

Medieval Theology and Philosophy: A Cross-Cultural Tapestry

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Over the last few decades, medieval theology and philosophy has undergone a profound transformation. While it was once regarded as mainly the domain of European Latin Christendom, medieval intellectual history is now understood as an intricate, dynamic and polycentric web of cross-cultural engagements. With the rise of cross-cultural research methodologies, recent scholarship in the field of medieval theology and philosophy increasingly focusses on shared concerns, mutual influences and profound interactions among the thinkers across Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Chinese, Indian and other intellectual traditions that flourished from late antiquity through the fifteenth century. This recent reorientation has certainly enriched and diversified medieval theological and philosophical debate. At the heart of this transformation is a recognition of the profound interconnectedness of the medieval world wherein the dialogue is not restricted by geographical boundaries, and religious, cultural and linguistic differences serve as the catalyst for innovation and deeper reflection. The Special Issue, titled *Medieval Theology and Philosophy from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, explores the rich and complex interactions among diverse intellectual traditions in the medieval period. It brings together a collection of articles that highlight the interconnectedness of theological and philosophical thought across cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries.

The translation movement, which took place between the 8th and the 10th centuries largely in Baghdad, was one of the most significant cross-cultural phenomena.¹ During this movement, works from various cultures were collected and translated into Arabic. According to O'Meara (2005, p. 186), because of the translation movement, “the curriculum typical of the later Greek Neoplatonic schools such as that of Alexandria was known in Baghdad”. This movement ensured the availability, in Arabic, of the Greek scientific and philosophical writings, such as those of Aristotle, Plato and Plotinus, to the medieval Islamic philosophers (Black 2011, p. 57).² These texts influenced and shaped medieval Islamic philosophy (Falsafa) and theology (Kalam). In his contribution to the Special Issue, Ismail Lala (2023) deals with Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī’s reception and treatment of Aristotelian hylomorphisms. He points out that some medieval Islamic philosophers adopted Aristotelian views as they were, whereas others reformulated them in accordance with their own preferences. Lala (2023) argues that Ibn ‘Arabī is one of the second kind of medieval philosophers as he does not simply adopt Aristotelian metaphysics but “fundamentally alters it and carries out a total theologization of it by drawing on Qur’anic terms and prophetic traditions and explicating them through hylomorphism.”

Aristotle provides cosmological proof for the existence of God, arguing for God as the “First Mover” of celestial bodies. Avicenna, medieval Islamic philosopher, critiques Aristotle’s cosmological proof and offers a metaphysical proof for God’s existence via syllogism that deduces God as the Necessary Existent from universal existence. Thomas Aquinas,



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medieval Christian philosopher, not only revives Aristotle's cosmological approach but also expands it by integrating creationist theology and identifying God as both First Mover and Creator. In her contribution, Xin Liu (2024) examines the differences in these three approaches to proving God's existence, and highlights the philosophical, theological and metaphysical factors responsible for these differences.

In addition to classical Greek philosophy, the Neoplatonic tradition greatly influenced medieval thought. The *Liber de Causis*, a brief treatise on Neoplatonic metaphysics, presumably authored by an anonymous Arab scholar, serves as a bridge between late ancient Greek, Arabic and Latin medieval philosophy. This treatise presents a theory of creation marked by a clear distinction between being and essence. In his contribution, Lingchang Gui (2023) explores, from the perspective of historical reception, the origins of this distinction in the treatise "and how it underwent development in the medieval Arab community (especially Avicenna) and subsequently impacted Aquinas's thought and how Aquinas transformed it even further in terms of monotheism." In this way, Gui (2023) demonstrates the exchanges, fusions and civilizational transitions that characterize medieval philosophy.

Dionysius Areopagita is an important Neoplatonic philosopher and Christian theologian who lived and worked during the late 5th and early 6th centuries. In his contribution, Jiansong Nie (2025) examines the way Dionysius Areopagita brings together Plato's allegory of the cave and the biblical narrative of Moses encountering God in darkness on Mount Sinai. Nie (2025) challenges Denys Turner's limited analysis by tracing three reinterpretations of divine darkness: Porphyrius' Neoplatonic view of darkness as a providential, divine presence in the material world; Origen's alignment of Platonic light imagery with Moses' partial vision of God, framing darkness as temporary ignorance; and Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on divine transcendence beyond human perception, rendering Moses' ascent an endless journey. The study concludes that Dionysius integrates these into a "triple divine darkness"—cosmological (material world as divine echo), mystical (God's transcendence beyond intelligibility), and Christological (divine concealment in the Incarnation)—ultimately positing God as perpetually dwelling in darkness, negating any association with visible light.

The interaction between religion and philosophy is one of the major and recurrent themes in medieval thought. Because of their different nature, the interaction between religion and philosophy often manifests in the form of conflict in medieval thought as instantiated by the Averroes versus Al-Ghazali polemic. However, in his contribution, Ishraq Ali (2023) argues that, contrary to the Averroes versus Al-Ghazali polemic, Alfarabi, the founder of Islamic political philosophy and Neoplatonism, reconciles philosophy and religion in his political thought, despite viewing philosophy as superior. While philosophy provides rational truth for the philosophers, religion offers symbolic truths accessible to the masses, ensuring societal cohesion. Alfarabi's ruler, a philosopher-prophet, combines both forms of knowledge to govern effectively, demonstrating that harmony between philosophy and religion is essential for the existence and stability of Alfarabi's virtuous city (Ali 2023).

The debate between Thomas Aquinas and Islamic Falsafa philosophers, particularly Avicenna and Averroes, on the nature of intellect and its role in explaining natural prophecy is the central theme of the contribution of Zhenyu Cai to the Special Issue. Aquinas criticizes Falsafa philosophers' emanation theory of concepts and their doctrine of the unity of intellect, which together form the basis of the Falsafa theory of natural prophecy. Cai (2024) defends the Falsafa theory of natural prophecy by defending the Falsafa philosophers' emanation theory of concepts and their doctrine of the unity of intellect. He argues that, in his critique, Aquinas overlooks Falsafa's nuanced metaphysical framework, rooted in rationalist and cultural contexts, which redefines thought as a transcendent act rather than an individual property.

While mainstream Muslim and Jewish Mutakallimūn defined necessary knowledge as immediate, indubitable cognition (e.g., sense perception, self-evident axioms), Saadya controversially extended this category to include mediate, deductive knowledge (e.g., inferring fire from smoke) and introduced a second-order necessary knowledge derived from the inherent connections between primary necessary truths. In their contribution to the Special Issue, Dong and Memet-Ali (2025) argue that Saadya's approach synthesizes Kalam's cognitive necessity with logical entailment, reframing deduction as a process of uncovering latent, interconnected knowledge structures rooted in empirical and intellectual foundations. This positions Saadya as expanding Kalam epistemology by integrating elements of Hellenistic scientific reasoning (e.g., Galenic demonstration) while maintaining alignment with classical Kalam principles of subjective certainty and empirical priority.

Kemal Batak's contribution to the Special Issue explores Ibn Rushd's (Averroes) formulation of the teleological argument, framing it as a form of reflective knowledge rooted in Aristotelian virtue epistemology. By emphasizing metaphysical principles such as the First Agent, First End, and *de re* necessity—concepts that underscore the universe's intrinsic, unalterable order—Ibn Rushd posits that the world's design reflects a divine creator and represents the "teleologically best of all possible worlds." The study underscores his integration of religious accessibility and philosophical depth, demonstrating how both simplified deductive reasoning (for the public) and complex metaphysical analysis (for philosophers) converge to affirm God's existence as certain knowledge (Batak 2024). This challenges interpretations that diminish the argument's epistemic robustness or reduce it to anthropocentric claims.

The concept of *analogia entis* (analogy of being) is one of the important topics discussed in the Special Issue. Xiaoyan Xu's contribution to the Special Issue examines how Thomas Merton's later theology employs *analogia entis* to confront modern spiritual and existential challenges. It critiques neo-scholastic dualism and secular materialism, emphasizing Merton's revival of natural contemplation (rooted in patristic cosmology), symbolic epistemology (prioritizing sacramental meaning over utilitarian signs), and non-dual awareness (resonating with Zen's self-transcendence). Merton's framework underscores God's dynamic presence in-and-beyond creation, promoting a theology that integrates mysticism, interfaith dialogue and a holistic response to modernity's fragmentation (Xu 2024).

There are two articles in the Special Issue which provide a comparison between Christian and Hindu mystical traditions. The first of these articles, authored by Jianye Liu and Zhicheng Wang, explores the structural symmetry between Meister Eckhart's Christian mysticism and Hindu Vedānta. Liu and Wang (2023) identify a convergent "seesaw" dynamic in Eckhart and Vedānta, where both resolve dilemmas of divine-human unity by emphasizing impersonal divinity and the sanctity of worldly action. The second article, authored by Yixuan Liu, compares Bonaventure's six-stage Christian spiritual ascent with Śankara's sixfold Vedānta practices. Liu (2024) highlights Bonaventure's and Śankara's shared methodologies of disciplined mental/spiritual cultivation to achieve oneness with ultimate reality, despite their divergent theological premises.

The relationship between Chinese and Christian thought is explored in three contributions to the Special Issue. In the first of these contributions, Lin Wang (2024) compares the localization of early Christianity in Rome and Buddhism in China through Tertullian's *Apology* and Mou Zi's *Answers to the Skeptics*. The two texts reveal a similar three-step localization strategy: one, distinguishing the faith from the pre-existing ones; two, incorporation of local ideas and ideologies; and three, integration into societal structure and norms. Wang (2024), however, points out a critical divergence in the socio-political contexts of the two religions: Christianity maintained strong political independence in Rome's religiously pluralistic environment, enabling its eventual rise to state religion with institutional

autonomy, while Buddhism encountered China's Confucian-dominated state ideology, which was deeply intertwined with political power, forcing Buddhism into a subordinate, adaptive role without displacing Confucian orthodoxy. This fundamental difference in religion–state relations shaped their historical trajectories, leading to Christianity's political ascendancy in the West and Buddhism's syncretic assimilation in China. In the second contribution, Amy Yu Fu (2024) addresses the historical misinterpretation of Neo-Confucian concepts by 17th-century Jesuit missionaries, who dismissed Neo-Confucianism's spiritual dimensions due to Aristotelian biases, hindering interreligious dialogue. Through a comparative analysis of Zhu Xi's *Reflections on Things at Hand* and Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, the study finds that both traditions emphasize ethical engagement grounded in interconnectedness. However, their methods diverge: Neo-Confucianism prioritizes removing desires to achieve equilibrium and societal harmony through ritual propriety and quiet-sitting, while Ignatian spirituality focuses on discernment of spirits and indifference to worldly attachments via imaginative contemplation. Fu (2024) concludes that these approaches offer complementary insights for cross-cultural spiritual enrichment, such as applying Ignatian imagination to Neo-Confucian narratives and integrating daily ethical practice into retreat-based exercises. In the third contribution, Yanbo Zheng (2024) explores the possibility of understanding medieval Christian mystical theology, specifically Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's exegesis of the biblical "Song of Songs", through the lens of ancient Chinese poetry, namely the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*). It addresses the challenge of cross-cultural interpretation by employing Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons", arguing that the shared, universal human experience of love depicted in both texts—despite their distinct cultural and religious origins—provides a common ground for Chinese readers to access Bernard's theology. Applying Bernard's theological interpretations to the *Shijing* reveals resonant themes, demonstrating that this cross-textual approach is not only feasible but also helps dispel misconceptions about Bernard's theology. The findings affirm that the *Shijing* serves as a vital cultural stepping stone enabling Chinese readers to comprehend Bernard's mystical framework, highlighting the shared emotional foundations of human nature across civilizations and the potential for cross-cultural theological dialogue (Zheng 2024).

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List of Contributions:

1. Ali, Ishraq. 2023. Philosophy and Religion in the Political Thought of Alfarabi. *Religions* 14: 908. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070908>.
2. Batak, Kemal. 2024. Averroesian Religious Common Sense Natural Theology as Reflective Knowledge in the Form of Teleological Argument. *Religions* 15: 1429. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121429>.

3. Cai, Zhenyu. 2024. Blind Man, Mirror, and Fire: Aquinas, Avicenna, and Averroes on Thinking. *Religions* 15: 150. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020150>.
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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed analysis of the translation movement see (Gutas 1998).
- ² We must clearly distinguish between the translation movement and the transmission of Greek thought to Medieval Islamic philosophers. It is true that the availability, in Arabic, of Greek corpus to medieval Islamic philosophers ultimately owes to the translation movement. However, the transmission of Greek thought to medieval Islamic philosophers was a complex phenomenon and the translation movement was a significant part of it. For a detailed discussion on the transmission of Greek thought to medieval Islamic philosophers see (Ali 2022).

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