



Constructive Comparative Philosophy of Religion: Translations of Christianity and Islam and a Case Study of Ibn Tufayl and Ralph Cudworth

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Research Article



Abstract

We point out how some Christian-Muslim comparative philosophies of religion may be enhanced with certain translations or interpretations of Christianity: a modalist view of the trinity and a high Christology. While perhaps of only limited significance, we argue in more detail that a comparison of two leading philosophers, one Islamic, the other Christian, can bring to light a shared philosophy of innate ideas or nativism, grounding moral and theological views of goodness and the divine

Keywords

Monotheism, Trinity, Incarnation, Ibn Tufayl, Ralph Cudworth, Innate ideas, Goodness, Plato.

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Introduction

There is an argument, inspired by the American philosopher Donald Davidson, that in order for interlocutors to engage in disagreement, there must be substantial, shared agreement about relevant facts and values. Davidson's line of reasoning involved translations. For one community of language users to translate the language of a different community, they could not succeed if their worldviews differed radically. To take an absurd example, a typical English translator would be at a loss to translate the term "sun" if the non-English speakers thought what we refer to as the sun (the star in our solar system) is actually a type of food. In the past, there have been cases when some translations of different religions have come close to being equally absurd (as in the depiction of Muslims in the eleventh-century *The Song of Roland*), which would be comic if it did not reflect tragic misunderstanding.

In inter-religious dialogue, one can always resort to extreme cases, for example, identifying Christianity with the contemporary White Nationalist Christianity in today's United States that treat non-Whites as subordinate to Whites (most of whom are followers of Donald Trump) and seeing Islam as only understood and practiced by extreme elements of the Islamic State with high profile beheading of aid workers, systematic persecution of Shea, and so on. More promising is to find a shared middle ground in more mainline Christian and Islamic traditions.

In this brief essay on cross-cultural philosophy of religion, we address two areas of when there might be helpful, shared translations or shared points of view between Christian and Muslim philosophers. The first concerns how to address the concept of God, stressing the monotheism of both traditions and how Christian views of the trinity and incarnation may be interpreted to be less conflicted with Muslim teaching. The second concerns how to understand an accord between two leading philosophers: Ibn Tufayl and Ralph Cudworth. This case study of comparing a Muslim and Christian philosopher can bring to light more accord than discord.

The concept of God

There are different philosophical traditions in Christianity and Islam. In Christianity, there is a strong Aristotelian tradition (culminating in Thomas Aquinas), a Platonic tradition (culminating in Cambridge Platonists like Ralph Cudworth), and a somewhat passional, existential tradition (Pascal and Kierkegaard). There have even been versions of Christianity that appear to be

non-theistic (Hegel, Tillich). Islam has also given rise to philosophers who favor Aristotle, and Plato, or seek to reconcile Plato and Aristotle (al-Farabi) and more existentialist outlooks; historically, perhaps the best-known distinct philosophical movements in Islam are rationalist philosophers (al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Razi) on the one hand and, on the other, philosophers who may be described as mystics or champions of the path of illumination (al-Ghazali, Suhrawardi). Where there is considerable common ground among Christian and Muslim philosophers, amidst all the diversity, is monotheism.

The belief in one God, as opposed to polytheism and atheism, distinct from creation, as opposed to pantheism, unites most Christian and Muslim philosophers. There is massive literature from both traditions that is compatible regarding divine attributes such as divine goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, God's being eternal, and divine aseity or God's necessary existence. The latter may be a case in which Islamic philosophy (through Avicenna / Ibn Sina) influenced medieval Christian philosophers such as Aquinas. The common strand of monotheism has been an important theme in the last seventy years of Christian-Muslim dialogue. To recommend only one exemplary case of comparative philosophy of religion, consider *God and Creation*, based on *An Ecumenical Symposium in Comparative Religious Thought* (2017) that took place in 1987. There have been abundant such conferences focusing on our monotheism since. These exchanges have included fruitful work on the virtues and vices of philosophical methodology, the need to avoid caricaturing the positions of others, the importance of impartiality, and the need to cultivate an appreciation of religious traditions from the point of view of practitioners.

In addition to a shared focus on monotheism, we highlight Christian-Muslim dialogue about points of difference involving claims about Jesus Christ. The significance of Jesus in Islam is substantial; he is referred to 97 times in the Qur'an (Mary is referred to 70 times). The book, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* is a rich resource of the myriad portraits of Jesus in Islamic sacred texts and traditions (Khalidi, 2003). On exchanges about Jesus Christ, we find that there is a greater opportunity for accord (but not, of course, even close to full agreement) when Christianity is represented in the context of a high Christology. In that vein, Jesus Christ is identified as at one with the second member of the Trinity. The incarnation involves the pre-existence of Jesus, prior to (or independent of) the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. On this view, Jesus is fully human and wholly God (*Totus Deus*) but not the whole of God (*Totum Dei*). This can enable one to interpret

some of the historically divisive New Testament passages that are closer (or less onerous) from an Islamic perspective. Consider these tenets: the proclamation that Christ is the Messiah; Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the light, and that no one comes to the Father except through Christ; and the affirmation of the Trinity. Many Muslims see Jesus as only a prophet, not the Messiah (although Jesus is explicitly named the Messiah in the Qur'an: (3:45); (4:171)) Jesus is not divine, and there are explicit denials of the trinity in the Qur'an. Even so, the notion that Jesus is the Messiah is compatible with (or can be interpreted as) the notion that God (Allah) worked through Jesus Christ to show the path of redemption. Muslims can (and do) believe that Allah is the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to Allah except by Allah. This does not (explicitly) rule out that Allah might act through Jesus, the prophet, to show us the way to Allah. While Muslims must deny what is called the social model of the trinity (the Godhead consists of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), they can (in principle) be more hospitable (or less hostile) to modal accounts of the trinity (as found in the work of two of the best known twentieth-century theologians, Karl Barth (Webster, 2004), a Protestant, and Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic). On the latter, God is revealed in three modes, quite independent of God's internal constitution. Allah may appear in the mode of Creator, the source of justice, and as the sanctifying, holy source of mercy, without implying that such modes constitute three substantial divine persons in the single Godhead. There are, of course, vexing contrasts. The Qur'an seems to hold that Jesus was not killed; we suggest that the Qur'anic verse may be rendered as the claim that *Jesus appeared to be killed (in the sense that he appeared to his enemies to be annihilated), but he instead ascended into the presence of Allah.*

We readily affirm that there are genuine conflicts between traditional Christian and Muslim claims. We admit that, from a Christian perspective, modalism is not the most common interpretation of the Christian belief in the Trinity and probably a lower Christology in which Jesus's "divinity" is interpreted in terms of *his being attuned to God* (possessing what Friedrich Schleiermacher referred to as "God-consciousness") rather than a high Christology would be more attractive to a Muslim philosopher sympathetic to recognizing Jesus as a great prophet. Even so, we note that modalism and a high Christology have some promise in finding common ground.

The first part of our essay addresses the search for common ground in *the general framework of comparative philosophy of religion* between Christianity and Islam, while the second selects a particular, concrete case of comparison where there is common ground between two seminal thinkers.

Concord between a Christian and a Muslim philosopher: a case study of comparative philosophy of religion

We propose that two of the most luminous and important thinkers in the history of Islamic and Christian thought share a fundamental agreement about essential epistemic, attitudinal, and ethical issues in their philosophical theology. Both Ibn Tufayl (1109/10, 1185/86) and Ralph Cudworth (1618–1688) claim that we can rely on innate ideas reflecting God’s goodness, enabling us to grasp moral truths that are eternal. These two thinkers share a common root in the Platonic tradition which inspired them. However, they were not mere parrots of Plato. It is therefore important to acknowledge the common background of Ibn Tufayl and Cudworth without reducing their profound agreement to mere repetition.

Ibn Tufayl was a medieval Islamic philosopher whose most well-known work, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (from here: *Hayy*), was written in narrative form, which scholars have called an allegory, a philosophical romance, a spectrum of narrative forms that disclose ideas. The *Hayy*, sometimes translated as “le philosophe sans maitre,” tells the story of a man who is raised by a gazelle, devoid of human social contact and affiliations but, nonetheless, develops an advanced philosophical theology in which he is fully aware of everlasting moral truths and the One God, disposing him also to religious experience in which he may have a taste of the divine (Ibn Tufayl, 1972). We understand this work to involve a defense of nativism. Nativism, now emerging as popular in cognitive science, with examples of modern nativists including Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor, is a basic commitment to the idea that there are innate concepts, and abilities that shape our cognition to enable us to understand the world (Samuels, 2002). While the *Hayy* is typically rendered a narrative about autodidacticism (see Hardman, 2016), we propose that, in this case, autodidacticism implies some nativism insofar as, if we have the ability to teach ourselves without relying on the thoughts of others, coming from external sources, then it is plausible to believe that we have innate ideas which can be discovered within us and inform our innate cognitive abilities which enables such learning.

In the case of Ibn Tufayl’s nativism or innatism, these ideas which can be unlocked from within, only partially rely on experience and certainly do not rely on traditions, cultures, and institutions to be realized. Further, it appears Ibn Tufayl’s commitment to innate ideas is woven into a commitment to there being eternal and immutable truths, especially about divine and ethical issues, which we can access through careful reflection and study. A way of clarifying

Ibn Tufayl is to see how his basic move is a Rousseuaian one. Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1712–1778), a philosopher who was likely exposed to the *Hayy*, similarly argues that a person devoid of institutions and cultures can actually do well cognitively in grasping basic truths and values (Clark, 2020, p. 174). It is through Ibn Tufayl’s nativism and his commitment to the existence of

eternal and immutable truths, that we can begin exploring the parallel between him and Ralph Cudworth.

Ralph Cudworth, along with Henry More (1614-1687), was a leader of a school of philosophers known as the Cambridge Platonists who synthesized ancient philosophy with the contemporary philosophy of their day, including the emergence of modern science. The impact of the Cambridge Platonists, the first philosophers to publish substantial philosophical work in English, is partly evident in their coining so many concepts and terms we use today in philosophy of religion, including the term “philosophy of religion”, as well as *theism*, *materialism*, *consciousness*, *Cartesianism*, and more. Cudworth was opposed to the belief that all of our thinking is imprinted upon us from the outside. Paradoxically, the most well-known philosopher opposing innate ideas, John Locke (1632-1704) has been claimed to have been influenced by Ibn Tufayl’s work:

The founder of empiricism in modern-day philosophy, John Locke, happened to be a student of Pococke, the Latin translator of the *Hayy*, and knew his teacher’s translation since he refers to it. But what is more, historians say that the English philosopher’s classic *tabula rasa* (“blank slate”) theory — the theory that the human mind at birth is a blank slate — is inspired by the *Hayy*; this observation is highly plausible. (Haq, 2016, p. 3)

We believe such a proposed link between Ibn Tufayl is wide of the mark. The *Hayy*, a tale that relies on, and finishes, with the distinction between external sources and a solitary individual discovering truths on his own, does not, to us, suggest that we learn from the outside instead of the inside. Furthermore, cognitive scientists such as Steven Pinker have pointed out that “a blank slate” is not equivalent to nothing at all; it (the slate or the person) must have the innate capacity to be written upon in the first place— which reflects a “bedrock of human universals” (Pinker, 2006, p. 3). This sentiment seems to have been precipitated by Cudworth, who claimed: “knowledge is not a passion from anything without [i.e. outside] the mind, but an active exertion of the inward strength, vigour, and power of the mind, displaying itself from within” (Cudworth, 1996, p. 77). In other words, an innate ability

must exist even for the most rigorous empiricist to do their job.

We are not dedicating this essay to a full defense of innate ideas and nativism, but instead pointing out that these two important thinkers, a Muslim and a Christian, shared an understanding of the role of unlocking innate ideas in accessing truth.

To highlight the common viewpoint of Ibn Tufayl and Cudworth, compare them with those who deny that truth can be accessed at all, whether innately or otherwise. Richard Rorty (1931-2007), the American neo-pragmatist philosopher, for instance, argued for the quasi-paradoxical notion that truth was a useful fiction to develop a ladder that took us from the enlightenment to where we are today, philosophically, but that the time had come to just let go of the notion of truth altogether (1989). Cudworth and Ibn Tufayl would not have hesitated to identify that they both believe truth is real, eternal, and even accessible across starting points. They would see thinkers and societies impacted by Rorty as corrupting and to be shunned. Consider the last part of the *Hayy*, when the protagonist becomes disenchanted with the intellectually corrupted and socialized world of institutions. He resigns himself to retreat, with a friend he meets only after discovering eternal truths on his own, back to the island to uniquely explore eternal truths, while being unburdened by society's failure on this subject. If we can't rely on social structures to guide us into truth, instead of away from it, then what can we rely on? According to both of these thinkers, who share an attitude of optimism about rationality, we must rely on our own reasoning. This is not to imply that either denies the role of experiential learning or promotes armchair philosophy.

The overarching shared epistemic and attitudinal commitments did encourage them to both conclude that the truth of monotheistic religions could be known through the light of reason (amongst other paths). This shared conclusion designed around the truth of monotheism motivated some overlap within the domain of ethics, especially insofar as both thinkers were pitted against the idea that we human beings can be the sufficient cause of moral values. Cudworth is especially clear about how freedom should be understood as oriented toward the good.

Cudworth's dispositional theory of freedom involves an understanding of freedom that allows us to direct our will toward the good: "That which first moveth in us, and is the spring and principle of all deliberative action, can be no other than a constant, restless, uninterrupted desire, or love of good as such, and happiness." (Cudworth, 1996, p. 173)

Like Ibn Tufayl, Cudworth contends that the spring of the good is the

goodness of God. Unlike the popular voluntarism in the seventeenth century, Cudworth denies that something is good because God wills it and instead insists God wills it because it is good. This emphasis on anti-voluntarism, in which voluntarism emphasizes the omnipotence of God (an omnipotence Cudworth believes is shaped by God's other attributes, especially omnibenevolence) is related to Cudworth's own understanding of the primacy of goodness in God. We propose the approach to the good, a good that both base on the goodness of God, inspired Cudworth and Ibn Tufayl to adopt a similar, though not identical, theory of what it means to be good, rather than merely to do good. In other words, what is at stake cannot be reduced to questions such as "Would a good person murder?" Or any alternative formulations such as "Is murder morally acceptable?" Instead, the sketch of how we become good highlights how a shared ethical platform can sit upon foundational monotheistic beliefs, especially in cases of shared epistemic commitments.

Ibn Tufayl uses the concept of *tashabbuh*, which roughly translates to mean 'developing a resemblance,' when addressing how to become a good person (Brenet, 2022). Put more clearly, Ibn Tufayl can be understood as advancing the notion that we must strive to resemble the goodness of God within ourselves by adopting those attributes of God that enable us to resemble the divine goodness. In Medieval Philosophy, this praxis was called *Imitatio Dei*, meaning imitation of God, in which we use God as the model for our understanding of what virtues we want to cultivate (Kreisel, 1994). Whether or not this development of a resemblance, a kind of theosis, parallels Cudworth perfectly would be subject to debate. What is critical, is the overlap insofar as a certain moral realism relies on striving towards goodness in both thinkers, a goodness crucially dependent on the goodness of God.

Conclusion

Constructive comparative philosophy of religion often rests on seeking out concord between religions. We set out to make some general observations on how Christian-Muslim dialogue may be enhanced if monotheism is stressed, and modalism and a high Christology were highlighted. Our second task was to point out that in a specific case, involving a Muslim and Christian philosopher, one can find substantial accord in terms of their epistemology, theology of God's goodness, and a realist view of truth and values.

Ethics declarations

Conflict of interests

The authors have no competing interests.

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