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Pietro Lorenzo Maggioni

# **Comparative Theology: A Fairy Tale**

For an Ethics in Comparison





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[info@aracneeditrice.it](mailto:info@aracneeditrice.it)

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[info@gioacchinoonoratieditore.it](mailto:info@gioacchinoonoratieditore.it)

via Vittorio Veneto, 20  
00020 Canterano (RM)  
(06) 45551463

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*This book is dedicated  
to the memory of my father.*



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## Abstract

The more recent proposals in the field of comparative theology distinguish themselves from the previous forms of the so-called “old comparative theology” in the following ways: they choose intentionally to deal with particularity, and primarily with religious texts, instead of reasoning about macro-systems of thought and general religious world-views. This evolution did not simply happen by chance. Rather, it is the natural outcome of a long process of self-correcting and reformulation of the presuppositions of the discipline of comparative theology.

This process is brought about by both centrifugal and centripetal forces. On the one hand, comparative theology has had to face the challenge of the most traditional theologians who see in this new development the risk of betraying the *depositum fidei*. On the other hand, comparative theology has had to defend itself from the accusation of cultural narcissism (because it searched different belief systems, as though they were mirrors, for the features and traces of the truth glimpsed in Christ); and hegemonism (because it imposed the religious categories proper to Christianity on all other spiritual paths). Comparative theology found itself caught in the midst of a struggle that saw religious studies and theology come into confrontation with each other.

Despite the fact that these accusations may have some merit, I will defend comparative theology as a discipline that can help today's Christians deepen the understanding of their own faith even while recognizing truth in other religions, which are approached for their own value, status, and distinctiveness. However, if comparative theology really intends to become mature, so to speak, it must elaborate a more thorough, though still flexible, method. My concern is to offer some ethical criteria for comparison that can be applied to various cases. Hence, after recounting the phases of formation of comparative theology and engaging with the thought of several comparative thinkers, I will strive to rethink comparativism philosophically in search of a more consistent methodology.



## Introduction

And fairy tales, through the incorporation of fantasy, inherently promulgate a belief in things unseen, a testament to the existence of another dimension to our existence. This magical element is depicted as generally unobserved or undervalued by most people, however; either they do not see the magic ... or they do not properly appreciate the magic...\*

*Call it magic...* Magic and fantasy are two fundamental aspects of the folklore of all peoples in any time. Whether they are an effective way of escaping the oppression of the powerful and the alienation of day-to-day life, or a means of projecting one's own fears and desires and being reconciled with them, or a door through which the supernatural and the spiritual take revenge on materialism, whatever the case, they are real driving forces for the production of fairy tales and narrative in general. Magic, in particular, is more pervasive and persuasive than one could imagine. It casts its shadow over fields of thought that the modern mind has difficulty acknowledging. Jonathan Z. Smith, on the basis of Frazer's and Tylor's typological studies, finds an unsettling analogy between the procedures of magic and those of the comparative sciences. As a matter of fact, as magic is somehow founded on "the association of ideas by similarity, [. . .] comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity". Moreover, "the chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity"<sup>1</sup>. Hence, we should conclude with Smith that "in comparison a magic dwells"<sup>2</sup>. If the methodological affinity between magic and

\* S. SWANN JONES, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, Routledge, New York 2002, 13.

1. J.Z. SMITH, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, 21.

2. J.Z. SMITH, *Imagining Religion*, 19–35.

the comparative sciences cannot be entirely confuted, Patton and Ray warn us that, nonetheless, the word “magic” should be somehow rehabilitated and with it the analogical comparative approach on which, in particular, the comparative sciences of religion are fundamentally based.

Like magic, comparative religion can be an efficacious act of conjuring, of delineating and evoking homologous relationships while simultaneously holding in view, and thus in fruitful tension, undisputed differentials. In the act of comparison, the two original components juxtaposed in scholarly discourse have the potential to produce a third thing, a magical thing, that is different from its parents. Not only is it “different”, but it can illumine truths about both of them in ways that would have been impossible through the exclusive contemplation of either of them alone<sup>3</sup>.

It seems that all the comparative sciences are in some sense caught between the idle and superstitious process of the mere association of ideas, and the powerful and efficacious enhancing of our knowledge of reality in all its multifaceted aspects that comparativism can eventually favor. Comparative theology does not escape this dilemma. What already in the nineteenth century was considered “a very popular, highly regarded, and respectable intellectual–spiritual pursuit”<sup>4</sup> — contiguous with but distinct enough from other contemporary academic approaches to the matter of religion — after a long season of decadence and oblivion is presently experiencing a renaissance, especially in the Anglo–American world:

Scholars have produced an increasing number of studies that either the authors or others have identified explicitly as “comparative theology”, new groups and academic affiliations have been formed under this name, and professorships for this field are getting established at high and low ranking universities<sup>5</sup>.

3. K.C. PATTON – B.C. RAY, eds. *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Post-modern Age*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, 18.

4. N. HINTERSTEINER, «Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)Translatibility and the Comparative Theology Project», in *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today: Theology in Global Dialogue*, ed. Norbert Hintersteiner, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2007, 465–66.

5. N. HINTERSTEINER, «Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)Translatibility and the Comparative Theology Project», 467.

Unlike its close relatives theology of religions, comparative religion, and history of religions, however, comparative theology is, according to Norbert Hintersteiner, “a constructive and reflective theological discipline that is mature in neither its theoretical nor its practical dimensions”<sup>6</sup>. This substantial weakness makes comparative theology particularly vulnerable and more exposed to various criticisms, from inconsistency and impressionism to naïveté and subjectivism, all of which the modern Western mind could easily associate with a kind of magic more than a science. Hence, it is my intention, first, to reexamine comparative theology by reconsidering the pivotal questions of its nature, methods, and aims. After recounting the phases of formation of what presently sees itself as a new discipline in current Christian theological debate, I will take into account the more recent proposals in the field. They distinguish themselves from the previous forms of the so-called “old comparative theology” in the following ways: they choose intentionally to deal with particularity, and primarily with religious texts, instead of reasoning about macro-systems of thought and general religious worldviews. In my opinion, this interesting evolution did not simply happen by chance. Rather, it is the natural — if not the necessary — outcome of a long process of self-correcting and reformulation of the presuppositions of the discipline of comparative theology.

This process is brought about by both centrifugal and centripetal forces. On the one hand, comparative theology has had to face challenges from the most traditional interpreters of Christian dogmatics, who see in this new development the risk of betraying the *depositum fidei*; this wariness arose in essentially all the different Christian confessions. On the other hand, comparative theology, together with other comparative disciplines, has had to defend itself from the accusation of cultural narcissism — because it searched different belief systems, as though they were mirrors, for the features and traces of the truth glimpsed in Christ — and of hegemonism — because it imposed the religious categories proper to Christianity on all other spiritual paths. More generally, comparative theology found itself caught in the midst of a furious struggle that saw religious studies and theology come into confrontation with each other. Despite the fact that these accu-

6. N. HINTERSTEINER, «Intercultural and Interreligious (Un)Translatibility and the Comparative Theology Project», 467.

sations may have some merit, I will defend comparative theology as a theological discipline that can help today's Christians deepen and broaden the understanding of their own faith even while recognizing truth in other religions, which are approached and studied for their own value, status, and distinctiveness.

However, if comparative theology really intends to become mature, so to speak, it must elaborate a more thorough, though still flexible, method. After engaging with the thought of several comparative thinkers, in particular with that of Francis X. Clooney, I will strive to draw some insight from both the merits and the limitations of those proposals in search of a more consistent methodology. Then, after showing that a serious risk of narcissism and subjectivism remains in many of these recent proposals, I will examine attempts to rethink comparativism philosophically, and I will try to illuminate comparative theology in light of the relationship between theology and religious studies. The quantity and the complexity of the arguments to be discussed is substantial. I will anticipate only a few of these arguments: the difference between religious studies and comparative theology and the connections of comparativism to both fields; the relationship between theology of religions and comparative theology; the correlation among religions and cultures; the link between scripture and tradition; the interpretation of sacred texts and their *Wirkungsgeschichte*; and, more deeply, the possibility of truth claims and the comparison among different (if not divergent) religious truths.

Then, I will devote special attention to the question of method. I strongly believe that any endeavor that intends to be thoroughly comparative and theological at the same time must carefully consider its methodological premises. Indeed, if this kind of reflection is avoided, this risks invalidating comparative theology and ultimately proving its implausibility. This concern arose naturally as a necessary development of my previous comparative projects in which I dealt with some specific subjects, but also in consideration of the various, not always compatible, proposals of comparative theology that I see appearing in the present academic arena. Accordingly, I will try to identify those conditions that make certain comparisons more or less suitable and, ultimately, tenable. In short, my major concern is to offer some ethical criteria for comparison that can be faithfully (sometimes more in spirit than in letter) applied to other cases.

Finally, I will introduce my next comparative enterprise, which I call the “Genesis project”. It is my intention to submit several of the stories in the book of Genesis to comparative analysis in light of some parallels in other traditions, at least according to what academia has either already demonstrated or simply supposed. In the history of religions we find the recurrence of an interesting phenomenon. Even though marked by a specific spirituality, a story can be accepted in other religious contexts because of its moral teachings, the analogy of the religious visions it discloses, or simply for its narrative qualities. Consequently, a sort of osmosis occurs. When the story is welcomed, at the same time, it receives some variations to adapt it to its new environment. Equally, the context itself is significantly changed by the acceptance of these borrowed motives. The book of Genesis, in its complex narrative structure, witnesses well the recurrence of this phenomenon: not only are some of its parts clearly drawn from the repertoires of other religious traditions, but some of its more original accounts also seem to have inspired further religious narratives and subsequent reinterpretations in other religious worlds. Thus, the book of Genesis appears to be at the crossroads, so to speak, among various religious inspirations, and it is only from this perspective that it can be read and understood adequately.

From my “Genesis project” I mean to deduce some general methodological insights. My primary aim in analyzing Genesis’s tales and their variants is to propose a theory of comparative theology based primarily on a rigorous comparison of different religious texts. My project is not merely descriptive — otherwise it would be simply an “Enlightenment” proposal with encyclopedic pretensions. On the contrary, I intend to adopt a perspective that at the same time is semiotic, narrative, and theological: this comparison of religious texts, which seem to share the same sources but have developed in different cultural contexts and ages, becomes the occasion to build a theological journey through time and space, within the history of cultures and religions<sup>7</sup>. What happens when a religious story enters another context with different religious understandings? What are the theological

7. In this regard, I significantly depart from Gregg’s project which, though valuable, is a historical and descriptive study of systems of belief: see R.C. GREGG, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings: Early Encounters of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015.

insights that these new visions could bring about? What will be the theological outcomes in the consideration of the image of God, or in terms of the conception of the human person? These are some of the questions that will underpin my research.

In my earlier research I dealt with two very specific comparative endeavors: the stories of the flood in both the Jewish and the Indian traditions, and the episode of the sacrifice of Abraham's son in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While I defer to the near future the study of a set of stories about origins of the universe and creation from all the continents, in these pages, I will present my project for studying interreligiously the fortunes of the story of Joseph and his brothers; it seems to have travelled the ancient world, being welcomed and retold in very distant countries and becoming part of the repertoire of other religious traditions. Given the transcultural dimension of my comparative endeavors, in which the stories that I intend to submit to comparison are from very different origins, a more rigorous and detailed reflection on the aspect of methodology emerges as something unavoidable.

Over the course of three chapters, I will strive to accomplish, respectively, three important tasks. In Chapter 1, I will try to map the spectrum of positions in comparative theology in the present debate by identifying the most representative trends and reflecting on the profound reasons for disagreement among the several perspectives. Moreover, while presenting the eminent authorities in the field, I will look at some major issues, such as the relation and the difference between religious studies and comparative theology, on the one hand, and theology of religions and comparative theology, on the other; the question of the nature and the limits of the discipline; and the necessity of dialogue with other philosophical and scientific approaches.

Since conciliation between the current different approaches in comparative theology is hard to achieve, in Chapter 2 I will investigate the origins of the discipline by reconsidering the first efforts on the part of the churches at facing the question of the existence and the value of other religions. From the apostolic era till our days, and especially focusing on the historical circumstances that gave birth to comparative theology as a modern autonomous discipline, I will search in history for the necessary resources for disentangling the present complex discussion. However, I will do it in a quite unusual and ironic way, under the form of a well-known fairy tale. Thus,



firmly believing in the transformational power of stories and knowing that in comparison “a magic still dwells”, I will retrace the various phases of formation and development of comparative theology in the evolution of Christian thought, giving attention to the major contributions from various denominations in what is at the same time an ecumenical and interreligious effort.

In Chapter 3, I will present my own proposal for a semiotic narrative comparative theology as a way to valorize the contribution of the other perspectives in the discipline and, concurrently, to avoid the pitfalls. In an effort to build an ethics in comparison, I will strive first to rethink comparativism philosophically and then to reflect on the use of categories and the choice of the criteria that constitute the right premises for a good comparison. Although some of the general principles of both religious studies and comparativism will be assumed in my approach as the necessary preconditions for a rigorous comparison, in this constructive part I will try to adhere to a point of view that is markedly theological and, moreover, Christian. I would say that I would not be satisfied with a generic Christian perspective, but I dare to consider my proposal authentically Catholic, intending with this term not only a Roman, apostolic identity but, as the word “catholic” indicates etymologically, an all-encompassing position in which the ecumenical spirit of intra-Christian exchange can meld with interreligious concern. Finally, I will introduce my future comparative endeavors under the name “Genesis project”. Regarding the biblical tale of Joseph and his brothers, I will reflect on the significant fact that it was accepted and read even in religious contexts that were apparently remote from the Judeo-Christian world, from both a geographic point of view and also an ideological perspective. Then, I will clarify once again that the main purpose of studying this tale together with its subsequent interpretations is to illustrate my idea of comparative theology as based on semiotic comparative analysis between different religious texts and not simply religious ideas. Moreover, I will explain the reasons why I consider the character of Joseph a powerful metaphor for comparative theology itself. Ultimately, this is what led me to decide to entitle the individual sections of the first chapter after the telling image of Joseph’s coat of many colors — in order to better characterize the variety of positions in the current comparative theological debate.

In conclusion, stories are something perilous and terribly serious because they touch on and represent the core of our existence and the question of its meaning. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, we are essentially story-telling animals who are in the persistent condition of addressing this fundamental question: “Of what story or stories do I find myself part?”<sup>8</sup>. If comparative theology is able adequately to contemplate and revive this crucial interrogative, and if it can provide itself with the appropriate intellectual tools, and establish a consistent methodology and a plausible ethics in comparison, then it will also inherit the transformational power of the same stories it submits to analysis. Otherwise, it will eventually prove to be *just* a fairy tale.

8. A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Bloomsbury, London 2013, 250.