

***Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective.* By Paul Hedges. Brill Research Perspectives in Theology. Leiden: Brill, 2017. vi + 89. ISBN: 978-9004358461 and 978-9004358454. \$84.00, e-book and paperback.**

Paul Hedges should be commended for this critical overview of comparative theology (hereafter, CT), as he deftly weaves together a volume that is both succinct (a mere eighty-nine pages) and loaded with rich analysis. This slim work manages to accomplish multiple goals in short order: providing an introduction to CT, including a brief historical overview of the field that charts its major changes over time; offering a critical analysis of CT, in light of both the scholarly deconstruction of “religion” and oft-neglected “subaltern” perspectives; and supplying a philosophical hermeneutics which offers intellectual grounding for comparative projects.

These aims are achieved through four well-organized sections. Preceding these, a short introduction opens the work. It alerts the reader that the following text will focus on the “contemporary practice” of CT rather than “historical questions,” and thus will proceed in a “thematic” manner that also attends to “future directions and prospects” (2). The first major section (“Part 1: Defining, Exploring, and Mapping a Field”) then opens by critically analyzing the “Old CT” (OCT) and “New CT” (NCT) framework of comparativist Hugh Nicholson. This analysis offers a brief historical overview of CT. It both presents and then critiques the OCT/NCT paradigm, which distinguishes between CT as commonly practiced in the nineteenth century (i.e., often with the polemical intention of showing Christianity’s “superiority” in a hierarchy of so-called “world religions”) and CT as pursued by contemporary scholars like Francis X. Clooney, S.J. The rest of Part 1 is then dedicated to “tracing a lineage of the normative academic pedigree” of CT, which Hedges critiques as “very white, male, and Western, and arguably focused upon reified traditions and notions of religion that has tended to prioritize elite, literate, male textual lineages” (9). The lineage then outlined by Hedges focuses upon the comparative practices of three main scholars: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Keith Ward, and Robert Neville. Analysis of CT as practiced by these scholars touches subsequently upon several other sub-issues: how CT relates to the theology of religions, CT’s methodology, CT’s relationship with confessional goals, and its impact upon theology more generally.

Part 2 (“Comparative Theology after Religion”) then addresses the role of CT in a context where terms like “religion” and “world religions” have been thoroughly deconstructed. Hedges endorses a position of “soft deconstruction”: that is, while acknowledging the value of critiquing reifications and mistaken assumptions in the “World Religions Paradigm” (WRP), terms like “religion” ought not be done away with completely, as they help to “define an arena of human culture that can usefully be discussed and classified” (33). In regard to CT, this “soft deconstructivist” position acknowledges that an uncritical embracing of the WRP can foster gross misunderstandings. However, this danger does not mean that CT ought to be abandoned altogether. Rather, Hedges urges comparative scholars to consider dimensions of religious practice (e.g., material elements) that are often overlooked in favor of comparing texts. He also names the danger of “essentialism” as an enduring risk to be aware of in any attempt to do CT “after religion.”

Part 3 (“Discourses on Power and Representation”) questions whether CT is itself “a subaltern voice,” is a practice that “gives space for subaltern voices,” or is “simply a vehicle for

main/malestream discourse and rhetoric” (40). This section builds upon the preceding part by highlighting the dangers of orientalism and appropriation in comparative study, questioning whose voices are heard—and whose might be appropriated—in the course of doing CT. But quite helpfully (and hopefully), Hedges moves beyond this critique to suggest also that CT itself, as a kind of “Third Space,” might counter “hegemonic and essentialist Christian and colonial discourses” (46–47). Such potential, however, is never guaranteed and offers more so an ideal towards which CT scholars might strive rather than a description of standard comparative practice. In support of the inclusion of more “subaltern” perspectives in this work, Hedges then highlights the few notable places where women and feminist theory appear in CT, before considering the “subversive” nature of CT conceptualized broadly.

Part 4 (“Comparative Theology, Hermeneutics, and Interpretation”) then concludes this overview of CT by exploring potential sources for its philosophical grounding. In response to critiques of the “thin” theorization beneath CT (58), Hedges argues that CT methods and hermeneutics can rest quite solidly on the interpretive theories of figures like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, as well as the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In addition to showing the philosophical relevance of these thinkers to comparative scholarship, this section also discusses a few hermeneutic “tools” or “lenses” intended to convey what happens in comparison through concrete images, rather than staying at the level of abstract philosophical arguments. These conceptual “tools” are double transformation, hospitality, and liberating interdependence. Finally, a brief conclusion, which notes several trends in contemporary CT, wraps up this work.

In sum, Hedges’ text is a relatively short, yet deep dive into comparative theological scholarship. Quite brief in its treatment of CT’s historical roots, the book focuses primarily on the contemporary practice of CT, including both present trends and areas for further growth. The book’s clear and accessible style is likely to be welcomed by anyone desiring a brief but cogent introduction to contemporary CT. As such, the book could work quite well in a college-level theology course.

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