

CONFLUENCES OF THE ISLAMIC IN HANS URS VON BALTHASAR'S THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS: TOWARD A COMPARATIVE Theo-Poetics WITH ISLAM

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Abstract

This essay is an excavation of Islamic theological confluences in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. It likewise demonstrates how comparative theology facilitates the de-essentialization of religious traditions. This essay uses the Swiss theologian as a case study in exposing how someone apparently closed off from interreligious learning is still inadvertently shaped by non-Christian traditions. Being adjacent to the work of Anne Carpenter, who seeks to save his theological project from Eurocentrism, this essay seeks to save it from theological exclusivism and Orientalism. It will argue that in the case of Christian theology, confluences of the Islamic in the past offer possibilities for future exercises in comparative theology. It looks back to look ahead by suggesting theo-poetics as a new direction for Christian comparative theology with Islam.

Introduction

This essay excavates the confluences of the Islamic in Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics.¹ It does so to open Christian theological engagement with Islamic traditions towards theo-poetics. While I am writing as a Catholic comparative theologian attending to a Catholic thinker, the proposals may apply to any Christian theologian who performs constructive exercises in comparative theology with Islamic traditions. It may likewise apply to Christian scholars of Islam who make judgments on Islamic traditions vis-à-vis soteriology and theological truth claims (theologians of religion). I zoom in on particular traditions to make narrow arguments that nonetheless gesture toward further claims in areas in which other scholars are experts.

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¹ I am inestimably grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers whose depth and breadth of knowledge, along with their careful attention to detail, provided critical and constructive feedback that allowed me to sharpen my arguments and evidence accordingly.

Adjacently, the case of Balthasar and theologies informed by Balthasar's thought demonstrates how Christian theologians and/or scholars of Islam may inadvertently be "enmeshed in hegemonic and apologetic identity politics."² To that end, this essay is less an exercise in comparative theology *stricto sensu* than an exercise in looking back to look ahead. Uncovering the confluences of the Islamic in Balthasar's theological aesthetics will thus "be used to 'de-essentialize' and partially deconstruct the oppositional contrasts constructed in ... political moment[s] of identity formation"³ that the Christian tradition has undergone in its perpetual conversation with the "religious other." In looking back, it looks ahead towards avenues of constructive comparative theological engagement with Islamic traditions in areas related (1) to post-classical Sufi-philosophical traditions and (2) to the Islamic theo-poetics that is a constitutive part thereof.

The intentional, methodical act of crossing confessional boundaries in search of theologies that may intensify, rectify, recover, reinterpret, be appropriated by, reaffirm, and/or critically challenge and subvert one's own Christian tradition offers a methodological break from decisively non-comparative Christian theology.⁴ Comparative theology reads not only Christian revelation and its interpretations by patristic, medieval, renaissance, early modern, and modern theologians, but also decisively non-Christian sources. While comparative theology is often constructive, it "can [also] function as a critical, anti-essentializing discourse."⁵ To that end, it exposes the "constitutive ambivalence and internal diversity" of religious identities and demonstrates how "traditions have always already been forged out of hybridity through powerful negotiations of in- and exclusion."⁶ Confessional comparative theology remains promising because it has embedded within it the tools and mechanisms to redraw interreligiously and interculturally the boundaries of Christian identity and tradition through the study of non-Christian knowledges, themselves deposits of challenging truths. It does this while being attentive to how the Christian tradition has historically and presently been relational, dynamic, and mutable vis-à-vis local and global religious and cultural traditions.

I offer two examples of this relational dynamic drawing from the work of Balthasar and his attention to Thomas Aquinas and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The choice for Balthasar is strategic. First, Balthasar's implicit theology of religions, on the spectrum from exclusivism to pluralism, is far closer to the former than the latter (notwithstanding his universalist tendencies, hopeful or otherwise). He is thus a constructive case study in exposing how even someone apparently uninterested in learning from Islamic traditions is still inadvertently shaped by them. Second, recent scholarship suggests that, on closer reading, the Swiss thinker is far less exclusive, supremacist, and Eurocentric than Balthasar scholars have implied. Anne Carpenter, in her "Balthasar Beyond European Modernity," takes seriously Balthasar's claims

² Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method* (Oxford: Wiley, 2020), 67.

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 115-48 and Axel Takacs, "Comparative Theology and Interreligious Studies," in *A Companion to Comparative Theology*, ed. Pim Valkenberg et al. (Boston: Brill, 2022), 574-79.

⁵ Hugh R. Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95.

⁶ Judith Gruber, "(Un)Silencing Hybridity: A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Theology," in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 31.

that “the Christ-form cannot be identified with any particular aesthetic form,”⁷ which means that, according to Balthasar, “Catholicism espouses the visibility of the Church and the theological authority of tradition. But this does not justify anyone’s absolutizing its historical and cultural *Gestalt* [form].”⁸ In her essay, she performs “an archeology and an advance, a *ressourcement* and a *révolution*”⁹ on Balthasar’s thought to save his theological project from Eurocentrism: “This ‘archeology’ (a re-sourcing) produces a thinking-again (a revolution) of Balthasar’s work in his theological aesthetics, what it is establishing, and why.”¹⁰ I adjacently follow her explanatory archeology but in reverse, as it were. Instead of reading Balthasar for what *he* has to say about the relationship between Christianity and other cultures (Carpenter’s project), I am excavating Islamic theological confluences in his thought and using them as a springboard for future comparative theological projects—looking back to look ahead, an adjacent *ressourcement* and *révolution*.¹¹ This excavation is for the sake of explanation, *ressourcement*, and *révolution* of Christian theology and its relationship with Islamic traditions. My looking back is admittedly more discursive (i.e., pertaining to discursive—textual or oral—traditions), uncovering confluences of the Islamic that made not only the past but the present possible. In this regard, again in a comparative theological key, I agree with Jennifer Newsome Martin, who recalls that *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* are “connected at the root.”¹² If this is the case, from Islamic confluences in the Christian tradition (a *ressourcement*, of sorts) grow Islamic comparative theological exercises today and in the future (*aggiornamento*). Carpenter’s concern is with Eurocentrism and colonial modernity; my concern is related in that attending to Islamic theological confluences demands consideration of aesthetic (and, ultimately, theo-poetic) forms from West Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia to China, South Asia, and Indonesia.¹³ This type of comparative theological *ressourcement*, like Carpenter’s theology of tradition, “demands a furtherance” but following a different path.¹⁴ Resourcing the Islamic confluences in someone like Balthasar de-

⁷ Anne M. Carpenter, “Balthasar beyond European Modernity: Re-Thinking *Herrlichkeit* through its Precursors,” *Modern Theology* 37, no. 3 (July 2021): 616–36 at 636.

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Transcendentality and *Gestalt*,” *Communio* 11 (Spring 1984): 4–12 at 10.

⁹ Carpenter, “Balthasar beyond European Modernity,” 616.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 617. In Anne M. Carpenter, *Nothing Gained is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), she extends this project in dialogue with other thinkers.

¹¹ See Carpenter, “Balthasar beyond European Modernity,” 619.

¹² Jennifer Newsome Martin, “‘Only What Is Rooted Is Living’: A Roman Catholic Theology of *Ressourcement*,” in *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*, ed. Darren Sarisky (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 100.

¹³ This is likewise related to colonial modernity. See Axel M. Oaks Takacs, “Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future of Christian-Muslim Relations: The Creative and Destructive Power at the Borders,” Plenary Response, Proceedings of the 76th Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society, *Thinking Catholic Interreligiously*, vol. 76: 11–21.

¹⁴ Carpenter, *Nothing Gained*, 114. Carpenter constructs a “metaphysic” of tradition that is “not so much about that tradition’s content, as its operation ... and its heuristic activities by which tradition *is*—at all or in the first place, in its development, in its sinful self-contradiction, in God’s supernatural action in it” (193–94). In this essay, the query in fact pertains to tradition’s content, but in a comparative theological key: what are the confluences of the Islamic that made the content possible and therefore made tradition’s operations possible? In looking ahead, a responsible tradition demands that its operations become, in part, comparative theological operations as well.

mands a looking ahead toward a tradition that is not only less triumphalist (per Carpenter),¹⁵ but also more open to comparative theological *aggiornamento*, as it were. It attempts to save Balthasar not merely from Eurocentrism, but also from Orientalism.

Comparative theologians have not been inattentive to Balthasar's theology. Francis X. Clooney, SJ engages Balthasar's theology, finding in him a fruitful conversation partner for his comparative theology projects.¹⁶ Additionally, Joshua R. Brown has noted the benefits of reading Balthasar's theological aesthetics for comparative theology.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Balthasar engaged other religious traditions only superficially and in broad-sweeping generalizations, often as a foil to Christian uniqueness.¹⁸ Aside from Greek pagan authors (such as the Neoplatonists) and modern German literature, he never performed a close reading of primary sources from any tradition other than the Christian. Notwithstanding, Balthasar writes at the end of his foreword to the first volume of his project on theological aesthetics that the "overall scope of the present work naturally remains all too Mediterranean" and admits that the "inclusion of other cultures, especially that of Asia, would have been important and fruitful."¹⁹ While he leaves Islam unmentioned, I surmise that Islamic theological aesthetics and theo-poetics would have caught Balthasar's attention.

This essay excavates the confluences of the Islamic in Balthasar's theological aesthetics and what this means for the future of comparative theology with Islam. In the bulk of this essay, I uncover the Islamic *theological* confluences in Balthasar's project through his praise and constructive use of both Aquinas and Goethe. Indeed, Balthasar contrasts his own theology with Rahner's using Goethe as an example: "Rahner has chosen Kant, or, if you prefer, Fichte: the transcendental starting point. And I—as a Germanist—have chosen Goethe, [who stressed] the form (*Gestalt*), the indissolubly unique, organic, developing form (*Gestalt*)."²⁰ A leading proponent of Balthasar's theology, Aidan Nichols, describes Balthasar's project as "Thomas fructified by Goethe and Schelling, and therefore especially concerned with cosmology in its relation to subjecthood and interiority."²¹ Two of the major and formative theological sources of Balthasar's project—Aquinas and Goethe—were themselves impacted by *Islamic theological* confluences. Aquinas was shaped by Avicenna, or Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037)—and Balthasar knew this—but the Muslim philosopher's critical insights into

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁶ Clooney notes that "one might justly judge [Balthasar] to be unsympathetic toward comparative work," even though "his integral understanding of theology in relation to aesthetics and narrative opens a surprisingly rich set of possibilities" for comparative theology (Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996], 289). Clooney also engages Balthasar in *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Joshua R. Brown, "Strange Companions? Hans Urs von Balthasar as Resource for Comparative Theology," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 369–88.

¹⁸ Balthasar reduces non-Christian mysticism to "a rather unimaginative and deracinated version of nondualism ... mentioned simply to provide a foil to the richness of the Christian truth" (Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 66). See also Brown, 371–75.

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), 11. Henceforth, *Glory of the Lord* will be abbreviated *GL*.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Geist und Feuer," *Herder Korrespondenz* 30 (1976): 72–82, at 75.

²¹ Aidan Nichols, *Say it is Pentecost: A Guide through Balthasar's Logic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 211.

ontology and metaphysics were facilitated by his engagement with earlier Islamic theology (*kalām*)—something Balthasar was unaware of. Goethe was inspired by Ḥāfiẓ of Shīrāz (d. 1390)—and Balthasar knew this—but the Muslim poet was steeped in both the Islamic School of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) and the School of Love (*madhhab-i ‘ishq*)—something Balthasar was unaware of. If Carpenter’s essay reads Balthasar to unmoor Christianity from European culture, this essay excavates Islamic theological confluences in Balthasar to open Christian resources for questions of human flourishing to the Islamic traditions.²² With exceptions, Christian scholars of Islam and comparative theologians pay careful attention to early Islamic history and Qur’ānic studies or to well-known figures, such as Ibn Sīnā and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), neglecting the many Muslim mystical and philosophical theologians in between and thereafter. Ultimately, this essay encourages Christian theologians—especially Balthasar scholars—to pay critical attention to the many innovative ways Muslim thinkers developed theo-poetics, theological aesthetics, and “cosmology in its relation to subjecthood and interiority” in post-classical (i.e., post-Avicennan) Islamic intellectual history—especially Sufi-philosophical thought and its constitutive theo-poetic tradition.

Method

This essay will uncover the Islamic *theological* and even *Qur’ānic* confluences that are largely ignored by Balthasar and Balthasar scholars. By ignoring these confluences, Balthasar and his later readers inadvertently occlude how the revelatory content of the Qur’ān may have impacted the development of Christian theology and their own interpretations thereof. This essay will thus “‘de-essentialize’ and partially deconstruct the oppositional contrasts constructed”²³ by Balthasar and some of his later interpreters, however unwittingly. It will proceed in two sections, each of which will have two movements—one that looks back and another that looks ahead.

The first section concerns Aquinas, Balthasar’s “theology of glory,” and his attention to the real distinction between existence and essence. The second section concerns Balthasar’s use of Goethe and his “heritage of glory” that permits perception of the divine presence in the cosmos, particularly in how the German author impacted the Swiss theologian’s conception of *Gestalt*. In both sections, the first movement looking back offers an Islamic pre-history of ideas and thinkers, thereby excavating the Islamic theological confluences of both Aquinas and Goethe; this history employs genealogical comparison and seeks to unearth confluences of the Islamic in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. This first movement permits the second, which looks ahead and explores how these ideas are far more than just historical confluences with Christian and European thought; no, after converging they developed uniquely in the Islamic traditions, and Christian theologians should learn in constructive comparison—and collaboration—therewith. The second movement therefore offers an Islamic post-history, demonstrating how the theologies of the Muslim thinkers and poets at play in the genealogical comparison had later foundational and formative impact on the development of Islamic theology, philosophy, and Sufism

²² See Carpenter, “Balthasar beyond European Modernity,” 625.

²³ Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 84.

(popular, lived religion as well as elite traditions) from the post-classical period to today. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic traditions developed these shared ideas in ways different from the Christian.

This post-history is a necessary intervention in Christian theologies with/of Islam because Christian scholars often end their interest in Islam after the so-called “Islamic Golden Age” (a misnomer at best) of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as if that were when Islamic intellectual discourse peaked, thereby identifying Islamic thought as a mere conveyer of Greek ideas to European Christianity.²⁴ Instead, Christian theologians—especially scholars of Balthasar—would do well to turn to fourteenth to twenty-first century Islamic intellectual, spiritual, and poetic traditions to learn from, and be challenged by, the unique, creative ways in which these ideas developed vis-à-vis “cosmology in its relation to subjecthood and interiority,” which was likewise a central concern of post-classical Islamic thought. This second movement shifts from genealogical to analogical comparison, even if grounded in a shared confluence of ideas.

Confluences of the Islamic offer possibilities for future exercises in comparative theology that endeavor to examine, explain, and construct theology in a secular age. Essentializing Christianity often over and against Islam occludes how these traditions share in the goal of cultivating greater awareness and perception of God in and through the material and embodied *aesthetic forms* of the world. Following Carpenter, it opens Balthasar (specifically) and the Christian tradition (generally) to traditions beyond Europe. If Balthasar was unwittingly shaped by Islamic revelation and its later interpretations, then scholars of the Swiss thinker and Christian theologians generally would benefit from engaging the Islamic traditions in question for continued critical and constructive insights into theo-poetics, theological aesthetics, and “cosmology in its relation to subjecthood and interiority.”

On Confluences, Currents, and Jet Streams: Caveat Lector Tripliciter

The term “confluence” is employed to conceptualize how Islamic theological ideas converged with Christian and German thinkers and eventually made their way to Balthasar. It is an alternative to “influence” and a term emic to the Islamic traditions. Dara Shikoh (d. 1659), a Mughal prince and Qādirī Sufi, is known for penning *Majmaʿ al-Baḥrayn*, or “Confluences of the Two Seas.” It may be described as an exercise in comparative theology *avant la lettre* in which he demonstrates a deep knowledge of both the Vedānta and Islamic Sufi-philosophical traditions, using each to illuminate the other.²⁵ I am likewise drawing from Shankar Nair’s monograph on Hindu-

²⁴ Orientalists, even up into the latter half of the twentieth century, often assumed that al-Ghazālī’s critique of some of Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical positions sounded the death knell of philosophy in the Islamic world. Frank Griffel has demonstrated quite the opposite; al-Ghazālī integrated philosophical methods, terms, and concepts into his theology, which subsequently—if not ironically—made peripatetic philosophy and Neoplatonic thought even more popular among theologians, Sufis, and Sufi-philosophers. See Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

²⁵ See also Shankar Nair, “Comparative Theology *avant la lettre*? A Muslim ‘Deep Reading’ of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Early Modern South Asia,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ*, ed. Axel M. Oaks Takacs and Joseph L. Kimmel (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2023), 442–48.

Muslim intellectual life in early modern South Asia.²⁶ Nair explains the interaction between Islamic and Hindu intellectual traditions in terms of a *confluence* of Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit *jet streams* that produced new intellectual *currents* or *wisps*. While it is counterfactually impossible to determine whether the new currents would have emerged without the confluences, it is unarguable that the confluences produced new currents. That is, confluence implies a coming together of intellectual jet streams that creates a theological insight—a theological creation or *poiesis* of something new. Might the theological insight have been encountered without the confluence or through another confluence? Perhaps. But it did not; it came about *this way*, whether one imagines it as historical accident or divine providence.²⁷ While Dara Shikoh's project is an act of comparison to illuminate similarities between the traditions, and Nair's context is an intentional Mughal project of Hindu-Muslim translation movements, the analogies of confluences, currents, and jet streams function similarly in this project and context, *mutatis mutandis*. The confluence of Islamic jet streams with Christian jet streams mutually shaped the structural integrity of each tradition (though this essay attends to the Christian). The jet streams are modified, or new wisps and currents are created, impacting the long intellectual histories of each jet stream. For Nair's context, the Persian language was the interreligious lexicon that was employed for the confluence of Hindu-Muslim intellectual jet streams. In my case, I will suggest that theo-poetics offers a flexible and creative Christian-Muslim field of study—or lexicon—for exercises in comparative theology. The deployment of confluence over influence is likewise related to three caveats.

First, talk of influence often presumes that the "influencer" is superior to the "influenced," or that "borrowing" implies the borrower is "less than" the tradition from which ideas were borrowed. Not only is this metric outdated, disproven, and based on heteropatriarchal assertions regarding the superiority of activity over receptivity/passivity, but the genealogy would have to be extended (indefinitely) beyond the seventh-century Arabian context and to pre- and non-Islamic sources. Instead, this essay underscores the confluences of the Islamic and Christian traditions and their participation in shared theological endeavors. Islamic and Christian traditions have been shaped by their mutual confluences of the shared human endeavor of explaining how the uncreated God relates to the created order—what *creatio ex nihilo* means for beauty, truth, and goodness. In the case of Balthasar studies, theologians miss out on, *inter alia*, innovative theologies of the imagination, theo-poetics, theological conceptions of passionate love, and a "metaphysics of glory" found within

²⁶ Shankar Nair, *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 23ff.

²⁷ This de-essentialization process must be put into critical conversation with magisterial statements such as *Fides et ratio* no. 72: "in engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history." Too often, Christian scholars, wedded to an alleged "providential plan of God," give undue and absolute centrality to Greco-Latin thought and thereby nearly divinize the Greek and Latin Christian traditions. Other religious and cultural traditions are *not* part of God's providential plan and therefore *inferior* to European Christian traditions; consequently, the *human* choice of the twenty-first century comparative theologian explicitly and intentionally to learn from non-Christian traditions is deemed outside of *divine* providence (as if, somehow, the non-modern Church Fathers had no agency and were entirely directed by God to interpret the teachings of a first-century Palestinian, Aramaic-speaking Jewish teacher solely through the lens of Greco-Latin thought). As Jeannine Hill Fletcher has argued, this logic is the foundation for White, Christian supremacy (*The Sin of White Supremacy* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017], 38).

the Islamic traditions when they essentialize the Christian tradition over against the Islamic or when they end their interest in Islam at the so-called Golden Age and its major figures. Indeed, “confluence” precludes the excessive focus in historiographical research on the “influence” of Arabic-Islamic philosophy on medieval Christian scholastic theology (or the “influence” of seventh-century biblical sources, Syriac texts, and rabbinical literature on the Qur’ān)—as illuminating as these may be and in which this essay participates. Religious and cultural traditions are all a series of mutual influences, which is to say that global intellectual history is a series of confluences and revealing those confluences unlocks creative—*poetic*—potential (especially for the Christian comparative theologian).

Second, this is an *essai*, a trial, a test. While I will give the genealogy of Islamic traditions that *conflued* with Aquinas, Goethe, and thus Balthasar, I will not offer a close, critical reading of texts Balthasar cites of Aquinas and Goethe, compare the timeline of writings to answer “when so-and-so read such-and-such and thus had been shaped by so-and-so,” or propose a clearcut homological comparison of certain words, phrases, and so on. It is my hope that this essay inspires that important research. This essay is intended to open Christian theology to lesser known (in “the West,” at least) figures and ideas of the Islamic traditions. Nonetheless, a couple avenues of comparative theological exploration are offered.

Third, at moments Balthasar and some of his readers come under censure for essentializing the Christian tradition over and against other religious traditions and inadvertently casting the former as superior to the latter. These critiques make no judgements on intentions, despite their unwitting perpetuation of Western, Christian supremacy. As Brown reminds us, someone like Henri de Lubac (a fellow associate of the *nouvelle théologie* who, unlike Balthasar, was open to learning from non-Christian religions, specifically the Buddhist) opined that Balthasar may have been “the most cultured man of our age,”²⁸ but the “culture in which Balthasar was so deeply steeped was primarily German modernity.”²⁹ Consequently, Balthasar—like most of his European contemporaries—was shaped, or traditioned, by the intellectual imaginary and ideology of Orientalism. In other words, Balthasar engaged and appropriated scholarship and culture that was “formed in no small part by the intellectual paradigms of Orientalism,”³⁰ which thus cast not only Asian religions and cultures but also Islamic traditions as inferior to Western, Christian intellectual and spiritual traditions. Some of his later interpreters uncritically adopted aspects of these positions. Yet, as Brown notes, even though “this Orientalist presupposition seems extant in Balthasar’s thought, it does not seem an active feature of his theology.”³¹ A task of this essay is to uncover the Islamic confluences—of the past and the future—that could save Balthasar and his later interpreters not merely from Eurocentrism but also from Orientalism.³²

²⁸ Brown, “Strange Companions?,” 373 (citing Henri de Lubac, “A Witness to Christ in the Church: Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 2 [Fall 1975]: 228-40 at 230).

²⁹ Brown, “Strange Companions?,” 373.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 374.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Saving Balthasar (and Balthasar studies) from Orientalism is likewise a step toward undoing and unsaying Christian Islamophobia, because “[in] the transition from late medieval anti-Islamic theology to early modern Orientalism and then to modern Orientalism and racism, it becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle the political discourses producing ‘European superiority over Oriental backwardness,’ as Edward Said puts it, from theological Christian supremacy” (Axel M. Oaks Takacs, “Undoing and Unsaying Islamophobia: Toward a Restorative and Praxis-Oriented Catholic Theology with Islam,” *Horizons*, vol. 48, no. 2 [2021]: 341-42).

Aquinas and the "Theology of Glory"

Scholars of Balthasar attest to the variable impact Aquinas had on the Swiss theologian's metaphysics. Whether Balthasar's metaphysics was "decisively affected by his study of Thomas Aquinas"³³ or that "Balthasar regarded [Aquinas] with perhaps more esteem than any other theologian in history,"³⁴ it is unarguable that references to Aquinas span across all his major works. Balthasar is not strictly a Thomist, or if he is, his Thomism is contested (he had sharp criticisms for his contemporary Thomists). Notwithstanding, he believes Aquinas's metaphysics enables the emergence of a "theology of glory" that is a central concern of his project. Additionally, there is a growing scholarly interest in how Aquinas structures Balthasar's thought and shapes his theological aesthetics. Anne Carpenter, in her *Theo-Poetics*, rekindled interest in Balthasar's Thomism. Relevant to the present essay, Carpenter suggests a thick and even mutually symmetrical relationship between metaphysics and aesthetics in Balthasar's theology—she argues, constructively, that this should be the case for theology *in toto*. Her project demonstrates how Balthasar's engagement with the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins is illuminating and constructive precisely because of his reliance on Thomas' distinction between *esse* and *essentia*.³⁵ Overall, Aquinas suffuses her book on Balthasar's theo-poetics. Jennifer Newsome Martin has continued this inquiry on the impact of Aquinas on Balthasar's theology and has demonstrated how Thomas' account of both divine simplicity and *analogia entis* shape the Swiss theologian's Trinitarian theology vis-à-vis the creaturely imaging of God.³⁶ For Newsome Martin, this is possible in part through "the creature's non-identity of essence and existence," which "both reveals and depends upon the simplicity of a God whose essence and existence are one and the same."³⁷ Carpenter and Newsome Martin confirm earlier scholarship on Balthasar's thought, viz., the central and formative importance of Aquinas's real distinction between existence (*esse* or "act of being," *actus essendi*, sometimes *ens*) and essence (*essentia*). However, they also move beyond it and dig deeper to discover that Balthasar is more of a Thomist than others have let on. This essay is in dialogue with their excavation of Balthasar's Thomism, however it seeks to take the conversation in an Islamic direction rather than toward questions of Thomism or Thomisms.

"In short, the *history* of ancient metaphysics *culminates* in Balthasar's exposition of Aquinas, specifically his doctrine of the real distinction."³⁸ The *emphases* in this quote illustrate the inadvertent way earlier scholarship on Balthasar's theology was cast as the apotheosis of "ancient metaphysics," as if no other religious tradition—such as the Islamic—has any value to add to the discussion. According to Balthasar, "Thomas's major creative achievement ... [is] his definition of *esse* and its relation to essences."³⁹ He suggests that

³³ Fergus Kerr, "Balthasar and Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225.

³⁴ Angelo Campodonico, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Interpretation of the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," in *Nova et Vetera* 8, no. 1 (2010): 34.

³⁵ Anne Carpenter, *Theo-Poetics: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Risk of Art and Being* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 170.

³⁶ Jennifer Newsome Martin, "The Consubstantial Otherness of God: Divine Simplicity and the Trinity in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Modern Theology* 35, no. 3 (July 2019): 542-57.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 548.

³⁸ Kerr, "Balthasar and Metaphysics," 231 (*emphasis mine*). See *GL IV*, trans. Brian McNeil et al. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 393-412.

³⁹ Balthasar, *GL IV*, 393.

Aquinas combines Greek metaphysics with Christian revelation—particularly the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*—to place God “in a new and much more radical way ... over and above all cosmic being.”⁴⁰ God is thus “the Wholly Other” and “ever greater” than any knowledge we obtain of Him from our experience of essences, of which God is their “efficient, exemplary and final cause.”⁴¹ Balthasar sought to balance divine immanence with divine transcendence, i.e., similarity between God and humans “always against the horizon of ever-greater difference.”⁴² Aquinas’s real distinction enables such a balancing act: “The real distinction between existence and essence necessarily opens our eyes to the truth that God is self-subsistent being [kataphatic theology] but it also closes our eyes and forbids us to cling on to what we have seen [apophatic theology].”⁴³ Stressing one side of the equation over the other invariably leads to rationalism or pantheistic idealism, so claimed Balthasar.⁴⁴ Instead, Balthasar asserts—with some hubris—that Thomas combines Greek thought with biblical revelation to elaborate a “philosophical reflection of the free glory of the living God of the Bible and in this way the *interior completion of ancient (and thus human) philosophy*,”⁴⁵ a reflection, he suggests, that philosophy “from India to Greece and Arabia” was unable to accomplish.⁴⁶ This is a clear example of what Nicholson calls the essentializing and oppositional contrasts produced in the process of identity formation—and, I might add in this case, a touch of Orientalist and even supremacist theology.⁴⁷ With the stroke of a pen, Balthasar casts aside whole swaths of the Islamic (and Hindu, Buddhist, even Jewish) philosophical and theological traditions as wholly inadequate in maintaining the “free glory of the living God” by balancing divine immanence with divine transcendence, creaturely dependence on God with creaturely freedom—again, as if these traditions have nothing of benefit for the concerns of Christian theology.⁴⁸ Let us prescind from another critical inquiry, viz., why Balthasar should judge *this* goal to be the *only* goal of other religious traditions and their accompanying philosophical and theological systems oriented toward human flourishing—comparative theology would challenge such a myopic assertion.

Later, in the fifth volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar writes that “the attempt to incorporate all aspects of the Christian inheritance within an ontology stands or falls with the interpretation of the Ontological Difference between the existent and Being.”⁴⁹ In elaborating his metaphysics of glory, Balthasar contends that it is only through the “real distinction” between *actus essendi* and the various *essentiae* “uniquely grasped by Thomas Aquinas,”⁵⁰ that a theology of glory emerges able to perceive the wonder of being, of cre-

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Newsome Martin, “The Consubstantial Otherness of God,” 547.

⁴³ Balthasar, *GL IV*, 405.

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, 405–6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 406–7 (*emphasis added*).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Balthasar’s elevation of Aquinas is echoed later in *Fides et ratio*. While the tenor of the encyclical is one of tentative openness to other traditions, it masks the Islamic impact on Catholic theology (reducing it to “Arab thought,” see section 43) and it nearly crowns Greek thought as superior, given that it was “God’s providential plan” to lead the Catholic tradition to engage “Greco-Latin thought” (section 72). See https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html. See also footnote 27.

⁴⁸ This balancing is rendered possible through the real distinction. See Kerr, “Balthasar and Metaphysics,” 234.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *GL V*, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 445.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 446 (*emphasis added*).

ation. As already mentioned, the more recent contributions by Carpenter and Newsome Martin confirm the central importance of the real distinction for Balthasar. "For Balthasar, then, the human being images God in the dynamic, imperfectly realized interplay between essence and existence, and does so in a positive rather than a merely negative mode. This claim has deeply Thomistic roots [according to Balthasar]."⁵¹ What of the Islamic roots?

The great Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā in part bequeathed the real distinction between being/existence (*wujūd*) and essences (*māhiyyāt*) to the Angelic Doctor, as is evident in Thomas's earlier work *On Being and Essence* (*De ente et essentia*), and even in his later works in which the actuality-potentiality distinction predominates.⁵² Ibn Sīnā's heritage remains central to Aquinas's metaphysics and thus to Balthasar's project. Furthermore, it is this distinction—a corollary of *creatio ex nihilo*—that makes possible a theological aesthetics capable of perceiving, with wonder, the epiphanies of the Beautiful, the Good, and the True of creation. All of this, it seems, was made possible through the confluence of the Islamic with Aquinas.

Balthasar is aware of Ibn Sīnā's impact on Aquinas's metaphysics.⁵³ He is, however, unaware of its Islamic pre-history and post-history. The Islamic pre-history demonstrates a Qur'ānic source for the real distinction, which is unsurprising given how the biblical imaginary shaped Islamic traditions—something to which the work of David Burrell attests (though he ignores the early *kalām* sources).⁵⁴ The Islamic post-history demonstrates how Ibn Sīnā's distinction between *wujūd* (existence) and the *māhiyyāt* (essences), along with several other metaphysical discoveries, developed in creative, complex, and rich ways, ways comparative theologians and scholars of Balthasar would do well to explore for theological insights.

Aquinas's Islamic Pre-History

It is often assumed that the real distinction between essence and existence bequeathed to Aquinas was the result of Ibn Sīnā's reading of Aristotle's corpus *absent* any other theological context. This supposition perhaps begins with Etienne Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers*, when in his chapter on "Essence and Existence" he affirms that "Avicenna himself is the real starting point, because the influence of his doctrine can clearly be seen in many philosophies of essence, mediaeval or modern."⁵⁵ However, the presumption is that Ibn Sīnā read the Arabic translations of Aristotle's texts, analyzed and commented on them with his (quite frankly, impressive) intellect, and

⁵¹ Newsome Martin, "The Consubstantial Otherness of God," 548.

⁵² To clarify, *ens* or *esse* is used by Aquinas for being/existence, which is Ibn Sīnā's *wujūd*. Later, when Aquinas appropriates the Aristotelian language of act and potency, he maintains the real distinction in terms of *actus essendi* (Ibn Sīnā's *wujūd*) and *essentiae* (Ibn Sīnā's *māhiyyāt*). "The most obvious case of such an appropriation is the real distinction between being (*ens*)—Avicenna would say existence—and essence (*essentia*) ... Even in Thomas's later works where the Aristotelian actuality-potentiality distinction comes to predominate, he never fully discards Avicenna's essence-existence distinction, as is clearly witnessed in Thomas's account of divine simplicity and divine perfection at *Summa Theologiae*, part I, question 3 and 4, respectively" (Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 252).

⁵³ See Balthasar, *GL V*, 10, 17, 48, 91, and 560; and *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 550-51, as well as *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory II*, trans. G. Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 245-46.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), and *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁵⁵ Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, second edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 75.

extracted the distinction between existence (*wujūd*) and essence (*māhiyya*) intuitively. This is only half the story and inadvertently occludes the Islamic—Qur’ānic and theological—context and its impact on Ibn Sīnā and his interpretation of Aristotle’s corpus.

The other half of the story concerns Ibn Sīnā’s engagement with early Islamic theology, or *kalām*, via the texts of the *mutakallimūn*, the Muslim theologians. Wisnovsky demonstrates how Ibn Sīnā first engaged the categories of *shay’iyya*, or thingness, of the Muslim theologians when discussing the essence/existence distinction. It is only later that he adopts the language of Arabic translations of Aristotle and that of al-Fārābī (d. 950).

Avicenna straddled two worlds: the world of *falsafa* and the world of *kalām*. His discussions of the relationship between thing and existent are clearly informed by previous *kalām* debates: both the terminology and the issues at stake are identical. But when Avicenna adopts the language of the Arabic Aristotle and of al-Fārābī, a slight conceptual shift is detectable. Instead of analyzing the relationship between thing and existent, Avicenna speaks of the relationship between essence (*māhiyya*, literally “whatness”) and existence (*wujūd*). The term he uses for essence, *māhiyya*, comes from the Arabic version of the various logic texts that constitute the *Organon*, in which a definition, when properly constructed, is held to indicate the essence (*māhiyya*) of a thing.⁵⁶

In other words, Ibn Sīnā’s most formative contribution to medieval scholastic theology—the distinction between essence and existence—was itself inspired by earlier *kalām* arguments on the distinction between a “thing” (*shay’*) and its existence. Furthermore, *their*—that is, the *mutakallimūn*’s—non-Aristotelian understanding of “thingness” (*shay’iyya*) and its relationship to the divine creative act comes from a Qur’ānic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, such as Surah 16 (*an-nahl*), v. 40: “If We ever will a thing [*shay’*] [to exist], all We say is: ‘Be!’ And it is! [*kun fa-yakūn*]”⁵⁷ As Wisnovsky demonstrates, Ibn Sīnā’s contribution is not in “having invented the distinction out of thin air,” but rather “in his framing of the distinction,” supplied by *kalām*, within the language of Aristotelian metaphysics.⁵⁸

Leaving out very many details of this pre-history, the intention is only to illustrate how Aquinas’s real distinction, inspired as it was by Ibn Sīnā, owes as much to Islamic theology’s ninth- and tenth-century debates among the Ash’arī, Māturīdī, and Mu’tazilī schools as it does to Aristotelian metaphysics. One can tentatively suggest, then, that Aquinas’s examination and constructive engagement with the real distinction results from confluences of the Islamic—Qur’ānic revelation proclaimed by Muhammad, very early *kalām* interpretations of the Qur’ān—and not from Ibn Sīnā’s reading of Aristotle in a discursive space void of Islamic revelation and theology. We

⁵⁶ Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicenna” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 109. Of note is that *māhiyya* is the literal translation of the equivalent term in Aristotle’s Greek, τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, or “the what it was to be [a thing],” which produced the Latin, *quidditas* (quiddity), or *quid sit* (what [a thing] is) vs. *an sit* (that it is). These distinctions are latent within Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, but Ibn Sīnā’s confluence of Islamic theological questions with Aristotle’s texts creates the novel distinction between essence and existence, which later shaped Aquinas.

⁵⁷ See also Qur’ān 2:117; 3:47, 59; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 36:83; 40:68.

⁵⁸ Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 110.

can perceive the wonder of being and creation—a theology of glory—in a Christian idiom *in part* because of early Islamic theological hermeneutics of revelation vis-à-vis the divine, creative will: a Christian theological project that results from confluences of the Islamic.

Interpreters of Balthasar's theology and his reading of Aquinas's real distinction underscore the "impact of the Christian doctrine of creation," which allows "the mystery of being" to "be approached with appropriate respect for divine transcendence and immanence."⁵⁹ However, it is precisely the Qur'ānic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*—something only implied in biblical texts—that stimulated the Islamic theological discussion over the distinction between a "thing" and its existence granted to it by God's creative will and command.⁶⁰ They were wrestling with the same issues because the biblical imaginary is shared by both the Christian and Qur'ānic doctrine of creation. Ibn Sīnā had to reconcile Greek thought with Qur'ānic theology, which resulted in the distinction between existence and essence converging with Thomas and later Christian theology. This distinction, according to Balthasar, "allows us to see the radical difference between creatures and God, and thus to respect each, letting creatures have their own reality and letting God be God, collapsing neither into the other."⁶¹ Given this pre-history, we must acknowledge the Islamic theological—even Qur'ānic—confluences within a Christian theology of glory.

Aquinas's Islamic Post-History

Aquinas refracted Ibn Sīnā's distinction in his own unique ways. Later Christian theologians and Western philosophers from the medieval to modern period, at least according to Balthasar, often emphasized one aspect of this distinction over the other; this led either to rationalism or to pantheistic idealism in the history of Western thought.⁶² Christian theologians often ignore the rich and complex Islamic theological post-history of Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics. This trend, at least in modern Catholic theology, once again begins with Gilson's treatment of Ibn Sīnā.⁶³ Gilson juxtaposes the determinism of the Muslim philosopher's Necessary Existence (along with the concomitant *lack* of the created essences' truth or being)⁶⁴ with the Christian doctrine of divine and human freedom in which God freely creates and creatures truly *are*, and *are free*: "There should be freedom in the world because the Christian God has eternally been free with respect to the world."⁶⁵ After the condemnation of Avicennian theses in 1277, Christian theologians reified and essentialized Islamic philosophy/theology as frozen in that Avicennian moment.

⁵⁹ Kerr, "Balthasar and Metaphysics," 234.

⁶⁰ Brian Robinette reviews literature on the biblical roots of *creatio ex nihilo* to conclude that, while the doctrine is not excluded by the Bible, it certainly "does not explicitly engage the question of 'Being/beings' that informs the . . . discussion of onto-theology" and *creatio ex nihilo* (see *The Difference Nothing Makes: Creation, Christ, Contemplation* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023], 28-31, quote at 28).

⁶¹ Kerr, "Balthasar and Metaphysics," 234.

⁶² See Balthasar, *GL IV*, 405-6.

⁶³ See Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 76-84.

⁶⁴ For Gilson, according to Ibn Sīnā, "it is not enough to say that, out of themselves, essences are not. The truth about them is that, however we look at them, there is nothing in any of them that calls for its existence. The First alone is necessary, hence He *is*, and He *is truly*, and, since truth is a property of being, the First is truth in virtue of His own necessity. But what about the rest? Since no possible essence is endowed with the slightest determination to existence, it has neither being or truth" (*ibid.*, 78).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

In doing so, not only do we perpetuate Orientalist claims about a deterministic “East” (in contrast to a free “West”), but we also ignore creative insights from the Islamic traditions, which struggled to maintain the same tension between divine immanence and transcendence, divine sovereignty and human freedom, that is the concern of the Christian traditions generally and Balthasar particularly. For in the Islamic traditions, *Allāhu akbar*, “God is always greater” than what humans can know, see, think, and experience. Yet, God is also immanent, for “We are nearer to [the human soul] than you all, but you do not perceive” (Q 56:85) and “We are nearer to [a person] than his jugular vein” (Q 50:16). Perhaps this tension is best encapsulated by the Qur’ānic verse, “There is nothing like unto [God’s] likeness, He is the Hearing and the Seeing” (Q 42:11), which begins with transcendence and ends with immanence.⁶⁶ Likewise, Ibn Sīnā’s (alleged)⁶⁷ determinism mingles in post-classical thought with Sufism and the School of Love (*madhhab-i ‘ishq*). His Necessary Existence meets the later traditions’ hermeneutical engagement with the popular *ḥadīth qudsī* (words of the Prophet Muhammad in the voice of God), “I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the world” and many other theologies that seek to return freedom to God and to humans via love.

If early Islamic *kalām* stressed transcendence and early Sufism—or Islamic mystical traditions—stressed immanence, the language of Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics permitted this tension to be debated in complex and creative ways from the twelfth century to today. “Avicenna laid down a limited number of positions on the distinction, positions that would eventually form the core of a radically expanded spectrum of positions.”⁶⁸ Historically parallel to the development of Christian thought, Ibn Sīnā’s distinction had foundational and formative impact on the development of Islamic theology, philosophy, and the Sufi-philosophical amalgam of classical and post-classical Islamic intellectual thought.⁶⁹ This distinction produces a unique and different set of traditions, from, inter alia, Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274), Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274), Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350), Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 1385), and Jāmī (d. 1492), to Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā Lāhījī (fl. 15th c.), Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 1502), Mulla Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1640), Mīr Findiriskī (d. 1641), Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī (d. 1648), and Hādī Sabzavārī (d. 1874)—all worthy of constructive investigation in a comparative light. The list of Muslim thinkers and diversity of Islamic positions are as protracted as the list of

⁶⁶ Embedded in this verse is similarity (God’s likeness/*mithlihi*) in ever-greater dissimilarity (nothing like/*laysa ... shay*), followed by similarity (He is the Hearing and the Seeing).

⁶⁷ Alleged, because the determinism of which Western and often Christian thinkers—such as Gilson—accuse Ibn Sīnā is not wholly justified. “Avicenna concludes that the Necessary Existent does not intend (*qaṣd*) the existence of the world, but he is also quick to add that neither does that which proceeds from the Necessary Existent proceed by nature, that is, by necessity. Avicenna’s...[argument is] that there are two conditions that guarantee that a given act is not by nature: One is that there is a recognition (*ma’rifā*) on the part of the agent that it is performing that act, and the other is that the act involves the consent (*riḍā*) of the agent” (McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 205-6). Because Ibn Sīnā’s Necessary Existence has both recognition and consent in the creative process, He creates not by nature but by divine will or volition (*irāda*); see McGinnis, *Avicenna*, 206. The novel insight regarding *riḍā*, or consent, could also be creatively and comparatively engaged, for the Arabic word also has semantic resonances with acceptance, pleasure, delight, and good will. Ibn Sīnā’s Necessary Existence takes delight in creating the world.

⁶⁸ Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 110.

⁶⁹ See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 31.

Christian thinkers and diversity of Christian positions—if not more, given the lack of magisterial and papal restrictions in Islamic authority, along with the social and theological value given to ambiguity, coherent contradiction, paradox, and metaphorical language in Islamic intellectual traditions and among societies of Muslims historically.⁷⁰ Christian theologians would benefit from approaching these Islamic traditions as collaborators in the project of explicating *creatio ex nihilo*, viz., how God relates to creation, the latter of which remains ever existentially dependent on the former, while not erasing human freedom. In other words, confluences of the Islamic with Christian theology need not be a historical artifact.

Some scholars of medieval theology and contemporary Christian theology are often still held hostage by the false (Orientalist) thesis that Islamic intellectual thought peaked in the twelfth century, when Greek thought was preserved by “Arab”—noticeably *not* Muslim—philosophers who then delivered it to Christianity for its “culmination.” This could not be further from the truth, as Islamic theology, philosophy, and Sufism coalesced into a Sufi-philosophical amalgam that offered creative interpretations, distinct from how Aquinas and his successors developed it. Furthermore, the disciplinary categories employed by Christian scholars would be challenged by the unique ways in which the Sufi-philosophical amalgam *merged* the theories and methods of philosophy, theology, and mysticism and *blurred* the distinction between elite traditions and popular discourses and practices of lived religion. Whether it is Ibn ‘Arabī’s complex doctrine of *tajalliyāt*, or theophanies, in which everything is a divine self-manifestation, or Mulla Ṣadrā’s intricate metaphysics of *tashkīk al-wujūd*, gradation of existence, in which creaturely realities are various intensities or gradations of existence, post-Avicennan metaphysics developed creative ways to relate creation to God beyond Thomistic participation metaphysics.⁷¹

In fact, regarding the essence-existence distinction, “it is the Shī‘ī and Sunnī *mutakallimūn* who propel the Avicennian tradition forward.”⁷² In other words, Muslim theologians develop this tradition, not necessarily philosophers (even though, after the thirteenth century, the borders among philosophy, theology, and Sufism are permeable).

The realization that Shī‘ī and Sunnī *mutakallimūn* are the true Avicennians comes as a bit of a shock, given our expectation that philosophy and *kalām* are naturally

⁷⁰ See *ibid.*, 386–408.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Robert Wisnovsky, “The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-Classical (ca.1100–1900) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations,” in *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries*, ed. Peter Adamson, Han Baltussen, and M. W. F. Stone, vol. 2 (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2004), 149–91, and his “One Aspect of The Avicennian Turn in Sunni Theology,” in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2004): 65–100. See also Ayman Shihadeh, “From Al-Ghazali to Al-Razi: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology” in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2005): 141–79 and Ayman Shihadeh, *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). See also the scholarship of Khaled El-Rouayheb. The existence-essence distinction elaborated by Ibn Sīnā merged with the School of Ibn ‘Arabī in the commentaries of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274) and Dawūd al-Qaysarī, both disciples of Ibn ‘Arabī. David Burrell is one of the few scholars of Aquinas who has attempted to engage constructively in comparison with Mullā Ṣadrā’s metaphysics, even though his project is more philosophical than constructive or systematic theology. See Burrell’s “Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) and Mulla Sadra Shirazi (980/1572–1050/1640) and the Primacy of *esse/wujud* in Philosophical Theology,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999): 207–19; “Mulla Sadra on ‘Substantial Motion’: A Clarification and a Comparison with Thomas Aquinas,” *Journal of Shia Islamic Studies* 2, no. 4 (2009): 369–86; and “Mullā Ṣadrā’s Ontology Revisited,” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 6 (2010): 45–66.

⁷² Wisnovsky, “Avicenna,” 113.

and perpetually opposed trends in Islamic intellectual history—an expectation fed by generations of Western scholars, sometimes citing al-Ghazālī’s supposedly fatal attacks; sometimes regurgitating the stale taxonomies presented by pre-modern Muslim doxographers ...; and sometimes blithely superimposing onto Islamic intellectual history a distinction between two categories, “philosophy” and “theology,” which itself arose as a result of the institutional separation between faculties of arts and faculties of divinity in medieval European universities.⁷³

Furthermore, the Sufi-philosophical amalgam (combining Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought with Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics) and the School of Love, which later fused with the School of Ibn ‘Arabī in writers such as Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 1289) and Jāmī, developed imaginative and intricate theological positions, which impacted both popular and elite traditions from West Africa to Central and South Asia and Indonesia. However, as Wisnovsky rightfully avers, Western scholars—and here we can include some Christian theologians—have simply ignored the 900-year history of the development of Islamic thought because of their misinformed assumption that Islamic intellectual history peaked in the twelfth century, or that it was a mere guarantor of Greek thought for the European Christian intellectual tradition. However, this Islamic post-history demands constructive theology through analogical comparison; in other words, it demands comparative theology. Given the theological inquiries shared between Christian and Islamic traditions in this post-history, comparative theology with Islamic traditions can be more fruitfully described as a collaborative endeavor to *confluence*—as it were—the Islamic and Christian jet streams.

In looking back, let us look ahead and offer two possible directions such a comparative theological project could take. First, Christian theologians writing about Aquinas, Balthasar, and a metaphysics of glory often remain beholden to “participation metaphysics,” which, in its shortest form, states that “God is essential being, whereas other things are beings by participation” (*Deus est ens per essentiam, et alia per participationem*, ST I^a q. 4 a. 3 ad 3). Theophany is often negatively appraised as approaching pantheism—especially given the various condemnations of its principal proponent, John Scotus Eriugena (d. 877), in the eleventh, thirteenth, and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁴ However, in the post-classical Islamic traditions elaborated above, it is *theophany* (*tajallī Allāh*) which reigns as the primary concept to understand the relation between *al-Ḥaq* (the Real, God) and *al-khalq* (creation). The term itself, along with its use to signify the divine self-manifestation, had been around for centuries before its primary expositor, Ibn ‘Arabī, elaborated on it. However, it was generally relegated to the discourse of the Sufis. The famous Sufi axiom, *lā takrār fi’l-tajallī*, “there is no repetition in self-manifestation,” is cited often by Muslim thinkers, and

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ For a more detailed report of various condemnations, see Maïeul Cappuyens, *Jean Scot Érigène, Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre, Sa Pensée* (Bruxelles: Culture Et Civilisation, 1969), 248 fn. 2. See also Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86; and Jean Potter’s introduction to Eriugena, *Periphyseon = On the Division of Nature*, trans. Myra L. Uhlfelder, introduction and summaries by Jean A. Potter (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), xxiii.

it is perhaps based on what Ibn 'Arabī ascribes to Abū Ṭalīb al-Makkī (d. 996), the author of the Sufi manual, *Qūt al-qulūb*: "God never discloses Himself in a single form to two individuals, nor in a single form twice."⁷⁵ This statement regarding one's personal encounter with a divine self-disclosure was transformed into a cosmological principle upon which an entire onto-theology is based. Yes, a Sufi may perceive a divine self-disclosure, but in fact the whole cosmos is nothing but an unbounded collection of infinite, unique divine self-disclosures. The aim of the human wayfarer is to become a *muḥaqqiq*, or a "realized one" able to *perceive* the divine self-disclosures via *dhawq*, or experiential, embodied knowing (literally, "tasting"), and not merely rationally assent to their existence.

Indeed, the post-classical Islamic Sufi-philosophical traditions were in large part meticulous debates over the proper balance between God's immanence—*tashbīh*—and God's transcendence—*tanzīh*—that theophany is supposed to maintain. According to Ibn 'Arabī, everything in the cosmos is "God not God" (*huwa lā huwa*), or "they are they are not."⁷⁶ Tension between existence and non-existence, between God and not God, between unity and duality, thus exists at every level of creation. Given this, he urges us to "see with two eyes," i.e., the eye of transcendence or apophasis (*tanzīh*) and the eye of immanence or kataphasis (*tashbīh*). For example, later in the famous fifteenth-century Persian commentary on a tremendously popular poem, *The Rose Garden of Mystery* (*Gulshan-i Rāz*) by Mahmūd Shabestari (d. 1340), the commentator, Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā Lāhijī (d. 1507), writes:

Those who profess immanence (*mushabbih*) ... profess the Real to resemble the physical ... and they do not know the transcendence of the Real's essence, and they are confined within immanence ... [But] those who profess transcendence [also] have one eye because they know the Real's essence only through the attribute of transcendence. But they do not see and do not know the modality [*kaifiyat*] of [the Real's] manifestation in the loci of manifestation. Seeing transcendence alone and seeing immanence alone both in reality fall short of recognition of God. The Folk of the Real bring together transcendence and immanence This person is the recognizer of God and sees with two eyes.⁷⁷

What we have here is Sufi spirituality meeting post-Avicennan metaphysics to engage, in effect, "cosmology in its relation to subjecthood and interiority."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt Al-Makkīyah*, ed. Osman Yahya (Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), I.266.9. [Volume. Page. Line]. See William Chittick *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 103.

⁷⁶ "So in existence 'they are they are not': The Manifest is their properties, so 'they are.' But they have no entity in existence, so 'they are not.' In the same way, '[God] is and is not': He is the Manifest, so '[God] is.' But the distinction among the existents is intelligible and perceived by the senses because of the diversity of the properties of the entities, so '[God] is not'" (Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.160.4-6).

⁷⁷ Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā Lāhijī, *Mafātīḥ Al-i'jāz Fī Sharḥ Gulshan-i Rāz* (Tih-rān: Zavvār, 1992), 69.

⁷⁸ Ibn 'Arabī writes in his most influential text, the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*: "The cosmos is nothing but [the Real's] self-disclosure [i.e., theophany] in the forms of their immutable entities whose [phenomenal] existence is impossible without Him." From the *Faṣṣ*/Chapter of Abraham: Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Niẓām al-Dīn Aḥmad (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 2015), 82 (Arabic, my translation); for English, see Ibn 'Arabī, *Ibn Al-'Arabī's Fuṣūṣ Al-ḥikam: An Annotated Translation of 'The Bezels of Wisdom'*, trans. Binyamin Abrahamov (New York: Routledge, 2015), 51; or Ibn 'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom (=Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 93.

Theophany is not foreign to the Christian tradition, however. Aquinas's teacher, Albert the Great, uses the term interchangeably with participation and in a way similar to Eriugena regarding the objective manifestation and subjective perception of the divine presence.⁷⁹ Additionally, *theophania*, or God-appearance, is also the word used in the Greek Christian tradition to refer to the Incarnation of the Divine Word in the person of Jesus Christ, and constructive insights regarding the Incarnation and theophany could be made in a comparative theological exploration with Islamic traditions.⁸⁰ The tradition of theophany could be recovered, salvaged, and constructively illuminated in conversation with Islamic traditions regarding *tajalliyāt* or theophanies. This recovery could be in comparative conversation with Balthasar's complicated position on divine theophany found in *Glory of the Lord* volumes I, VI, and VII, wherein he relates Old Testament theophanies to the Incarnation and the appearance of δόξα (glory, as in Luke's account of the Transfiguration).⁸¹ If we tie this to Balthasar's constructive theology found in his work on Maximus the Confessor, rooted in Chalcedonian Christology, a comparative theological exercise with *theophany* in Islamic traditions (especially regarding the Muḥammadan Light [*nūr*] or Reality [*ḥaqīqa*]) as it relates to participation metaphysics and a cosmic Christology would certainly emerge and prove insightful.⁸²

Secondly, the post-classical poetic traditions elaborate on the Qur'ānic phrase that facilitated Ibn Sīnā's discovery of the distinction, *kun fa-yakūn*, "Be! And it is!" (Qur'ān 16:40) This Qur'ānic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which suggests the radical dependence of creatures on God, makes its way into popular poetry and music from the fourteenth to the twenty-first century. The post-history develops in ways ignored by Christian scholars. Vernacular traditions of the *ghazal* (love lyric), *rubā'iyāt* (quatrains), and *mathnawī* (didactic poetry) include this Qur'ānic phrase often to poetically illustrate the glory and beauty of God and the radical dependence—desire—of creation on/for the Real. Commentarial traditions expand creatively thereon, noting how the Divine Names of Beauty (*al-jamāl*) and Glory/Majesty (*al-jalāl*) attract the human wayfarer through desire while maintaining their ontological need for existence.⁸³ South Asian *qawwālī* singers historically and contemporarily employ this phrase musically. In fact, the hit Bollywood film *Rockstar* has a musical scene of "Kun Faya Kun" by A. R. Rahman, Javed Ali, and Mohit Chauhan that has garnered 300+ million views on YouTube with comments by both Hindus and Muslims praising its message.⁸⁴ It behooves Christian scholars of Balthasar and theologians writing on theo-poetics and theological aesthetics to explore these traditions. In fact, it is to these poetic traditions that I now turn.

⁷⁹ See Simon Tugwell, *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 84–86.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Axel M. Oaks Takacs, "Perceiving Divinity, Cultivating Wonder: A Christian-Islamic Comparative Theological Essay on Balthasar's *Gestalt*," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology*, 326–44.

⁸¹ "Jesus is the *theophany itself*, which now extends all the way to the Incarnation" (Balthasar, *GL I*, 315). For his connection between the Transfiguration and Old Testament theophanies, see *GL VII*, 341ff.

⁸² See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2003).

⁸³ Persian love lyricists, such as Ḥāfīz, play on orthographic similarities between *nāz* and *niyāz* to this end: the Beloved's coquetry (*nāz*) draws to Herself the human lover, who is in need (*niyāz*) of the Beloved (who is without need [*bi-niyāz*]).

⁸⁴ For the musical scene, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T94PHkuydcw>. For the English lyrics: <https://www.bollynook.com/en/lyrics/7529/kun-fayakun/>.

Goethe and the "Heritage of Glory"

As a scholar of German literature, Goethe interpolates himself endlessly in Balthasar's Trilogy, but especially in his seven-volume *Glory of the Lord*, in the fifth volume of which Balthasar dedicates nearly seventy pages to the poet, playwright, novelist, and scientist.⁸⁵ For Balthasar, Goethe "unquestionably represents a last secular manifestation of the heritage of 'glory' which the history of western metaphysics has bequeathed to us."⁸⁶ Again, of note is the Occidocentric, essentializing nature of this claim that ignores the Islamic pre-history to be described below. He has much praise for the German poet, from whom his use of the term *Gestalt*, or form, is in part taken. However, we must remember that for Balthasar *Gestalt* means everything from outward shape to historical figure, and it includes medieval conceptions of form as idea or image as well as beautiful shape (*formosa*). He draws from Goethe but modifies it with Aquinas. The complex (and changing) use of *Gestalt* by Balthasar is beyond the purview of this essay. Suffice it to say, according to Balthasar, Christ is the *Gestalt* of God, indeed the *Gestalt* of the world. Already, connections to theophany, the Incarnation, and the post-classical Islamic traditions elaborated above can be made.

It is noteworthy mainly because *Gestalt* finds its Islamic corollary in the pre- and post-history of one of Goethe's poetic interlocutors: Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī. Balthasar was of course aware of the influence Persian poetry had on Goethe, especially on his *West-Eastern Diwan*. Once again, however, he occludes the Islamic and non-Western sources in essentializing the tradition ("the history of western metaphysics"). When he does admit to Goethe's cosmopolitan sources, he characterizes this influence as from "the ancient Persians"⁸⁷ and not from Islamic traditions. This is unsurprising; until recently, scholars of Persian literature debate with scholars of Islam as to the depth and breadth of Islamic influence (or lack thereof) on Ḥāfiẓ.⁸⁸ However, consensus among scholars now is that Ḥāfiẓ was deeply shaped by various Islamic traditions from the Qur'ān to the School of Ibn 'Arabī and the School of Love. By relegating much of Goethe's influence to the generic "ancient Persians" rather than to the rich, complex, and internally diverse Islamic traditions that shaped his primary interlocutor, Ḥāfiẓ, we miss the Islamic theological confluences within not only Goethe's corpus, but Balthasar's use of *Gestalt*. Even if genealogically the connection to Islamic pre-history is weaker (relative to the confluences regarding Aquinas), analogically it would merit comparative theological investigation with both Islamic pre- and post-history.

As a scholar of Ḥāfiẓ and the post-classical Islamic and Persian mystical traditions, when I read what Balthasar has to say about Goethe's poetry, particularly his *West-Eastern Diwan*, I hear resonances, or see confluences, of Ḥāfiẓ and the Islamic, Sufi-philosophical traditions that shaped the mystical poet and the traditions that later interpreted him in the commentarial corpora. Now admittedly the confluences of the Islamic in Balthasar's thought via Goethe emerge and travel in ways different to how the Islamic traditions converged with the Swiss thinker via Aquinas. That is, Avicenna's

⁸⁵ Balthasar, *GL V*, 339-408.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 340 (*emphasis mine*).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 341. See also 364.

⁸⁸ See the opening pages of Axel Takacs, "Transposing Metaphors and Poetics from Text to World: The Theo-Poetics of Lāhūrī's 'Mystical Commentary' on Ḥāfiẓ's Love Lyrics," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 9, no. 1(2021): 106-44.

confluence with Aquinas, and thus the larger Islamic theological confluences with Balthasar as detailed in the previous sections, follows a far more direct and formative path. We must, therefore, excavate deeper to uncover the confluences of the Islamic in Balthasar via Goethe, but they are unequivocally there. Looking back gives Christian theologians creative ways to look forward when it comes to comparative theology with Islam and its theo-poetic traditions.

According to Balthasar, for Goethe “poetic creation was the act that joins heaven and earth, God and the world; the ecstatic discovery that creativity in Nature and in the heart of the genius has a single common source.”⁸⁹ This is precisely the role of the poet in the Islamic theo-poetics from the School of Ibn ‘Arabī to the School of Love, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries: God’s creative act (*ex nihilo*) is a theo-*poiesis*, and the poet’s *poiesis* participates in God’s creative imagination.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, Balthasar writes that “Like the ancients, Goethe neither could nor would separate God’s immanence from his transcendence ... he rejected a flat pantheistic interpretation of the mystery, and so was left with the hyphenated formula ‘God-Nature.’”⁹¹ Indeed, this is what the Sufi-philosophical theory of *tajalliyyāt*, or theophanies, attempted to hold in tension—divine transcendence and immanence. If Goethe and Balthasar had *Gestalt*, the Islamic traditions in question had *ṣūra*. The forms (*ṣuwar*, sg. *ṣūra*) of creation—phenomenally-embodied forms—are all divine self-manifestations (*tajalliyyāt*) according to this Islamic tradition and these forms reveal meaning (*ma‘nā*); however, meaning is inaccessible without form, and form is empty without meaning. Scholars of Balthasar will recognize this formula in his use of *Gestalt*. The glory of God’s epiphany can only be encountered *through* the *Gestalt*—not beyond or behind or within.⁹² The Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), God, can only be encountered through phenomenally-embodied, historical and concrete forms of the world, the *maẓāhir* or *majālī* of creation (loci of divine appearances or theophanies). But all this has an Islamic pre-history and post-history, and Christian theologians and scholars of Balthasar would benefit from engaging these histories in comparative and collaborative light. Once again, confluences of the Islamic need not remain an artifact of the past.

Goethe’s Islamic Pre-History

Al-majāz qanṭara al-ḥaqīqa (“Metaphor is a bridge to Reality”).

—Arabic literary axiom

The secret of the face of everything is the point of its connection (with God). There is a sign (ayāṭi) concealed in creation. Loveliness (ḥusn) is the trace (nishān) of creation. The secret

⁸⁹ Balthasar, *GL V*, 344.

⁹⁰ See Takacs, “Transposing Metaphors.”

⁹¹ Balthasar, *GL V*, 363.

⁹² “[In] trying to perceive God’s own beauty and glory from the beauty of his manner of appearing, we must neither simply equate the two—since we are to be transported *per hunc (Deum visibilem) in invisibilem amorem*—nor ought we to attempt to discover God’s beauty by a mere causal inference from the beauty of God’s epiphany, for such an inference would leave this epiphany behind. We must, rather, make good our *excessus* to God himself with a *theologia negativa* which never detaches itself from its basis in a *theologia positiva: dum visibiliter cognoscimus*” (*GL I*, 121–22, citing without notation the preface to the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Solemnity of the Nativity).

of the face of that face is that which faces [God]. So long as one does not see the secret of the face, then he will never see the sign of creation and [its] loveliness. That face is the beauty of "what remains in the face of your Lord" (Qur'ān 55:27). What is other than that is not a face, for "Everything on the earth will perish" (Qur'ān 55:26).
—Aḥmad Ghazālī, *Savānih*⁹³

"Existence (wujūd), all of it, is an imagination within an imagination (khayāl fi khayāl)."
—Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Chapter on Joseph⁹⁴

Among the power (quwwa) of the creation of the World of the Imagination is that the coincidence of opposites (al-jam' bayn al-ḥād) manifests therein, because sense perception and the intellect are unable to make opposites coincide, whereas the imagination is able [to do so] ... The imaginal faculty (al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila) and the World of Imagination ... is the nearest to indicating the Real ... Hence nothing has truly attained unto the [Divine] Form except the imagination.
—Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*⁹⁵

When the traveler reaches the planet Venus, Venus takes him before Joseph, who casts to him the sciences which God had singled out for him, that is, those connected to the forms of imaginalization (tamaththul) and imagination (khayāl) ... This is the celestial sphere of complete form-giving (al-taṣwīr al-tāmm) and harmonious arrangement (al-niẓām). From this sphere are derived assistance (imḍād) for poets.
—Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*⁹⁶

Before time, a ray of your loveliness was breathed through theophany.
Passionate love emerged, and set fire to the whole world.
—Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzi⁹⁷

The pre-history of Ḥāfiẓ is unequivocally Islamic and Qur'ānic. In other words, confluences of the Islamic are found in Balthasar once again—albeit more indirectly. Certainly, Ḥāfiẓ needs to be contextualized within the context of Persian court poetry, but this does

⁹³ Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ghazzālī, *Savānih*, ed. Hellmut Ritter (Tehran: Markaz-i Dānishgāhī, 1989), 15 (Persian, my translation), Chapter 12; for English, see Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ghazzālī, *Sawānih: Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits*, trans. Nasrollah Pourjavady (London: Routledge, 1986), 33.

⁹⁴ Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 138, Arabic, my translation; for English, see *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 125, and *Ibn al-'Arab Fuṣūṣ Al-ḥikam*, 72.

⁹⁵ Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, IV.325.3-8; see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 115-16.

⁹⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, II.275.13-14, 17-18; also cited by William Chittick, "The World of Imagination and Poetic Imagery According to Ibn al-Arabī," *Temenos* 10 (1989): 99-119 at 114.

⁹⁷ This is the first couplet of love lyric #148 in Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīwān-i Ḥāfiẓ Khwāja Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad*, ed. Parvīz Nātil Khānlarī (Tehran: Khvārazmī, 1983), 610; and #148 in *The Collected Lyrics of Ḥāfiẓ of Shīrāz*, trans. Peter Avery (Cambridge: Archetype, 2007), 369; This lyric is translated by Elizabeth Gray in *The Green Sea of Heaven: 50 Ghazals from the Diwan of Hafiz* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1995), 93.

not preclude the constitutive impact of his Islamic—Qurā'nic, theological, philosophical, and Sufi—learning on his poetry. Lewisohn, drawing from the work of Iranian scholars Khurramshāhī, Zarrainkūb, and Āshūrī, has demonstrated that Ḥāfiz's paideia included *kalām*, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), Qur'anic studies, the School of Ibn 'Arabī, and the School of Love, and that he even received a regular stipend for his professional teaching duties.⁹⁸ His *takhalluṣ*, or nom de plume, Ḥāfiz, is the honorary title of someone who has committed the Qur'ān to memory.

The details of this pre-history merit book-length attention, but I offer a short introduction based on the citations that open this section.⁹⁹ *Al-majāz qanṭara al-ḥaqīqa* (metaphor is a bridge to Reality) is “unarguably the single most important Arabic literary axiom appropriated by the Islamic mystico-poetic tradition.”¹⁰⁰ For Islamic traditions, it shaped the hermeneutics of the Qur'ān and of the world. The whole world is a collection of rich, concrete metaphors through which reality—God—is accessed. These forms are not to be discarded for pure, formless meaning; rather, one needs to encounter them in the body—as one orally and aurally encounters the Recitation (*al-Qur'ān*)—to encounter Truth. Early on, forerunners of the School of Love understood that it is through the phenomenally-embodied forms of the world that the loveliness and beauty of God is encountered. The quote from Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 1123, the little brother of the more famous al-Ghazālī) speaks to this; God's loveliness is manifested in the world and cultivates desire in/and human flourishing. These forms entice the wayfarer toward God, while leaving her desiring “ever more” (*Allāhu akbar*, “God is greater!”) since God is not flatly equated with the forms (it is not pantheistic tout court). Passionate love (*ishq*) is the engine moving the wayfarer toward God; later, God's essence (*dhāt*) is equated with *ishq*.¹⁰¹

The three quotes from Ibn 'Arabī indicate how he and his later interpreters liken this theophanic world to the imagination, but not in the sense of “fake” or “unreal,” but rather as concrete images through which the Real is encountered in embodied form (more akin to Ricœur's definition of image and metaphor).¹⁰² The life, wisdom, and charisma of the Prophet Joseph, as revealed in the Qur'ān (Surah 12), is connected to the imagination and the interpretation of embodied forms/images. These images are divine self-disclosures that simultaneously *reveal* God and *conceal* God's superabundance—apophasis and kataphasis come together. The imagination is thus able to bring together opposites, and it is this

⁹⁸ See Leonard Lewisohn, *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry* (London, England: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2010), 19, 60-61n151.

⁹⁹ See *ibid.*, especially his two-part prolegomena.

¹⁰⁰ Takacs, “Transposing Metaphors,” 119-20. See Wolfhart Heinrichs, “Contacts between Scriptural Hermeneutics and Literary Theory in Islam: The Case of Majaz,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 7 (January 1991): 253-84.

¹⁰¹ See Joseph Lumbard, “From Hubb to 'Ishq: The Development of Love in Early Sufism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 345-85.

¹⁰² See Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 172-73.

faculty and “the World of the Imagination” that can access the Real, God, whose creative act is likened to imaginative *poiesis*. Additionally, in this theo-poetic tradition Muḥammad receives revelation from God via the World and faculty of the imagination; and, therefore, later poets participate not merely in God’s creative act but in the same process whereby the Qur’ān was revealed to the Prophet. God gives form to the world; Muhammad mediated form to the Recitation (*al-Qur’ān*); and poets—or at least select poets—mediate form to their poetry, which was the privileged site of post-prophetic revelation.¹⁰³ The opening couplet from a love lyric of Ḥāfiẓ demonstrates how these traditions come together: God is passionate love who emerges in theophany, creating the world and instilling *eros* in all who seek the Truth *through* embodied experience.¹⁰⁴

As is evident by this brief background, Ḥāfiẓ’s pre-history merits careful attention by scholars of Balthasar who engage his retrieval and appropriation of Goethe, especially regarding the Swiss theologian’s deployment of *Gestalt* in his theological aesthetics. Christian theologians in general who work on aesthetics, literature, poetry, and narrative theology would learn much from comparative engagement with this theo-poetic pre-history. We miss out when we ignore the Islamic theological confluences within Christian theology vis-à-vis Balthasar, Goethe, and theories of *Gestalt*. Now that we have looked back, let us look ahead.

Goethe’s Islamic Post-History

“Less than a century after Ḥāfiẓ’s death, the well-known Sufi-philosopher of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī and School of Love, Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, bestowed upon him the honorific, *lisān al-ghayb*, or Tongue of the Unseen; that is, the person whose poetic imagination found its source in the same domain whence the Qur’ān descended onto the Prophet.”¹⁰⁵ The post-history of Ḥāfiẓ from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries and from the Balkans to the Bengal region is one in which Islamic mystical poetry was the primary method of expression both for elite scholars—theologians, philosophers, commentators, and so on—and for discourses and practices of lived religion among societies of Muslims (such as the hit Bollywood musical scene). As Shahab Ahmed has rightfully stated, the *Dīvān* (complete collection of love lyrics) of Ḥāfiẓ—once again, of formative impact on Goethe—was “the most widely-copied, widely-circulated, widely-read, widely-memorized, widely-recited, widely-invoked, and widely-proverbialized book of poetry in Islamic history—a book that came to be regarded as configuring and exemplifying ideals of

¹⁰³ I have summarized the thick relationship among pre-Islamic poetry, Qur’ānic revelation, Muhammad’s status as prophet, and how the classical and post-classical traditions characterized later Muslim poets as participating in aspects of prophetic revelation in “Prophet Muḥammad Between Lived Religion and Elite Discourse: Rethinking and Decolonizing Christian Assessments of the *uswa ḥasana* through Comparative Theological Aesthetics,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 34, no. 3 (2023): 245–84, see especially 262–66. Like Ricœur: “imagination can have a ‘constitutive’ role” in this “real” world when “the field of the possible ... extends beyond that of the real” (Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 184). The poet is a prophet (and vice versa) because their poetic images have a “constitutive role” in the “real” world. Shahab Ahmed has demonstrated how the Prophet Muhammad openly participated in poetic discourse and practices of seventh-century Arabia in *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁴ The love lyric analyzed in Takacs, “Transposing Metaphors,” illustrates how Ḥāfiẓ and one of his seventeenth-century commentators saw his poetic creation as participating in the divine imagination, which was itself the source both of divine creation and divine revelation.

¹⁰⁵ Takacs, “Transposing Metaphors,” 108.

self-conceptions and modes and mechanisms of self-expression in the largest part of the Islamic world for half-a-millennium.¹⁰⁶ These love lyrics treat themes of erotic love, wine-drinking, the suffering of passionate love, libertinism (inspired or otherwise), and mystical knowledge by way of desire, among other topics, all while invoking verses from the Qur'ān, allusions to *ḥadīth*, and the larger Islamic tradition to make meaning, find value, and uncover T/truth through a comprehension of the Unseen Realm.

The concrete relationships between historical forms and *the Form*, God (often addressed as the Real, *al-Ḥaqq*) is underscored in this post-history. One example is a seventeenth-century South Asian, Persian commentary on Ḥāfiz's love lyrics. The commentator stresses that the experiences of love and beloveds in their historical and embodied life are not to be discarded for a disembodied, spiritual experience of Love and *the Beloved*, God. True, the love lyrics treat themes that apply to human love and beloveds, but like Balthasar it is only *through* those experiences—not behind or within—that one experiences divine love and *the Beloved*: “The concealed and hidden God self-discloses [through] the lovely and beautiful, which appear in the veiling garments of the manifested phenomenally-embodied (*majāzī*) beloved, because it is through the forms of beauty (*suwar-i ḥusniyya*), in reality, that the non-delimited God attracts the hearts of lovers [to God's self].”¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere, he references the Arabic literary axiom, “The adept should not seek the grace of anyone but the phenomenally-embodied beloved and phenomenally-embodied love, since she/he is a vehicle by means of which one attains union to the Real (*ḥaqīqī*) Beloved and Real Love; by the intermediary of the phenomenally-embodied beloved and phenomenally-embodied love one may unite oneself with the Real Beloved and experience Real Love—for ‘*majāz* is a bridge to Reality.”¹⁰⁸ Post-Ḥāfiz, the theo-poetic concept of *ṣūra* (form) develops in tandem with theories of *majāz*, or metaphor, which, given the tradition, must be read not as “fake” or “less real,” but as the phenomenally-embodied, concrete forms of this world. The famous fifteenth-century Sufi, poet, and philosopher Jāmī, an admirer of Ḥāfiz as already noted, inverts assumptions regarding *ṣūra* and *majāz*. In his commentary on one of Ibn 'Arabī's texts, he criticizes “exoteric scholars” who argue that the application of *ṣūra* to God is *majāz*, or “metaphorical.” That is, “form” (*ṣūra*) only applies to bodies, and since God is bodiless the form of God is really God's attributes. Whereas exoteric scholars apply the term *ṣūra* only to phenomenal beings, “according to realized ones, *ṣūra* refers to that without which the unseen and immaterial realities cannot be intellected or manifested.”¹⁰⁹ He then continues:

For our [realized] group, since the world in all its spiritual, corporeal, substantial, and accidental parts is the particularized *ṣūra* [form] of the Divine Presence, and the Complete Person is the comprehensive *ṣūra*, the attribution of *ṣūra* to God is real (*ḥaqīqa*), and to all other than God it is metaphorical (*majāz*).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 32.

¹⁰⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan Khatamī Lāhūrī, *Sharḥ-i 'irfān-i ghazalḥā-yi Ḥāfiz*, 4 volumes, ed. Bahā' al-Dīn Khurramshāhī et al (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 1995), vol I, 428.

¹⁰⁸ Lāhūrī, vol. IV, 2,566.

¹⁰⁹ Jāmī, *Naqd Al-nuṣūṣ Fī Sharḥ Naqsh Al-fuṣūṣ*, ed. Jalāl Al-Dīn Āshtiyānī and William Chittick (Tih-rān: Mu'assasah-'i Muṭāla'at Va Taḥqīqāt-i Farhangī, Vā'b Astah Bih Vizārat-i Farhang Va Āmuzish-i 'Alī, 1991), 94.

¹¹⁰ Jāmī, *Naqd*, 95.

The theological concept of *ṣūra* in this theo-poetic tradition offers a possibility of creative and constructive analogical comparison. Jāmī, Lāhūrī, and others, engaging with Ḥāfiz's poetry or otherwise admirers of his corpus, suggest that God's *ṣūra* is that through which the world is created. While Balthasar's use of *Gestalt* is obviously not the same as the Islamic theo-poetic tradition's deployment of *ṣūra*, the analogies are ripe for comparative theological engagement.

As Ahmed has stated, "the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiz was ... a pervasive poetical, conceptual and lexical presence in the discourse of educated Muslims" during the temporal period of 1350 to 1850 and the geographical regions "from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal."¹¹¹ It is no overstatement to aver "the centrality of the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiz to the historical being of Muslims."¹¹² My own experience studying texts from Islamic intellectual traditions alongside Muslim students and scholars from Iran is a testament to how Ḥāfiz's poetry informs the understanding and meaning of various mystical and/or philosophical teachings and concepts. Not a session occurs in which an otherwise obscure mystical or philosophical statement is not rendered lucid by a couple *bayts* (couplets) from a *ghazal* (love lyric) of Ḥāfiz, recalled by a student who grew up surrounded by them.

A general—admittedly hasty—comparison between Islamic and Christian literary and intellectual histories after the thirteenth century reveals the extent to which poetry, metaphor, paradox, and contradiction shaped the lived religion and elite intellectual discourses of societies of Muslims. While not intending to downplay the popularity of poetry in medieval, renaissance, and early modern Europe, it arguably cannot be compared to the pervasiveness of poetry in the Muslim-majority and Persian-speaking world during the same time periods. Shahab Ahmed has demonstrated how poetry became the means and mechanism for engaging Qur'ānic revelation: "Metaphor and paradox are ... of key semantic and existential significance to Muslims' meaning-making. We need ... to take seriously Muslims' modes of saying (which are also modes of doing) when we seek to understand Muslims' modes of being We need to understand that metaphor and paradox are not merely ornaments; they are also uses (that is, means) and meanings of Islam."¹¹³ When combined with Islamic elaborations of the Qur'ānic *creatio ex nihilo* (received and refracted by poetic traditions via "citational exegesis"), attending carefully to the theo-poetic traditions of Islam in exercises of comparative theology not only is responsible, but also creatively illuminating.¹¹⁴ Scholars of Balthasar and Christian theologians would undoubtedly encounter novel insights into theological aesthetics by attending to the

¹¹¹ Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 73.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 33; For the "Ḥāfizocentric" nature of Persianate, Islamic civilization, see Lewisohn, "Socio-historical and Literary Contexts; Ḥāfiz in Shīrāz," in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love*, 16ff.

¹¹³ Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 392-93.

¹¹⁴ Citational exegesis is "the insertion or 'quotational borrowing' of Qur'anic elements—verses, idioms, words, concepts, images and figures—verbatim or by way of reminiscence or echoing of the Qur'an... [which implies a] citational process ... [of] interpretation, a particular reading, of the text which is the result of ... [a] transportation and adaptation that a textual element from the Qur'an undergoes from its original setting to its new interpretive *locus*." See Omar Ali-de-Unzaga, "Citational Exegesis of the Qur'an: Towards a Theoretical Framework for the Construction of Meaning in Classical Islamic Thought," in *The Construction of Belief: Reflections on the Thought of Mohammad Arkoun*, ed. Abdou Filali Ansari and Aziz Esmail (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 168-93, 171. Ali-de-Unzaga's chapter concerns classical Islamic thought, but this applies as much to the post-classical poetic traditions in which verbatim Qur'anic verses or resonances thereof are inserted within poetry. In other words, Qur'anic exegesis need not be restricted to the classical *tafsīr* genre.

Gestalt of the Islamic poetic traditions. Poetry was the *modus vivendi* of societies of Muslims historically.

Another possible direction concerns theological epistemology and anthropology assumed by Islamic theo-poetics. Medieval to Enlightenment and Modern theology and philosophy in Europe—Christian and post-Christian—maintained the Aristotelian hierarchy of faculties in which *ratio* and *intellectus* are placed above the *imagination*; reason and intellect are superior because they deal in imageless concepts. But in many Islamic traditions, the imagination was, to a certain extent (and with exceptions), exalted above the intellect in the hierarchy of faculties precisely because it was the faculty whereby the Qurʾān was conveyed to the Prophet (and poetry to select post-Prophetic poets). In short, to be Muslim was to engage the imagination and poetry—from Ḥāfiẓ and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273, whose *Mathnawī* was labeled “the Qurʾān in Persian tongue”), to Yunus Emre (d. 1328) in Turkish, to Ghālib (d. 1869) and the *qawwālī* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997) in Urdu, and hundreds more in dozens of vernacular languages from West Africa to Central and South Asia and Indonesia—to *this day*. In their commentarial traditions, the faculty of the imagination, with its ability to receive poetic/revelatory inspiration and create images and metaphors, its capacity to perceive and attain unto the divine form, is superior to the intellect and to reason. The intellect or reason (*ʿaql*) delimits our knowledge of God, “for ‘reason’ (*ʿaql*) is a ‘delimitation’ (*taqyīd*), the word *ʿaql* being derived from [the word] ‘fetter’ (*ʿiqāl*).”¹¹⁵ However, the heart (*qalb*) “possesses fluctuation (*taqlīb*) from one state to another”¹¹⁶ and “fluctuates (*taqallub*) in the varieties of forms and [of God’s] attributes.”¹¹⁷ These later traditions connect the heart with the faculty of the imagination: both are able to encompass God and make meaning out of the impossible, viz., God residing in a piece of human flesh, the heart. Indeed, post-classical traditions invert the symbol of the heart via the imagination. For example, Jāmī writes: “Know that the heart, i.e., the heart of a recognizer (*ʿarīf*) of God—because the heart of someone other than an *ʿarīf* is called ‘a heart’ only metaphorically—is capacious [enough to embrace God].”¹¹⁸ This statement, somewhat perplexing, suggests that most of us have metaphorical hearts until we obtain *real* ones in which God resides (based on the saying of the Prophet in the voice of God, “My heavens and My earth do not encompass me, but the heart of my faithful servant does encompass me”). Lāhūrī, the commentator on Ḥāfiẓ’s lyrics, glossing an opening couplet on the heart (in which God resides, the poet suggests), writes, “The intended [meaning] of ‘heart’ here is the pine[cone]-shaped heart that is on the left side [of the body] under the chest.”¹¹⁹ This is not a metaphor—no, God is (somehow) in your heart! Here, we see how the Islamic theo-poetic traditions concerning metaphors and the imagination can illuminate the imaginative and poetic function of the Incarnation, whereby the Word is made flesh. I have barely scratched the surface of the many pathways possible for comparative theological exploration with the Islamic traditions, but Christian theologians, including scholars of Balthasar, would

¹¹⁵ Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, III.198.35.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, III.198.34.

¹¹⁷ Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 174 (Arabic); *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 150 (English); *Ibn Al-ʿArabī’s Fuṣūṣ Al-ḥikam*, 88 (English). From the *faṣṣ*/Chapter of Shuʿayb.

¹¹⁸ Jāmī, *Naqd*, 198–99, translation mine.

¹¹⁹ Lāhūrī, vol. II, 1,276.

encounter fresh theological insights by carefully attending to this Islamic, theo-poetic post-history of Ḥāfīz, along with their philosophical and mystical commentarial traditions, rather than relegating them to “the Ancient Persians” who inspired Goethe. These traditions offer something truly different and thus comparative theology therewith would be eminently constructive, a collaborative theology of *Gestalt*, aesthetics, and theo-poetics in search of re-establishing the Islamic confluences of the past in the present. Theologians shaped by Balthasar would find in these traditions collaborators in their projects critiquing modern rationalism/scientism (the ‘aql/reason restricting us) and constructing theological aesthetic responses (via the heart and imagination) to secular modernity.

Conclusion: Toward a Comparative Theo-Poetics

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!
—Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*, lines 1-4¹²⁰

According to Balthasar, “the Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics in our time.”¹²¹ What this essay has demonstrated is that the Christian can guard metaphysics more effectively in collaboration with the pre- and post-histories of the traditions that were in confluence with “Western metaphysics,” such as early Islamic theologians, post-Avicennan philosophers, mystical theologians, members of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī, the School of Love, and the poetic corpora of so many Muslim poets and their commentaries, from the thirteenth to the twenty-first century, from West Africa to South Asia and beyond. These traditions offer an Islamic theo-poetics nonetheless in conversation with post-Avicennan Islamic metaphysics. That is, in the post-classical period, careful attention and study of the Sufi-philosophical amalgam requires critical engagement with the theo-poetic traditions that received, refracted, and developed Avicennan philosophy in a poetic key. When Christian theologians ignore these rich, complex, and innovative theologies of the Islamic traditions, two negative consequences emerge. First, they continue to essentialize the Christian tradition in contradistinction to the Islamic, as if “never the twain shall meet.” They artificially create and perpetuate sharp borders and *inadvertently* suggest that West is best.

Second, they miss opportunities to sharpen their own thinking and to construct innovative theologies after comparison. Systematic and historical theologians may uncover, through comparative theology, the Islamic theological confluences deep within Christian traditions, as this essay only begins to do. Constructive theologians may encounter the creative permutations of shared ideas that have developed throughout the 1400-year history of Islamic thought. In offering some directions, I have merely sketched some ideas; there are others. In any case, comparison allows us

¹²⁰ Rudyard Kipling, *Rudyard Kipling’s Verse*, definitive edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 233-36.

¹²¹ Balthasar, *GL V*, 656.

to “‘de-essentialize’ and partially deconstruct the oppositional contrasts constructed”¹²² through non-comparative Christian theology. We can begin to view Christian and Islamic traditions as collaborators in a shared endeavor of critically and constructively exploring how the human relates to God, self, and others in response to divine revelation and in the context of secular modernity and its totalizing, rationalistic, Promethean ideologies and titanisms (Balthasar’s terms). While Kipling’s goal of dissolving borders may be beyond a Christian sense of “tradition,” surely when “two strong [traditions] stand face to face” in comparison—a confluence of the two seas, like Dara Shikoh’s treatise—then creative and imaginative insights abound. Scholars of Balthasar and theologians have much to gain from exploring the Islamic traditions elaborated above, and following Carpenter, we should save the Swiss thinker not merely from Eurocentrism, but also from exclusivism, supersessionism, Orientalism, and supremacy. In this way, I have proposed a different sort of *ressourcement* (looking back) to construct a different sort of *aggiornamento* (looking ahead), viz., both in an interreligious and comparative theological—specifically Islamic—key.

Finally, as is evident by now, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics provides a novel Christian-Muslim comparative theological field of study, viz., *theo-poetics*.¹²³ This turn toward theo-poetics disrupts the dominant trends in Christian studies of Islam, e.g., focusing on Islamic philosophy as though frozen in Avicenna’s or Averroes’s time, dwelling on the seventh-century biblical and Syriac Christian discourses and their relation to the Qur’ān, examining the theologies and places of Jesus and Muhammad in each tradition, etc. While these topics are certainly illuminating, they often occlude other fruitful avenues of comparison. Furthermore, this trend is Eurocentric and colonial, whereas learning from the theo-poetic traditions that dominated post-classical Islamic metaphysics and lived religion is a step toward decolonizing the discipline.¹²⁴ However, theo-poetics is, as it were, a language shared by Christian theological aesthetics, especially Balthasar’s, and Islamic traditions of poetry and their Sufi-philosophical commentaries. They integrated metaphysics into their poetic traditions, and as such theo-poetics connects the divine creative act (*kun fa-yakūn*) with the human imagination. Theo-poetics could even be a new frame given to those old questions regarding Avicenna, Averroes, seventh-century biblical and Syriac Christian discourse vis-à-vis the Qur’ān, and the place of Jesus (Incarnation) and Muhammad (Prophet). The confluences revealed in this essay are evidence that exercises in Christian comparative theology with Islamic traditions would do well to attend to theo-poetics as a shared field of study.

¹²² Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 84.

¹²³ For examples, see Axel M. Oaks Takacs, “Theological Aporia and the Cultivation of Desire: Reading Eriugena’s *Creatio Ex Nihilo* Through an Islamic Theo-Poetics,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 4 (December 2023): 679–707; “Prophet Muhammad Between Lived Religion and Elite Discourse: Rethinking and Decolonizing Christian Assessments of the *uswa hasana* through Comparative Theological Aesthetics,” and “Perceiving Divinity, Cultivating Wonder.”

¹²⁴ Poetry arguably remains the dominant mode of discourse that links Islamic theology and philosophy (elite traditions) to lived traditions even today from West Africa to South Asia. See the scholarship of Oludamini Ogunnaike and Ali Asani, among others. A turn to theo-poetics in the discipline is thus a decolonial turn. See Takacs, “Prophet Muhammad Between Lived Religion and Elite Discourse.”