

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



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CATHERINE CORNILLE is the Newton College Alumnae Chair of Western Culture and professor of comparative theology at Boston College. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before her presentation on women and interreligious dialogue.

OWENS: Can you distinguish comparative theology from other ways of doing theology and also from what's sometimes known as comparative religions?

CORNILLE: That question is really on people's mind now because it is indeed a new field. People have been doing comparative theology for the past twenty years without always calling it comparative theology.

Comparative theology is theology—meaning faith, seeking understanding—but done within the context of religious diversity. Comparative theologians tend to be trained theologians who have also expertise in one other religion. Because the knowledge of every religion is so demanding, it's hard for a comparative theologian to have mastery of more than one tradition. So usually comparative theologians focus on one other tradition and engage that tradition in dialogue with Christianity on particular questions.

Insofar as it's theology, it's a normative discipline. In that regard, it's different from comparative religions, which, at least ideally or in terms of its goal, is a neutral or non-normative or purely social scientific approach to the study of religion. Comparative theology is a normative discipline, starting from a confessional perspective and then engaging the other traditions. Comparative religion is

being focused mainly on understanding, whereas comparative theology is focused on advancing truth.

There are many different ways in which that's done. My interest has really been in mapping those different approaches to



comparative theology and seeing whether there is one or the other approach that I think—or that we think—is more legitimate or advisable for the discipline. The distinction I usually make is between a confessional and a meta-confessional approach to comparative theology.

The term comparative is sometimes used by people who call themselves theologians who are really after a kind of

truth in the absolute sense—who are less concerned with aspects of revelation and confessionality and groundedness within a particular tradition. Some comparative theologians use the data of different religions to create or to discover a truth that is beyond every religious tradition. I call this philosophy of religion rather than comparative theology, though insofar as they use the data from different religious traditions, it has a comparative dimension to it. I would classify people like Raimon Panikkar and maybe even Robert Neville as doing comparative theology in this way.

There's also comparative theology that starts from the data of a particular religious tradition and tries to advance its self-understanding. While the first type wants to discover truth, the second type is more confessional; it wants to elucidate truth that is already given within a particular religious tradition.

I also distinguish the two types of doing comparative theology as being meta-confessional or confessional. When it's confessional, it starts from the normativity of a particular tradition. It recognizes the authority of established figures of hierarchy in matters of theology and so on, so it tries to do theology as everyone does it but with an openness to what might be learned from other religions.

OWENS: Are there people—scholars, practitioners—who identify as comparative theologians outside of the Christian tradition?

CORNILLE: There are some, but it's really still predominantly a Christian enterprise. It's been developed in Christian—actually mostly Catholic—circles; though it's of course not a prerogative of Christians. Ideally, or hopefully, thinkers in other religious traditions will also see this as a useful methodology. That would help us get over the idea that this is Christians domesticating the teachings of other religions or using other religions for their own benefit.

I think comparative theology is actually something that has been done for centuries implicitly in every religious tradition. We have all borrowed from each other throughout the ages without acknowledging that we were doing that. Hindus in the 19th century were stealing all kinds of Christian ideas to develop their own more universal teachings. So it's happened throughout history, and continues to happen. The difference now is that we acknowledge that we are doing it, and we're doing it in a more systematic way.

My Boston College colleague John Makransky is a Buddhist thinker or Buddhist theologian who does comparative Buddhology—comparative theology from a Buddhist perspective. Hopefully it will become a more universal discipline.

OWENS: One can imagine doing comparative theology strictly based on textual interpretation, and yet one of your primary areas of inquiry is dialogue with people from other traditions. Could you say a bit about the centrality of interreligious dialogue as a component to comparative theology?

CORNILLE: To me, comparative theology is just a systematic way of doing interreligious dialogue. I don't see comparative theology as different from interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue can be done in many different

ways, between hierarchies, or people living in the same neighborhood; or it can take the form of social action and so forth. Those are all different ways of doing interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology is a more systematic theological way of doing interreligious dialogue. It's all interrelated in that sense.

“For interreligious dialogue to be possible, one must be receptive to the idea that there is truth in another religion. Once you have that kind of awareness, then it becomes imperative.”

OWENS: What do women bring as a unique element of interreligious dialogue that either men don't or that the tradition over the centuries of interreligious dialogue hasn't really brought to the fore?

CORNILLE: Interreligious dialogue or comparative theology can be very helpful for women because usually we start a dialogue on the basis of certain commonalities, and women have innumerable areas of commonality over which they can dialogue with one another and from which they can learn from one another also. There is plenty of common ground for women to dialogue about their own positions in different religious traditions. There's also plenty for them to learn from each other by dialoging about women's issues: from the different ways in which

each tradition has either marginalized or integrated women, from the way women have kind of spontaneously used the symbols and the resources of their tradition to develop more liberative practices and ideas and so forth.

Is there a distinct contribution that women can make to a dialogue that's not specifically about women's issues? There's considerable disagreement and debate among women on this question. That's one of the things that is brought out in the volume I co-edited, [Women and Interreligious Dialogue](#).

Some scholars would argue that there is nothing distinctive that women can bring to the dialogue: that just their presence or their being at the table is important just to have their voices heard, but that talking about what women can bring distinctively to the dialogue is a form of essentializing women in different religions and not allowing them to really have different voices among themselves. So to say that there is something unique that women bring to the dialogue is probably risky.

But if you look at the history of women's contributions, you see that women have participated in dialogue in different ways. There are a few articles in the volume that talk about how women were very active and proactive during World War II—for example, Christian women saving Jewish women and men from being captured and killed.

There are also women's groups that organize dialogues around important celebrations in the lives of women in different traditions. In this way, women's contribution is maybe one of seeing religion in a more holistic fashion, where it's not just about arguing or exchanging ideas but also participating in each other's religious ceremonies and going on pilgrimages together or appreciating the other religion in a holistic way—including the more aesthetic aspects of other religious traditions. In the book, these

come out as areas in which women may have something distinctive to offer.

But again it was very interesting, at the conference: nobody wanted to put their foot down and say “this is what women can bring” or “this is a distinctive contribution of women,” but at the same time everyone was sort of feeling around it and still sort of offering, by way of examples, ways in which women have really been very instrumental in dialogue.

OWENS: You’ve written important work on the concept of double or multiple religious belonging. This is something that stretches many faithful people’s minds a bit. Can you say what you mean by that concept and what you don’t mean by it?

CORNILLE: It’s a category that started to come into academic discourse and dialogue mostly in the early 2000s. (I actually published [a book](#) that I think is partly guilty of spreading that word around.) What we see in the past ten to fifteen years is more and more people who claim to be, in particular, Christian and Buddhist. There are also JewBus—people who are Jewish and Buddhist—and more limited affiliations between Christians who claim also to be Hindu.

What’s interesting is that, in the 1960s, people didn’t want to belong to any religion. Now they want to claim that they actually belong to more than one tradition. That’s an interesting shift, I think, that may be reflective of a greater sort of respect for religious identity and belonging in the past 15 years.

It’s easy, of course, to say that you identify with or belong to different religious traditions. I see my work as sort of a critical reflection on the possibility and limits of multiple—religious belonging. I love patterns and ideal types and classifications, so what I try to do first is show how many different types of multiple-belonging there are.



There are also a lot of people who belong to different religions not out of their own will—involuntary multiple-belonging versus voluntary multiple-belonging. If you happen to be born in a family where your parents are from different religions, you will somewhat belong to each. Or if you’re born in a culture where the religion is shaped by different religions, you will somewhat belong to many.

The more problematic, or challenging, situation is one where people voluntarily belong to more than one religion. This is something that has happened throughout history. When people are sick, they go and find solace wherever it’s offered. In Japan, for example, people may be Buddhist primarily or Christian, but when they’re sick they go to a new religion that offers miraculous healing. That also goes on in Africa, where Christians go to Muslim faith healers; or in India, where Muslims go to Hindu temples that have goddesses who can promise all kind of goods. That’s usually a temporary multiple-belonging.

But some people say that they fully belong to Christianity and Buddhism. This, I think, is a much more problematic situation. But those who make such claims are adamant about it. I try to point to the problems—theological or practical—of that reality and also try to

advance another theory for why religions might have the ideal of single belonging. Now we’re sort of in a culture where any claim to absoluteness or any claim to absolute control or belonging is seen as sort of exclusive and jealous, but I also have tried to show that there might be sort of deeper spiritual reasons for a single religious identity or belonging.

My latest work in that regard is developing different ways of negotiation of multiple belonging, so people who claim to belong to more than one religion have different ways of rationalizing this or claiming that it’s possible. I’ve tried to map out how that’s done.

OWENS: How, if at all, does this—what you described as kind of a growing group of people who are identifying with multiple traditions—map on to the simultaneous sort of rise of what is called the American “nones”—the unaffiliated in the United States? Are these some of the same people who identify with multiple traditions but do not have official membership in these traditions?

CORNILLE: I think that some of the “nones” might be multiple-belongers. Those who really go full out and claim multiple-belonging really wouldn’t say that they’re “nones,” but it comes out of the same pool of emphasizing your own autonomy and spiritual distance from

full self-understanding of religion. In that sense I think it's part of the same phenomenon. At the same time, I see the nones more as a continuity of the New Age movement of the 1960s, whereas multiple-belongers are now trying to turn back and claim seriousness or respectability for their religious identity.

OWENS: As someone born in Belgium who travels frequently in a professional capacity, lecturing and researching all over the world, what can you say about the differences in interreligious dialogue between the American context and other contexts around the world?

CORNILLE: The initiative for interreligious dialogue is really something that is most prevalent in the North Atlantic sphere and is often rightfully regarded as a Christian initiative. I just spent some time in Nepal, for example, where there are large groups of Buddhists and Hindus, and they've all lived together peacefully for a very long time, but they're relatively uninterested in each other. So I think it's really a western enterprise that tries to deal with questions of truth, I think, from the perspective of realization of the reality of religious diversity.

For interreligious dialogue to be possible, there are a number of theological and social and political conditions that need to be fulfilled, which I try to develop in [The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue](#). It is quite a tall order for all of those conditions to be there, and I think the North Atlantic sphere is really where that's mostly in order right now. In most of the rest of the world—even in countries that have long traditions of religious plurality—the different religions are just sort of living side by side, and dialogue isn't really that important or desirable.

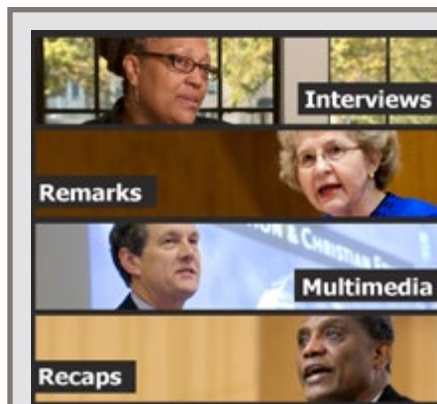
OWENS: One of your central arguments in *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* is that the sole sufficient condition for interreligious dialogue is a posture or a stance or a sense of hospitality in a theological sense or in an epistemological sense. What's interesting to me

is that a lot of other cultures around the world have a much deeper cultural tradition of hospitality—in the traditional sense of opening their doors to other people—than Americans do. Yet you're saying that, in other traditions outside of the North Atlantic context there's a lack of epistemological hospitality. Is there something paradoxical about that or noteworthy about that difference?

CORNILLE: I don't think so. I think interpersonal hospitality is something that is given with a more humanistic or religious tradition that doesn't have to be related to real interest in what other people believe or receptivity to the possibility of them bringing something new and insightful to one's own religious tradition. Maybe the term "hospitality" was a bit misleading in that sense because, as you say, it really is epistemological and about receptivity to the idea that there is truth in another religion. If your religion allows for the recognition of truth in other religions and that truth is different from your own religious tradition, then there would be logically something imperative about receiving that truth in your own tradition and learning from it. It has taken Christianity a long time to recognize the

possibility that there might be distinctive truth in other religious traditions, and we're still arguing about the status of that truth and how it relates to our truth and so on. That's not a natural attitude for any religious tradition, and hence the title of my book: *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. I think every religion requires a lot of hermeneutical work in order for that kind of openness towards possibly constructive truth in other religions to be present. But once you have that kind of awareness or realization, then it becomes imperative, I would say.

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