

Political Implications of Comparative Theology: A Response

Lucinda Mosher



Journal of Interreligious Studies
December 2023, Issue 40, 75-78
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

Abstract

This essay is a slightly edited version of the formal response to a session of the Comparative Theology Unit at the 2022 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion on the political implications of this discipline.

Keywords

political, ethical, public, theology

Religion, Paul Hedges has said, “is always, everywhere, and inherently political.”¹ That declaration makes sense. Religions spawn or are embraced by communities. Communities have polities. A community *needs* a polity: a principle or method of organizing and governing itself. When a community is constituted by embrace of a common life-stance, its polity facilitates its ongoing ability to establish, maintain, and celebrate a meaningful world—which, I often assert, is what “religion” is and does.² All well and good. *However*, Hedges sees religion as “always political” because religion is concerned with “human interactions in society related to power.”³ Furthermore, he says, scholarship on religion is “inevitably political,” because the themes it explores and the methods with which it explores them are, he says, “determined by the matrix of modernity, colonialism, and the triad of race, gender, and class.”⁴

What about theology? An emerging scholar in my care has called it “a field of tremendous responsibility.” Is *theology* inherently political? It is difficult to say that it is not. Whether it be defined as “faith seeking understanding,” or as discourse about that “than which nothing greater can be imagined,” theology tilts toward the political because it explores the

¹ Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 421.

² Here I am following H. Byron Earhart, *Religious Traditions of the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 7.

³ Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 421.

⁴ Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 423.

human-to-human as well as the divine-human relationship. Because I need a definition that works for discourse on worldview questions within non-theistic as well as theistic traditions, I have great fondness for the approach taken by ethicist James Wm. McClendon, Jr. According to him, theology is “the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another *and to whatever else there is*.” Put that way, there is no doubt that theology is concerned with “human interactions in society related to power.” Hence, it is *political*.

All of this given, *comparative* theology, characterized by Francis Clooney as a response to diversity that is serious, spiritual, and intellectual, may also be inherently political. At the very least, it can and does take on political themes—community, power, and agency among them. It is its own discipline. However, many of us carry its principles into nearby arenas. Hence, there may be the need to ask: how do public theology and political theology differ?

Public theology was the theme of *Anglican Theological Review* 102:2 (Spring 2020), for which Robert Heaney (Virginia Theological Seminary) and I were guest coeditors. In our consideration of various definitions of “public theology” as a category, we took note of the notion, articulated by Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, that public theology has several *marks*:⁵

1. It is inherently incarnational.
2. It identifies which “publics” to engage.
3. It is interdisciplinary.
4. It is essentially dialogical.
5. Its perspective is global.
6. It is to be *performed*.⁶

We also noted Auburn Theological Seminary’s description of public theology as “faith-rooted thinking on crucial issues of public concern.” We appreciated how such a definition opens the door to dialogical and comparative approaches.⁷ E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr points toward those approaches even more explicitly by defining public theology as “theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways that can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants as criteria.”⁸

If theology be already inherently political, how then is “political theology” a thing? Are political theology and public theology distinct? Some say that the former deals with the governmental, whereas the latter deals with the civic. They may be correct. Whatever the label given to the endeavor, comparisons can indeed be drawn between two or more instances of “theologically informed public discourse about public issues,” each of which has been addressed to some particular religious body. The methods characteristic of comparative theology can, indeed, be brought to bear on issues of governmental concern or issues of concern to the wider public. Adherents of disparate worldviews can glean and apply insights from each other.

⁵ Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Brill, 2017), 2.

⁶ Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Brill, 2017), 10ff.

⁷ See <https://auburnseminary.org/public-theologies/>.

⁸ E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr., “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” in *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23:2 (2003), 55–96.

During the 2022 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, several emerging scholars—David Maayan, Ha Yong Kang, Hans Harmakaputra, and Joseph Kimmel—looked closely at instances of the intersection of comparative theology and politics. Having noted that previous studies had tended to the broad issue of comparative theology’s political implications, they were determined to take a different approach. Their diverse examples of comparative theological analysis highlighted political aspects of religious practices—political dimensions that rise to the surface when practices and traditions of one religion are compared to another.

Hence, in his examination of the construction of the Devotional Self, David Maayan considered the intertwining of the political and metaphysical in the approaches taken by nascent Hasidic Judaism and nascent Christianity (as found in the communities addressed in the Pauline epistles). Both movements, he contended, had need of a new polity: administrative, economic, and identity-affirming methods, structures, and metaphors that would distinguish and nurture a distinctive community. In both communities, he asserted, fundraising (obviously a necessity) was justified and encouraged theologically.

Ha Yong Kang showed how the employment of a feminist comparative-theological “outsider-within” framework can enable us to understand how minoritized women may confront privilege and may claim authority and voice within religion’s arena. Accordingly, women with the ability to hear and respond to callings from the spirits play a profound role in remembering, sustaining, and envisioning their religious communities—and are not easily silenced.

Turning now to the first of two papers from this panel published here in JIRS Issue 40, we can see that, in his fresh look at the Christian notion of holiness, Hans Harmakaputra has asserted that politics is integral to the complex matrix of human life, hence cannot be excluded from holiness. Using a comparative theology lens, he has searched for insights with potential to expand the notion of Christian sainthood by bringing it into conversation with the Islamic concept of Friends of God. He has concluded that sanctification encompasses all dimensions of human life, including politics; holiness may include political activities, thus cannot be limited to personal piety.

The second of the two panel presentations published herein is an analysis by Joseph Kimmel of particular texts. In it he demonstrates how close reading of narratives from the Christian and Buddhist traditions can call attention to oppressive and coercive naming practices that are characteristic of hierarchical hegemonic relationships. He shows how a particular political theory usually applied to contemporary socio-political relations and structures can yield insights accounting for the power dynamics of rituals, texts, and traditions in which, as he puts it, “the human and more-than-human interact.”

Indeed, each of these four scholars took a unique approach to considering the political aspects of religious practices through the hermeneutic of comparative theology. Of the two who shared their papers here in Issue 40, JIRS readers might ask: What working definition of “politics” or “political” do each of them have in mind? Do either of them see themselves engaged in comparative *political* theology? What difference would it have made if they were to do so?

Responding to these papers occasioned some reflection on my own work. While I engage in comparative theology regularly around several themes, my deepest contribution to this field occurs through my work with the Building Bridges Seminar—a twenty-one-year-old experiment in dialogical close reading of Christian and Muslim texts (always scripture, but rarely exclusively so). The participants are scholar-believers, each involved in the project from a faith perspective. Hence, I have long felt it qualifies as engagement in comparative theology.

Each year’s convening facilitates deep study of a theme from Christian and Muslim perspectives—and some of these themes have been overtly political. The 2005 meeting, held in Sarajevo, focused on “the common good”—and that entailed comparative theological consideration of faith in the public square, citizenship, poverty, and models of governance and justice. It was followed by convenings on justice and rights (2006); the community of believers—its nature and purpose (2013); divine and human power (2017); racial, ethnic, gender, and sociopolitical inequalities—including matters of class, caste, and enslavement (2018); and freedom (2019). Indeed, the sorts of texts read dialogically, the range of expertise that was gathered, and the general tone of these meetings differed strikingly from the initiative’s convenings on topics like revelation, prophethood, monotheism, prayer, sin, forgiveness, and naming God. As I see it, the Building Bridges Seminar’s Christian-Muslim dialogical foray into political/public theology provides ample evidence of the primary implication of a comparative theological turn toward the public or the political: that it will have more to do with the ethical than with the systematic or constructive.

In sum, during my own ruminations on the political implications of comparative theology, I have also pondered the comparative aspects of public theology, on the one hand, and of political theology on the other. This musing has affirmed my sense that *comparative political theology* is its own category. To work within it, we theologians need a broadly acceptable definition of *the political*, a willingness to take a “lived religion” as well as a text-based approach, and an inclination toward employment of a decolonial hermeneutic that prioritizes marginalized voices, perspectives, and epistemologies.

RY

Lucinda Mosher, Th.D., director of the Master of Arts in Interreligious Studies program at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, is the senior editor of the Journal of Interreligious Studies. She is also the Vice President/President-Elect of the Association of Interreligious/Interfaith Studies.

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.