

## UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION:

### A Reply to Marianne Moyaert

#### *Introduction*

In her very stimulating response to my paper, Marianne Moyaert presents an abundance of important points that merit discussion. Three of them seem to me to be especially important, so I will discuss them in my response to her in the brevity required here. First of all, Moyaert asks if the text-centred approach, which can be found in representatives of comparative theology like Francis X. Clooney, can be extended to other religions or if it is a typically Christian enterprise to define religious identity on the basis of texts. Moreover, not all wisdom religious traditions are interested in theology, which raises the general question if there can be theology outside of Christianity at all.

This question strikes me indeed as particularly worthy of reflection with respect to Eastern religions. But I can say, at least with respect to Islam—on the basis of my experiences up till now with setting up Islamic theology at German universities at present—that there is something like Islamic theology. The text-centeredness is not a concern for Muslims either as a rule.<sup>1</sup> I do not consider this typically Christian, however, and in any case not typically Catholic, for at the center of the Catholic faith is not a text but the living Christ and thus the Eucharist. Accordingly, I myself place much more value on defining comparative theology not only and also not primarily as the comparison of texts (Von Stosch 2012: 197-99). That is why the orientation of comparative theology until now as described by Moyaert is perhaps even more accommodating of Islam, as we will see. Whether an attempt at comparative theology in the Jewish context will also yield fruit I cannot say with the same certainty. But I share absolutely the rejection of the enterprise of a theology of religions, which Moyaert introduces as a Jewish reason for doubting that enterprise. I do not want by any means to invite a Jewish or Muslim theology of religions but

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of the multiple ways Muslims have also now become involved in the project of comparative theology, cf. the contributions to comparative theology published by me and, for my critique of every attempt at a theology of religions, Von Stosch 2012: 17-131.

only to invite Muslims and Jews to participate in the project of comparative theology from other religious perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

A second question very worthy of reflection raised by Moyaert is whether the methods and standards of comparative theology do not latently monopolise the practice of comparative theology. Are non-Christian approaches to science and reality transferred to other religions with the result that much in other religions is reinterpreted in the contributions to comparative theology, making them somewhat the same? Will the genuine approach by other religions to their own learning not be lost if they adapt themselves to the Christian pattern of theology? I take this concern very seriously. Indeed, comparative theology has been stamped by the Western academic tradition. That is why it should not monopolise religious learning any more than it does interreligious dialogue.

Obviously, comparative theology is grounded in the Western academic tradition, and it has to engage in that as well if it wants to find its footing in Western universities. But this academic tradition is not, however, to be confused with a Christian academic tradition. Academics in the West has often enough asserted its norms in conflict with the church as well, and it has cost Christian theologies a great deal to adopt a form that can find recognition in the university system. At least, with respect to Islam and its long history of debate with the Greek tradition of reason, I know of no reason why Muslims should not accept this challenge as well and continue to develop their theology. Only if they succeed in this will they want and be able to participate in the project of comparative theology. The experience that many Muslims in the West at this time have successfully followed this path grounds my optimism that comparative theology will not remain purely a Christian enterprise, without therefore looking only into possibilities of comparative theology for understanding between the religions.

The most important point in Moyaert's response seems, finally, to me to be her demand of me to clarify more fully the relationship between love, understanding, and appreciation. Even if people *in religiosis* are extremely vulnerable and unprotected in their identity, that does not mean that they should therefore already be appreciated in their otherness and not be attacked on ethical grounds. To appreciate others only because they demand it strikes Moyaert as paternalistic—indeed, such recognition would be, in her view, an insult. Love should not be shrink from judging—either positively or negatively. Therefore, it can no longer be demanded, as hermeneutical openness, to be prepared to understand the other in her otherness. It is very important to see that there is an important difference between our ability to understand and our ability to appre-

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<sup>2</sup> For a distinction between theology of religions and comparative theology, see Von Stosch 2012: 216-30.

ciate: there are also things that we cannot appreciate even though we understand them.

I can only unreservedly agree with everything Moyaert says here. Of course, the command to love one's neighbour does not mean that I have to appreciate the religious other in her religious otherness only because she is other. To do so would then lead immediately to a pluralistic relativism. Indeed, love also means that I confront my neighbour with reality and therefore that I must often hurt him. Transferring this to theology, this means that comparative theology is also committed to the truth and should not refrain from testifying to the truth out of friendship. Precisely for that reason Moyaert is also right that only hermeneutical openness, not love, can be demanded in interreligious dialogue and in comparative theology. And that is also why, for me and other practitioners of comparative theology, friendship belongs not so much to what is required methodologically but only to what is hoped for (cf. Von Stosch 2012: 150f.)

Thus, I do not want to deny that sometimes things can be understood that, nonetheless, cannot be appreciated. To the contrary! This insight is completely undisputed and—in contrast to Panikkar (1990, 61f.)—I even insist that there can also be an understanding that does not appreciate the understood. Anything else would banish the discipline of hermeneutics from the area of academics. I am concerned here precisely with the reverse point: Is there not also the indisputable phenomenon that love and friendship can produce appreciation where no understanding is (yet) possible?

I want to illustrate what I mean by a simple example. When I, as a teenager, visited my brother-in-law in Morocco for the first time, I fasted for a day during Ramadan with him and his Muslim family. I did not understand why Muslims fast and still find it remarkable that people are not allowed to drink anything when it is hot. In general, I did not understand much about Islam, but because I was fond of my brother-in-law and his family, I wanted to fast with them. Through this common act I experienced what it means to hunger and thirst together; I experienced how much the communal breaking of the fast is also a spiritual experience and how much it was able to restore religious identity and community. Despite this, there was still much I did not understand and still do not understand. Why, for example, this rigorism with respect to drinking? Why this often grotesque-seeming conflict as to what day precisely the fasting should begin? The theological and ethical reasons given here do not seem convincing to me, and what I do understand I cannot esteem to a certain extent. There are thus things here that I understand but do not esteem.

Nevertheless, I experienced something in the communal fasting that was supported by friendship, that permanently enriched me and that I appreciate. I experienced, perhaps, something of the religious dimension of fasting. Since then I have come to know that Muslims are doing something here that is im-

mensely valuable. This appreciation is not dependent on intellectual understanding. For me, it is not about appreciation for the sake of an ethical command but one based on communal personal experiences. Friendship makes an appreciation possible that is ultimately fed by actions.

Of course, the understanding thus also increases. That is why precisely empathy and hospitality are so important in comparative theology for coming to a deeper understanding. But this understanding will never be complete and comprehensive, for we never completely understand our own religion either. If religious rituals and convictions do actually have to do with the reality of the Unconditioned, then my necessarily limited understanding can never be complete—no more with respect to one's own religion as to other religions. My reflection will never catch up with the consummation of faith, as Karl Rahner already knew (1984: 14).

Wittgenstein can help us describe and clarify the phenomenon that we follow different grammars in ways of life in different religions. If it is correct that religious truth claims are ultimately grounded in specific grammars and are even constituted by them, their semantic form will change if they are turned into objects of understanding—one more reason why this change in meaning across religious borders must be reflected upon and understood together if we want to understand and compare religious living. Space prevents me from exploring the implications of this undertaking more closely, and I must therefore refer to another work by me (Von Stosch 2003). But I hope that it has become clear how important friendship can be in making appreciation possible where one's own understanding (yet?) stops. I want to understand love of neighbour here only as a demand to exercise such friendship also where I am not yet able to appreciate it in a positive way. Indeed, I am more concerned with a hermeneutical openness—but precisely because of that also with the overcoming of every kind of inclusivism.<sup>3</sup>

### LITERATURE

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<sup>3</sup> For a critique of inclusivism, cf. Von Stosch 2012: 87-131.