Comparative Theology in the Islamic Sciences

Muhammad Legenhausen (iD)

Professor of Philosophy, Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, Qom, Iran.
legenhausen@gmail.com

Abstract

This article provides a brief background of how Comparative Theology is understood today, to point out features of how it is practiced that are responsive to issues peculiar to contemporary Catholicism, and to suggest how a version of CT might be developed that is more consistent with Islamic traditions of thought on related issues. In order to accomplish this last goal, a brief introduction to the traditional "Islamic sciences" is provided. It will be suggested that an Islamic Comparative Theology (ICT) can be understood as a multidisciplinary field that draws on several Islamic sciences, as well as research in religious studies. I argue in favor of a blurring of the distinction between Comparative Religion and Comparative Theology, and point out that relevant discussions are to be found across a variety of traditional Islamic sciences, but that it would be advantageous to collect these discussions together and to augment them with information gleaned from both secular and Islamic approaches to the teachings of Muslim thinkers about theological issues, broadly understood, in comparison with what is found in non-Islamic traditions in such a manner to enrich our own understandings of the issues and those with whom we engage in dialogue.

Keywords

Introduction: orienting comparative theology for Muslims

Some of the most cited work that has been done so far under the rubric of "Comparative Theology" (CT) includes that by Clooney, Cornille, and von Stosch. All of them have sought to define CT within the framework of Catholic theology as an alternative to the approach toward other religions that has dominated the philosophy of religion in the works of John Hick and others, and which is sometimes called "the theology of religions".[1] CT is a relatively new field, and there is considerable uncertainty and a lack of consensus about how it is to be defined and practiced. My purpose in this article is to provide a brief background of how CT is understood today, to point out features of how it is practiced that are responsive to issues peculiar to contemporary Catholicism, and to suggest how a version of CT might be developed that is more consistent with Islamic traditions of thought on related issues. In order to accomplish this last goal, a brief introduction to the traditional "Islamic sciences" is provided. It will be suggested that an Islamic Comparative Theology (ICT) can be understood as a multidisciplinary field that draws on several Islamic sciences, as well as research in religious studies.

What is comparative theology?

Comparative theology is not yet clearly defined; although the definition given by Clooney is widely cited:

> *Comparative theology – comparative* and *theological* beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition. (Clooney, 2010, p. 10)

While Clooney's approach to CT is highly influential, there are alternatives. Its practitioners present it as an academic discipline; but they make use of various methodologies, have different aims, and it is understood by some as a subfield of Christian Theology, the part that deals with other religions, and by others as a subfield of Comparative Religion, the part that deals with their theologies.[2] While the tendency in most recent publications is to see CT as a

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1. See (Fredericks, 1995); (Kiblinger, 2010).
2. See (Clooney, 2010), p. 12; (Hedges, 2017), pp. 10-18.

branch of theology, I will suggest that an understanding of CT as a branch of comparative religion is more suitable for ICT.

To avoid confusion, it will be helpful to begin to specify what CT is not. As understood by most writers in the field, CT is not just a comparison of theologies or theologians or theological topics as they occur in two or more religious traditions. This is part of it, but as understood today, it is an approach to religions that grew out of Catholic systematic and constructive theological encounters with non-Christian religious traditions. It is not comparative religion because it is understood to be *theology* as understood in the Christian tradition. *Theology* itself is a Christian concept. It can be applied to other traditions, so that we may speak of Jewish theology, Muslim or Islamic theologies, and Hindu theologies; although in non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, the term could only be used by analogy.

The current sense of CT is that of a kind of theology that utilizes insights gained through the study of one or more non-Christian religions in order to enrich Christian theology (von Stosch, 2012). In Western history, theology developed as a *normative* discipline, in the sense that it attempts to guide co-believers in matters of doctrine. While this normative dimension is not missing in discussions among Muslims, Muslims are more often concerned with descriptions of what one must believe in order to avoid heresy and creedal judgments that lack rational or scriptural support. The distinction between propagation (*tablīgh*) and theology (*kalām*) is blurred in both Christian and Muslim discussions, but the blurring has been reinforced by modernization in the European tradition, with the result of a gulf between religious studies, which is presented as a secular social science, and theology, which is confessional.

One of the major voices in Catholic Comparative Theology is Catherine Cornille. She emphasizes the normative nature of Comparative Theology to distinguish it from Comparative Religion:

> While comparative religion is oriented to a deeper understanding of the nature of religion or the meaning of a particular religious idea or phenomenon, comparative theology is more interested in their meaningfulness or validity. It is this normative question which ultimately separates comparative theology from comparative religion. (Cornille, 2020, p. 11)

There is a difference between comparing religions and comparing theologies. Religion is generally understood to include much more than theology. There are scriptures, literature, religious law, religious ethics, rituals,

customs, and more. Those who study comparative religion may focus on any of these areas, whether or not they are concerned with creedal statements. According to Cornille's view, we move from comparative religion to CT when we abandon the pose of the social scientist engaged in descriptive work and take a stand in favor of or against various beliefs or interpretations of beliefs or practices.

The emphasis on the normative derives from the manner in which theology faculties were assembled in Europe in contrast to the other faculties.[1] In order to teach Catholic theology, one had to have authorization from the Church. In order to teach Comparative Religion, on the other hand, what is required is knowledge of the subject. Whether one considers oneself to be an adherent of any denomination or none is irrelevant to one's competence to teach comparative religion or religious studies. One cannot teach the *theology* of a denomination, however, except to support it. Here, the normative character of theology is indicative of advocacy.

CT is *confessional*. It involves bearing witness to one's faith in the light of one's study of one or more other traditions. CT is not apologetics or polemics, although elements of either might creep in. CT is understood as an openness to religious ideas from another tradition without giving up one's own Christian religious commitments. It is often assumed that although CT has been conducted for the most part from Christian and, more specifically, Catholic perspectives, the same sort of structure could be used to yield Jewish CT, Islamic CT, Hindu CT, and others. The main problem with this idea is that non-Christian traditions do not have faculties of theology whose professors must be approved by religious authorities. The attempt to form non-Christian CTs on the model of Catholic CT is that substitutes for the authority of the Church will be sought. In the Islamic world, it is not difficult to find those who would be happy to take on the role of determining orthodoxy; but there are reasons non-Christians might want to resist this, for the absence of a magisterium allows for greater flexibility.

Cornille makes it clear that CT (at least as practiced in Catholic departments of theology) is distinct from syncretism and relativism, both of which are considered by the Church to be heretical tendencies. But syncretism and relativism, even if they are heresies, are not academic fields. So, when CT is said to assume a rejection of syncretism and relativism, we are not being informed about what constitutes CT as a field of study, but more of an

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1. See (Stackhouse, 2016); (van den Brink, 2020).

ideological stance of approved practitioners.

Syncretism is a blending of one or more religious traditions to form a new denomination. Syncretic denominations from late antiquity include Gnosticism and Manicheanism. Syncretic religions that have drawn on Islam and Catholicism include the religious beliefs and practices predominant among the Alawites, the Druze religion, and, more recently, the Chrislam of Nigeria. From its inception, Islam has recognized other faiths, and some scholars claim that Islam itself is a syncretic religion. Some have claimed that all religions are inherently syncretic:

> Religions always have been, and are, inherently syncretistic…. There exists no unadulterated "pure" tradition, contra the kind of argument found in certain theological systems often termed particularist…. All of this is about the contestation and creation of religious traditions and religious identities. Power dynamics are therefore central and fundamental to studying and understanding comparative theology in terms of its ideology, methodology, and reception. (Hedges, 2017, p. 41)

While the Church rejects *syncretism*, *assimilation* is tolerated. Catholicism may make use of the symbols specific to a given culture. It is ecclesiastical authority that determines where the line is to be drawn between assimilation and syncretism. The rejection of syncretism is characteristic of Catholic theology but it does not define a field of study.

Catholic practitioners of CT also reject religious relativism, although attacks on relativism are not only launched from the Church. Absolutism continues to be attractive to fundamentalists of all denominations, including Muslims. Relativism and syncretism are often feared as undermining religious identities. Religious identities are formed by drawing lines that exclude non-believers or outsiders; and they are fortified by the "black sheep effect," by which approved insiders are evaluated more highly, and disapproved insiders are evaluated more negatively, than outsiders. When religious communities mix, one might find it difficult to gain the sense of belonging characteristic of religious and other communal identities; and the consistency of standards for approval and disapproval becomes more difficult to maintain. Questions of religious identities, however, are issues pertaining to pastoral theology and missions rather than to systematic theology.

According to Catherine Cornille, relativism is a "clear threat". She writes:

> [Relativism] contradicts the self-understanding of religions as grounded in ultimate claims to truth, and it jeopardizes commitment to established religious teachings and practices. While religions may recognize the

historical and cultural conditioning of some of their teachings and practices, they still present them as the highest expression of ultimate truth, which in turn generates surrender and commitment on the part of believers. The reduction of religious traditions to their historical and cultural contexts would inevitably lead to an erosion of religious confidence and to a weakening of religious traditions. (Cornille, 2024, p. 22)

The peculiarity of the insistence on the *confessional* nature of CT that is widespread among its proponents comes into sharper focus if we contrast it with comparative law. A French legal scholar, for example, might be interested in dialogue with legal scholars from other traditions in hope for insights that will help resolve some of the problems she faces in French law or legal theory. This does not mean that she aims at a syncretic transnational law, and it does not mean that the law is reduced to its cultural and historical contexts. The recognition that different laws are followed in different countries by no means threatens the commitment anyone in France might have to comply with French law. In religion, the attitudes are strikingly different. There, expertise and commitment to following a given path are not sufficient for theology to be considered *confessional*.

There are two factors that distinguish confessional theology from national jurisprudence: authority and advocacy. The French legal scholar is not expected to advocate that others should adopt French law, nor even that French citizens should obey French law, which goes without saying. No one would take a failure to declaim the superiority of French law to indicate that the legal scholar has doubts about her political obligations. A moderate form of legal relativism is generally assumed without any fear that commitment to the law will be weakened, or accusations that the law is being made to serve egocentric interests. Even the acknowledgment that the law of another country has advantages over the law of one's own land is no indication that one is any less committed to obeying the law of one's own country as it is, at least until legal reforms are made. In law, there are public institutions, such as the courts, inspection agencies, and law enforcement, that are tasked with promoting the observance of and respect for the law. This is not the task of the legal theorist. In theology, by contrast, the theologian is expected not only to have expertise in her "home tradition" but to advocate it and use it as the ultimate basis of judgment in theological issues. Advocacy in theology used to be restricted to apologetics. Today, it seems to pervade all areas of Christian systematic theology. The best explanation for why this has happened is provided by the course of the development of Christian faculties of theology in European and

American universities.

In Europe, even today, the appointment of professors to chairs in theology requires the approval of ecclesiastical authorities. The mere fact that a person has advanced degrees and a list of publications in theology is not sufficient for that person's recognition as a theologian. The theologian is supposed to be a believer, and the theologian's work is expected to be confessional, even if it presents itself as generically Christian. There is no such expectation in legal theory. The judiciary of France, for example, does not decide whether or not a professor of French jurisprudence should be prohibited from teaching because his teachings conflict with jurisprudential orthodoxy.

The role of Church authorities in the theological and other faculties has a long history in Europe. One of the most famous protests against the interference of religious authorities on the philosophical faculties is Kant's *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (Knat, 1979). With the secularization of public institutions, Theology departments were sometimes replaced with departments of Religious Studies. In the United States, there have been cases in which Theology departments were merely given a different name to fulfill requirements for funding. The secularization of the study of religion in Religious Studies and Comparative Religion put more emphasis on the confessional status of theology. Theologians resist the secularization of their field and seek to put distance between it and Comparative Religion. Comparative Theology is viewed with suspicion by some theologians who see it as sliding into Religious Studies; hence, emphasis is put on the normative confessional nature of CT.

The history of Religious Studies as an academic field may be traced to the late 19th century, although the study of religions can be found in the literary traditions of many cultures from antiquity to the present. Religious Studies only became an accepted curriculum of university study in the 1960s, when it was introduced as an alternative to theological approaches to religion that was often advertised as providing a dispassionate scientific approach to religion in contrast to the advocacy of religious belief characteristic of Christian theology. Theology and Religious Studies are then primed for conflict, with accusations of reductionism and lack of objectivity frequent. Critical approaches to the concept of *religious studies* have been articulated in an increasing number of books and articles over the last twenty years or so; often the criticisms draw on feminist literature or post-colonial studies.[1]

The subfields of Religious Studies are not only different areas of study

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1. See (Fitzgerald, 2000); (Martin, 2017); (Masuzawa, 2005).

within the broader field. They also designate different approaches to the field as a whole. For example, according to some authors, the field of Religious Studies is primarily the sociological or anthropological study of religious phenomena in various societies, while others identify Religious Studies with what used to be called "the history of religions." What unites the different approaches to Religious Studies is an aspiration to scientific objectivity and the avoidance of confessionalism. Comparative Religion and CT study the same phenomena, but Comparative Religion does so with the attitude of the social scientist while CT is confessional. Clearly, a division of academic fields cannot be legitimately made on the basis of whether or not one takes a pious attitude toward what one is studying, at least not if the legitimate divisions must be based on what is studied, in contrast to requirements for government funding and the other historical accidents that drove theology and religious studies into their opposing corners.

The Islamic sciences

Discussions of the classification of the sciences have a long history in Islamic culture. An illuminating introduction to the classification of the sciences in Fārābī, Ghazalī, and Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī is provided by Baker (1998).[1] Fārābī divided the sciences by subject matter, methodology, and aims, and this was accepted by subsequent authors. The Hellenistic classification adapted by the Muslims did not include a special position for history, and neither did those of Fārābī or Ghazalī. Instead of history, there were numerous biographies. History was seen as the lives of noteworthy figures.

Much of medieval theology, whether Islamic, Christian, or Jewish, has been carried out in the language of philosophy. Islamic philosophy, or *ḥikmat* has been extremely influential in the development of Islamic theology, especially among the Shi‘ah. *Theology*, even if restricted to systematic theology, as understood in Christian cultures, is not found in the *madrassahs* or Islamic seminaries as a subject of study. Systematic theology includes reflections on elements of Christian belief and practice that are comparable to some of the discussions found in such Islamic sciences as *‘irfān* (mysticism), and *tafsīr* (Qur’ānic exegesis), but which have not been organized into an Islamic systematic theology that includes all of these discussions.

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1. In addition to (Baker, 1998), helpful discussions of how History gradually found its way among the Islamic sciences are provided by (Rosenthal, 1968).

Theology is usually translated into Arabic and Persian as *ilāhīyāt,* literally *divinities*, not in the sense of supernatural beings, but in the sense of affairs pertaining to God. However, *ilāhīyāt* is divided into general and specific senses, with the general sense covering the discussions of traditional metaphysics and in the specific sense restricted to discussions of the proofs for the existence of God and the divine attributes for which rational proofs can be given. This is what in the Western tradition has been called *natural theology*.

Another Arabic word used to translate *theology* is *kalām*. Some of the discussions of *kalām* are the same as those in *ilāhīyāt* in the specific sense. In a long tradition, Muslims have divided the science into the *'aqlī* and *naqlī*, the intellectual science and the narrated sciences. In philosophy, everything is supposed to be based on how reason (with the aid of experience) assesses the issues, while *kalām* makes use of revealed sources, the Qur'ān, and hadiths. But even if we combine *ilāhīyāt* with *kalām*, we come nowhere near the breadth and variety of topics included in what Christians understand as *theology*, which includes all sorts of reflections about the relations between God, humans, and the world as understood in the light of the religious point of view of the theologian. Many of these discussions are comparable to discussions found in the texts of Muslim authors, but they are scattered across different areas of study.

The *'aqlī/naqlī* distinction might seem to line up closely enough with the Western distinction between secular science and theology, but the similarity is superficial. The philosophers, the *ḥukumā'*, did not consider themselves to be practicing a discipline that would be neutral with regard to religious differences. They would merely show the extent to which philosophical principles could underwrite religious claims, and leave it to the *mutakallimīn* to fill in whatever else is necessary.

Kalām was viewed as expressly polemical. It was the science of giving answers to doubts about the creed. But *kalām* and *ḥikmat* were not the only areas of study by which an understanding of the faith was to be gained. So, if we, following Clooney, take Christian theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), there is much in the Islamic sciences that has been considered to be needed for religious understanding. The Muslim jurists, accordingly, issued judgments about which of the sciences were obligatory for individuals, which for a sufficient number of members of the community, and which should be encouraged, even if not obligatory. Witchcraft is considered to be a forbidden science. However, the criteria for obligation was never restricted to science that had the aim of religious understanding. Medicine, for example, was viewed as obligatory for the community because of the value of

health. The Islamic sciences were by no means restricted to theology, no matter how widely understood.

Through the centuries, the divisions of the sciences multiplied, and neglected sciences came to be recognized. Various alternative hierarchies of the sciences were proposed. The growth of the number of sciences generally accompanied the coming into prominence of new or previously neglected topics of research. New methodologies of study were introduced, but these augmented the extant sciences rather than leading to new sciences. An exception is the division of *'irfān* into theoretical and practical. The theoretical/practical division is one of the oldest and can be traced to Aristotle. At first, it was taken to divide general areas of study; but after methods had been developed in some detail for spiritual wayfaring, the study of these methods was called practical mysticism, *'irfān-e amalī*, in contrast to theoretical mysticism, *'irfān-e naẓarī. Kalām*, on the other hand, never divided in this way. Traditionally, there was no practical theology, although recent scholars have begun to produce works in *social theology*, *ilāhīyāt-e ijtimā'ī* (Taqizadeh, 2020), and studies of *political theology, ilāhīyāt-e sīyāsī,*[1] have also been undertaken; and Islamic ethics is now regularly taught in the theology faculties of the universities in Iran. Ethics was traditionally considered to be a subfield of philosophy, grouped together with Politics and Home Economics as practical sciences. Today in Iran, Ethics (*akhlāq*) is distinguished from the Philosophy of Ethics (*falsafeh-ye akhlāq*) in a manner that makes the former a practical and the latter a theoretical science. Although the Ethics taught in the seminaries is invariably Islamic ethics and draws on the Qur'ān and narrations, Islamic theological ethics was not given its own place in the classification of the sciences. There have been detailed discussions of Islamic ethics scattered in works of *tafsīr* (exegesis of the Qur'ān), moral education, and jurisprudence and its principles.[2] None of these were conceptualized as branches of an overarching science that would include all Islamic teachings, practical and theoretical, that would be analogous in subject matter to what is found in Christian theology.

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1. There are numerous Persian language journals that examine theological questions in the light of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, a sampling of which can be found at:

https://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/magazinesearch?SearchText=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%DB %8C%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C.

2. Just one example of this is (Misbah Yazdi, 1380/2001), a three-volume work on the ethics of the Qur'ān, which is considered a work in Qur'ānic Studies and practical ethics.

Islamic comparative theology

Although Muslims would undoubtedly agree with Cornille that extreme forms of relativism should be rejected, a moderate or qualified form of relativism does not contradict the understanding of Islam that one finds in the Qur'ān. There the ultimate truth that is proclaimed is said to be common to what was brought by all the prophets, while differences in rites are recognized as legitimate and are to be tolerated.

> For every nation We have appointed rites which they observe; so let them not dispute with you concerning your religion, and invite to your Lord. Indeed, you are on a straight guidance. [22:67][1]
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> Indeed the faithful, the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans—those of them who have faith in Allah and the Last Day and act righteously— they shall have their reward from their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve. [2:62]
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> We have sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it of the Book and as a guardian over it. So judge between them by what Allah has sent down, and do not follow their desires against the truth that has come to you. For each [community] among you We had appointed a code (*shir'atan*)and a path (*minhājan*), and had Allah wished He would have made you one community, but He should test you in respect to what He has given you. So take the lead in all good works. To Allah shall be the return of you all, whereat He will inform you concerning that about which you used to differ. [5:48]

Here we find a recognition of historical and cultural conditioning of divinely revealed truth, which can take various forms. Of course, the adherents of any given denomination will often take their teachings and practices as the closest approximation to absolute truth that is available; but, this should not blind anyone to a recognition that such absolutist claims cannot be sustained on the basis of standards for rationality and moral evaluation that will be accepted by all regardless of denomination or particular religious orientation. On the other hand, this recognition should not lead us to what Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, emeritus Pope Benedict, condemned as a "dictatorship of relativism" whose ultimate aim is the ego and its desires (Cornille, 2024, p. 22). No religion can be understood without regard to the historical and

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1. For the Qur'ān, (The Qur'an with English Paraphrase, revised edition, 2005) is used with minor adjustments.

cultural contexts in which it emerged, but taking the perspective of the social scientist does not entail a value judgment that the religions must be taken as roughly equivalent with regard to questions of truth and validity. Even if the social scientist can judge that various cultural phenomena, such as religion, can have instances, particular denominations, that pass a given threshold in their ability to serve social goals, questions of ultimate truth and validity can only be answered from within a particular value perspective.

Absence of universally endorsed grounds to support the superiority of any given denomination does not entail that the denominations are to be considered objectively equal, not even "for all practical purposes." Suppose that physicists are working with a complex model in which the variables x, y, and z occur. Relative to some parameters the value of x is greater than the other two; but relative to other parameters, y or z has the greatest value. An inability to determine the values of these variables independent of any parameter would not lead anyone to suppose that the values must be equal, yet it is quite common to find religious pluralists who claim that some set of religions must be considered equal because there are no common criteria admitted by the adherents to the major denominations that would generate the superiority of one denomination.[1]

An Islamic theology of religions can reject supersessionism without requiring the dubious result that the religions must be equal. The overall superiority of a religion over rivals is only to be found on the basis of beliefs that are internal to one or several of them. The Jew can conclude that Judaism is superior to its rivals on the basis of principles internal to Judaism while recognizing the Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and others can do the same. If the adherents of some denomination affirm the superiority of that denomination, it must be recognized that agreements among the adherents of *different* denominations are not a sufficient basis for such affirmations of superiority.

Catholic practitioners of CT frequently presuppose a commitment to Catholicism, because CT is considered a branch of *theology*. Fundamental disagreements then tend to be seen as stumbling blocks to genuine understanding or meaningful dialogue. One should not confuse agreement with understanding. True tolerance requires the recognition of differences and acceptance of them, not the rejection of all fundamental differences as misunderstandings.

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1. See, for example, (Leukel-Schmidt, 2017).

Interreligious dialogue may be carried out with differing aims: the reduction of tensions between the adherents of different religious groups, or, more ambitiously, world peace; answering objections that have been made by one group against another; some might seek to promote an interdenominational form of spirituality; some see such dialogues as opportunities for missionizing or polemics; yet other forms will have academic purposes, such as the enrichment of mutual understanding of a topic of mutual interest. Interreligious dialogue is not for everyone. Some will find challenges to their religious views to precipitate crises in religious identity. Aims and methods should be made clear to participants, as well as potential side effects. Participation in academic work in CT or ICT is further restricted. Sufficient background is needed to contribute to the discipline.

The practice of CT involves interreligious dialogue, but it is not confined to it. Nevertheless, the diversity of aims characteristic of interreligious dialogue may infect CT. If ICT is to be an academic discipline, the aim should be *'ilm*, science, in the sense of the knowledge to be gained through the work of engagement with the theological views of others, whether practical or theoretical. Practitioners may defend or raise objections to theological positions within their own denominations or those they are examining but the aim should be religious understanding (regardless of agreement). Unlike Western Religious Studies, there is no need for ICT to make any attempt at value neutrality. Objectivity is a value in ICT as in any other science but this does not preclude defending a position any more than the objectivity of physics precludes the defense of a controversial physical theory.

Instead of viewing theology with the Anselmian slogan, "faith seeking understanding", to emphasize religious advocacy, Muslims might consider Islamic theology to be the seeking of understanding in matters of a particular faith, Islam, while ICT would be the search for understanding in matters of two or more faith traditions through comparative analysis. In this work, it will be natural for Muslims to draw upon the values and doctrines of Islam, which will naturally prompt accusations that ICT cannot be a science because it lacks objectivity. An answer to this objection can be given by making all such presumptions explicit, as far as this is possible. Islamic principles are not to be smuggled into dialogue in the hope that agreement with them may be won through inadvertent acceptance. Analysis utilizing Islamic concepts and principles should be considered conditional rather than categorical.

For many years Muslims have observed that the social sciences are often based on attitudes and assumptions that conflict with an Islamic worldview. This has given rise to calls for the Islamization of the humanities and social

sciences.[1] However, the movement for Islamization has neglected the fields that would seem most crucial: Religious Studies, Islamic Studies, Comparative Religion, the Philosophy of Religion, and related areas. While Max Weber's ideal of *Wertfrei* social sciences has largely been abandoned along with the fact/value dichotomy[2] by philosophers of the social sciences, for funding purposes and in response to political pressures these fields are presented as though they did not implicitly further particular sets of values. Recognition of this tension, if not hypocrisy, requires renewed attention to the problem of objectivity.

The problem of objectivity was directly addressed in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 2004 & Gadamer, 1990), who focused on the need for presuppositions in order to engage in any kind of exegetical work, including the interpretation of history. Some critics have condemned his views on the charge of relativism. However, the idea that any hermeneutics must begin from one's own perspective does not imply that this perspective cannot itself be articulated and subject to critical examination, and in the process, yield more *objective* results. The project of nurturing sacred or Islamized approaches to Religious Studies is essentially a hermeneutical project, for it requires the reinterpretation and renewed understanding of Religious Studies from an explicitly Islamic perspective. When an Islamized Islamic Studies focuses on beliefs and religious practices, the result will be a form of Islamic theology.

A more recent approach to the objectivity of the social sciences given the untenability of the value-free ideal measures objectivity as risk reduction. Results of research are considered to be objective to the extent that others in the field are able to rely on these results while minimizing epistemic risks.[3]

Even if values and presuppositions cannot be eliminated from theology, questions of theological interest may be addressed independent of one's religious allegiance. Likewise, the methods employed by theologians are not off-limits to non-believers. Theological research that is independent both of requirements of secularism and of requirements of the approval of religious authorities and institutions could be called "free theology". Likewise, we

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1. For more on the history of this movement and some of its major protagonists, see (Legenhausen, Hermeneutical Foundations for Islamic Social Sciences, 2011).

2. See (Putnam, 2002).

3. See (Koskinen, 2020), and for the application of this analysis to the Islamization of the sciences, see (Legenhausen, Objectivity and Values in the Islamic Social Sciences, 2020).

could define "free comparative theology" to be the comparative study of different religious traditions without the requirement of religious neutrality or the requirement of a faith commitment. In an Islamic Comparative Theology, the "Islamic" part need not stand for adherence. It can indicate that some theological position outside Islam or in alternative schools of thought within Islam are to be compared. Where presuppositions current among Muslims are employed, they should be made explicit. This is an aid to objectivity, which can be further supported in a relativized sense by minimizing epistemic risks for those to whom the research is addressed, which again, should be made clear at the outset.

I am sure that some Christians, and perhaps some Muslims, as well, will protest that without the aim of defending the faith, what remains is not theology anymore. It is just secular Religious Studies. Perhaps an analogy can help to answer the objection. As an academic field, theologians typically reject the views of their fellow believers while defending what they consider to be a superior interpretation of the faith. In philosophy, one se to whom the research is addressed, which again, should be made clear at the outset. can have expertise in epistemology without adhering to any of the major tendencies: empiricism, pragmatism, rationalism, or whatever. Like the theologians, the philosophers debate the issues and point out what they consider to be strengths and weaknesses in the positions canvassed. But for the philosopher, there is no need at the end to affirm commitment to a specific tradition. One can be a Marxist, a Kantian, or a follower of Mulla Sadra's *transcendent wisdom*; but a failure to pick sides and pledge to defend it does not mean that one is no longer doing philosophy. A free theology, likewise, would provide space for argumentation about theological issues without requiring the defense of a creed. Unlike secular Religious Studies, a free religious studies would permit an examination of religious beliefs and practices regardless of whether the researcher is committed to some or none of them.

In conclusion, I heartily endorse the observation by Betül Avci who observes a blurring of the boundaries between some current approaches to Religious Studies and Comparative Theology (Avci, 2018). An example of this blurring in recent Persian publications is the book by my colleague Husayni Qalehbahman, whose title translates as *Comparative Theology: Ultimate Truth in Religions* (Husayni Qal'ehbahman, 2019).[1] Much of the

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1. A second volume by the same author is scheduled for publication in 2024, which offers a comparative study of religious anthropologies.

work aspires to being purely descriptive of the views about ultimate reality as found in a number of major religious traditions. The work ends with a defense of Islam in view of the comparative work that precedes it. This kind of model for Islamic Comparative Theology is generating interest among Muslims, both in the West and in the Islamic world. It is to be hoped that it will contribute to advances in the theologies of the religions subject to comparison and to deeper understandings of the theological positions taken by people of faith.

Ethics declarations
Conflict of interests

The author has no competing interests.

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