cases, especially in situations where the church has spoken out against pluralism. I am not condemning these motivations—they may, after all, create room for freedom.

The second, more popular and always polemical, type is the caricature of the pluralist position as a so-called postmodernist trend that is very tolerant, accepting all the different truth claims of the religions without noting their differences, tensions, and mutual contradictions. Those guilty of such caricatures claim they have looked behind the curtain and discovered the real nature behind pluralism, namely, that pluralism is not concerned with truth and not interested in the truth claims of religions at all. Pluralism is, in fact, indifferent towards truth and assumes all religions to be equal without any differences between them.

One variation on this polemical attitude interprets this apparently tolerant position as not, in fact, tolerant at all but as claiming truth for itself rather exclusively, as Gavin D’Costa argues (1996: 225). Uncovering pluralism (and

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1 For a response and subsequent discussions, see: D’Costa (2003: 30ff, 2011: 35); D’Costa, Knitter, and Strange (2011: 140); Hick (1997).
in some way inclusivism too) as relativistic and, consequently, as a performative self-contradiction is the well-known standard argument against any type of relativistic, critical, and deconstructive approaches. Beyond the more intellectual approaches, this fixed ascription became popular and widespread among the anti-pluralism advocates. I argue, however, that I do not know a single pluralist who considers all religions strictly equal. In addition to being rude polemics, this kind of critique is based on an epistemological confusion of the theology of religions typology. It is therefore essential to clarify the epistemological status of the typology.

The Confusion between Epistemology and Theology of Religions

With respect to the threefold typology, it is to Perry Schmidt-Leukel's merit that he distinguishes between the two disciplines of epistemology and the theology of religions (2005: 72f.). I will set out below three epistemological stances related to the typological terms.

An exclusivist epistemological position affirms that 'a' and 'non-a' cannot be true simultaneously. In this sense, anyone who tries to speak comprehensively has to adhere to this rule of logic. Therefore, in an epistemological sense, we are all exclusivist, since we want to be seen as wise and not as fools.

An inclusive epistemological position implies that all knowledge and experience is inevitably bound to how our perceptions operate. Epistemological inclusivism underlines the binding of all knowledge to perceptivity. The act of understanding has an inclusivistic nature. There is no pure objective knowledge without, for example, any origin, subject, context, worldview, understanding, perception or comprehension. Everyone speaks from a particular perspective, with presuppositions and pre-understandings; everyone has his or her own epistemological position and constructs the entire surrounding world on the basis of this epistemological starting point.

A pluralistic epistemological position changes epistemological exclusivism into its opposite and assumes that all truth claims are valid, even if they are contradictory.

In summary, since we prefer to speak comprehensively and truthfully on an epistemological level, both an epistemological exclusivism and an epistemological inclusivism are needed. In addition and consequently, it is imperative to avoid epistemological pluralism.

I will now look at the consequences of mingling epistemology and the theology of religions, which happens very often within the debate. This mingling
is a source of misinterpretations, suppositions, the creation of fog, and, more accurately, as Paul Hedges put it during a conference discussion, a matter of muddying the waters.\(^2\)

The \textit{inclusive epistemological counterargument} against any theology of religions' argument for exclusivism or pluralism is obvious, since the theology of religions sees itself as doing theology, which is faith-based reflection on particular beliefs within a particular faith community; the theology of religions is always from a certain perspective. But, in fact, inclusive epistemological counterarguments like these actually take a position above the theology of religions' discussion, while still claiming that they are involved in the game of the theology of religions. In reality, however, all they are doing is causing confusion.

The same is true of the \textit{exclusive epistemological counterargument} against the theology of religions' positions of inclusivism and pluralism: that everyone, except a fool, wants to be considered an epistemological exclusivist. But this is not a decision within the field of the theology of religions: it is an epistemological one. Exposing theological pluralists as secret exclusivists is nothing more than a methodological juggling trick, or, if I want to be clear, a rude polemic against religious pluralism. In addition, it insinuates that theological pluralism is a nonsensical position when viewed through the lens of epistemological pluralism. This kind of counterargument, however, does not reveal hidden exclusivism within religious pluralism; rather, it reveals the critic's own confusion or his/her malicious intent.

\textbf{Ideology and the Need to Make a Decision}

Aside from these two above-mentioned critiques of the typology, there is a more serious objection to the threefold typology: this critique is uncomfortable with the fact that this typology inevitably calls for a decision. It recognizes the logical nature of the typology and realizes that there is no way out of choosing one of the models. But, for a variety of reasons, it affirms that not everybody is prepared to act at this stage and to reveal his/her position. Furthermore, it argues that the pressure for a decision is framed within an ideology of religious pluralism. In other words, this critique argues that there is an inherent tendency toward the pluralistic model among the supporters of the typology, The

\(^2\) The comment was made during the “Thirty Years of the Typology of Religions” Conference, University of Winchester, U.K, September 2013.
logical distinctions between the types are biased by an affinity for pluralistic theology.³

I think this observation is correct and an appropriate account of the typology. And there are many good reasons why a decision in the field of the theology of religions is nevertheless required. I would like to indicate this through comparative theology.

**Comparative Theology’s Objections to the Meaningfulness of a Theology of Religions Typology Decision**

Almost all comparative theology’s proponents—except me—are extremely skeptical of the benefits and advantages of reflections on the theology of religions. Some of them consider it impossible to decide on an appropriate type for comparative theology, because the choice, after the exclusion of the exclusivist option—between the inclusivist and the pluralist model is subject to aporia: if one chooses an inclusivist theology of religions, one preserves the identity of one’s own faith but compromises other religions. But if one decides for a pluralist theology of religions, one appreciates other religions but jeopardizes one’s own.⁴ That is why they choose not to take a position within this typology.

A second or supplementary argument by comparative theology’s proponents views reflections on the theology of religions as being too theoretical and removed from the particularities of religious traditions (Clooney 2010b: 196). Generalized representations of other religions are simply not helpful for this group. The theology of religions, they argue, lacks competence and real interest in other religions (Fredericks 1999: 167). Therefore, they consider decisions on the models fruitless and superfluous.

This second argument leads to a third. If decisions on particular models within the typology are to be legitimate, they require substantiated and proven knowledge of other religions, but, because the theology of religions cannot provide this, such decisions are far too premature. This argument might admit that, after a hundred years of comparative theology, enough data to evaluate the relationship and hierarchies between different religions might have been

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³ The more drastic version of this criticism charges the typology with being violent in a subtle way. See Grünschloß (1999: 28).

gained. It is, therefore, at the end and not at the beginning of comparative theological research that a decision can be made.\footnote{The most prominent proponent of this type is Francis X. Clooney (2008: 183, 2010a: 14ff.).}

In conclusion, almost all try to avoid making a decision. But I think this is an unfortunate position: it endangers \textit{the theological character} and motivation of comparative theology.

\section*{An Appropriate Concept of the Pluralistic Model}

In addition to these objections by comparative theologians, I assume that a fear of becoming identified with the religious pluralism project also exists. I want to take motivations like this very seriously (Winkler 2012). Comparative theologians can be easily misunderstood as no more than defenders of pluralism and unlimited relativism, abusing the religion's data as a means of proving a problematic presupposition; comparative theology could function as a support for an ideology. However, this need not necessarily be the case if we elaborate on the notion of the theology of religions’ pluralist model in a more appropriate way.

The pluralist model of the theology of religions does not claim that the content of all religions are true on an equal level. The pluralist model simply rejects the assumption of the inclusivist model that, prior to any experience, the highest degree of truth and salvation can be found in only one particular religion. Rather, the pluralist model expects more than one equally advanced religion. It considers similarities on as high a level as possible. Therefore, the pluralist model speaks about the \textit{possibility} of equality or superiority. It does not affirm equality between religions as \textit{a priori} fact. This is my next point.

Since the theology of religions participates in the very problematic notion of ‘religion’,\footnote{Cf. two major studies: Smith (1963) and Masuzawa (2005). For some discussions see: Auffarth (2005); Bergunder (2011); Feil (2000); Fitzgerald (2000); Hedges (2013); Nehring (2006, 2008); Stausberg (2009); Stietencron (1993).} which, among other things, has been driven by external attributions and outsider representations, the theology of religions has to be alert to the fact that diverse traditions, sacred texts, times, cultures, practices, rituals, and regions have been reduced to accord with the concept of one ‘religion,’ such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity (see Moyaert’s chapter in this volume). If we want to be serious about our decisions, we have to identify the points of comparison more adequately. Effective decisions on the hierarchy of religions can be taken only at the level of particular items. So I will try to speak about a pluralist theology in \textit{particular mode} or a \textit{partial} pluralist theology.
This definition is consistent with the self-understanding that I mentioned above, that the typology is not a means of description and empirical measurement of the religions but more of a systematic theological tool for evaluating one’s own theological position and self-understanding with respect to the claims by another religion concerning salvation and truth. The theology of religions is less appropriate for observing actual religious pluralism or, as Jacques Dupuis puts it, a pluralism *de facto*, rather than claiming to assert a pluralism *de jure* (2005: 208, 312, 386f.).

Theology of Religions as a Precondition of Comparative Theology

In addition to theology, there are several other honorable motivations for interreligious dialogue and studying other religions such as exoticism, pragmatism, ethics, common action, and philosophical motivations. But they all fall short of giving theological authority within a theological discipline like comparative theology. Why should I deal theologically with other religions if my concern and motivation are only a fascination with the exotic or practical questions, ethics, or philosophy? Therefore, I am convinced that a theological answer to the motivation and starting point of comparative theology is required.

Since one of the most accepted criteria for the idea of comparative theology is its difference to comparative religion, this criterion needs to be applied, even in the field of reasoning within the new theological discipline. For the older discipline, the scholar’s subjective fascination and personal openness and curiosity is quite enough, like the scientists’ observation of the world’s most extraordinary or most common phenomenon. But these scientists do not expect truth, values, and answers to ultimate questions like theologians do. One of comparative theology’s aims is to learn about other religions in particular. But why should other religions be viewed as functioning at a theological level as *loci theologici*, as sources of theological insights that become an authority for my own faith? Here I have to give a twofold answer.

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7 Even though Klaus von Stosch and I collaborate in fostering comparative theology in German-speaking theology, we choose different epistemological and hermeneutical approaches in this respect. Because, in addition to theology, Von Stosch was also trained in philosophy, he relies more on philosophical reasoning than I do. For him, the philosophical argument is also sufficient for comparative theology too in that everyone’s worldview encounter with other worldviews is substantial for one’s own self-understanding and searching for truth. Theology need not justify an extraordinary theological epistemology to face the challenge of other religious truth claims. Stosch, Klaus von, *Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in die Welt der Religionen* (Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie 6), Paderborn u.a. (2012: 220ff.).
The theology of religions argues that there are theological values in other religions. For example, as a Catholic theologian, I draw on the Second Vatican Council and the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*. There are “truth and holiness” and “bona spiritualia/good things given by the Holy Spirit” (*NA 2*) in other religions. Furthermore, acceptance of this statement will result in an attitude in practice, an attitude toward other religions. Hence, the Council “exhorts” Catholics not only to tolerate the values of the others but also to “recognize, preserve and promote” (*NA 2*) them. The second and third call for active engagement on behalf of the other’s values and goods. This theological reflection on other religions is the major concern of the theology of religions, besides the typology discussion.

What are the qualities of these theological values in other religions? If the level of the realization of these values is *a priori* and automatically higher in my own religion, and other religions are thereby inferior, namely the assumption of the inclusivist model, other religions contain no serious resources or possibilities for learning. If we want to be honest and learn theologically from other religions, we have to make a decision that other religions possibly contain high quality insights. That implies choosing the pluralist model, as I have defined it above. *The decision for a pluralist theology of religions in a potential and particular mode constitutes the precondition for serious comparative theology.*

There has to be a reciprocal exchange between the theology of religions and comparative theology. On the one hand, while I affirm that the theology of religions is a prerequisite for comparative theology, on the other I stress that it is also the result of comparative theology, because the theology of religions continuously becomes more distinguishable and sophisticated through the results of comparative theology. Both are linked to each other within the principle of reciprocal interaction, what Georg Simmel terms the “Prinzip der Wechselwirkung” (2013).

**The Authority of Theologically Based Comparative Theology**

Again, we have to reflect on the differences between comparative theology and comparative religion, like Arvind Sharma’s “Reciprocal Illumination” (Sharma 2005), which is very close and similar to works in comparative theology, as he deals in detail with several theological issues. In short, the criteria for differentiation are the theological truth claims of comparative theology. But, as we can observe, they are not used by comparative theologians primarily to separate other religious traditions, or issues within another religion in particular, into
true and false. Moreover, I suggest one significant impact is that we learn and bring the results of dialogue home into the house of our own theology.

Since identities are complex, hybrid, fluid, and negotiated, interreligious dialogue and comparative theology are also about authority. What are the implications of comparative theology on one's own faith community and one's own theology? A comparative theology that is theologically grounded in the theology of religions is able to claim a theological authority at the negotiation table in one's own house of the church, and in theological thinking about one's own identity.

**Bibliography**


8 While Gavin D’Costa shares some sympathy with Comparative theology he criticizes the lack of this judgment within it (2009: 40ff.); cf. Bernhardt (2012).


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