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The Possibility of Recourse to the Religious Other in Islamic Comparative Theology: An Analysis Grounded in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Reason*

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Abstract

Within the confessional approach to comparative theology, epistemic recourse to engagement with other religious traditions aims at attaining a deeper understanding of the home tradition while maintaining fidelity to the boundaries of its orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In this framework, the religious data of other traditions are consulted, examined, and brought into comparison with those of one's own tradition. From the standpoint

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of Islamic orthodoxy, however, such engagement requires theoretical justification. This foundational epistemological concern constitutes the central problem addressed in the present study. The guiding question is therefore: within Islamic comparative theology, how can engagement with and benefit from the religious data of other traditions be justified? The study employs a descriptive-analytical and comparative method. Its findings suggest that the legitimacy of such engagement may be inferred through the cumulative force and mutual corroboration of evidences derived from the Qurʾan, the hadith, and reason. Elements of truth present in other religious traditions may be understood as vestiges of humanity's historical and prehistorical encounters with the Sacred Source, as well as products of human reason and *fiṭrah* (the primordial human disposition). Such elements are dispersed across diverse times and places, yet remain accessible to discerning theological inquiry. Furthermore, interreligious learning is not limited to drawing upon the object of comparison—that is, appropriating religious data from another tradition. The act of comparison itself also possesses intrinsic epistemic fecundity. Accordingly, this study concentrates on establishing the justificatory grounds for such engagement, while leaving the systematic articulation of the methodological and inferential frameworks required for interreligious learning to future research.

Keywords

Islamic comparative theology, confessional approach, engagement with the religious other, interreligious learning

A. Introduction

1. Statement of the Problem

Within the confessional approach to comparative theology, the theologian seeks to attain a deeper understanding and articulation of his or her own religious tradition (the home tradition) through engagement with the data of another religious tradition. Despite this engagement with the religious other, the ultimate aim remains the exploration and clarification of the home tradition itself, accompanied by a firm commitment to it—a commitment that safeguards the boundaries of its orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The underlying methodological premise of this approach is that, through careful study of the self-understanding of another religious tradition, the theologian may arrive at a fuller apprehension of the truths contained within his or her own faith, gain new insights, and thereby contribute to the enrichment of the theology of the home tradition. The potential for epistemic enrichment thus emerges through a renewed reading of one's own tradition within the broader theoretical and practical horizon of another religion.

From the standpoint of traditional Islamic orthodoxy, however, a prevailing doctrinal presupposition maintains that the sacred texts, theological teachings, and religious practices of other religious traditions generally lack epistemological credibility. Consequently, the very principle of engagement with such sources cannot proceed without sound theoretical grounding and authorization derived from the authentic sources of Islam. A fundamental question therefore arises: how can a source regarded as unreliable simultaneously serve as a resource for refining, deepening, or even correcting one's own theological understanding?

The central problem of the present study may therefore be formulated as follows: within a confessional framework of Islamic

comparative theology, on what theological grounds can the legitimacy of engagement with and benefit from the data of another religious tradition be established, and interreligious learning thereby justified?

2. Literature Review

Within the field of Islamic comparative theology of a second-order type, which reflects upon the discipline itself, several scholars have addressed aspects of the problem examined in the present study. Their discussions, however, have generally remained unsystematic and have been limited to broad observations and general considerations rather than sustained theoretical analysis.

For example, Mustafa Abu Sway regards the authentic and undistorted messages of the divine prophets as forming a historical continuum that remains accessible to examination and reflection. On this basis, he presents balanced dialogue as both a theological duty and an ethical necessity, oriented toward peaceful coexistence and the protection of human dignity (Abu Sway, 2009).

Similarly, Asma Afsaruddin argues that respectful and dialogical engagement with non-Muslims, particularly the People of the Book, has a firm grounding in Qurʾanic teachings. She prioritizes reconciliation and tolerance over claims of superiority and polemical approaches, and views interreligious dialogue as a means of strengthening mutual understanding and fostering constructive transformation (Afsaruddin, 2009).

Mouhanad Khorchide and Ufuk Topkara, drawing especially on the example of al-Ghazālī's method, argue that Islamic theology historically developed not in isolation but through critical engagement with other intellectual and religious traditions. They therefore present Islamic comparative theology as a faith-based and reflective approach

that, through engagement with other religious traditions, particularly Christianity and Judaism, can both enrich Islamic thought and contribute meaningfully to broader interreligious theological discourse (Khorchide and Topkara, 2013).

Muna Tatari, approaching the acquisition of knowledge as a dialectical process, contends that without comparative inquiry and interreligious dialogue there is a persistent risk that human understanding will remain confined to a one-dimensional perspective. At the same time, she explicitly rejects any movement toward relativism (Tatari, 2018).

In addition, Vahid Mahdavi Mehr has examined the possibility of Islamic comparative theology and argues that supersessionism, understood as the abrogation of an earlier religion by a later one, is not a defensible position. The model of comparative theology he proposes is grounded in a form of non-supersessionist Abrahamic theology (Mahdavi Mehr, 2022), a view that, however, cannot be regarded as consistent with Islamic orthodoxy.

Accordingly, no comprehensive and systematically articulated precedent has been identified for justifying engagement with the data of other religious traditions within Islamic comparative theology. This absence constitutes a significant gap that the present study seeks to address. The research therefore aims to establish a foundation for the justification of engagement with the religious other, grounded in Islamic revelation, including the Qurʾan and the hadith, as well as in reason.

The significance of this study lies, first, in its contribution as an initial step toward the articulation of an Islamic comparative theology and, second, in its potential to assist Islamic seminaries in engaging more fully with contemporary global developments in theology.

It should be emphasized that the present study is concerned exclusively with justifying the principle of constructive theological engagementwith the religious other from an Islamic standpoint and does not attempt to address other theoretical foundations of comparative theology. Among the various approaches to this discipline, including confessional, meta-confessional, interreligious, and postcolonial models, the study adopts the confessional approach, as this is the framework most commonly embraced by orthodox theologians. Furthermore, key concepts such as religion, religious tradition, theology, constructive theology, normativity, faith seeking understanding, reason, and *fiṭrah* are understood within the parameters of this approach. For this reason, the study does not undertake a conceptual analysis of these terms, since such discussions have been treated extensively in the existing literature.

In addition, the study presents several examples of engagement with the religious other aimed at achieving a deeper understanding of one's own religious tradition, drawn from both Christian and Islamic contexts. These examples are offered solely to illustrate the possibility of such constructive theological engagementand the pursuit of constructive theological inquiry. The inferential methods employed in these cases are not evaluated, nor are their conclusions assessed. Accordingly, the author assumes no responsibility for the theological judgments or outcomes associated with them.

B. Research Findings

As an initial step, it is necessary to clarify the Christian approach to the question of epistemic engagement with the religious other. Christianity constitutes the historical context in which what is now known as "new comparative theology" first emerged and remains the setting in which the largest body of research on this subject has been

produced. Clarifying this background helps orient the present study in an appropriate direction.

1. The Existence of Truth in Other Religions from a Christian Perspective

Throughout history, various forms of theological engagement with other religious traditions have existed, and new comparative theology continues this trajectory in a more systematic manner, without the intention of undermining other religions but rather with an attitude of respect and appreciation toward them (Cornille, June 25, 2023). Friedrich Max Müller regarded not only learning "about" other religions but also learning "from" them as desirable (Müller, 1874, p. xxv). He further maintained that the comparative study of religion could infuse Christianity itself with renewed vitality (Müller, 1874, p. xix).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the term comparative theology came to designate a theological and normative discipline that generates theological insights through the process of interreligious comparison (Cornille, July 2019, p. 2). In this regard, the Catholic theologian and priest David Tracy describes comparative theology as a truth-seeking endeavor in which the theologian undertakes comparative inquiry on the basis of the theological foundations of his or her own faith (Tracy, 2005, p. 9126). According to the Catholic theologian and priest James Fredericks, comparative theology seeks to clarify the meaning and truth of the home religious tradition through the establishment of a critical correlation with the primary texts of another religious tradition (Fredericks, 2010, pp. x–xi). Catherine Cornille likewise notes that comparative theology enables theological reasoning to grow and develop by drawing upon insights found in other religious traditions and by rediscovering the theological standing of one's own tradition within a broader religious and theological horizon (Cornille, 2019, p. 150).

Similarly, Francis Clooney maintains that religious believers must learn from the possibilities and resources of other religions without falling into relativistic generalizations (Clooney, 2010, p. 7). He further argues that comparative study, when undertaken properly as a form of religiously committed reading, does not weaken religious commitment but instead strengthens and deepens it (Clooney, 2010, pp. 20–21).

1–1. Open Inclusivism as the Basis for Engagement with the Religious Other

The comparative theology of Francis Clooney, as one of the principal architects of the confessional approach to comparative theology, resonates with forms of inclusivist theology associated with the Jesuit theologians Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis. These approaches seek to maintain a balance between the claim of the uniqueness of Christianity and the need for openness toward other religions as sources from which one may learn (Clooney, 2010, p. 16). Open inclusivism has thus become the theological foundation for much of the work produced by confessional comparative theologians. Within this framework, the comparative theologian remains faithful to the self-understanding of his or her own particular tradition while remaining open to constructive engagement with other religious traditions (Cornille, 2019, p. 59).

According to Paul J. Griffiths, the Church has come to acknowledge that it must learn part of what it ought to teach from those who stand outside its own boundaries and that other religious traditions also convey certain truths. Consequently, it becomes difficult to deny that some of what the Church must learn may already be present in the teachings of other religions. This recognition captures the essence of what is meant by open inclusivism (Griffiths, 2001, p. 63).

Cornille further observes that within the Christian tradition theologians have frequently appealed to the concept of the Logos, understood as the Word or will of God active in the world prior to the Incarnation, as well as to God's continuing activity in the world through the Holy Spirit. As a result, pneumatology, the theology of the Holy Spirit, or Spirit-Christology has served as one of the principal theological resources for an open inclusivist approach to other religions (Cornille, 2019, p. 58).

1–2. The Desirability of "External Sources"

Klaus von Stosch, a theologian and ordained deacon of the Catholic Church in Germany (Universität Bonn, n.d.), argues that even if Christianity alone contains the revelation of God, the Church can never fully comprehend what it has received from God. Given the limitations inherent in human cognitive capacities, humanity's witness to the divine Word may remain incomplete. It therefore remains possible that something decisive for the Church may be disclosed elsewhere in the world and, accordingly, within other religious traditions as well (von Stosch, 2014, p. 63).

Most comparative theologians belong to the Catholic Church and seek to introduce new insights into Catholic theology by drawing upon ideas that have proven compelling to Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of other religious traditions (Legenhausen, April 14, 2023). Von Stosch maintains that comparative theology, understood as a practice of interreligious learning, possesses a particular affinity with catholicity in the original sense of the term, as well as with Catholic Christianity in its more specific meaning. Among the considerations he advances is Christianity's longstanding openness to non-theological sources of knowledge, namely "external sources" (*loci alieni*), and its

recognition of their value for theological reflection (von Stosch, 2014, p. 59). He further argues that under contemporary interreligious and intercultural conditions, a theology that claims catholic universality cannot refrain, in its search for knowledge, from considering the religious and cultural perspectives of other traditions regarding humanity and the world as potential loci alieni (von Stosch, 2014, p. 63).

According to the Protestant Methodist theologian and pastor, Robert Neville, for Catholics who have reached theological maturity the theology of the Church represents a synthesis of numerous traditions, ranging from the Judeo-Gentile theologies of the first century to patristic, Augustinian, Thomistic, Tridentine, Kantian, Neo-Thomist, and twentieth-century existentialist theologies, among others. Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has engaged in fruitful dialogue with Syriac, Orthodox, Asian, African, and other theological traditions. Its engagement with Hinduism and the Chinese religious traditions also dates back to the Jesuit missions. Such interactions have added subtle yet significant dimensions to the theological horizon of Roman Catholicism (Neville, 2017, March 6).

1–3. Vatican II's Endorsement of Engagement with the Religious Other

The Spanish Dominican friar and scholastic theologian, Melchior Cano (c. 1509–1560), enumerated ten sources of Christian theology (*loci theologici*): the Scriptures, the Catholic tradition, the ecumenical councils, the Church of Rome, the Church Fathers, the scholastics, natural reason, philosophers and jurists of civil law, and history. The first seven constitute the primary loci of theological reflection, while the final three function as useful auxiliary resources (Wilhelm, 1910). Cunningham and others refer to these last three as loci alieni, adding that since the Second Vatican Council the category has also come to include various aspects of contemporary non-Christian cultures, as

well as the findings of the social sciences (Cunningham, Hofmann, & Sievers, 2007, p. 117).

Since the convening of the Second Vatican Council, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church has invited its members to view other religions with appreciation and to consider the possibility of learning from them (von Stosch, April–July 2023). Referring to the Vatican II declaration on world religions, *Nostra aetate*, Clooney highlights a positive and open attitude in which one may remain fully Catholic while acknowledging the truths present in other religions:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (Clooney, 2010, p. 17; *Nostra aetate*, 1965, para. 2).

Clooney interprets this passage as an expression of the "great tradition of Christian learning," a tradition to which the Catholic Church belongs and which resonates with the exhortation in Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (Clooney, 2010, p. 17). Accordingly, he cites Philippians 4:8–9 at the beginning of his book *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*:

> Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Clooney, 2010, p. vi).

Cornille likewise cites the statement "[t]he Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions" as acknowledging

the possibility that truth may be found in other religions (Cornille, 2019, p. 59). Subsequent Vatican documents, such as *Dialogue and Proclamation*, have also opened the way for engagement with other religions and for learning from them. According to this document, Christians should be ready to learn both "from" others and "through" others the positive values present in their traditions (Pontifical Council, 1991, sec. 4, no. 82). Cornille regards this statement as facilitating constructive engagement with other religions (Cornille, 2019, p. 59).

1–4. Examples of Christian Engagement with the Religious Other

Example One: The Swiss Catholic priest, Hans Küng, in his well-known project World Ethos, sought to highlight the importance of fundamental moral principles by demonstrating the shared ethical commitments found across various religious traditions (Cornille, 2019, p. 120).

Example Two: Through observing the Islamic Ramadan fast and experiencing the spiritually charged moments preceding the breaking of the fast, Klaus von Stosch came to a renewed appreciation of an older Catholic tradition concerning the Eucharist. In that earlier tradition, believers were not permitted to eat or drink until the late morning, when the liturgy was celebrated. This relatively brief period of fasting caused the consecrated bread received during the ceremony to carry greater significance for believers than it often does under present practices (von Stosch, April–July 2023).

Example Three: The engagement of some Christian theologians with Hinduism has led them to suggest that Jesus's statement about being "one with the Father" may be interpreted through the category of non-duality (*advaita*) in *advaita vedānta* (Dupuis, 1997, pp. 268–275).

Example Four: Holly Hillgardner conducted a comparative study of the thirteenth-century Flemish Christian mystic Hadewijch and the sixteenth-century Hindu mystic Mirabai. In contrast to Augustine's traditional ideal of attaining final rest and repose in God, Hillgardner, drawing on the example of Mirabai, seeks to highlight Hadewijch's emphasis on the centrality of the act of longing itself rather than on the notions of possessing or consuming the desired beloved (Hillgardner, 2016, pp. 149–170).

Example Five: Some Christian comparative theologians, through engagement with Hindu and Buddhist forms of meditation, have rediscovered early forms of hesychastic contemplative practice within Christian spiritual traditions. These practices center on the repetition of a simple Christian invocation: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This form of the Jesus Prayer has continued within certain strands of Eastern Orthodoxy, but before contact with Asian religious traditions it had not spread widely into other branches of Christianity. Through such engagement with Asian traditions, however, the prayer came to be practiced within the World Community for Christian Meditation (Cornille, 2019, p. 127).

2. The Existence of Truth in Other Religions from an Islamic Perspective

In light of discussions within Christian comparative theology concerning the permissibility and desirability of constructive theological engagement with the religious other, the issue may now be reconsidered within the horizon of the Islamic religious tradition.

2–1. The Possession of Truth by the Religious Other in the Qur'ān

From the perspective of the Qurʾan, the existence of truth in the pre-Islamic divinely revealed religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, is self-evident and requires almost noargument. In addition to the numerous verses that affirm the originally undistorted character of their sacred scriptures and the partial authenticity of the scriptures available at the time of the Qurʾan's revelation, other verses clearly indicate the presence of truth within those religions: "Had God not repelled some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein the name of God is much mentioned, would surely have been destroyed" (Qurʾan 22:40). "Indeed, those who believe, and those who are Jews, Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord …" (Qurʾan 2:62). "And the magicians fell down in prostration. They said: 'We believe in the Lord of the worlds … Our Lord, pour upon us patience and cause us to die as Muslims'" (Qurʾan 7:120–126). "The disciples said: 'We are the helpers of God. We believe in God; bear witness that we are Muslims'" (Qurʾan 3:52). "He has ordained for you of the religion what He enjoined upon Noah, and that which We have revealed to you, and what We enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus …" (Qurʾan 42:13). "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but rather a *ḥanīf*, a Muslim, and he was not among the polytheists" (Qurʾan 3:67). "And Abraham instructed his sons, and Jacob likewise: 'O my sons, indeed God has chosen for you the religion, so do not die except as Muslims'" (Qurʾan 2:132).

Moreover, the plurality of religions throughout history does not imply that human beings have been left to themselves, nor does it necessarily indicate that religions not explicitly referred to in the Qurʾan and hadith as divinely inspired are merely human constructions. Such

abandonment would appear incompatible with the divine attributes. The Qurʾan explicitly states that every community throughout history has had divinely appointed guides: "There was never a nation but that a warner passed among them" (Qurʾan 35:24), and "You are only a warner, and for every people there is a guide" (Qurʾan 13:7). In this way, the Qurʾan affirms the universality of the divinely instituted office of prophethood throughout human history. This doctrine may serve as a central principle in Islam's epistemological outlook toward other religions.

2–2. The Possession of Truth by the Religious Other in the Hadith Tradition

With regard to the number of divinely appointed prophets, the hadith literature mentions the figure of 124,000, a number intended to convey their great multitude. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq reports Prophet Muḥammad as saying, "Indeed, God, Exalted be He, has one hundred and twenty-four thousand prophets, and I am their master, the most excellent among them and the most honored …" (Ibn Bābawayh, 1983 b, vol. 2, p. 48). It is also reported from Imam ʿAlī that "The earth is never devoid of one who stands for God with His proof (*ḥujjah*), either manifest and well known or fearful and hidden, lest the proofs and clear signs of God be rendered void" (Nahj al-Balāghah, Saying 147).

In *al-Kāfī*, there is a chapter entitled "If there remained on earth only two persons, one of them would be the divine proof (ḥujjah)." In this chapter, for example, Imam al-Ṣādiq is reported to have said, "If there were only two persons left on the earth, one of them would be the ḥujjah" (al-Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 1, p. 179). Another report from him states, "The last one to die will be the Imam, so that no one may argue before God, the Mighty and Exalted, that He left him without a divine proof" (al-Kulaynī, 1407 AH, vol. 1, p. 180). It is likewise reported from Imam al-Bāqir that "The earth never remains without an

Imam, whether manifest or hidden" (Ibn Bābawayh, 1983 a, p. 31).

Moreover, the statement "Were it not for the ḥujjah, the earth would collapse with its inhabitants" is reported in a quasi-*mutawātir* manner (al-Majlisī, 1982, vol. 60, p. 213). Accordingly, the divine proof has always existed throughout history, and even in prehistory, and many of the sound teachings found in various religions may be regarded as traces of these divine proofs.

In addition, numerous hadiths recommend acquiring wisdom (*ḥikmah*), knowledge (*ʿilm*), and truth (*ḥaqq*) from any source whatsoever. The Prophet is reported to have said, "Take wisdom; it will not harm you from which vessel it emerges" (Muḥammadī Reyshahrī and Berenjkār, 2010, p. 245). From Imam ʿAlī it is reported, "Take wisdom from whoever brings it to you; look at what is said, not at who says it" (Āmidī, 1989, hadith 5048). He is also reported to have said, "Wisdom is the lost property of the believer; take wisdom even from the people of hypocrisy" (Nahj al-Balāghah, saying 80). Another report states, "Knowledge is the lost property of the believer; take it even from the hands of the polytheists, and let none of you feel ashamed to receive wisdom from whomever he hears it" (Muḥammadī Reyshahrī and Berenjkār, 2010, p. 246). It is also reported from Imam al-Ṣādiq, "Seek knowledge, even if it requires plunging into the depths of the seas" (al-Majlisī, 1982, vol. 71, p. 277). Finally, a hadith attributed to ʿĪsā (Jesus) states, "Take the truth from the people of falsehood, and do not take falsehood from the people of truth; be discerning critics of speech" (al-Barqī, n.d., vol. 1, p. 359).

2–3. The Possession of Truth by the Religious Other from the Perspective of Religious Scholars and Other Thinkers

In *Biḥār al-Anwār*, ʿAllāmah al-Majlisī recounts the story of Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf, a narrative describing the life of the

Buddha and the wise counsels of his spiritual guide Bilawhar. He draws this account from Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's *Ikmāl al-Dīn wa Tamām al-Niʿmah*. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq, in turn, transmits this highly admonitory story from Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā (Ibn Bābawayh, 1997, vol. 1, pp. 11–26).

Āyatollāh Moḥammad-Hādī Maʿrefat regards engagement with the works of earlier civilizations, including those of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Jews, and even ancient Iranians and Hindus, as not merely permissible but necessary. Consulting ancient religious texts, which are often surrounded by layers of inherited superstition, should be undertaken with caution, patience, and careful scrutiny, particularly when the aim is to uncover the revelatory truths that may lie within them. Such engagement, he argues, constitutes both a cultural and an existential necessity (Maʿrefat, 2009, vol. 10, pp. 90–91).

Āyatollāh Javādī Āmolī interprets the word "knowledge" (ʿilm) in the prophetic hadith "Seek knowledge even if it be in China" (al-Majlisī, 1982, pp. 177, 180) in a broad sense, encompassing the various human, empirical, mathematical, and other sciences (Javādī Āmolī, 2005, p. 218). He further maintains that it also includes knowledge pertaining to ethics and beliefs (Javādī Āmolī, n.d. b, pp. 165–167). Similarly, ʿAllāmah Ḥasan-Zādeh Āmolī, who likewise regards this hadith as transmitted from the Messenger of God, reports that Imam al-Ṣādiq explained this "knowledge" as follows: "This knowledge refers to self-knowledge, and within it lies the knowledge of the Lord" (Ḥasan-Zādeh Āmolī, 2005, p. 143).

Āyatollāh Javādī Āmolī states elsewhere:

> Every sound word found anywhere in the world ultimately derives from revelation. Imam al-Bāqir (peace be upon him) told two of his students that wherever a sound piece of knowledge is found in the

east or the west, it comes from us; that is, it has reached humanity through the chain of messengership and prophethood: “Travel to the east and the west, and you will not find any sound knowledge except something that has emerged from us, the People of the House” (al-Majlisī, 1982, vol. 2, p. 92). Just as the prophets were sent one after another without interruption, “Then We sent Our messengers in succession” (Qur’ān 23:44), so too the words of the prophets form an unbroken continuity: “And indeed We have conveyed the word to them in continuity so that they may take heed” (Qur’ān 28:51).

In his interpretation of the verse “And indeed We have conveyed the word to them in continuity,” he adds that the Exalted God has never left humanity without guidance. Heavenly scriptures have continually been revealed, and the chain of prophethood has never been interrupted. Even in the intervals between prophets, their successors and pious and knowledgeable individuals, as guardians of the religious tradition, preserved and transmitted their teachings. In the verse “Then We sent Our messengers in succession,” the term “in succession” signifies the uninterrupted continuity of the chain of prophets, divine scriptures, and the words issuing from the Divine (Javādī Āmolī, n.d. a).

Āyatollāh Vāḥid Khorāsānī, after referring to India as a “center of wonders” and an “abode of marvels,” and noting the existence of civilizations and many forms of knowledge that have been buried and lost over time, transmits, through an intermediary, a remarkable report from the philosopher Abolqāsem Mīrfendereskī concerning astrology: “It is narrated from Abū ʿAbd Allāh (peace be upon him) that he was asked about astrology. He said, ‘None knows it except a household from among the Arabs and a household from among the people of India’” (al-Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 8, p. 330) (Vāḥid Khorāsānī, 2002). In his

commentary on this hadith, ʿAllāmah al-Majlisī explains, "His statement, 'a household from among the Arabs,' refers to the household of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him and his family)" (al-Majlisī, 1984, vol. 26, p. 458). That mastery of a particular field of knowledge should be confined to the Household of Infallibility (the Ahl al-Bayt) and to a household from India suggests the presence of significant capacities within the religious other.

Daryush Shayegan recounts that when he would read the Upanishads to ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī, the latter would remark, "These are the very same teachings as our own Islamic doctrines." In response to various passages from the Upanishads, Ṭabāṭabāʾī would recite a passage from a supplication, a statement from Nahj al-Balāghah, or a verse from the Qurʾan, and a genuine and substantive act of comparison, without precedent, would unfold. Ṭabāṭabāʾī even encouraged Shayegan to translate the Upanishads into Persian (Kadivar, 2023). In *al-Mīzān*, Ṭabāṭabāʾī writes, "The contents of the Upanishads are exalted truths that a small number of individuals, those endowed with divine guardianship (*wilāyah*), have discovered and borne" (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 2008, vol. 10, p. 431).

Sayyid Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti describes the milieu in which Islam emerged as a historically rich environment shaped by diverse religious and intellectual currents. He maintains that the Qurʾan and the hadith address this plurality and argues that even a minimal understanding of the Qurʾan is not possible without familiarity with its cultural contexts. He writes, "A prerequisite for interpreting the Qurʾan is familiarity with the Old and New Testaments, for the Qurʾan has been revealed with reference to these texts." He further notes that in some works of Qurʾanic exegesis numerous pages have been devoted to explaining a point that could have been clarified in a few lines had the exegetes consulted the Bible. He also considers a certain

degree of familiarity with Zoroastrianism and the Avesta, and even with Indian religions, to be necessary. Likewise, he regards the critique of hadiths as inappropriate without sufficient knowledge of now-extinct religions, arguing that without such awareness a researcher "cannot understand the language of many hadiths" (Hosseini Beheshti, 2020.).

According to Ahmad Paktachi, one may confidently claim that the Qurʾan itself authorizes the comparison of the Qurʾan with the scriptures of earlier religions. This becomes evident when one considers verses such as "Indeed We wrote in the Psalms after the Reminder that My righteous servants shall inherit the earth" (Qurʾan 21:105) and "Indeed this is surely in the former scriptures, the scriptures of Abraham and Moses" (Qurʾan 87:18–19). The Qurʾan explicitly refers to the Psalms (Zabūr) and the scrolls of Abraham and Moses. Since the Qurʾan does nothing in vain, such references point to the importance, and even the necessity, of comparing the Qurʾan with earlier revealed scriptures (Paktachi, 2024.).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, at the beginning of his translation and commentary on the Tao Te Ching, cites the prophetic hadith "Seek knowledge even if it be in China" and offers the following supplication: "O Lord of the two easts and Lord of the two wests, open for us the gate of knowledge" (Izutsu and Nasr, 2021, pp. 11–13). He describes the Tao Te Ching as "one of the most famous sacred books of the religions of the world," a short text dating to the fifth or sixth century BCE in which "every sentence is full of meaning and, in terms of the length of its chapters, it more closely resembles the sūrahs of the final section of the Qurʾan." Nasr explains that his aim in translating and commenting on the work is "to illuminate some of the truths of the Tao Te Ching in the philosophical and mystical language of Islam" (Izutsu and Nasr, 2021, pp. 12–21). In this work, he makes

extensive use of sources from Islamic mysticism and the poetry of Muslim gnostics and Sufis, thereby demonstrating the affinities between certain Taoist teachings and Islamic spiritual doctrines.

Muḥammad Dārāshukūh regards the presence of the religious other as an almost imperative necessity, an "other" without whose existence each person would remain forever imprisoned within the vicious circle of self-centeredness (Shayegan, 2003, pp. 3–4). In his Persian translation of the Upanishads, he renders a number of Indian ontological or mythological concepts through Islamic equivalents: the "four states of Ātman" are equated with the "four worlds of Islamic cosmology," the Trimūrti trinity with the three archangels, *mahākāśa* with the Supreme Throne (al-ʿArsh al-Akbar), *māyā* with divine love, and *pralaya* with the Resurrection (Shayegan, 2003, pp. 18, 30–32).

Mostafa Malekian regards indifference to the intellectual heritage of humanity, and the sense of self-sufficiency that dismisses the works of sages, philosophers, mystics, theologians, and the founders of religious traditions throughout the world, as nothing short of foolishness and self-deprivation. The inheritance of our predecessors, he argues, must be examined and sifted so that its genuine jewels may be preserved (Malekian, 2010/04/10). One must attend to the sacred texts of all religions and traditions, attention in the sense intended by Simone Weil: not necessarily accepting those views, but recognizing that their presence or absence matters for us. In other words, we should not live as though figures such as Kant, Shakespeare, Dante, Buddha, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), Socrates, or Plato had never existed; such a way of living would be profoundly irrational. Rather, after subjecting them to critical examination, we ought to make the fullest possible use of what is contained in the sacred texts of all religions and traditions (Malekian, 2010/04/10).

In addition to the foregoing considerations, one may also point to a practical principle in the discipline of the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), namely the presumption of continuity (*istiṣḥāb*) of the rulings of previous religious laws. This principle is a form of istiṣḥāb applied to legal rulings and is invoked when a ruling is known to have been established in a previous revealed law, while after the advent of Islam no reliable proof of its abrogation is available, leaving doubt as to whether it remains valid for Muslims. In such a case, the continuation of that ruling is presumed. For example, some jurists, in arguing for the validity of a *juʿālah* contract with an unspecified reward, have cited part of the story of the Prophet Joseph (Qurʾan 12:72). They reason that such a contract was certainly valid in that earlier dispensation, and since Muslims now doubt whether its validity has ceased, the presumption of continuity applies. A number of prominent scholars of uṣūl al-fiqh, among them Ākhond Khorāsānī and Shaykh Anṣārī, consider this type of istiṣḥāb to be operative (Markaz-e Eṭṭelāʿāt va Madārek-e Eslāmī, 2010.).

C. Analysis and Discussion

1. The Imperative of Universal Learning

According to the testimony of the Qurʾan, the hadith, and human reason, elements of truth are divine endowments—scattered pearls distributed across humanity. Consequently, the pursuit of truth is commendable and desirable regardless of its location or the person who possesses it.

On the Christian side, the merit of learning from any source is underscored by Karl Barth's celebrated assertion:

> God may speak to us through Russian communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does… God may speak to us through a pagan or

> an atheist, and thus give us to understand that the boundary between the Church and the secular world can take at any time a different course from that which we think we discern (Barth, 1936, p. 55).

John Thatamanil, an American Anglican Christian of Indian origin whose comparative theological work engages especially with Hinduism, draws on Barth's expression to suggest that truth may also be found outside the Church. He remarks, "If God can speak through a dead dog, why could He not speak through a Hindu?" (Thatamanil, 2023). Although the wording is hardly courteous, it points to an important reality.

Interestingly, similar ideas appear within the Islamic tradition. The Qurʾan recounts that God raised a crow to teach Qābīl (Cain) how to bury his brother (Qurʾan 5:31). Hadith literature also enumerates praiseworthy traits found in animals and even recommends learning from them. Some hadiths speak, for instance, of acquiring specific virtues from the crow[1] and commend lessons to be learned from the rooster.[2] Moreover, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) calls attention to lessons that may be drawn from creatures such as the hedgehog, snake, ant,

1. It is reported from Imam al-Riḍā, from his forefathers, from Imam ʿAlī that the Messenger of God said, "Learn three qualities from the crow: its concealment during mating, its early rising in the search for provision, and its caution" (Ibn Bābawayh, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 99–100, hadith 51).
2. Imam al-Riḍā said concerning the white rooster, "It possesses five qualities from the qualities of the prophets: its awareness of the times of prayer, protective honor, generosity, courage, and great attentiveness to its household" (Ibn Bābawayh, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 298–299, hadith 70). Among the counsels of Luqmān to his son is the following: "My son, do not let the rooster be wiser than you or more vigilant in observing the prayers. Do you not see that at the time of every prayer it calls out for it, and at dawn it raises its voice while you are asleep?" (Daylamī, 1991, vol. 1, p. 72).

scorpion, birds of the sky, ostrich, viper, salamander, and bat (Ibn Sīnā, 1036, p. 8). Commentators and interpreters have elaborated extensively on the mysteries of their creation, discerning in them lessons that strengthen and balance the human soul. Such reflections, they claim, assist the ascent of the rational soul from the level of bodily attachments to higher stages of spiritual perfection, ultimately reaching the station of conjunction with the Active Intellect (Ibn Sīnā, 1991).

God created the human being as a seeker of perfection. Human beings therefore ought to acquire perfections from every possible path and learn from every creature in proportion to the capacities that God has bestowed upon it. If learning even from animals is recommended, then the legitimacy of learning from and through rational human beings, including peoples and religions that, according to the testimony of the Qurʾan and the hadiths, have encountered divine teachings throughout history and prehistory, becomes self-evident.

One may therefore employ the sieve of reason to distinguish the genuine from the spurious. Every belief or tradition must be weighed against the standard of one's own authentic and sound religious beliefs and practices: whatever accords with that standard may be affirmed, whereas whatever contradicts it must be set aside. It is reported that Jesus and his disciples once came upon the carcass of a dog. While the disciples remarked on its foul odor, Jesus instead drew attention to the whiteness and brightness of its teeth.[1]

2. The Meaning of "Truth" in Confessional Comparative Theology

In confessional comparative theology, only those elements and

1. It is narrated that Jesus, peace be upon him, passed by the carcass of a dog with the disciples, and the disciples said, "How foul the smell of this is." Jesus, peace be upon him, said, "How intensely white its teeth are" (Shahīd al-Thānī, 2000, p. 11).

teachings in another religion that are consonant with one's own home tradition, or at least not in conflict with it, may be regarded as true (Cornille, 2019, p. 54). Put differently, within the literature of the confessional approach to comparative theology, "truth" denotes truth that is compatible with, or grounded in, the accepted revelation of the theologian's own religious tradition, rather than truth derived from neutral inquiry conducted without doctrinal presuppositions.

According to Catherine Cornille, confessional comparative theology examines normative questions and religious truths on the basis of the theologian's own religious tradition. Normativity arises from the home tradition, and the theologian seeks to articulate the truth of that tradition. The comparative theologian's task, therefore, is to reflect on truth from within a particular tradition, namely, his or her own (Cornille, September 27, 2024).

Jacques Dupuis, writing from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, similarly argues that divine truth must be carefully sifted from non-truth and that, in this process, Christ remains the *norma normans*, the supreme norm and criterion of all criteria. Whatever stands in contradiction to the Word, cannot come from the God who sent him (Dupuis, 1997, pp. 249–252). Accordingly, the confessional comparative theologian remains fully committed to the normative teachings of his or her own religious tradition in discerning truth in other religious traditions (Cornille, 2019, p. 162).

Within the Islamic context, the matter may be expressed in Islamic terminology as follows: a Muslim comparative theologian is obliged to remain committed to the core, inviolable principles and prescriptions of the religion, namely *uṣūl al-dīn* and *furūʿ al-dīn*, and to observe the divinely prescribed limits governing obligations, prohibitions, and the essentials of faith. Such a theologian must strictly avoid unacceptable innovation

(*bidʿah*) and deviation. These frameworks define the religious boundaries within which he or she operates, and fidelity to them safeguards the preservation of Islamic identity. What is beyond dispute is the impermissibility of transgressing the essentials of religion or contravening the definitive rulings of the Sharīʿah.

3. Focusing on the "Object of Comparison"

In engagement with the religious other, attention is sometimes directed to the data themselves, that is, to the object of comparison, so that something is learned precisely "from" the other. A simple example may be found in the various arguments for the existence of God developed within Christian natural theology. The writings of Christian theologians contain numerous such arguments from which one may profit. Even if some of such arguments were originally adopted from the works of Muslim thinkers, they may have been further refined by later authors and thus acquired additional value. Christian theodicies addressing the problem of evil in the order of creation provide another example of this kind.

A far more complex illustration, one that assumes a juridical (*fiqhī*) dimension, is mentioned here solely to demonstrate the seriousness of the discussion. It should be emphasized that no evaluative judgment is offered regarding this example and that any normative assessment properly belongs to jurists (*fuqahāʾ*) and *mujtahid*s alone.[1] The example concerns Saqib Hussain's article on

1. The authors emphasize that the determination of whether the results of comparative theological reflection possess doctrinal and practical validity rests solely with the mujtahids. If comparative theologians are not mujtahids, they serve only in an advisory capacity. Following the completion of their scholarly inquiry, they must defer the establishment of authoritative proof and the issuance of final legal rulings to those qualified to exercise *ijtihād*.

Qurʾan 4:34. Drawing upon Jewish legal sources, Hussain undertakes a detailed discussion of the Islamic jurisprudential concept of *nushūz*, seeking to challenge the meaning traditionally assigned to it in Islamic jurisprudence and proposing instead that it be interpreted as "sexual infidelity."

Relying on evidence from pre-Islamic Arabian literature and offering a comparative analysis with Jewish law, especially the rabbinic *sotah* ritual described in Numbers 5:11–31 and in the Mishnah concerning a wife suspected of adultery, he argues that the Qurʾanic procedure for addressing a woman suspected of nushūz closely parallels the rabbinic legal treatment of a woman suspected of infidelity. In his view, both legal traditions address the same underlying concern, namely marital betrayal.

Within the sotah ritual, a three-stage process is likewise observed. The husband first warns his wife, then abstains from marital relations with her, and finally brings her before a priest who administers the ordeal of drinking the bitter water. Hussain notes the similarity between this sequence and the three Qurʾanic stages of admonition, separation, and striking. He concludes that in both legal systems two principles apply: first, that punishment of such a woman cannot be imposed without the testimony of witnesses; and second, that the Qurʾanic term *ḍarb* should be understood not as domestic chastisement but as a judicial measure (Hussain, 2021).

4. Focusing on the "Act of Comparison Itself"

In engagement with the religious other, it is sometimes the very act of comparison that generates knowledge: learning occurs "through" the other rather than "from" the other. The epistemic force of comparison can deepen theological understanding without necessarily requiring the adoption of elements from the other tradition. Attention to the act

of comparison itself has the additional advantage of making learning possible even through aspects of the other's thought that are judged unacceptable by the home tradition.

In this connection, and without any intention of offering evaluative judgments, two examples may be cited simply to illustrate the method.

Example One: Yusuf Daneshvar Nilu argues that the excessive emphasis placed by some contemporary Muslim thinkers on human dignity is rooted more in the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment than in the Qurʾan and the hadiths. At times, on the basis of Qurʾanic verses that speak of human dignity and excellence, such as Qurʾan 17:70, 95:4, and 23:14, a thoroughly optimistic view of the human being is adopted. Yet comparison with the Christian doctrine of original sin may redirect attention to other Qurʾanic verses, such as 33:72, 2:74, and 7:179, and thereby lead to the conclusion that Qurʾanic anthropology is by no means uniformly optimistic about humanity. From an Islamic perspective, such Christian doctrines may indeed have developed in an erroneous form; nevertheless, they may still contain traces of truth. When one returns to the Qurʾan in light of such a comparison, a kind of rediscovery may occur. Instead of centering attention on verses that praise the human being, one comes to emphasize those that censure humankind and to recognize that even in verses that appear to praise the human being, the true object of praise is not humanity itself but God. This shift in perspective is not something learned directly from Christianity. Rather, through the process of comparison, one views one's own religious sources from a different angle and derives this renewed understanding from

the Qurʾan itself. The condition of the contemporary world likewise lends support to such a more pessimistic view of humanity (Daneshvar Nilu, 2023).

Example Two: A reluctance to endure the hardships of pilgrimage, together with indifference to the proper etiquette of visiting the graves of the *awliyāʾ* of God and a tendency to suffice with inward attachment and salutations offered from afar, may amount to a form of spiritual deficiency. Numerous traditions, for example, encourage physical presence at the graves, placing one's hands and face upon them, and benefiting from the spiritual effects associated with being present beneath the dome and at the head of the grave. Thus, for example, ʿAllāmah Majlisī states, "It is more precautionary not to perform prostration upon the grave; however, placing the sides of one's face upon it and supplicating and imploring there is part of the tradition" (Majlisī, 2007, p. 26).

Familiarity with certain teachings in other religious traditions may influence some individuals who have previously been indifferent to such practices. For example, in the Jewish Kabbalistic doctrine of *ibbur*, an incomplete soul attains perfection through attachment to the soul of a *ṣaddīq*, that is, a righteous person. According to this belief, the souls of virtuous individuals remain present above their graves after death, and whoever visits the grave and casts themselves upon it may be entered by that soul, which then assists them in walking the path of goodness (Stewart, 2009, p. 121).

D. Conclusion

This study has shown that, within Islamic comparative theology, epistemic recourse to, or engagement with, the religious other is

grounded in the Qurʾan, hadith, and reason. The central question has been how such engagement and the benefit derived from it can be justified within a tradition that generally regards the data of other religions as, in principle, unreliable. The findings indicate that such engagement is neither categorically rejected nor uncritically accepted. Rather, it is approached in a measured, critical, and confessional manner.

On the one hand, the Qurʾan and the hadiths emphasize the universality and historical continuity of divine guidance, as well as the enduring presence of divine proofs among human societies. On the other hand, numerous hadiths encourage the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and truth from any source. These teachings strongly suggest that elements of truth are not confined to a single historical period or geographical region. Rather, owing both to humanity's historical and prehistorical encounter with the Sacred Source and to its endowment with reason and fiṭrah, such elements are dispersed among diverse peoples and religious traditions. From this perspective, the presence of elements of truth in the sources of the religious other may be understood as an assumption deeply rooted in Islamic teaching.

The views of Muslim scholars and thinkers likewise demonstrate that constructive theological engagement with the intellectual and religious heritage of others is not unprecedented in the history of Islamic thought. Indeed, it has at times been regarded as necessary for attaining a deeper understanding of Islamic sources. Such engagement, however, has consistently been accompanied by an emphasis on caution, critical evaluation, and assessment in light of intra-religious criteria. It has never been understood to imply a slide into religious relativism.

It is also important to note that, in confessional comparative theology, only those elements and teachings of another religion that are compatible with, or at least not in conflict with, one's home

tradition may be regarded as true. Here, “truth” refers to truth that is consonant with, or grounded in, the accepted revelation of the comparative theologian’s own religious tradition. Accordingly, a Muslim comparative theologian remains bound to the core principles and precepts of the home religion, observing the divinely prescribed limits concerning obligations, prohibitions, and the essentials of faith, while rigorously avoiding bidʿah and deviation. The final judgment regarding the outcomes of this form of theological reflection necessarily belongs to those who possess the faculty of ijtihād.

Moreover, the study has shown that deep learning across religious borders is not limited to the reception of data from another religion. The act of comparison itself also possesses epistemic force. Comparison can open new horizons for rereading one’s own religious sources, generate new questions, and lead to the discovery of neglected possibilities within the sources of the home tradition, without requiring acceptance of the teachings of the other.

Ultimately, the cumulative force and mutual corroboration of revelatory and rational evidence support the legitimacy of epistemic engagement with, and learning from and through, the religious other. Such engagement constitutes not a threat to faith but an opportunity for the deepening, refinement, and enrichment of theology. By laying the foundations for this form of engagement, the present study represents an initial step toward the construction of an orthodox Islamic comparative theology, while leaving the detailed articulation of its methodological and inferential frameworks to future research.

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