

Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology. By Catherine Cornille. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020. 224 pp. ISBN: 978-1-119-53522-5. \$44.95, paper; \$35.99, eBook.

In a text likely to become required reading for graduate students of comparative theology, Catherine Cornille successfully conveys both the breadth and the depth of this burgeoning field through a comprehensive overview that simultaneously engages particular methodological, hermeneutical, and theological issues currently facing comparative theologians. Cornille, on the one hand, paints an expansive panorama of recent comparative theological scholarship, enabling the reader to gain a broad perspective on the current state of the field and the contributions made by scholars over the last few decades. At the same time, this breadth of information is complemented by her deep engagement on specific issues faced perennially by comparative theologians. These include the variety of potential stances taken by comparative scholars with respect to other religious traditions (such as the relationship between comparative theology and theology of religions), hermeneutical opportunities and challenges occasioned by comparative analysis (including syncretism and hegemony), and the relationship between comparative theology and other kinds of theology (for example, confessional and meta-confessional theologies).

Cornille's text pursues this dual objective, discussing both the breadth and depth of comparative theology, through five chapters bookended by a succinct introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, Cornille represents comparative theology, broadly speaking, as a ubiquitous practice that occurs in "every religious and theological tradition" (1) as religious people shape their respective traditions through engagement with other faiths. However, while such engagement often occurs unwittingly, the modern scholarly discipline of comparative theology, by contrast, seeks to advance theological understanding through a "conscious, open, and systematic" interaction with multiple traditions (1). Cornille then goes on to describe how this discipline draws on both the fields of religious studies and theology in pursuing its normative goals of a more robust theological understanding and greater appreciation of truth. Though commonly rooted in these broad similarities, comparative theologians nevertheless engage an array of religious phenomena (such as texts and practices), utilize diverse methods (including scholarly writing and artistic expression), and even express divergent understandings of their common discipline (2–4). After thus depicting these commonalities and contrasts within the field of comparative theology, Cornille provides a brief roadmap for the rest of the book before ending her introduction by asking whether this discipline is a uniquely Christian one. As a challenge to such an assumption, Cornille highlights examples of comparative theological scholars from other religious traditions.

Chapter 1 then traces how comparative theology emerged as a discipline out of the earlier comparative study of religions, and how comparative theology can be practiced as both a form of confessional theology and as meta-confessional theology. The former approach is characterized by a scholar's rootedness within a particular religious tradition, which "provides the impetus, the theological questions or problems to be probed, and the guiding norms for discerning truth in other religions" (18). By contrast, meta-confessional comparative theology (also called interreligious, transreligious, or interstitial theology) engages the insights of multiple religions "in order to attain to religious truth that is not limited to any one religion" (25). Resisting an overly-simplistic dichotomy, however, this chapter concludes by examining approaches that blend both a confessional and meta-confessional stance.

Chapter 2 surveys a variety of positions a comparative theologian might take with respect to the epistemological status of other religious traditions—from an exclusivist theology of religions to a pluralist one. The chapter examines how one’s theology of religions might influence how one engages comparatively with other faiths. It then concludes by discussing the impact of postcolonialism on “the very notion of religious boundaries and the existence of distinct religious identities” (65) and underscores the importance of continued dialogue among theologians holding different views regarding the status of other religions.

Chapter 3 analyzes the theological hermeneutics at play in comparative endeavors, namely the “complex interplay between seeing the other through oneself and seeing oneself through the other” (80). Referencing the scholarship of Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Francis Clooney, among others, Cornille underscores the value of comparative learning in light of the hermeneutical “indeterminacy” of texts (as well as of experiences, practices, rituals, etc.). At the same time, she acknowledges certain challenges inherent to comparative analysis (such as projection of one’s own prejudices onto the other) and the constant need for comparativists to check their prejudices against others’ self-understanding. When engaged with self-awareness and humility, comparative theological learning creates an opportunity for broadening one’s hermeneutical horizons and discovering overlooked or underappreciated interpretations of theological truth. In addition to these hermeneutical arguments, this chapter also discusses non-textual interreligious engagement (including interreligious ritual participation) and the potential pitfalls involved in interreligious borrowing, such as syncretism and hegemony.

Chapter 4 then surveys six types of learning that can occur through comparative theological analysis: intensification, rectification, recovery, reinterpretation, appropriation, and reaffirmation. Put briefly, intensification refers to an “amplification of the meaning and truth of one’s own religious ideas and experiences” (117). By contrast, rectification involves restoring a correct understanding of another tradition, while recovery references rediscovery of forgotten or marginalized aspects of one’s own religious heritage. A fourth type of learning occurs through reinterpretation, where the concepts of one religion are used to make a different tradition intelligible to a particular cultural or religious context. Appropriation, by contrast, integrates particular elements of one tradition into another, while reaffirmation highlights a new (or renewed) appreciation of the truths within one’s own religion.

Chapter 5 addresses the relationship between comparative and confessional theology, asking how the insights of comparative theological projects, as aspects of constructive theology, might be incorporated in contemporary theological discussions more broadly. Towards this end, Cornille highlights certain challenges faced by comparative theologians which necessarily impact the reception of their projects in larger theological circles. These challenges include one’s choice of specific comparands, one’s discernment of truth and value in other traditions, the target audience of specific comparative projects, and the relationship between comparative theology and apologetics. Finally, while emphasizing the importance of comparative theology for confessional theology, this chapter concludes by highlighting the productive operation of comparative theology in meta-confessional ways as well.

Cornille then concludes her book with a summary essay that touches upon certain themes discussed at length in the preceding chapters. These include confessional vs. meta-confessional approaches, how particular theology-of-religion positions (for example, exclusivism) affect the types

of learning enabled by comparative study, and the influence of movements like postcolonialism on comparative theology.

In sum, this book is an invaluable resource for anyone desiring to understand the contours of comparative theology, as it provides a thorough (yet fairly brief and not overwhelming) overview of the discipline's relationship to proximate fields (such as theology of religions), hermeneutical challenges and opportunities, and areas of commonality and diversity among comparative scholars. While the text is less useful for those looking either for a "how-to" manual of comparative analysis, or for a thorough historical analysis of the discipline's pre-twentieth century roots, the book's thorough engagement with modern comparative scholarship and detailed discussions of hermeneutics, methodology, and inter-theological relationships (that is, comparative theology vis-à-vis confessional and meta-confessional theologies) commend this text to anyone desiring a broad and deep dive into modern comparative theology.

Joseph Kimmel
Harvard University

The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS)* are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the *JIRS* staff, the *JIRS* Board of Advisors, or *JIRS* publishing partners.