

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

WHAT ARE CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN'S DOING WHEN THEY DO COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY?¹

Answering the question of my title depends upon defining its terms. The key terms in this case are “Catholic theologians” and “comparative theology,” neither of which has an uncontroversial definition. Let me first make some brief comments on each to begin with.

Let us thus look first at “Catholic theology,” and then, by extension, the “Catholic theologian.” Catholic theology, I suggest, is a human activity whose limits are determined, as are those of any human activity, by noting its principal purpose and the fundamental norms that order the pursuit of that purpose. The principal purpose of the activity called baseball, for example, is to play and win the game whose rules are set forth in the appropriate rule book—and that book, in turn, provides, in detail, the norms that govern and, indeed, constitute the pursuit of that end. This is a clear enough case. There is not, ordinarily, much doubt about whether a particular specimen of human activity is or is not an instance of baseball. Similarly, with not all that much more ambiguity, in the case of the activity called “writing an academic paper for publication.” It may not be easy to say what the principal purpose of that peculiar activity is, but there is a rule book, and it is not usually difficult, at least for the cognoscenti, to know whether the activity is being performed or not—I am doing it now. The precision with which human activities can be individuated and defined varies, of course; Catholic theology is quite like baseball in this respect, however, which makes my task easier.

So, briefly, I would say that Catholic theology is the enterprise of elucidating by the intellect’s devices the self-revelation with which the triune LORD has gifted his church. The principal purpose of that activity is to extend the church’s explicit understanding of the gift given to it and in that way to bring the church into closer intimacy with its LORD. Catholic theology is an essentially ecclesial activity, therefore, performed ideal-typically by some among

¹ An earlier version of these remarks was delivered at a panel on comparative theology and Catholic theology at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Chicago on 19 November 2012. I have made only slight revisions; this written version preserves most of the oral flavor of the version delivered in Chicago.

the baptized (not everyone needs to be a theologian) who are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, and undertaken for the principal benefit of the church of Jesus Christ, which subsists, as the formula of *Lumen Gentium* has it, in the Catholic Church. Catholic theology, so understood, attends principally to what has been given in revelation, a gift that assumed its greatest intensity in Christ's incarnation, and, derivatively, in the confection of the scriptural witness to that incarnation and which was then given, over time, a series of authoritative (magisterial) elucidations by the teaching church. Catholic theologians, then, are those who engage in this activity; what they do, of course, comes in many kinds (scriptural, historical, dogmatic, etc.), but all of it, in so far as it is Catholic theology, participates in the characteristics just given. Finally, Catholic theology is without independent authority; it orders and explicates what is given, and it speculates about what is not given; it proposes rather than disposes.

All that I have just written floats upon deep waters. The one-sentence version is: Catholic theologians order and speculate about the LORD's self-gift to his church in order to deepen the church's understanding of that gift.

What, now, of comparative theology? This is more difficult. The phrase has only a short history as a descriptor for a kind of theology, a theological sub-discipline; and there are features of the phrase that make a short elucidation of it difficult, not least that spiky word, "comparative." Suppose we say that comparative theology is, first, theology, that is, its topic is the LORD, and its principal product reasoned discourse about the same—that, after all, is what the (Greek) word means. This is a definition of theology that sits well enough with the understanding of specifically Catholic theology I just laid out. That analysis specified how Catholics do theology; the definition of "theology" in play here—reasoned discourse about the LORD—is sufficiently abstract to embrace its Catholic instance, and to make clear something I suppose sufficiently obvious not to need further elucidation or defense, which is that non-Catholics can do theology, so understood, too, and that some of them not only can but do. There are properly Catholic positions on the nature of theology that seem to deny that it can be done by those without the infused theological virtue of faith, and, thus, also to deny that theology is or can be done by the unbaptized. But this is only an apparent contradiction with the line I am taking here. Those who say this sort of thing (they tend to be Thomist) do not, in saying it, deny that the unbaptized can speak of the LORD; they deny only that such speech has or can have the kind and degree of intimacy with what it speaks of as necessarily possessed by Christian theology. And that position is entirely compatible with the one I am here suggesting.

On such an understanding of theology, how can it be comparative? Here I will be stipulative. Theology becomes comparative when the theologian deploys as the principal device for its prosecution a close reading of texts from traditions

of reasoning and practice alien to her own. Such reading is done, nevertheless, in the context of the authorities that order her own tradition, whatever these might be. “Alien” here serves as an antonym for “domestic” or even “local”: a tradition of reasoning or practice is alien to your own, to your home tradition, just to the extent that the two have come to be what they are independently of one another, and have, therefore, a conceptual grammar—a lexicon and a syntax, that is—without causal connection. Alien-ness, so construed, comes in degrees and kinds. When Thomas Aquinas reads and comments upon Aristotle in the thirteenth century, the texts he reads are completely alien in the sense that Aristotle was quite innocent of Christianity; but the Christian tradition on which Thomas draws is not innocent of Aristotle—some among his Christian teachers and ancestors had read and written about Aristotle; and there had been, before Thomas, already a considerable history of Christian interaction with Jewish and (especially) Islamic thinkers who were themselves formed, more or less, by readings of Aristotle. But when the Jesuit Ippolit Desideri reads scholastic Buddhist texts in Tibetan in the seventeenth century and in turn composes texts in Tibetan to be read and responded to by his Buddhist interlocutors, the alien-ness is profound on both sides: each tradition is, to that point, very largely innocent of the other. And there are many other possible modes and degrees of alien-ness. But the central definitional point remains: comparative theology is constituted as such first by the fact that its practitioners read from traditions more or less alien to their own; and they do so knowingly and without abandoning submission—*obsequium religiosum*, we might call it—to the authority of their own tradition.

Not only this. Practitioners of comparative theology read the alien texts they read for theological purposes. They want, in doing their reading, to come to a fuller understanding of the LORD. Different communities of practice will have different methods of proceeding here. Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists who work as deep readers of alien texts or practices with a view to seeing what can be learned from them about the LORD have different constraints upon what they do and what they hope to learn from doing it than do Christian theologians in general, or Catholic theologians in particular. What, then, are the constraints and assumptions that should govern the Catholic practice of comparative theology, and how ought Catholics to think about and categorize the outcomes of that practice?

First, and perhaps most fundamental: Catholic comparative theologians begin their work on alien traditions with the thought that the materials those traditions contain and valorize may contain important truths about the LORD; those materials may, that is, be beautifully responsive to the LORD whose name the church knows. Immediately entailed by this thought is another, which is that if it is possible that the materials of the alien tradition are beautiful in these ways, it is also possible that they are not, that they have nothing to offer the Catholic theologian reading them in hope of learning something about the LORD. Alien

materials, that is, may be ugly, disordered, dark, erroneous, and foul, just as they may be radiantly and delightfully beautiful. They may also, of course—and this is, in practice, the usual thing—be a mixture of both. Catholic practitioners of comparative theology, therefore, may not approach their materials and their practice of reading them with judgments about them in the indicative mood but rather with judgments in the mode of possibility. The actual theological yield of comparative theology as practiced in particular cases will be known only empirically as it is done and typically only after an arduous and lengthy practice of ecclesial reading over time. It is, nevertheless, given dogmatically for Catholic theologians that alien texts and traditions may contain (suggest, imply, connote, resonate with) truths about the LORD, and that such truths may, therefore, come to be known by way of the practice of comparative theology. That is one of the reasons that has prompted Catholic theologians in the past to practice comparative theology, and it has lost none of its force today.

So much seems beyond reasonable disagreement. Also beyond reasonable disagreement is the fact that among the most important stimuli for the church's growth in understanding the revelation given to it has been comparative theology understood in this way. Augustine read the *libri platonici*, and was moved by their language and patterns of thought toward theological formulations that have since provided the fundamental grammar of Catholic thought in the West. Aquinas read Aristotle, commented in obsessive detail upon his texts, and was thereby caused to deploy a battery of technical terms and argumentative moves that have ordered much Catholic dogmatics since. So there are some uncontroversial positions about the importance of comparative theology for the church. Their import may be summarized by the claim that the practice of comparative theology—which is, we may recall, the deep and close reading of alien texts and practices by Catholic theologians for the church—is important, perhaps even essential, for the growth and flourishing of Catholic understanding of the LORD.

But beyond that clarity, much about the nature and significance of comparative theology is obscure. I would like to end by noting and exploring two such obscurities, and suggesting, tentatively, possible resolutions to them. The obscurities I am about to comment on may seem arcane, but I do not find them so. Different positions on them have importantly different implications for how we might think about the future of comparative theology.

The first obscurity is taxonomic. Should we think of the practice of comparative theology as itself a theological discipline, itself an instance of what Thomas would call the science that is *sacra doctrina*?

In favor of so categorizing it is that comparative theology is, clearly, theological: it has the LORD as its topic, and the materials treated by those who

practice it deal, in one way or another, with the LORD, even if ordinarily not under that name. Also in favor of so categorizing it is that the audience for whom Catholic comparative theologians write is, at least ideally (and often actually), the church. According to the definitions in play here, Catholic comparative theologians read what they read and write what they write as women and men of the church, formed by the church, and submissively responsive to its authority. Their goals in doing what they do are, therefore, ecclesial. And so, perhaps, comparative theology can be understood as belonging to theology proper, perhaps in something like the same way that historical theology does. On this view, therefore, Catholic comparative theologians do theology *stricto sensu* exactly when they work as comparative theologians. A commentary by a Catholic theologian on the *Bhagavad-gita* or the *Vijnaptimatratra-siddhi* or the *Shobogenzo* might, on this view, itself be a properly Catholic theological artifact; and the answer to the question of what Catholic theologians do when they do comparative theology is exactly that they do Catholic theology.

This is a winsomely attractive view, and the arguments in support of it are far from negligible. But there are also strong arguments against. First among these is the view that the materials studied and written about by Catholic comparative theologians do not belong under the category of the self-revelation with which the triune LORD has gifted his church—which was, we may recall, the definition used at the beginning of these remarks of the materials on which Catholic theologians work. Alien texts and practices, however gorgeous, however elegantly subtle, however productive of new and important distinctions for the practice of Catholic theology, however radiant in their response to the triune LORD's face, do not belong to the LORD's revelatory self-gift. That gift is definitively particular: it was prepared for by the election of Abraham, reached its definitive intensity in Jesus Christ, and has been handed over to the church for Spirit-guided rumination. It does not include anything and everything that has to do with the LORD; it does not include anything and everything that evinces understanding of the LORD; it does not, in brief, include alien materials, however fine. It belongs to the very essence of a Catholic (and, I should think, a generically Christian) understanding of the LORD to think of him as working by way of particular intimacies. There are, then, boundaries around the revelatory self-gift, and while it may not be easy to say in some cases whether this or that object is inside or outside those boundaries, there are many clear cases. And the clearest are exactly the materials treated by comparative theologians: these are alien by definition, and therefore they are not among the materials that Catholic theologians treat when they are working as Catholic theologians.

These arguments, I think, defeat the arguments that support the other view. If that is right, then we should not categorize comparative theology as theology proper: its characteristic activity—the deep reading of the alien—is not itself theological, even though its yield for theology might be profound and trans-

formative. For that yield to become properly theological, however, it needs baptism. Just as each of us, as Christians, had to die in order to be incorporated into the body of Christ (that is what baptism does), so what comparative theologians do might be thought of as preparing the materials they read for baptism. If it is not too rhetorically difficult, there is another scriptural image that might be helpful here. I mean the regulations in Deuteronomy 21:10-14 providing the conditions under which Israelite men may marry non-Israelite women taken captive in war. Such women are to have their heads shaved and be sequestered for a one-month period of mourning before they can be taken to wife. Something like this, perhaps, is what comparative theologians ought to understand themselves as doing with and to the materials they treat. If this view is correct, then the right answer to the question of what it is that Catholics are doing when they do comparative theology is that they are preparing *an-cillae* for the properly theological work of the church—or, if one prefers a different metaphor, they are interpreting the pages of the texts they read to prepare them for inscription into the margins of the sacred page.

All that may sound a little negative, somewhat imperialist, a trifle triumphalist. And so, I suppose, it is. The conclusion seems to me hard to avoid, however. But I should like to end by moderating the surface harshness of this position by commenting briefly on a second obscure point about comparative theology. It is this: May Catholics say that the church can learn things about the LORD that it does not already know from the close reading of alien materials? It is clear that the church may find truths about the LORD in alien materials; that is given dogmatically, and is in any case close to obvious. But it is not so clear that the truths so found may be truths as yet unknown to the teaching church. I think we Catholics should, speculatively, say that this is possible, that the practice of comparative theology is not only an indispensable stimulus for the church's properly theological work, but also that it may be productive of new knowledge about the LORD. The fecundity, that is to say, of the Israelites' foreign wives—to return to the trope from Deuteronomy—may be productive of substantively new and properly theological understandings on the part of the teaching church. This claim, if it is defensible, need not contradict the view that the LORD's self-revelation to the church is complete: if the church can learn truths about the LORD not yet explicitly known to it by way of comparative theology, this is not because they fail to be implicitly known to it. It is because, in the order of knowing and explication, the church needs instruction by those outside herself. Coming to see that this is true, I suggest, is itself an important theological lesson that it is among the offices of comparative theology to prepare the church to learn.