

The Major in Comparative Theology

PhD Program in Theology at Boston College

Introduction

Religious pluralism is a key challenge facing theologians and religious communities today. It raises questions regarding how practitioners and believers from different traditions do and should encounter one another as they enter into substantial and regular contact in every part of the world. Careful reflection on religions in their particularity and interrelated is an increasingly important and necessary theological task. The PhD Major in Comparative Theology at Boston College offers the opportunity for in-depth study of Christianity in relationship to one other religious tradition.

Comparative Theology entails the study of one or more religious traditions other than one's own, and critical reflection on one's own tradition in light of the other tradition or other traditions. Given the location of this program within a Jesuit and Catholic university, it is expected that most of our students will engage in Comparative Theology from within the Christian tradition. Study of the other religious tradition aims at fostering both genuine competence in that tradition and a deep level of engagement with Christian theology. The program also welcomes students who belong to and have scholarly training within other religious traditions, and who wish to engage in an in-depth comparative study of their own tradition with Christian theology. Focus on one other religious tradition aims at fostering both genuine competence in that tradition and a deep level of engagement with Christian theology.

Like all other areas of Theology, Comparative Theology's ultimate horizon is reflection on God, the transcendent, or the nature of ultimate reality. Though Comparative Theology is related to the historical and philosophical work of comparative religions and philosophy of religion, it aims to be constructive theology. The practitioner, while rooted in one tradition, is deeply affected by systematic, consistent attention to the details of the other religious and theological tradition, thereby informing continuing theological reflection upon his or her own tradition. It is this focused attention to the distinctive details of different traditions that distinguishes Comparative Theology from the Theology of Religions, but also opens the possibility of a newly and more deeply informed Theology of Religions. Theology of Religions, or the theological reflection on the meaning of religious diversity from within one's own religious tradition, thus forms an integral part of Comparative Theology.

“Comparative Theology” is often a discipline closely related to Systematic or Doctrinal Theology, but it may also be presented in accord with other disciplines, such as Comparative Ethics or Law, or the Comparative Study of Sacred Scripture. It may

likewise deal with historical materials or with contemporary issues. References in the following pages to Comparative Theology include the possibility of those alternative modes of study.

All PhD students at Boston College are encouraged to integrate comparative work into their studies in the other Areas of Theology (Systematic Theology, Theological Ethics, History of Christian Life and Thought, Pastoral Theology, or Biblical Studies), but students may also choose to major or minor in Comparative Theology (henceforth CT). For some students, the Major is the ideal focus, while for others a Minor is sufficient and more appropriate.

A practical goal of both the Major and Minor is to prepare graduates to become theologians conversant in the issues related to the study of religions in a theological perspective, who are able to teach courses on another religious tradition and on chosen areas of Christian theology. While Interreligious Dialogue is only one of many subordinate themes possibly taken up in this program, the Major and Minor both provide sound theological and intellectual foundations for actual dialogue.

At the MA level, students can integrate comparative questions into their studies by taking even just one or two courses with a comparative emphasis, or by making a comparative question their special topic for their comprehensive examinations. The MA is not treated in this document, and interested students are urged to consult members of the CT Area regarding possibilities with respect to the Department's MA program.

Section I of this document deals with the Major, Section II with the Minor, and Section III with matters common to both. Except where specifically noted, rules given in following pages pertain to normal procedure and do not preclude exceptions for good reason. Regarding matters not covered here, the general rules applying to the PhD program as a whole should be considered operative.

1. The Major in Comparative Theology in the PhD Program

1. Prerequisites

Applicants for admission to this Major should already have master's-level background in Christian theology, and have studied in an academic context the second religious tradition that they intend to compare with Christianity. So too, students must have completed at least one year of language study relevant to the non-Christian tradition they will be studying.

2. Distinctive features of the Major in Comparative Theology:

Students majoring in CT are normally expected to take courses covering the following topics:

- a. Theology of Religions and the theory and practice of Comparative Theology*
- b. Theory and Methods in the Comparative Study of Religions*

*Graduate courses will be offered in alternating years in Theology of Religions and in Theory and Methods in the Comparative Study of Religions; more specialized areas of focus, such as Comparative Ethics or the Comparative Study of Scripture may be offered according to need. (a. and b. together comprise 2 or 3 courses)

c. A significant engagement in the issues and methods represented by another subdiscipline of Christian Theology, either as represented by the Areas of the PhD Program (Bible, Ethics, History, Systematics, Pastoral Theology) or as devised in relation to the strengths of other faculties in the Boston area (e.g., Missiology and Mission History, or the study of specific religions not focused on in our Program). These courses form the grounding in theology necessary for comparative theological work. This special topic may also constitute a Minor according to the rules of another Area, but is not required to do so. (4 courses)

d. A specific concentration in a religious tradition other than the Christian. (4 courses)

e. The CT Seminar: CT majors are expected to participate in this seminar during their entire residence at Boston College. They will register for the seminar in their fourth semester of coursework and receive one semester's course credit. (1 course) CT minors may also participate.

f. Additional courses are electives determined in conversation with advisors. In general, students are encouraged to plan creatively, since there may be relevant courses not only in the Department or BTI schools, but also in Philosophy, Literary Theory, and other disciplines. Students are responsible for receiving the necessary approvals to ensure that courses from other disciplines count towards departmental and university degree requirements.

g. Three languages are to be studied to a level where they are useful in research; normally, two of these languages are western scholarly languages such as Latin, Greek, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, or another language useful in the student's research. The third is specific to the religious/cultural area on which the student focuses, ordinarily in relation to a non-Christian religious tradition. The goal of the study of this third language is proficiency at a 2-year reading level (as demonstrated in a departmentally administered competency test) and at least facility in "getting behind translations" and exploring the primary texts in a useful manner.*

*Students entering the program with one year of preparation in the tradition specific language are strongly encouraged to fulfill the remaining year of language requirement through summer courses. The program is prepared to cover a total of \$ 4000 per student to support the study of

languages. Courses in the tradition specific language taken during the regular Fall or Spring semester may count as electives toward the fulfillment of course work.

Students should be cognizant of the fact that they are required to take 50% of their courses in any one semester within the offerings of the Joint Doctoral Faculty. If the specialized requirements of a student's program make this impossible, the student must consult his or her CT advisor **and** the Theology department's graduate director to petition for an exception to this requirement.

From the beginning of their program of study, students are expected to work closely with two advisors, one in the CT Area and the second in one another Area of the Faculty. The faculty in the CT Area also commit themselves to planning and announcing course offerings two years in advance.

The CT Area faculty, in cooperation with the faculty in other Areas, is responsible for the timely preparation of comprehensive examination questions for students, including any special questions required for particular students.

It is desirable that the students spend a semester or year in a country where a religion studied flourishes. Occasionally, a student may also have reason to spend a semester at another university in North America or Europe. This time abroad normally occurs after the Comprehensive Examinations.*

*Funding for this year must be obtained through external forms of financial aid such as Fulbright Fellowships. Students who spend a year abroad will ordinarily finish the PhD program in 6, rather than 5 years. The regular stipend provided by Boston College to PhD students will be suspended for the duration of the year abroad and resumed upon return.

3. Comprehensive Examinations

Three written examinations will be taken in the third year of the program during the Theology Department's regular comprehensive exam periods.

Six months before the planned comprehensive exam date, the student will submit electronically to the area convener his or her proposal for comprehensive exams, already approved by the student's advisor. This proposal will include the following elements:

- a. Preliminary Dissertation Proposal of no more than five pages. Normally, this proposal will be closely related to the topics of the comprehensive examination. While this proposal will not bind the student to this specific dissertation project, it is expected that it indicates his or her likely course of research and writing. The student should expect that this proposal will help guide the faculty in constructing the actual exam questions.

b. Reading lists for two exams: in the student's chosen non-Christian tradition and in the special topic of Christian theology in which the student will be examined. The student will introduce these lists with a brief narrative discussion which explains the specific focus of these exams, including potential approaches to presenting the comparative analysis for the third exam.

i. The reading list in the non-Christian tradition should demonstrate general competence in this tradition, but should also focus on a specific well-defined topic or set of texts within it.

ii. The special topic in an area of Christian theology may come from the subdisciplines of Bible, Church History, Ethics, Pastoral Theology, Systematics or a more specific specialization like Christology, mission history, ecology or feminist ethics, scriptural interpretation, or theoretical issues in teaching religions and pastoral practice. This special topic should be relevant to comparative study, though it need not itself be specifically comparative. If the student's special topic has been formulated as a standard minor according to the rules of another Area, this examination may be simply the Minor examination offered by that Area. Students will also, in the course of their exams, be expected to demonstrate general competence in Christian theology.

c. A third reading list, in Comparative Theology and Theology of Religions is standard and provided [on this site](#), III.2. Students may propose alterations to this list.

Based on these documents, the student's advisor and exam committee will develop specific questions for the exam according to the following outline.

i. A tradition-specific examination in a tradition other than the Christian.

ii. An examination on a special topic in an area of Christian theology.

iii. Comparative analysis. This examination brings the materials handled in i. and ii. into conversation so as to shed new light on a theological question. In addition, this essay is to include an exposition of the student's understanding of Comparative Theological method and its implications for the Theology of Religions. The student is encouraged to discuss possible approaches to this essay with his or her advisor and with other faculty members.

iv. The Oral Examination

The student will be examined orally on the content of the reading lists, the content of the written exams, and the informal dissertation proposal.

4. The Dissertation

Students are expected to continue their comparative theological study by making comparative aspects and questions central to their dissertation topic.

The dissertation proposal is to be submitted by September 30 of the student's fourth year, to receive faculty approval by December 31 of that year.

The Committee for the PhD Dissertation will be comprised of 3 members, with at least 2 belonging to the Joint Doctoral Faculty.

5. Teaching

Students majoring in CT are ordinarily expected to serve as a Teaching Assistant with a Religious Quest professor at least for one year in preparation for teaching Religious Quest as a Teaching Fellow.

II. The Minor in Comparative Theology in the PhD Program

1. Introduction

The Area also offers a Minor intended to enhance other major programmatic concentrations. This minor complements and interrelates with the other major doctoral concentrations (Bible, Ethics, Church History, Systematics) and also the minor concentration in Pastoral Theology. Students pursuing a minor in CT will thereby enrich their major concentration by reflexive study of analogous area(s) in one (or more) other religious traditions, contextualizing this focused study historically and communally within those other traditions.

Students who wish to minor in CT must officially declare their intent to do so by the end of the first year of the PhD program. They must at that time seek a CT advisor who will help them prepare for the comprehensive examination.

2. Course Requirements for the Minor

The Minor requires a minimum of four courses, which are to be identified in consultation with the student's Minor advisor: the range of appropriate courses includes courses specifically on the theory and practice of Comparative Theology, Theology of Religions, Missiology, and particular religious traditions.

3. The Minor Field Comprehensive Examination in Comparative Theology

a. Preparing for the examination

The reading list for the examination will be prepared by the student in consultation with her or his advisor, and circulated to the other faculty in the Area for comment and possible revision. This list must be submitted no less than six months before the intended exam date. A selection of suggested texts relevant to the theory of Comparative Theology is listed in Part III below.

The question for the examination is described below; the student is encouraged to discuss possible approaches to it with his or her advisor and even with other faculty members.

Comprehensives are taken at the regular times available for PhD students.

b. The question for the written examination

The student will write a single essay comprised of the following four aspects. (Time: 3-4 hours)

- i. An exposition of a major theological theme in a non-Christian tradition, contextualized within the greater world of that tradition;
- ii. A comparative study of that same theological theme, drawing on both the non-Christian tradition studied in i. and the Christian tradition;
- iii. An explanation of how the materials handled in i. and ii. shed light on some aspect of Christian theology, particularly in relation to the student's major Area of focus in theology.
- iv. A statement making clear the student's understanding of Comparative Theology as practiced in the other parts of the essay developed according to i., ii., and iii.

The student may take up these four aspects in any order.

c. The oral examination

The written materials for this Minor will be subject to the usual oral examination along with the rest of the written materials for the comprehensives.

III. Matters Common to Both the Major and the Minor

1. Events

a. The Comparative Theology Lunches: These are informal conversations led by faculty, students, and visitors on some question, topical theme, or example of work in progress related to CT. Topics range from informal discussion of a question someone raises at lunch, to presentations by professors or students on topics they are writing about, to discussions with visitors to the university. No background expertise, preparation or reading is required. For currently scheduled and past lunches, see the Comparative Theology website (www.bc.edu/comparativetheology)

b. Center for Christian-Jewish Learning: The Center for Christian-Jewish Learning is dedicated to the multifaceted development and implementation of new and positive relationships between Christians and Jews. To do so requires engagement in Comparative Theology, investigating the ways that Christians and Jews understand themselves in the presence of the other. Students may receive degrees with a focus on Christian-Jewish Relations through an appropriate MA course of studies or through a major or minor in the PhD program in CT with a focus on Judaism. For more information on the Center and its courses, go to <http://www.bc.edu/cjlearning> or contact Prof. Langer or Prof. Cunningham.

c. Engaging Particularities: This is an annual national graduate student conference in CT and related fields. This conference brings together graduate students from Jesuit and select other universities around the country for a weekend of presentations and discussion. Students in our Program organize the annual Engaging Particularities Conference.

d. The Boston-area Society for Comparative Theology: The Society for Comparative Theology ordinarily meets two or three times a year and is open to faculty and graduate students in the Boston area, who take turns in giving papers and responding. Information is available on the Comparative Theology webpage.

e. Other lectures and seminars: The Area is committed to creating an ongoing collegial conversation among faculty and graduate students — in the Department, at the university, among area schools, and more widely as well — and for this purpose invites speakers for lectures or seminars several times a year.

In general, students should ordinarily participate regularly in the events described under III., though no particular event will be required.

2. General Reading List for the Comprehensive Examination in Comparative Theology

[This reading list is provisional and will be revised and updated regularly]

Barnes, Michael, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (2002)

Clooney, Francis. *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (1993); *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (1996); *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries Between Religions*. (2001)

Cornille, Catherine, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (2002)

D'Costa, Gavin, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (2000)

Dupuis, Jacques, *Toward a Christian theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997)

Flood, Gavin, *The Ascetic Self. Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (2004)

Griffiths, Paul J., *Problems of Religious Diversity* (2001)

Hefling, Charles, and Pope, Stephen, *Sic et Non: Essays on Dominus Iesus* (2002)

Heim, S. Mark, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions* (1995); *Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (2001)

Patton, Kimberly and Ray, Benjamin, ed. *A Magic Still Dwells. Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. (2000)

Knitter, Paul, *Introducing the Theology of Religions* (2002)

Masuzawa, Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions* (2005)

McCutcheon, Russel, ed., *The Insider-Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (1999)

Neville, Robert, ed., *The Human Condition* (2000); *Ultimate Realities* (State University of New York Press, 2000); *Religious Truth* (2000) [One of these volumes will normally suffice.]

Smith, Jonathan Z., *Relating Religion. Essays in the Study of Religion* (2004)

Sharpe, Eric, *Comparative Religion: A History* (1975)

Ward, Keith. *Religion and Revelation* (1994); *Religion and Creation* (1996); *Religion and Human Nature* (1998); *Religion and Community* (2000) [One of these volumes will normally suffice.]

3. Members of the Comparative Theology Area of the Joint Doctoral Faculty

For each faculty member we list just one or several representative publications, normally books; please check the individual faculty websites for further bibliography.

Boston College's Joint Doctoral Faculty:

Catherine Cornille: Theology of Religions, Theory and Methods in the Study of Religion, Interreligious Dialogue

- Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity (2002);
- Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita (2006)

Philip Cunningham (<http://www2.bc.edu/~cunningph>): Jewish-Christian Studies, Director of the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

- A Story of Shalom: The Calling of Christians and Jews by a Covenanting God (2001);
- Sharing the Scriptures (2003)

Mark Heim (ANTS): Theology of Religions

- Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religions (1995);
- Depth of the Riches: a Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (2001)

Daniel Jeyaraj (ANTS): History of Missions, Missiology

- Inkulturation in Tranquebar: der Beitrag der frühen dänisch-halleschen Mission zum Werden einer indisch-einheimischen Kirche (1706-1730). (1996).

Ruth Langer (<http://www2.bc.edu/~langerr>): Judaism

- To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism (1998)
- Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue. Edited by Ruth Langer and Steven Fine (2005)

John Makransky (<http://www2.bc.edu/~makransk>): Buddhism

- Buddhahood Embodied (1997)
- Buddhist Theology . Edited by John Makransky and Roger Jackson (2000)

John McDargh: Psychology and Religion

- Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion: On Faith and the Imaging of God (1983)

James W. Morris: Islam

- Islamic Thought in World Civilization (2004)
- The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s “Meccan Illuminations” (2005)
- Knowing the Spirit (2006)

Louis Roy, O.P.: Systematic Theology

- Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique (2001)
- Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers (2003)

Sze-kar Wan (ANTS): New Testament, Asian Christianity

- Bible in Modern China : the Literary and Intellectual Impact (1999)

Other faculty members at Boston College are engaged in various modes of comparative work and willing to work with students in this Area, and students are encouraged to work with faculty outside the Comparative Theology Area.

So too, many faculty in the BTI schools are interested in Comparative Theology and the Theology of Religions. For example,

Boston University

John Berthrong: Theology of Religions; Religious Pluralism; Confucianism

David Eckel: Indian and Tibetan Buddhism

Robert Neville: Philosophy and Theology of Religions; Confucianism

Harvard University

Francis Clooney, S.J.: Hinduism, Comparative Christian Theology

Anne Monius: Religions in South India

Parimal Patil: Hindu and Buddhist Philosophies and Theologies

Janet Gyatso: Tibetan Buddhism