
TRADITIONS - DIRECTED
APPROACH IN THE
COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY
OF RELIGION

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On the Nature of Comparison

When it comes to making comparisons in a philosophical setting, we should begin with a few basic remarks concerning the elements that comprise the structure of any comparison. Ralph Weber has developed a categorization based on an earlier proposal by Christian Wolff¹. Weber argues that, for a comparison to be conducted within the context of comparative philosophy, five features must be present.² A philosophical comparison must include 1) the comparer, who is the person by whom comparison is performed, 2) the comparata that represents all sides of the comparison to be compared, 3) the pre-comparative tertium that indicates a point of resemblance that is affirmed in the process of selecting the comparata as the entity that will be subjected to the comparison, 4) the tertium comparationis, also known as an aspect that is maintained

¹ For more on Wolff's proposal see Ralph Weber, "Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2014): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-014-9368-z>.

² For a discussion on this see Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Amara E. Chimakonam, "Two Problems of Comparative Philosophy: Why Conversational Thinking Is a Veritable Methodological Option," in *Comparative Philosophy and Method: Contemporary Practices and Future Possibilities*, ed. Steven Burik, Robert Smid, and Ralph Weber, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 224, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350155053>; Ralph Weber, "How to Compare? - On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy," *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 7 (2013): 593–603, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12042>.

by all comparata, and 5) the outcome of the comparison, which is the relation between comparata with respect to the tertium comparationis. Based on these five elements, says Weber, a basic analytical tool can be prepared to fulfil a philosophical comparative study.³ The primary stage in the formation of a comparison begins when a comparer who has sufficient knowledge about comparata (concepts, practices, arguments, etc.) becomes cognizant of the pre-comparative tertium, which is, in Smith's words, a 'recollection of similarity.'⁴ The comparison will achieve a fruitful outcome after the tertium comparationis—which is a well-developed version of the pre-comparative tertium—is studied and developed based on engagements generated between comparata by the comparer.

However, in order for a comparative endeavor to be characterized as philosophical, it has to have the character of reflection, which is the process by which particular issues or problems experienced by different traditions are addressed, based on widely acknowledged principles or patterns. This element—reflectiveness—makes the comparison an ongoing and ever-evolving piece of work. In spite of that, the application of a 'formalized analysis' required of the established field of philosophy gives it a fixed structure.⁵ A cross-tradition interaction that takes place by comparing a set of things from one tradition with a set of things from one or more other traditions allows us to better comprehend or interpret all sets of things involved. Comparative philosophers place particular emphasis on the fact that the development of the very practice of philosophy is an essential component of this comparative action.⁶

³ For more on this see Weber, "How to Compare?."

⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Prologue: In Comparison a Magic Dwells Jonathan Z. Smith," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, ACLS Humanities. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 26.

⁵ Paul Masson-Oursel and Harold E. McCarthy, "True Philosophy Is Comparative Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 1, no. 1 (1951), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1396931>: 7; Raimundo Panikkar, "What Is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?," in *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, ed. Eliot Deutsch & Gerald James Larson, 116–136 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 122, 124.

⁶ Robert W. Smid, *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy: The Pragmatist and Process Traditions*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 216; Stephen C. Angle, "The Minimal Definition and Methodology of Comparative Philosophy: A Report from a Conference," *Comparative Philosophy: An Interna-*

On this account, a comparison conducted inside a philosophical framework would result in the transformation of ‘thinking,’ ‘reasoning,’ and ‘philosophy,’ as well as of our understanding of the ways in which ‘comparison’ can be performed effectively.⁷ This suggests that in order for us to reap the potential of comparison in intercultural philosophies, it is also necessary to undertake critical correlations between sets of things from all comparata. This would in fact contribute to the creation of enduring progress.

When seeking to develop methods for philosophical comparison, as argued by Brakel and Ma,⁸ universalism and relativism in their most extreme forms must be avoided. One must stay well away from linguistic relativism, which holds that each philosophical tradition has a distinctive and enclosed discourse or language-game, an attitude that renders the relationship between philosophical traditions incommensurable and completely untranslatable. At the other extreme is a kind of linguistic universalism that assumes a full translatability, in which a single ideal language is thought to exist through which cross-cultural philosophy may be accomplished and its findings communicated most successfully. Such a position is problematic as well. Because of this, and taking Brakel and Ma’s argument into consideration, I would argue that while engaging in comparative studies, it is essential to maintain a balanced approach. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that in performing a comparative study we have already accepted that the

tional Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches toward World Philosophy 1, no. 1 (2010): 106, [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2010\).010109](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2010).010109).

⁷ Masson-Oursel and McCarthy, “True Philosophy Is Comparative Philosophy”; J. Fleming, “Comparative Philosophy: Its Aims and Methods,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (2003): 261.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on the inadequacies of the idea that either ultimate universalism or pure relativism are applicable to comparative philosophy’s methodology see Brakel and Ma’s following three works: Jaap van Brakel and Lin Ma, “Necessary Preconditions of the Practice of Comparative Philosophy,” in *Comparative Philosophy and Method: Contemporary Practices and Future Possibilities*, ed. Steven Burik, Robert Smid, and Ralph Weber, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 38, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350155053>; Lin Ma and Jaap van Brakel, “On the Conditions of Possibility for Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2013): 297–312, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11172-013-9330-5>; Lin Ma and Jaap van Brakel, *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

comparata are distinct spheres that may inform one another on things that they can collectively possess but not universally share (inadequacy of universalism). On the other hand, one cannot accept absolute relativism, according to which every side of a comparison cannot share any understanding with other sides (i.e., they are incommensurable), hence negating the possibility of conducting comparative research between different spheres (inadequacy of relativism).

The most intriguing proposal—one with the fewest potential complications—could be the suggestion that ‘the idea of an ideal language with fixed and exact meanings’ be replaced by the notion of family-resemblance-concepts in which all the following assumptions are disregarded: ‘(1) the ideal language assumption, (2) the assumed necessity of a shared, or common, or in-between language, and (3) the assumption of a number of (linguistic, cognitive, cultural, philosophical) universals.’⁹ In a comparative study of Christian and Muslim theologies, for instance, it must be acknowledged that Islamic theological claims cannot be entirely translatable into Christian terms and vice versa. The conceptual, cultural and historical gaps between the two faiths make this inevitable. Nevertheless, sufficient translatability exists to be able to provide a productive comparison study. On this account, a ‘de-essentialized’ approach, which adopts a Wittgensteinian family resemblance perspective to the issue of cross-cultural language, is the most appropriate strategy for fulfilling the requirements.¹⁰ In other words, the capacity to conduct philosophical comparisons across traditions is conditional to mutual attunement based on family resemblance as opposed to a specific universal principle with a predetermined common core.¹¹

One of the purposes of cross-cultural comparisons between different philosophies is the advancement of the field of philosophy today. The comparing process has the potential to transform philosophical practice

⁹ Brakel and Ma, “Necessary Preconditions,” 38.

¹⁰ For a thorough and useful examination of interreligious (in)commensurability and (un)translatability, see Gorazd Andrejč’s book, particularly the chapter entitled ‘Incommensurability and Interreligious Communication’: Gorazd Andrejč, *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement: A Philosophical and Theological Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-49823-6>.

¹¹ Ma and Brakel, *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy*, 195; Ma and Brakel, “On the Conditions,” 297–312.

globally. It is suggested that this transformative element is present not just in comparative philosophy, but also in comparative theology. Later in this paper, it will be shown how this advancement must be highlighted in the disciplines of comparative philosophy, comparative theology, and comparative philosophy of religion. The theology of religions was the starting point for Western Christianity's serious involvement with other religious traditions on a systematic and theological basis. Alan Race's 1983 book *Christians and Religious Pluralism* classified Christian encounters with other religions into three categories: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Since the publication of Race's work, scholars have maintained a variety of viewpoints on the typology suggested by Race, which contributed to further developments in the discipline of theology of religions. Although 1983 was the year that signified the commencement of the study of the theology of religions, these three positions, but especially the inclusivist and exclusivist views, can be seen throughout the history of Christian thought.

Christian exclusivism claims that non-Christians are deprived of Christian truth and salvation. More moderately, inclusivism holds that non-Christians have partial access to the truth and/or salvation. In his concept of 'anonymous Christianity,' which represents a form of inclusivism, Rahner contends that non-Christians may be rescued by their implicit faith.¹² While inclusivists disagree on certain issues among themselves—e.g., Hans Küng disputed Rahner's approach—the very idea of inclusivism, which is situated between externalism and pluralism, entails that Christian truth is superior to non-Christian truth. Trying to go beyond both exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism claims that in order to be granted truth and salvation neither an explicit nor an implicit faith in Christ is necessary. According to John Hick, the pluralist approach is the only one that fully appreciates the 'universality of God' since salvation is available to everybody, whether they are Christian or not.¹³ As a reaction to pluralism, which in the West has historically been rooted in liberal theology, a post-liberal perspective

¹² Esra Akay Dag, *Christian and Islamic Theology of Religions: A Critical Appraisal*, Routledge Studies in Religion 56 (New York: Routledge, 2017), 14–15.

¹³ Akay Dag, "Christian and Islamic Theology of Religions," 22.

has been developed. Post-liberal theology appeared in 1984 with George Lindbeck's book *The Nature of Doctrine*. A 'Cultural-linguist' type of theology of religions was proposed by Lindbeck's post-liberal theology in which he argues that people's experiences are shaped by their language and prior experiences. By means of a problematic reading of Wittgenstein, Lindbeck's post-liberal theology contends that theological language is incommensurable and uncommunicable.¹⁴ Several scholars have argued—persuasively—that Lindbeck's position is unwarranted and of limited value to comparative studies of religions.¹⁵

The advent of contemporary comparative theology in the 1990s occurred against the backdrop of Christian attitudes toward non-Christian faiths that predominated in Western theology of religions from the middle to the end of the 20th century. Contemporary comparative theology has a more ambitious objective than that of the theology of religions. From the outset, contemporary comparative theology was more receptive to different religious traditions, including seeking truth in other traditions. Scholars still debate the relationship between comparative theology and the theology of religions. Certain thinkers, especially Paul Hedges, see comparative theology as a subset of the theology of religions,¹⁶ while some of the main scholars within comparative theology, such as Francis Clooney and James Fredericks, disagree. While theologians like Clooney think that comparative theology and the theology of religions are methodologically separate, they resist the idea of substituting one for the other and suggest that they can still complement one another in many ways.¹⁷ Although comparative theo-

¹⁴ See the Chapter on Lindbeck in Andrejč, *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement*, 72–80. See also Moyaert's critique of Lindbeck: M. Moyaert, "Postliberalism, Religious Diversity, and Interreligious Dialogue: A Critical Analysis of George Lindbeck's Fiduciary Interests," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2012): 64–86.

¹⁵ For a detailed explanation of this topic, see Andrejč, *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement*, chap. 4.

¹⁶ For further on this see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, Controversies in Contextual Theology Series (London: SCM Press, 2010), 152.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the contrasts between theology of religions and comparative theology, as well as their connections to one another, see Francis X. Clooney, "Catholic Roots for the Discipline," in *A Companion to Comparative Theology*, ed. Pim Valkenberg et al., vol. 2, Brill's Companions to Modern Theology, Volume 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 43–44; Akay Dag, *Christian and Islamic Theology of Religions*, 38–39.

logy has been influenced by the theology of religions, it is often critical of it and goes beyond it. Comparative studies carried out by comparative theologians have shown a pattern of progression that has substantial parallels with the one that was outlined in relation to philosophy. By paying close attention to their similarities, differences, and even disagreements¹⁸, practitioners of comparative theology are able to expand their understanding not just of other religious traditions but also of their own religious tradition.¹⁹

Comparative theologians have, as one of their primary aims, the goal of arriving at a more profound religious truth by acquiring a better understanding of the religious truths that are included within the *comparata*. This is said to be the case due to the fact that comparative theologians argue that our knowledge of the religious truth is accumulative in the sense that the more attentively we study a variety of religious traditions, the more access to the entire religious truth we will have.²⁰ By means of critical correlations between sets of things among *comparata* and a hermeneutical effort—that must include an hermeneutical openness of *comparata*—one would be able to arrive at such profound knowledge.²¹ A ‘diatopical hermeneutics,’ as Panikkar terms it, is needed here to overcome ‘the distance between two (or more) cultures which have independently developed in different spaces (*topoi*) their own me-

¹⁸ For a discussion on religious disagreement see Andrejč, *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement*, 13.

¹⁹ For more on deep learning in comparative theology see Francis X. Clooney, “The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology: A Bibliographic Review,” *Theological Studies* 56, no. 3 (September 1995): 521–50; Catherine Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); James L. Fredericks, “Introduction,” in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (London: T & T Clark, 2010), xvii; Akay Dag, *Christian and Islamic Theology of Religions*, 38.

²⁰ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xiii, 16, 69,.

²¹ Fredericks, “Introduction,” x; Klaus von Stosch, “Comparative Theology as Liberal and Confessional Theology,” *Religions* 3, no. 4 (2012): 983–92, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3040983>; David Tracy, “Comparative Theology,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles Joseph Adams, vol. 14 (New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1987), 447; Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness,” *Modern Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2011.01724.x>.

thods of philosophizing and ways of reaching intelligibility along with their proper categories.²²

New studies have a tendency to make a distinction between what are known as confessional comparative theologies and meta-confessional comparative theologies. A further step in comparative theology is an approach which goes beyond the confessional comparative theology. Catherine Cornille uses the term ‘meta-confessional comparative theology’ to refer to the potential for comparative theology to be fundamentally ‘unconstrained by the doctrinal or ritual constraints of any particular tradition.’²³ Meta-confessional comparative theology (Catherine Cornille), interreligious theology (Perry Schmidt-Leukel), transreligious theology (J. R. Hustwit), and interstitial theology (Tinu Ruparell) are terms used to describe a type of theology that attempts to go beyond the constraints of any one religious tradition.²⁴ The word ‘theology’ in ‘meta-confessional comparative theology’ refers to the field’s tradition-situatedness, while ‘meta-confessional’ suggests a specific emphasis on intellectual and intersubjective aspects which signify that the comparison stretches across or goes beyond diverse confessions. Since meta-confessional comparative theology makes an effort to be something distinct from comparative studies that are connected to one faith or confession, it is sometimes referred to as interreligious theology.²⁵ Comparative theology is often thought of as having a normative character, which suggests that it not only investigates the meaning of specific practices and beliefs but also seeks to establish their truth.²⁶ Once it is recognized as a means of acquiring a more universal understanding of the truth, it is referred to as ‘meta-confessional.’ Thus, it varies from ‘confessional’ comparative theology, which is seen as a means for gaining a deeper or more nuanced grasp of the truth as it is found within a certain religious tradition. Meta-confessional comparative

²² Panikkar, “What Is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?,” 130.

²³ Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020), 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁵ For more on the concept of interreligious theology see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures--an Extended Edition*, 1 online resource vols., Gifford Lectures (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017).

²⁶ Cornille, “The Problem of Choice in Comparative Theology,” 20–21.

theology is not an apologetic practice, but an intellectual enquiry into the meaning and purpose of human life in religious traditions. Unclear phrases are refined and improved through comparison, resulting not only in the progress of the discussion but also in the transformation of the one doing the comparative study. A meta-confessional stance, however, is sometimes necessary, especially when one admits that once a comparison is done the comparer will eventually arrive at a certain level of understanding about the truth of the *comparata*. This is why it can be argued that meta-confessional comparative theology, comparative philosophy of religion, imparative theology (Raimund Panikkar), as well as what we have previously alluded to as interstitial theology (Ruparell) and interreligious theology (Schmidt-Leukel) and meta-confessional comparative theology can refer to the broad practice of Going beyond one's own religious tradition in order to learn from the religious other. It is a field in which hybrid perspectives or stances are formulated in order to promote a fruitful discourse between different religious traditions, which ultimately leads to the development of 'recombinant' religious traditions.²⁷

Gaining a better knowledge through comparing philosophical and theological contexts inspired researchers to account for various forms of learning. For example, comparative theology identifies several modes of learning that are applicable to comparative philosophy as well. When one engages in a kind of learning that is known as 'intensification,' the meanings of ideas, concepts, practices, and texts become clearer. Moreover, the truth in any particular tradition can be bolstered and intensified based on the truth seen in other religious traditions. Once the concealed or neglected components of a religious tradition have been invigorated, a different method of learning known as 'recovery' or 'rediscovery' is at work, claims Cornille.²⁸ The process of 'reinterpretation,' in which sets of things in one religious tradition are reinterpreted in light of ideas from other tradition or traditions, adds another layer of depth and richness to newly uncovered pieces of information. A shift of this kind took place, for instance, during the historical reconstruction

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

of Christian theology on the basis of philosophical ideas acquired from Hellenistic philosophy. This faced Christianity not only with ‘challenges and questions’ but also ‘new avenues of understanding and experience’ which led to a broader Christian self-understanding of its principles and ideas.²⁹ On top of the learning process, ‘appropriation’ enables the comparer to create new ideas, experiences, and actions when interacting with other traditions. It can be viewed as the development of elements (teachings or practices) that have long been components of one’s own tradition, or as the introduction of fresh experiences and newly discovered insights.³⁰ Traditional theologians who lack experience or expertise in comparative theology may struggle with or reject an understanding of appropriation in which aspects absent from the comparer’s own religious tradition are to be included.

The Comparative Philosophy of Religion

In this study, the distinction between comparative philosophy of religion and meta-confessional comparative theology is not substantial, because it is presumed that they share incredibly profound traits that enable us to make interchangeable use of the two. Nevertheless, given that there are a few differences between them, it is sensible to keep them apart conceptually. This study highlights a *traditions*-oriented versus a *tradition*-oriented approach. This means that it favors the term ‘comparative philosophy of religion’, because for comparative theology of any kind *tradition*-situatedness ultimately still matters and any intersubjective and universal attempt must serve the latter. Consider, as an illustration of this point, a study comparing sets of things from a certain school of Islamic theology to sets of things of a specific theology in Christianity. The comparative philosophy of religion in this case compares not from an Islamic or Christian perspective, but from a much less theologically determined Abrahamic vantage point that is shared by both Islamic and Christian traditions. Notice that, to perform interreligious study, the comparative philosophy of religion approach adopted here

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28–31.

employs neither a strictly neutral nor a *tradition*-oriented approach. It, rather, seeks to implement a *traditions*-oriented practice in which equal credit is given to all *comparata*. Two case studies will later illustrate how this strategy might be applied.

Philosophical Analysis

It is argued in this paper that philosophical analysis is the most significant element of the comparative philosophy of religion. The reason for this is that the philosophical analysis is aimed at helping us comprehend the most appropriate interpretation of theological assertions. The contexts in which words are used determine their appropriate meanings. Therefore, philosophical analysis aims to describe the depth-grammar—as distinguished from the surface-grammar—of theological claims. The concepts of ‘surface-grammar’ and ‘depth-grammar’ were developed by Wittgenstein to elucidate the manner in which one might grasp the most appropriate meanings of words and phrases. Gorazd Andrejč investigates, in light of his interpretation of Wittgenstein, how David Burrell differentiates between these two concepts and how he uses this difference to address the problem of God-talk in his philosophical theology. According to this account, as explained by Andrejč, in order to determine the most appropriate meanings of religious assertions about God (while using a logical and linguistic analysis), one must differentiate between the ordinary meanings of the religious language (surface-grammar) and their meanings as appeared in their theological context.³¹ In order for philosophical analysis to be conducted as extensively as possible, different strategies are offered. Any list of elements on which philosophical analysis is founded is not conceptually exclusive and may be expanded. The most important elements of philosophical analysis that are applicable to comparative philosophy of religion are discussed below.

Comparative philosophy of religion, very much like comparative theology, has the potential to be seen as a ‘visionary’ work, which suggests that a philosopher of religion who is engaged in comparative

³¹ See Andrejč, *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement*, chap. 6.

study is urged to observe things attentively. Cornille elaborates on the significance of ‘a visionary quality’ in relation to the process of conducting a comparative study by stating that:

The comparative theologian suddenly sees or understands something in and through the other religion that she deems important and enriching also for her own tradition, and that she cannot but attempt to integrate or reflect upon from within her own religious framework. This may not prove to be immediately relevant for other theologians within a particular tradition. But it may still come to leave its mark in time or among some fellow theologians and believers. Comparative theology, when conducted from within a particular religion, may thus avoid the sense of randomness by directly contributing to theological discussions occurring within their respective traditions, or by attempting to awaken other theologians to the relevance of their own visionary insight. It is this focus on a particular religious and theological community that saves comparative theology from the negative implications of randomness.³²

On this account, the visionary feature makes it possible for a comparer to recognize not only the pre-comparative *tertium*, but also what *comparata* have in common or where they differ. An approach that is visionary lays the way for a good identification of issues and the efforts that are to be made to address them.

It is legitimate to expect that the comparative philosophy of religion will serve as a method for problem-solving. Taking a comparative approach to addressing issues and finding answers that cut across cultural boundaries is one way to accomplish this goal. Later on, I will show how the case studies included in this paper serve as examples of problem-solving approaches that are used to explore the traditionally delicate problem of religious language. In the role of a problem-solver, a comparer makes an effort to provide concrete explanations and solutions to the emergence of philosophical dilemmas within certain historical and cultural settings.

Moreover, for the development of a flourishing comparative philosophy of religion, its approach should also be explanatory. On this ground, a philosophical explanation—though not a scientific explanation

³² Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*.

inasmuch as it relates to the current study—of *comparata* is necessary. A scientific explanation is a kind of explanation that utilizes the empirical data and is intended to shed light on the link between empirical phenomena by formulating theories and putting them to the test. Philosophical explanation does not appeal to empirical data; rather, it is an investigation of concepts and the rational interrelationship between abstract ideas. The relevance of this is derived from the fact that comparison is an essential activity that requires a deep understanding of the features to be compared. Providing an explanation of a phenomenon is more complicated than just describing it by means of general descriptions, since explanation needs an in-depth and detailed grasp of the subject of study. More specifically, in a philosophical and theological setting, an explanatory approach goes beyond description to provide the reasons why a thing is as it is and not otherwise. In addition, having an explanatory viewpoint demands a dialogical engagement between various persons or cultures, which is different from simply making theories or thinking in solitude. This suggests that to be a successful comparer, one must not only be equipped with comparative thinking in which one compares methods of thinking, but also one has to know how to think comparatively, that is a thinking which is considered to be comparative in nature.³³ Thinking comparatively, to put it another way, is characterized by a nature that is self-critical, creative, and cross-cultural, due to which the outcomes/results of comparative studies are continually re-evaluated. In light of this, an explanation of the comparative philosophy of religion cannot simply consist of thinking in isolation or developing a theoretical formulation; rather, it calls for the confrontation of many figures or traditions by a dialogical confrontation.³⁴

Another essential aspect of the comparative philosophy of religion is its constructiveness, which is one of the reasons why it is regarded as a

³³ On the difference between comparative thinking and thinking comparatively see Chima-konam and Chimakonam, "Two Problems of Comparative Philosophy," 227.

³⁴ David Cheetham, "Comparative Philosophy of Religion," in *Contemporary Practice and Method in the Philosophy of Religion: New Essays*, ed. David Cheetham and Rolfe King, Continuum Religious Studies (London: Continuum, 2008), 109–110.

productive process by nature.³⁵ The constructiveness of this discipline relies on the existence of an innovative system in which theological issues are addressed in stages and in which constant improvement is made to the best available options. It is suggested that a constructive comparative philosophy of religion must have been already supplied with hermeneutical creativeness. The importance of hermeneutical creativity for philosophical study of theologies has been emphasized by comparative theologians such as Burrell, Tracy, Stosch, and Moyaert, among others.

As we have seen, various elements of philosophical analysis have been explored so far; however, we have yet to examine the most crucial component of the field. I would suggest that an important part of philosophical analysis that needs to be incorporated into the methodological strategy is that of Wittgenstein. As we will see, adopting a Wittgensteinian method helps in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the *comparata*. While there are several different ways of thinking about analysis in analytic philosophy—‘reductive and connective,’ ‘revisionary and descriptive,’ ‘linguistic and psychological,’ and ‘formal and empirical,’ to name a few—the so-called method of the ‘Grammar of Our Language’ by Ludwig Wittgenstein³⁶ fits particularly well with the comparative philosophy of religion as it is understood here. The later Wittgenstein’s grammaticalist conception of religion has been quite influential. According to this conception, language plays the most important role in establishing the meaning of religious statements.³⁷

In the Wittgensteinian approach, philosophical analysis is a grammatical examination in which the prioritized thing to do is to clear away any misunderstandings that may have arisen from a particular philosophical issue. The misuse of words, which is mostly brought on ‘by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language,’ is the source of the most serious misunderstanding.

³⁵ For more on constructive analysis see David B. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 46.

³⁶ Michael Beaney, “Conceptions of Analysis in Analytic Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analysis/s6.html>.

³⁷ See Andrejč, *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement*; Gorazd Andrejč and Daniel H. Weiss, eds., *Interpreting Interreligious Relations with Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies*, Philosophy of Religion - World Religions Ser. (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

This problem can be remedied by ‘substituting one form of expression for another,’ which, as Wittgenstein suggests, can be best described as philosophical analysis, since it is similar to process of ‘taking a thing apart.’³⁸

Case Studies

In this part, two case studies that were carried out very recently are examined in order to shed light on the understanding of the subject matter of the present paper. The first study is a book titled *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur’an*, which employs comparative theology to study the notion of Jesus Christ as it appears in the Qur’an. The second case study analyses how an innovative approach to the methodology of comparative philosophy of religion, which is closely connected to the meta-confessional methodological framework, can be taken.

Case Study 1: The Other Prophet

*The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur’an*³⁹, published in 2019, is the outcome of a comparative theological research on the topic of Christology and Qur’anic prophetology co-authored by Muslim theologian Mouhanad Khorchide and Catholic theologian Klaus von Stosch. Rather than serving as an example of apologetics, this work is an original inquiry into the nature of Jesus Christ that takes into account historical and contextual knowledge about Jesus in an effort to answer modern questions about the Islamic and Christian understandings of Jesus. The methodological strategies employed in the book bear resemblance to those outlined in this paper, in a discussion on the nature of comparison. The first section of the book employs the ‘intensification’ method

³⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Repr. of English text with index (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), sec. 90, https://edisciplinas.usp.br/plugin-file.php/4294631/mod_resource/content/0/Ludwig%20Wittgenstein%2C%20P.%20M.%20S.%20Hacker%2C%20Joachim%20Schulte.%20Philosophical%20Investigations.%20Wiley.pdf.

³⁹ Mouhanad Khorchide and Klaus Von Stosch, *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur’an*, trans. Simon Pare, 1 online resource vols., Interfaith Series (Chicago: The Gingko Library, 2019).

to revisit the background of the controversy over Jesus in the Qur'an in order to provide Christians with a novel understanding of Jesus. The objective of this research, which serves as a contemporary example of comparative theology, is not to establish who has the best picture of Jesus of Nazareth, but to develop and broaden our understanding 'by remaining faithful to the truths to which we are both committed.'⁴⁰ The reader is presented with a number of problematic conceptions about Jesus at different points in the text. The authors argue that certain Christians or Christologies, which are not indicative of Christianity as a whole, are the source of these problematic ideas of Christianity. This is the reason why they could suggest that Christians are enabled to correct problematic Christologies in light of insights provided by the Quran. This characteristic points out the self-correctiveness of comparative theology based on the critical correlations between religious traditions.

In a chapter titled 'New Developments in Modern Christology,' Klaus von Stosch, based on his analysis of modern Christologies, suggests a particular Christology that would be helpful for setting up a mutual understanding between the Christian and Qur'anic conceptions of Jesus. Stosch is determined in using the methodology of comparative theology which is not only inspired by transcendental philosophy and Wittgensteinian grammatical analysis, but also by philosophical perspectives offered by contemporary comparative theologians and theologians of religions. Stosch attempts to demonstrate that the most productive comparison must be made between the Quran, which is seen as divine revelation within the Islamic context, and Jesus Christ, who is regarded as divine revelation in Christianity. Such a comparison is far more beneficial than comparing the Prophet Muhammad to Jesus Christ.

A novel interpretation of the Quranic verses referring to Jesus Christ is proposed in another debate in the research, based on not only historical but also grammatical examinations. It is argued that the verses in question include denunciations that are directed at particular exaggerations that are common in certain Christologies. This work's methodological approach is bolstered by a critical investigation of those

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Christologies proposed by the Quran and other modern Christologies in which Jesus Christ is misrepresented. As this study testifies, the depth-grammar must be distinguished from the surface-grammar of theological representations, with the help of philosophical analysis. In a discussion on Jesus and Quranic prophetology, an attempt is made to conceive Jesus Christ through the lens of the Quranic understanding. To demonstrate how prophetology can contribute to Christology, the emphasis here is on Jesus as a prophet. According to this, Jesus is described using terms that are utilized by a well-established Islamic understanding in which Jesus is portrayed as a prophet who serves as the messenger of God. This depiction of Jesus is distinct from the image of Jesus in Christianity, in which he is depicted as the Son of God. This is an example of a method employed in comparative theology, in which an in-depth knowledge of a set of things from one tradition is provided through in-depth knowledge of a set of things from another tradition. This features a critical aspect of any critical comparative study (including comparative philosophy of religion), namely the evolutionary nature of comparison in general.

The significance of constructiveness, which, as we have seen, is regarded as one of the most important methodological approaches of a successful comparative study, is emphasized in the penultimate chapter of the book. The authors make an effort to demonstrate that the Quran supports the achievements and fundamental principles of Christology and Christian soteriology, but not always by the same terms as they are employed in Christian terminology. The Quran, according to this research, is the actual divine presence by which God 'allows His own being to become an event,' a presence that the authors believe to be the representation of divine salvation.⁴¹ On this premise, God can be conceived of as a being with a free relationship to creation based on divine love and salvation. Efforts are made to develop this innovative understanding of the Quran's message in accordance with the creative, yet critical, approach of comparative theology. In this book, although each author is situated in his own religious tradition and aims to demonstrate how the comparative study in question is developing their understandin-

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

gs of their respective traditions, both of them at some points attempt to be *traditions*-oriented in order to make more universal claims that contribute to the improvement of the notion of Jesus across traditions involved. Such a *traditions*-orientedness is shown in statements such as this one: ‘Our aim is not to compete to determine who has the better perspective on Jesus of Nazareth, but rather to advance our perspectives by remaining faithful to the truths to which we are both committed.’⁴² According to the findings of this study, it is clear that the Christological and Quranic conceptions of Jesus Christ are closer to one another than was previously believed. That is to say, a more developed concept of God is born as a result of the critical correlation between Islamic and Christian theologies, in which the equally valued Christian and Muslim conceptions of Jesus Christ are compared, contrasted, and evaluated, and due to which a stronger partnership between Christianity and Islam is constructed.

Case Study 2: Towards A New Comparative Agenda in Philosophy of Religion

The second case study compares and contrasts the manner in which Muhammad Huseyn Tabatabai, a Shiite theologian, and David B. Burrell, a Catholic theologian, discuss the concept of God in their respective philosophical theologies.⁴³ The two main *comparata*, i.e., Tabatabai’s and Burrell’s approaches to the problem of God-talk, have roots in Aristotelian and Platonic philosophical traditions, which were subsequently reinterpreted by Avicenna and Aquinas, respectively. Tabatabai and Burrell have reworked Avicennan and Thomistic philosophical traditions based on their respective Abrahamic theistic heritage. This is the reason why we can talk of significant—although not complete—translatability between Tabatabai’s and Burrell’s philosophies of religion. The respective philosophical theologies of Tabatabai and Burrell can, arguably, be read as being at the boundary between confessional and meta-confessional comparative theologies. Each of the two philosophies,

⁴² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴³ This comparison is the subject of a forthcoming PhD thesis on the topic.

through a critical reinterpretation of the theological traditions they inherited, has resulted in a greater understanding of the concept of God.

To be more specific, Burrell develops a type of philosophical theology⁴⁴ that, based on his grammaticalist reading primarily of Thomas Aquinas and occasionally of other philosophers as well as biblical material, seeks to provide an interpretation of religious language in which the transcendence and unknowability of God are compromised with the divine act of creation.⁴⁵ Accordingly, Burrell applies a Wittgensteinian/grammaticalist Thomistic approach to the problem of religious language. He conducts a comparative study between the Christian doctrine of 'Son of God' and the Quranic teaching 'God has no son', arguing that the apparent contradiction between the above two statements can be resolved if they are interpreted as grammatical assertions whose meanings are dependent upon their respective depth-grammars. The seeming incompatibility between the Islamic principle of '*tawhid*' and the Christian doctrine of 'Trinity,' says Burrell, can also be resolved in the same manner.

As with Burrell, Tabatabai also maintains that any progressive philosophy must actively seek to learn from a wide range of religions and cultures. To offer a new system better prepared to solve theological issues like the problem of religious language, he began to investigate and reinterpret the traditional philosophical theology in which he was situated. His critical approach to the philosophical theologies he inherited from Avicenna and Mulla Sadra, his reworking of old philosophical concepts and methods, and his development of new conceptual frameworks (including the concept of *itibariyyat*) are proof of this. Tabatabai

⁴⁴ According to Burrell, while it is possible to use the terms 'philosophy of religion' and 'philosophical theology' interchangeably, it is more reasonable to use the term 'philosophical theology' for any tradition-oriented investigation, including Burrell's own work, i.e., an investigation whose progress is impossible 'without attending to the religious traditions which animate its inquiry.' See David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 1.

⁴⁵ For more study see Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*; Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*; David B. Burrell, "Analogy, Creation, and Theological Language," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

argues that fruitful comparative studies—such as comparative studies he, along with French philosopher Henry Corbin, has conducted of religious texts and mystic teachings of a few religious traditions (including the Gospel of John, the Upanishads, and the Tao Te Ching)⁴⁶—must be done through a critical examination of teachings and beliefs found in *comparata*. Due to his engagements with a range of theological and philosophical interpretations, both inside and outside of Islamic tradition, he was able to develop a mystical-philosophical theology,⁴⁷ which strives to be less problematic and more constructive than the previous studies carried out by his predecessors in his tradition.

Despite the fact that the philosophical theologies of Tabatabai and Burrell have occasionally crossed certain confessional boundaries, in the end they are considered to fall within the confines of confessional and, at times, meta-confessional comparative theologies. Recently, however, an alternative idea has been argued for which presents Burrell not as a ‘confessional’ thinker or even a ‘meta-confessional’ thinker, but rather as something that goes beyond such categories. Farina and Valkenberg (2022), following in the footsteps of Cornille, claim that the reciprocal illumination that was intended in Burrell’s comparative work can be considered as an interreligious comparative theology. If this proposal is accepted, then, arguably, Tabatabai’s philosophical theology can also be viewed as an example of interreligious comparative theology. Note that, whichever label we use, the philosophical theologies of both thinkers should still be distinguished from the field of philosophy of religion because, in the end, they are nevertheless *tradition*-oriented endeavors.⁴⁸ The approach I have been developing in the present study, however,

⁴⁶ Siyyid Huseyn Nasr, “Introduction,” in *Muhammad Huseyn Tabatabai, Shiite Islam*, trans. Siyyid Huseyn Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 24; Hamid Algar, “Allama Siyyid Muhammad Hussain Tabatabai: Philosopher, Exegete, and Gnostic,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 17, no. 3 (2006): 344; Muhammad Huseyn Tabatabai, *Shiih: Majmuih-Yi Muzakirat Ba Prufisur Hanri Kurban*, ed. Ali Ahmadi and Hadi Khusrowshahi (Qum: Risalat, 1978).

⁴⁷ Muhammad Legenhausen, “‘Allamah Tabataba’i and Contemporary Philosophical Theology,” in *Contemporary Topics of Islamic Thought* (Tehran: Alhoda, 2000).

⁴⁸ Pim Valkenberg et al., “Introduction,” in *A Companion to Comparative Theology*, ed. Pim Valkenberg et al., vol. 2, Brill’s Companions to Modern Theology, Volume 2 (Leiden; Brill, 2022), 12–13.

while comparing the philosophical theologies of Tabatabai and Burrell, aims to be comparative philosophy of religion rather than comparative philosophical theology. It attempts to move beyond the theologies of the two thinkers while taking theoretical advantage of merging certain components of their approaches. The *traditions*-oriented nature of this study suggests that it does not seek to conduct comparative research from either a Shiite or a Thomistic viewpoint, but rather from a position in which both Shiite and Thomistic views are accorded equal value. In addition to its *traditions*-orientedness, it does not seek neutrality, since a neutral approach which adopts an agnostic view on religions would move beyond the *comparata* in a manner that would refuse to see them as legitimate ways of truth-seeking.

In this case, it is possible to highlight more than one *tertium comparationis* between the two *comparata* in order to clarify the implications of being *traditions*-oriented and avoiding neutrality. They include an adherence to an Abrahamic cosmology (ethical-monotheistic understanding of the cosmos, humanity, and reality, and their relationship to one another), the recourse to analogous interpretative and conceptual resources in western and Islamic traditions (e.g., their reworking of Aristotelian and Platonic categories), and the isomorphism between Burrell's 'way of analogy' and Tabatabai's principle of 'focal meaning.'

Concluding Remarks

In light of what has been explicated about the methodology of comparative philosophy of religion, which is illuminated and supported by insights learnt from the two case studies, a *traditions*-oriented—but not merely 'neutral'—approach to comparative philosophy of religion is proposed in this paper. According to key elements of this approach, the explanatory method incorporates a conceptual analysis with a formal-evaluative task, since the explanation of concepts assists the comparer to obtain a deeper and more adequate understanding of *comparata* in order for a successful comparison to be conducted. This is because a philosophical comparison necessitates an in-depth examination of all sides, which enables a deep knowledge of *comparata*. Identifying the grammatical structures at work in religious language is a crucial strategy

in gaining an appropriate understanding of *comparata*. The first step to performing this task effectively is to pay close attention to the linguistic appearances of words and expressions (surface-grammar). As required of any comparative study, and the comparative philosophy of religion is no exception, it is critical to identify similarities, which are resemblances between certain characteristics shared by all *comparata*. This paper's approach avoids affirming the presence of a common core across the *comparata*, rather it affirms the fruitful presence of quasi-universals, but not fully-fledged universals, in a genuinely comparative study. The family-resemblance principle underlies the kind of universality represented by quasi-universals. It is demonstrated that in a comparative study there are some quasi-universals (such as hybrid conceptions) that serve to illustrate the interconnectedness of the traditions involved in the comparison.⁴⁹ In addition to identifying affinities, the task of contrasting⁵⁰ not only differences but also disagreements between the *comparata* becomes a must.

It is argued that the philosophical approach of comparative philosophy of religion must be characterized by the importance it places on reflection in addressing the problem at hand. According to this account, to be reflective entails being flexible in one's approach to an issue by approaching it from a number of viewpoints and being willing to modify one's strategy at different times and in different settings. In addition to reflectiveness, it includes a formalized analysis, which imparts generalizability and universality to the process. In this respect, a formalized analysis varies from reflectiveness, which is a gradual process involving a self-correction mechanism. Nonetheless, the combination of these rather distinctive features suggests a 'de-essentialized' approach that overcomes the aforementioned forms of universalism and relativism that result in essentialism and incommensurability, respectively. Such a de-essentialized method enables a reciprocal attunement in comparing *comparata* based on the concept of family resemblance. In

⁴⁹ On the universality of quasi-universals, see van Brakel and Ma, "Necessary Preconditions of the Practice of Comparative Philosophy."

⁵⁰ For a discussion on the notion of contrast see Panikkar, "What Is Comparative Philosophy Comparing?"; Daya Krishna, "Comparative Philosophy: What It Is and What It Ought to Be," *Diogenes* 34, no. 136 (1986): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/039219218603413604>.

order to achieve ideal attunement, critical correlations between various spheres must be of immense value. This allows the comparative philosophy of religion to operate as a problem-solver by using the comparative method, which not only examines problematic situations but also resolves them by undergoing necessary adjustments. In its culmination, the philosophical method applies grammatical analysis to determine the depth-grammar of different assertions. Understood in this way, the comparative philosophy of religion is an approach that strives for an illuminative and imaginative interpretation, enabling us to illustrate how comparison entails the development of our knowledge of the *tertium comparationis* at issue. Such an integrative approach transcends the mere juxtaposition of *comparata* with the aim of enhancing the comparative work as a whole. In conclusion, although a *traditions*-oriented method in comparative philosophy of religion strives to be meta-confessional on the one hand, it avoids approaching the *comparata* with a neutral–agnostic–attitude on the other. The outcome of the application of the methodology of such a comparative philosophy of religion in a Judeo-Christian-Islamic context is a particular mode of the Abrahamic philosophy of religion.

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