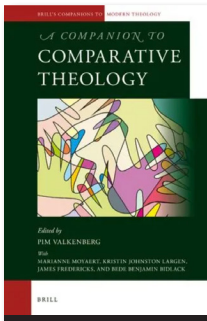


BOOK REVIEW

A Companion to Comparative Theology

Edited by Pim Valkenberg, with Marianne Moyaert, Kristin Johnston Largen, James Fredericks, and Bede Benjamin Bidlack. Leiden: Brill, 2022. xviii + 637 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-38838-3. \$201.00 (hardcover and e-book).



How do you judge when an area of study has “arrived” in the academy, having developed into something more than an idiosyncratic set of theoretical questions or esoteric clique? One measure would be the emergence of a distinctive secondary literature, including guides and handbooks, to explore and to set limits on what can now be recognized as a field or sub-discipline. If so, then Comparative Theology (CT) seems to have arrived, at least in the Anglophone worlds of North America and Europe. Francis X. Clooney published *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Boundaries* (Wiley-Blackwell) in 2010, but this was arguably still aspirational and more than a little idiosyncratic to Clooney himself, as one important founder of the discipline. More recently, methodological overviews of the field have been published by Paul Hedges (*Comparative Theology*, Brill, 2017) and Catherine Cornille (*Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2019). Michelle Voss’ *Comparing Faithfully* (Fordham UP, 2016) and Mara Brecht and Reid Locklin’s *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom* (Routledge, 2016) offer resources for bringing CT into the classroom, and there is also at least one entry in the YouTube-ish “how to do it” category: Clooney and Klaus von Stosch’s *How to Do Comparative Theology* (Fordham UP, 2017).

Two major research companions have also now appeared on library shelves to guide new scholars in the field: Axel M. Oaks Takacs and Joseph L. Kimmel’s *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2023) and the present volume, edited by Pim Valkenberg and several colleagues. The subtitle of the former names it as a festschrift to Clooney, and it could be read as a multi-author update to his 2010 introduction, with whole sections on spirituality, vocation, and the Society of Jesus alongside those taking up questions of theory and method or

attempting particular comparative experiments. Valkenberg's volume, by contrast, reveals a tighter and more systematic structure. At either end of the collection are sections on the history of CT up to 1985 (Part 1) and "New Directions" in the contemporary discipline (Part 7). In-between, the work explores distinctive patterns of comparative engagement by religious tradition: Judaism (Part 2), Islam (Part 3), Hinduism (Part 4), Buddhism (Part 5) and Chinese Religions (Part 6). Each of these tradition-based explorations has the same four-part structure, with a first overview chapter followed by three chapters that are more explicitly comparative. It is notable that Christianity is not one of the traditions with its own dedicated portion, thus conceding that contemporary Comparative Theology remains an overwhelmingly Christian enterprise. Christian interlocutors are characterized by the editors as "initiating partners" of each conversation (2). Nevertheless, they have ensured that each section includes at least some voices from the various "Others" who define the structure of the work. Altogether there are 31 chapters by 32 contributors, including both well-known luminaries and up-and-coming scholars in the discipline. It is strengthened by a very helpful introduction which lays out the rationale of the work clearly and walks through the sections step by step, as well as an extensive index.

The structure of the *Companion* could be read as a capitulation to the widely criticized "world religions paradigm," and this is definitely a weakness of the approach; at the same time, this choice opens space to facilitate deeper dialogical engagement than one finds in the Takacs and Kimmel volume, for example. Thus, in the first chapter of Part 2, Marianne Moyaert explores the unique, non-symmetrical relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and hypothesizes that comparative theologians often avoid engaging Judaism out of fear of perpetrating "new comparative violence" (125). This issue of asymmetry, identified by Moyaert, becomes a thread through subsequent chapters on Torah and Christ by a Christian comparativist (chapter 6, Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski), on the Song of Songs by a Jewish comparativist (chapter 7, Devorah Schoenfeld), and on the Land of Israel in the Jewish meal blessing, *Birkat Hamazon* (chapter 8, Emmanuel Nathan). The thread is then picked up again in future sections of the book, including Jonathan Edelman's creative *sic et non* on the fruitfulness (or not) of a comparative approach to Hindu Studies in Part 4 (chapter 16) and Louis Komjathy's exploration of the possibility of a Daoist comparative theology in Part 6 (chapter 24). Near the end, Axel Takacs' chapter 30 calls for a closer relationship between comparative theology and interreligious studies precisely because of this endemic asymmetry. He urges comparative theologians to acknowledge the inherent relationality of

religious communities and to fix their scholarly gazes “on the liminal spaces of interreligious encounters rather than on single religious traditions” (569). These are the places where the boundaries of the given religious tradition—Christianity, too!—are continually re-drawn.

Individual chapters also raise new questions and interpretive perspectives, with wide relevance. In chapter 11, for instance, Vahid Mahdavi Mehr asks the provocative question, “Can There Be an Islamic Comparative Theology?” His answer is ultimately no, at least with respect to Christianity and Judaism—because, on his reading, the Qur’ān neither claims to supersede these traditions nor concedes that they are truly “foreign” to itself. Hence, the only possible engagement would be a form of ecumenism. In chapter 21, Bede Bidlack invokes comparative theology as a tool to help Christian theology get past cultural essentialism or its mirrored foils. By paying attention to the language systems in which religious traditions have developed (for instance, the significance of Chinese language in Chinese religions, and Greek in the case of Hellenized Christianity), the Christian comparative theologian can guard “against the entrenchment of equating Hellenization with revelation, on the one hand, and against scrapping the tradition of the church in favor of some pure, non-Hellenized theological development on the other” (417). In both Mehr and Bidlack’s chapters, comparison helps the religious community recall historical modes of relation with neighboring traditions which were not the taxonomic world religions paradigm.

The *Companion* features several methodologically innovative examples of comparative theology that break out of well-worn debates about whether comparative theology should be confessional or meta-confessional. To begin with, nuanced historical treatments by Hugh Nicholson (ch. 3) and Pim Valkenberg and Christian Krokus (ch. 4) reveal the complex, dynamic relation between confessional theology and phenomenology of religion in such figures as Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Jean Daniélou and Henri DeLubac. Readers are also introduced to the ‘ritual turn’ in comparative theology, thanks to chapters by Kijin Wu on sacrifices to ancestors, *jì zǔ* (祭祖), in Taiwan (chapter 23) and Marianne Moyaert on the importance of intentional communal performance (chapter 27); both point to liturgy or ritual as a prime theological locus for comparison. Moreover, several essays go on to hint how embracing these dynamics of lived religion may infuse comparative theology with a livelier sense of social or spiritual engagement. One stellar example of this is Maureen Walsh’s chapter on pregnancy loss memorials in Japanese Buddhism and American Catholicism. Instead of looking for analogues

of thought, text, or even practice in two traditions, Walsh notes how these memorial practices (Buddhist rituals pertaining to *mizuko*, “water children,” and American Catholic shrines and statues honoring the unborn) arise out of the “same basic problem—the issue of pregnancy loss”—but conceive of this problem in different terms and therefore propose different therapeutic responses to it. As our globalized world confronts new ecological and technological disruptions, such a problem-based approach could situate comparative theology to play a useful role in identifying shared challenges along with a variety of ways for interpreting and responding to them. Moreover, although professors everywhere are weary of being asked about the “relevance” of studying religion, this *is* the sort of comparative work that can readily appeal to the pragmatic nursing undergrad taking a general education class or that may still delight the jaded university administrator wondering whether Humanities disciplines are using their cultural diversity turf in the curriculum to bring anything interesting to the table.

Several chapters press the difference that religious commitments can make in realizing a socially engaged but not socially determined life. In chapter 18, John Makransky seeks to combine a Christian concern for human dignity and liberative justice with a Buddhist suspicion of reductive dualities (the oppressor versus oppressed, the exploiter deserving ire versus sufferer deserving solidarity). Pondering what modes of activism are truly effective, Makransky does call for a socially engaged “fierce compassion,” but he insists this must be suffused with the best of Buddhist and Christian theological anthropology, lest religious activism fall into either uncaring passivity or self-righteous anger. So too, Lucinda Mosher’s chapter on calligraphy and iconography raises the question of what lettering and imaging is really for. Exploring these ancient devotional practices as deeply humanistic participations in beauty and narrativization, she also notes contemporary interreligious efforts, such as a 2003 event at which Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scribes worked in parallel and in collaboration, where spiritual writing becomes a “construction zone” for comparative theology. Especially as AI tools like ChatGPT and Dall-E cause some to question the value of human writing and art, at least on the level of distilling information or generating a picture, Mosher’s chapter can serve as a reminder that religious devotions may aspire to something else entirely. At a time when society seems awash in polemics and overwhelmed with data, such chapters in the *Companion* hint that CT could come to the rescue—laying open anew just how pluralistic, alternative, and creative the religiously committed human experience can be.

As Catherine Cornille sums it up in her title for the final chapter, comparative theology is “more than comparing theologies.” As a whole, this volume successfully orients the reader to the multiple ways scholars have sought to render that difference. Early on, as the sub-discipline sought to establish legitimacy, scholars devoted much energy to asserting which methods and commitments were shared or unshared with comparative religion. More recently, comparative theologians have grappled with questions of normativity and epistemic power, trying to embrace honestly the inevitability, opportunities, and risks in trying to think better along with someone else’s resources. Today, comparative theologians continue to worry about the methodological rigor and ethics of their work, while increasingly embracing the lived intercultural and interreligious milieu in which religious communities encounter each other and continue to theologize their spiritual and social life.

The *Companion* both surveys these developments and offers myriad examples of comparative theologies animated by this range of concerns, making it a truly panoptic orientation to the work of the discipline.

Reid Locklin
University of Toronto–St. Michael’s College

Stephanie M. Wong
Villanova University



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