

Islamic-Christian Comparative Theology Today

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This essay covers recent developments in Islamic-Christian comparative theology and demonstrates how they move beyond the histories and themes of Islamic-Christian relations and comparisons while not ignoring their pedigree. It then poses a question: given the shared histories, theologies, narratives, spiritual disciplines, and religious figures, is Islamic-Christian comparative theology more ecumenical than its disciplinary cousins, such as Buddhist- or Hindu-Christian comparative theology? It then concludes, drawing on the work of David Tracy, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Anne Carpenter, that the Catholic theological tradition must account for Islam's impact on its development.

Introduction

Two trends have recently emerged in Christian comparative theological engagement with Islam. First, comparative theologians attentively study the Qur'ān and the early community of believers in the 7th to 9th century context. However, this critical study no longer intends to reduce the text and its later interpretations and communities to historical circumstances (as with much 19th to early 20th century Orientalist scholarship). Rather, Christian scholars are reading the Qur'ān and its surrounding discursive traditions faithfully, reflexively, and self-critically, providing constructive insights to their own Christian tradition. Second, comparative theologians are moving beyond the textual product of the Qur'ān and exploring classical and post-classical Islamic traditions that received and refracted the Qur'ān in creative and constructive ways. Christian scholars explore these traditions, encountering insights into their own theological traditions, which likewise inherited and refracted Greek traditions within a Biblical imaginary.

Reevaluating Past Christian Comparison with Islam

Christians, encountering Muslims and Islamic traditions, transformed their practices and theologies in constructive response. The model proposed by Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg offers an insightful way to analyze and theorize — even theologize — this interreligious history: co-produced religions. In brief, “co-production means the ongoing dynamics of forming, re-forming and transforming the three religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity in their manifold sectarian forms through mutual interaction in thinking and living with each other.”¹ It is historical fact that Christian and Islamic traditions mutually co-formed each other, so to speak of the Catholic tradition mono-religiously is to refuse to recognize the formative impact of the Islamic traditions on its development: Catholic theology has always been interreligious.

A major theme in Christian-Islamic comparison has been the Qur’ānic portrayal of Jesus (‘Īsā ibn Maryam) as the Messiah (*al-masīh*), contrasting Christian doctrines of his divinity and sacrificial atonement with Islamic views of him as a revered prophet. Studies comparing Muhammad to Jesus and the Qur’ān to the Bible were central, as were comparisons between Trinitarian theology and Islamic *tawhīd* (God’s absolute oneness), the latter often *misunderstood* as portraying a distant, impersonal God in Islam versus a relational God in Christianity. Recent scholarship focuses on the Divine Word’s entry into history, likening Jesus to the Qur’ān (the Word) and Mary to Muhammad (Bearers of the Word). The past few decades have seen a rise in comparative Mariologies, underscoring the significance of both Jesus and Mary in the Qur’ān, which narrates Jesus’s virgin birth through the Spirit, mirroring Christian annunciation accounts.² Additionally, Muslims regard Muhammad as part of the Jewish and Christian prophetic lineage, prompting Christian responses to the possibility of post-canonical revelation, which have evolved from polemical to constructive over time, such as Anna Bonta Moreland’s *Muhammad Reconsidered*.

To reevaluate past Christian interaction with Islam, Christian Krokus applies “Bernard Lonergan’s understanding of history as the relationship among three vectors—progress, decline, and redemption—to Christian-Muslim history.”³ When Christians observed what Lonergan calls “the transcendental precepts, Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be

responsible,”⁴ they manifested more positive, open comparison with Islam. Moments of progress are perpetually threatened by moments of decline, for instance when Muslims and Muhammad were demonized and nefariously stereotyped. To this day, progress and decline exist simultaneously, with moments of redemption enacted in recent scholarship.⁵ I return to these three vectors vis-à-vis the Catholic theological tradition in the conclusion.

Recent Developments: Moving Further Within and Beyond the Qur’ān

Recent scholarship evinces twin movements. First: historically recurring themes are being revisited and “re-visioned” through more critical, constructive, and reflexive studies. Accordingly, comparative theologians are moving deeper within the Qur’ān and its revelatory, multireligious—including Jewish and Christian—context. Second: exercises in comparative theology are moving beyond the inscribed text of the Qur’ān and instead learning from classical and post-classical Islamic intellectual traditions. Accordingly, comparative theologians are recognizing that the later intellectual and spiritual traditions are creative commentaries on *al-Qur’ān* as a *kitāb*, not as a “book” but rather as, according to Daniel Madigan, Jesuit scholar of Islam, “an open-ended process of divine engagement with humanity in its concrete history.”⁶ Indeed, Madigan’s scholarship is central to recent developments in Islamic-Christian comparative theology, for he offers a more robust, expansive, and historico-theological perspective on the meaning of divine revelation in the Qur’ānic and post-Qur’ānic traditions, moving comparisons beyond the inscribed text. Islamic revelation is therefore, according to one Muslim scholar, “a verb, not a noun, a living encounter, not an indelible inscription.”⁷ This conceptualization of Islamic revelation opens theologians to creative comparisons with the multilingual, Islamic discourses of the last 1400 years, as rich and nuanced as Catholic intellectual traditions.

The first movement is exemplified in the work of comparative theologian Klaus von Stosch and the Muslim-Christian team of researchers he coordinates. Von Stosch is a systematic, comparative theologian and scholar of Islam who draws from cutting-edge research in Qur’ānic Studies, specifically the historical and multireligious context in which the Qur’ān was proclaimed by the Prophet Muhammad. However, unlike

Christian Orientalist scholars, they do not uncritically and unreflexively conclude that the Qur'ān misrepresents conciliar Christology or that it poorly reproduces Christian discourses circulating in the 7th century. Likewise, unlike earlier Muslim scholars, they do not repeat the polemical, apologetic claims against Christians' views of Christ. Instead, as in *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur'an*, co-authored by von Stosch and Muslim scholar, Mouhanad Khorchide, they situate the Qur'ānic revelation in the context of 7th-century, intra-Christian Christological debates and Christian-Jewish debates. The Qur'ānic critiques leveled against certain Christologies circulating in the 7th-century are then applied to today's modern Christologies (academic and popular/folk). In other words, by going deeper within the Qur'ān and its historical context, insights into modern Christology are encountered for systematic and constructive theology. This book and related research projects present Qur'ānic Prophetology as a response to Christology. Other constructive work includes developing a Christian Prophetology in comparison with Qur'ānic Prophetology and in conversation with Christian theology of Israel (questions of supersessionisms loom large). The recent work by Pim Valkenberg should also be added to this movement. In *No Power over God's Bounty: A Christian Commentary on the "People of Scripture" In the Quran*, Valkenberg explores Qur'ānic verses concerning the *ahl al-kitāb* ("people of scripture"), but he does so from a Christian theological perspective, a historico-contextual perspective, and a dynamic, historical Islamic perspective.

The second movement has a much longer history. Earlier, Christian scholars of Islam narrowly focused on the classical period (11th-13th centuries), which witnessed profound Islamic-Christian comparative practices, particularly through the Arab-Islamic translation and development of Greek philosophical traditions. This period later influenced medieval Latin Christian thought. Muslim philosophers like al-Kindī (d. 873), al-Fārābī (d. 951), Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), and al-Rāzī (d. 1209) critically and constructively engaged Greek philosophy, and their works were transmitted to Christian scholars via Arabic-Latin translation movements from the Iberian Peninsula to Sicily. These texts significantly shaped medieval Christian scholastic theology, with figures like Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) engaging in comparative theology *avant la lettre* by

integrating Muslim philosophical commentaries into Christian thought.⁸ Modern, Orientalist scholarship initially dismissed Islamic philosophy as “a mere guarantor of Greek thought for the European Christian intellectual tradition,”⁹ attributing its decline to al-Ghazālī’s allegedly anti-rationalist critiques. However, recent studies highlight the continued evolution of Islamic intellectual traditions, such as the development of *ḥikma* (post-classical Islamic philosophy) and Sufi-philosophical-theological syntheses, fertile ground for Catholic comparative theological exploration.

Recently, the second movement explores these developments in new light and includes the work of senior scholars, such as David Burrell (d. 2023), established scholars such as Joshua Ralston, and emerging scholars, such as Hans Harmakaputra, Michael VanZandt Collins, Kate Kelly Middleton, Megan Hopkins, Alexander Massad, and the present author. These exercises in comparative theology attend to the vast and variegated theologies found within Islamic *falsafa* and *ḥikma* (philosophy), *kalām* (theology), Sufism (from lived religion, rituals, and poetry to *ʿirfān*, a post-classical fusion of philosophy and Sufism), Shiʿī thought, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), etc. Rather than restricting oneself to the inscribed text of revelation—the written Qurʾān—this movement includes the entirety of dynamic Islamic traditions, received and refracted in the lived and ongoing experiences of the Recitation through diverse Muslim communities and in variegated Islamic genera and practices. Indeed, this mirrors a Catholic understanding of tradition, which is neither restricted nor reduced to Biblical texts. The Catholic tradition includes the theological development and exploration of the *meaning* of the Christ event—the Incarnation, teaching, death, and Resurrection of Jesus—found in two millennia of writings, from the New Testament to contemporary theology. Accordingly, these comparative theologians implicitly or explicitly aver that the Islamic tradition likewise includes the theological development and exploration of the *meaning* of the Qurʾānic-Prophetic event—the revelation, experience, and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, whose “light” (*nūr Muḥammadī*) or “reality” (*ḥaqīqat al-Muḥammadiyya*) is eternally present to creation, in and through which are found God’s revelatory signs (*ayāt*) or “verses” of revelation (see Qurʾān 41:53). The Arabic term, *ayāt*, refers to both (revelatory) signs and to individual verses of the Qurʾān, thereby eliding the distinction between

Qur'ānic revelation and the revelation experienced through one's reflexive encounter with creation, self, and others. This theological development and exploration are found in 1400 years of texts and practices. Moving beyond the inscribed text of the Qur'ān, these traditions are effectively commentaries on "the Recitation," be it philosophical or poetic, be it post-classical philosophical theology or philosophical Sufism of the School of Love (*madhhab-i 'ishq*), including contemporary, constructive Muslim thinkers, such as Lailatul Fitriyah, Martin Nguyen, Caner Dagli, Khalil Andani, Tazim R. Kassam, Cyrus Zagar, Maria Massi Dakake, Celene Ibrahim, Jerusha Rhodes, Oludamini Ogunnaike, Aseel Azab-Osman, inter alia.

Among Anglophone scholars, Burrel was among the first to attend to the classical and post-classical Islamic traditions in dialogue with Jewish and Christian philosophical theologies. His approach explores how Christian, Islamic, and Jewish philosophical theologies emerge in conversation with each other. A major feature of Burrel's scholarship concerns the Qur'ānic and Biblical revelation of *creatio ex nihilo*. Medieval philosophers from each tradition were forced to reconcile emanationist-necessitarian cosmologies found within the Greek philosophical traditions with the revealed doctrine that God creates freely and without necessity, a doctrine shared by all three religions; this likewise has comparative implications for human freedom. His comparative work is thus both genealogical and analogical. Ralston's work, too, moves beyond the text of the Qur'ān and instead attends to the development of Islamic political and legal discourses; his conclusions engage contemporary debates around secularism and modernity. Finally, the scholarship of Laksana turns toward embodied, lived religion in the comparative practice of pilgrimage traditions, which have shaped Catholic and Islamic identities and rituals in nearly all contexts.

Emerging scholars continue this trend of comparative encounter with classical and post-classical Islamic thought. Harmakaputra attends to an Islamic-Christian comparative theology of saints. Indeed, one of the foremost ways Muslims receive—historically and to this day—God's abundant blessing is through the theological, social, and mystical institution of "friendship" (*walāya*) with God, a theological category with sources in the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and the early piety movement. Harmakaputra writes as a Protestant theologian engaging the Catholic teaching of the

communion of saints with the Islamic theology of friendship with God.¹⁰ VanZandt Collins explores virtue ethics in constructive comparison with the formative Islamic theologian, Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, in the context of the ecological concerns of climate change. Middleton's research explores comparative theologies of hope and fear in the medieval (Thomas Aquinas) and classical (al-Ghazālī) traditions; both interlocutors share a common theory of virtue, but her work is innovative in that she applies these theologies to historical and contemporary atrocities around forced internment, concentration camps, and genocide, and employs mixed-methods research. Hopkins' research, recognizing how the Word (Logos, *kalima*) becomes flesh in Christianity and recitation (Qur'ān) in Islam, draws from the common Muslim practice of Sufi *dhikr* (contemplative recitation) to answer the question, "How to live the Eucharist in the everyday?," originally posed by Karl Rahner; by attending to the theology and praxis of *dhikr*, Hopkins takes seriously the embodied, lived religion of Muslims historically and presently to constructively compare it with an embodied and lived Eucharistic theology today.¹¹ My own work looks to the larger post-classical traditions, especially the Arabic and Persian poetic and commentarial traditions and the *madhhab-i 'ishq* (School of Passionate Love), to engage constructively and systematically with Catholic theological aesthetics, theo-poetics, and theologies of the imagination. This subject is ripe for constructive comparison because of the formative place the poetic traditions had—and continue to have—on the Islamic literary and intellectual traditions, both elite and popular/lived.¹²

This review of recent developments is incomplete. It also ignores scholars working in adjacent disciplines, such as Catholic scholars of Islam attending to the history of Muslim-Christian relations or dialogue (e.g., Rita George-Tvrtkovic, Gabriel S. Reynolds, John Zaleski, Sandra Keating, and Anna Bonta Moreland). Notwithstanding, enough has been shared to pose the tentative and concluding question of this contribution.

Comparative Theology with Islam: Ecumenical or Comparative?

Islam and Christianity share contested theological categories, revealing both antagonism and rapport. This dynamic demands attention to their co-constructed history. As Moreland notes, these traditions are "mutually

illuminating” precisely because “they share enough terms to enable reasonable communication.”¹³ Unlike Hindu- or Buddhist-Christian comparisons, Islamic-Christian theology acknowledges a genealogical bond, akin to Jewish-Christian relations. However, Islam uniquely critiques, extends, or rejects aspects of Christianity. This raises the question: is Catholic comparative theology with Islam more *ecumenical* than comparative?

Muslim comparatist Vahid Mahdavi Mehr constructively reframes the discussion.¹⁴ He argues that the Qur’ān situates Judaism and Christianity within an “Abrahamic theology,” later distorted by “supersessionist frameworks... not derived from or based on the Qur’ān but forced upon it.”¹⁵ The Qur’ān’s covenantal theology, he contends, seeks to *correct* — not wholly reject — prior revelations. If comparative theology traditionally learns from an “other,” Mehr questions whether Muslim-Christian engagement is truly comparative, proposing instead an “Abrahamic theology” distinct from current models.¹⁶ This perspective reshapes Catholic comparative theology. No longer conceptualizing each tradition as hermetically sealed “deposits of faith,” Catholic theologians instead turn to the Qur’ānic revelation — *historically received* — in search of transhistorical constructive critiques to our own theology *today*. In this case, doing theology in constructive and critical dialogue with the Islamic traditions connects the revelation and tradition of the *past* with contemporary theological questions *today*, a connection that bridges the first and second movements in recent scholarship.

David Tracy’s *The Analogical Imagination* offers a framework. For Christianity, the “originating tensive event” is the Incarnation.¹⁷ Analogously for Islam, it is the Prophetic-Qur’ānic event. Both events guide interpretations of “real-similarities-in-real-difference” and are models for understanding how religious truth operates in a pluralistic world. These events are not merely historical; they also disclose how the nature of God is both transcendent and immanent, reveal the possibility of divine-human communion, affirm revelation as dynamic, and conceptualize hermeneutical engagement with revelation as an analogical participation in that revelatory event. Tracy’s analogical imagination facilitates comparative theology because the originating tensive event validates, as it were, paradox, mystery, seemingly contradictory truths, and

ongoing interruption of the status quo through constructive interpretation of the original interruption: the Incarnation and the Prophet-Qur'ānic event. Comparison is not merely academic but ethical, challenging social injustice—a theme in emerging scholarship. Revelation (or religion), as Johann Baptist Metz argues, is an interruption, the contestation of the unjust and restrictive status quo.

Yet the Christ event and Prophetic-Qur'ānic event remain distinct, encouraging Catholic theology to integrate Islam's influence without conflating the two (“real-similarities-in-real-difference”). The goal is not convergence but mutual correction and enrichment, grounded in a living tradition that confronts historical progress and decline in search of redemption.

Conclusion: Catholic Tradition in Living Engagement with Islam

Notwithstanding, the Catholic tradition cannot dissolve into “Abrahamic theology;” the Christ event remains its irreducible center. While Christianity and Islam share similarities-in-difference, their originating tensive events — the Incarnation and Prophetic-Qur'ānic revelation — must be preserved as distinct mysteries. Negations serve as anti-reductive measures to preclude the superficial, false equivalency between these events and “function as principles of [mutual] intensification.”¹⁸

Hans Urs von Balthasar underscores this: the Word made flesh uniquely binds divine revelation to Christology, “the letter is related to the Spirit as the flesh of Christ...to his divine nature and Person,”¹⁹ making tradition a living encounter with God's self-disclosure. Yet Catholic theology must fully acknowledge Islam's formative role in its development. Balthasar's framework of theology as a dynamic relationship among revelation, tradition yesterday, and tradition today, suggests that “tradition must always remain a living principle, [and] the theology of all past ages has to be incorporated as a living thing.”²⁰ Given the mutually, co-constructive history of Christianity and Islam, along with the urgent need for a cooperating Muslim-Christian ethical and liberative praxis, Catholic *theology* today must include direct engagement with its sibling, Islam, which *should be included* in “the theology of all past ages.” This will not result in “Abrahamic theology,” but in a Catholic theology that accounts for the relation among ongoing revelation, tradition yesterday,

and tradition today, a tradition that, *without the Islamic heritage, would not exist as it currently exists.*

Recently, Anne Carpenter reframed tradition as dynamic memory—“life” that mediates past and present through divine action *pro nobis*.²¹ This memory includes both sin and redemption in Muslim-Christian relations.²² Following Krokus, we might view this history through Lonergan’s vectors: moments of progress (e.g., medieval philosophical exchanges), decline (demonization), and redemption (modern comparative theology). Tradition thus “demands our participation”²³ in healing these fractures while resisting either despair or uncritical synthesis.

The future lies in *intensification*: not convergence or rejection, but mutual correction through difference. As the Qur’ān suggests, Christians are *ahl al-kitāb* — people “*not of scripture as a book,*”²⁴ but people of “an open-ended process of divine engagement with humanity in its concrete history,”²⁵ a people who participate in revelation, which is “a verb, not a noun, a living encounter, not an indelible inscription.”²⁶ Catholic theology must therefore (1) preserve the Christ event’s uniqueness while learning from Islam’s theological and ethical insights, (2) embrace revelation/religion as interruptive, challenging injustices through comparative praxis, and (3) engage Islam’s living tradition, from classical thought to contemporary reformulations, as a “co-produced” partner. In this way, Catholic theology honors its interreligious heritage while witnessing to the “radical mystery” of the Incarnation—a paradox that invites deeper encounter rather than resolution.

Notes

1. <https://coproduced-religions.org/about>.
2. E.g., Muna Tatari and Klaus von Stosch, *Mary in the Qur’an*, tr. Peter Lewis (University of Chicago Press, 2022).
3. Christian Krokus, “Healing and Creating in Christian-Muslim History,” in *Theological Studies* 85:3 (2024), 442.
4. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 52.
5. On moments of redemption, see Krokus, 445.
6. Daniel Madigan, *The Qur’an’s Self-Image* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 178.
7. Tazim R. Kassam, “Signifying Revelation in Islam”, in *Theorizing Scriptures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 34.

8. See Axel Takacs, "Confluences of the Islamic in Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics," in *Modern Theology* 40, 650 – 677.
9. Takacs, "Confluences," 665.
10. See Hans Harmakaputra, *A Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology of Saints* (Brill, 2022). See also Axel Takacs, "Drawing Near to God, Drawing Near to Others," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 32(1): 33-65.
11. Megan Hopkins, "Refractive Sacramentalities: Islamic and Christian Worship and Friendship," *Concilium* 2025/1: 101-109.
12. See Takacs, "Confluences," "Prophet Muḥammad Between Lived Religion and Elite Discourse," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 34(3): 245-284, "Theological Aporia and the Cultivation of Desire," *Theological Studies* 84(4): 679–707, and "Perceiving Divinity, Cultivating Wonder," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ*, edited by Axel Takacs and Joseph Kimmel (Wiley and Blackwell, 2023), 326-344.
13. Anna Bonta Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 119.
14. Vahid Mahdavi Mehr, "Can There Be an Islamic Comparative Theology?" in *A Companion to Comparative Theology* (Brill, 2022), 230-246.
15. *Ibid.*, 231.
16. Mehr, 243-244.
17. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (Crossroad, 1981), 408.
18. Tracy, 409.
19. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Place of Theology," in *The Word Made Flesh*, vol. I, *Explorations in Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 149.
20. Balthasar, 156-159.
21. Anne Carpenter, *Nothing Gained is Eternal* (Fortress Press, 2022), 193-195.
22. "Christian tradition is traditioned ironically by its own sin" (Carpenter, 175).
23. Carpenter, 195.
24. Balthasar, 156.
25. Madigan, 178.
26. Kassam, 34.