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At the Border of Christian Learning: Islamic Thought and Constructive Christian Theology

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Legend has it that one of the very first dialogues between Christians and Muslims took place in the kingdom of Axum, modern day Eritrea and Ethiopia, around the year 615 CE. Early biographers of Muhammad, such as Ibn Ishaq and al-Tabari, recount how the Prophet sent a small community of Muslims away from Mecca to seek safe haven with the Negus, likely Najashi, the Christian king. The rulers of Mecca who challenged Muhammad and persecuted the early followers of Islam chased after the migrants. The Christian king was displeased with outsiders causing trouble in his kingdom and called both groups to court to defend themselves. After the Meccans accused the Muslims of crimes and demanded their return, representatives of the Muslims stood to proclaim their innocence. They did so with theological aplomb, offering a testimony of their previous idolatry and ignorance before the one true Creator God—the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—sent a prophet to call them back to right worship of God. Their testimony culminated in a recital of portions of Sura al-Mariam, which tell of the annunciation and the virgin birth of the Messiah, as well as the call from Jesus to worship “my God and your God, my Lord and your Lord.”¹ The leader of the Muslims professed that Jesus is God’s servant, prophet, Messiah, and even God’s spirit. At this the Negus is said to have offered protection to the Muslims and affirmed that this revelation came from the very same fountainhead as the gospel. Still, to note the abiding differences, he picked up a stick and drew a line in the sand. Standing up, he stated that the length of the stick was all that separates Christians from Muslim.²

This ancient story, surely indulged by later biographers to affirm the veracity of Islam, holds much insight about the perils and possibilities of Christian-Muslim theological dialogue. It names how then, like now, theological dialogue is interwoven with political power, human migrations, and the (in)justices of political rulers. Theological articulation still carries life or death consequences for those seeking safe haven, be it in ancient Ethiopia or modern-day Europe. Theologically, the narratives by both the Muslims and the Negus tell of a broad, shared conception of the Creator God, the call to worship God alone, God’s pursuit of humanity through law and prophets, and even shared figures like Abraham and Moses. Yet this space for dialogue is cut through, or maybe even torn asunder, by a boundary.

The boundary was and remains our understandings of Jesus: the one whom both traditions revere,³ but about whom both traditions have often fundamentally disagreed.⁴ Even

¹ Note the echoes in the Sura with John 20:17, although Jesus speaks of ascending to “my father and your father, my God and your God.” The possible import of shifting father to Lord for Islamic and Qur’anic Christology has been explored at length by scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth, Gabriel Said Reynolds, Carlos Segovia, and others.

² There are various narratives about this event, some emphasizing the line in the sand and others the length of a stick.

³ *Nostra Aetate*, §3

⁴ Christology is surely not the only issue that divides Christians and Muslims, but the fact that Jesus is both a shared and contested figure is fundamental to understanding Christian-Muslim theological debate. In fact many of the other recurring questions around the

those with only a cursory knowledge of Islam surely know that Islamic commitments to the unity and transcendence of God, as well as the apparent meaning of the Qur'an's own account of Jesus/'Issa, has produced seemingly endless polemics and apologetics by Christian and Muslims alike. The shared conceptions of God, world, and biblical characters are also marked by fundamentally distinct criteria for judgment: Jesus Christ for my Protestant Christian position, and the Qur'an and Hadith for Sunni Islam. These different norms fundamentally shape, inform, and condition the apparent commonalities between Muslims and Christians. As the Muslim theologian Vincent Cornell notes, the Negus's stick has more often been a chasm that forbids any crossing than a thin line that marks connections and distinctions.⁵ We stand here at the border of Christian learning.

Crossing Borders with Comparative Theology

Comparative theology, especially as articulated by the influential work of Francis Clooney, S.J., relies on crossing borders. According to Clooney, comparative theology is an act of faith seeking understanding across religious boundaries, where a theologian rooted in their own faith tradition enters into the texts, practices, and imaginaries of another tradition or thinker. As Clooney defines it, comparative theology "marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition."⁶ Comparative theology challenges theologies of religion to shift attention away from internal Christian arguments about the epistemic and soteriological value of non-Christian religions. Instead, they propose a method to better account for theological and ethical distinctions while remaining open to learning from religious others. To do this, it critically appropriates from comparative studies of religion, especially critical religious studies, in which religious traditions are analyzed on their own terms without recourse to a universal normative perspective, be it from Christian theology or essentialist definitions of religion. However, comparative theology attempts to advance beyond comparative studies of religion by insisting on the importance of theological analysis and understanding, not only for Christian theology but also for the texts and traditions being compared. Religion is not only ritual, but also encompasses metaphysics, philosophy, myth, and even theology.

Comparative theology is constructive theology written as a hybrid between comparative study of religion and Christian theologies of religion. It trades grand theories of religious pluralism for "limited case studies in which specific elements of the Christian tradition are interpreted in comparison with elements of another religious tradition."⁷

law, salvation, theological anthropology, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the (tri)Unity of God relate to views of Jesus.

⁵ Vincent J. Cornell, "The Ethiopian's Dilemma: Islam, Religious Boundaries, and the Identity of God," in Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, Bruce D. Chilton, and Vincent J. Cornell, *Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims Worship the Same God?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 85–129. Cornell's use of the Ethiopian's dilemma as an opening story to the explore Christian theologies of the Trinity and Islamic commitments to the unity of God serves as inspiration for my own engagement in this topic.

⁶ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

⁷ James L. Fredricks, "A Universal Religious Experience? Comparative Theology as an Alternative to a Theology of Religions," *Horizons* 22:67–87.

Comparative theology does not seek a neutral ground in which to analyze all religions, but instead writes theology in and through comparative and dialogical engagement.⁸ As Catherine Cornille writes, “The goal of comparative theology is the advancement of theological truth through a process of learning from and through other religious traditions.”⁹ Comparative theology would appear to offer Christian theologians a map for learning from non-Christian traditions, for crossing the Negus’s line in the sand.

But why would Christian theology seek to engage with Islamic thought, especially in a posture of what Clooney calls “deep learning”? Are not the theological disagreements so fixed, the history so fraught, and the competing accounts of revelation so intractable? Karl Barth, for instance, encourages the study of Islam, but notes that Islamic thought cannot offer insights for Christian theology, since “in this outer circle generally there is nothing that it can abstract and use.”¹⁰ Islam may be worthy of investigation but not of the type that would produce the Christian learning that Clooney, Cornille, and others comparativists encourage.

Moreover, questions linger about how comparative theology can account for the long history of polemics within Christian approaches to Jews and Muslims. It is not surprising that the majority of the earliest proponents of comparative theology in the English-speaking context worked on Christian-Hindu or Christian-Buddhist thought.¹¹ While this presents its own challenges, both in method and content, the histories of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism are not as nearly intertwined in their development as Christian theology has been with both Judaism and Islam. Christian theology was in some way formed by its disavowal of post-temple Judaism. Similarly, most Christian theologians have long opted to evade the challenges and questions of Muslims by reinterpreting Islam as a Christian heresy¹² or using

⁸ Such a view is in contrast to Keith Ward’s claim that comparative theology is “not....a form of apologetics for a particular faith but... an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions,” Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 40. In the final volume of his four-part comparative theology, Ward appears to have moved slightly away from such a strong contrast between comparative and confessional theology. “Naturally, each scholar will have a particular perspective. One might expect it to develop and deepen in the many conversations of comparative theology, but it will most probably remain the same in its fundamental elements, especially if the scholar is a member of a religious community.” Keith Ward, *Religion and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 339. These differences between approaches to comparative theology have been clearly laid out in Catherine Cornille’s *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020). She distinguishes between approaches that remain primarily rooted in and responsible to a particular tradition, naming these “confessional” comparative theology, and those that are unconstrained by their traditions, naming these as “meta-confessional” comparative theology.

⁹ Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, 115.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2, 828.

¹¹ In addition to Clooney, Cornille, and Fredricks, other important thinkers working in these areas include Michelle Voss Roberts, John Thatamanil, Paul Knitter, and S. Mark Heim.

¹² Most famously and influentially by John of Damascus, who lists Islam as the 101st in his line of Christian heresies.

Islam as a trope for intra-Christian polemics.¹³ Islam shares these supersessionist impulses, even if the particular manifestations are distinct. The dominant interpretation of Islam by Muslims views the Qur'an as a correction to Christian and Jewish errors. Islamic theology developed at key points in conscious contradistinction from and debate with Christian theology. As Josef von Ess notes, "On the whole, taken in relation to Christianity, Islam did not treat new problems; it treated the same problems differently."¹⁴

For Christian theology to learn from Muslims, it cannot simply cross over into Islamic thought in a straightforward fashion by reading Muslim texts or appropriating Islamic ideas. The Christian theologian must find a way to attend to the history of Christian-Muslim polemics in a non-confrontational fashion that still accounts for disagreement and difference. Even in the ancient story that opened the paper, the Christian king recognises that for all that unites Christians and Muslims—belief in the Creator God, creation, Abraham, and even Mary and Jesus—there remains the enduring obstacle of Christological disagreement.

Muslim Questions to Christian Theology

Given these seeming insurmountable obstacles, why carry out theology in a dialogical manner? Why not continue theology in and through Scripture and tradition, as well as through engagement with philosophy, social sciences, or even physics? In some way, the answer is simple: because Muslims directly address and challenge us as Christians. Muslims present profound and challenging questions that address the core of traditional theological claims of Christian theology and worship. How can God be a human being without this act compromising God's identity as the creator and sustainer of all? If God is all merciful and all compassionate, as recited in the Muslim *bismillah*, or love, as confessed by Christians, why is Jesus's death either fitting or necessary for salvation? How is God both one and yet named as three? At some level, these are the most basic and elemental considerations of Christian theology, present throughout Christian history and often asked by children and parishioners alike.

The Qur'an itself—which Muslims view not only as Scripture, but as a divine address—calls and invites Christians to give an account of our beliefs and actions. Christians are named as both people of the book (*ahl al-kitab*) and Nazarenes (*Nasara*) in the Qur'an. Christians are described as being "closest in affection towards the believers" (Sura al-Ma'idah, 5:82–83) and Muslims, Jews, and Christians are implored to "come to a common word" about the unity of God and obligation to worship God alone (Sura al-Imran, 3:64).¹⁵ The Qur'an also can be interpreted as affirming divine revelation in Christianity when it states that God handed down the gospel to Jesus (Surah al-Hadid, 57:27) or when Christians are implored to follow their own gospel and way (Sura al-Ma'idah 5:41–48). In addition to these various positive accounts of Christianity, there are also strong critiques. At numerous points in the Qur'an, the divine address demands that Christians give an account for their theology, worship, and practices. Christians are portrayed as innovating in religious practice

¹³ For more on this tendency see my essay, "Islam as Christian Trope: The Place and Function of Islam in Reformed Dogmatic Theology," *Muslim World* 107 (2017): 754–76.

¹⁴ Josef Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans, Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 15.

¹⁵ This second verse provides the titular inspiration for the 2007 document written by Muslim scholars, *A Common Word Between Us and You*. A copy of this document can be found at <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>.

and thereby diverging from the ways of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus, most notably in Sura al-Nisa' when Christians and Jews are implored to "not go to excess in your religion" and to not "say anything about God except the truth" (Sura al-Nisa', 4:171). This includes a critique of Christians associating creatures with God, claiming God has a *walad* or son, and insisting on describing God as three in one. Beyond these direct claims, the various Qur'anic accounts of Jesus and Mary include complex theologies of God's revelation and the human condition, which implicitly and explicitly challenge Christian theology and practice.

Outside of the Qur'an, Muslim thinkers have long engaged with Christian theology and practice. For instance, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah's poetic rebuttal of the incarnation and crucifixion begins by asking "Oh Worshippers of Christ, we'd like your most wise answer to our questions."¹⁶ The poem goes on, in a rhetorically incisive and polemically cutting fashion, to challenge the logic of the incarnation and how it constricts and limits both God's transcendence and divine mercy. More formal theological treatises by 'Abd al-Jabbar, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Hazm, and al-Qarrafi engage in detail with the central confessions of Christian theology, demonstrating richer engagement with Christian theology than most classic Latin and Greek Christian texts do.

For all their diversity, these texts raise profound challenges to core Christian claims. Muslims again and again ask about the logic of the incarnation, asking why the main article of Christian faith has produced such deep and abiding Christological divisions between Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians. In the past decades, major Muslim thinkers such as Syed Naquib al-Attas (Malaysia),¹⁷ Muhammad 'Abduh (Egypt),¹⁸ Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi (Palestinian),¹⁹ Mahmoud Ayoub (Lebanon),²⁰ and Mona Siddiqui (Britain)²¹ have sought theological and ethical dialogue with Christian theology. Simply put, these Muslim intellectuals invite Christian theologians to respond to their questions and insights.

Argumentation, Borrowing and Expanding the Christian Theological Conversation

Muslims press Christians to offer an "account of the hope that is within" us (1 Pet 3:15). The theological questions that Muslims ask, as well as the alternative understandings of Jesus, Moses, the human condition, salvation, and the unity of God, cut to the very heart of the gospel. When Christians have engaged with these Islamic challenges and questions, especially in the West, there has been a tendency to do so in an apologetic or polemical fashion. To evade Islamic thought by resorting to polemics that fail to engage seriously with Muslim questions or to invoke banal appeals to some sort of trans-religious core unity is an abdication of theological responsibility.

¹⁶ <https://simplyseerah.com/2018/02/19/ibn-al-qayyims-poem-to-christians/>.

¹⁷ Syed Naquib al-Attas, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future* (Kuala Lumpur: Art Printing Works, 1978).

¹⁸ Muhammad 'Abduh *al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyyah ma 'a l'-'ilm wa Madaniyyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Manar, 1953).

¹⁹ Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Survey and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967).

²⁰ Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).

²¹ Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Instead, I propose that a chastened version of comparative theology might create room for dialogical discovery, such that Christian theology can engage with Islamic thought as a key resource in the theological quest for a more truthful and just witness to God. Rather than seeking a shared theological foundation or an *a priori* agreed upon notion of just action, I have argued elsewhere for witness/*shahid* as a productive non-foundational framework for Christian-Muslim theological exchange.²² While the category of witness is indigenous to both religious traditions, the term is supple enough not to presuppose a shared agreement about God, justice, or Scripture as a baseline for further theological dialogue. In fact, one of the benefits of considering Christian-Muslim encounters through the lens of witness is that it remains open-ended and dynamic. To bear witness is to give an account or a testimony, but one that is inherently contestable and thereby leaves room for cross-examination, debate, and mutual learning. Witness, then, holds together particularity and openness, mission, and dialogue. In order for constructive theological engagement with Islam to occur, Christian theology should cease approaching Islam primarily as a trope to shore up and advance internal Christian claims or reinforce Christian superiority.

Muslims and Islamic thought should be included as key components in the theological community of disputation and discovery. In so doing, I am building on recent work on the nature of doctrine in relationship to communities of argumentation, especially by the American theologians Kathryn Tanner, Kevin Hector, and Christine Helmer.²³ None of these works give specific attention to the questions of inter-religious relations, but their ideas about theological disputation, language, and truth, and understandings of theology as human disputation about God and God's word can be expanded to include not only fellow Christians or philosophy or cultural studies, but also other religious communities such as Muslims.

Tanner's *Theories of Culture* offers a fresh reading of the dynamic and changing nature of culture and its meaning for Christian theological reflections, especially in light of debates in the 1980s and 1990s between correlationist theology (e.g. Tillich and later Chicago) and cultural-linguistic theology (a reading of Barth via Lindbeck and Frei at Yale). Her book helpfully illustrates how Christian "culture" or worldviews are never self-enclosed but always constructed in relation to their surrounding environs. She challenges the presuppositions of both the correlationist and cultural-linguistic approaches, which posit distinct spheres of "Christian" or "church" on the one hand and "culture" or "philosophy" on the other. Instead, her reading of recent anthropological and cultural studies illustrates how identities and

²² My current book project expands on some of the key arguments around this approach to develop this into a broader method for Christian-Muslim theological learning. See Joshua Ralston, "Bearing Witness," *ThTo* 74 (2017): 22–35 and Joshua Ralston, "Christian-Muslim Commonality as Dialogical Difficulty" in Margit Eckholt, Habib El Mallouik, and Gregor Etzelmüller, eds., *Hermeneutische Grundlagen des christlich-muslimischen Gesprächs* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2020), 14–28.

²³ More specifically Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014). Space precludes a full engagement with any of these thinkers, but it is interesting to note how all engage with a re-interpreted understanding of Schleiermacher, particularly in light of later developments in theology, be it Barth, the Yale school, or Tillich in their own constructions.

communities are porous and dynamic, marked throughout by exchange, debate, and mutual interaction.

In light of this, she offers a theological account of the nature of theology that take seriously the importance of debate, contestation, and borrowing, without also giving up the normative importance of God's word. Tanner contends that Christians should recognize their embeddedness within particular cultures and communities and how this influences theological articulation. This entails a recognition that "theology is something that human beings produce. Like all human activities, it is historically and socially conditioned."²⁴ This is not a simple affirmation that all theology is contextual, although that remains true; it is a recognition that Christian social practices, theologies, and ideas are always embedded within the worlds and cultures of its participants. Analyzing and understanding Christian social practices and identity also entail attending to the multiple and ad hoc ways that communities and individuals are formed. "While there are boundaries between Christian and non-Christian ways of life, those boundaries are fluid."²⁵ Simply put, Christian theology and Christian identity have always overlapped in complex ways with other modes of being and understanding the world. Two key components are central to my own interest in extending Tanner's work on the nature of theology to engage with Christian-Muslim theological learning: borrowing and argumentation.

First, Tanner shows how Christian theology has always taken up and made odd the existing cultural, philosophical, and linguistic discourses and thoughts of its environment. The "theologian is always ultimately making meaning rather than finding it" and thus "offering situation-specific arguments that he or she knows cannot be immunized against contestation by others."²⁶ To take the example of the Nicaea-Constantinople confession, this was the result of an extended and extracted debate over the meaning of Jesus in Christian worship, theology, and Scripture. Both intra-Christian debate and the borrowing of concepts from Greek philosophy were fundamental to the creation of the ecumenical Nicene Creed. The philosophical concept of *homoousios*, for instance, is not found in Scripture but became instrumental for making sense of the eternal sonship of Christ. This borrowing and debate are a constitutive part of both Christian theology and practice, from the earliest utilization of Greek philosophy to current interest in philosophy or sciences.

Engagement with knowledge and practice outside of the Christian community need not come at a loss to Christian confession or worship, but can in fact be a tool for new and fresh expression. As Tanner writes, "The test for the proper use of borrowed material is not whether those materials seem to threaten the established character of Christianity. What counts is whether that use distorts that to which Christians are trying to witness."²⁷ For her, engagement beyond the boundaries of the church or the traditions of theology is a necessary response to the freedom of the divine word and the reality of Christians and Christian communities as embedded people on the way. In this taking up and making odd, however, Christian theology is also transformed. Borrowing does not entail appropriation alone. "Borrowed materials should not, then, always be subordinated to Christian claims; they should be permitted, instead, to shake them up where necessary. If Christianity's having the upper hand over non-Christian materials is made into a rule, this only encourages the Word's

²⁴ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

enslavement to the human words of Christians.”²⁸ There is a mutual transformation of philosophical concepts and cultural practices by Christians, even as Christians and Christian theology are changed by this engagement.

Second is her understanding of theology as a community argumentation, which holds promise for thinking about Christian-Muslim comparative theology. For Tanner, disagreement, debate, and even conflict are not incidental to the work of theological learning, but central to it. Christian theology is not primarily concerned with maintaining the boundaries of a fixed orthodoxy. The unity of Christians is not found in a core worldview, linguistic community, or agreed upon theology, but in the shared task of discovery and response to God’s word. Christian identity is one *in via*, and thus we are united in the struggle to respond to and make sense of God’s word toward us, as well as the various forms of borrowing that are constantly being negotiated. The task of theology is to make judgments about claims and practices, both ours and others’. “Being a Christian at all, in even the simplest of circumstances, requires theological judgements; one must either take responsibility for that judgement oneself or decide to acquiesce to someone else’s judgement.”²⁹ Rather than evade this reality, Tanner invites Christians to engage in a more honest fashion with the fundamental import of debate and contestation. “Through the ongoing practice of choosing dialogue over monologue, there emerges a strengthening of the commitment to search for the meaning of Christian discipleship together, with both seriousness about the stakes and an eagerness to make something good come of conflict.”³⁰

Christian theology has always been an act of theological imagination and construction that draws from not only Scripture and the varied and various church traditions, but also broader philosophical, semantic, scientific, and cultural contexts. While Tanner does not connect her cultural and social analysis to non-Christian traditions, there is nothing within her work that mitigates against such use. In fact, her argument that Christian theology and social practices are not a united singular culture, but a “genuine community of argument” that involves “mutual correction and uplift”³¹ could easily be expanded beyond the boundaries of the Christian church to include Muslims.

There will, of course, remain distinctions in so far as Christians are united in the task of following and bearing witness to the in-breaking of God in and as Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, in so far as Jews, Christians, and Muslims all share a long history of debate, dialogue, and contestation about the one God, creator of heaven and earth, there is good reason to engage with one another in the shared task of theological witness and discovery. Extending Tanner’s community to include Muslims and Jews allows us “to become a *genuine community of argument*, one marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift, in keeping with the shared hope of good discipleship, proper faithfulness, and purity of witness.”³²

Christian theology is in some sense arbitrary. This is not to say that it is random, for inevitably it will engage questions of God and the world, sin and salvation, Christ and church. By arbitrary I mean that it is taken up at a particular time and place and engages with

²⁸ Ibid., 150.

²⁹ Ibid., 160.

³⁰ Ibid., 175.

³¹ Ibid., 123.

³² Ibid., 123.

the thinkers, texts, concerns, hidden assumptions, and political realities of its situation. The theologians' chosen—and yes, it is often a choice!—conversation partners shape Christian theology in crucial ways. Theologians' decision to write theology in the mode of analytic philosophy or through widening dialogue with continental thought, to take two contemporary movements, change both theology and the theologian.³³ Theological coherence, clarity, persuasiveness, beauty, and other commitments vary by the standards of our interlocutor. Even when philosophical conclusions are resisted or recalibrated through dialogue with Scripture and tradition, the imprint of philosophical debates are profound. Entire academic guilds, from Ph.D. theses to multi-series volumes by senior professors, are given over to studying the legacies of Hegel or Kant on modern theology, or the forms of Aristotelianism deployed by Scholastics, or the participatory metaphysics of Plotinus and Plato on either Augustine or Basil. What theology looks like is shaped in significant ways by whom the theologian engages.

And yet rarely have Christian theologians in the Western tradition sought to engage consciously with the questions, challenges, and categories of Islamic thought in a non-apologetic and non-polemical fashion. Engaging with religions in the very act of thinking and writing Christian theology is often rendered outside the proper boundaries of genuine Christian theology, made an optional interfaith path, or viewed as irrelevant to the core of Christian theology. By contrast, the study of Aristotelian logic, Hume's empiricism, analytic philosophy, Derrida, neo-Platonism, or any host of philosophical perspectives is considered appropriate borrowing for Christian theology.³⁴ Is it really the case that philosophy demands theological response and appropriation, while other religious traditions can be safely ignored in the process of Christian theological learning?

It is my central conviction that there is no inherent reason to avoid Islamic theological and philosophical thinking in the act of writing Christian theology. In fact, given the shared concerns about God and God's relationship to the world, and the direct address that both the Qur'an and Muslim confront Christians with, crossing into engagement with Islamic thought is as coherent a conversation partner as philosophy. As Christine Helmer argues, doctrinal development comes about as "a word or words came to be articulated under the pressures of a particular reality."³⁵ The pressures of Islamic thought—just like the pressures of Kant for Schleiermacher and Aristotle for Thomas—reframe the questions and categories of theological production. Christian theology, then, might risk both borrowing and arguing with Muslims.

Reapproaching the Negus's Christological Dividing Line

³³ This is not intended as a dismissal of either analytic theology or theological dialogue with continental thought. In fact, both have potential for further enhancing the type of comparative theology that I am proposing. Analytic theology is currently being undertaken by Muslim theologians, especially through the new project at Cambridge Muslim College, led by Ramon Harvey and Safaruk Chowdhury.

³⁴ One can see similar problematic assumptions in the ways that Black, Dalit, Feminist, Womanist, Liberationist, Indian, or Chinese Christian theological engagements are rendered outside the bounds of proper theology, or as an elective choice, while engagement with Greco-Roman, German, or analytic thought is considered "normal" or even "normative." The ongoing importance of these power distinctions is evident in current debates on ministerial education.

³⁵ Helmer, *The End of Doctrine*, 113.

But what of the Christological dividing line that opened this paper? Has this winding essay about argumentation, borrowing, and mutual learning only led us back to the same border? In one sense, it has. Christians and Muslims remain divided over Christology, the crucifixion, and the human condition. However, our journey also allows us to look at this border from different perspectives and vantage points.

One of the most productive turns in recent Christian-Muslim theological dialogue has been found through the analogical resonances in Christian and Muslim thought about divine transcendence and the word (*logos* and *kalam* in Greek and Arabic). Recent theological work in Christian-Muslim Relations by David Burrell, Daniel Madigan, and Jerusha Lamptey have prioritized the importance of the word of God as a site for theological exchange. In this approach a comparison is drawn between Jesus as the word of God and the Qur'an as the word of God. In so doing, they argue that if we take a step back from the explicit Christian or Islamic claims about Jesus and the Qur'an, and instead turn to the broader theological issues around divine transcendence and revelation, there are analogical comparisons and broader conceptual space for conversation. In various ways, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have appealed to the revelation of God's speech to make sense of how God communicates with us, without being domesticated by us. Like in the Genesis account, God's speech is the means of creation in the Qur'an as God says "Be," and it is. God, in the words of the Quran, said *kun fa ya kun*: "Be and it is" (Sura Ya-Sin, 36:82). Creation is not an act that compromises God's transcendence or the ontological distinction between creature and creature, since God's word is the very means through which creation comes into being.

While these Genesis accounts of the word and creation are positively appropriated or alluded to by the Qur'an and the broader Islamic tradition, the way that they are re-crafted in the opening prologue to the Gospel of John is regularly thought of as one of the major issues that divides Christians and Muslim. There is no doubt that John has featured prominently in the development of Christian articulations of both the incarnation and the Trinity and thus are prone to be eschewed in models of Christian-Muslim dialogue that seek common ground. Interestingly, however, Daniel Madigan has offered a compelling argument that attending closely to the place of the word, both in John and the broader theological accounts of God's communication allows us to note common patterns of thinking and to "develop a common language to express our disagreements."³⁶ A central feature of this argument is Madigan's argument that the Islamic tradition, particularly in the Sunni tradition, develops something akin to a Johannine pattern in its debates about God's unity and God's word or speech. Islamic debates about the eternity of the Qur'an and God's speech are not the same as Christian arguments about the 2nd Person of the Trinity, but they are not wholly different either. "God's speech (*kalâm Allah*) is an essential attribute (*sifa dhâtiyya*) of God, neither identical with God, nor other than God—*Zâ 'aynuh wa là ghayruh*. It is unthinkable that there would have been a time when there was no speech of God, because that would imply that God once had nothing to say for Godself—and a mute God is no god at all. Or it would imply that God had undergone a change from being silent to speaking, and the idea of such a change in God is no more satisfactory."³⁷ Madigan goes on to discuss how this notion might be developed through a closer reading of John and Jesus as the "body-language of God." Even when Christians do not share in Muslim convictions regarding the Qur'an's centrality

³⁶ Daniel Madigan, SJ, "People of the Word: Reading John with Muslims," *RevExp* 104 (2007): 81–95 (82).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

and finality, their own understanding of Christ's existence as the word of God and Christian Scripture's importance for theology better equips them to follow the reasoning of Islamic arguments that appeal to the Qur'an's status as divine word. For Christians and Muslims, the better comparison is not between the Bible and the Qur'an or between Jesus and Muhammad, but between Jesus and the Qur'an. For Christians, the eternal word of God becomes a Palestinian Jew. For Muslims the eternal word becomes Arabic book.

This model of comparative engagement is not what Catherine Cornille calls "meta-confessional," seeking a trans-religious account of divine speech, but instead allows the shared frameworks and divergent understanding of Islam and Christianity to be challenge one another, even as the theologian remains bound in some ways by the norms of their own confessions. The real and powerful differences that often fuel polemics and apologetics are not overlooked. Instead, such a comparative theology engages the polemical areas of Christian-Muslim debates, but with an irenic posture that seeks to learn from critiques and then rearticulate and explore fundamental theological claims in conversation with the other tradition. As the important recent work of Mona Siddiqui, Mahmoud Ayoub, Daniel Madigan, Mouhanad Khorchide, Klaus von Stosch, and Jerusha Lamptey show, albeit coming from different traditions and with distinct aims, even Christology and the Qur'an can be a site for mutual learning.³⁸ As Mona Siddiqui rightly notes, "Christological doctrines are in my mind, the most disputed and perhaps the most intriguing area of Christian-Muslim debates."³⁹

For instance, Von Stosch and Khorchide's co-authored book, *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur'an*, offers a close re-reading of the Qur'anic discourse on Jesus within the late antique context.⁴⁰ This work reveals a complex Islamic Christology that challenges Christian tendencies, both ancient and modern, to downplay the full humanity of Jesus. In response, von Stosch offers a fresh twenty-first-century Catholic theology of Christ as the self-communication of God towards us, one that relies on both Islamic and Catholic thought to affirm how God comes to us as creatures. Khorchide's concluding chapter, by contrast, engages in a close reading of Jesus to reframe and reapproach Qur'anic understandings of prophethood, exploring how God communicates through prophets, not only directives, but a way of being in the world. Or to take the example of Mahmoud Ayoub's work on sonship as a further example of mutual learning. Ayoub's essay attends closely to the meaning of the two Arabic terms for son: *ibn* and *walad*. Through this analysis, both in the Qur'an and in later Muslim exegetes, he reconsiders if the Islamic critique of Christians as veering toward idolatry applies. Instead, he notes how the word of God in Jesus is a word of truth, one that challenges both Christians and Muslims to return to God and reform their practices. When this occurs, Ayoub becomes "convinced that this theological barrier is not an impenetrable wall dividing our two communities" and that "this wall could be transformed into a beacon of

³⁸ The theological payout of such comparative attention to the question of Jesus and the divine word in Christian-Muslim debate is evident in the ground-breaking essay by Daniel Madigan, "People of the Word: Reading John with Muslims," cited above, and more recently, Jerusha Lamptey, *Divine Words, Female Voices: Muslima Explorations in Comparative Feminist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Mouhanad Khorchide and Klaus von Stosch, *Der andere Prophet: Jesus im Koran* (Freiburg im Breslau: Herder, 2018).

³⁹ Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 226.

⁴⁰ Khorchide and von Stosch, *Der andere Prophet*.

light guiding us to God and the good.”⁴¹ Even in these short summaries, we see how if we linger at the Christological border between Christians and Muslims, learning, transformations, and surprise is possible.

Conclusion

Engagement with Islam is surely not necessary for the writing of Christian theology, but Muslims do offer a profound invitation to learn, rethink, and reconsider the central claims of Christian faith, practices, and politics. Given the historical and political realities of our day, engaging with the arguments, protestations, and logics of Islamic thought is as urgent a task for Western Christian theology, if not more so, as carrying out theological reflections again in the modes of analytic theology, science engaged theology, or continental thought. But to do this demands intellectual humility and openness to learning from the rich and diverse array of Muslim witnesses to God and God’s action toward creation. To learn from Islamic thought is to let go of what Linn Tonstad has aptly diagnosed as the idol of Christian theological mastery in the academy.⁴² This need not entail a compromise of central theological commitments to God’s love in Christ or the fundamental import of the gospel, but it does demand a willingness to distinguish between God and our theological claims about God. The theologian does not stand as a judge or jury, but as a witness. Theology is *nachdenken*, thinking after divine speech and revelation. It has a genuine object toward whom it points, but never grasps, even if we can be confident that God’s word of grace always grasps us. This commitment to the security that comes in God’s love toward us frees up the Christian theologian to engage with our Muslim neighbours in a stance of openness toward surprise and learning as we speak across a porous border.

⁴¹ Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity*, 118.

⁴² Linn Marie Tonstad, “(Un)Wise Theologians: Systematic Theology in the University,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12361>.