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Article

A Contribution to Comparative Theology: Probing the Depth of Islamic Thought

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Abstract: Muslim theologians, as much as ordinary Muslims, will immediately agree with the characterization of God as all compassionate. However, it remains rather opaque how God's compassion can be fully explained in terms of comparative theology. How can Muslims relate to God's compassion? What role does God's compassion precisely play in the Quranic revelation and the daily practice of Muslims?

Keywords: Islamic theology; theology of compassion in Islam; comparative theology; Islamic thought; compassion and mercy in Islamic theology

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I. Laying the Foundation

Islamic theology currently faces a challenging phase of its ongoing development. Whereas the global Muslim community is engaging global modernity in the political, cultural, economic and social arenas, Islamic theology remains—aside from individual examples few and far between—somewhat reluctant to participate in new forms of comparative discourses. Only a handful of theologians across the world seem to have realized how fundamentally important this is for the future of Islamic theology.[1]

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[1] These theologians represent a wide range of interests and scholarly work. However, their work is particularly stimulating, as it broaches the disciplines intellectual frontiers by engaging idea(l)s of modernity. The list includes, but it is not limited to: Khaled Abou El Fadl, Ebrahim Moosa, Farid Esack, Sherman Jackson, Mohammed Arkoun.

Ignoring the intellectual and philosophical challenges that modernity poses to any set of beliefs is essentially a hopelessly isolationist stance and one that Islamic theology can no longer afford to hold. More importantly, this kind of intellectual stagnation fails to reflect the historically rich self-perception and scrutiny of Muslim theologians across the centuries, who have often analyzed and engaged new intellectual frontiers in the past. As proven at multiple points in its long history, Islamic theology only grew stronger by juxtaposing its ideas and beliefs against those of other traditions.

Engaging modernity does not invalidate the Islamic past. To the contrary, it is absolutely necessary to reiterate the Islamic tradition in its multifarious manifestations and introduce all strands to a new discourse fueled by modernity. Muslim theologians should be held accountable for nothing less than establishing a series of critical comparative explorations. In fact, as much as it is essential for the Muslim community to probe Islamic heritage, the same value and significance should be devoted to the studies of modern day philosophies and intellectual inquiries from other religious, as well as secular traditions.

A historical example of such a comparative effort makes this point very clearly. One of the most intriguing and intellectually stimulating scholars in Islamic history is Muhammed Abu Hamid Al-Ġhazālī. Only very few scholars can claim to have had as far reaching an impact on both the practices and beliefs of Muslims across centuries. Certainly, Al-Ġhazālī's scholarly work was, to some extent, promoted by the Seljuk Wazir Nizam Al-Mulk for political reasons. However, the extensive impact of Greek philosophy on Muslim scholars and contemporary debates influenced Al-Ġhazālī's scholarly work. From Al-Kindi, to Al-Farabi and Ibn-i Sina, many Muslim scholars incorporated Greek philosophy into their thinking and reasoning, leaving the door wide open for both criticism and agreement between these two broad schools of thought as a form of comparative theology.

Al-Ġhazālī was among those who criticized the influence of Greek philosophy on Muslim theology, pointing out the incompatibilities between the two. He did so not only because the political authorities demanded this of him, but because of his critique on his own intellectual convictions and beliefs [1]. We can draw this conclusion from an incredibly audacious biographical work in which Al-Ġhazālī guides the reader on his journey through philosophy and faith. The reader accompanies Al-Ġhazālī through various stages of doubt and self-reflection, to the point at which he finally reaches a coherent answer to his central inquiry of how to access or experience divinity. Some Muslim scholars argued (and some even still hold this position today) that Al-Ġhazālī has responded to the central claims of philosophy by means of philosophy, itself, and thereby undermined any legitimacy of philosophical thought for theology *per se*. As much as this extreme claim cannot be taken seriously, we simultaneously have to underline the fundamental differences between 12th century and 21st century understandings of philosophy.

Like many of his contemporaries, Al-Ġhazālī viewed Greek philosophy as an intellectual threat to Muslim beliefs. What sets him apart, however, is that instead of simply refuting philosophy, as a whole, he thoroughly engaged it. Essentially, Al-Ġhazālī provided a blueprint from which we can derive both an epistemology and a critical methodology, a method that is applicable to the set of inquiries we are facing in our own contemporary situation. Like Al-Ġhazālī in his time, present-day Muslim theologians should not hesitate to investigate and examine other strands of critical thought that

could help us understand our faith more deeply [2].[2] As Al-Ġhazālī showed us, Islamic theology can develop an epistemology and critical methodology born from and based upon its own traditions and, yet, in analytical dialogue with others; an epistemology and methodology able to coherently and constructively respond to intellectual challenges to our faith.

II. Comparative Theology

There are multiple points of entrance through which Islamic theology can join modern comparative theological discussions. However, one particular debate Islamic theology will have to address sooner or later is the paradigmatic shift in modern philosophy that was introduced by Immanuel Kant. Certainly, contemporary Muslim scholars are by and large aware of the most important currents of Western philosophy. Many Muslim scholars have, in fact, reflected on modern Western philosophy.[3] However, we still believe that levels of engagement and even the very meaning of "engaged" are contested. It is legitimate that Muslim scholars' fundamental stance toward modern philosophy, as a Western non-Muslim way of thinking, is to be highly critical. But this should not prevent them from examining Western modern thought thoroughly.

Until recently, there has been no comprehensive scholarly work, relying upon a Muslim perspective, dealing with the critical assessments of Kant's description of the relation of reason and philosophy and the status of religion in modern thinking. For instance, in comparison to the breadth and depth of Christian scholarly work devoted to Kant's paradigmatic Enlightenment reflections, Muslim scholars' engagement with Western philosophy has been rather insufficient and scattered.[4]

Whereas the confrontation with modern-day philosophy remains to be seen, the remainder of this essay will focus on a particularly intriguing contemporary theological debate in which Islamic theology is beginning to engage comparative theology.

Even a cursory look at the numerous modes of expression of religious groups in the present-day leaves us overwhelmed. A highly diverse and heterogeneous group of communities believe, in one way or another, in a deity. Comparative theology emerged in this theological realm, seeking truth in and through various religious and non-religious traditions. More precisely, comparative theology holds that a believer in one tradition can seek understanding, and perhaps even a measure of truth, in and through other religious traditions. It is important to underline that comparative theology is not directed to challenging a particular faith *per se*, but is rather concerned with creating new means of understanding the other, and through that process, the self.[5] In other words, comparative theology could help Islamic theology develop a greater reflective and reflexive understanding. Through comparison with other cultures and traditions, we could develop new means of communication, in our attempts to address the divine.

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[2] Ebrahim Moosa's work on Al-Ġhazālī is a profound example of how the tradition can be engaged critically and applied to current debates.

[3] The list includes, but is not limited to, Sir Muhammed Iqbal, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Tariq Ramadan and Hassan Hanafi.

[4] Kant's "critique of reason" is not directed against Christianity or any specific denomination. It rather develops a coherent theory of epistemology, which fundamentally challenges perceptions of the relation between reason and faith.

[5] For a thorough description of comparative theology, see in this volume: Klaus von Stosch, Comparative Theology as Liberal and Confessional Theology.

Speaking about the divine and the ways in which the believer reaches out to the divine (including practices) requires a specific frame of linguistic and cultural references. Any community of believers shares these references internally. However, they remain rather opaque to anyone outside of the community who is trying to grasp their meaning. As long as one cannot fully understand what the shared practices and linguistic references actually mean, it is simply inconceivable to fully comprehend the strands of communication with the divine defined by these cultural references. However, it is not entirely impossible to overcome these limits on our understanding. Comparative theology holds that by long and patient study, the outsider could become somewhat of an insider. Truly, this requires quite a bit of a scholarly and personal effort. Nevertheless, the depth of understanding one can possibly achieve is equally rewarding.

On a different note, broader understanding of those linguistic references could help us to decipher the underlying strands of communication of each and any religious tradition. Still, one might ask why would we want to understand those peculiar and alien categories of communication with the divine? Why would we want to understand how a different religious group is addressing its deity in the first place? As simple as it may sound, by engaging in this process, we might be able to explore and distinguish fine nuances in our own communication with the divine. Moreover, it could also be seen as an attempt to read God's signs, which the Qur'an emphasizes on multiple occasions ([3], Q 2:164; Q 3:190).

By engaging with a community and its linguistic and cultural references, we can discover ourselves both in and through the other. This would not only allow us to detect shared practices of belief; it could also enrich our own practice or deepen our faith. In many ways, it would exemplify the Quranic claim that God has created us in different tribes and that we are supposed to get to know each other [3].[6] The verb used in the verse goes beyond the notion of simple acquaintance or friendly relationship. It rather implies a sincere attempt to understand the other, in all of the other's complexities and contradictions to what we see, feel or know as truth ([4], pp. 605–07).

III. How Can Comparative Theology Contribute to Islamic Theology

Islamic theology has not been predominantly concerned with responding to modernity. Essentially, Islamic theology is preserving and conveying an understanding of and a belief in God, outlined and defined in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammed. However, this does not mean that Islamic theology is merely operating within a restricted theological arena isolated from the rest of the world. An insular existence of Islamic theology, of its reasoning about God or its faith seeking understanding, is neither intended nor encouraged [5]. Comprehension and understanding of the divine are fostered in networks of shared knowledge and references. Thus, Muslims and their belief are as much intertwined with other cultures as those are with the Muslim world. Throughout the history of the Muslim world, Muslims have been exposed to many experiences, cultures and theologies. Consequently, learning from other cultures was perceived as both necessary and enriching for its own understanding. Even if Muslim scholars considered other traditions, faith based or not, to be flawed or

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[6] The Qur'anic verse reads ([3], Q 49:13) "People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes **so that you should recognize one another**. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware."

in some ways inferior and unacceptable, they still did not hesitate to study and learn from them. By doing so, Muslim scholars not only extended the horizon and depth of Muslim thinking, they also acted in accordance with the prophetic teaching that striving for knowledge is considered an obligation for every Muslim.

We have already mentioned some of the intellectual challenges ahead for Islamic theology, *i.e.*, the philosophical inquiries surrounding the belief in a supremely powerful and compassionate deity. Whereas a wide range of different topics can be addressed, one particular debate continues to attract special interest. The question is fairly old, yet still very persistent. Considering all of the misery, poverty, suffering and sorrow in this world, how can we still believe in an all-merciful, all-compassionate God? While Christianity, for example, embraced this inquiry, which is usually defined as theodicy, as part of its theological discourse, Muslim scholars remain somewhat silent on the issue. Muslim scholars, in general, seem to be reluctant to devote any attention to this question, claiming that it has no relevance for Islamic theology.

However, not all Muslim scholars can easily ignore the question of theodicy. Currently, we are witnessing the emergence of Islamic theology as an academic discipline in Germany. The German government has endowed several universities across the country in order to encourage the emergence of Islamic theology within their theological faculties. Muslim students have thus already started to study their religion through intellectually sophisticated and compelling comparative theological reflection.

Even though the faculty and the students of these departments are devoted to preserving and discovering their own religious heritage, Islamic theology will no longer remain isolated within an intellectual vacuum. Muslim theologians will have to engage meaningfully the vast and long-lasting tradition of German thought and philosophy. Ultimately, they will help forge an understanding of Islam that will be open to academic and modern philosophical scrutiny. Therefore, it is very unlikely that Muslim theologians in Germany will be able to avoid the question of theodicy any longer. Comparative theology could provide them with a series of tools for tackling this particularly challenging issue.

Also, as stated above, Christianity embraced this question and developed a set of arguments that explain why Christians can and should believe in God, even when the world is haunted by great suffering and sorrow. We believe that Muslim theologians can learn a great deal by familiarizing themselves with the relevant discourse shaped by Christian theologians. This is, moreover, true not only related to this particular question of theodicy. The study of comparative Christian theology and its peculiar engagement with Western philosophy could help Muslim theologians comprehend and evaluate theological reasoning that meets modern global philosophical scrutiny.

Secondly, as we have previously pointed out, seeking a divine truth is an endeavor that Muslims share with many religious groups. However, some traditions are closer in theory and practice to us than others. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are viewed as the three Western monotheistic cultures or Abrahamic religions. The Qur'an mentions time and again that following Abraham's teachings and the teachings of all other prophets who came after him is mandatory to establish Islam: "So [you believers], say, 'We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him'" ([3], Q 2: 136).

Given this practice of engaging the other Abrahamic religions, it is rather bewildering how dismissive contemporary Muslim theologians can be when it comes to evaluating, for instance, Moses or Jesus based on respective Jewish or Christian sources. This is a relatively new phenomenon, as Jewish sources were, at times, relied on in such areas as seeking knowledge about the prophets during the early stages of Islam. In fact, a whole genre called Isra'iliyat [7] was introduced into early Islamic writings. The Isra'iliyat also proves useful for our time, serving as an excellent example of how differently the process of transmitting knowledge can be perceived. The Isra'iliyat was a focused attempt to understand the history of the prophets through the eyes of Jewish scholars or in light of Jewish sources. It served as historical evidence, incorporated into the oeuvre of Islamic writings. One might assume that those beliefs were considered only as long as they did not oppose or violate the theological position of Islam in any essential way.

In other words, Muslim scholars could essentially gain compelling insight into Jewish sources if they would engage historical material based on the criteria of comparative theology discussed above. More precisely, connecting the Isra'iliyat with Jewish theology would certainly help us better understand this specific inherent and embedded set of comparative beliefs. The same would be true for any attempt to appreciate the life of Jesus based on Christian sources and Christian theology [7]. Consequently, Muslim history offers us a legacy; namely engaging Jewish and Christian theological reasoning as part of what Islamic intellectual discourse has incorporated throughout history.

However, we should be aware that this kind of approach would not receive overwhelming support from many Muslim thinkers. On the contrary, many will object to the historical reliability and authenticity of Jewish and Christian sources, claiming that the Qur'an has actually refuted them [8–10].[8] Others will argue that the Christian perception of Jesus is diametrically opposed to the Muslim belief and the Quranic statement about his prophethood. We cannot now engage this point in greater detail, but it should be underlined that perceptions that are not grounded in a deeper reflection, essentially prevent us from unlocking meaningful trails of understanding and appreciation of both the other and ourselves.[9]

IV. The Theology of Mercy in Islam: A Contribution to Comparative Theology

As we elaborated earlier, engaging with comparative theology can be a mutually beneficial process for both Muslims and non-Muslim theologians. Islamic theology could not only seek to unveil new

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[7] Wahb ibn Munabbih was a specialist in this kind of knowledge and was reputed to be the first to write a book in the genre. Wahb lived from 34 to 110 Hijri (654–728 CECE) and was famous for his vast knowledge of religious texts and stories relating to the pre-Islamic prophets and past nations (*Isra'iliyat*). See, for further information, the Jewish Encyclopedia under WAHB IBN MUNABBIH (Abu 'Abd Allah al-Ṣana'ani al-Dhimari); Another example for heavy influence of *Isra'iliyat* in Islamic writing is „The History of the Prophets" written by Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, 1912.

[8] The corruption and/or misreprsentation of the Bible has long prompted Islamic theological debates. However, in contrast to the common perception, some Muslim theologians (e.g., Süleyman Ates) argue to re-evaluate the issue based on revised hermeneutical access to the Qur'an.

[9] Klaus von Stosch (in this volume): The quality of a comparative theology is not dependent on the number of internalized theories, but rather on its capacity to create networks and to be in dialogue with other perspectives, *i.e.*, searching for truth in different contexts.

insights, but at the same time inspire and stimulate thinkers of other religious denominations. We believe, for instance, that the theology of mercy in Islam is suited to nurture a deeper perception of God.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is utterly divine. Muslims also believe that by engaging the Qur'an, *i.e.*, reciting and contemplating its meaning, they actually engage in and are somehow touched by the divine. The Qur'an, therefore, resembles a particularly decisive experience in the realm of Muslim life. One can hardly imagine how fundamentally and deeply this impacts Muslims' perceptions of the relationship of God and humanity, the role of the created *versus* the creator and, most importantly, the supreme attributes of God in Muslim belief.

Before we ask how Muslims perceive God, it seems necessary first to ask how God is described in the Qur'an. Given the above-explained importance of the Qur'an, reflecting about God through the Qur'an resembles both the point of departure and the ultimate goal of Muslim theological reasoning.

Based on the Qur'an, we can therefore make the following statement: Muslims can identify God, because He describes himself in the Qur'an "He is God: there is no god other than Him, the Controller, the Holy One, Source of Peace, Granter of Security, Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, the Truly Great; God is far above anything they consider to be His partner. 24 He is God: the Creator, the Originator, the Shaper. The best names belong to Him. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him: He is the Almighty, the Wise." ([3], Q 59:23–25).

Many attributes are listed in the above-mentioned verse. However, one attribute is emphasized in the Qur'an more than others—God's mercy. The Qur'an states "'Grant us good things in this world and in the life to come. We turn to You.' God said, 'I bring My punishment on whoever I will, but **My mercy encompasses all things**.'" ([3], Q 7:156).

Muslim theologians, as much as ordinary Muslims, will immediately agree with the characterization of God as all merciful and compassionate. However, it remains somewhat unclear how God's mercy can be fully explained and scrutinized. How can Muslims relate to God's mercy? Or is it a rather figurative or descriptive term? What precise role does God's mercy play in the Quranic revelation and the daily practice of Muslims?

In attempting to define God, Khaled Abou El Fadl elaborates "God is too infinite, too grand, and too limitless for any human being to presume to know or to possess the one and only way of unlocking the secrets of our moral universe. {...} It is in the very nature of things that each of us searches for a way, that each group of people that believes in an idea will search for a way, and what matters is that they become convinced or persuaded that their way is correct" ([6], p. 226). Abou El Fadl outlines basically the context in which the search for God unfolds. "Believing in an idea" expresses the notion about how each group of people arrive at their conclusions about God. In Islamic theology, these conclusions are based on the revelation of God, the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed and the long lasting tradition of Islamic thought. In the modern world, as stated above, we can likewise enrich our understanding by directing our attention to non-Muslim perceptions of the divine. Additionally, we can also explore new paths of understanding by engaging our own tradition differently, aided by a comparative approach to religious truth.

Hence, we believe that there is much reason to acknowledge God's mercy as a promising way to contextualize God. God Himself highlights in the Qur'an that He can be held accountable on the grounds to be merciful: "Say, 'To whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth?' Say, 'To God.

He has taken it upon Himself to be merciful. He will certainly gather you on the Day of Resurrection, which is beyond all doubt. Those who deceive themselves will not believe'" ([3], Q 6:12).

There are a series of other observations that support this assumption. First of all, "mercy" is the attribute by which God describes himself most often. No other attribute is cited as much as mercy. 113 out of 114 chapters of the Qur'an start with the formula "In the name of God the allforgiver, and merciful." Secondly, the Qur'an even goes one step further, and not only describes God as merciful, but equates the attribute of mercy with God and states that there is an essential connection between them [3].[10] God's mercy is also described as a place of refuge: "Say, '[God says], My servants who have harmed yourselves by your own excess, do not despair of God's mercy. God forgives all sins: He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful" ([3], Q 39:51). The concept of mercy is therefore both the hope that God will always bestow his mercy upon us and also a promise that we can rely on his mercy.

We would like to briefly examine one particular field in which some might detect a contradiction or tension of sorts. How does the theology of mercy relate to the numerous accounts of God's wrath? Indeed, God describes Himself in many instances as wrathful ([3], Q 16:106 and Q 20:81). The divine wrath should not, however, be evaluated as a simple act of vengeance for not obeying God's rules. It should rather be perceived as a call to mankind to uphold the divine incentives of mercy, justice and compassion. It is the divine mercy that reminds us constantly not to violate the prime directives that God has framed for us in his revelation. Here, we can clearly establish a strong connection between the concept of mercy and its implication in our lives. The divine mercy is not merely a theoretical concept restricted to the Qur'an. Additionally, it is not an arbitrary notion derived from the Qur'an. Moreover, the divine mercy establishes interdependency between our hopes and actions. The Muslim is asked to enact in his own life the same kind of mercy he expects to receive from the divine.

God's mercy does not only manifest itself in the Quranic revelation. It actually reaches into our everyday life. God's mercy is, therefore, all encompassing and cannot be restricted. It is also not reserved solely for those who believe in God. Mercy is passed on to any being that has been created by God. Engaging with God's mercy means both giving and receiving. It does not only indicate receiving mercy from God. Rather, Muslims are asked time and again to initiate mercy themselves, to act upon mercy and, thus, to fuel God's mercy. Consequently, we should understand the Quranic revelation as a communicative, dialogical process, in which the Muslim actively engages with God. By doing so, he instantly receives God's mercy, while at the same time he also reflects upon it, spreads it and directs it back to God.

Still, no matter how much we elaborate the issue of mercy, we will always fall short of fully grasping what God's mercy finally entails. As Khaled Abou El Fadl says, "God is too infinite, too grand, and too limitless for any human being to presume to know or to possess the one and only way of unlocking the secrets of our moral universe." As a consequence, drawing on all manifestations of God's mercy can help us to intensify and strengthen our comprehension. A brief analysis of Christian theology, for instance, will reveal that Biblical texts often refer to God's mercy. Comparing Christian with Muslim understandings of God's mercy might help us observe how it is bestowed upon mankind.

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[10] The Qur'an states in 17:110 "Say [to them], 'Call on God, or on the Lord of Mercy–whatever names you call Him, the best names belong to Him."

This is not unfamiliar to Islam anyway, since Jesus' teachings are incorporated into our set of beliefs. However, can we really claim to have a thorough idea of what Jesus taught or how God's mercy was conveyed through Jesus? By and large, Muslims only relate to the Quranic references about Jesus. Taking Christian sources into account would improve our understanding quite directly.[11] It stands to reason, however, that we would likely detect the same God speaking to us through the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed as the God who spoke through Jesus.

On the other hand, Christian theology can also derive insight into God's mercy by exploring the life of the Prophet Muhammed. Addressing the prophet's role, the Qur'an states "A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering distresses him: he is deeply concerned for you and full of kindness and mercy towards the believers" ([3], Q 9:128). This is the only instance in which a divine attribute, namely mercy, is being assigned to the Prophet. Therefore, the life and the teachings of the Prophet became not only thoroughly intertwined with divine mercy, but the Muslim community based on this Quranic verdict also evaluates all records about the Prophet by reference to divine mercy. Muslims are therefore convinced that God exemplified his mercy in the Prophet Muhammed's life and, by doing so, gave us a human role model.

Without too much debate, we can conclude that mercy is one of the overarching themes of the Quranic revelation. A theology of mercy could help us shift the gravity of Islamic theology and, consequently, enable Muslims to investigate a relatively unexplored field of theological reasoning, comparative theology. At the same time, it could also inspire other religious groups to reflect on and dialogue with Islamic thinking in a broader sense—and to seek to bring new insights into their own reasoning about the divine.

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