ULRICH WINKLER

TO DARE SUBTLE LEARNING

A Response to Francis Clooney’s Plea
for Comparative Theology’s Catholicity

§1. Without a doubt, Francis Clooney may be regarded as the father of contemporary comparative theology. At most of his public lectures, he starts off by saying he is a Catholic, Jesuit, i.e. a member of the Society of Jesus and a priest in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as a professor at Harvard University and director of the Center for the Study of World Religions. Therefore, it is not surprising that Clooney presents his thesis with great commitment and emphasis. Comparative theology can unreservedly claim that 1) it is theology, 2) it is Catholic theology, 3) it is about time for theology to embark on an intensive study of other religions, and 4) that the question of comparative theology as Catholic theology is reflected decisively in the person’s (faith) attitude and the theologian’s intention in doing his or her research.

§2. I wholeheartedly support Clooney’s thesis; it is presented with both firmness and great circumspection in responsibility before the Catholic tradition. In this response, I will first summarize Clooney’s thesis concisely and comment upon it (§§3-10). In the second part I will pose a number of exploratory questions.

Clooney’s Thesis

§3. I would like to start with a comment by a theologian who expressed her dismay after reading the topic of the AAR Panel in Chicago. She wondered how timid Catholic theologians, burdened with anxiety about the Catholic Church’s acceptance, were to approach such a promising new discipline. It is obvious, however, that the panel was not composed of theologians who were frightened and intimidated by the magisterium and wanted to find a place for a new discipline in an inconspicuous corner of Catholic theology. On the contrary, Francis Clooney is an example of confidence and convincingly places comparative theology at the heart of the Catholic tradition and the Catholic Church.

§4. To answer the question if comparative theology is Catholic, Clooney discusses the concept of theology and its relevance for comparative theology in
the first part of his paper. In the second part he presents four reasons that ground the theological character of comparative theology.

§5 ad 1). The logical prerequisite to answering the polar question posed (is comparative theology Catholic?) depends on the clarity of the issue under discussion. Since probably no universally accepted and undisputed definition of Catholic theology can be found, the question can be answered only by recourse to a particular concept of theology. Thus, the greater difficulty lies not in finding a response in comparative theology itself but much more in the concept of theology itself—this insight may seem trivial, but it is of fundamental importance for a sometimes heated discussion. After all, the one who is tempted to make very clear negative responses to comparative theology has already tacitly made a much more serious limitation, namely a narrowing of the pluri-formity of theology itself, which can go as far as questioning theology as an independent academic field. But those who answer the question in an affirmative way can choose to place comparative theology either on the margins or at the centre of Catholic theology. Clooney chooses the latter.

§6 ad 2). Beyond the possible disputes about direction, theology has a variety of methods and approaches whose interaction constitutes the essence of theology. The decisive factor is not a single method or a particular source or content. In themselves, each can be applied or used theologically or non-theologically; rather, it is the theological intention that is crucial—how the content and methods are being placed in the service of theology. With this, Clooney has made scholastic subtleties on the right concept of theology and simple binary simplifications and exclusions obsolete by—without mentioning it explicitly—bringing “the Third” (Peirce) into play, i.e., the interpreter. The person of the theologian who is both a believer and engaged in different religious traditions plays a constitutive role in comparative theology.

§7 ad 3). A broad concept of theology allows for innovative research; a narrow concept hinders it. Cardinal Franz König (König 1999) also pointed out vehemently, when he addressed hasty suspicions of theology of religions as a whole in the case of Jacques Dupuis. Questions should not be dismissed before they are even adequately stated and discussed.

§8. Clooney then addresses some of the reasons for the rejection of comparative theology as Catholic theology and mentions first the caution and the concern that theology could become indistinguishable from religious studies. He finds an even more subtle reason in this rejection: convenience, not having to deal with other religions and being satisfied instead with general descriptions. Again, it comes down to questions of attitude. Caution, concern, and convenience are attitudes and presuppositions that occupy and affect a person.
§9. The distinction between theology and religious studies cannot be made on the basis of the material examined. On the one hand, theology studies extrabiblical content in its core subjects as well, for example, and, on the other, religious studies would be burdened with a theological task if theology were to be denied the opportunity to study other religions. What looks like an elegant solution and brings an apparent truce to theology constrains both theology as and other religions. Clooney puts a special emphasis on the special expertise that theology brings to the understanding of other religions.

§10. The above has four consequences. (1) If theology did not have its own competences with regard to understanding other religions, it could not discuss other religions and would have no ability to assess other religions. It would have to leave this judgement to another discipline. Since, this is not, by definition, part of the mandate of religious studies, theology would have to take over the results of religious studies—which results do not exactly arise from a theological understanding—in order to interpret them theologically. (2) A synoptic comparison of the content of religions from the objective and neutral attitude endorsed in religious studies is impracticable and not even desirable. (3) Instead of observing from outside, an understanding of religious traditions with theological competence can be more successful if a sufficient methodological awareness of the problem of one’s own epistemic presuppositions exists and the influence of Christian self-understanding is reflected in the lens of perception of other faiths. Clooney speaks here of sensibility. (4) This critical self-discovery process of the epistemic condition of understanding of other religions has repercussions for one’s own self-understanding.

§11. In the second part of his paper Clooney supports his thesis of comparative theology as Catholic theology by four arguments.

§12 ad 1). First, whoever looks for truth, goodness, and grace (Dominus Iesus 8) in other religions poses a theological question that can be answered only by someone with theological training.

§13 ad 2). Clooney calls his second argument a matter of “Discerning Legitimate Analogies.” Since he cares less about the history of salvation parallels in the various religions and more about the application of theological research methods in relation to other religions, the title could also read: “legitimate analogies in discerning.” Clooney’s comparative theology focuses on text studies, and therefore he uses some basic principles from the Second Vatican Council for the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, such as God’s Word spoken in a human way, the distinction of literary genres, historical and cultural con-

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1 It should be added: truth, holiness and spiritual goods (bona spiritualia) from Nostra Aetate 2 (“all that is true and holy” and “the spiritual good things”).
textuality, the unity of Scripture, embedding in the teaching tradition of the church, etc. Other texts deserve to be read like one reads one's own texts. And here again Clooney points out three attitudes: humility, modesty, and sensitivity in addition to the methodological principles of hermeneutics. Exegesis that resembles a mining expedition, i.e., a partial or strategic reading of other texts and traditions, is in diametrical contrast to that.

§14 ad 3). The academic pursuit that is both obliged to the standpoint of its own identity and hermeneutical honesty cannot be religious studies—it can only be theology. A purely external observational understanding or secondary extrinsic reception process is increasingly being replaced by an increasingly engaged understanding of other religious traditions—access from within, as it were.

§15 ad 4). A Catholic comparative theology can be recognized by its good fruit. Because comparative theology does not lead a niche existence within theology and the church but is fully embedded there, not only is it compatible with theology of religions and missiology, but its results impact theology as a whole. Though theology thus certainly dares to engage in a subtle learning process, its outcome cannot be largely guaranteed, as was the case in the past with the integration of other disciplines in theology that are recognized today. Theology can only enter this venture if the study of religions is not delegated to an external academic discipline like religious studies but if it meets the challenge of studying and understanding. In addition to rational grounds, Clooney explicitly mentions political and ecclesiastical reasons for retreating from this venture. So, we are back once again at one’s basic attitude to other religions and thus comparative theology.

§16. After this somewhat pointed and admittedly interpretive summary, I want to add some comments and additional considerations.

Questions and Comments

§17 ad §1. It is the lot of the comparative theologian that, when he talks about comparative theology, he needs to do so many other things than just comparative theology. Let me therefore remind the reader of Clooney’s life work. Clooney studied languages, texts, literature, rituals, poetics, aesthetics, and Hindu traditions, etc. for decades and wrote a series of detailed studies. Despite this tremendous expertise, however, Clooney remains a Catholic theologian who constantly invites others to accompany him on journeys of discovery or to make those journeys on their own. The credibility of his thesis is related to his personal credibility since he is both a supporting member of the Jesuit order and a priest firmly anchored in the Catholic Church as well as one who has also acquired a deep participant perspective of Hindu traditions and spiritualities in addition to his academic qualifications.
§ 18 ad § 3. The confessional anchoring of comparative theology is one of its strengths. It thus subjects itself to a high standard with respect to quality. The opposite insinuation, i.e. that one should pursue a free and supra-confessional theology beyond the not only glorious but also chequered and guilty traditions of the Catholic Church is tempting. It is more demanding however, to develop a methodology with the persuasive power that can produce commitment and expertise in one’s own faith questions as well as a special sensitivity in the understanding of other faiths. This requires a sharp self-critical analysis and conversion of one’s own faith. The claim of the Catholicity of comparative theology is not an opportunistic gesture of submission to church leadership but a robust challenge for the development of Catholic theology in line with the epochal upheavals of the Second Vatican Council in relation to other religions.

§ 19 ad § 5. We sometimes find ourselves in the middle of an absurd situation where a very limited and narrow method for speaking about the Wholly Other, Infinite, and All-Embracing is expected and demanded, oppressively limiting the possibility of speaking about God. Every theology has to resist placing restrictions along the lines of Neo-Scholasticism or a compendium and harmonizing summary of doctrinal propositions because this would cut off theology from its magisterium in the church. Therefore, the concept of theology held by fierce opponents of comparative theology in particular has to be very critically examined.

§ 20 ad §§ 6, 9. The question “What is theology?” cannot be answered only according to content. Clooney’s distinction between content and subjective intention draws on a classical topos of Catholic theology.

§ 21. (1) The unity of theology (since theology is God-talk) in the variety of methods and content is given by the concept of God. Thomas Aquinas puts it as follows: “Ergo dicendum quod sacra doctrina non determinat de Deo et de creaturis ex aequo, sed de Deo principaliter, et de creaturis secundum quod referuntur ad Deum, ut ad principium vel finem. Unde unitas scientiae non impeditur.” (“Sacred doctrine does not treat of God and creatures equally, but of God primarily, and of creatures only so far as they are referable to God as their beginning or end. Hence the unity of this science is not impaired”) (Summa Theologica [ST] I.1.3 ad 1).

§ 22. (2) No reality is therefore excluded from the theological reflection: “Omnia autem pertractantur sacra doctrina in sub ratione Dei, vel quia sunt ipse Deus; vel quia habent ordinem ad Deum, ut ad principium et finem.” (“But in sacred science, all things are treated of under the aspect of God: either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end”) (ST I.1.7c.). The material object (obiectum materiale) of theology is the whole of reality from a specific perspective or a formal object (obiectum formale). “Respondeo dicendum quod cuiuslibet cognoscitivi habitus obiectum
The object of every cognitive habit includes two things: first, that which is known materially, and is the material object, so to speak, and, secondly, that whereby it is known, which is the formal aspect of the object.” (ST II-II.1.1c). So there is no content that are excluded from the content of theology per se.

§23. (3) Therefore, very consistently, Thomas asks: “Utrum fidei possit subesse falsum.” (“Whether anything false can fall under faith?” (ST II-II.1.3). He denies this categorically: “Sub qua [ratio formalis objecti fidei est veritas prima] nullum falsum stare potest, sicut ... non-ens sub ente ... Unde relinquitur quod fidei non potest subesse aliquid falsum.” (“... under [the formal aspect of the object of faith is the First Truth] nothing false can stand, as neither can non-being stand under being …. It follows therefore that nothing false can come under faith”) (ST II-II.1.3c). Therefore, what theology really is cannot be decided on the level of content. Denying that comparative theology being theology because of its preoccupation with non-Christian sources is completely untenable methodologically. The distinction between theology and religious studies is not made at the material level.

§24. (4) The decisive issue is if theology is able to pose a theological question. The criterion for theology and thus comparative theology is thus not determined by content but by grammar, i.e., the way in which such connections are made between ultimate reality, the sources of Christian revelation and the faith of other religious traditions. Already due to these formal reasons, which are anchored in the concept of theology, an exclusion of comparative theology from theology is wrong.

§25. After these formal reasons concerning the concept of theology we will now add some substantive considerations. Religious traditions and the faiths of other religions are not material objects and objects of knowledge like other things in the world to which theology can relate. Rather, there are substantive reasons that characterize other religions with respect to their particular importance for their reflections on Christian faith. Clooney discusses such reasons in the second part of his contribution.

§26. It is the task of theology of religions to discuss this question since it has a much broader concern than discussing the typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Its tasks are the theological justification of (1) the special definition of the relationship to other religions, (2) one’s own self-understanding because of a new relationship to other religious traditions, (3) a new attitude toward other faiths that, as a faith-based position, I call a spiritual attitude or spirituality, and (4) the practical implementation of interreligious encounters, exchange and learning, and common life and action.
§27. I see Clooney’s contribution as a theological discourse on comparative theology and thus as a theology of religions (cf. §1). I would like to distinguish two categories of arguments. (1) For contentual justifications Clooney very briefly mentions the well-known texts on the theological value of other religions as places of truth, holiness, and grace (§§12, 18).² They determine the course of theology of religions and answer the question why religions are different from the material object of any other reality. Thus, the theology of religions provides another important argument for the foundation of the theological nature of comparative theology. Not only the formal object of the question about God, but also the material object of the dignity of religions as special places of theological knowledge (lo ci theologici) emphasizes the theological authority of comparative theology. The theology of religions is thus a basic prerequisite for comparative theology.

§28. Thus, I disagree with James Fredericks and Klaus von Stosch who understand theology of religions and comparative theology as alternatives.³

§29. I am just as critical of Clooney’s reluctance to engage with the theology of religions. His “allergy” (Clooney 2010: 47) to this is understandable where the purely theoretical reference to other religions prevents or dispenses with intensive study of these religious traditions. In fact, at this point even Clooney cannot proceed without recourse to theology of religions’ arguments when he describes and justifies comparative theology as he does in his current contribution to this discussion here or in his excellent book of 2010. Therefore, I think that theology of religions and comparative theology are in a mutual relationship. Just as theology of religions is a prerequisite for comparative theology, so the results of comparative theology have an impact on theology of religions.

§30. Clooney’s considerations (2) concerning the second category (§27) are more detailed, namely the epistemological presuppositions and attitudes the examination of other religions is based on. (§§13, 14). I will develop these arguments somewhat more here. If grammar is crucial for theology (§24), it is also crucial (1) with respect to the intention with which the grammatical references are made—what Thomas Aquinas calls (§22) a habitus or a cognitive attitude and Clooney (§20) a subjective intention—and (2) how these relations are created. The grammar is a formal structure that always needs to be filled with content during a new creative process.

² Detailed arguments in the field of Catholic theology were made, for example, by Jacques Dupuis and Gavin D’Costa. See Dupuis 2006; D’Costa 2000, 2009, and 2011.

³ See also Fredericks 1995 and 1999; Von Stosch 2007 and 2012.
§31. The first preliminary grammatical decision is to abandon polemical apologetics and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Werbick) regarding other religions. The tract *demostratio religiosa* by Neo-Scholastic apologetics started with the a priori preliminary decision that the truth of one’s own faith has the highest validity and is automatically and unconditionally superior to all truth claims by other religions and also sovereign to each experience. Theology of religions, however, is able to justify why a preliminary decision of the assumption of truth regarding other religions is theologically necessary (§§12, 18, 27). From the point of view of one’s own faith (epistemological inclusivism), one may trust that there are inspired truths in other religions and their realization in other religions that one can learn from. It is his generally critical assumption of truth that animates comparative theology to engage in detailed studies. Therefore, the willingness to learn presupposes the possibility of a better realization of truth—otherwise, there would be nothing to learn. Hence, I call this position in theology of religions a potential (partial) pluralism that is interested in details as the first grammatical preliminary decision and prerequisite for comparative theology.

§32. This change in the assumption of truth also allows a central concern in Clooney’s argument to be honoured, namely the theological competence with respect to perceiving other religions. Theology has to examine, in critical self-reflection (§10 [4]), its own epistemological interests as to whether it treats other religions with suspicion or with trust. That is the basis for deciding if theology can do justice to other religions. Religious studies, after all, claims that it is able to describe other religions in an objective and fair way, while theology has distorted other religions out of self-interest. Only after this first grammatical or preliminary epistemological decision has been made can theology read other religious sources theologically, treat them in as sensitive a manner as its own, and thus regain credibility with respect to religious studies. Over against traditional religious studies, theology is in a position to contribute added value to the understanding of religions because it can do better justice to their theological character and particular nature as sources of meaning.

§33. This is followed by a second grammatical rule, namely to move more and more from an outsider perspective to an insider or participant perspective regarding other religions (§§6, 14). Since theology is participant-oriented reflection on faith, comparative theologians and theologians must also pursue a form of internal perspective for the religions investigated. That is also where theology of religions differs from religious studies, which must remain at an objective distance, uninvolved. The forms of this commitment can vary greatly.

§34. This is what Clooney is pointing to when he speaks of the constitutive role of the interpreter (§6) because it is not just about the comparison of content. Rather, the theologian and his or her attitude are of constitutive importance for comparative theology. Though Clooney has focused on texts, the field
of comparative theology deals with is much wider. Just as texts do indeed play an important but not the only role in the theologian’s own religion, so a wider range must also be taken into account for other religions as well. In addition to the sacred texts, interpretation, poetics, reflection, and further development one should also look at the dimension of performance. Oral and ritual, non-textual representations and performances are very essential to the life of religions. The identity of believers and religions is much more comprehensive than what is found in their texts.

§35. Comparative theology entails a third grammatical structure: the results have implications for one’s own faith (§15), which can be highly varied. Comparative theology is not a useless and trivial game. The faith and theology of those who are engaged in faith is engaged, challenged, enriched, and transformed. While a weak and uncertain belief stokes resentment (Nietzsche) and looks for the weaknesses of others in order to cover up its own weaknesses and to present itself as stronger, a mature faith, looking for the strengths of others, can see its own weaknesses and learn from others.

§36. This point is often regarded with fear, which is connected with an inadequate concept of identity. The identity of the Catholic faith is not simply the repetition of the same (idem) but is reflected in the fact that it is responsive, that it is capable of responding in a communicative and not isolationist way to the issues and contexts of the time. Since identities are constituted by far more than ideas, texts, and propositional truths, etc. and after the cultural turn are represented in a very essential way preformatively, symbolically, and via the media, they cannot be determined once and for all. Since identities are not fixed once and for all but are fluid, not unilateral but multidimensional, not preset but always subject to renegotiation, comparative theology does not need so much to wage such a great battle over the nature of the Catholic faith to defend content and dogmas as much as it needs to stand firm at the negotiating table of Catholic identity. When the question of identity goes far beyond questions of nature and content and conversations, grammar, practice, performance, the body, mediality, symbolic representation, questions of power, and the “political and religious” reasons (§15) enter the picture the task of the comparative theologian exceeds the field of systematic theology and reasoning by far. They have to persist in these power issues of the negotiations (Foucault) about identity or, stated more theologically: they bear witness. Indeed, comparative theology is Catholic, it has ecclesial authority and cannot be banished from the negotiating table of Catholic identity.

LITERATURE


I am grateful to Ulrich Winkler for the welcoming and positive tone of his response to my arguments in favor of the thesis that comparative theology is Catholic theology. I also welcome his very fine insights that help us to understand still more deeply why there is no incompatibility between comparative theology and Catholic theology understood more broadly, if indeed we remember what “theology” and “Catholic theology” mean.

Winkler is quite right to notice how much importance I attribute to the personal credibility and subjective engagement of the theologian who studies another religion. That such study be integral, embodied in the life and intentions and practices of the thinking and praying scholar, is a necessary feature of any theology, including the learning of a tradition other than one’s own. While I very much respect distinctions among kinds of theology and disciplines within theology—Bernard Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* remains a favorite of mine—it is simply contrary to long-standing values essential to Catholic theology to imagine that one person can study the religions while another, innocent of that hard work, determines their meaning for Christians. Too often that division of labor has led to bad scholarship on religions, ill-informed by theology, and theologies poorly informed by what the other religions have to teach. As Winkler rightly puts it, my appreciation for subjective intention—something like Aquinas’ *habitus*—is required; for this, the work of actual comparative study too is required, as the work of the Catholic theologian for the sake of the Catholic Church. I am pleased that Winkler appreciates this dynamic.

I am also content that he gives me a little bit of a hard time regarding my “allergy” to the theology of religions. He understands my reluctance to shift over to a conversation largely with theologians who do not study other religions, where I would have to explain myself on their turf. But he also insists that “even Clooney cannot proceed without recourse to theology of religions’ arguments when he describes and justifies comparative theology as he does in his current contribution to this discussion” (§29). Comparative theology and the theology of religions are, as he correctly says, “in a mutual relationship.” Of course: there are times when I need to defend my field and in doing so, I cannot avoid venturing onto the field of the theology of religions.

Winkler’s valid insights in this regard do not overcome my basic reluctance, which stands firm for several reasons. First, it is still the case that there are
many more theologians engaged in the theology of religions than in comparative theology. For reasons given in my paper and appreciated by Winkler, we very much need more of the latter—even if training Catholic theologians who can study deeply other religions, skilled in the languages and technical details of other traditions, means that there will be fewer non-comparative Catholic theologians. Second, Winkler himself shows the value of expertise when it comes to arguing the technical points of Catholic theology. He does a very fine job in §§21-25 in proposing “formal reasons,” drawn from Aquinas, for the judgment that “an exclusion of comparative theology from theology is wrong.” Reading through his erudite paragraphs (and making mental notes for future reading) reminded me, just as when I go back and read the works of Jacques Dupuis, how there is no substitute for real expertise if one actually is to undertake a theology of religions. I have enough trouble understanding the Sanskrit and Tamil sources and bringing them into conversation with Catholic tradition and do not need to try also to be expert in a traditionally framed theology of religions with all its scholastic equipment. I am delighted to see that Winkler thus begins where I leave off and does a better job of making the case on a technical level than I would have. Comparative theology and the theology of religions can both flourish, and a way to do this is to see the latter as “phase two,” following upon comparative theology and learning from what the Catholic comparative theologian has written.

A third reason for my reticence regarding the theology of religions is that the transit from comparative theology to the theology of religions travels a difficult and even treacherous path. Some of my earlier books—Seeing through Texts (1996), Hindu God, Christian God (2001), Divine Mother, Blessed Mother (2005), Beyond Compare (2008), and even the recent His Hiding Place Is Darkness (2013)—have required of me meticulous study of Hindu traditional materials, alongside certain considerations of texts and themes in Christian tradition and theology. But it is clear even to me that my last chapters always stop short, pointing, sketching but not filling out the Catholic theology—theology of religions, or Christology or Mariology, etc.—that seems ready to follow upon the work I have done. Some readers (particularly those who prefer to skip detailed intervening chapters and harvest only conclusions summarized in the last chapters of books) are disappointed. I stop at the edge of a different kind of theology for various reasons: because my books are usually already long enough; because others, such as Winkler, may well do the follow-up better than I, insofar as they have learned from what I have written; and because I have opened up issues that cannot be fit back into a Catholic theology innocent of interreligious learning, as if some current form of the theology of religions were the very unusual old wineskin that actually could hold new wine. (Mark 2.22)

Winkler, in responding so expertly and sensitively to my paper, shows us how the transit back to mainstream, non-comparative theology can begin. In the
meantime, I reaffirm my intention to keep my distance from explicit work in the theology of religions and related doctrinal fields, in order to engage in a Catholic comparative theological learning that is rarer and all the more in need in the church today.