

## Theology Today: Comparative Theology as a Catholic Theological Approach

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### Abstract

Comparative theology is a relatively novel theological approach that revolves around a practice of comparative reading of authoritative religious documents. The International Theological Commission's *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2012) develops a systematic-theological elaboration of the specificity of Catholic theology. Our author investigates the question whether and to what extent *Theology Today* may endorse comparative theology as a genuine expression of Catholic theology.

### Keywords

comparative theology, Catholic theology, *Dei verbum*

**T**heological reflection is guided by the context in which theology is done. We should not, therefore, be surprised that one of the most important challenges for contemporary theology has to do with religious plurality and the way Christianity responds to this reality. Pertinent questions for Catholic theologians are: How can we think and name God in view of the complex realities of religious diversity? How can theology be done in the midst of global cross-cultural and interreligious processes? How can we develop a coherent Catholic theology in the face of our babelish condition? If we want to explore the inexhaustible mystery of God and the many ways God works to bring salvation in diverse settings, theologians should take seriously both the

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inextricable phenomenon of religious diversity and the particularity of religious traditions. To that end we need new theological approaches that allow for deep learning across religious borders.<sup>1</sup> Like many scholars in the field, I am convinced that comparative theology, understood as the “the rereading of one’s home theological tradition . . . after serious engagement in the reading of another tradition,” meets this need.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is a fact that the question whether comparative theology really deserves to be called Catholic presents itself with a certain urgency.<sup>3</sup>

Theology departments in Catholic universities worldwide are struggling with the question of how to respond to the phenomenon of pluralization. They are wondering “how to properly integrate the new awareness of religious diversity in their curriculum while still remaining faithful to the Roman Catholic tradition.”<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, an ongoing academic discussion poses the question of how comparative theology can be Catholic. Some theologians are concerned that the comparative theology project cannot be reconciled with the particular nature of Catholic theology.<sup>5</sup> Will establishing a program in comparative theology not function as a Trojan horse, undermining the particularity of divinity schools and theological departments from within and transforming them into departments of religious studies? Not addressing this concern would make it very difficult for comparative theologians to be recognized and welcomed as *Catholic* theologians and could, therefore, lead to their marginalization in Catholic institutions and exclusion from ongoing theological conversations.<sup>6</sup> As long as it remains unclear as to whether comparative theology is worthy of being called

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1. See Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
  2. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: Albany State University, 1993) 3.
  3. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24 (2014) 5–118 is a special issue dedicated to the question, Is comparative theology Catholic?
  4. Catherine Cornille, “Comparative Theology and the Study of Religions at the Catholic University,” a paper read at Pune, November 1–4, 2011, <http://fiuc.org/w/cms/COCTI/ACTESPUNE/Catherine%20Cornille.pdf>.
  5. Calling comparative theology Catholic and seeing it as a highly valuable and needed theological approach does not mean that comparative theology is exclusively Catholic, even though the fact that most theologians engaging in comparative theology are Catholic, which, in my view, is significant in itself. Protestants are also engaged in comparative theology, and some would say that this approach may also be appropriated outside the Christian tradition by Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, etc. Of course, this would require them to develop a particular confessional appropriation of comparative theology.
  6. As Ulrich Winkler explained in his article on comparative theology, “The Catholic Church must give its *nihil obstat* (‘no objection’) and the refusal to do so bars a candidate. In case of conflict, the Church can withdraw the candidate’s ecclesiastical license to teach as a Roman Catholic theologian (*missio canonica*) while exercising his or her profession” (“Reasons for and Contexts of Deep Theological Engagement with Other Religious Traditions in Europe: Toward a Comparative Theology,” *Religions* 3.4 (2012), special issue on European Perspectives on Comparative Theology, 1180–94, at 1183.

Catholic, the academic future of this theological endeavor within Catholicism continues to be uncertain. What is more, not to engage in a theological “apology” for comparative theology may also smooth the way for those voices arguing for a reaffirmation and reinforcement of the distinctly “Catholic” profile of theology departments. Those who urge the necessity of a stronger commitment to orthodoxy usually also advocate the necessity of a clear distinction between theology and religious studies and reject the crossing of borders so typical of comparative theology.<sup>7</sup> In times of “crisis”—and many perceive the process of pluralization as a crisis—it seems much easier to enhance clarity of boundaries and avoid confusion about what deserves to be called Catholic theology.

In this article, I argue that comparative theology as a particular theological approach is a highly valuable and needed theological approach in light of our contemporary context of pluralization and deserves in principle to be called Catholic.<sup>8</sup> I construct my argument in conversation with a document recently issued by the International Theological Commission (ITC), *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (March 8, 2012). This document intends a systematic-theological exploration of the specificity of Catholic theology. To that end, it looks at several important issues with regard to contemporary theology: its methodological criteria, its relation to other nontheological disciplines, such as the religious sciences, as well as what may be regarded as the foundational principles for Catholic theology. After summarizing the genesis of this document’s most important principles, I continue to investigate to what extent *Theology Today* may endorse comparative theology as a genuine expression of Catholic theology, calling special attention to those dimensions of comparative theology that at first sight may seem odd, unorthodox, or hard to reconcile with Catholic theology. In doing so, I hold up these difficulties to the ITC document, arguing that their challenge is more apparent than real.

## Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria

The ITC was formed after the Second Vatican Council,<sup>9</sup> and, as one of its former members, Adelbert Denaux, states, “Its very existence shows the importance given to theology and theological advice by Church authorities since the Council.”<sup>10</sup> The commission is considered a continuation of the important role theologians played

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7. Marianne Moyaert, “On Vulnerability: Probing After the Ethical Dimensions of Comparative Theology,” *Religions* 3.4 (2012) 1144–61.

8. I acknowledge limits to this argument. In the final analysis, the real judgment about the Catholicity of comparative theology will depend on the theological fruits this method yields. See Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “Is Comparative Theology Catholic? Expectations Regarding the Comparativist,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24 (2014) 18–26, at 25.

9. The ITC was established in 1969 by Pope Paul VI.

10. Adelbert Denaux, “From Vatican II to *Theology Today*: Has Vatican II’s Perspective on the Function of Theology Been Received?,” *Louvain Studies* 37 (2013) 28–51, 33.

as *periti* during the council, assisting various commissions in realizing the urgently needed *resourcement* and *aggiornamento*.<sup>11</sup> The primary task of the ITC is to serve the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) in an advisory capacity with regard to important doctrinal questions; its president is the prefect of the CDF.<sup>12</sup> Though the ITC does not have magisterial authority, documents produced by it reflect concerns of the CDF and sometimes herald the publication of more authoritative documents.<sup>13</sup>

*Theology Today* addresses Catholic theologians mainly in an effort to clarify some particularly important questions. Its tone is generally positive; it speaks with appreciation of theological scholarship in a spirit evocative of Vatican II, which likewise avoided judgmental and cautioning language, expressing trust in both internal ecclesial conversations and in dialogue with the world.<sup>14</sup> *Theology Today* expresses trust in the work theologians do and recognizes their contribution to the church at large. Drawing on a conversational understanding of revelation and a dynamic interpretation of tradition, *Theology Today* regards theology as dialogical: theologians are called to enter into dialogue with Scripture and tradition, the broader church, the magisterium, and their theological colleagues—to explore how they may contribute to both ecumenical and interreligious dialogue (nos. 49, 56). Moreover, theologians ought to enter into a dialogue with the world (nos. 51, 53), various cultures (no. 54), and other nontheological disciplines (no. 74). The document also confirms that human persons are able “by the light of reason” to penetrate “beyond appearances to the deep-down truth of things.” Because all human beings are searching for truth, “which is objective and universal, . . . authentic dialogue [is] possible between human persons” (no. 62). This focus on dialogue is refreshing, particularly in view of recent Vatican admonitions of certain Catholic theologians.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, as is the case with any dialogical

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11. The best-known *periti* were Joseph Ratzinger, Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, Hans Küng, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Yves Congar.

12. The commission is composed of theologians from diverse schools and nations, who are noted for their knowledge and fidelity to the Church’s magisterium. The members, numbering no more than 30, are nominated by the Holy Father *ad quinquennium* after having been proposed by the cardinal prefect of the CDF and after consultation with the bishops’ conferences. See [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_pro\\_14071997\\_ictheology\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_14071997_ictheology_en.html). All URLs referenced herein were accessed October 21, 2014.

13. This was the case, e.g., with the ITC’s “Christianity and the World Religions” (1997), which paved the way for the CDF’s *Dominus Iesus* (2000).

14. During a June 2014 visit to the ITC, Pope Francis stated that “as theologians, this Commission has an irreplaceable role in fostering dialogue and understanding between the Church and different cultures.” This responsibility makes them pioneers: “This notion of being a pioneer is very important because sometimes it’s easy to think of theologians as being out in the distance. Like being stationed at a military base, not on the front lines.” For a recording of Francis’s talk in Italian and reporting in English, see [www.romereports.com/pg155026-pope-to-international-theological-commission-god-is-not-a-threat-en](http://www.romereports.com/pg155026-pope-to-international-theological-commission-god-is-not-a-threat-en).

15. I am thinking especially of Jacques Dupuis, Elizabeth Johnson, and Jon Sobrino.

undertaking, the question is, How does this dialogical openness relate to the identity of Catholic theology?<sup>16</sup>

### *Catholic Theology: One and Many*

*Theology Today* begins from the fact that Catholic theology as a dialogical endeavor flourished after the Second Vatican Council:

There have been new theological voices, especially those of laymen and women; theologies from new cultural contexts, particularly Latin America, Africa and Asia; new themes for reflection, such as peace, justice, liberation, ecology and bioethics; deeper treatments of former themes, thanks to renewal in biblical, liturgical, patristic and medieval studies; and new venues for reflection, such as ecumenical, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. (no. 1)

The multiple theologies testify to the fact that revelation is “received in diverse ways by human beings” (no. 5). Not only is it not possible for human beings to grasp the “abundance of the divine truth” as a whole, they can also never understand it in any final way; they always grasp it “with new eyes” (no. 77). This reality leads necessarily to a theological plurality that raises the question of what unites different methodological approaches. Though the ITC does not want “uniformity” or some sort of “single style” (nos. 2, 5, 80), fragmentation is also to be avoided (nos. 1, 5). When answering the question, What is the *proprium* of Catholic Theology?, the commission formulates a *theological* legitimation for both unity and multiplicity in Catholic theology:

The Church’s catholicity derives from Christ himself who is the Saviour of the whole world and of all humanity (cf. Eph 1:3–10; 1 Tim 2:3–6). The Church is therefore at home in every nation and culture, and seeks to “gather in everything for its salvation and sanctification.” The fact that there is one Saviour shows that there is a necessary bond between catholicity and unity. As it explores the inexhaustible Mystery of God and the countless ways in which God’s grace works for salvation in diverse settings, theology rightly and necessarily takes a multitude of forms, and yet as investigations of the unique truth of the triune God and of the one plan of salvation centred on the one Lord Jesus Christ, this plurality must manifest distinctive family traits. (no. 2)

### *Criteria of Catholic Theology*

*Theology Today* consists of three chapters that delineate the criteria of Catholic theology: theology is Catholic

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16. Elsewhere I have argued that dialogue is part and parcel of Catholic identity. See Marianne Moyaert, “Postliberalism, Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Analysis of Lindbeck’s Fiduciary Interests,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47 (2012) 64–87.

if it arises from an attentive listening to the Word of God (cf. Chapter One); if it situates itself consciously and faithfully in the communion of the Church (cf. Chapter Two); and if it is orientated to the service of God in the world, offering divine truth to the men and women of today in an intelligible form (cf. Chapter Three). (no. 3)

Next, the document asks how this understanding of the theological task translates into concrete principles and criteria. These criteria ought not to be seen as a checklist allowing a firm decision about who is in and who is out. Rather, they have to be placed within the broader theological framework of the document, which sketches how Catholic theology is both singular and pluriform. Allow me to enumerate these criteria briefly, locating them in their respective chapters.<sup>17</sup>

Chapter 1, “Listening to the Word of God,” elaborates on Catholic theology as rooted in the faithful act of listening to God’s revealed word and specifies three criteria. The first criterion is the “recognition of the primacy of the Word of God,” which also implies the recognition that God speaks “in many and various ways” (nos. 6–9). Next, Catholic theology “takes the faith of the Church as its source, context, and norm” (nos. 10–15). From this, it follows that Catholic theology is always a “science of faith” (no. 19); it is “faith seeking understanding” (nos. 16–19).

Chapter 2, “Abiding in the Communion of the Church,” draws attention especially to theology’s ecclesial nature, and also delineates criteria for Catholic theology:

- It must give priority to Scripture, which is regarded as the soul of theology (nos. 21–24).
- It presupposes fidelity to the apostolic tradition as a criterion of Catholic theology (nos. 25–32).
- The *sensus fidelium* is a distinguishing feature of Catholic theology. Theology must therefore strive to discover and articulate accurately what the Catholic faithful actually believe (nos. 33–36).
- Catholic theologians are also expected to give “responsible adherence to the magisterium in its various gradations” (nos. 37–44).
- The vocation of theologian is not individual but ecclesial (nos. 45–50). Catholic theology therefore should be “practiced in professional, prayerful, and charitable collaboration with the whole company of Catholic theologians in the communion of the Church, in a spirit of mutual appreciation and support, attentive both to the needs and comments of the faithful and to the guidance of the Church’s pastors.”
- Catholic theology should happen in an ongoing dialogue with the world. “It should help the Church to read the signs of the times illuminated by the light that comes from divine revelation and to profit from doing so in its life and mission” (nos. 51–58, at no. 58).

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17. For a close reading of the text see Lieven Boeve, “Creating Space for Catholic Theology: A Critical-Empathetic Reading of *Theology Today*,” *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 828–55.

The third and longest chapter, “Giving an Account of God’s Truth,” formulates three more criteria and presents theology especially as a “rational and human endeavor” (no. 60):

- Catholic theology “should strive to give a scientifically and rationally argued presentation of the truths of the Christian faith” (no. 61). The scientific nature of theology as well as its place in academia is elaborated in particular (nos. 61–73).
- Regarding the relation to scientific disciplines (nos. 74–85), a Catholic theology “attempts to integrate a plurality of enquiries and methods into the unified project of the *intellectus fidei*” (no. 85).
- Theology is not only a science but is always a search for wisdom (nos. 86–99). Catholic theology “strives for true wisdom in its study of the Mystery of God, . . . [and] acknowledges the utter priority of God; it seeks not to possess God but to be possessed by God” (no. 99).

Before engaging in an exploration of the question whether comparative theology deserves the label *Catholic* according to my reading of *Theology Today*, I want to make three more general remarks. First, it is fair to say that this document depicts an ideal image of Catholic theology; it defines criteria that Catholic theology should ideally try to fulfill, realizing full well the challenge that this ideal brings—and not only for comparative theologians.<sup>18</sup> Second, the ITC left some questions unresolved, such as the precise understanding of *sensus fidelium*.<sup>19</sup> Third, there are, as is usually the case with documents written by a team of authors, ambiguities and tensions in the text. And as Lieven Boeve explains, this means that these texts are not easy to read. Moreover, if it can be said that all texts are open to multiple interpretations, this holds true for church documents as well.<sup>20</sup>

## Can Comparative Theology Be Catholic?

As mentioned in my introduction, comparative theology seems to deviate from Catholic theology as commonly understood, and as a consequence it evokes many questions. The most important, I suggest, are the following: How does comparative theology relate to the primacy of God’s self-revelation? Is it “Catholic” to read sacred texts of other religious traditions? How does the reading of such texts relate to Scripture? Is comparative theology just a scholarly exercise, or is it a properly ecclesial exercise of *fides quaerens intellectum* in a pluralist context?<sup>21</sup> Is it “Catholic” to

18. See Denaux, “From Vatican II to *Theology Today*” 41.

19. This question is further explored by one of the subcommissions of the ITC and resulted in the document entitled *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html).

20. See Boeve, “Creating Space for Catholic Theology” 834.

use comparative reading strategies? How does comparative theology relate to the apostolic tradition of the church? How are the fruits of this comparative theological endeavor communicated to the ecclesial community? Is it “Catholic” for theologians to turn to nontheological disciplines (e.g., comparative religion) in their search for truth, or should they limit themselves to the theological sources of Scripture and tradition?

I will further explore these questions from the perspective of *Theology Today* and its view of Catholic theology. Space precludes treatment of all the criteria adduced in the previous section; those that can be considered especially important in view of the “ambivalent status” of comparative theology, and that may help cast light on the questions formulated above, I will treat more extensively. I will not use the enumerated criteria as a checklist but try to develop my argument in accord with the dialogical spirit of *Theology Today*.

### *Comparative Theology and the Question of Revelation*

Chapter one of *Theology Today* begins with a direct quotation from *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (no. 4),<sup>22</sup> connecting the specificity of Catholic theology with a specific understanding of revelation that is dynamic, personal, and dialogical:

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). (*Theology Today* no. 2)<sup>23</sup>

The most important contribution of *Dei verbum* might be its paradigm shift from a cognitive and propositional view of revelation to a personalistic, relational, and dialogical understanding.<sup>24</sup> Revelation is not primarily a matter of communicating the content of faith (*revelata*), but an encounter with God who wants to begin a dialogue with all people. The universal reach of revelation is thus confirmed.<sup>25</sup> What is unique is that God reveals Godself in words and deed, and unceasingly reaches out to all

21. See Martin Ganeri, “Tradition with a New Identity: Thomist Engagement with non-Christian Thought as a Model for the New Comparative Theology in Europe,” *Religions* 3 (2012) 1054–74, at 1054.

22. At [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

23. Boeve notes that *Dei verbum* and *Verbum Domini* are the two most-quoted documents in *Theology Today* (“Creating Space for Catholic Theology” 838).

24. See Peter De Mey, “The Relation between Revelation and Experience in *Dei Verbum*: An Evaluation in the Light of Postconciliar Theology,” in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, ed. M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis (Leuven: Peeters, 2002) 95–105, at 95.

25. Joris Geldhof, *Revelation, Reason, and Reality: Theological Encounters with Jaspers, Schelling, and Baader* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).



people. In essence, God communicates Godself (*sese revelavit*) and thereby invites (as opposed to imposing, ordaining, or obligating) people to enter into a relationship with God and thus share in God's divine nature (DV no. 2). *Dei verbum* states that God revealed Godself out of love for people, whom God addresses as friends.

The life, death, and resurrection of Christ, together with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, constitute the culmination of divine self-revelation in human history. Continuing in this line of thought, comparative theologian Michael Barnes argues that "the revelation of the Word of God, spoken definitively in Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing to fruition the 'seeds of the Word' in creation, represent together a single continuous action of God in the World."<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, we cannot accept that some revelations somehow surpass, contradict, or correct God's final revelation in Christ. There can be no new revelations of God. Gavin D'Costa puts it this way:

First, there cannot be new revelation which is ontologically different and/or independent of Christ, such that there is now a new *addition* to our knowledge of God which is entirely novel and totally unrelated to God's self-disclosure as Father, Son and Spirit. This does not require that there can be no "new" revelation historically and geographically apart from Jesus Christ. The context of this ontological denial is to maintain that if God is God, and God has revealed himself as he is in the trinity, then there is no fourth or fifth God such that alongside the Father, Son and Spirit resides Allah and Brahman. . . . Second, there can be no new revelations in the sense of changing God's self disclosure as Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

God makes Godself also known in history and creation, and that God has done so apart from the living Christ. God has chosen to reveal Godself in a variety of ways and contexts outside the revelation in Christ. God made Godself known to the first parents, the patriarchs, the prophets, and the sages before Christ's incarnation, so there seems to be no reason to exclude the possibility that God may have manifested Godself to those of other faiths. Since Catholic anthropology also emphasizes that human beings are historical and social, it seems likely that God approaches people by using the historical and social structures in which they live, including their cultures and religions. There seems to be no reason not to at least affirm the possibility of God's revealing Godself through other traditions.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, it is important to note that Vatican II's *Ad gentes* quotes Irenaeus, who claimed, "From the beginning even the Son, assisting at His own creation, reveals the Father to all to whom He wills, and when He wills, and insofar as the Father wills it."<sup>29</sup> Gerald O'Collins, in his comment

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26. Michael Barnes, S.J., *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (New York: Cambridge University, 2002) 45.

27. Gavin D'Costa, "Revelation and Revelations: Discerning God in Other Religions; beyond a Static Valuation," *Modern Theology* 10 (1994) 165–83, at 169.

28. *Redemptoris missio*: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate no. 55, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html).

on the importance of this passage, points to another passage in *Ad gentes* that references Hebrews 11:6: “Therefore though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to find that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6).”<sup>30</sup> According to O’Collins,

the Council follows the Letter to the Hebrews in acknowledging that mere religious beliefs to which human beings can rise are insufficient for salvation. Without faith in the self-revealing God, it is not possible to “please” God, and for Hebrews that involves a grateful and reverent worship of God, along with deeds of kindness and service toward others. To “please God” and be saved, everyone needs the divine gift of faith, given by God when people anywhere respond to the self-revelation of God. How the gift of faith reaches many people may be known only to God. But that God offers them this gift follows from the divine will to enlighten and save all human beings. The gift of faith necessarily implies what is strictly correlative with it: the action of the self-revealing God.<sup>31</sup>

Acknowledging the primacy of the word of God does not preclude affirming the possibility of revelation to adherents of other religious traditions. It may be stated that the word of God is both active and present in creation and is capable of mediating God’s revelation to all human beings.

Moreover, the Catholic tradition recognizes the tension between what is expressed and what remains unexpressed in revelation. Revelation is a play of veiling and unveiling, of concealing and revealing. To say that revelation has reached its completion in Christ does not mean that it has been made completely explicit in its entirety. In view of human finitude, Catholic tradition states that the deep significance and meaning of divine self-revelation still remains to be grasped. *Dei verbum* also points out that overstating the fullness of what has been revealed in Christ may lead to understating “the glorious manifestation of our Lord” that is still to come.<sup>32</sup> Discerning the revealed truth and trying to understand its meaning is a never-ending process of discernment that will not reach its completion until the eschaton. The eschatological dimension of revelation necessitates that the church accept and affirm, in all humility, its status as a pilgrim church struggling to grasp what it cannot fully grasp in this time and age. Until the eschaton, the church sees through a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:12). Sometimes, however, the church sees revelation as a “fragile gift” handed to her to transmit to future generations; and living in the already/but-not-yet tension, she reacts out of fear of contamination by becoming too protective.

29. *Ad gentes*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, chap. 1, no. 3, n. 2, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html).

30. *Ad gentes* no. 7.

31. Gerald O’Collins, “Vatican II’s Constitution on Divine Revelation,” *Pastoral Review* (2013), <http://www.thepastoralreview.org/index.php/issues/past-issues/38-march-april-2013/117-vatican-ii-constitution-on-divine-revelation-dei-verbum>.

32. *Dei verbum* no. 4.

## Comparative Theology and Fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition

To understand divine self-revelation is a task to which the church is continuously called but will never fully complete. Comparative theologians, like other believers, accept this task wholeheartedly and seek to increase their knowledge of God by asking whether God is revealed in the sacred texts of other traditions. In doing so, they embrace the theological virtue of humility. As Catherine Cornille puts it, comparative theology

presupposes humble awareness of the limitation of one's own understanding and experience and of the possibility of change and growth. . . . Humility . . . may . . . be understood . . . to denote a genuine acknowledgment of the limitation and imperfection of one's insights and accomplishments, as indeed of all human realization and self-expression. In dialogue, it is such a humble awareness of the finite and partial nature of one's own understanding that drives one from the same to the other, from complacency to an active search for growth in the truth.<sup>33</sup>

The humility Cornille describes presupposes our accepting that we do not possess the fullness of revelatory truth, and that we express instead the wish to be part of the truth. In so doing, humility also presupposes our recognizing that truth is also to be found by turning to other religious traditions. Of course, it is more comforting and tempting to seek God only where we are used to seeing God, and it is all too human to listen only to the words that have already been spoken. The authors of *Theology Today*, however, argue that a great value of theology is its ability to enable us to see God with new eyes (no. 77) and in diverse ways. Comparative theology makes this possible.

The challenge is one of discernment, which is a difficult task requiring thoughtful inquiry and nuanced reflection.<sup>34</sup> In view of this work of discernment, *Theology Today* points to the special status dogmas have in tradition; they are statements “in which the Church proposes a revealed truth definitively, and in a way that is binding for the universal Church, so much so that denial is rejected as heresy and falls under an anathema” (29). The dogmas are “points of reference for the Church's faith.” That is also

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33. Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008) 9.

34. It is not simply coincidence that the comparative theology project sprang from the Jesuit tradition and has been embraced by several Jesuit universities (Boston College, Georgetown, Marquette, etc.). Comparative theology has deep roots in Jesuit history and follows the Jesuit tradition of serious, open-minded, and intelligent engagement with the world. “Beginning with St. Francis Xavier, Jesuits in the first centuries of the Society pioneered the study of religions and cultures around the world, and contributed greatly to the development of modern understandings of religions. Much research has been done on individual missionaries in various parts of the world—the Jesuits in China, for instance, have been well studied—but this project, aimed at a wider audience and not just at specialist scholars, will aim at integrating the wisdom we learn from the worldwide Jesuit tradition,” <http://www.jesuit.org/worldwide/interreligious-dialogue/projects>.

how “they are used . . . in theological reflection and argumentation.” Interestingly enough, the document also argues that “dogmas belong to the living and ongoing Apostolic Tradition. Theologians are aware of the difficulties that attend their interpretation” (no. 29). Dogmas are not clear-cut packages of truth functioning as mere boundaries. Fidelity to the apostolic tradition is not seen as submission but as a constructive and creative task, precisely because “tradition is . . . something living and vital, an ongoing process in which the unity of faith finds expression in the variety of languages and the diversity of cultures. It ceases to be Tradition if it fossilises” (no. 26). The theology of revelation so central to *Theology Today* sees theologians not as mere custodians of tradition but as those who engage with tradition in creative and constructive ways. If they fail in this task, then the Christian tradition becomes no more than a treasure chest full of past meanings that no longer appeal to people today.

To be clear, comparative theology does not intend to completely alter or rewrite dogmatic tradition; nor is it set on producing radically new truths. On the contrary, it progresses cautiously with a concern for the truths already known and revered in tradition.<sup>35</sup> Comparative theology does not hastily try to accommodate tradition to our contemporary context of plurality. Rather, it proceeds at a deliberate and careful pace, refraining from formulating final answers to complex problems. As a cautious undertaking, comparative theology is not intent on developing some grand theology of religions in which the questions about Christology, soteriology, and revelation would be dealt with definitively. On the other hand, comparative theology does not merely repeat what dogmatic tradition has always said. Rather, it asks, searches, and probes after truth, trying to see God anew. Comparative theology seeks fresh insights into those familiar truths handed down by tradition that may lead to new ways of understanding, interpreting, and receiving those truths.<sup>36</sup> In this way, it contributes to keep tradition alive.

## **Comparative Theology and the Broader Church Community**

Comparative theology stands or falls with people who are rooted in the ecclesial tradition. For comparative theologians, the church functions as a point of departure and return, reading tradition and theologizing as believers belonging to and serving the church by their work. When discussing the ecclesial dimension of comparative theology, a recurrent theme among Catholic comparative theologians is how to find venues for sharing the fruits of their work with the broader church community and entering into conversation with church authorities. The work of comparative theology is not for theologians’ intellectual pleasure, but it must be communicated to the church for evaluation and judgment. As Cornille puts it, if comparative theology “really offers the promise of religious development and spiritual growth, then those who have both the

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35. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* 157.

36. *Ibid.* 112

capacity and the opportunity to engage in it also have the responsibility to dedicate their results to the benefits of others and of the tradition as a whole.<sup>37</sup> Not to accept this ecclesial responsibility would marginalize comparative theology and make it utterly redundant to the ongoing development of tradition. Although this ecclesial dimension can be experienced as “an undue limitation of religious options,”<sup>38</sup> it is precisely this traditional embeddedness that can make comparative theology fascinating and fruitful.

Comparative theologians read their own tradition through the eyes of the other. Shifts in meaning, new interpretations, and unexpected insights flow out of this practice. What was strange becomes familiar, and what was familiar becomes strange. It is important that believers not keep these new insights “for themselves” but share them with their own faith communities. The fruits of comparative theology must be considered in an intrareligious way. After studying foreign religious texts for the insights they convey, comparative theologians are challenged to consider points of contact with their own religious heritage. The church is the “home community” to which comparative theologians must return and to which they should offer the fruits of their theological inquiry. Clooney puts it this way:

As theological knowledge must find its place, the comparative theologian must find her home. Even powerful religious ideas and insights will not endure unless received into a community appreciative of the idea that there are truths worth seeking, receiving, and living by.<sup>39</sup>

A bit earlier, Clooney writes:

I would like to think, for example, that I write a Catholic comparative theology and do the work of a Catholic theologian, regardless of how deeply I am engaged in the study of Hinduism. But I cannot decide on my own, or just with my friends, that I actually am a successful Catholic theologian. It is something the Church has to think about and decide, in the complex ways the Church does such things. Other communities will have other ways of deciding if the comparative theologian is to be welcomed home or not. . . . So the comparative theologians will always be saying something unexpected to the community, and the community will need to keep finding ways to make it possible to hear what this theologian is saying.<sup>40</sup>

*Theology Today* points out that the ecclesial and communal dimensions of any theological enterprise not only require that “individual” theologians present their findings to the entire church for scrutiny and evaluation, but the document also holds that theologians “need and deserve the prayerful support of the ecclesial community as a whole, and particularly of one another, in their sincere endeavors on behalf of the Church”

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37. Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* 210.

38. *Ibid.* 61.

39. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* 158.

40. *Ibid.* 157–58.

(no. 47). In discerning the viability, credibility, and authority of the insights that spring from comparative theology, the *sensus fidelium*—that is, “the sense of the faith that is deeply rooted in the people of God who receive, understand and live the Word of God in the Church”—plays a significant role (no. 34). New insights must pass through the sieve of ecclesial discernment if they are to be recognized as Catholic.

### *Comparative Theology as Faith Seeking Understanding*

A criterion of Catholic theology is that it takes the faith of the Church as its source, context and norm. Theology holds the *fides qua* and the *fides quae* together. (no. 15)

A criterion of Catholic theology is that, precisely as the science of faith, “faith seeking understanding [*fides quaerens intellectum*]” it has a rational dimension. (no. 19)

The dogmatic constitution *Dei verbum* focuses on the fact that revelation is a dialogical and relational event between the trinitarian God and humankind. It is a reaching out by God to all human beings, a divine attempt to engage them in an ongoing dialogue. The appropriate response to this divine outreach is that of faith: “Faith, then, is experience of God which involves knowledge of him, since revelation gives access to the truth of God which saves us (cf. 2 Thess 2:13) and makes us free (cf. Jn 8:32). Without faith, it would be impossible to gain insight into this truth, because it is revealed by God” (no. 12). Traditionally, Catholic theology emphasizes that faith is never a merely personal disposition toward encounter with God, but is also always ecclesial: the faith of the church that bears witness to the divine revelation is normative. *Theology Today* distinguishes between two distinct, though interrelated, dimensions of faith as *fides qua creditur* (act of belief or trust—the subjective dimension of faith) and *fides quae creditur* (the intelligible content that is believed or professed—the objective dimension of faith); the two dimensions are to be held together in theological reflections (no. 13). Both dimensions together establish a criterion of Catholic theology (no. 15).

This faithful response to God’s revelation does not exclude the use of reason. In the Catholic tradition, *fides et ratio* presume each other, an idea expressed in the notion *intellectus fidei* (nos. 17, 18). On the one hand, the ecclesial community submits itself to being interpreted by the ever-challenging word of God. On the other hand, it is also called to interpret anew God’s word in rapidly changing circumstances and in light of continually new challenges. The *intellectus fidei* fosters an ongoing dialogical process that occurs in many forms, in different ecclesial settings, and according to the capacities of the faithful: prayer, meditation, Bible study, and, of course, theology. Theology is the rational and scientific exploration of divine revelation; its pluriformity testifies to the “abundance of divine revelation, which is received in diverse ways by human beings” (no. 5).

These “diverse ways” often manifest themselves in different theological subdisciplines (biblical theology, dogmatics, church history, pastoral theology, and moral theology). Differences may also be related to context (e.g., African theologies, feminist theologies, postcolonial theologies), sometimes springing from new challenges, such as

religious diversity and interreligious dialogue. Though the document does not name comparative theology specifically, it may be recognized as one possible expression of the theological task. This approach realizes the theological task of *fides quaerens intellectum* in a world characterized by religious diversity, a world where people all too often misunderstand one another because they do not speak the same religious language and because they do not know one another's wisdom tradition. Like any Catholic theology, comparative theology's "source and starting-point must always be the word of God revealed in history, while its final goal will be an understanding of that word which increases with each passing generation" (*Fides et ratio* no. 73).<sup>41</sup> Illuminating in this regard is the way Clooney describes his theological approach:

[It] marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition [the Catholic tradition] but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.<sup>42</sup>

### Comparative Theology as Dialogue with the World

A criterion of Catholic theology is that it should be in constant dialogue with the world. Catholic theology should help the Church read the signs of the times illuminated by the divine revelation and by so doing profit from in its life and mission. (*Theology Today* no. 58)

If secularization was for a long time seen as a "dominant sign" of modern times, what stands out today is the phenomenon of pluralization. The Catholic Church realized this during the Second Vatican Council, intending, as Jacques Dupuis noted, "to rally the highest possible majority on the council floor in favor of a change of attitude of Christians and the church toward the members of other religions."<sup>43</sup> The declaration *Nostra aetate* on the relationship of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions is especially important in this context.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. It regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and life, those precepts and teachings that, though differing in many aspects from the ones it holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth that enlightens all people. Indeed, it proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), in whom all may find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself. (*Nostra aetate* no. 2).

Indeed, *Nostra aetate* expresses a conversion of the Catholic Church with respect to other religions. With this document, the Church sought to establish a new climate in

41. Quoted in Clooney, "Is Comparative Theology Catholic?" 26.

42. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* 10.

43. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2002) 59.

which encounter and dialogue were understood as part of the Church's role in the world. This dialogical perspective is also affirmed in *Ad gentes*, which calls on Catholics to "learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth" (no. 11). In later documents this call to dialogue is repeated, and, although the Roman Catholic Church recognizes that there are various forms of interreligious engagement, it also argues for a *theological engagement with other traditions*. After Vatican II, various Catholic theologians took up the further theological development and refinement of the council's dialogical spirit. Undeniably, according to the Vatican document "Dialogue and Proclamation," theological dialogue may enable "theologians [to] explore together the understanding of each other's doctrinal beliefs and spiritual values."<sup>44</sup>

From a theological perspective, the question of the relationship of Christianity to other religions is urgent. Theology is faced with the challenge of reflecting on the meaning of religious diversity for the Church, its traditions, and Christian identity. I would argue that comparative theology is one very specific expression of the Church's calling to engage in a dialogue with the world, to listen to the word of God, and to inquire into the mysterious ways in which the triune God has made Godself known.

### *The Use of Nontheological Disciplines*

A criterion of Catholic theology is that it attempts to integrate a plurality of enquiries and methods into the unified project of the *intellectus fidei*. . . . Catholic theology recognizes the proper methods of other sciences and critically utilizes them in its own research. It does not isolate itself from critique and welcomes scientific dialogue. (*Theology Today* no. 85)

One of the more ambivalent aspects of comparative theology is the way it combines the faithful and committed perspective of theology and the detached and neutral perspective of comparative religion. Why should Catholic theologians turn to the comparative science of religion when theologizing about religious others?

Though *Theology Today* does not speak about the way comparative theology makes use of comparative religion, it does develop a theological legitimation for the way theologians integrate a plurality of disciplines and methods that, to my mind, may apply to comparative theology as well. This legitimation is rooted in the spirit of Vatican II, which initiated a period of ecclesial *aggiornamento* and breathed into the Church an air of trust, renewal, and openness. Theologically, it was a time of receiving the "seeds of the Word" in the world.<sup>45</sup> The ITC recognizes that theologians often work at the "frontiers of the Church's experience and reflection" (no. 47) in order to read the signs of the times faithfully. In entering unfamiliar territory and engaging new

44. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" no. 42.

45. *Ad gentes* no. 11; *Nostra aetate* no. 2.



challenges, theologians help “the faithful and the magisterium to see the importance of developments, events and trends in human history, and to discern and interpret ways in which, through them, the Spirit may be speaking to the Church and to the world” (no. 53). Learning from reality is a central task of theology and requires an active hermeneutics of listening to what the world in all its complexity has to say.

This theological concern with the real world in all its complexity grants an important place and task for new sciences, theories, and disciplines. After Vatican II various theological subdisciplines learned to use of a wide spectrum of scientific methods.<sup>46</sup> The processing of empirical data from religious studies collected by theologians and other scientists is an accepted and valued source for theology.<sup>47</sup> The ITC affirms just how important it is for theologians to draw upon nontheological disciplines. Indeed, it warns theology not to isolate itself from other sciences, and argues that religious studies should be “integrated into the fabric of theological methods” (no. 83). Many examples come to mind that have already found acceptance in academia: systematic theology not only uses insights from philosophy of religion but also appeals to insights from the natural sciences—the theory of evolution, for example; biblical studies integrates the findings of philology;<sup>48</sup> church history adheres closely to the principles of secular historical research; liturgical studies attempt to make Christian rituals understandable, not only by both clarifying their embedment in the particular Christian tradition but also by appealing to symbol and ritual studies; and ecclesiology, as the study of building up the church, is inspired and challenged by communication studies.

If theologians can incorporate insights from secular sciences into constructive theology, it makes sense that they also turn to the comparative study of different religious traditions. Viewed from this perspective, what comparative theology does is suddenly much less extraordinary. Comparative theology is based on the intersection of two different disciplines: the theology of religions and comparative religious studies. The strength and originality of this approach, as well as its theological potential for listening to the “seeds of the Word” (*Theology Today* no. 57) is found in the cross-fertilization of the “confessional” perspective and the “removed” perspective of comparative religion. Clooney explains:

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46. This development dovetails with suggestions from Vatican II in, e.g., *Gaudium et spes* no. 62, where the council clearly argued that insights from secular, nonreligious disciplines may be helpful for theology.

47. Johannes A. van der Ven, “A Chapter in Public Theology from the Perspective of Human Rights: Interreligious Interaction and Dialogue in an Intercivilizational Context,” *Journal of Religion* 86 (2006) 412–41, at 414.

48. Reimund Bieringer, “The Spirit’s Guidance into All the Truth: The Text-Critical Problems of John 16,13,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis*, ed. Adelbert Denaux (Leuven: Peeters, 2002) 183–207; Benedicte Lemmelijn, “Free and Yet Faithful: On the Translation Technique of LXX Exod 7,14–11,10,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 33 (2007) 1–32; Joseph Verheyden, “Documenta Q: The Reconstruction of Q 22, 28–30,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 76 (2000) 404–32.

Because the comparative theologian is engaged in the study of a religious tradition other than her own, she needs to be an academic scholar proficient in the study of that religion, or at least seriously in learning from academic scholars. This is necessary if comparative theology is to be faithful to text and language, history and context, and not mistaken or lazy in (mis) using what is known about the religions in question. Shoddy or superficial scholarship about religions produces bad theology.<sup>49</sup>

Here Clooney makes explicit his underlying assumption throughout his work, namely, that theological reflection and judgments based on weak or biased knowledge of a foreign religious tradition leads to bad theology.

### *The Study of Scripture as the Soul of Theology*

A criterion of Catholic theology is that it should draw constantly upon the canonical witness of Scripture and should promote the anchoring of all of the Church's doctrine and practice in that witness, since "all the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture." Theology should endeavor to break open the Scriptures, so that the faithful may come into contact with the living word of God (see Heb 4:12). (*Theology Today* no. 24)

Scripture is central to comparative theology, but comparative theologians would immediately add that what makes their approach specific is comparing biblical texts with texts from other traditions for theological purposes. This is original and needed, but it is also "unorthodox." Indeed, the fact remains that religious texts are usually read, studied, and used for worship in a *monoreligious* setting. It is anything but obvious for both Christians and non-Christians to engage in a study or even a reading of foreign religious texts. And it is certainly not common to read Christian texts *together with* foreign religious texts, as comparative theology proposes. Quite often, Christians feel they should not engage in such an interreligious practice. According to comparative theologian Máire Byrne, there are a number of reasons for this reluctance:

Principal among them [are] that Christians should spend more time learning about our own texts, and that we would somehow insult [religious others] by reading [their religious texts] or that we would be showing some sort of disservice to our "own" texts if we studied or began to appreciate the texts of another religion.<sup>50</sup>

Comparative theologians recognize these complexities but nevertheless point to the importance of engaging foreign religious texts. In an effort to "normalize" the comparative theological project and its focus on comparative reading, Clooney states that "texts have been central to most theologies as they have been to most disciplines in the humanities, and there is no reason to imagine that interreligious

49. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* 12.

50. Máire Byrne, *The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: A Basis for Interfaith Dialogue* (London: Continuum, 2011) 5.

learning should be primarily non-textual learning.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the core identities of many religions are closely intertwined with their scriptures and accompanying traditions of study, interpretation, and argumentation. Because sacred books are constitutive for the formation of particular religious imaginations, it makes sense to engage them in an effort to gain access to the religious imagination of the other.<sup>52</sup>

By doing so, comparative theologians recognize that many major religions of the world have transmitted their religious legacy in a written form. As in Christianity, these scriptures are often seen as sources of their faith. Sometimes they are claimed to have been revealed directly by the Divine, and are thereby regarded not only as authoritative but also as sacred. Comparative theologians, however, cannot (always) confirm these scriptures as the sources of revelation they are claimed to be, but theologians can acknowledge that these texts may help us reread Scripture and Christian traditions in another light, so that we may encounter these traditions in a new way. In the end, this dialogical process of reading between religious traditions can help us rediscover forgotten meanings or even grasp something of God’s self-revelation that we had previously overlooked or ignored. In the process of “intertexting,” something that had been hidden until then shows itself; something speaks in a way previously unheard.

Drawing upon *Dei verbum*, *Theology Today* no. 22 points to the importance of various exegetical methods to understand and explain the meaning of biblical texts: historical-critical exegesis as well as literary analyses that pay attention to the way divine truth is expressed in various literary forms (*Dei verbum* no. 12). Constructing an argument for the catholicity of comparative theology, Clooney argues:

there are legitimate analogies between how we study the scriptures and theologies of our own Christian tradition and how we must, as theologically alert, study other traditions. . . . The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking, and narrating that prevailed at the time of the sacred writer and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another. To be able to pick up on all these nuances and contextual factors in a useful way—a theologically relevant way—requires, I suggest, that the reader be a good theologian and the theologian a good reader.<sup>53</sup>

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51. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* 58.

52. David Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007) 68.

53. Clooney, “Is Comparative Theology Catholic?” 22.

## Comparative Theology Seeking Wisdom

As it strives for true wisdom in its study of the Mystery of God, theology acknowledges God's utter priority; it seeks not to possess but to be possessed by God. It must therefore be attentive to what the Spirit is saying to the churches by means of "the knowledge of the saints." Theology implies a striving for holiness and an ever-deeper awareness of the transcendence of the Mystery of God. (*Theology Today* no. 99)

The project of comparative theology takes root in the recognition of the mystery of God: *Deus semper maior est*. Revealed truth can never be fully grasped.<sup>54</sup> Continuing the theological tradition of Anselm, Clooney, along with other comparative theologians, emphasizes the seeking dimension of faith, rather than focusing on faith in terms of what is certain, non-negotiable, and absolute. Though faith can be simple and stark, the truth all believers long for is never a possession that they can appropriate for themselves. Believers are pilgrims on the way to truth and know that a perfect understanding of truth will always, to some extent, elude them. As comparative theologian Scott Steinkerchner puts it, "This side of heaven, the seeking never ends. None of us individually, nor all of us collectively, possess a complete understanding of our faith. That fullness of truth lies forever in the future."<sup>55</sup> This is also affirmed in *Fides et ratio*, which states that our knowledge of the mystery of the revelation of God is "always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding."<sup>56</sup>

The only way to move forward is to ask questions, to study and learn, to seek understanding, and to gain insights that evoke new questions in the search for more nuanced answers. Is this not an expression of what *Theology Today* asks of Catholic theologians—"to recognize the transcendence of the ultimate Truth, which can never be fully grasped or mastered" (no. 86)? This is fully in line with what Jesus tells his disciples in his last discourse in John:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (Jn 16:12–15, NIV)

Arriving at "all truth," however, is an eschatological event. That is why comparative theologians gropingly search for where God enters into the picture and do so with an open but critical attitude. Comparative theologians are continually searching for traces of God. Where does God reveal Godself? Where does God provide knowledge

54. *Dialogue and Proclamation* no. 49.

55. Scott Steinkerchner, O.P., *Beyond Agreement: Interreligious Dialogue and Persistent Differences* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011) 149.

56. *Fides et ratio*: Encyclical Letter on the Relationship between Faith and Reason no. 13, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_15101998\\_fides-et-ratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html).

about Godself today? What does God want from us? How can people perceive God's saving nearness today? In what way can we also help give shape to God's salvific intentions for humanity today? These questions are at the heart of theology, according to *Theology Today*:

Heeding God's final Word in Jesus Christ, Christians are open to hear echoes of his voice in other persons, places, and cultures (cf. Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–28; Rom 1:19–20). The council urged that the faithful "should be familiar with their national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them." It specifically taught that the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is "true and holy" in non-Christian religions, whose precepts and doctrines "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens" all people. Again, the uncovering of such seeds and discernment of such rays is especially the task of theologians, who have an important contribution to make to inter-religious dialogue. (no. 57)

## Concluding Remarks

Globalization has brought about a pluralization of the religious sphere, bringing other world religions, such as Islam and different Asian traditions, to the West. Doing theology is now set in a new historical context that must be studied and understood. For theologians the question is, how we can name God in view of religious diversity? How can theology be done in the midst of cross-cultural and interreligious processes of a global nature? How can we refrain from the inclination to limit God's salvific outreach to humanity? Faced with this new context, new methodological approaches are needed, approaches that make room for cross-fertilization between various disciplines and are not fixated on maintaining strict and pure disciplinary boundaries.

Comparative theologians tend to cross these boundaries, keeping open the question of a deep engagement with other religious traditions. This open theological approach is greatly needed in our contemporary context. Yet this project has met with serious resistance. Some Catholics suspect that it does not comply with traditional Catholic theology. Comparative theology is seen as being on "the edge of mainstream Catholic Theology."<sup>57</sup> As I suggested in my introduction, this perception may have very real consequences for the presence of comparative theologians in Catholic theology departments.

In this article I argued that this concern is unnecessary and that comparative theology deserves to be called Catholic by showing how this novel theological project fits into the framework developed by the International Theological Commission. A recent speech by Pope Francis on the occasion of his visit to *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a journal edited by Jesuits, confirms this claim. In that speech he presented the contributors with three tasks:

The first word is "dialogue": your fidelity to the Church still needs to be uncompromising against the hypocrisies which result from the closed, the sick heart. Be uncompromising against this spiritual illness. But your main task is not to build walls, but to build bridges

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57. Martin Ganeri, "Tradition with a New Identity" 1055.

which establish dialogue with all peoples, even those who do not share the Christian faith. The second word is “discernment”: God is at work in the life of every person and every culture: the Spirit blows where He wills. Try to find out what God has done, and how He will continue his work. Study, sensitivity, and experience are needed to seek God in all things, in every field of knowledge, art, science, and political, social and economic life. But it is also important to keep the mind and the heart open, and to avoid the spiritual illness of referring everything according to oneself. The third word is “frontiers.” Your right place is at the frontiers. This is where Jesuits belong. . . . Please . . . be men at the frontiers, with a trust and ability that comes from God. Do not fall into the temptation to domesticate frontiers. When you have to go to the frontiers, do not carry them back to your home, to gloss over them a bit, to tame them.<sup>58</sup>

These words may strengthen comparative theologians in their endeavor to discern God’s wisdom by engaging in serious comparative study.

### Author biography

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58. Quoted from a summary report of the meeting: <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/papal-mission-jesuits-dialogue-and-discernment-frontiers>.