

Catherine CORNILLE, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. Hoboken NJ, Wiley Blackwell, 2020, 17 × 24,1 cm, 224 p., ISBN 978-1-119-53522-5

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Catherine CORNILLE, **Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology**. Hoboken NJ, Wiley Blackwell, 2020, 17 × 24,1 cm, 224 p., ISBN 978-1-119-53522-5.

Catherine Cornille was born into a Dutch-speaking family in Belgium; she is fluent in many languages. She has been involved in interreligious dialogue for more than twenty years, and she authored and edited a good number of books. An article of mine on various excellent thinkers, published in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 29 (2019), pp. 19-43, introduced her conception of fruitful dialogue. She is presently the Chairperson of the Theology Department at Boston College.

Chapter 1 begins by clarifying the difference between two kinds of scholarship: the comparative study of religions and comparative theology. The former is secular and neutral vis-à-vis any particular faith; the latter assumes the normativity of a particular faith. Their respective goals are not the same. While the comparative student of religions pursues pure understanding, “the comparative theologian seeks to deepen and advance theological truth” (p. 10) – which of course comprises understanding. For Cornille, then, the more recent scholarship of comparative theology differs from the more traditional scholarship of comparative religion.

Still in that chapter 1, she also distinguishes between confessional and meta-confessional types within comparative theology. Both are intent on doing a theology that includes comparisons and mutual learning between at least two religions. However, the former is done from the perspective of a specific faith or confession, whereas the latter aims at going beyond any faith or confession.

Chapter 2 examines how non-Christian religions have been appraised by comparative theologians. Cornille lists four positions. There is exclusivism, namely the denial of the salvific function of other religions. There is also particularism, that is, an epistemological stance according to which each religion is confined to its own perspective. There is also inclusivism, which engages other traditions on the basis of its own normative doctrines. Finally, there is pluralism, for which all religions are more or less equal.

Chapter 3 goes into hermeneutical problems as they arise in comparative theology. Cornille recommends being aware of the strengths and limitations of both one’s interpretative framework and the interpretative frameworks of another religious group. Then what can felicitously happen is an understanding of the other through one’s framework as well as an understanding of oneself through the framework of the other. The dynamics of mutual borrowing is also facilitated by direct contact, either orally or liturgically. Moreover, she draws attention to the pitfalls of syncretism and hegemony.

Chapter 4 addresses the conditions for a reception of the benefits of interreligious dialogue. They are: intensification, rectification, recovery, reinterpretation, appropriation, and reaffirmation. All those benefits have to do with the way we actively receive and adopt what we find helpful in another tradition.

Chapter 5 returns to the practice of confessional theology, which Cornille maintains can be constructive. She discusses the fact of hybrid religious identity for some participants; in 2002, she edited a book on that phenomenon, titled *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belongings and Christian Identity*. She goes on to tackling the problem of choosing the themes that one wishes to study and of discerning which

elements in one's own and in another religious tradition may be fruitfully focused on. She also mentions the target public of comparative theology and its ambiguous relations to apologetics.

Each chapter of the book contains many endnotes, and the volume closes with a long Bibliography and a good Index.

The main goal of Cornille's book reviewed herein is to describe the different approaches to comparative theology which have been practised over the last fifty years or so. She includes all of them as scientifically legitimate, although she situates herself among the confessional theologians, who think from the perspective of a religious tradition, be it Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or else. She made a case for the importance of belonging to a religious tradition, in an earlier article titled "The Confessional Nature of Comparative Theology," *Studies in Inter-religious Dialogue*, 24 (2014). pp. 9-17.

All these things being acknowledged, one may nevertheless wonder what is the specific character of confessional theology for scholars who see themselves as Catholic. In this regard, there is, in Cornille's book, an absence of any *clear* distinction between meaning and truth, and this absence entails questionable implications that she does not appear to envision.

For instance, she often speaks of the comparative theologian's task of "determining" – or "ascertaining" – the *truth* of a particular doctrine (pp. 54-61; emphasis added). Wouldn't it be better to speak of determining the *meaning* of a particular doctrine? We have here an important epistemological issue: in science, historical scholarship, philosophy, and theology, *meaning* is what makes sense and is basically hypothetical, until it is verified and thus becomes *truth*. That distinction would be most helpful in those areas.

Furthermore, about what is called "confessional comparative *theology*," wouldn't it be better to consider it as "confessional comparative *philosophy*"? We may think of Paul Ricœur and of Jean-Luc Marion, who are doing philosophy of religion, drawing from biblical and Christian texts. Both are believers who rightly do not view themselves as theologians, but insist they are philosophers.

To conclude: In addition to offering an impressive wealth of information and clarification, this book has the significant merit of proposing the above-mentioned two distinctions: first between the comparative study of religions and comparative theology, and second between confessional and meta-confessional types within comparative theology. Therefore this volume will surely be useful to comparative students of religions for a good number of years.

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