



Conference: Comparison and Comparative Theology

Program

2023, October 5th – 7th Université de Fribourg

Thursday, October 5th

- 13h **Conference Opening**
- 13h15 Helmut Zander (Religious Studies / Comparative History of Religions),
University of Fribourg
Introduction, Technical Questions
- 14h Catherine Cornille (Catholic Theology, Chair of Western Culture),
Boston College
**Comparing the Tertium Comparationis in Comparative Religion and
Comparative Theology**
- 15h Coffee Break
- 15h30 Ralph Weber (European Global Studies), University of Basel
**Confucianism as Religion and as Pre-Comparative Tertium: On the
Possibility and Limits of Comparison**
- 16h30 Lea Schlenker (Protestant Theology / Islamic Theology), University of Tübingen
**Comparing Theologies at the Table On Perspectives from Religious Studies
in Comparative Theology after the Practice Turn**
- 18h30 Dinner – **Café du Gothard**

Friday, October 6th

- 9h30 Mathieu Cudre-Mauroux (Catholic Theology), University of Fribourg
Problems of comparison when doing non-text-based Comparative Theology

- 10h30 Coffee Break
- 11h Klaus von Stosch (Catholic Theology / Systematic Theology), University of Bonn
Syriac and Qur'anic Theology of Signs in Dialogue. How to Learn from Comparisons within Catholic Systematic Theology
- 12h Lunch
- 14h Jens Schlieter (Religious Studies / Buddhist Studies), University of Bern
Doing Comparative Religion by Comparing Ethics: Thomas Aquinas' Doctrine of the Double Effect, the "Trolley Problem," and Buddhist Ethics
- 15h Coffee Break
- 15h30 Scott Steinkerchner O.P. (Catholic Theology), Dominican University, River Forest (Il.)
Deconstructing Gender Essentialism: A Comparative Reading of Julian of Norwich and Yeshe Tsogyal
- 17h45 Short Cultural Tour of Fribourg
- 18h30 Dinner – **BekaaHouse**

Saturday, October 7th

- 9h30 Lora Walsh (Religious Studies and Literature), University of Arkansas
Mother Church as Christian Goddess in Comparative Perspective
- 10h30 Charles Gillespie (Catholic Theology), Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, (Ct.)
Dramas of Comparison in Theology and Religious Studies
- 11h30 Coffee Break
- 12h **Roundtable Discussion**
 Commentary: Joel Sagut (Catholic Theology), University of Santo Tomas, Manila
 Closing Remarks

Conference Abstracts

Helmut Zander, University of Fribourg

Conference Introduction and Technical Questions

Comparative theology sees itself as a comparative scholarly practice, but has only rarely dealt with the epistemology of comparative literature. This is not only an epistemological problem, but also a disciplinary one: comparative literature is a central methodical tool in religious studies and in other disciplines (literary studies, political science), and discussions of these are only present to a very limited extent in theology. The aim of the conference is therefore to raise fundamental and also new questions about comparative literature, and to stimulate interdisciplinary conversation between theology and religious studies and other disciplines in cultural studies.

Catherine Cornille, Boston College

Comparing the Tertium Comparationis in Comparative Religion and Comparative Theology

One of the most important and the most delicate steps or moments in all comparative work involves the choice of the topic for comparison, the element with respect to which to compare, often called the “tertium comparationis.” This topic or category has to be relevant to the traditions compared, but also sufficiently “vague,” so as to not be overly determined by one tradition or the other. In this paper, we will explore ways in which this category tends to be derived in comparative religion and comparative theology, and whether there is (or should be) a difference between the two disciplines.

Ralph Weber, University of Basel

Confucianism as Religion and as Pre-Comparative Tertium: On the Possibility and Limits of Comparison

Comparative theology has been thriving in recent years. This has raised a few intricate problems such as the question whether such comparative endeavors can escape their Eurocentric origins. In this presentation, I examine problems around comparativism from the viewpoint of a philosophy of comparison (that I have formulated against the background of discussions in comparative philosophy) and with the example of Confucianism.

Lea Schlenker, University of Tübingen

Comparing Theologies at the Table On Perspectives from Religious Studies in Comparative Theology after the Practice Turn

In recent years, Comparative Theology has expanded into additional fields of comparative inquiry, for instance by comparing not only dogmatic texts and concepts, but also rituals or other religiously informed practices. These developments can be linked to the so-called ‘practice turn’ in the humanities in general, which led to an interest in what people do in their everyday lives, in how they act, and in processes of meaning-making related to these practices. To get a better grasp of religious everyday practices such as eating and sharing meals, methods and case studies from the discipline of Religious Studies contribute to inquiries in Comparative Theology. Looking at the central role of bread in Christian and Islamic traditions, the paper explores a Christian hymn and an Islamic treatise about bread. Comparing the ‘theologies at the table’ in these sources, it asks how the respective theologies inform and reflect the eating of bread. In order to analyze the links between theology and bread, the paper draws on methods from Religious Studies, particularly on ways of researching religious practices. This includes not only paying attention to historical and sociological dimensions of eating bread, but also the question to which extent a Christian hymn from a 20th century German hymnal and an Islamic treatise from 17th century Ottoman Damascus can be compared. Yet, this challenge also points to a distinction between Comparative Theology and Comparative Religious Studies: While the chosen examples come from rather different historical and social backgrounds, their relations to theological tradition on the one hand and to current-day practice among Christians and Muslims on the other hand make them comparable at a theological level. Hence, the paper shows that a comparison of ‘theologies at the table’ benefits from religious studies in terms of methods and existing case studies. However, it has a specific hermeneutic and theological interest by asking how theology and normative traditions inform the believers’ eating of bread and how this in turn should be reflected theologically.

Mathieu Cudre-Mauroux, University of Fribourg

Problems of comparison when doing non-text-based Comparative Theology

Traditionally, comparative theology has mostly focused on textual studies. This Western Christian view has, however, been more and more criticized in recent years (e.g., by Paul Hedges or Marianne Moyaert). In my research, I use methods of ethnography and social studies as a “new” vantage point for doing comparative theology. However, this approach leads to problems of comparison—old and new ones—as well. Based on examples from my data, I will highlight some of these issues and offer some possible solutions.

Klaus von Stosch, University of Bonn

Syriac and Qur'anic Theology of Signs in Dialogue. How to Learn from Comparisons within Catholic Systematic Theology

The crisis of the Catholic Church today is very much a crisis of the understanding of Her sacramentality. The paper wants to explore whether the Qur'anic theology of signs (*āya/āyāt*) can help to improve this understanding. In this context the Qur'anic theology has to be compared with the way how the Syriac fathers talk of the signs (*rāzē*) of God because this seems to be the Christian theology that the Qur'an wants to challenge. Through the historical and philological work in comparison we might get inspiration for reshaping our contemporary theology of the sacraments – an inspiration which does not only learn from the Qur'an but also a neglected part of our own Christian tradition. The paper wants to explore on the methodological level which insights can be drawn from this project for the nature of comparisons within comparative theology.

Jens Schlieter, University of Bern

Doing Comparative Religion by Comparing Ethics: Thomas Aquinas' Doctrine of the Double Effect, the "Trolley Problem," and Buddhist Ethics

The presentation will take the Western philosophical discussion of ethical dilemmata as a point of departure. Significantly, these dilemmas (for example, if it is allowed sacrifice one in order to save the life of five) are an integral part of Western philosophical and theological discussion, but almost absent in Buddhist ethical reasoning. Why? The presentation will aim to show that these dilemmas incorporate important Western Theological background assumptions that can be traced back to, amongst other, Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the double effect -- the moral principle that a person may in extraordinary circumstances be morally allowed to act even if the consequences are harmful. On the other hand, the absence of dilemma-reasoning in Buddhism is likewise intriguing. It shall be traced back to the concept of ethics as embodied cultivation practice. Finally, the contribution will discuss how "comparing ethics" may help to uncover hidden assumptions in one's own tradition.

Dr. Scott Steinkerchner, Dominican University

Deconstructing Gender Essentialism: A comparative reading of Julian of Norwich and Yeshe Tsogyal

Christianity and Buddhism each have complex and contradictory understandings of the relationship of gender, sex, and spirituality. While both religions hold that the Ultimate is beyond the distinctions of gender, in practice, both religions tend to limit the religious opportunities of women. Roman Catholicism also tends to refer to God in exclusively masculine terms, tacitly endorsing a religious difference between men and women. This paper will compare the writings of two women mystics, eighth century Tibetan Buddhist Yeshe Tsogyal and fourteenth century Roman Catholic Julian of Norwich, to see how they dealt with these received gender imbalances, subverting them and projecting a vision of the Ultimate in feminine terms. It will then investigate if Tibetan Buddhism's emphasis on overcoming dichotomous labeling, which is essential to gender identification, can offer clues as to how Catholicism might overcome its problem of over-essentializing gender differences.

Dr. Lora Walsh, University of Arkansas

Mother Church as Christian Goddess in Comparative Perspective

Many scholars of comparative religion, as well as contemporary feminist theologians, frequently regard the Virgin Mary as the most goddess-like figure in Christian tradition. This paper proposes instead that Mother Church, particularly in premodern Greek and Latin sources, is the figure most phenomenologically and productively comparable to the goddesses of other religious traditions. Using Mother Church as a case study, I apply methodological insights from comparative studies of goddesses to identify the distinct metaphysical status of Mother Church in textual sources. These methodological insights include Miranda Shaw's defense of the term "goddess" in her study, *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (2006), and Caroline Walker Bynum's recent critique of superficial comparisons between Mary and Hindu goddesses in her *Dissimilar Similitudes* (2020). I also incorporate Mother Church into the field of comparative feminist theology by acknowledging Mother Church's historical implication in divisive and violent comparisons, such as between Ecclesia and Synagoga, or between the (Protestant) Bride of Christ and the (Catholic) Whore of Babylon. To involve Mother Church in better comparisons and alliances, I reconsider this figure using the comparative and embodied theological method developed by goddess feminist Carol Christ and Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow in their dialogically co-written work, *Goddess and God in the World* (2016). I conclude by articulating the value of a goddess-like Church who stands in oblique, reformist relation to ecclesiastical institutions, and who resembles other feminine divinities in delivering nurture and justice to diverse human persons.

Dr. Charles Gillespie, Sacred Heart University

Dramas of Comparison in Theology and Religious Studies

My paper will develop a theory of comparison that holds the dialectic of normative theology and descriptive religious studies in dramatic tension. Stages are never neutral. Comparison illuminates how religious meanings operate within multiple overlapping, non-neutral, and non-collapsible fields. If comparison implies a third term, it is most often the scholar's work with texts or phenomena from multiple religious traditions. I build on Hans Urs von Balthasar's framework to theorize drama, and its participations, between "lyric" (theological) and "epic" (religious studies) comparisons. But attention to comparisons between religious myths and symbols as performed in a work of theatre can render productive—rather than defeating—the impossibility for any “neutral” position in comparative theology or comparative religious studies. I ground my theoretical work in two sets of brief examples that compare across genre conventions. I consider how multiple religious phenomena can appear, and are thereby compared, in a “non-religious” performance (such as the use of so-called "real" songs and prayers from Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic practice in the popular musical *Come From Away*). I also surface insights wrought by literary and theatrical juxtapositions of Catholic-Christian mythology and folklore from indigenous and “vernacular spiritualities” from North America and Ireland.