

Theologies of Religions

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Other language version: Theologie der Religionen (Deutsch)

The term “Theologies of Religion” refers to the field within systematic theology that deals with the relationship of the Christian faith and the community of the faithful (Church) to other religions. It involves the examination of religious plurality in general as well as questions that emerge in relation to specific non-Christian religions (such as Islam).

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Editorial Note

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1. Term and Concerns of the Theologies of Religion

Christian theology has always grappled with non-Christian religions (as well as with heterodox forms of Christianity): with Rabbinic Judaism right at the beginning, with Islam since the end of the 7th century (in the case of Johannes of Nikiu ^{GND} and Johannes of Damascus ^{GND}), and also with other forms of religion, especially those encountered by Christian missionaries. In order to demonstrate the inferiority of these religions, this confrontation was mostly carried out with an emphasis on differences as well as in an apologetic and often polemical manner.

In the 1960s, the demand emerged – especially in Western Christianity – for a paradigm shift in interreligious relations: the relationship between the Christian faith and Church to other religions, in praxis as well as in theological reflection, was now to follow the “dialogue” model of communication. This in turn triggered questions about how and in what way the Christian faith’s claim to truth could be upheld, if other religions were to be recognized as equal partners in dialogue. The term “theologies of religion” first appeared in Catholic theology in the context of, and in the

wake of, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) as a way of defining the thematic field in which questions concerning interreligious relations and their formation were being discussed. In 1964, Heinz Robert Schlette ^{GND} published “Überlegungen zu einer ‚Theologie der Religionen“.^[1]

In the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, the Roman Catholic Church made an epochal shift to a new appreciative view of other religions. The view that prevailed until then was expressed in Cyprian of Carthage’s ^{GND} († around 250 CE) maxim: “There is no salvation outside of the Church.” The position now became: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.”^[2] This shift gave rise to a strong impetus toward reflection on the theologies of religion. Theologically speaking, Karl Rahner ^{GND} took this new position even further and granted followers of other religions who had not yet been confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ an “anonymous Christianity.”^[3]

Critical objections soon emerged. Some critics did not view the theologies of religion as an open field of study in which very different approaches could be discussed. They identified it with certain positions – such as the designation of religions as “paths to salvation” – and rejected it. The accusation here is that the designation of all religions as “paths to salvation” involves sweeping a priori value judgments regarding the truthfulness and salvific significance of religions based merely upon theological speculation. However, this criticism is by no means compelling. “Theologies of religion” simply consists in making non-Christian religions a subject for theology.

Within the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theology, broadening the perspective beyond Christian confessions and denominations led to increased engagement with non-Christian religions. Anglophone theology in particular developed new approaches to the theologies of religion (see below). German Protestant theology, on the other hand, remained cautious. This was due in part to the criticism of the concept of religion in the Word of God theology (Karl Barth ^{GND}), but it is ultimately grounded in German Protestant theology’s focus on Christ and its emphasis on the Bible as the primary source of knowledge.

2. The Relation Between the Theology of Israel and the Theologies of Religion

The question of whether Judaism is a non-Christian religion or whether it occupies a special position as the “mother or sister religion” of Christianity has sparked debates. Contemporary Judaism repeatedly warns against theological appropriation by Christianity and emphasizes the “dignity of difference”^[4] (Jonathan Sacks ^{GND}). Judaism is thereby considered a religion entirely independent of Christianity. Christian theologians, on the other hand, point to the historical and theological roots of Christianity in Judaism. On this point, it is necessary to distinguish between biblical Israel as the root of Christianity and post-biblical rabbinical Judaism as a religion clearly distinct from Christianity.

3. Approaches in Modern Theologies of Religion

Since the 1960s, and increasingly since the 1980s, various approaches have been developed for the theological interpretation of religious plurality and for determining the relationship between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions. The most important of these are:

- a. *Pluralistic Theologies of Religion* (PTR), whose main proponent is John Hick ^{GND} (1922–2012). Its basic idea is that, at least in the case of the major, traditional “world religions,” religions are equally valid ways of relating to the divine reality. An analogous foundational process takes place in all of them: the breaking down of human self-centeredness and the opening up to ultimate reality, which Hick calls “the Real.”^[5] The most important German-speaking representative of this approach (which he developed further) is Perry Schmidt-Leukel ^{GND}.^[6] Focused in particular on the question of its theological justifiability, the discussion around PTR was particularly intense in the last decade of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st century. The Vatican’s

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith condemned this position in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* of August 6, 2000 and also sanctioned its representatives.^[7]

- b. The *Abrahamic Theologies of Religion* (ATh) approach deals only with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These religions – so the theory goes – are oriented toward one and the same God who is attested to in different ways in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Koran. Abraham is considered the progenitor of the belief in this God and is a common reference point for the three religions. According to Genesis 16f, two lines of descent originate from Abraham: one through Isaac and the other through Ishmael. Jews and Christians could relate themselves to Abraham through Isaac, while Muslims could do so through Ishmael. In contrast to PTR, the proponents of this model want to remain closer to the narratives of the three religious traditions. However, ATh leads to serious problems, among other things because the three religions depict the figure of Abraham differently and because Galatians 4:21–31 places Isaac and Ishmael in sharp contrast to each other.
- c. *Comparative theology* (CTh) rejects all theologies of religion that make a priori (i.e., prior and superordinate to concrete engagement with other religions) stipulations regarding the relationships between religions and their relationships to the divine reality. It seeks to limit itself entirely to the “micro-logical” comparison of individual manifestations of religious traditions. It is therefore more so a method than a conceptual framework. Francis X. Clooney ^{GND} of Boston College is one of the most important pioneers of modern CTh.^[8] In German-speaking countries, Klaus von Stosch ^{GND} has distinguished himself as one of its leading representatives.^[9] However, even this approach cannot avoid making use of theological assumptions regarding other religions. For example, the expectation that comparison will lead to theologically relevant insights is based on the assumption that the non-Christian religious phenomena used for comparison represent authentic experiences of transcendence.
- d. While PTR and ATh postulate fundamental similarities between religious traditions and CTh seeks to gain theological insights by means of interreligious comparison, the *Hermeneutic Theologies of Religion* aims at dialogue between religions that is sensitive to differences. Keeping in mind these enduring differences, it develops Christian theology in reference to non-Christian religious traditions. In so doing, it strives for the most authentic understanding of these traditions possible while also seeking to develop its own positions in such a way that they can be understood by followers of these traditions.

The interpretation of religious plurality cannot take place from a universal bird's eye view but only from within the diversity of particular religious and ideological perspectives. Religions are therefore like different languages that not only express different worldviews but also constitute them. They are different global perspectives referring to the transcendent reality. There are good reasons to assume that the divine reality they refer to is one and the same. Ultimately, however, this question must remain open.

According to this model, each religion is urged – from the core of its own religious convictions – to identify bridgeheads (*Brückenköpfe*) that allow for the establishment and formation of dialogical bridges. To this end, the potential for universality contained in religious traditions can be drawn upon, for example, the Christian belief in God as the free and unified foundation of all reality and in the universal “Word” and “Spirit” of God who transcends all religions.^[10]

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- ⁴ Cf. Sacks, Jonathan, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London 2002.
- ⁵ See, for example, his major work, Hick, John, *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New York 1989, 233–296.
- ⁶ Cf. Schmidt-Leukel, Perry, *God Beyond Boundaries. A Christian and Pluralist Theology of Religions*, Münster 2017; idem, *The Celestial Web: Buddhism and Christianity. A Different Comparison*, Maryknoll/New York 2024.
- ⁷ Cf. Dominus Iesus. On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, 06.08.2000 (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html), accessed on 27.01.2026.
- ⁸ Cf. Clooney, Francis X., *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar. A Love Story*, London 2024; Kimmel, Joseph L./Takacs, Axel M. Oaks (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology. A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ*, Hoboken 2023; Cornille, Catherine, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, Hoboken 2019.
- ⁹ Cf. Stosch, Klaus von, *Einführung in die Komparative Theologie*, Paderborn 2021.
- ¹⁰ I also refer to this approach as "reciprocal inclusivism" ("Inklusivismus auf Gegenseitigkeit") or "mutual inclusivism" ("Mutualen Inklusivismus"). See Bernhardt, Reinhold, *Ende des Dialogs? Die Begegnung der Religionen und ihre theologische Reflexion*, Zürich 2006, 206–275; idem, *Inter-Religio. Das Christentum in Beziehung zu anderen Religionen (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen 16)*, Zürich 2019.

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