

Conference: Comparative Theology, Comparison and Religious Studies

Executive summary: The conference aims at determining the role of comparison in comparative theology. This implies an engagement with the discussion of methods in religious studies and a clarification of the status of intentionally neutral methods within the framework of normative approaches in theology.

Starting point I: comparative theology: Comparative theology was the liberation from a theology of religion that, with its normative claims (inclusivist, exclusivist, pluralist), no longer provided satisfactory answers to religious dialogue in a global religious landscape. One reason was the normative claims, which were considered as theologically encroaching and became a burden: Psychologically, their normativity was considered an obstacle; in a postcolonial perspective, they appeared as a transfer of European problems; epistemologically, they were a second step before the first, because religious perspectives preceded the analysis of facts.

Comparative theologians have found a way out: for example, in the reflection on their own biographical involvement in the research process or in the intentionally non-presuppositional perception of others. In these reflections, however, the specific comparative dimension of "comparative theology" has not yet been systematically addressed – although it is one of the two key terms of this discipline.

Starting point II: religious studies. Comparative studies on religion on an academic level have been developed since the late 19th century. The young discipline reacted to a problem to which comparative theology is also structurally exposed: the inescapable and increasing global pluralisation. The theoretical project of scientific studies of religions to cope with this pluralisation through the phenomenological approach has been considered a failure since the middle of the 20th century, because the concept of a (transcendental, divine, spiritual) unity in or behind all religions, which was at the same time supposed to secure the unity of the academic discipline of religious studies, turned out to be a (Protestant) theological legacy. Realising this, comparative studies of religion were forced into a crisis from which it has not fully recovered to this day. The restriction of the research horizon to regions or isolated religions is a result of the "phenomenological shock". Only recently have there been renewed attempts to fundamentally anchor comparative studies in the study of religions.

Comparative theology and the methodology of comparison. Comparative theology is also affected by this deficit. In the fundamental texts from the early days as well as in the systematising works that have appeared in recent years, the comparative dimension is taken for granted – but not reflected upon to the extent that would correspond to the title-giving function of the term "comparative". In the conference, we shall discuss the epistemological role of comparison, starting from the insight that comparison is an element of cognition that cannot be eliminated and that the performance of comparison is always normatively marked. Furthermore, we shall explore the possibilities of

operationalising the comparative dimension on the relationship between comparative theology and comparative methods in religious studies.

Objective of the conference. In view of these problems, the conference aims at

1. determining the role of comparison in the theory and practice of comparative theology,
2. reflecting on the relationship between intentional neutrality and theological confessionality, and
3. discussing the relationship of the study of religions within and outside theology in view of both common methods and objects and normative differences – concurrently with regard to partly arbitrary boundaries.

The conference is scheduled to take place this year (2023) from October 5th to 6th.

Proposals are requested by May, 13th, to be sent to Storm Obuchowski (storm.obuchowski@unifr.ch).

The conference will take place in Fribourg/Switzerland; costs for travel and accommodation will be covered.

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