

Does Comparative Theology have an Advantage over Religious Studies?

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Abstract

In this essay, I assess the prospects for Comparative Theology as some scholars proffered towards building a general theory of religion. I first acknowledge the relationship between the two disciplines; second, I examine the relationship between faith and religion which I believe is crucial to enter the discussion on Comparative Theology and Religious Studies; third I come to the crux of the matter by assessing the influence of theology on the study of religion; fourth, having problematized the method of Comparative Theology, I underscore the limits of theological method for comparative analysis in the study of religion. This above outline is consciously intended to take the general reader as well as specialists toward my conclusion, which is to suggest that Comparative Theology can only serve an internal theological purpose of one religious tradition but not for the purpose of a general theory of religion.

Keywords: Religion, Faith, Belief, Theology, Religious Studies, Comparative Theology, Comparative Religion, Social Scientific Study of Religion

Introduction: The Relationship between Theology and Religious Studies

For the theologian, and most especially for comparative theologians, persons from other traditions are not of interest

solely because they offer us data for the construction of a given theory of religion, but because what they have to say about the nature of the real might be true or at least worthy of contestation as an [sic] genuine alternative to one's own position. Theology can make possible what theory of religion cannot. By insisting that we must take the other seriously as other and not merely as an object of our theoretical scrutiny, theology can destabilize positions of power and privilege that theoreticians grant themselves (Thatamanil 2010: 1178).

In the light of the above claim, in order to address the issue whether or not Comparative Theology has an advantage over Religious Studies, we need to first understand the relationship between the two. Discussion about the complex relationship between Religious Studies and Theological Studies has been an on-going saga in the past several decades, largely in the western academia. From its humble beginnings in Theological Studies, study of religion went through many transformations before it eventually became settled largely as Religious Studies, also known in other places as Comparative Religions, Science of Religion, Phenomenology of Religion, and History of Religions. At one time, Phenomenology of Religion reigned supreme in the study of religion mainly in the search for an objective understanding of other religions, i.e., non-Christian ones. Of course, most of them were either practicing Christian theologians or trained in Theological Studies, but chose to be phenomenologists in order to distinguish their studies from the Theological Studies genre on methodological grounds. Their work had been characterized by a deep sense of religious experience. From Van der Leeuw to Mircea Eliade, a whole host of them could be listed in this sector. Ninian Smart, who established the first Religious Studies department in the UK (University of Lancaster) and later in the US (at University of California, Santa Barbara), pursued phenomenology, but often described himself as 'methodologically agnostic'. Some recent scholars have discussed the place of phenomenology in the scientific study of religion (cf. Ryba 1991).

It is important to understand this connection between the two disciplines in order to appreciate not only their distinct boundaries but also the issues that are often debated in this context. The extent to which

Religious Studies departed from Christian Theology has been debated by a number of scholars. Preus (1987) argued that since David Hume with the rise of naturalist arguments, study of religion departed from Christian Theology Preus. However, Balagangadhara (1994) contested that the shift towards naturalistic explanations in the study of religion was indeed not a break from Theology, but rather it had to do with the gradual secularization of Theology. Jakob de Roover (2003:615-635) after analyzing Balagangadhara's arguments concluded that even Feuerbach who despised Theology operated within theological framework, which makes the point that Religious Studies continues to operate with in a larger theological framework. I will return to the influence of theology on the study of religion later on. Furthermore, Balagangadhara's critique that secularization of Christian theology helped it to remain dominant in Religious Studies can be seen reinforced by periodical arguments as to why theology can be and should be studied in a secular university (Macdonald Jr. 2010: 991-1024).

While the relationship between Christian Theology and Religious Studies remains still an ongoing debate, it is also important to recognize the enormous influence from social sciences on the study of religion (e.g., Durkheim, Weber, Freud, Jung *inter alia*). Those who are rooted in the social scientific methods in the study of religion wish to see Religious Studies established on its own rather than continually implicated in the theological enterprise(cf. McCutcheon 2003a). At the same time, there is also some growing trend in recent years among scholars other than of Christianity (e.g. Hindu, Buddhist) who wish to approach their studies as insiders from a theological perspective. This is particularly true of those non-ethnic scholars who consider themselves as practicing Hindus or Buddhists. Some of them having been raised in previously Christian background desire to find some compatibility between their former Christian upbringing and their present study of Hinduism or Buddhism, or whatever the case may be, and hence their desire to use theological method to study religion as an insider. To this list one may add some Hindus who consider themselves theologically oriented, e.g., followers of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISCKON) who have in recent times entered the mainstream academic study of religion, especially in North America. In other words, theological method has been appropriated within other religions such as Hinduism notwithstanding many distinct ways in which those religions might

understand their metaphysical ideas. Popularization of the notion of God through the spread of Western Christianity around the world might have something to do with the pervasiveness of the appropriation of theological ideas in many cultures outside Christianity.

Categories ‘Faith’ and ‘Religion’

In unpacking the issue of Comparative Theology in relation to Religious Studies we need to also examine briefly the relationship between ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ as two significant categories in this context. Because theology is deeply rooted in the category of faith it makes theological method limited by religious experience of the practitioners of a religion. As such, Religious experience is obviously the most important principle that underlies theological method. In other words, theology is founded on the principle of faith received through revelation. It is precisely on the basis of the conviction that ‘religion’ as a category has led to scholarly reification of religious traditions as systems that W.C. Smith (1963) argued against the category of ‘religion’ and any attempt at systematization of things. Instead, he viewed religious traditions as dynamic ‘cumulative traditions’ which are underpinned by individual religious experience based on faith. Therefore, he also rejected the cognate concept of religion, viz., ‘belief’ (cf. Smith 1987). If W.C. Smith wanted ‘religion’ as a category to disappear entirely, J.Z. Smith limited the category ‘religion’ to the scholar’s analytical purposes. In his most oft quoted statement that ‘religion’ exists only for scholarly analysis and as such there is no religion independent of scholar’s imagination J.Z. Smith (1982) too was critical of the category ‘religion’ in a different way¹. In the period between the two Smiths a great deal has happened in the discourse on religion, especially in methodological debates that have particular significance for theology in general and Comparative Theology in particular.

¹ Although J.Z. Smith sounded like he was reducing religion to merely scholarly analysis, and like W.C. Smith was interested in diversity of religious expression, he did not quite buy the conclusion of W.C. Smith (1963) that ‘religion’ as a category will disappear from scholarly attention. Instead, he reinforced it when he diametrically opposed Eliade’s phenomenological vision of religious essence (see J.Z. Smith 2004).

J.Z. Smith's assertion that there is no religion except that it exists for scholar's analysis is of course different from the earlier Christian theological and missionary refusals to allow 'religion' as an universally applicable term for all cultures, albeit it was gradually extended to other religions. In this context, it is worth noting that several recent scholars have criticized such tendencies that have crept into the academic study of religion. For instance, Cabezón (2006: 21-38) criticizes the western scholarly tendency to deny in other cultures criticality, rigor, theoretical sophistication and self-awareness that characterized the notion of 'religion' in western academia. These principles that Cabezón refers to are rational principles that are deployed in the study of religion. But for a long time theology too has claimed these rational principles in its discourse. Placing the rationality of theology on a par with science, back in the early days of scientific discoveries, one earlier theologian put it boldly – 'The limits which science and ethics set for themselves temporarily theology consciously and deliberately transcends. Thereby it saves science and ethics from decay and death' (Cross 1922: 400). Such claims of theology about its rational discourse continued to the extent that theologically oriented scholars tended to tilt the academic study of religion toward theological approach.

In the 1970s, Schubert Ogden (1977: 6) while distinguishing Religious Studies and Theological Studies claimed that theology like Religious Studies complies 'fully with contemporary standards of reflection'. Privileging faith as the underlying element of religion, he defines religion as a fuller realization of human life. Therefore, Religious Studies for him stood for such a realization of life –

Because religion exists, as I have argued, to give answer to the question of faith by expressing a comprehensive understanding of our existence in relation to ultimate mystery, the only study of religion as such, and, in that sense, religious study, is some way or other of reflectively understanding religion as an answer to that question of faith (Ogden 1977: 12).

In other words, the constitutive element of Religious Studies is supposed to be the meaning of the question of faith of the religion in question, according to him. The difference between Religious Studies and Theological Studies

for him really is that the latter is based on what he calls – ‘Christian witness of faith’ (Ogden 1977: 15). In his view, like the study of religion theology asks the very same question of meaning of faith, but it (theology) goes further by relating that faith to Christian witness. Nonetheless the common denominator in both is faith. Like W.C. Smith, Ogden too distinguished between ‘faith’ and ‘religion’. But faith is the basis for the study of religion as it is the ‘substance of culture’ –

Accordingly, on my usage, Paul Tillich's famous statement that religion is the substance of culture, while culture is the form of religion has to be reformulated so that it is *faith* which is the substance of culture, while religion is the particular cultural form in which that substance is first of all made explicit (Ogden 1977: 9; e.i.o.).

This Tillichian way of defining the study of religion on the one hand and theology on the other is pervasive in the academy, especially in North America as pointed out by J.Z. Smith (2010: 1139-1170). I believe this issue of the influence of Tillich is crucial for the epistemological issues between the study of religion and theology and for an assessment of Comparative Theology's ability to deploy theological categories beyond the goal of inter-faith communication.

Continued Influence of Theology on the Study of Religion

This pervasive influence of Tillich is what J.Z. Smith called ‘the remains of Tillich’. J.Z. Smith (2010: 1139) calls Tillich the ‘unacknowledged theoretician of our enterprise’ in North America and everywhere. What Smith intended by this was a double critique –

[f]irst, that the AAR (American Academy of Religion), and religious studies in North America more generally, themselves largely the beneficiaries of the expansion of programs in the study of religion in public institutions, should ground their enterprise in a Protestant Christian ‘apologetic’ theological project; second, that this influence should be largely unacknowledged (Smith 2010: 1140).

In other words, in Tillichian tradition study of religion must include issues of ‘ultimate concern’. He points out that although the term ‘ultimate concern’ is dropped from most lexical definitions of religion, its cognate term ‘symbol’ continued to dominate the discussions on religion (Smith 2010: 1153). For Tillich, a religious symbol is true ‘only if it participates in the power of the divine to which it points to’ (Smith 2010: 1155). It is here in a significant epistemological sense on the issue of symbol’s status – whether it has a status beyond merely ‘pointing to’ that Smith sees the most important distinction between Religious Studies and Theological Studies –

From my perspective, this joins an even larger question as to whether knowledge and experience, of any sort, are always mediated or whether they can be immediate—a debate I have described elsewhere as being between re-presentation and presence. *This question divides the academic study of religion in ways that thoroughly cross-cut old, quasi political divisions such as the warfare of theology with the history of religions* (Smith 2010: 1156; e.a.).

Responding to Smith’s concern of Tillich’s influence in the study of religion, Thatamanil (2010: 1171-1181) disagrees. He says,

[T]he trouble with this Tillichian fixation is twofold. First, Tillich’s influence remains unacknowledged and second, the uses to which Tillich has been put remain, at best, unhelpfully vague and diluted (Thatamanil 2010: 1173).

He explains that Smith limits Tillich to being a theoretician and ignores his theological significance. He also notes that like Smith, Tillich takes history seriously and accepts the limits of phenomenology. In other words, in his estimation what Smith is to Eliade, Tillich is to Rudolph Otto (Thatamanil 2010: 1175). He also suggests that,

Tillich does not object to a secular and humanistic study of religion and theology and even commends the necessity of secular critiques

of religion on theological grounds². Secular reflection for Tillich can provide a rational and autonomous critique of religion because religion always runs the danger of becoming heteronomous and coercive. An autonomous secular critique can not only shed anthropological illumination on the nature of religion but can also provide a religiously important critique of religion. Tillich readily acknowledges that theological activity, like all religious activity, is a historical and cultural enterprise and so subject to humanistic interpretation (Thatamanil 2010: 1177).

Thatamanil's (2010: 1176-1177) main objection to Smith seems to be that 'theologians remain merely the objects of study while the theoretician of religion is alone privileged to serve as subject'. He further adds –

By insisting that we must take the other seriously as other and not merely as an object of our theoretical scrutiny, theology can destabilize positions of power and privilege that theoreticians grant themselves (Thatamanil's 2010: 1178).

I shall return to this statement of Thatamanil shortly.

Thatamanil's sublime claim for theology might sound fine, except he either seems to miss or ignore the fundamental difference that J.Z. Smith in particular and theoreticians of religion in general make. While theologians require a faith commitment or theological commitment to an ontological position, grounded in historical investigation and being self-reflective of their analytical work, theoreticians of religion or scholars of religion can see the possibility of a fruitful study of religions in their cultural and historical contexts without such ontological commitment. It is not as if there is no religion or religions in historical and cultural contexts, but rather when I

² I am unsure how secular critique is possible on theological grounds if secular society is not necessarily grounded on theological worldviews! Additionally, how can theological approach be the ideal way to develop a secular critique, if, as Thatamanil claims in the same breath (seemingly with approval), secular critique is autonomous? And why should the secular be subjugated to the religious and on what grounds?

speak of imagining religion what I am calling for is a meta-analysis of what scholars pursue in their studies of various religious traditions. In a sense, it is the study of the study of religions. In this sense, in line with J.Z. Smith I take the category 'religion' as a meta-category and not as an empirical one. Not in the sense that it is not deployed empirically, but when it is done so, there is no unanimity on what it refers to other than being the nominative of the adjective religious. But what exactly is religious is determined within a culture by its adherents and not by outsiders, let alone theoreticians. And there is no necessary agreement across cultures on 'religious'. And even within a particular culture there is a great deal of diversity on how religious is determined³. While J.Z. Smith sees Tillich being largely responsible for sustained theological influence on the study of religion, he also alludes to religionists themselves who were to some extent responsible for quasi-theological influence from the back door as it were. In this regard, not only Smith, but other theologically oriented scholars too point out Eliade's work as being responsible for perpetuating theological moorings in the study of religion. For instance, Tyler Roberts (2009: 81) argued that,

[M]any think that, after a century of confusion and intermingling between theology and the study of religion, scholars of religion are finally in a position to establish the study of religion on properly

³ Smith therefore alludes to two important statements made by two prominent theoreticians in the field. First he refers to Russell McCutcheon's point about religion's relationship to culture when he differentiates between the use of religion *and* culture (in particular with reference to frequent scholarly usage such as 'religion and the environment', 'religion and society' and so on) and 'religion *in* culture' – 'the preposition 'in' signifies that the area of human behavior we have come to know as 'religion' is but one element within human cultural systems' (Smith 2010: 1160; Smith quotes from McCutcheon 2006: 1). Second, Smith refers to Gary Lease's rather blunt statement – 'that, there can be no such thing as a history of religion 'for the simple reason that there is no religion, rather such a history can only trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as 'religion' while excluding others' (Smith 2010: 1160, Smith quotes from Lease's 1994: 453-479).

academic, theoretical foundations. In this story Eliade's antireductionist discourse of the 'sacred' becomes the epitome and, it is hoped, the last gasp of religious studies as a quasi-theological discourse. Yet despite their efforts to guide the study of religion away from Eliade, many remain Eliadan insofar as they accept Eliade's 'locative' approach to religion.

Comparative Theological Method and the Study of Religion

With the above background, it brings us to the assessment of comparative theological method. Application of theological method to study religions other than Christianity is not new. As mentioned above, early missionaries in various parts of the world commonly deployed theological concepts and vocabulary to describe in their missionary reports and later on in books written by them on religions that they had encountered in their missionary work. Many of them went on to become professors of religion in various western universities and pursued their teaching and research on other religions along theological lines. The cumulative effect of these trends is the gradual emergence of what is now called 'Comparative Theology'. Comparative theology has been practiced by many scholars in recent years and this must be distinguished from earlier Christian missionary studies studying non-Christian religions from a Christian theological perspective with a view to interpret other religions from a Christian fulfillment message that scholars, such as Raimundo Panikkar (1981) espoused in his earlier years, although it must be noted that Panikkar moved away from this position in his later years⁴. The present enterprise of Comparative Theology⁵ is

⁴ In his later years he claimed that he went from Europe to India as a Christian, became a Hindu and returned to Europe as a Buddhist.

⁵ Smith's many books (1989; 1993; and 1998) on this subject of theological comparison signify this deep interest theologians have shown in comparative theological work. Smith and Panikkar were some of the early scholars who engaged in comparative theological work. However, both of them saw their work having the object of inter-religious dialogue (cf. Panikkar's 1981; 1998). Smith however went further to engage in what he called World Theology (Smith 1989).

mainly to deploy theological concepts to interpret other religions and seems to go beyond inter-faith understanding and reflects an ambition to achieve what social scientific study could not. For example, in describing Hindu traditions, many scholars began to deploy theological terms and concepts especially those traditions that are seemingly theistic – e.g., Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Scholars such as Frank Clooney (1993) have applied theological categories even to traditions that are generally not considered theistic – e.g., Non-dual philosophy (Advaita Vedanta) of Shankara. In this regard, three questions have become generally important—first, are theological categories and concepts compatible with other religious traditions? Second, are traditions that are described as ‘theistic’ essentially the same as how Christian tradition understands itself? Third, and perhaps more important from a methodological point of view, is whether theological method has the analytical rigor to be applied to any religion in its academic and scientific study. In other words, the issue is to establish on what epistemic level the theological method stands. In the rest of the essay, I shall pay more attention to the third question. That is, in order to answer the question that I have raised in the title of this essay, the epistemological issue is central to the appraisal whether or not Comparative Theology has an advantage over Religious Studies. Therefore, let me quickly dispense with the first two questions.

To the extent there are traditions in other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, aspects that are seen to fit the criteria of a deity, a doctrine about that deity based on textual sources (scripture), it might offer some possibility for the application of theological categories in the study of those traditions. For reasons of having these above elements, some traditions are indeed described as theistic. Examples of such studies are *Theology of Ramanuja* by John B. Carman (1974), *God and the Universe in the Vedantic Theology of Ramanuja* by Eric J. Lott (1976) just to mention a few among scores of others. These studies in effect offered, as indicated above, the prospect of Comparative Theology. However, for Comparative Theology to be considered a viable alternative to Religious Studies it must offer epistemological universality. That is to say, any epistemology for it to be considered useful for purposes of making generalizations should be available to believers and non-believers alike. In other words, the epistemological method that Comparative Theology uses cannot only be peculiar to a

particular religion. It then means that we need to unpack the boundaries of theological method.

Limits of Theological Method

Responding to both Samuel Preus (1987) and Robert Segal (1989; cf. also Segal 1992), David Ray Griffin (2000:99-124) summarizes their joint position in three simple statements –

- 1) The academic study of religion should not avoid the task of explaining the origin and persistence of religion.
- 2) Any explanation, to be acceptable in the academy, must be a social scientific explanation.
- 3) Any explanation, to be considered a social scientific explanation, must be ‘naturalistic’ in their sense of the term (Griffin (2000:100)).

Although he concurs with Preus and Segal that explanations cannot be avoided, he points out that some may dismiss the first claim by distinguishing two kinds of sciences—*Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* and thereby arguing that it is not appropriate to explain the religious by the natural as it may result in reductionism. However, he rejects the second and the third claims of Preus-Segal, viz., that explanations of religion must be social scientific and naturalistic. But before we examine Griffin’s argument further, let’s pause and examine the two kinds of sciences to which he makes reference. It is interesting that this above distinction is based on the nature of the two worlds, viz., the spiritual world and the natural world. But instead of making this distinction on the lines of epistemology,⁶ it is distinguished on the basis of the nature of their existence and a further ritual distinction to which Griffin (2000:100) refers as ‘sacrilegious’. Aside from the fact that something is ‘sacrilegious’ matters to the practitioners of a religion rather than to everyone neutrally, what is important to recognize here

⁶ It might be useful to note that the non-dualist philosopher Shankara makes the distinction on the basis of consciousness and hence, an epistemological one, that is, between transcendental world (Paramarthika) and the empirical world (Vyavaharika).

is that the two worlds are epistemologically distinct. While the spiritual world is known only to those who share in that worldview, the natural world is accessible to both those who affirm such a spiritual world as well as those who live in the natural world. In other words, the natural world is epistemologically shared by all while the spiritual world is only known by the select few and it is therefore problematic to build a rationale to compare things and explain on the basis of the limited access to a certain type of data. There is no sharable cognitive relationship between the two worlds.

Let us consider the epistemic aspects that Griffin identifies in relation to the position held by Preus and by implication Segal. In view of my main attention to epistemic issues, I shall limit my reference to Griffin to the epistemic issues alone. 1. Griffin agrees with Preus [Segal] that theology should not attempt to explain things that belong to the natural world. He admits 'Preus is surely right to say that the academic study of religion must be naturalistic in this sense, a contention that is no longer a matter for serious debate' (Griffin 2000: 105). 2. 'we should work towards a uniform set of explanatory categories for all features of the world' (Griffin 2000: 105). However, he seeks the status of partial autonomy for religion instead of complete autonomy as some theologians would prefer (Griffin 2000: 105). That is, he wants to provide some space for 'genuine religious experience' in explaining religion (Griffin 2000:103). 3. He agrees with Preus that 'any academic theory of religion should be experientially grounded' but he qualifies it by seeking to find place for 'theological theories' (Griffin 2000: 107). 4. It is precisely because Griffin wants to give salience to religious experience, he disagrees with Preus' form of naturalism which he refers to as 'sensate empiricism' (Griffin 2000: 107). He points out that while David Hume subscribed to the idea of 'sensate empiricism', William James used the idea of 'non-sensate empiricism'. Preus' rejection of religious experience in Griffin's view does not take into account 'non-sensate empiricism' of William James (Griffin 2000: 108). However, it must be pointed out that Griffin does not take into account the difficulty involved in using 'non-sensate empiricism' as the basis to include religious experience in explaining religion. While the religious experience that is available through such extra sensory perception might be genuine and one does not need to doubt the veracity of the person who claims such religious experience, the difficulty is that it is known only to that person. Even those who accept his or her

religious experience and act accordingly, do so only because they share in the worldview of that person and feel compelled to admit his or her religious experience as valid and not because they have any direct knowledge of it. And this is precisely the problem that one encounters in deploying theological method for comparative study. Our ability to compare data is central to the task of explaining religion. But we cannot compare data that is only available through someone's religious experience and is unavailable to public knowledge. Griffin sees his difference with explanations based on social scientific and naturalistic accounts as philosophical. In other words, which form of naturalism (the one based on sensate empiricism or the one based on non-sensate empiricism) is closer to the truth is a philosophical matter (Griffin 2000 113. He therefore argues –

The only valid reason for advocating naturalism_{sam} for the academic study of religion, in other words, would be the philosophical argument that this form of naturalism is superior to all other forms, providing a more adequate framework for interpreting all the evidence of human experience, including scientific experience. Otherwise, there would be no reason for an *a priori* rejection of theistic interpretations of religion, at least if they embody naturalism in the minimal sense (Griffin 2000 114).

As Griffin points out, for Segal however it is a social issue. Here, of course, both Griffin and Segal are concerned with the issue of origin of religion. In the end Griffin in his essay tries to demonstrate that social scientists are not antithetical to religion and that the issue is not between religionists and social scientists, but rather the issue is 'between religious and antireligious *philosophies*' (Griffin 2000: 116; e.i.o). He believes that the materialistic worldview continues to be dominant in scientific circles. He, therefore, argues,

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Otherwise, there would be no reason for an *a priori* rejection of theistic interpretations of religion, at least if they embody naturalism in the minimal sense (Griffin 2000: 114).

He further believes that the motivation for secular causes of religious belief is ‘a prior philosophical conviction as to the falsity of religion’ (Griffin 2000: 116). He takes his point further by arguing that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that ‘religious beliefs are always shaped by psychosocial factors’ (Griffin 2000: 116). In other words, he seeks to reject the social scientific explanations on the basis of a philosophical disagreement, but at the same time demands sociological evidence for the social scientific view that religious beliefs are shaped by psychosocial factors. His argument relies on the fact that ‘sensate empiricism leaves us with no explanation of our apparent knowledge of causation and of the external world’ (Griffin 2000: 120). He also relies on the assumption that non-sensory perception such as intuition can result in genuine knowledge. What he does not, however, concede is that such knowledge could not be commonly shared outside the believing community. It is not so much that religious explanations cannot be proffered for religious experiences. Rather the fact that such explanations are limited by privacy of such religious experiences makes the access to such knowledge limited through faith, and no direct or perceptual apprehension is possible. This is what presents the difficulty in deploying the method of theology for comparative purposes in the study of religion. Even if on philosophical grounds one gives credence to the possibility of religious explanations through religious experience, in order for such method to be given a place in the study of religion, it must be available commonly to other scholars. It is highly problematic to require a non-believing scholar to accept an insider’s religious experience as the basis for comparing the data of a religion. Besides, religious experience is not uniform in any religion and therefore cannot have universal salience in comparative study.

While Griffin has been critical of social scientific study of religion on the basis that the practitioners of such studies cannot yet rule out non-sensory perception that is the basis of religious experience, Griffiths criticizes religionists (in particular Jonathan Z. Smith 2004; and Bruce Lincoln 1996: 225-227) for being normative about their methods much like the rule books, and not declare their overall commitments, whereas theologians are able to

declare their commitment to a particular theological tradition (Griffiths 2006: 74). It is not true that scholars of religion [or religionists as they are often referred to] cannot declare their overall commitments. For instance, Mark Wood understood Religious Studies as ‘critical organic intellectual practice’. He elaborates this by suggesting that Religious Studies scholars need to mobilize critical theories in the service of human development and in the process need to question the ‘anti-materialist’ tendencies in religious traditions. He suggests that ‘[C]ritical theories enable students to develop a more fully human understanding of the multifaceted nature of religious ideas, institutions, and practices’ (Wood 2001: 158). Russell McCutcheon (1997: 443-468) also affirmed the need for Religious Studies scholars to play active role in society as ‘public intellectuals’. So, it is unfair to criticize Religious Studies scholars as having no commitment in society.

In an effort to rescue Theological Studies and Religious Studies from the impasse as it were, Gavin Hyman (2004 195-219) argued in favor of a postmodernist resolution. He argues,

that just as certain forms of theology have adapted themselves to the new postmodern condition and have revitalized themselves as a result, so too religious studies may undergo a parallel process of transformation If religious studies were to transform itself in this way (and there are signs that it is already beginning to do so), then it would find itself fully cognizant of the postmodern context in which it now finds itself. Furthermore, the reading of postmodernism as an opportunity for the return of theology and death of religious studies would be replaced by an alternative reading in which postmodernism provides an opportunity for the revitalization of *both* theology *and* religious studies.

However, such postmodernist resolutions might simply limit the study of religion to the locative approach that Tyler Roberts (2009: 84) decried as being unhelpful. Thus, there seems to be no unanimity among theologians in their response to Religious Studies. Besides, Gavin Hyman’s claim that theologians have taken advantage of postmodernist trend by emphasizing the particular is misleading as most Religious Studies scholars who are also specialists of particular religions have always given priority to the particular

location of religion.⁷ The difference, however, is that Religious Studies scholars are willing to place that particular in broader relation to the universal discourse on the particular religion in question as well as the larger discourse on religion in general. For instance, James B. Apple, in dealing with the narrative of the Buddha in Bodh Gaya follows a three step method to do precisely that. In his essay on ‘Redescribing Mandalas: A Test Case in Bodh Gaya, India’ Apple (2008: 41) explains his method as ‘description, comparison, redescription, and rectification’. He explains it as follows – ‘I will focus upon an initial structuring and presentation in a socio-historically accurate manner of the ethnographical and empirical data that I currently have on this circular stone object. I will follow with an identification and placement of this object in a category, comparing this data with previous information in the category. Then, I will present a redescription and rectification of the category in light of the envisioned evidence’ (Apple 2008: 41). As such, for scholars of religion location matters, but at the same time the broader relation to the overall general framework in its universal relationship matters just as importantly.

Further Difficulties that Theology Faces

Theologians often make a distinction between ‘secular’ theories of religion and ‘religious’ theories of religion. For instance, Thatamanil speaks of ‘normatively committed theory of religion’ in his response to J.Z. Smith. It is one thing to critique that Religious Studies scholars are just as normatively situated as the Theological Studies scholars. But to speak of ‘normatively committed theory of religion’ defies any unity of the theory that is most likely proffered in this sense. If we tweek further Thatamanil’s notion, it means in his own words –

Just as Christian theologians offer readings of the human and of the religious from explicitly Christian theological commitments, we can just as readily envision Buddhist or Hindu theories of religion (Thatamanil 2010: 11780).

⁷ In recent times, religion scholars have examined the theoretical implications of focusing on the location of religion (cf. Knott 2005).

This makes theory subjective to each religious tradition and makes it most likely inappropriate or irrelevant for other religious theoreticians, for each of those is based on particular norms of those religions. This means there can be no general theory of religion. It is one thing to be sensitive to religious norms, but it is another to speak of theory of religion that regardless of religious commitments all scholars can share on observable data, methods of analysis and explanation and theoretical postulations.

Now, theologians have in recent times claimed that theology takes the other traditions more seriously than theoreticians of religion⁸. Note the claim of Thatamanil (2010: 1178) in this regard –

Theology can make possible what theory of religion cannot. By insisting that we must take the other seriously as other and not merely as an object of our theoretical scrutiny, theology can destabilize positions of power and privilege that theoreticians grant themselves.

But if we read his statement made just before those lines –

⁸ Here I must also clarify the confusion that is often created. There is a general tendency to lump scholars who study non-Christian religions as religionists or scholars of religion, and those who study Christianity as theologians, although a fair number of them do Religious Studies. In my view, the scholar of religion is not the same as theoretician of religion. There are scholars of religion who do not engage in theoretical reflections with a view to develop a theory of religion. Likewise, study of religion must be distinguished for its theoretical work from the study of world religions in general. Study of any of the world's religions does not automatically constitute a theoretical study. In order for theoretical study to be undertaken Max Muller's dictum of 'he who known one knows none' still counts. I believe this distinction is important in order for us to separate the nature of data among different users. Thatamanil, I submit, correctly contrasts theologians and theoreticians of religion without conflating them with scholars of religion.

For the theologian, and most especially for comparative theologians, persons from other traditions are not of interest solely because they offer us data for the construction of a given theory of religion, but because what they have to say about the nature of the real might be true or at least worthy of contestation as an [sic] genuine alternative to one's own position (Thatamanil 2010: 1178).

This then betrays the theological agenda. That is to say, the 'theological agnosticism', if I may call it, that Thatamanil alludes to here and which could be the position of a comparative theologian in dealing with other religious traditions, is really to examining the truth claims of those traditions to figure out whether it really offers an alternative to his own position, and I take this to mean an alternative religious position to the one that he/she currently possesses. In this sense, it reduces the theological method to an engagement of religious debate. One would have, in the first place, thought that Christian theology had moved far beyond such engagement in relation to other religions. The second problematical issue in such a statement is that 'real' is cast in some essentialist mode as if it is out there to be grasped and all that one needs to do is to see who is got the closest picture of it! This problem of essentialism in phenomenology has been addressed by numerous scholars in the study of religion before (e.g. McCutcheon 1997).

Underneath this quest for the 'real' or the 'ultimate concern' that theologians are seemingly concerned about, are the following issues, as expressed by Thatamanil (2010: 1179) – 'The work of imagining religion has to date remained a narrowly western project that has been globalized'; 'the category has been diffused by colonialism'; 'an inevitable part of the larger project of creating the *secular*'. By circumscribing the general theory of religion in this way, theologians such as Thatamanil continuously reject the possibility that knowledge is universal, and it can only be universal if it can be generalized. If the criticism of Thatamanil on behalf of theology against Religious Studies is valid, then it should equally apply to all disciplines of knowledge including natural sciences.

The study of religion stands apart from both theology and phenomenology in the above sense. Specifically, Comparative Theology and Comparative Religion or scientific study of religion may be criticized for using terms and concepts that may be foreign to religions that they either

theologize (in the case of Comparative Theology) or theorize as in the case of the study of religion. The difference I see in theology deploying theological terms of Abrahamic family to read other religions is two fold—first, the theistic ideas that may be present in other religions are not necessarily similar, a condition that is necessary for a very basic comparison; second, as often claimed by comparative theologians that their purpose in looking through their comparative theological lens is really to point to their Christian theological colleagues the theological work done by ‘theologians’ in other religions, e.g., Ramanuja in the Srivaishnava tradition. But this is simply what I would refer to as self-reflection of what a Christian theologian is engaging in regarding the other as if the other is doing what Christian theologian is doing! The other might not be even thinking in the terms that a Christian theologian might be thinking.⁹ Even though such theological comparisons have highlighted important differences between Christian theology and other ‘theologies’, to capture them under the rubric of theology might not serve well for those traditions for the simple reason that the object or purpose of such comparison is never clear. If the purpose¹⁰ is to compare

⁹ It is interesting to point out here the fascinating narrative that Thatamanil offers about his long engagement with his Advaita Swami in Madras (Chennai). After all that engagement, there seems no evidence of the Advaita Swami thinking along theological lines but rather Thatamanil progressed from being a strong committed Christian to acquiring a ‘double religious identity’ (Thatamanil 2000: 799). This makes it seem as if comparative theology is a peculiar Christian theologian’s preoccupation!

¹⁰ Clooney (1995) speaks of constructing a Comparative Theology based on multiple traditions or based on more than one foundation. He says it is a theology deeply changed by details of multiple traditions. But he does not clarify exactly what that theology is, and what its content is and if it is grounded in faith, who then owns it?! Likewise, Thatamanil too makes the point that comparative theologians ‘aim to engage and be engaged by those theological claims so that they can undertake constructive reflection on ultimate realities after having taken seriously the insights of other traditions’. But he does not clarify the nature of that theology and who may subscribe to it, if it is rooted in ‘more than one tradition’, as he puts it (Thatamanil 2000: 794).

all theologies and arrive at a unified understanding of God (as W.C. Smith ambitiously outlined in his 1989 book), then who owns such understanding in the end? If there is no community owning that theology, then does it mean Comparative Theology is without a believing community? For it is hard to imagine a theology without a community sharing it. Or, is it for scholarly purposes? If so, then what is traded as Comparative Theology is really a backdoor approach to studying religion, or is it not! The only problem is it now lacks the credibility of both the theoretical scholar of religion as well as an absence of a community which owns it.

In any case, such an enterprise is too close to popular religious tendency to construct one's religious or spirituality from a garden variety of religions. Comparative Theology cannot, in this sense, avoid being trapped in proffering in the end some kind of universal religion of some sort (as much as even theologians with an interest in dialogue rejected such an outcome)! Or, as Thatamanil (2000: 799) looks at his engagement with an Advaita teacher, it could result in acquiring a 'double religious identity'. If it is done, on the other hand, for academic reasons, what theoretical value does it have other than most certainly a true appreciation of another tradition at best? This then moves such comparative theological engagements into nothing more than inter-religious dialogue. Such a task of theological comparison is certainly a noble one in creating harmony among religious groups. In my view, however, it does not count as theoretically rigorous task of producing theoretical knowledge on religion. If Comparative Theology wants to engage in comparative task, it needs to, in the first place, face the difficult choice of making its epistemology grounded in verifiable terms and not in faith claims. For as long as theological studies in general and Comparative Theology in particular are rooted in the 'ultimate concern' it cannot speak to people of no faith. For I believe even an agnostic, methodological or otherwise, should be able to study religion in the same way and with the same critical tools that are available to any scholar of religion.¹¹ In this sense, theological enterprise is seemingly exclusionary in its vision by placing religious as its qualification. It is in this sense, study of religion stands differently from the comparative theological engagement. In this regard, comparative theology may well have its reasons and its purposes for Christian Theology. It is

¹¹ For the non-religious study of Hinduism, cf. Kumar (2008).

positioned though in such a way that it cannot be enforced onto other religions – i.e. that they should be studied in similar ways¹².

An additional difficulty that theologians seem to have is their unwillingness to distinguish the category ‘religion’ when deployed in empirical sense in a loose way and in an analytical sense in which scholars of religion deploy. The difference is that in its empirical usage, it is vague and entirely determined subjectively by adherents in a culture. What may be religious in one culture may not be so in another, as alluded to earlier. However, it is only in its scholarly deployment it can acquire greater analytical clarity and precision. Scholarly analysis cannot afford to have any arbitrariness in its usage, meaning and intention. This can only be achieved if we follow the method explained by for instance, Apple (2008) as mentioned above. It is not as if theological study is not historical, but what distinguishes their historical consciousness is their commitment in the end to an ultimate concern. The historical consciousness of the historian of religions on the other hand is not limited by such concern, nor is it averse to it. In a sense¹³, this may be referred to as, in Ninian Smart’s terms, a methodological

¹² I do not discount the importance of Christian theology in engaging in ‘comparative theological’ engagement for their, a) self-understanding and self-realization; b) to positively engage with other religions for establishing inter-religious communication, especially since Christian theology was extraordinarily harsh in their treatment of other religions in the past. And I do recognize the positive progress that Christian theologians have made in moving away from Christo-centric theological affirmations to a more genuine dialogue with other religious communities.

¹³ Smart understood ‘methodological agnosticism’ as being open to the possibility that transcendence exists, albeit that he established Religious Studies in distinction from Theological Studies based on agnosticism rather than on faith. See, Ninian Smart. *The Phenomenon of Religion*. (London: Macmillan 1973). Here I do not necessarily disagree with Hyman’s (2004: 200) point when he says, ‘I need not resort to any supposed ‘neutral’ or ‘agnostic’ position to do so. I can be openly situated within my own worldview or tradition and be critical of Smart’s position on the basis of that worldview without compromising the accuracy and empathy with which I convey Smart’s thought’.

agnosticism. Both theologians and scholars of religion of necessity operate within history, albeit they may have different notions of what it entails.

Concluding Remarks

From the above arguments that I have offered, I believe that Comparative Theology can only serve an internal theological purpose but not for the purpose of a general theory of religion. Unless generalizations are deemed unnecessary entirely, the academic study of religion cannot avoid the search for such theoretical framework. We may not have arrived at the satisfactory general theory of religion on all accounts, but I believe that we have arrived at the broader framework for it, in that it (such a framework) seeks a) data that can be shared by both insiders and outsiders; b) method of analysis is repeatable; c) interpretation and explanations do not depend on insider's intuition, but rather are not only available to outsiders but equally open to subsequent redescription and rectification as Apple (2008) suggested. In any scientific study, theory is always a work in progress, and in this regard Comparative Theology with its tendency to emphasize insider's perspective more than the non-believer's views can close the doors on a common quest for generalizations that both religious and non-religious, theists and atheists or agnostics alike can share. I am yet to hear or read a satisfactory argument as to why atheists and non-religious people cannot theorize religion.

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