

***Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.* By Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. xiii + 321. ISBN: 978-0802874665. \$35.00, hardback.**

Doing the Work of Comparative Theology aims to complement previous introductory guides to the field of comparative theology by moving beyond the emphasis on “guidelines” and “methodological explanations,” in order instead to do “the actual comparative theological work” (pp. 10–11). Describing itself as a “guide” and a “primer” for comparative theology (p. 10), this book seeks to offer readers not so much a set of guidelines for how to do comparative theological analysis but rather a set of case studies in which the author compares the views of the Christian tradition with those of other religions. Four other religious traditions are set in comparison with Christianity throughout this work: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Bookended by an introduction and a brief epilogue, the heart of the book consists of ten chapters, each of which compares a Christian understanding of a particular theological topic with views on this topic expressed respectively in the other four traditions. These ten topics proceed sequentially as follows: Revelation and Scripture, the Triune God, Nature and Creation, Humanity and Human Nature, Jesus Christ and “Savior” Figures, Atonement and Reconciliation, Spirits, Salvation and Liberation, Religious Communities, and Eschatological Visions and Symbols.

This text might be most helpful for a Christian audience that desires a basic introduction to several non-Christian religious traditions. A setting such as an introductory course on world religions taught at a Christian liberal arts college would likely be a good fit. The book provides broad information about certain widespread religious features (e.g., scriptures) across several traditions, presenting and framing this information through explicitly Christian categories (e.g., “atonement”). This explicitly Christian framing runs the risk of obscuring complexities, as well as implying incorrectly that such categories are native also to the non-Christian religions discussed in this text. However, one could argue that, while necessarily distortive to a certain degree, this framing nevertheless provides a point of access for Christians who otherwise might remain unaware of other religious traditions.

But is this multi-religious introduction an example of “comparative theology”? How so? I think it is important to clarify the text’s potentially confusing assertion of doing “actual comparative theological work” (p. 10). “Comparative theology” over the past couple of centuries infamously has referred to many different kinds of practices vis-à-vis spiritual traditions other than the one with which one personally identifies. So while, for instance, this book favorably references (particularly in its introduction) the comparative theological work of Francis X. Clooney, SJ, this book engages in comparative theology via a notably different methodology from that employed by Dr. Clooney. This is important, because while both approaches might be (self-)referred to as “comparative theological work,” the actual outcomes and conclusions of this work are significantly different. Whereas the studies of Dr. Clooney proceed through the careful, juxtaposed reading of two specific texts from different traditions—a method that deliberately avoids grand comparative statements about traditions as reified wholes—*Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, by contrast, speaks directly at that very broad level. For example, regarding the theme of “atonement” by a “Savior” figure (ch. 6), this book eschews a focused comparison of how one specific Christian text presents atonement, set in juxtaposition to a text on atonement from a different religio-spiritual background. Instead, Kärkkäinen’s book first summarizes

extremely briefly the “Christian theology of atonement” (p. 161), with only a cursory mention of the vastly important differences among various strains of “Christianity,” followed by a sweeping analysis of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu views on atonement—all in under ten pages!

Such an approach can certainly be called “comparative,” but it performs its comparative work in a significantly different manner than the comparative theology of scholars like Francis X. Clooney, Hugh Nicholson, S. Mark Heim, and other contemporary comparative theologians. There is nothing inherently problematic with this difference, but the unique comparative style of this book—with its attendant advantages and drawbacks—should be recognized: On the positive side, Christians who are largely unfamiliar with other religious traditions will likely find this book quite helpful in providing introductory comparisons of several traditions across ten important aspects (important, at least, to a Christian theological perspective). Hopefully such Christian readers, however, will not stop their comparative reading with just this introduction: it may offer a helpful place to begin, but there is much deeper, more nuanced comparative work to explore and from which to develop one’s understanding of both Christianity and other traditions.

More problematically, this book’s approach may tend to reinforce the mistaken idea that all religions are different in detail but are basically the same in kind: that is, the book’s methodology of surveying multiple religions across several categories betrays, and problematically reinforces, the notion that Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are all basically the same kind of entity, each having its own idiosyncratic set of emphases and characteristics (even though, for instance, the question of whether Buddhism is a “religion” is very briefly acknowledged [see p. 75]). This mistaken notion rests upon a flawed, Western understanding of “religion,” a complex concept (not adequately defined or described in this book) with a long, troubled history intersecting with colonialism’s oppressive legacy.

In sum, this book is likely to be quite helpful to Christian readers who want to begin learning about how their religious tradition compares with those of others. But I would encourage such readers to view this text as a starting place and not an endpoint: if readers truly want to deepen their interreligious knowledge, develop their capacity for comparative theology, and/or engage in the “hospitable dialogue” across religions advocated in this book, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology* might usefully offer some signposts to launch their journey, but it should not be thought to provide a complete map.

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