Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning: A Muslim's Approach to Interreligious Learning

Betül Avcı

Department of Religious Studies & School of Islamic Studies, Ibn Haldun University, Başakşehir Mahallesi, Ulubatlı Hasan Cd. No: 2, 34494 Başakşehir/İstanbul, Turkey; betul.avci@ihu.edu.tr

Abstract: In this paper, I examine Comparative Theology (CT) and Scriptural Reasoning (SR), two distinctive interreligious learning practices, in relation to each other. I propose that these practices, with respect to their dialogical features and transformative power, represent two of the most noteworthy current modes of interreligious dialogue. They achieve this by their ability to explicitly understand the "other." This is also because they serve not only as tools in service of understanding in academic circles, but also as existentially/spiritually transformative journeys in the exotic/familiar land of the "other." In respect to religious particularity and (un)translatability, I argue that both CT and SR have certain liberal and postliberal features, as neither of them yields to such standard taxonomies. Finally, I deal with Muslim engagement with CT and SR and present some initial results of my current comparative questioning/learning project. Consequently, I plan for this descriptive work to stand as a preliminary to, first, an SR session that focuses on some Qur'anic verses and biblical accounts with a probable progressivist view of history and, second, an in-depth study of the Islamic tradition in that light.

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, Comparative Theology (CT) and Scriptural Reasoning (SR), two distinctive practices of interreligious—or dialogical—learning, have gained attention in both academic and non-academic circles. Michael Barnes considers CT and SR to be two significant modes of "reading" practice. He argues that both are "religious" in contradistinction to "consumerist" readings (Barnes 2011). Francis X. Clooney, inspired by Ben Quash's depiction of SR's basic features of *particularity, provisionality, sociality,* and *surprise* (italics are the author's) argues that all four features also apply to CT. However, as he also notes, the main distinction between the two practices is that SR is extroverted, explicitly conversational, and focuses mainly on scripture, in contrast to CT's inclination toward individual, introverted reading, focusing on secondary theological writings (Clooney 2013). Paul D. Murray also draws attention to family resemblances between SR, CT, and Receptive Ecumenism. He argues that all three are "self-consciously postliberal strategies" on the grounds that they all prefer particularity and plurality over commonality and final agreement. Consequently, they seek to learn from and across differences and disagreements (Murray 2013).

In what follows, I will introduce both CT and SR with respect to their backgrounds and contexts within which each survives and serves as a dialogical tool for the individual and the community. I will examine both in regard to their dialogical features and transformative power and argue that they are two of the most noteworthy current modes of interrelational learning, as well as interreligious dialogue practices. Further, building upon the three works mentioned, I will compare these two modes of learning and discuss the issues of religious particularity and (un)translatability. Finally, I will

raise some points on the methods of SR and CT from a Muslim's vantage point and present some initial results of my current comparative questioning/learning project. I plan for this descriptive work to stand as a preliminary to, first, an SR session that focuses on some Qur'anic verses and biblical accounts with probable progressivist view of history and, second, an in-depth study of the Islamic tradition in that light.

2. Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning: Backgrounds and Contexts

According to one of its contemporary practitioners, Francis X. Clooney, "Comparative theology is a practical response to religious diversity read with our eyes open, interpreting the world in light of our faith and with a willingness to see newly the truths of our own religion in light of another" (Clooney 2010). For Clooney, the aim of this practice is to "make a contribution to [his] Christian theology" (Clooney 2011). According to James L. Fredericks, another significant name in CT, it "entails the interpretation of the meaning and truth of one's own faith by means of a critical investigation of other faiths" (Fredericks 2010). As Ulrich Winkler notes, CT "presupposes both theological reflection and religious experience—in one's own and other religious traditions, intellectual discourse, and existential encounter" (Winkler 2011). Based upon these descriptions, CT may be depicted as a comparative enterprise in search of truth and meaning that is based on faith seeking intellectual understanding and/or existential/spiritual experience.

The history of CT can be traced to as early as an individual ancient believer's curiosity about his neighbor's belief through the earliest instances of Jewish and Christian apologetics. In the premodern period, although not mentioned by name, some early examples of Western CT are found in the missionary practices of two Jesuits, Roberto de Nobili (d. 1656) and Matteo Ricci (d. 1610). Roberto de Nobili tried to penetrate and understand Hindu culture, while Matteo Ricci did the same with the Chinese tradition. Thus, both tried to overcome earlier aggressive, polemical approaches by studying the native cultures and traditions of the people they were proselytizing among and comparing them with their own. Hugh Nicholson argues that early Religious Studies developed as another name for liberal theology in the latter's effort to go beyond a polemical, dogmatic, apologetic, and *a prioristic* method by resorting to an experimental-empirical and so-called "scientific" approach (Nicholson 2011). In another vein, while James Garden's *Comparative Theology* (1700), Frederick Denison Maurice's *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity* (1847), and James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) are often regarded as the earliest modern examples of CT, what we come across (in the works of Max Müller, Cornelius Petrus Tiele, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and even Joachim Wach) under the heading of Comparative Religion, *Religionswissenschaft*, or Phenomenology of Religion is also a refined form of theology and another name for CT. Hence, all these names represent so many attempts to go beyond the polemical, dogmatic, and apologetic approaches of an earlier theology. What is more, they tackled their theological task in a comparative way. What they were trying to achieve was proving the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity in relation to other religions, and/or to deepening their own spirituality through comparison and by finding spiritual riches in other religious traditions. One should also note Vatican II, particularly the *Nostra Aetate*, and its aftermath as the inspirational environment in which CT has flourished enormously.[1] Many of CT's modern practitioners, such as Francis X. Clooney, Keith Ward, Robert C. Neville, James L. Fredericks, and Raimon Panikkar, are not only academics but also Christian clergymen. Besides, the Roman Catholic identity of Clooney, Fredericks, Tracy, Panikkar, and Boston College inevitably call attention. Lately, however, Muslim academics and Islamic themes have also been, in an explicit and self-proclaimed way, involved in CT practices. As of today, modern CT has been undertaken for around 30 years in North America, especially at Harvard Divinity School and Boston College, and at Paderborn University in Germany.

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[1] For a personal account of doing CT in the aftermath of Vatican II, see Clooney 2013, pp. 228–29.

SR was originally inspired by textual reasoning, which was initiated by a group of Jewish Bible scholars, theologians, and philosophers in the early 1990s. These scholars used to read scriptures in relation to the Western academic tradition. Peter Ochs, David Novak, Steven Kepnes, and Robert Gibbs were prominent members of this group, which developed into the Society of Textual Reasoning in 1991. While "text" referred to the Jewish scripture, "reasoning" was a reference to the intellectual methods and practices of philosophy and theology based on reason. Participants of textual reasoning were particularly concerned with the reshaping of Jewish thought after the Shoah. They were critical of abstract modernist thinking and believed that reading Jewish scriptures in a traditional manner, studying and interpreting them, was the best method for such a task. In this manner, they thought that they would be able to develop solutions to contemporary problems. This was, in fact, not a return to premodern and pre-critical thought, but a post-critical approach. Christian theologians such as Daniel Hardy and David E. Ford and Muslim scholars such as Basit Bilal Koshul and Aref Nayed joined textual reasoning sessions by the end of 1990s. Finally, the SR group emerged, which involved the participation of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars. In SR, as David E. Ford notes, four elements are combined: Jewish textual reasoning; Christian postliberal textual interpretation; a number of Catholic and Protestant philosophies and theologies; and Muslim concern for the Qur'an and Islam against Western modernity (Ford 2006). Another element or influence on SR is the philosophical pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce. Although SR was initiated among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, today, it extends beyond these three traditions. In sum, SR principally encompasses traditional reading of mostly Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures, and contemporary intellectual approaches to these scriptures.

One of the initiators of SR, Peter Ochs, notes that the aim of this practice is to provide an "academic scriptural theology." Such an academic theology would be able to provide a third space distant from both "intellectual reductionism" and "religious reductionism." In such an atmosphere, mostly Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians and scholars would bring both "their sciences and their faiths" to the SR session (Ochs 2005). It is necessary to point out that such reasoning is not an abstract, purely intellectual undertaking, but, in the words of Kepnes, "a reasoning of the heart" (Kepnes 2006). Consequently, it is the hope of SR to find answers to contemporary questions and solutions to today's problems in relation to scriptures. A radical resistance or a retreat to the premodern is not the goal of SR, but a reparation of the tradition and the sacred is. As one of its most significant features, SR does not try to build up an agreement or to reach a common ground among its practitioners in respect to the texts they study. It neither looks forward to reaching a conclusion, nor tries to find easy satisfaction for its members. Rather, SR seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the scriptures in the presence of others. Thus, SR has a hopeful, wait-and-see approach. If an SR meeting ends with disagreement of good quality, it should be deemed successful. This is because it does not seek to overcome differences of opinion or find a common ground; on the contrary, it embraces differences and seeks to live with them.

Today, there are various groups, academic centers, and programs that practice SR in addition to providing training and trying to construct theories based on SR practices. Princeton University, the University of Virginia, and Duke University in the U.S., Cambridge University in England, the Institute of Comparative Scripture and Interreligious Dialogue at Minzu University in China, the American Academy of Religion, *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*, and the *Journal of Comparative Scripture* are some of the most significant contemporary SR environments. In addition to these institutions, centers, and publications, there are SR groups in the Middle East, Europe, Pakistan, Russia, and Australia. While SR was mainly initiated among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim academics, it has recently extended to schools, hospitals, correction facilities, and non-academic circles.

3. Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning: Two Contemporary Modes of Interreligious Dialogue

Catherine Cornille describes interreligious dialogue as "any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions" (Cornille 2013). Such engagement may range from

grassroots social and political cooperation to monastic-spiritual prayers and meditation among members of different religious traditions. What distinguishes "interfaith dialogue" from simply "interfaith relations" is that dialogue is "more deeply and mutually implicated than the language of 'relations' suggests" (Race 2008). Thus, interreligious dialogue can range from spontaneous personal conversations among people of the same neighborhood to international conferences involving specialists. As an example, Moyaert, in "Inappropriate Behavior?", explores ritual participation as an interreligious category and the possibility that it may provide for "experiential learning" (Moyaert 2014). The "classic" four forms of interreligious dialogue as presented in the "Dialogue and Mission" of the Catholic Church are the dialogue of life, deeds, religious experience, and specialists. While the dialogue of life encompasses all spheres of life and includes everybody in a multicultural society, the dialogue of deeds enforces working together for a better world in humanitarian, economic, social, and political domains. The dialogue of specialists is often limited to certain individuals within a religious tradition who seek to "understand" others in respect to their "spiritual values and cultural categories." The dialogue of religious experience tends to share an individual's existential/spiritual quest to find God in the presence of members of other traditions (14 September 2018).[2] Within the field of Interreligious Studies, besides the abovementioned forms of dialogue, some others are listed as verbal, nonverbal, transformative (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007), cognitive, affective (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, pp. 16–17), and forgiveness through the confession of "faults"—e.g., Crusades, etc.—toward members of other religions (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, pp. 22–24). Although diverse, all interreligious forms include an urge for an implicit or explicit *understanding* of the other through a certain type of encounter.

Considering that CT is interreligious faith seeking understanding, we may very well consider it as a dialogical learning practice that includes at least one other religious tradition in addition to one's own. Although most forms of interreligious dialogue involve at least two individuals who communicate verbally, CT is mostly performed solo in written form. However, it encompasses the most important feature of any dialogue: intellectual and/or spiritual transformation of the self. Thus, CT may be viewed as an individual, inner, inaudible, intellectual, theological, existential/spiritual type of dialogue. Moreover, CT is often inspired by and/or is inspirational for other forms of interreligious dialogue. Likewise, although not initiated as a dialogue activity, SR intends to engage its participants with not only their own scriptures, but also with scriptures of others in relation to their own intellectual makeup. Thus, various webs unite in such a setting. For instance, during an SR session, a Muslim individual who has been intellectually molded by modern academy will be engaged with:

(1)   Her own scripture, the Qur'an;
(2)   Jewish and Christian scriptures;
(3)   Jews and Christians who read the Qur'an;
(4)   Jews and Christians reading their own scriptures;
(5)   Her own co-religionists in such a setting.

If we consider such a web of relations for each Jewish and Christian SR practitioner, in each SR session, numerous layers, such as modern, traditional, interreligious, intrareligious, Western, and Muslim, concurrently coexist. Thereby, classical dichotomies—at least for a while—disappear. This is because SR practitioners not only expand upon religious texts, but also learn how to sit at the same table and communicate with one another, even in disagreement.

Considering the abovementioned types and essential features of interreligious dialogue, we may reasonably regard CT and SR as two of the most current dialogical learning practices. Both CT and SR seek to find God in the modern world in an interrelational manner. While SR tries to accomplish this task through restoring the broken relationship between God and the individual

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in a public setting, CT often achieves this on a personal level. They are both intellectually and/or existentially/spiritually transformative for the individual and the community as they try to learn from/by means of other religious traditions. Thus, although both CT and SR were not initiated as interreligious dialogue *per se*, they include various features of the abovementioned forms of dialogue. This is mostly because they require an explicit understanding of the other through studying and often lead to an inner transformation.

In the hermeneutic dimension of interreligious dialogue, Cornille notes that both Clooney and David Burrell do not seek to discover new truths when they engage with other religious traditions. Rather, they seek to deepen their understanding of religious truth by means of such an encounter (Cornille 2012, pp. 140–41). Thus, CT is not solely an academic mental exercise, but also a means for existential/spiritual and/or intellectual transformation. Clooney notes that it is "finding God in all things," "welcoming wisdom where it exists," and aiming to "know God better" (Ray et al. 2013). What Clooney seeks here is to have a novel experience of God in a different dimension. As he reads Hindu texts in relation to the texts of his own tradition, he deepens not only his theological and intellectual knowledge, but also his Catholic spiritual experience and tries "to remain an intellectually committed Catholic who has taken another religion to heart" (Clooney 2011, p. 147). Thus, although not as his own Catholic doctrine or issues of faith on the doctrinal level, but on a spiritual level, he believes that God may speak through another religious tradition:

> [C]omparative theology honors the possibility of spiritual and mystical exchange among traditions that may eventually go beyond ordinary scholarly discipline. I have stressed the discipline and obligations of theology, but in fact I work with a fairly rich sense of theology. Theology also has to do with experience, with mysticism. It is a mystical practice too, it can overflow into prayer, it can relate to worship, and so on. Serious academic, seriously professional theology can also have these spiritual, mystical, and prayerful dimensions. It need not be the case that comparative works stops short of prayer whereas other theologies are prayerful. Comparative theologians need not only talk about God, in the general sense, but our study also intensifies our encounter with God, in and through the comparative process itself. I can meet God, I can pray better, I can talk in conversation with God better, more intensely because I have done comparative work. Perhaps this is why God has given us religions other than our own. (Clooney 2011, p. 146)

Along the same line, inspired by the Bible, SR employs "house-tent" imagery as a self-description. In this case, home signifies each individual's own religious tradition, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Each individual practitioner primarily belongs to her own house, and her relation with the external world originates from there. An SR session is considered to be a "tent" in which the individual is a guest and encounters the "other" tradition. When the individual travels out of her house and stays in another's tent for a while, she encounters novel experiences. Finally, on the way back home, she would be filled with new questions, inspiration, and confusion. Consequently, a person who has spent some time in the tent of the "other" would be existentially/spiritually and/or intellectually challenged and transformed into a different person.

In the West, belonging to more than one religion or participating in rituals of various religions at one time is often not acceptable due to doctrinal reasons. However, in certain parts of the East, such dual belonging, or "ritual polytropy," seems to be common (Moyaert 2016b). Paul Knitter, a Christian theologian, explains his journey to the land of Buddhism and his return to his own Christian faith. He describes such an experience as being existentially/spiritually transformative because, after exploring the nondualist view of Buddhism, he has reached a more profound appreciation of his own Christian tradition. In the end, as he relates: "[M]y core identity as a Christian has been profoundly influenced by my passing over to Buddhism" (Knitter 2013). Like many others in CT, Knitter also

depicts his journey as "passing over" to another tradition and "coming back" to his own.[3] On the other hand, while CT and SR may provide very valuable intellectual and/or existential/spiritual outcomes for their practitioners, they may also bring one to obscure, unexplored grounds distant from the society. They have the risk of rendering their practitioners prone to criticism both as members of their broader religious community and as intellectuals. For instance, while fellow co-religionists might deem a comparative theologian naive or suspicious, noncomparativist theologians may regard her as superficial and historians of religions as normative and biased.

4. Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning: Particularity and (Un)Translatability

The Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck, in his famous work *The Nature of Doctrine*, offers a cultural-linguistic theory of religion and a postliberal theology against premodern propositionalism and liberal experiential expressivism. Although he also critiques propositionalism, which argues that "church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities" (Lindbeck 1984), his main interlocutor is liberal theology or modern experiential expressivism, which prioritizes universal religious experience. Thus, Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory of religion is a response to contemporary dominant liberal trends, such as individualism, pluralism, emphasis on personal feeling, and universalism. Against the universalist view that "various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate, and that therefore they must respect each other, learn from each other, and reciprocally enrich each other" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 23), he proposes a particularist and intratextual hermeneutics. Lindbeck argues that each religious tradition has a unique system, categorization, and experience. Consequently, each is incommensurable and cannot be "translated" into any other tradition. For instance, "Buddhist compassion, Christian love . . . and French revolutionary *fraternité* are not diverse modifications of a single human awareness, emotion, attitude, or sentiment, but are radically (i.e., from the root) distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and cosmos" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 40). Accordingly, the Bible is the authoritative narrative that decides for the Christian individual and the community, as Lindbeck notes, "[i]t is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 118). Thus, postliberal theology centers around the particularity of the Christian revelation contained in the Scripture that interprets itself and the world around it. For Lindbeck, religions are asymmetrical and do not yield to comparison, as the cultural-linguistic approach "proposes no common framework . . . within which to compare religions" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 49). Along the same line, in *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad argues that the use of asymmetrical categories by anthropologists to define the "other," especially in their approach to religion, is not proper. This is because the foundation of such an analogy is based on Western concepts. Therefore, it does not give way to cross-cultural analysis. For Asad, Western—basically Christian—historiography rests on the conceptions of progress and development. He argues that the dominant Western paradigm of historiography, although naturally particularist, claims to present a universalist view (Asad 1993). Against the universalist view of religion, Asad argues that "constituent elements of and relationships [of religion] are historically specific." (Asad 1993, p. 29)

Asad's asymmetricality and Lindbeck's postliberal, particularist theory presume different religious traditions as incommensurable units and concur with SR practitioners on the asymmetricality between religions. However, such radical particularity may be criticized on the grounds that it leads one to exclusivism, putting any meaningful connections between religious traditions and interreligious encounters at stake. Against the untranslatability and radical incommensurability of religions, Moyaert, inspired by Paul Ricoeur, welcomes such translation and interreligious dialogue by means of the

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3　　Such a journey back and forth coincides with the *exitus-reditus* model, inspired by earlier philosophies, which was also systematically employed by Thomas Aquinas. More recently, it was utilized by the theologian John S. Dunne in *The Way of All the Earth* (1972), and has been a significant feature of CT.

hermeneutics of hospitality (Moyaert 2012).[4] Paul Hedges, who is critical of radical particularism's insistence on incommensurability, concurs with Moyaert. Likewise, he views hospitality as a sphere involving challenges by religious others (Hedges 2017). Hedges also rightfully criticizes Lindbeck's example of love, on the grounds that love, as described in *Romeo and Juliet*, does not need to be translated into a meta-language in order to be understood and appreciated by, for example, a Chinese person. This is because it can already be understood within one's own language and experience (Hedges 2008). Moreover, particularity fails to acknowledge the multiplicity within a religious tradition and seems to put Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic traditions under the umbrella of Christianity. Also, religious traditions have been shaped cross-culturally, since not only internal but also external questions construct the answers and consequently religious dogmas. In sum, there is no "pure" theological tradition constructed in a vacuum. At this point, contemporary CT, critical of both radical intratextuality of postliberal theology and pluralist globalism of liberal theology, stands out.

Paul Knitter argues that CT, although "not dependent on" postliberalism, "resonates with" it (Knitter 2014). However, Moyaert maintains that while Lindbeck's postliberal theology favors intratextuality, CT is "a form of intertextual theology" (Moyaert 2011). Klaus von Stosch also follows Moyaert and explains CT "to be in a sort of tension with postliberal thinking" (Von Stosch 2012). Overall, today's CT focuses on particular case studies rather than former globalist comparative theologies. This is because its aim is not to trace certain particularities of a religious tradition toward the larger phenomenon of religion. However, based on its current examples, CT may be criticized on the grounds that it is often limited to sameness between traditions, while SR glorifies asymmetricality.

Peter Ochs seems to concur with Michael Barnes that SR is a "principled postmodernism" (Barnes 2011, p. 400). Ochs agrees to call SR postliberal on the grounds that it provides answers to modern liberal theology's "inadequate attention to problems in everyday practice." However, he maintains that SR does not yield to "standard postmodern criticisms" (Ochs 2006). He also states that SR is particularly postmodern in the sense that it respects "text-and-tradition specificity" (Ochs 2006, p. 122). Thus, although SR builds upon postliberal particularism against liberal pluralism, it seeks to deepen collegiality among religious others through their particularities and disagreements. Although liberal pluralism looks for unity in diversity, SR practitioners try to learn how to live together and rediscover their own traditions in the context of diversity. Thus, SR is unique among other postliberal tendencies in the sense that it seeks a community of respectfully disagreeing voices rather than shutting itself in as a closed community. SR welcomes other "text-and-tradition specific" communities, i.e., Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others. SR is postmodern in the sense that it tends to go beyond modern abstract, individualist thinking and practice. However, it is not pre-critical, because it employs modern critical thinking. SR may be considered a religious practice that desires to hear the voice of God through scripture in the presence of others and in the modern, secular, pluralist world, rather than hearing its own abstract theologizing voice.

Accordingly, CT, as it is practiced today, may be depicted as a bridge between universality and particularity of religious traditions, since it favors contextuality and focuses on particular case studies. While present-day CT embraces postliberal criticism of metanarratives, it concurs with postliberal theology on the grounds that it is against *a prioristic* pluralisms. Postliberal hermeneutics is often criticized by the claim that it excludes the reader and the outside world as interpreters of the text. This is because the human subject and the community are not only the receivers but also the creators of

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4　For a valuable exploration of the possibility of interreligious dialogue in relation to Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory and particularism, see Marianne Moyaert's *Fragile Identities*, particularly the chapter entitled "The End of Dialogue." Here, Moyaert argues that particularism is "a kind of soft version of the cultural-linguistic theory of religion." However, as she also notes, it "remains (suspiciously?) quiet on the issues of the untranslatability of religions, the principle of intratextuality, and the radical incommensurability of religions." Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2011, p. 172.

a certain religious tradition. Thus, CT parts ways with postliberal theology, because religious traditions are not closed, incommensurable units on which I will expand below.

5. Muslim Engagement with Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning

SR practitioners are not only academics, but also members of their religious communities who attend, respectively, mosques, synagogues, and churches. In addition to having been trained, they keep teaching in their own traditions with both modern and traditional methods. Thus, within an SR session, various sub-branches of modern academia, and many religious sub-traditions, schools, and approaches are brought together. As an example, a Salafi Muslim anthropologist sits at the same SR table with a Sufi Muslim scholar of the Qur'anic exegesis. At the table, both Muslim scholars, from different Islamic sub-traditions and academic backgrounds, provide different approaches to the Muslim scripture. Moreover, while one of these Muslim SR practitioners may share the same academic background, method, and approach with a Jewish or Christian practitioner, she may hold views different from her co-religionist on certain matters. Consequently, considering Jewish and Christian practitioners, there are a great number of religious and intellectual correlations. In an SR session, each participant brings along, in the words of Aref Nayed, her "internal library" (Kepnes 2006, p. 31). The "internal library" for a Muslim includes philological, literary, etc., knowledge of Islam and the Qur'an in addition to information on various Islamic approaches to the Qur'an. Moreover, the Qur'an would not be the only intellectual focus of attention, but also the main part of the individual's rituals and social life as a Sunni, Shiite, Salafi, or Sufi Muslim.

As already noted, CT currently seems to be often occupied with texts and the discursive dimension of religion. Although it is argued that CT may be based on various media, such as art and rituals, currently, it almost always depends on texts. Likewise, SR is centered around scriptures, and so, both are textual practices. As noted by Moyaert, the focus of CT on religious texts is due to their authoritative feature, feasibility, and accessibility (Moyaert 2017). To these reasons, I would also add the discursive nature of religions of the West. However, Moyaert is also concerned that CT "has a limited scope due to it textual focus" and suggests a liturgical shift (Moyaert 2017, p. 192), arguing that the textual emphasis of CT needs to be turned into material aspects of religion, and consequently it may be "corrected" (Moyaert 2016a). It is noteworthy that there is lively interest in lived practices of cross-religious participation, as in the recent studies of Tim Winter, A. Bagus Laksana, and others. For example, Winter explores shared rituals on the pragmatic level, since such sharing is inevitable and natural in pluralist societies as well as due to intermarriage. He also questions whether non-Muslims would be welcome in Muslim ritual prayers based on Islamic jurisdiction and argues for the positive (Winter 2016). Laksana looks at shared rituals—or what he calls "cross-riting"—between Javanese Muslims and Catholics, as he is more interested in the spiritually transformative aspect of this practice:

> [W]hile reading the texts of religious others can appear to be an objective and religiously neutral scholarly activity, or just a sign of intellectual or spiritual curiosity where a distance might be easier to maintain, cross-ritual participation seems to assume a further, deeper, and more serious "consent" to both the theological understanding and the "divine reality and presence" of the religious other. Cross-ritual participants are putting themselves in a distinctive religious mode that is quite different from that of the readers of texts, largely because they are now addressing the Divine in his very presence. This creates a rather intense situation where distance is much harder to maintain, as the mind, the heart, and the body of the believer are involved. (Laksana 2016)

Along a similar vein, SR also seems to ignore the ritual dimension of religion, that is, liturgical readings of the scripture. This issue is also closely related to the asymmetrical status of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For example, the Qur'an is a book that addresses not just the cognitive faculties of the individual. A Muslim is obliged to recite certain verses of the Qur'an in its original Arabic even if she does not understand their meaning. In this case, the sound and letters,

the very Word of God, His "untranslatable" names (which are believed to be filled with divine power) achieve their function.[5] Likewise, a Sunni Muslim is not supposed to touch the Qur'an, except in certain situations, without ritual ablution. Thus, a Muslim would not comply with applying any sort of biblical form criticism to the Qur'an similar to a Christian's and would most probably not consent to interpret it out of the massive tradition of the Qur'anic exegesis.

In respect to asymmetricality, a certain body of truth according to one tradition may be deemed a diversion from the truth by another. However, such an asymmetrical relation would be welcome for SR. For example, as Nicholas Adams notes, scripture called "Tanakh" by a Jew should be named "Old Testament" by a Christian. He argues that each tradition is unique in its own terms, and it is not proper trying to approximate concepts and beliefs of one tradition to the other's (Adams). For him, what matters here is neither the question of the authenticity of the scripture, nor the truth contained therein, but the value of the text in the eyes of its beholder. However, in this case, more curious approaches to a certain entity will emerge. For example, based on the Qur'an, a Muslim will view the Christian scripture as either totally or partially corrupted or altered in respect to text and/or meaning. In order to avoid such a dead end for meaningful conversation, Peter Ochs suggests ignoring true-false dichotomies and focusing on the "coherence, beauty, strength, and expressiveness of the scripture" and consequently praising the pragmatic consequence as a success or failure in resolving the current problem—in the end suggesting a contextual and pragmatic result (21 July 2018) (Ochs 2002). He also argues that the question of truth should be suspended until the end times. However, a Muslim would depict the Gospel as a body of text directly revealed to Jesus in his lifetime similar to the Qur'an, while a Christian and a Jew would hold almost totally distinct views of it. Moreover, even within the Islamic tradition, there are differing views on the contents of the Gospel. For example, contrary to the traditional Islamic view that the Gospel is a body of text similar to the Qur'an, in his *İncîl ve Salîb*, ʿAbd al-Aḥad Dāwūd (d. 1931), a Christian convert to Islam, argues that the Gospel is only an "oral statement."[6] Consequently, since there is an enormous difference within and between religious traditions, not only on the content and status of certain religious phenomena but also on the conceptual level (as in the case of the Gospel above), I am curious to see how pragmatic contextualism as employed by Peter Ochs would avoid any probable relativism.

Another issue worth mentioning is the relationship between CT and Religious Studies. It is often suggested that while Religious Studies does not adhere to any truth question and keeps an outsider's perspective, CT sticks to the question of truth and an insider's perspective. For example, according to Cornille, what distinguishes CT from Religious Studies is the former's "commitment to and pursuit of the truth," and the difference between CT and traditional missionary approaches is CT's "genuine interest in learning from other religions" (Cornille 2012, p. 139). However, neither so-called academic "neutrality," "emphatic understanding" of the scholar, nor the distinction between insider-outsider perspectives seems to solve the problem of boundaries between CT and Religious Studies. This is because such academic neutrality is not possible and, as Rita M. Gross truthfully observes, "[e]veryone has an agenda and those who claim they are outsiders to religion are insiders to and advocates of some other belief about religion" (Gross 2005).

Along the same line, theology does not totally exclude an outsider's perspective, as is often suggested (Von Stosch 2016). Additionally, there are two significant features that blur the boundaries between CT and Religious Studies. First, contrary to Religious Studies' so-called adherence to the outsider's perspective, the new turn in the field opts for an insider's perspective. Second, as Reinhold Bernhardt argues, contrary to its statement of purpose, CT does not concretely engage with the truth question or with any evaluative judgment (Bernhardt 2012). However, many CT participants are often

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5   David Burrell employs Annamarie Schimmel's neologism "inlibration" for the Qur'an as the Christian parallel of the Incarnation. David Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 171–3.

6   For further information on ʿAbd al-Aḥad Dāwūd, see my forthcoming entry in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*.

inclusivists or pluralists, although they do not often explicitly express their own stands within their particular CT practices. Along a similar vein, "normativity" is also suggested to demarcate CT from Religious Studies. However, similar to the "truth" question, "normativity" is often vague and does not seem to have either a clear description or a concrete expression in current particular CT practices.

6. Asymmetricality between Christian and Islamic Traditions: A Personal Questioning/Learning Story

In the preceding pages, I have introduced CT and SR with respect to their backgrounds and contexts, within which they developed into two of the most noteworthy scholarly interreligious learning practices. I have proposed that they achieve this role by means of their explicit understanding of the "other." This is also because they serve not only as tools in service of faith seeking understanding in academic circles, but also as existentially/spiritually transformative journeys in the exotic/familiar land of the "other." Further, from examining similarities and differences between the two practices, I have noticed that both CT and SR have certain liberal and postliberal features, as they equally do not yield to such standard taxonomies. In the following, I will introduce my ongoing comparative project in respect to the asymmetricality between Islamic and Christian traditions. Beforehand, I need to reveal that I am a practicing Sunni Muslim woman of Turkish origin. As a scholar of Religious Studies, I have been looking for the ways in which God communicates with humanity and humanity's access to the divine. Thus, I have been explicitly studying Catholic theologies of revelation and history while implicitly "questioning" Islamic theologies of history. Meanwhile, I have often come across contemporary Western and often Christian concepts and categories being juxtaposed on Islamic ones. For example, Fred Donner notes that early prophets served as "proto-Muslims," and he names the time period before the Prophet Muhammad as "proto-Islamic." According to Donner, the early Muslim community viewed itself as the heir to this "pre-Islamic" period (Donner 1998). As a follow-up, Tarif Khalidi argues that the so-called pre-Islamic period served as a stage of preparation, heralding the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (Khalidi 1994). Furthermore, John Wansbrough's utilization of the concept of salvation history in Islamic self-understanding should be viewed along the same line (Wansbrough 1978). Likewise, in modern scholarship, the terms "biblical prophets" and "pre-Islamic prophets" are often employed as references to "prophets in the Qur'an." However, this perception, rooted in the Judeo-Christian starting point, does not do justice to the self-image of the Qur'anic and Islamic understanding regarding the period of early prophets. This is because, for example, while there is no mention of Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Malachi in the Qur'an, all prophets are considered to be Muslims who followed the right path.

Thus, in my scholarly engagement with another tradition, namely Christianity, the question of a "progressive" revealing of God and a probable asymmetricality between Christianity and my own Islamic tradition emerged. During my informal comparative thinking, I have noticed that not only in Paul's letters and the Letter to the Hebrews, but also in the Gospels, salvation events of the New Testament are often regarded as the ones prefigured in the Old, and consequently, a gradual development is suggested. Furthermore, inspired by certain biblical accounts, early Christian theologies of revelation and history seem to suggest a gradual development of humankind to a more advanced time period, to a more concrete and clear understanding and experience of revelation. For example, in the 2nd century, Irenaeus (d. c.202) in his *Against Heresies*, fully develops the idea of progressive salvation history. Against Marcion, Irenaeus claims that God established a new covenant that superseded the old one, and this is the gradual development in human perfection (*Adv. Heresies*, Book IV). Clement of Alexandria (d. c.215), in his *Stromata*, talks about God's pedagogical plan, which covers the whole cosmos. This plan includes pagan philosophy as well. Clement describes philosophy as a divinely ordered preparation for the Greeks for faith in Christ, as the Law was for the Hebrews (*Stromateis*, Book I, V). According to Eusebius (d. 340), as depicted in his *Church History*, Christ as a part of the divine economy preexisted, and showed himself to the patriarchs and the prophets in theophanies. He also taught them the knowledge of the Father and right actions. However,

at a certain point, he appeared to humanity in human form. This appearance was necessary at that point, because humanity would not be able to fully grasp the truth of the Incarnation in its former state. Thus, there was need for progressive development in human conditions (*Church History,* Book I, II). Consequently, I have noted that throughout the ages of Christian theology, up until today, such an approach to revelation and history has been quite prevalent. The "Christ event" or the "Incarnation" has been viewed as the culmination point in the history of God's communication with human beings, or so-called salvation history. This theology of history accompanies the view that such divine manifestation is progressive. Hence, the time period before this event was a "preparation" for such a focal point. Such an understanding is often based on certain biblical accounts filled with allusions to the concepts of "fullness," "fulfillment," "preparation," and "progress."

Eventually, an interrelational reading of the Qur'an with Christian theologies of revelation and history in mind has helped me to notice the ways in which the Qur'anic perception of revelation and history is peculiarly different from the biblically inspired patristic theologies. I primarily analyzed various Qur'anic verses, some of which read as follows:

> And who would forsake the religion (*milla*) of Abraham except one who makes a fool of himself? We have chosen him in this world and in the Hereafter; he shall be one of the righteous. When his Lord told him: "Submit" (*aslim*), he said: "I have submitted (*aslamtu*) to the Lord of the Worlds." And Abraham bequeathed that to his sons, and so did Jacob saying: "O my sons, Allah has chosen the religion (*dīn*) for you; so do not die except as submitting people (*muslimūn*)." Or were you present when Jacob was in the throes of death and said to his sons: "What will you worship when I am gone?" They replied: "We will worship your God and the God of your forefathers, Abraham, Isma'il and Isaac—the One God; and to Him we submit (*muslimūn*)." That was a nation that passed away. Hers is what she has earned and yours is what you have earned. And you shall not be questioned about what they did. They say: "If you become Jews or Christians, you shall be well-guided." Say: "Rather, we follow the religion (*milla*) of Abraham, who was upright (*ḥanīf*) and no polytheist." Say: "We believe in Allah, in what has been revealed to us, what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was imparted to Moses, Jesus and the other Prophets from their Lord, making no distinction between any of them, and to Him we submit (*muslimūn*)." (Q 2: 130–36)

Additionally, I examined certain Qur'anic terms, such as *dīn* (religion), *sharī'a* (jurisprudence), *islām-muslim*, and *ḥanīf* (upright). As noted in the Qur'an, although there have been differences in the systems of civil and ritual law depending on different circumstances of each nation (Q 5: 48), the religion that has been established all throughout history is the same one, namely *Islām*, and the prophets were *ḥanīfs/muslims* (Q 2: 130–40). In the end, I have realized that the Qur'anic account of revelation and history does not suggest a gradual development in order for a higher goal to be realized. The time period before the Prophet Muhammad was not a "preparation," nor was there a focal point of God's revealing in human history. History in the Qur'an is the interruption of evil that pervades the course of human history and leads to degeneration, which is later overcome by the advancement of another prophet. This suggests a cyclic reading of history as "degeneration" followed by "regeneration." Therefore, the Qur'anic approach to history is non-progressive and the theme of "gradually developing salvation history" does not do justice to the Qur'anic perception.

However, although not necessarily in the Qur'an, there are certain trends within the Islamic tradition that point to a progressivist view of history. For example, in his *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, al-Jāḥiz, a Mutazilite theologian of the 9th century, views Islam as the final home for wisdom, where all former wisdom of earlier cultures is accumulated and inherited by the Muslim society. Additionally, in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Umam,* Ṣā'id al-Andalusī, an Andalusian scientist of the 11th century, argues that knowledge travels from one nation to another while it appears and reappears. Finally, knowledge accumulates and Arab-Muslim scientists develop what was first discovered by the earlier cultures. Furthermore, even though science begins in the East, it reaches its culmination in the Muslim West, namely Andalusia.

In the end, based on my initial cross-cultural questioning, I have realized that comparison or interrelational exploration is possible. I believe that cross-cultural comparisons may be employed in order to stress the particularity, the uniqueness of a tradition, and consequently, to problematize categories while highlighting asymmetries. Thus far, as a Muslim who is undertaking such a comparative task, I have been able to investigate my own Islamic tradition in a more nuanced way and on more solid grounds and avoid naive juxtapositions. As a follow-up to my initial interrelational study, I am planning to conduct an SR session focusing on certain Qur'anic verses and biblical accounts that seem to suggest a progressivist view of history. In this way, it is my hope to employ both SR and CT in my ongoing interrelational questioning of a "progressivist" view of history.

7. Concluding Remarks

In respect to difference vs. similarity, or asymmetricality vs. symmetricality, it is not healthy trying to understand one religious tradition on the basis (namely, categories and conceptions) of another. However, it is inevitable that not only each religious tradition, but also each individual, will judge the others by means of her own criteria, that is, by applying her own categories and conceptions. On the other hand, finding asymmetries and highlighting differences should not lead to radical particularism that would block any meaningful communication. Obviously, there is no neutral language or a starting point. So, what we are left with is either no communication or employing the ones available for the healthiest translation possible, i.e., using our own categories and conceptions as necessary analytical tools. Thus, the criteria are not essentially fixed and should be open to change by means of engagement with the "other." In a recent work, Campany shows us that rather than abandoning the Western category of "religious" altogether on the grounds that it does not serve as a cross-cultural universal, it is possible to find analogous categories in non-Western cultures, such as premodern China. Therefore, rather than tearing it down altogether, it is a matter of revisiting the territory in order to correct the map:

> Smith has written that "'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess" (J. Smith 1978: 309), but I would object: we also possess the capacity to correct our maps where they distort or obscure what we are trying to understand, or at least recognize that they distort, and how, and we do that by walking the territory—working closely with texts and other artifacts.[7] (Campany 2018)

Accordingly, studying the Christian theology of revelation (and a progressivist view of history) and the Qur'anic view of revelation interrelatedly may help us highlight asymmetries between the two traditions and help us correct the orientalist conceptions and categorizations simply juxtaposed on the Islamic tradition. Thus, highlighting asymmetries as a part of SR and CT would be one of the most promising ways to "correct our maps." Finally, I believe that my ongoing project is a comparative or interrelational exploration that aims to deconstruct the unjust representation of the "other," namely the Islamic tradition. However, considering the boundary issues between CT and Religious Studies that I have discussed above, I am still curious to see whether my project would be considered within the field of CT or Religious Studies. This is because, as I have argued elsewhere, comparison is not a neutral endeavor in itself and is one of the most significant means that blurs the boundaries between CT and Religious Studies (Avcı 2018).

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[7]　For a compact discussion on the use of the term "religion," see Paul Hedges. *Comparative Theology* 27–36.

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