Elisabeth Migge

Comparative Theology – The Risk of Reiterating Patterns of Religionization?

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel befasst sich mit Marianne Moyaert's Analysen zur ›religionization‹. Dieser Prozess, der Konstruktion des religiös Anderen durch das Christentum, wird anhand einer ihrer Beispiele, der Klassifizierung von Völkern auf der Grundlage von philologischen Untersuchungen im 19. Jahrhundert, dargestellt. (Moyaert, 2024a) Ausgehend von diesen Überlegungen wird in diesem Artikel untersucht, ob gegenwärtig die theologische Disziplin der komparativen Theologie Gefahr läuft, Muster der ›religionization‹ zu wiederholen – wenn auch unbeabsichtigt. Dafür wird ein genauerer Blick auf die komparative Theologie geworfen und exemplarisch vier Aspekte dieser Disziplin untersucht. Diese sind: Die hohen Voraussetzungen an die komparativen Theolog:innen, die mikrologische Vorgehensweise, die Berücksichtigung des Judentums und zuletzt die Gefahr, den anderen zu instrumentalisieren.

Summary

The article provides an insight into Marianne Moyaert's analysis on ›religionization‹. One of her examples, the ›religio-racialized taxonomies based on comparative philology‹, demonstrates the process of the ›making‹ of Christianity's others in the nineteenth century (Moyaert, 2024a). Taking this into consideration, the article examines whether nowadays the theological discipline of comparative theology is at risk of reiterating patterns of religionization – even if unintended. Therefore, the article takes a closer look at comparative theology exemplarily analyzing four aspects of this discipline regarding patterns of religionization. These aspects are: the high requirements that comparative theologians aspire to fulfil, the methodological principle of working micro-logically, the consideration of Judaism and finally the risk of exploiting ›the other‹.

About the Author

Elisabeth Migge, 1988, Dr. theol., is a postdoctoral researcher and project coordinator at the Elie Wiesel Research Center at the Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Tübingen. She studied Catholic Theology and Biology, did her PhD in Systematic Theology and now works as a lecturer in the Department of Religious Education. Her research focuses on interreligious dialogue and the prevention of antisemitism.

Recent publications

Migge, Elisabeth (2024): Nostra Aetate. Tarea permanente y brújula para la teología cristiana, in: Ante el judaísmo: rescatar un vínculo acallado. Iglesia Viva (iviva). Pensamiento crítico y cristianismo, Número 300, (4/2024), p. 53–74; Binici, Erkan / Gaus, Edeltraud / Migge, Elisabeth (2024): Theologische Grundlegungen und die Relevanz von Reflexions- und Kommunikationsprozessen als Teil interreligiöser Kooperation, in: Ibrahim Koçyiğit; Senol Yağdı (Hrsg.): Interreligiöse Hermeneutik in pluralen Gesellschaften. Begründungen, Herausforderungen, Chancen und Grenzen. Wiener Beiträge zur Islamforschung, S. 281–309. Online: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-658-44523-2_14; Migge, Elisabeth (2022): Mohammed – ein Prophet auch für Christen? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit neueren christlich-theologischen Positionen – aus christlich-theologischer Perspektive. Theologie des Zusammenlebens – Christliche und muslimische Beiträge, Bd. 3, Ostfildern.

ORCID: 0009-0002-0846-6326

GND: 1253033366

The following article arose from a response to Marianne Moyaerts book project »Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other«, I hold at the University of Tübingen in May 2022. Therefore, this article refers mainly to her analyses in her book chapter »Religio-racialized Taxonomies Based on Comparative Philology« (Moyaert, 2024a: 257–290), reflecting on the question of whether comparative theology is at risk of reiterating patterns of religionization and whether it is an exercise of power itself. In the first part, I will recall some main features of the concepts involved and the understanding of essential terms like ›religionization‹ according to Moyaert. I will also focus on one of her examples: the religio-racialized taxonomies based on comparative philology. This gives rise to the question in the second part of whether religionization is merely a problematic process of the past or whether it remains to be an issue to this day. In the third part, I will outline a critical view on comparative theology with regard to the analysis of religionization by Moyaert. For this, the focus is drawn on four aspects of comparative theology in relation to the question of possible reiterations of patterns of religionization – even if unintended.

1. Recalling Main Features

1.1 Definition of Essential Terms: ›Religionization‹, ›Selfing‹ and ›Othering‹

Moyaert introduces the term ›religionization‹[1] in order to refer to the process of the ›making‹ of Christianity's others throughout history. In her book, she examines »various processes by which Christianity's others were named and renamed, categorized, essentialized, and governed by those who embody the Christian norm« (Moyaert 2024a: 1). Thereby, Moyaert explains that every process of making ›the other‹ and creating an image of them is at the same time a process of making ›the self‹ – that means the Christian. Religionization can be understood as »co-depen-

---

[1] The term is also used by other scholars like Markus Dreßler (Dreßler, 2019:4), to whom Moyaert refers in her book (Moyaert, 2024a: 2).

dent processes of ›selfing‹ and ›othering‹ that are predicated on religious difference« (Id.: 1). In the context of religionization, ›selfing‹ is the way of »the configuration of identity« – i. e. of Christian identity – and ›othering‹ »the making of alterity« (Id.: 15). Therefore, Moyaert points out »[o]ver time, imaginaries of Christianity's others were circulated, reproduced, and adapted according to changing Christian needs and interests.« (Id.: 1) In addition, she defines ›selfing‹ as »the construction of an imagined normative identity« and ›othering‹ as »the creation of a deviant and hence illegitimate other« (Id.: 1–2). This indicates a hierarchization and an exercise of power in societies and communities, meaning that »[w]hile some are privileged, others are excluded, discriminated against or oppressed« (Id.: 2). Given that Moyaert's analysis is confined to Western Europe and to Christianity, further research is required to analyse whether »the notion of religionization is also applicable to other ›religious‹ traditions« (Id.: 11). Below, a concrete example will help to understand where and how Moyaert identifies the process of religionization in history, outlining and clarifying the patterns of religionization which she presents.

1.2 Comparative Philology – Aryan and Semitic Languages

In her book, Moyaert outlines that in the nineteenth century – which was characterized by colonization and Europe's hegemonic position – »old and novel patterns of religionization would now be dressed up in scientific discourses« (Id.: 258). Philologists from Europe (mostly France and Germany) started to examine linguistic differences in order to understand the origins and diversity of humanity (Id.: 259–261). Moyaert states that with the idea of now using scientific methods and scholarly theories, these scholars were »reaffirming Europe's hegemonic position in the world at large« (Id.: 286). As an example, Moyaert refers to the works of the philologists Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) and his analysis of the inner structure of languages as well as to the works of Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and his main distinction between Aryan and Semitic languages. Based on their ways of analyzing languages and interpreting their philological results, Moyaert explains how and in what way the process of religionization occurs: The philologist Schlegel draws a »grammatical distinction between languages that make use of inflection and those that are incapable of inflection and that are agglutinative« (Id.: 268). Moyaert shows that Schlegel then concludes a variety of interpretations from this observation. Finally, it leads to a dichotomy and hierarchization of people based on their categorization of inflective or agglutinating languages (Id.: 267–270).

Table 1 summarizes the resulting dichotomy:

1. Inflective languages	2. Agglutinating languages
make use of inflection	incapable of inflection, just adding prefixes or suffixes to the ›lifeless and unproductive‹ roots
organic development of languages → impulse towards growth and perfection	mechanical languages → irredeemably inferior, animal-like, simple, rude, and imperfect
languages (examples): Sanskrit (*Ursprache*), German, Latin, Greek (Indo-European languages)	languages (examples): Hebrew, Arabic
→ superior cultural capacity of the people → civilized people → in the very essence superior	→ primitive people

Table 1: Summarizing outline of the grammatical distinction between inflective and agglutinating languages and the hierarchization of people by Friedrich Schlegel

As shown, linguistic differences led to a categorization and hierarchization of human beings. The French scholar Ernest Renan (1823–1892) then made the distinction between Aryans and Semites also based on differences in language and applied this to religious traditions (table 2) (Id.: 270–279).

1. Aryan languages	2. Semitic languages
Indo-European languages	Arabic and Hebrew
→ Aryan people (races)/**Aryans** Indo-Europeans, Indo-Germans	→ Semitic people/**Semites** (races: Jews and Arabs/Muslims)
noble populations, superior civilization	indigenous populations

characterization of the people:
→ rich, creative imagination
→ scientific creativity
→ a philosophical and scientific mind,
   and a profound political instinct
	characterization of the people:
	→ lack of creativity and curiosity
	→ lack of nuance and humor
	→ they lack political skills and military discipline,
	   their spirit is anti-philosophical, anti-scientific

polytheistic mythology	monotheism

Table 2: Summarizing outline of the distinction between Aryans and Semites and the hierarchization of people by Ernest Renan

In this outline, it becomes clear that the ›Semites‹ are considered to be inferior. Moyaert points out that for Renan, one of the only things the Semites offered to human civilization was the idea of a universal God and thus monotheism – while holding that this idea was not their accomplishment but rather something that came to them (Id.: 273–274). Here, Renan lays the foundation for the so-called Aryanization of Christianity. »In Renan's reading, Jesus liberated the Christian religion from Semitism«, understood to be an »emancipatory process« meaning that in consequence »Christianity is Aryan and Occidental, rather than Semitic and Oriental« (Id.: 275). Christianity here is understood as the unique and universal – the true religion of humankind (Id.: 275–277). Moyaert points out that »Renan is reiterating a classical understanding of the place and role of the Hebrew people in history as both unique (preparing the way for Christianity) and anachronistic (because they had missed the fulfilment of their own calling). […] Supersessionism takes on a new form« (Id.: 275).

Here, Moyaert examines and shows that philologists built up a whole »racial-religio-philological taxonomy« (Id.: 261) based on linguistic differences. These scholars assumed that their scientific research and methods could lead to a better understanding and categorization of people and religions. With this example of the process of ›religionization‹[2], Moyaert shows the ways of superiorizing and inferiorizing people and the ›making‹ of Christianity's others by those who embody the Christian norm.

2. Religionization – Merely a Problematic Process of the Past?

First of all, it is peculiar that these philologists assumed that comparing languages and their grammatical structures would allow a hierarchical classification of people speaking different languages and to come up with a distinction of religions – like Ernest Renan implemented. Through this classification and categorization, these European-Christian scholars were superiorizing their own Christian religion and at the same asserting the inferiority of other (monotheistic) religions, mainly Judaism.

Possibly, one could think that these analyses relate to the nineteenth century and are merely part of the past whereas today, we can see efforts to promote interreligious dialogues and interreligious encounters throughout various parts of the world: »In a world of close encounters between members of different religions, interreligious dialogue presents itself as an essential feature of peaceful coexistence and as a promise for religious growth« (Cornille 2008: 1).

Taking all this into account, a basic and fundamental question arises: If it is the case that the process of religionization is an ongoing process in history and »old and new patterns of reli-

---

2   For the meaning of religionization see the explanation above or see (Moyaert 2024a: 1–3).

gionization continue to do real work in today's world« (Moyaert 2024a: 338), we have to ask whether or not we are able to overcome these ongoing processes of selfing and othering. Or is it rather the case that we have to be aware of the fact, that ›religionization‹ is factually always taking place, that it is always connected with and generated in human history and that we, also as theologians, are even part of this process nowadays? Consequently, is there not a kind of responsibility to demask such structures and processes in our time? Or, as Moyaert asks: »To what extent does the past continue into the present?« (Id.: 4). »Does dialogue break with the past of religionization […] or does the dialogical ideal itself build on new and transformed patterns of religionization?« (Id.: 255–256). Especially from a Christian-theological point of view, the question also revolves around the relationship towards Judaism and, as shown in the example above, which role supersessionism still plays.

Therefore, I would like to cast a critical eye on comparative theology considering patterns of religionization. Comparative theology is a discipline that arose in the late twentieth century, also called new comparative theology. The distinction between ›old‹ comparative theology and ›new‹ comparative theology is already part of the discussion concerning the perspective of religionization, on which I am not going to focus (Hedges 2012: 1120–1137; Moyaert 2024b, 423–424). Moyaert is a comparative theologian herself and therefore her reflections on comparative theology will also be taken into consideration.

3. A Critical View on Comparative Theology in the Face of Religionization

3.1 Comparative Theology as a Way of Practicing Interreligious Dialogue

Comparative theology[3] emerged in the USA in the 1980s, mainly through Francis X. Clooney (*1950), James L. Fredericks (*1951) and Catherine Cornille (*1961) and became a diverse theological discipline (Fredericks, 2010: ix). It is rather difficult to define the discipline and to tell what exactly comparative theology is (Tietz 2009: 315–316). Running the risk of oversimplification, the central aspects are as follows. The discipline is characterized by three main purposes: the »practice of rethinking aspects of one's own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition« (Clooney, 2007: 654), the appreciation of the other and the search for truth (von Stosch 2012: 154). Klaus von Stosch (*1971), one of the main representatives of the discipline in Germany, states that comparative theology is like taking a journey in the world of people of another religion and therefore being and understanding one's own religion in a new and better

---

3   On the history and definition of the term ›comparative theology‹ in more detail see (Clooney 2007: 654–659).

way (von Stosch 2013a: 75).[4] Comparative theologians like Clooney, Fredericks, Cornille, and von Stosch share the opinion that comparative theology is part of a confessional theology and that its scholars are therefore rooted in a particular religious tradition, truth, and belief (von Stosch 2012: 138–141). Thus, a distinction can be made between confessional comparative theologians and meta-confessional theologians. The latter have a more universal understanding of truth and abandon a confessional stance (Cornille 2018: 21–24). Historically, comparative theology of the late twentieth century arose from a mainly Christian, more precisely Catholic thinking (Winkler 2013: 233). However, von Stosch states that comparative theology is not exclusively Catholic and open to be implemented by other religious traditions (von Stosch 2013b: 249).

According to von Stosch, practicing comparative theology means to follow six methodological principles (von Stosch 2012: 194–215):

1. Comparative theology works micro-logically – focusing on a particular aspect of interest.

2. Aspects are problem-based – problematic within one's own religious tradition (vulnerability).

3. Changing the perspective – doing in-depth studies of the other theology/belief.

4. Supervisory perspective within the dialogue (e. g. third religious tradition, atheistic position, …) – perspective of a third party.

5. Links back to the religious practice.

6. Reversibility and fallibility of judgment.

It is characteristic for comparative theology to pay attention to details instead of looking at another religion in its entirety. Therefore, some comparative theologians reject overall assessments about religions on a systematic level, as it is the case in the Theology of Religions.[5]

3.2 Possible Reiteration of Patterns of Religionization? – Aspects Worthy of Consideration in Comparative Theology

Having a closer look at comparative theology and referring to the methodological principles, I will focus on mainly four aspects:

• Comparative theology – a highly sophisticated method?

• Defining the aspect of the discourse – an exercise of power

---

4 Original quote: »Der Name ›Komparative Theologie‹ ist insofern etwas missverständlich, als es der Komparativen Theologie gar nicht so sehr auf das Vergleichen ankommt. Vielmehr geht es darum, eine Reise in die Welt andersreligiöser Menschen zu machen und bereichert […] die eigene Religion neu und besser zu verstehen. Diese Reise geht vom Eigenen aus, bemüht sich aber, den Blick auf das Eigene vom anderen aus in die eigene Theologie einzubeziehen« (von Stosch 2013a: 75).

5 For more detailed information especially on Klaus von Stosch's position, see (Migge 2022: 206–209).

- Comparative theology and the consideration of Judaism

- Comparative theology and the risk to exploit the other

Regarding these four aspects, the leading question is whether comparative theology can fall prey to a reiteration of patterns of religionization – even if unintended.

3.2.1 Comparative Theology – A Highly Sophisticated Method?

Practicing comparative theology is an intellectual project that implies in-depth studies of another faith tradition, »which includes linguistic and historical competencies« (Cornille 2018: 27). Von Stosch emphasizes that while it is not necessary to master the language of the non-Christian religion like a second mother tongue, it is crucial to have a basic grammatical knowledge of their religious language. Hence, one should attempt to immerse oneself in the world of the other religion (von Stosch 2021: 19).[6] It is essential to have theological knowledge not only in one's own religion, but also in the theology of the other – non-Christian religion (Id.: 19). Ideally, a comparative theologian should have studied his own theology as well as the theology of the other, even though it is not possible to achieve the same level of expertise in several religions (von Stosch 2012: 203–204). This means that scholars have to meet high requirements in order to get access and to be part of the scientific community practicing comparative theology. Thus, comparative theology is a highly sophisticated method which excludes those who do not meet these high requirements. Furthermore, scholars who practice theology by means of comparative theology not only define with which religious tradition or more precisely denomination of the other they engage, but also which particular aspect they examine. Taking the aforementioned patterns of ›religionization‹ into consideration, comparative theologians need to be aware of their power and their own privileged position in determining the discourse in this way.

3.2.2 Defining the Aspect of the Discourse – an Exercise of Power

Secondly, comparative theologians work methodically in a micro-logical way, focusing on a particular aspect of interest. Von Stosch generally suggests that the choice of a particular aspect should not be arbitrary. It should orientate towards a discussed problem within one's own religious tradition and theology (von Stosch 2012: 199–200). In this way, the aspect of interest is a real problem within a religious tradition and thus also implies vulnerability. By choosing a problem in one's own religious tradition, scholars of comparative theology attempt to approach the comparison from a standpoint of vulnerability and need for learning. Beyond that, the particular aspect can also be part of problematic issues in society, thus, different religious traditions then search for resources in their religions (von Stosch 2021: 18–19). Accordingly, the way of defining the particular aspect of interest has to fulfill certain criteria. Nevertheless, Cornille criticizes that, while

---

6   Original quote: »Dabei ist es nicht nötig, die Sprache einer nichtchristlichen Religion wie eine zweite Muttersprache [sic] zu lernen. Aber es sollte schon versucht werden, in die fremde Welt der anderen Religion einzutauchen und zumindest Grundkenntnisse ihrer Grammatik kennenzulernen« (von Stosch 2021: 19).

the other chosen tradition or belief mainly depends on personal interests, the actual focus on a particular aspect »seems to occur fairly haphazardly« and »leaves open an infinite array of other possibilities« (Cornille 2018: 25). Like von Stosch, she suggests that in order to contribute insights from the field of comparative theology to the broader theological discussion, the focus should be on »particular burning issues« of the wider theological community (Cornille 2018: 33).

Taking this into account, it should be an important issue of self-reflection to reveal and justify the particular aspect chosen by comparative theologians for their theological work. Which important problems, religious texts or figures, ideas, theological images or spiritual practices are chosen as a particular aspect to be studied? Why is this aspect particularly relevant and to whom? Who defines the ›burning issues‹ within a theological community? These questions and decisions in practicing comparative theology are also part of the process of making ›the other‹, creating an image of them and of ›the self‹.

The following considerations may illustrate the importance of these reflections on a more general level when choosing a particular aspect: Although comparative theologians also refer to non-textual sources, they mainly focus on textual materials. One argument in favor of focusing on textual materials is that they »represent stable data« and thus »offer a continuous basis for reflection«, meaning that »the focus on texts is not purely arbitrary or unjustifiable« (Cornille 2018: 28). Moyaert however is concerned about this textual focus of comparative theology as it limits the understanding of religion and the theological creativity. »[T]he preferences for texts, such as philosophical treatises or theological commentaries, is not an ›innocent‹ one but is rooted in a long and complex history in which mind (reason, reading, texts) was privileged over body (senses, performance, symbolic practices).« (Moyaert 2018b: 2). She pleads for a relationship of complementarity, which means both the textual as well as lived religion studies (Moyaert 2018b: 21–23).

It seems to be obvious that the choice of a particular aspect of interest within the process of practicing comparative theology is a choice of responsibility and an exercise of power. Arguing within the inherent structure of comparative theology, it can be an option to rethink the fourth methodological principle of comparative theology: The supervisory perspective in dialogue (von Stosch 2012: 209; 2021: 19–20). The question is: Why is someone's perspective and criticism of another religious tradition or denomination, an atheistic view, the perspective of literary or religious studies etc. (the third party), only brought in during the dialogue-based process, or sometimes even afterwards? Would it not be appropriate to involve the views, ideas, and perspectives of a third party right at the beginning? This would allow the third supervisory perspective to also be part of the dialogue-based process of defining the particular aspect that will be examined by comparative theologians.

3.2.3 Comparative Theology and the Consideration of Judaism

Thirdly, thinking about Moyaert's analysis and perspective on patterns of religionization which I outlined briefly in part 1.2 and part 2 (the philologists of the nineteenth century and their hierarchization of religions, the superiority of Christianity, the inferiority of Judaism and supersessionism), I now turn to Judaism and how this religion is considered in comparative theology.

The religions that are of special interest and that comparative theology is highly engaged with are Hinduism and Buddhism, while Judaism is hardly taken into account (Cornille 2018: 25). Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski states: »Judaism is a submerged tradition within the writings and practices of comparative theology. When comparative theology is written (predominantly by Christian theologians), Judaism is rarely a tradition that is engaged. […] the Christian orientation of most comparative theology scholars has resulted in a latent hegemonic view of Judaism in which a reflexive, subconscious form of supersessionism has operated.« (Joslyn-Siemiatkoski 2010: 89) Even if Cornille argues that the motivation could be »a sense of prudence in not wanting to appear as (again) using Jewish texts for Christian theological purposes« (Cornille 2018: 25), is it not the case that the problem persists? To put it more precisely: the problem does not persist on the micro-level, by choosing a particular aspect of interest, but on the macro level by marginalizing a whole religious tradition, namely Judaism[7], within the field of comparative theology.

Comparative theology can be essentially characterized as a Christian endeavor, more likely a Catholic one (von Stosch 2013b). Looking at the history of Christian-Jewish relations, it has mainly been a history of hostility and anti-Judaism for over 2000 years. It was only after the atrocities of the Shoah and the Seelisberg Conference (1947), later named the International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism, that the Roman Catholic Church drew up a fundamental change of attitude towards Judaism in the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) (Lenzen 2016). Regarding the manner of practicing theology, it is important that the declaration *Nostra Aetate* emphasizes the mutual understanding of Christians and Jews through fraternal dialogues, as well as biblical and theological studies (*NA* 4,5). The consequences are far reaching, because this theological dialogue is essential to Christian theology. Christian theologians explain that the spirit of the gospel can no longer be figured out without the Jewish dialogue partner (Siebenrock 2007: 663[8]; Hoff 2015: 128–129; Höftberger 2023: 96–97). A close relationship exists between Christianity and Judaism that is existential for Christian theology, still only few theologians within the field of comparative theology engage with Judaism. Moyaert points out that »the history of Jewish-Christian relations shows how difficult it is to engage in a comparative reading without falling prey to supersessionist typological readings which depreciate Judaism.« (Moyaert 2018a: 167). She concludes: »After the Shoah we must ask, what are the rules of engagement when engaging Judaism from a comparative theological perspective?« (Id.: 171).

Comparative theology could contribute important work here: In one regard by being aware of the ongoing risk of reiterating old patterns and creating new patterns of religionization, and in another regard by taking the question of a comparative theology after the Shoah seriously. For Moyaert, this »also requires trying out new ways of reading that enable the theologian to discover new theological trajectories. […] Interruption and disruption of the familiar are at the heart of this approach. It is less about making the other familiar than about defamiliarizing what is known; it is […] about re-reading oneself through Jewish eyes« (Moyaert 2022: 122).

---

7   Moreover, the diversity within Judaism must also be taken into account.

8   Original quote: »Was Geist des Evangeliums ist, was Geist Christi ist, wird man nicht mehr ohne den jüdischen Gesprächspartner selbst bestimmen können« (Siebenrock, 2007: 663).

Could it not be fruitful to think about the question of post-Shoah comparative theology in a comparative context, meaning that Christian and Jewish comparative theologians debate it together?

When thinking about this, it is key to recall the five core conditions of comparative theology: doctrinal or epistemic humility, commitment to one's own tradition, interconnection, as well as empathy and hospitality to the authentic truth of the other (Cornille 2008). I assume that all of these five conditions are represented in a special and also ambivalent way within the relationship of Christianity and Judaism. Analyzing the five core conditions explicitly in the context of Christian-Jewish relationships could reveal a deeper understanding.

As I write this piece, the first ›Conference of Comparative Theology in Europe‹ (September 1–3, 2024) is underway, dedicated to »The Special Relationships of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a Challenge for Comparative Theology«. According to the announcement, the main focus is to »discuss new approaches in the theologies of the three religions that study their special relationships« (Uni Bonn 2024). They state that the centers of comparative theology in Europe, for example in Edinburgh, Leuven, Paderborn and Bonn, shifted their focus on encounters of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. One can look forward to the discussions and contributions.

3.2.4 Comparative Theology and the Risk of Exploiting the Other

Fourthly, with regard to religionization, I would like to question critically one of the three main purposes of comparative theology. As mentioned before (part 3.1), one purpose of comparative theology is to rethink aspects of one's own faith through the study of aspects of another faith and to advance the meaning of one's own (von Stosch 2008: 410, Cornille 2018: 28). Some representatives like Fredericks consider the better understanding of one's own belief and theology (Christianity) to be the main goal of practicing comparative theology (Fredericks 1999: 169). Referring to this concern, von Stosch warns that it is important not to exploit and instrumentalize the other. If the main motivation in comparative theology is the understanding of one's own belief, there will be a danger that the other – their tradition and theology – loses its own dignity and intrinsic value (von Stosch 2012: 152).

Therefore, von Stosch explains that when focusing on the new and better understanding of one's own belief and theology as the main goal, it has to be understood in the context of friendship with the religious other. Without going into more detail, I would like to point out that von Stosch shows how Fredericks and Clooney understand friendship christologically. Here, the encounter with the other is understood as encountering Jesus Christ in the other, in a way of perceiving the other as the other. For them, doing comparative theology within this christological horizon does not mean the instrumentalization of the other (von Stosch 2012: 152–155).

Regarding the risk of exploiting the other, I would like to cast an eye on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995): his fundamental critique on the western philosophy as »egology« (Levinas 2007: 44), where relationship to the other means oppression and brutality – dehumanization and totality. For Levinas, the ›first philosophy‹ is not ontology but ethics. Ethics as ›first philosophy‹ means that there is one ethical principle: the infinite responsibility for the Other (Levinas

2007: 42–48). The Other calls me and obliges me. It is a moral demand that the Other, the face of the Other (German: Antlitz), poses on to me. The relationship with the Other »is a teaching [enseignement]. […] it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain« (Id.: 51). Levinas suggests an asymmetrical relationship of the Other over the I, where the otherness of the Other persists. In fact, it is the face of the Other that calls one out from revolving around oneself (Czapski 2019: 142). At the same time, this philosophy has to face the question of how far the infinite responsibility for the Other reaches? What about one's own vulnerability? Jutta Czapski outlines that Levinas also thinks about the responsibility for oneself, an obligation to take care of yourself. For Levinas the decisive aspect is the third one, who also calls me and obliges me. There are also more and other humans, who also demand one's responsibility. But even within this process of equity, it is an infinite responsibility for the Other (Id.: 144–145).

Regarding the process of religionization, it is important, »that humanity is constantly challenged and always remains a swaying floor without a stable ground« (Czapski 2023: 249).[9] In a relationship to the Other, it might be important for comparative theology to think about the »venture of vulnerability« that keeps a vacancy open: »The venture of vulnerability reaches beyond my actions and thoughts. Something is at play that gives rise to deep life and love« (Id.: 253).[10]

Reflecting on Levinas' philosophy, it might be useful to question the encounter and relationship between the religious Other and me. Taking the philosophy of Levinas into consideration, the infinite responsibility for the Other, the responsibility towards the third one within the responsibility towards the Other, and the aspect of vulnerability could be fundamental when thinking about the risk of exploiting the Other.

It is relevant which attitude, theology, and philosophy shapes or even determines such an encounter and the way in which one studies themes or particular aspects of another religious tradition. The conception of one's own theology and anthropology should be disclosed to oneself – in a manner of ongoing self-reflection – as well as to the Other(s).

4. Conclusion and Further Thoughts

Marianne Moyaert's detailed examinations on ›religionization‹, her further reflections on Judaism and her research on comparative theology after the Shoah are deeply interconnected. Her book ›Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization‹ (2024a) can be relevant for different disciplines, however it encourages self-reflection especially for Christian

---

9   Original quote: »Die Menschlichkeit wird permanent versucht, sie bleibt immer ein schwankender Boden ohne festen Grund.« (Czapski, 2023: 249).

10   Original quote: »Auch wenn der Blick auf die Verwundbarkeit innerhalb der Philosophie und der Theologie aus zwei unterschiedlichen Fließkräften stammt, weist er doch eine elementare Verbundenheit auf. Beiden gemeinsam ist, dass sie eine Vakanz offenhalten: das Wagnis der Verwundbarkeit geht über mein Handeln und Denken hinaus. Etwas ist im Spiel, das tiefes Leben und Liebe stiftet, und das nicht in letzten Erklärbarkeiten aufgeht.« (Czapski, 2023: 253).

theologians. In this article, I exemplarily focused on four aspects of comparative theology and the risk of reiterating patterns of religionization, also outlining the potential hiding in this discipline. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that Moyaert states: »Comparative theologians have to be ›proactive and brutally self-critical‹ as they engage in the process of dismantling patterns of religionization, revisit seemingly natural (and innocent) categories, and seek to craft an understanding of Christianness which seeks to move beyond binary patterns of thinking and imaginary constructs« (Moyaert 2024b, 421–430, 428).

Here, Moyaert refers to Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier who emphasizes: »We must focus on real people in their real lives […]. This may also mean rejecting the binary set-up of two traditions in much of comparative theology – which belies the multireligious character of many people's lives, especially marginalized ones« (Tiemeier 2022, 92). Considering this critique and the proposed idea to move beyond ›binary patterns of thinking‹, it could be rewarding to think about ›fuzzy logic.[11] For cultures, Jürgen Bolten describes this way of a many-valued logic, which is rather based on a logic of relations and affiliations. Many-valued logics do not exclude binary patterns but rather include them (Bolten 2011). It may be helpful to (re)think this kind of logic within the context at hand.

All in all, the thoughts and analyses on religionization bear a great challenge for theologians, as shown exemplarily in this article for the field of comparative theology. At the same time, it is relevant to develop and improve the sensitivity for patterns of religionization in order to raise awareness and to prevent the reiteration of those patterns also in seminars, classrooms, discussions and in the everyday practical field.

Bibliography

Bolten, Jürgen (2011): Unschärfe und Mehrwertigkeit. »Interkulturelle Kompetenz« vor dem Hintergrund eines offenen Kulturbegriffs, in: Dreyer, Wilfried; Hößler, Ulrich (Eds.), Perspektiven interkultureller Kompetenz, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 55–70.

Clooney, Francis X. (2007): Comparative Theology, in: Webster, John B. (Ed.), The Oxford handbook of systematic theology, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 653–669.

Cornille, Catherine (2008): The im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company.

Cornille, Catherine (2018): The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology, in: Clooney, Francis X; von Stosch, Klaus (Eds.): How to Do Comparative Theology, New York: Fordham University Press, 19–36.

Czapski, Jutta (2023): Verwundbares Antlitz. Die Menschenrechte im Denken von Emmanuel Levinas, in: Keul, Hildegund (Ed.): UnSichtbar. Interdisziplinäre Stimmen zu Vulnerabilität, Vulneranz und Menschenrechten, Würzburg: Würzburg University Press, 237–522.

Czapski, Jutta (2019): Verwundbarkeit in der Ethik von Emmanuel Lévinas, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Fredericks, James L. (2010): Introduction, in: Clooney, Francis X.(Ed.): The New Comparative Theology. Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation, London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, ix–xix.

---

11   I would like to thank my colleague Thomas Jürgasch for drawing my attention to the ›fuzzy logic‹.

Fredericks, James L. (1999): Faith among Faiths. Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press.

Hedges, Paul (2012): The Old and New Comparative Theologies: Discourses on Religion, the Theology of Religions, Orientalism and the Boundaries of Traditions, in: religions, 1120–1137, 3/2012, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/3/4/1120 (access: January 29, 2024).

Hoff, Gregor Maria (2015): Nostra Aetate 4 als Anfrage an die systematische Theologie, in: Boschki, Reinhold; Wohlmuth, Josef (Eds.): Nostra Aetate 4. Wendepunkt im Verhältnis von Kirche und Judentum – bleibende Herausforderung für die Theologie, Paderborn, 125–134.

Höftberger, Elisabeth (2023): Religiöse Tradition in Bewegung. Zur Hermeneutik des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils im jüdisch-christlichen Dialog, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, Daniel (2010): Comparative Theology and the Status of Judaism: Hegemony and Reversals, in: Clooney, Francis X.(Ed.): The New Comparative Theology. Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation, London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 89–108.

Lenzen, Verena (2016): Von Seelisberg nach Rom. Der jüdisch-christliche Dialog in der Schweiz im internationalen Kontext, in: Jeggle-Merz, Birgit; Durst, Michael (Eds.): Juden und Christen im Dialog, Freiburg Schweiz: Paulusverlag, 36–52.

Levinas, Emmanuel (^{21}2007): Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.

Migge, Elisabeth (2022): Mohammed – ein Prophet auch für Christen? Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit neueren christlich-theologischen Positionen. Aus christlich-theologischer Perspektive, Ostfildern: Grünewald.

Moyaert, Marianne (2024a): Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Moyaert, Marianne (2024b): Comparative Theology Beyond Religionization, in: Oaks Takacs, Axel M.; Kimmel, Joseph L. (Eds.): Comparative Theology. A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ, Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 421–430.

Moyaert, Marianne (2022): An Introduction to Christian-Jewish Comparative Theology, in: Valkenberg, Pim (Ed.): A Companion to Comparative Theology, Leiden Boston: Brill, 111–131.

Moayaert, Marianne (2018a): Comparative Theology After the Shoah. Risks, Pivots, and Opportunities of Comparing Traditions, in: Clooney, Francis X.; von Stosch, Klaus (Eds.): How to Do Comparative Theology, New York: Fordham University Press, 164–187.

Moyaert, Marianne (2018b): Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–23.

Nostra Aetate. Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen. Zweites Vatikanisches Konzil (1965): https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (access: 10 February 2024).

Siebenrock, Roman, A. (2006): Theologischer Kommentar zur Erklärung über die Haltung der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen. Nostra aetate, in: Hünermann, Peter; Hilberath, Bernd Jochen (Eds.). Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil, Bd. 3, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 595–693.

von Stosch, Klaus (2021): Einführung in die Komparative Theologie, Paderborn: Brill.

von Stosch, Klaus (2012): Komparative Theologie als Wegweiser in der Welt der Religionen, Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie, Bd. 6, Paderborn et al.: Brill.

von Stosch, Klaus (2013a): Die Methodik Komparativer Theologie als Chance für den muslimisch-christlichen Dialog, in: CIBEDO – Beiträge zum Gespräch zwischen Christen und Muslimen   (2/2013), 72–81.

von Stosch, Klaus (2013b): Ist Komparative Theologie katholisch?, in: Gruber, Judith; Weiß, Andreas M., Winkler, Ulrich: Salzburger Theologisch Zeitschrift (SaThZ) 17 (2/2013), 249–258.

von Stosch, Klaus (2008): Komparative Theologie als Herausforderung für die Theologie des 21. Jahrhunderts, in: Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie (ZKTh) 130 (4/2008), 401–422, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24170723 (access: January 24, 2024).

Tiemeier, Tracy Sayuki (2022): White Christian Privilege and the Decolonization of Comparative Theology, in: Coblentz, Jessica; Horan, Daniel P. (Eds.): The Human in a Dehumanizing World. Reexamining Theological Anthropology and Its Implications, New York: Orbis, 85–95.

Tietz, Christiane (2009): Dialogkonzepte in der Komparativen Theologie, in: Bernhardt, Reinhold: Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie, Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen, Bd. 7, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 315–338.

Uni Bonn: The Special Relationships of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a Challenge for Comparative Theology. First CTE-Conference from September 1–3, 2024 in Bonn, https://www.ctsi.uni-bonn.de/en/media/comparative-theology-in-europe.pdf; https://www.ctsi.uni-bonn.de/en/news/events/cte-conference, (access: January 27, 2024).

Winkler, Ulrich (2013): Einen subtilen Lernprozess wagen. Eine Antwort auf Francis Clooney's Plädoyer der Katholizität Komparativer Theologie, in: Gruber, Judith; Weiß, Andreas M., Winkler, Ulrich: Salzburger Theologisch Zeitschrift (SaThZ) 17 (2/2013), 233–243.

Campus der Theologien

Zeitschrift für Theologische
Studien und Kritik

2 / 2025: Patterns of Religionization