Religious Identities in Third Space: The Location of Comparative Theology

Ulrich Winkler

§1 After the cultural turns in the humanities and the shift in the liberal arts to cultural studies, we are now looking at the impact of these developments on theology. It is not only a matter of sexing up theology through fashionable jargon but also one of acquiring new analytical and pragmatic insights into the challenging problems of theology today.

Several decades ago, the theology of liberation and contextual theologies started to focus their attention on the social and cultural dimensions of theology. With the assistance of tools provided by the social sciences and political analysis, they identified inclines and slopes from the First to the Third World, from the north to the south, from white to indigenous, from the center to the periphery, from local to global, from Christianity to secularism, etc.

But, like the first groundbreaking books on colonial critiques and Orientalism—such as those by Frantz Fanon (1963; 1967) and Edward Said (1978)—these studies were deeply shaped by the dichotomies of perpetrators and victims, the colonizer and the colonized, etc. Fanon focused on the colonized while Said highlighted the colonizer’s responsibility. Therefore, the solution to these problems were convincing only as long as the reality was conceived as clearly distinct and divided between the good guys and the bad guys.

– Postcolonial studies traced Edward Said’s epochal insight that the discursive conditions of the West shape the representation of the others, and the production of knowledge is always mingled with interests and power (i.e., the discourse in Foucault).

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1 In this short paper I will elaborate on the heart of my thinking and avoid further explanation and reasoning. For such explanation and further argumentation that will support my ideas, I refer the reader to some of my more extensive studies: Winkler, Ulrich 2015, 2014a, 2014b, 2013, and 2011.

2 Cf. also Schmitz 2012 and 2008 and Schäbler 2011.

3 In the 1970s Said was one of the leading interpreters of Michel Foucault in the US. Cf. Schmitz 2012: 109.
– Subsequently, the binary structure was replaced by the more differenti- 
ed complexity of postmodern and postcolonial epistemology, as in Homi 

All I remember are some keywords such as deconstruction, representation, 
writing back, identity construction, in-between, overlapping, hybridity, mim- 
icry, etc.

At this point, the spatial turn (cf. Crang and Thrift 2000; Bachmann-Medick 
2010) was proclaimed as the most recent development in cultural studies. It 
lies in the very notion of ‘turn’ that observations and results do not remain rel-
vant only in their fields of origin, like geography and literature, but cross these 
borders and influence a widespread area of disciplines, including theology.

Beyond their function as descriptions within the original area of research, 
turns can also be used as analytical tools in other fields. But once again, be-

ond these tasks, a turn—and, in particular, the spatial turn, I argue—is also a 
means of problem solving. So I claim that the postcolonial and spatial turns in 
cultural studies are useful in describing and analyzing comparative theology, 
in solving predicaments, and in answering critiques. Here I want to concen-
trate on the last point.

§2 Comparative theology is a new discourse in the field of theology and religious 

studies. Comparative theologians claim both their commitment in theology and 

faith perspective and their competent engagement in other religious traditions. 

Comparative theology is done under conditions of both religious pluralism and 

secular worldviews.

Comparative theology (Clooney 2013, 2010a, 2010b) is involved in three differ-

ent realms and contexts: (1) the church, (2) the other religions, (3) the secular.

(1) Since theology is the reflection on faith bound to the perspective of one’s 

own religion, it is rooted in a personal life of faith and practice, which 
I call spirituality, and in the life of the faith community, i.e., the church. 
With respect to theology of religions, I argue that theology is capable 
of attaining a spiritual stance of respect, mindfulness, and appreciation

⁴ Homi Bhabha introduced a new epoch in postcolonial studies, going beyond the binary 
structures and dichotomies in Fanon’s and Said’s epistemology. Cf. Bhabha 2007b, 2007c; and 
Bhabha and Mitchell 2004.