

# Neither Exclusion, Relativism, nor Religionswissenschaft:

## Comparative Studies as Paradigm for Science-Religion Dialogue

The New Atheists have exceeded even the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French Enlightenment in the vehemence of their protests. Their argument is not merely that religious claims are mistaken or that religious believers are self-deceived. They claim that religion is intrinsically opposed to science, that it is inherently evil, and that sane and rational people everywhere should do everything in their power to stamp it out. As Christopher Hitchens so charmingly puts the point in the beginning of his book,

«Religion has caused innumerable people not just to conduct themselves no better than others, but to award themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel-keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eyebrow.... People of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons everything.»<sup>1</sup>

I find these claims and arguments by the New Atheists to be wholly without merit. Scores of powerful responses have been published in most of the European languages, and no adequate rejoinders have been forthcoming. Sam Harris has participated in several high-visibility debates, generally without making conceptual progress, and I have debated with Daniel Dennett about his claims, generating heat but little light ... and certainly no resolution. The kingpin of the movement, Richard Dawkins, generally declines invitations to debate, as he did when we were both at Harvard at the same time. The leaders, it seems, prefer to speak exclusively to their followers and to groups of like-minded individuals. All this leaves one with the distinct impression that the New Atheists are happier throwing missiles from afar in the direction of religion than engaging with religion «up close and personal.» Deep intellectual engagement with scholars of religion on issues in epistemology and the philosophy of religion apparently does not interest them.

<sup>1</sup> C. Hitchens: *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York 2007, 6. 13.

You will of course recognize the irony of this situation: religious believers, whom the New Atheists label obscurantist and anti-intellectual, have consistently shown readiness to produce arguments and engage in debate, whereas the New Atheists, who like to name themselves in a self-congratulatory fashion «the Brights» (*die Intelligenten*), seem more interested in spewing undifferentiated criticism of all things religious, showing little interest in engaging in critical discourse about what is adequate and what is inadequate in their own arguments.

This situation is, of course, immensely unfortunate—not least because of the immense influence that this group of authors has had. We live in an age and in societies that are happy to pronounce religion guilty on the basis of accusations alone, to pronounce her death sentence, and to bury her still breathing if necessary. The subtleties of the questions are lost from sight and mind—not only among the masses, but also among the leading intellectual figures. Both sides wage war not with arguments but with headlines and sound bites as their weapons. Only American politics exceeds the war of science and religion in the ratio of noise to rationality.

Allow me to contrast the present situation with the period 1991-2001, when one was frequently able to convene groups of interested scientists and religionists to discuss overlaps and differences between science and religion.<sup>2</sup> For five of those years I co-led an international project called Science and the Spiritual Quest ([www.ctns.org/ssq](http://www.ctns.org/ssq)), which brought together some 123 scientists from around the world to engage in private discussions and to speak publicly about the results.<sup>3</sup> I will never forget the excitement of these leading scientists as they explored subtle relationships between their sciences and the world's religions.

As a philosopher, I have found that teasing out the intricacies of religion-science relationships brings with it the most subtle and complex challenges that one encounters in any of the myriad fields of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> When informed scholars share the commitment to avoid simplistic judgments, the complex terrain at the boundaries of the sciences and the religions becomes a rich region

<sup>2</sup> P. Clayton and Jim Schaal, eds.: *Practicing Science, Living Faith: Interviews with Twelve Leading Scientists*, New York 2007.

<sup>3</sup> P. Clayton, W. M. Richardson, et al., eds.: *Science and the Spiritual Quest: New Essays by Leading Scientists*, London and New York 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussions in Clayton, ed.: *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* Oxford 2006.

to explore. Real progress comes only when one comes to the questions with the sort of research, focus, and depth that they require.

### Three Mistakes

The title of this article mentions three mistakes. Let me say a word about why I believe that each one, taken on its own, represents a mistake. I hope thereby to set the groundwork for making a substantive constructive proposal in the pages that follow.

(1) *Exclusivism*. The vast majority of religionists who engage in religion-science dialogue around the world work from the standpoint of one particular religious tradition and are proponents of that tradition. As many critics of religion-science discussions have noted, most of the participants in the debate write in ways that serve an apologetic function. This is certainly true of some of the best known Christian voices: John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke in Britain; Robert Russell, Ted Peters, Nancy Murphy, Kenneth Miller, and John Haught in the United States; Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Küng, Michael Welker, and others in Germany—and the list could easily be extended. Similarly, Muslim writers are usually dedicated to showing the viability of Islam in an age of science, whether one considers people like Professor Nasr in the more traditional direction or Nidhal Guessoum on the more progressive side. Popular Muslim authors, like conservative evangelicals in the United States, often defend their religion by attacking Western science and seeking to undercut its theories. Many defend the attacks on science as part of the apologetic task; as the saying goes, the best defense is a good offense.

Jewish authors, by contrast, are far less likely to undercut science or to construct apologetic arguments on behalf of Jewish beliefs. Judaism is, after all, not a proselytizing religion. Still, these authors not surprisingly concentrate on Jewish interests: the compatibility of science and Torah, or connections between mystical Jewish writings (Kabbalah) and contemporary science, or research related to Israel's history, or Jewish responses to bioethical issues raised by the sciences, or the compatibility of science with Jewish observance.

In each of the cases just mentioned, the distinctive interests of a particular religious tradition determine the topics and set the agenda for most of the discussions. Books written solely from within a single religious tradition, or writing that is determined by the interests of one tradition, create the im-

pression of exclusivism—whether or not this is the intention of the authors. When one’s arguments are designed to serve the purposes of one tradition, without explicit consideration of the standpoint of other traditions, the impression is created that the research topic is not really «religion and science» but actually «Christianity and science» or «Islam and science.» (Michael Welker made this contrast the focus of discussion in his article for the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, where he argued explicitly that the paradigm of religion and science should be replaced by the paradigm of theology and science.)

At a minimum, I suggest, it is difficult to draw convincing conclusions about a number of the world’s religious traditions when one’s «data set» is drawn only from a single tradition. We should be wary of drawing conclusions about religion *überhaupt* based solely on studies of a single tradition. It may well be that we can only avoid the impression of exclusivism by increasing our attention to comparativist questions.

(2) *Relativism*. When authors *do* move to a comparativist approach and begin to include multiple religious traditions, they frequently also move to a position in epistemology known as relativism. These authors consider differences between religious truth claims, but only under the assumption that *none* of the truth claims are true. John Hick represents one of the most famous advocates of this view. In *An Interpretation of Religion*, he claimed that all religions are directed toward the Real, which he interpreted in the sense of the Kantian noumenon. Even the distinction between personal and impersonal claims about the absolute is thereby left behind. Interestingly, virtually the only thing that Hick thought worth preserving from the religions is the emphasis on compassion; this particular goal he retains as having import and surviving any move toward relativism. (Apparently, compassion *really is* good.)

Many other authors who acknowledge religious plurality affirm a similarly radical form of relativism. What is interesting about this move is that it frequently capitulates to the scientific critique of religion. On this view, all that one can know to be true are scientific forms of knowledge. All religious truth claims are therefore suspect precisely because they appeal to religious modes of knowing. To argue in this way is to ascribe primary validity to scientifically grounded knowledge claims and then to dismiss all other knowledge claims as suspect. (One may locate the epistemological model for this

view in John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality*. Even the famous American pragmatist Richard Rorty, who was famous for his epistemic skepticism, still remained relatively uncritical of scientific knowledge claims.)

Even this brief analysis suggests that pluralism does not necessarily entail relativism. Consider a scientific example. Shortly after a scientific revolution there may be four or five serious contenders for the best theoretical framework to explain a given domain of data. Only over time do the strengths and weaknesses of the various contenders become clear, and the research community begins to narrow down the options. If knowledge develops in this way, why is a plurality of religious options automatically met with the assumption that relativism is the only outcome? One suspects that the scientific critics are assuming a positivistic model of knowledge. On this model, science holds the key to everything that can pass as knowledge, and everything else merely expresses subjective preferences. When it appears in its strongest form, this neo-positivism even claims that religious beliefs are strictly speaking meaningless; they do not convey any cognitive content at all.

So is there an alternative? Unlike some religious authors—Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance, for example—I do not think we can claim that religious beliefs qualify as a form of knowledge that is equally as rigorous as science just because they have their own unique domain and criteria of assessment. Given the impressive precision of scientific testing and the powers of prediction and falsification that the sciences manifest, it is incumbent upon us to make a case for the epistemic justification of religious truth claims, one that acknowledges their difference from scientific explanations. But our opponents must *also* make a case that there could be no such thing as religious knowledge. To assume from the mere fact of religious plurality that relativism wins is not persuasive; such simple dismissals fall below the level of philosophical sophistication that is required.

(3) *Religionswissenschaft*. The third and final approach that we will consider begins with the pluralism of religions that I have just been discussing. But rather than adopting the philosophical standpoint of relativism—or any other philosophical standpoint, for that matter—it claims (either implicitly or explicitly) that only social scientific studies of religion, and today increasingly natural scientific treatments of religion, can pass as knowledge. Both the implicit truth claims found in religious beliefs and the subjective experiences of the believers are thereby bracketed out. What this means, in practice, is that all valid explanations of

religious phenomena become *functionalist* explanations. Beliefs and practices are fully explained in terms of their positive social, psychological, or even biological consequences.

Now one cannot deny that much light has been shed on religious practices by means of *religionswissenschaftliche* studies. These fields have also encouraged comparative studies of religion more strongly than any other field to date. But note that the study of the function of religious beliefs *does not need to exclude the question of their truth*. In organizations such as the American Academy of Religion, and at many German-language universities, the rise of Religionswissenschaft during the last 20 years has correlated with the decline of theological studies, as if the two are playing a zero-sum game.<sup>55</sup> But to claim that the two are incompatible is a mistake. Knowledge of the psychology, sociology, anthropology, and biology of religion provides data for philosophical and theological analysis. Religionswissenschaft gives rise to Religionsphilosophie. Rather than excluding one another, the two offer a natural partnership.

With these three criticisms in place, I therefore turn to my constructive proposal.

### Comparative Philosophy in Theory

No general philosophical framework will suffice for all the roles that the theologians of the various religions must play. The reason is simple: theologians, whatever other roles they may play in the university, also serve indispensable functions within their religious communities. Consider the wide range of tasks and challenges with which believers are confronted. To assist them, theologians must offer belief-centered interpretations of the sacred texts and scriptures, translate traditional answers to contemporary language and plausibility structures, provide answers to the objections that believers most often encounter (apologetics), and assist in the transition from theoretical matters to practical living. All of these tasks are of the utmost importance to practitioners.

The way that each theologian carries out these tasks expresses a series of underlying assumptions. One can identify these assumptions, express how they are (or are not) consistent with each other, and contrast them with the working

<sup>55</sup> The actual causal explanations are of course more complex and multi-factorial.

assumptions of other theologians in the same tradition and in other traditions. Let's call this sort of analysis *comparative philosophy*.

I suggest that comparative philosophy provides precisely the framework that was lacking in exclusive, relativist, and Religionswissenschaft approaches. Hence my central thesis: *Psychological, sociological, and biological analyses do not exhaust all the questions that are raised by religious belief and practice*. All religions claim to be in touch with a level of reality that is either deeper or more transcendent than empirical reality. Religious beliefs represent concrete views of what this reality might be. One can dismiss the possibility of this reality in various ways—perhaps arguing against it, or perhaps merely assuming that it is false. When one dismisses comparative philosophy in this way, one relativizes all religious belief, subjectifying it or subsuming it under a scientific master-narrative. For example, this move allows the New Atheists to dismiss religion as anti-scientific and therefore ultimately as evil.

For all who think such dismissals are false—or for those who are not sure but think the question deserves closer attention—the perspective of comparative philosophies is indispensable. It is the place where the question of the possible truth of the religious traditions, either separately or somehow taken together, is thematized. Theologians of every religious tradition therefore have the highest motivation for defending and engaging in comparative philosophies. Comparative philosophy thematizes the conditions of the possibility of religious truth: the commonalities across the traditions, and the distinctiveness of each.

In making these assertions I, too, have made a number of assumptions. For the sake of brevity I list five of these assumptions without further comment, though each deserves an article of its own: (a) Comparative philosophy, so understood, presupposes that the claim to truth is not irrelevant in the analysis of religious beliefs. (b) It presupposes that, although religions differ in their content, some common ground can be found, some common categories can be adduced, some analogies can be substantiated, and some cross-tradition evaluations can be made. (c) It assumes, on the one hand, that individual beliefs cannot be totally abstracted from the context of belief and practice in which they arise; hence some sort of coherence-based evaluation is necessary. (d) On the other hand, it is not true that every system of belief and practice is so self-contained that no comparisons can be drawn. (e) Finally, I acknowledge that some of the assumptions of comparative philosophy are themselves con-

troversial. For example, much Western theology is closely tied to a number of assumptions—about content, method, and results—which are not shared in the Indian, Tibetan, and Japanese traditions. It may well be that comparative philosophy is both indispensable and problematic.

### Comparative Philosophy in Practice

These five assumptions set the parameters for the approach that I wish to defend. Now let's consider what the approach looks like when one puts it into practice.

One begins with a particular system of belief and practice. Usually these will be drawn from one of the major religious traditions (the so-called world religions). But in principle it might be any system of belief and practice that is well enough defined for this coherence to come to the surface and be identified. One then works to understand the stated beliefs and the implicit assumptions of the tradition, always using actual practice as a guide. To do this analysis well, a fair amount of immersion in the tradition's beliefs and practices is needed. (Of course, people will fight about how much is necessary: some insist that only total commitment over a lifetime suffices, while others claim that even a quick study with little or no practice suffices to grasp the strengths and expose the weaknesses of any given religion. It's usually the critics who prefer the latter, simpler approach.)

In virtually every tradition, *multiple theologies* claim to provide the most adequate account of the religion's coherence. Sometimes the competing theologies define sharply different groups or communities within the religion, and sometimes these differences evolve to be so great that people begin to identify them as separate religions altogether. In the early days of Christianity, its distinctiveness from Judaism was not fully clear, and many of the followers continued to observe Jewish Law. Only after Paul and his allies repealed the requirement of circumcision, which had been the sign of Jewishness for males, did the new believers begin to be identified as Christians, in contrast to Jews. Similar histories can be described in the evolution and expansion of Buddhism across cultural boundaries.

Let's call *theologies* those attempts, from within a given system of belief and practice, to specify how it is that they are coherent and *what* the coherence is that ties them together. When one begins to compare theologies (so un-



derstood), one discovers an amazingly diverse range of ways that they can accomplish the task of making (or recognizing) coherence. Theologies can tell the narrative of the life of the religion's founder; they can abstract core beliefs; they can move from the actual beliefs and practices to an underlying level on which the coherence of the whole allegedly becomes visible (cf. the development of the concept *Brahman* from the Vedas to the Upanishads); they can appeal to the primacy of practice against theory, or the primacy of theory against practice; and they can ascribe meaning to the whole from an apophatic place that is beyond all language. The comparison of theologies is an important part of comparative philosophy, though not its only task. Certainly the comparativist task presupposes sufficient knowledge of the beliefs, practices, and theologies of a given tradition. The comparativist with expertise in one tradition then needs to acquire a similar expertise in at least one other tradition. Generally she will not become equally adept at both. People in the field often joke that a person knows she is far enough when important aspects of the belief and practice of the second tradition begin to seep into her religious belief and practice in her «home» tradition. Occasionally a conversion from the first to the second tradition even takes place.

What is *not* sufficient for comparative philosophy is merely supplementing one's «home» tradition with an introductory-level knowledge of the other world traditions. Not surprisingly, at the level of introductory textbooks *all* the other traditions appear superficial. The mono-religious person is likely to dismiss all other traditions as «obviously wrong,» or he will view them as less adequate expressions of the insights that are more perfectly expressed in his own tradition. Certainly Hegel was guilty of this mistake when he saw all other religious traditions as merely *Vorstadien* to Christianity as the Absolute Religion.

Persons with bi-religious or multi-religious competence are able to engage in richer studies of comparative philosophy or comparative theology. Whatever our weaknesses as scholars, superficial misunderstandings and dismissals of others' positions occur much more rarely. Again and again in our studies, we find that new light is shed not only on the other traditions, but also on our «home» tradition.<sup>6</sup> And, I would argue, the results are not only of interest to

<sup>6</sup> I use the quotation marks because, over time, one often becomes unsure which tradition is really one's home tradition.

members of the two traditions; they also help to establish a framework of dialogue—and of *openness* to dialogue—between the world's religious traditions that it may otherwise not be possible to obtain.

My own work has centered on connections between Christianity and the Qualified Non-Dualism school (*vishisht-advaita*) in Vedantic Hinduism, including studies of soul, mind, consciousness, prayer, and religious experience.<sup>7</sup> Some of the theological concepts that I hold to be extremely important for Christian theology today, such as panentheism, receive deeper and more profound treatment in Vedantic thinkers such as Ramanuja.<sup>8</sup> In one sense, such studies can be understood as a hermeneutical lens, shedding new light on one's home tradition. But as studies of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Horizontverschmelzung* will understand only too well, in another sense a genuine transformation of traditions occurs when the comparatist perspective is applied.

### Comparative Philosophy as Model for Religion-Science Dialogue

We are finally in the position to be able to speak to the question of science-religion dialogue. My thesis will seem straightforward to comparative scholars of religion, I think, but it may be disturbing to scientists and to theologians rooted in only a single religious tradition. It is this: *an adequate understanding of relationships between «religion» and «science» is possible only when the singular «religion» is replaced by «religions.»* The dialogue needs to be based on inferences from the study of many individual religions—just as talk of «science» must reflect theory and practice in a range of sciences. (No one will understand the «evolution vs. religion» debate from the standpoint of particle physics alone, and it takes research in the social sciences to understand how religious worldviews contribute to meaning-construction [*Sinnstiftung*].)

Earlier I argued against three popular approaches to the study of religions, and I have now sketched and defended a fourth approach. When the comparative philosophy approach is followed, it yields rather sophisticated conclusions about the specific religions being studied as well as careful inductive generali-

<sup>7</sup> R. Narasimha, B. V. Sreekantan, S. Menon, and P. Clayton, eds.: *Science and Beyond: Cosmology, Consciousness and Technology in the Indic Traditions*, Bangalore 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Clayton: «Panentheisms East and West,» *Sophia* 49 (2010): 183-191.

zations across religions—though these conclusions are more careful and circumscribed than those one frequently encounters in the literature.

I began by recounting the superficial dismissals of «religion as such» by some scientists today—scientists with little or no acquaintance with religion—and the dismissals of genuine science by many religious persons who have no familiarity with science. Imagine, by contrast, what a subtle and interesting comparison of sciences and religions becomes possible when the discussion partners have comparative religious and comparative theological expertise on the one hand, and familiarity with multiple sciences on the other. One will hardly encounter superficial dismissals in the work of such scholars! The subtle connections, the agreements and disagreements, the analogies in theory and practice are rich enough to consume several lifetimes of study and publication.

Searching for concepts that are adequate to encompass the diversity of epistemologies in the sciences and the religions is a complex and exciting task. For example, one recognizes that what «theory» is in highly evolved theologies is neither identical with nor diametrically opposed to what it is in highly evolved sciences. Gradually one formulates a broad enough set of epistemologies to describe the fully spectrum of sciences and religions. Then one reconstructs the actual theoretical positions of, say, the major theologies of two religious traditions and of two sciences. Only then, on my view, could one begin to do religion-science dialogue in any serious way. For only at this point would one be able to recognize when specific theologies and sciences are making the same claims, where they are making analogous claims, and where they may be making opposing claims. And *only when all of these research advances have been accomplished can one begin to raise the truth question!*

Consider a brief example. The New Atheists are famous for the most superficial dismissals of the notion of God, on the level of «We cannot detect God among the objects in the universe, so clearly God does not exist.» Mono-religious science-religion scholars are not guilty of such silly statements. But they will generally describe God using the categories (or: one of the competing sets of categories) within their own theological tradition. Christians generally affirm some sort of plurality within the one God, whether or not they are orthodox Trinitarians. This makes them, for example, much more open to panentheism, the view that the world is contained within the divine, although God is also more than the world. Because the revelation of the Prophet Mohammed emphasized the absolute Oneness and Unity of God, explicitly rejecting the

Christian Trinity, Muslim theologians are not open to panentheism in the same way—no matter how helpful it may be in dealing with the problem of divine action in the age of science.<sup>9</sup>

Or take a second example. Although Christian theologians explore a range of pantheisms<sup>10</sup>, they almost never affirm a fully pantheistic worldview. The influence of the Hebrew Bible, with its injunctions against identifying God and the manifestations of God, is just too great. By contrast, the great affirmations on panentheism in the Vedantic traditions almost always take place in the force field of the continual attraction of pantheism. Shankara's *advaita* (non-dual) Vedanta and affirmation of *nirguna Brahman* (Brahman without attributes) are always present, even for those who wish to qualify it, whereas the more strongly Dualist schools play overall a lesser role. This different center of gravity creates a radically different universe of discourse when one turns to specific philosophical questions arising out of the sciences: how does one interpret the four forces of nature from a metaphysical perspective? What is the principle of life shared in common by all living things? Are animals conscious?

### Why Comparative Philosophy?

I would like to mention one objection in closing. Some may criticize me for giving the term «comparative philosophies» such a central place in this proposal. Why, they may respond, would it not suffice to speak of comparative *theologies*?

I wish therefore to stress in closing that my argument does not imply the goal of subordinating theologies to some overarching (and hence controlling) philosophical framework, some absolute System. The intention is actually quite the opposite. The conceptual heavy-lifting can be done by comparative philosophy because it does not need in the end to be an advocate for one or another religious tradition. *But members of religious traditions neither can be nor ought to be neutral about their traditions in this way.* And this same non-neutrality also pertains to their theologies—at least if the theologies are playing the service roles that the religious communities need them to play.

<sup>9</sup> Sufi thinkers and mystics represent an important counterexample.

<sup>10</sup> P. Clayton and A. Peacocke, eds.: *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, Grand Rapids 2004.

In short, the religious believer will at some point experience a deep level of commitment to her meditative practice, to her observance of Torah, to her obedience to the five pillars of Islam, or to her inner experience of salvation or Enlightenment or oneness. Since this level of commitment goes beyond the results of comparative philosophical analysis, she cannot use those results to ground the commitment. Still, she is also within her epistemic rights to affirm the experiences she has had and to acknowledge the conviction that they produce. This same sort of commitment, and the same sort of epistemic rights, pertain also to the theologies that she and her community formulate out of these primary beliefs and experiences (and other tradition-internal sources). It is this embeddedness of theologians and religious believers that defines their distinctiveness, but also their unique responsibilities vis-à-vis their own traditions, others' traditions, and the non-religious world.

### Conclusion

Should this proposal be widely accepted—and there is increasing evidence that it *is* being appropriated—many questions will need to be resolved: what mistakes need to be avoided? Which topics are most urgent, which yield the richest results? Which topics should be avoided because they lead to fruitless disputes? What concrete principles guide the discussion?

I discuss these issues in a recently published book and cannot treat them in detail here.<sup>11</sup> However disappointing it may be to classically trained metaphysicians, it is clear that the comparative discussion has moved away from the abstract metaphysical topics that characterized (for example) the Buddhist-Christian dialogue of the 1960s and '70s. Not surprisingly for a new field, methodological questions receive much attention: the importance of the debate itself.<sup>12</sup> Ethical and pragmatic questions occupy far more of the attention, and perhaps rightly so: many believe that only a partnership of scientific facts (say, about global climate change) and religious motivation can avert a global meltdown. Comparative notions of ultimate reality offer fruitful material for discussion.<sup>13</sup> But they provide neither the skeleton nor the meat of most of to-

<sup>11</sup> Clayton: *Religion and Science: The Basics*, London 2011.

<sup>12</sup> P. F. Knitter: *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian*, Oxford 2009.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. R. Cummings Neville, ed.: *Ultimate Realities*, Albany 2001.

day's discussions. Instead, other questions dominate: how will we get along and avoid more religiously motivated wars? Why does religion so often function as the hidden motivation for racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and cultural imperialism? How can the cycle of religious fanaticism be broken? Can comparative religious studies undercut materialism and the abuse of the planet? Can global values of conservation be derived from a broad religious consensus? In each of these cases, both scientific and comparative religious resources play a crucial role.

These are not the issues on which many scholars are trained. But they do represent some of the most urgent global issues today. Perhaps the pragmatic and applied-ethics focus of the recent discussions will help raise this exciting new form of dialogue to public attention more quickly than the more classical areas of study were able to do.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Professor Reinhold Bernhardt of the University of Basel for discussions before the November 2010 conference in Basel and for helpful questions and criticisms afterwards. Unfortunately, I was not aware of the work, edited by R. Bernhardt and K. von Stosch: *Komparative Theologie. Interreligiöse Vergleiche als Weg der Religionstheologie*, Zürich 2009, until after completing this paper. Readers will recognize the significant parallels between the two works.

*Abstract*

Nach einem kritischen Blick auf die Auseinandersetzung mit dem sogenannten «Neuen Atheismus» werden in diesem Artikel zunächst drei problematische Ansatzpunkte für die Beziehungsbestimmungen zwischen Theologie und Naturwissenschaften vorgestellt und diskutiert: (a) «Exklusivismus», verstanden als Beschränkung des Blickfeldes auf nur *eine* der religiösen Traditionen. (b) «Relativismus» als Versuch, eine religionsübergreifende Perspektive einzunehmen, wobei dann aber der Wahrheitsanspruch der religiösen Traditionen bestritten wird, und (c) die religionswissenschaftlich-funktionale Betrachtung religiöser Erscheinungsformen, die das Selbstverständnis der Anhänger der jeweiligen Religionen ausblendet. Im zweiten Teil wird vorgeschlagen, die Beziehungsbestimmungen zwischen Theologie und Naturwissenschaften im Rahmen einer «komparativen Philosophie» vorzunehmen, die religiöse Wahrheitsansprüche im interreligiösen Vergleich auf ihre Möglichkeitsbedingungen und Implikationen hin untersucht. Der Dialog mit naturwissenschaftlichen Ansätzen kann demnach nicht länger auf einzelne religiöse Traditionen bezogen bleiben, sondern muss von den Ähnlichkeiten und Kontrasten zwischen den Religionen ausgehen.