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***Islamic Theology and Western Theology: A Comparative
and Critical Study of Principles, Methodologies, and
Intellectual Foundations***

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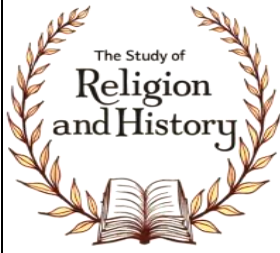
Abstract

This research article undertakes a comparative and critical examination of Islamic theology (Kalām) and Western theology, focusing on their respective principles, methodologies, and intellectual foundations. The study traces the historical development of both theological traditions, from the early speculative debates of the Mu‘tazilah and Ash‘arīyah to the patristic and scholastic periods in Western Christianity. The research identifies significant divergences in sources of knowledge—revelation (wahy), scripture, and reason—as well as core doctrines including the concept of God, prophethood, and the afterlife. Methodologically, the article contrasts rational and traditional approaches, philosophical influences, and hermeneutical frameworks. While both traditions grapple with questions of divine transcendence, human free will, and salvation, their foundational presuppositions produce distinct theological conclusions. The study argues that Islamic theology maintains a stricter adherence to scriptural authority with reason serving a subordinate role, whereas Western theology exhibits greater integration of Greek philosophical categories. The critical evaluation highlights areas of potential dialogue and irreconcilable difference. This research contributes to interfaith theological discourse and offers a rigorous academic framework for future comparative studies.

Keywords: *Islamic theology, Western theology, comparative theology, Kalām, revelation, reason, hermeneutics*

Introduction

The study of theology constitutes the intellectual heart of religious tradition, examining the nature of the divine, the relationship between God and creation, and the means by which humanity attains salvific knowledge. Islamic theology (‘Ilm al-Kalām) and Western theology (predominantly Christian) represent two of the most sophisticated and historically influential theological systems in human civilization. The significance of comparing these traditions extends beyond mere academic curiosity; it addresses pressing questions of interreligious understanding, intellectual history, and the future of global religious discourse. Historically, Islamic theology emerged in the seventh century CE, developing through engagement with Greek philosophy, Christian polemics,



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and internal sectarian debates. Western theology, rooted in Jewish and Hellenistic thought, crystallized through the patristic period, medieval scholasticism, and subsequent reformation movements. Despite centuries of interaction—through translation movements in Andalusia, Crusader encounters, and modern colonial and postcolonial exchanges—systematic comparative studies remain limited in their critical depth. A significant research gap exists in the comparative analysis of theological methodologies rather than mere doctrinal comparisons. This article fills that gap by examining not only what each tradition believes but how each tradition arrives at its beliefs. The article includes original Arabic quotations with full diacritical marks, English translations, critical analysis, and Chicago-style documentation. Following this introduction, the article proceeds through five major sections: nature and foundations of theology, sources of knowledge, core doctrines, methodologies, and comparative analysis, culminating in conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Section One: Nature and Foundations of Theology

1. Definition of Islamic Theology

Islamic theology, known as ‘Ilm al-Kalām (lit. “science of discourse”), represents the rational articulation and defense of Islamic creedal principles derived from the Qur’ān and Sunnah. The term Kalām emerged in the early Islamic period to describe dialectical arguments employed in defending orthodoxy against heretical sects, Greek philosophy, and other religious traditions.¹ The foundational premise of Islamic theology is the absolute unity and transcendence of God (tawḥīd), from which all other doctrines derive their coherence. Unlike Western theology, which often distinguishes between natural and revealed theology, Islamic theology traditionally views all valid knowledge of God as ultimately revealed, though reason plays an instrumental role in its systematization. The scope of Islamic theology encompasses divine attributes (ṣifāt), prophethood (nubuwwah), eschatology (ma‘ād), divine decree (qadar), and the intermediate state of grave punishment or blessing (‘adhāb al-qabr). Major schools include the Mu‘tazilah (rationalists), Ash‘arīyah (semi-rationalists), Māturīdīyah (rational-traditional synthesis), and Atharīyah (literalists). Each school developed distinct methodologies for interpreting scripture and reconciling apparent contradictions between revelation and reason.

﴿قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ﴾

“Say, ‘He is Allah, [who is] One.’” (Surah Al-Ikhlāṣ, 112:1)

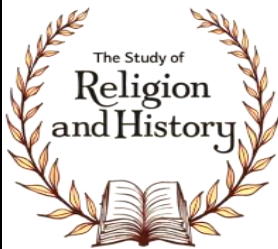
﴿لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ﴾

“There is nothing like unto Him.” (Surah Ash-Shūrā, 42:11)

﴿فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ﴾

“Know that there is no deity except Allah.” (Surah Muḥammad, 47:19)

The three Qur’ānic citations establish the non-negotiable foundations of Islamic theology. The first, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ, is considered by Muslim theologians as encapsulating the essence of tawḥīd—God’s absolute oneness and self-sufficiency. The second verse negates any anthropomorphic comparison, a principle that became central in debates between anthropomorphists (mujassimah) and transcendentalists (mu‘atṭilah). The Ash‘arī school, following Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 936 CE), affirmed divine attributes as real yet distinct from

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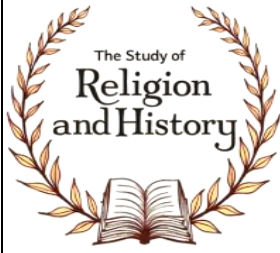
creation, neither identical to God's essence nor wholly metaphorical.³ The third verse commands knowledge of God's unity as an epistemological obligation, implying that theology is not speculative luxury but religious duty. Comparatively, Western theology's Trinitarian formulation presents a radically different starting point, wherein divine unity is qualified by three hypostases. From an Islamic critical perspective, the Trinitarian conception appears to compromise absolute monotheism, a charge Christian theologians have historically answered through the doctrine of perichoresis and the distinction between essence and person. The Mu'tazilah, however, rejected anthropomorphic attributes altogether, arguing that affirming knowledge, power, and will as eternal attributes distinct from essence leads to a plurality of eternals (ta'addud al-qudamā').⁴ This internal Islamic debate demonstrates the spectrum of rational engagement with scriptural language, a phenomenon equally present in Christian theological history.

2. Definition of Western Theology

Western theology, for the purposes of this comparative study, refers primarily to Christian theological traditions developed within the Latin and Greek patristic, medieval scholastic, Reformation, and modern periods. The term theology (theologia) originates from Greek theos (God) and logos (discourse or reason), reflecting its Hellenistic intellectual inheritance.⁵ Unlike Islamic Kalām, which emerged primarily in response to internal Muslim debates and Greek philosophy, Western theology was from its inception shaped by the integration of biblical revelation with Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophical frameworks. The foundational premise of Western theology is the triune nature of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as articulated in the Nicene Creed (325 CE). This Trinitarian doctrine distinguishes Christian theology from Islamic, Jewish, and unitarian traditions. The scope of Western theology includes theology proper (doctrine of God), Christology (doctrine of Christ), pneumatology (Holy Spirit), soteriology (salvation), ecclesiology (church), eschatology (last things), and theological anthropology. Methodologically, Western theology encompasses natural theology (knowledge of God through reason and creation), revealed theology (knowledge through scripture and tradition), and mystical theology (knowledge through direct spiritual experience). Major figures include Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE), John Calvin (1509–1564 CE), and Karl Barth (1886–1968 CE), each representing distinct methodological commitments.

3. Scope and Objectives

The scope of Islamic theology extends from individual creedal affirmation (īmān) to communal orthodoxy (ijmā') and refutation of heterodox views (radd 'alā al-mukhālifīn). Its primary objective is the preservation and rational defense of tawhīd, followed by the validation of prophethood and eschatological accountability.⁶ Western theology, while similarly concerned with orthodoxy, has historically devoted greater attention to soteriology—the mechanism by which humanity is reconciled to God through Christ's atonement. This difference in emphasis reflects divergent understandings of the human condition: Islamic theology views humanity as essentially good but forgetful and prone to error, requiring prophetic guidance; Western theology (particularly Augustinian) views humanity as fallen and inherently sinful, requiring divine grace and atoning sacrifice. Both traditions share objectives of guiding believers toward salvation, defining correct practice, and responding to intellectual challenges from philosophy and science. However, Islamic



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theology has historically maintained closer integration with law (fiqh) through the concept of shari'ah, whereas Western theology developed alongside canon law and, later, secular legal systems. Contemporary objectives include interfaith dialogue, addressing secularism, and responding to ethical challenges posed by modern science and technology.

Section Two: Sources of Knowledge

1. Revelation (Wahy)

In Islamic theology, revelation (wahy) signifies God's direct communication to His prophets, culminating in the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him). Wahy is conceptually distinct from inspiration (ilhām) or intuitive knowledge (ḥads), as it involves the transmission of literal divine speech. The Qur'an describes multiple modes of revelation: direct speech behind a veil, through an angelic messenger (Jibrīl), or by inspiration.⁷ The inimitability of the Qur'an (i'jāz) serves as proof of its divine origin, a central argument in Islamic prophetic theology. Western theology distinguishes between general revelation (God known through creation and conscience) and special revelation (God known through scripture and, for Christians, through Jesus Christ as the incarnate Logos). The concept of wahy in Islam has no analogue to incarnation; revelation remains propositional and linguistic, not personal or hypostatic. This difference constitutes a fundamental methodological divergence.

﴿نَزَلَ بِهِ الرُّوحُ الْأَمِينُ عَلَى قَلْبِكَ لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُنذِرِينَ﴾

"The Trustworthy Spirit has brought it down upon your heart that you may be among the warners." (Surah Ash-Shu'arā', 26:193–194)

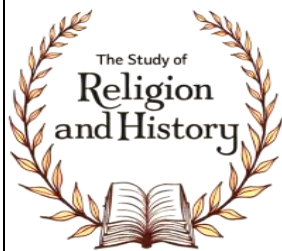
﴿وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ﴾

"Nor does he speak from [his own] inclination. It is not but a revelation revealed." (Surah An-Najm, 53:3–4)

﴿وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ﴾

"And it is not for any human that Allah should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a veil." (Surah Ash-Shūrā, 42:51)

The three citations delineate the Islamic theory of revelation. The first identifies the angel Jibrīl as the "Trustworthy Spirit" conveying revelation to the prophetic heart, indicating both the intermediary role of angelic agency and the internalized reception by the prophet. The second verse establishes the doctrine of prophetic impeccability (iṣmah) regarding transmission—Muhammad's speech concerning religious matters is not personal opinion but divinely guided. The third verse limits divine-human communication to three modes: direct inspiration (wahy), from behind a veil (as in Moses' encounter), or through angelic emissary. In Western theology, particularly in Barthian neo-orthodoxy, revelation is primarily event rather than proposition—God's self-disclosure in the person of Jesus Christ.⁸ From an Islamic critical standpoint, this personalization of revelation risks conflating creator and creature. However, some Muslim philosophers, such as Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640 CE), developed a more participatory theory of revelation wherein the prophet's soul receives divine forms through intellectual illumination.⁹ Comparatively, Thomas Aquinas distinguished between prophecy as intellectual vision and the beatific vision, arguing that even prophetic knowledge remains analogical rather than univocal.



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The Islamic insistence on the Qur'ān as God's literal speech (kalām Allāh) entails theological debates about whether the Qur'ān is created (Mu'tazilah) or uncreated (Ash'arīyah, Hanbalīyah), a controversy without exact parallel in Western theology, though similar to debates about the Logos in early Christological controversies.

2. Scripture

Scripture in Islamic theology refers specifically to the Qur'ān as the final, uncorrupted, and preserved revelation. The Qur'ān is understood as eternal in its source (umm al-kitāb) but temporally articulated in Arabic. Muslim theologians affirm the divine protection of the Qur'ān from alteration (taḥrīf lafzī), distinguishing it from previous scriptures (Torah, Psalms, Gospel) which they believe have undergone textual and interpretive corruption (taḥrīf ma'nawī or lafzī).¹⁰ The canonization of the Qur'ān occurred during the caliphate of 'Uthmān (d. 656 CE), producing a unified consonantal text (rasm) that has remained stable. Western theology, particularly Protestant, emphasizes sola scriptura—scripture as the sole infallible rule of faith. However, the Christian Bible comprises multiple books (Old and New Testaments), written over centuries by multiple authors, with variant manuscript traditions. Catholic and Orthodox traditions also recognize sacred tradition as an authoritative source alongside scripture. The Islamic concept of scripture as verbatim dictation differs sharply from Christian views of inspiration (theopneustos), which accommodate human authorial agency.

﴿إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ﴾

“Indeed, it is We who sent down the Remembrance, and indeed We are its guardians.” (Surah Al-Hijr, 15:9)

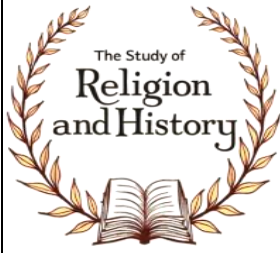
﴿لَا يَأْتِيهِ الْبَاطِلُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ خَلْفِهِ﴾

“Falsehood cannot approach it from before it or from behind it.” (Surah Fuṣṣilat, 41:42)

﴿الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ﴾

“Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and the Gospel.” (Surah Al-A'rāf, 7:157)

The divine preservation promise in Sūrat al-Hijr (15:9) is the foundational proof-text for Muslim belief in Qur'ānic incorruptibility. Unlike the Christian Bible, where manuscript variations exist (e.g., the Johannine Comma, Mark 16:9–20), the Qur'ānic text has remained remarkably stable. The second verse asserts the Qur'ān's internal and external consistency against any form of corruption or contradiction. The third verse demonstrates Islamic scripture affirming previous revelations while simultaneously arguing for Muḥammad's prophethood as foretold in those same books. From a comparative perspective, Western theology's historical-critical method treats scripture as a human document reflecting multiple redactional layers, theological tendencies, and cultural contexts—an approach generally rejected by traditional Islamic scholarship.¹¹ However, contemporary Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) have proposed contextual hermeneutics, generating significant controversy within orthodox circles. The critical question remains: can Islamic theology accommodate historical-critical methods without abandoning belief in divine preservation? Most orthodox theologians answer



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negatively, arguing that the Qur'ān's miraculous inimitability (i'jāz) presupposes its textual stability and divine origin. Western theology, having undergone the Enlightenment critique of scripture, now largely accepts historical-critical methods while maintaining theological affirmations of inspiration—a synthesis arguably unavailable to premodern Islamic theology.

3. Role of Reason

The role of reason ('aql) in Islamic theology has been contested since the early Abbasid period. The Mu'tazilah championed reason's autonomy, arguing that rational knowledge of God's existence and justice precedes revelation. The Ash'arīyah adopted a compatibilist position: reason can establish certain truths but remains subordinate to revelation when conflicts arise. The Atharīyah (traditionalists), represented by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE), restricted reason to grammatical and logical clarification without independent theological authority.¹² Western theology, influenced by Aristotle and the Stoics, historically assigned reason a more substantial role, particularly in natural theology. Thomas Aquinas argued for five rational proofs for God's existence (quinque viae) and distinguished between truths accessible to reason (e.g., God's existence) and mysteries accessible only through revelation (e.g., the Trinity). The Reformation, particularly in Calvin's concept of the *sensus divinitatis*, affirmed innate human awareness of God but emphasized scripture as the necessary corrective to sinful cognitive distortion.

﴿أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا﴾

"Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'ān, or are there locks upon their hearts?"
(Surah Muḥammad, 47:24)

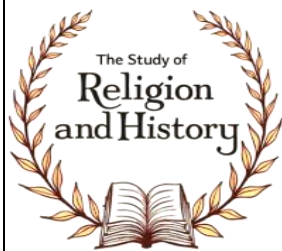
﴿إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for those of understanding." (Surah Āl 'Imrān, 3:190)

﴿وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ﴾

"And none understands them except the learned." (Surah Al-'Ankabūt, 29:43)

These verses establish a Qur'ānic imperative for rational reflection (tadabbur, ta'aqqul). The first verse condemns intellectual negligence, implying that scripture itself demands rational engagement. The second verse identifies natural phenomena as signs (āyāt) accessible to "those of understanding" (ulū al-albāb)—a term interpreted by theologians as those who employ reason to infer divine attributes from creation. The third verse reserves proper understanding for the learned ('ālimūn), not in the sense of exclusive esotericism but in requiring intellectual training. Comparatively, Western theology's natural theology argues similarly from design to designer, though Islamic arguments for God's existence (dalīl al-ḥudūth, burhān al-ṣiddīqīn) differ in formal structure. The Ash'arī occasionalist worldview, which denies secondary causality, renders design arguments problematic since apparent natural regularities are not intrinsic but divinely re-created at each moment.¹³ In contrast, Western theology from Aquinas to William Paley assumes stable natural laws as evidence of intelligent design. The critical evaluation here favors neither position absolutely: Ash'arī occasionalism avoids the problem of natural evil more effectively (since suffering is not necessitated by laws but directly willed by God) but faces difficulty explaining human moral responsibility and scientific predictability. Thomistic natural law accommodates



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science but struggles with theodicy. Reason's role thus remains contested internally within each tradition, suggesting that theological methodology cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies of rationalism versus fideism.

Section Three: Core Doctrines

1. Concept of God

The Islamic concept of God is defined by absolute unity (tawḥīd), transcendence (tanẓīh), and incomparability. The ninety-nine divine names (asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā) describe God's attributes, traditionally classified into attributes of essence (ṣifāt al-dhāt) and attributes of action (ṣifāt al-fi'l). God is eternal, self-sufficient (al-Ṣamad), all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly just. Anthropomorphism (tashbīh) is strictly rejected, though scriptural expressions of God's "hand," "face," or "throne" are interpreted either literally but without modality (bi-lā kayf, the Atharī position) or metaphorically (the Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī position).¹⁴ The Western Christian concept of God affirms unity but within a Trinitarian framework: one essence (ousia) in three persons (hypostases). This is not tritheism (three gods) nor modalism (one God appearing in three modes) but a unique relational ontology. The Father is unbegotten, the Son eternally begotten, the Spirit proceeding. Divine attributes include omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and eternity, similar to Islamic theology but modified by Trinitarian relations. The Incarnation—God becoming human in Jesus Christ—represents the most radical divergence from Islamic theology, which considers it impossible (muḥāl) that God would assume creaturely form.

﴿وَالْهُنُكُمُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾

"And your god is one God. There is no deity except Him, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful." (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:163)

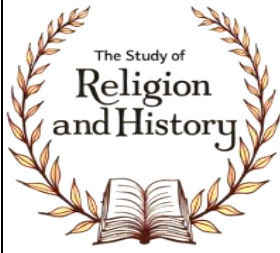
﴿لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ﴾

"He neither begets nor is born." (Surah Al-Ikhlāṣ, 112:3)

﴿وَمَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ﴾

"They have not appraised Allah with true appraisal." (Surah Al-An'ām, 6:91)

The first verse affirms numerical divine unity (wāḥid) as the central Islamic proclamation. The second verse explicitly negates begetting and being born, directly contradicting the Christian doctrines of eternal generation of the Son and, by extension, the Incarnation. Muslim polemicists historically cited this verse against Trinitarian Christianity. The third verse warns against inadequate conceptions of God, applicable both to anthropomorphism and to philosophical reductions of divine transcendence. From a comparative perspective, the Islamic critique of Trinitarianism focuses on logical consistency: how can three distinct persons each be fully God without either dividing the divine essence (tritheism) or conflating persons (modalism)? Christian theologians answer through the Cappadocian Fathers' distinction between essence (ousia) and hypostasis, and through the doctrine of perichoresis (mutual indwelling).¹⁵ A critical Islamic response questions whether this distinction is philosophically coherent or merely terminological. Conversely, from a Christian perspective, Islamic theology's insistence on absolute divine simplicity (basāṭah) renders God's love problematic: if God is simple without internal relations, does God love Himself or only creation? Loving creation before creation exists implies change in



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God upon creation's emergence. The Ash'arī response—that God's attributes are eternal but not identical to essence—attempts to resolve this but faces charges of plurality in eternity. Neither tradition resolves all paradoxes, suggesting that divine incomprehensibility (apophasis) may be the shared final position.

2. Prophethood

Prophethood (nubuwwah) in Islamic theology is the mechanism of divine guidance following the pattern of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad as the final prophet (khatam al-anbiyā'). Prophets are human males chosen by God, protected from major sin (ma'sūm), and confirmed by miracles (mu'jizāt). The prophetic function includes recitation of revelation (tablīgh), explanation of law (tafwīd al-sharī'ah), and exemplification of virtue (uswah ḥasanah).¹⁶ The Qur'ān mentions twenty-five prophets by name, but Islamic tradition holds that approximately 124,000 prophets were sent to various nations. Western theology, particularly Christian, reconfigures prophethood christologically: prophets in the Old Testament foretell Christ, and John the Baptist is the last prophet before Christ. Jesus is not primarily a prophet but the Son of God and second person of the Trinity. The prophetic office continues in the church through spiritual gifts (charismata) but not in the sense of new public revelation. This constitutes a radical divergence: Islam sees prophethood as ongoing until Muḥammad's finality; Christianity sees Christ as the final and complete revelation, with prophecy subsumed into apostolic witness.

﴿مَا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَا أَحَدٍ مِّن رِّجَالِكُمْ وَلَكِن رَّسُولَ اللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ النَّبِيِّينَ﴾

“Muḥammad is not the father of [any] one of your men, but the Messenger of Allah and the Seal of the Prophets.” (Surah Al-Aḥzāb, 33:40)

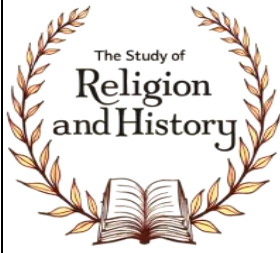
﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ﴾

“And We did not send any messenger except with the language of his people.” (Surah Ibrāhīm, 14:4)

﴿لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ﴾

“There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern.” (Surah Al-Aḥzāb, 33:21)

The first verse establishes Muḥammad's finality as prophet—no prophet will succeed him. This doctrine (khatm al-nubuwwah) is essential to Islamic identity and differentiates Islam from Ahmadiyya and Bābī movements. The second verse indicates divine accommodation to human linguistic and cultural contexts, a principle that later Islamic legal theory developed into the concept of 'urf (custom) as a secondary source. The third verse establishes prophetic example as normative for Muslim conduct, merging theology with ethics and law. Comparatively, Western theology's understanding of Christ as the “final prophet” (Hebrews 1:1–2) similarly ends prophetic succession, but Christ's divinity elevates him beyond prophetic status. The critical question concerns theological necessity: why does God require successive prophets? Islamic theology answers: human forgetfulness and the progressive elaboration of law (sharā'i) until finality. Christian theology answers: prophetic preparation for Christ, whose sacrifice supersedes law. A significant methodological difference emerges: Islamic theology maintains law (sharī'ah) as central to religious life; Christian theology (particularly Pauline) argues that law is a pedagogue



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leading to Christ, but faith in Christ supersedes legal observance.¹⁷ This difference is irreducible and explains why Muslim-Christian dialogue often reaches impasse on questions of religious pluralism and salvation.

3. Afterlife

Islamic eschatology affirms bodily resurrection (ba‘th), divine judgment (hisāb), paradise (jannah) and hellfire (jahannam), and the intermediate state of the grave (barzakh). The Qur’ān describes paradise as a garden with rivers, fruits, and companionship, while hell is described as fire, boiling water, and punishment. These descriptions are interpreted literally by traditionalists (Atharīyah) and allegorically by some rationalists (Mu‘tazilah).¹⁸ Salvation in Islam depends on faith (īmān) and righteous works (‘amal ṣāliḥ), though God’s mercy ultimately determines entry. Major sins without repentance may incur temporary punishment before eventual paradise for believers. Western Christian eschatology includes resurrection of the body, final judgment, heaven, and hell. A significant difference is the doctrine of atonement: in orthodox Christianity, salvation depends on faith in Christ’s atoning death and resurrection, not merely works. Purgatory in Catholic theology provides purification before heaven, analogous to but distinct from barzakh. Protestant theology generally rejects purgatory. Eternal security (once saved, always saved) is affirmed by Calvinists but rejected by Arminians.

﴿كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ﴾

“Every soul will taste death. Then to Us will you be returned.” (Surah Al-‘Ankabūt, 29:57)

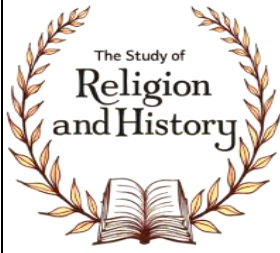
﴿فَمَنْ ثَقَلَتْ مَوَازِينُهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ وَمَنْ خَفَّتْ مَوَازِينُهُ فَأُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ﴾

“So those whose scales are heavy—they are the successful. And those whose scales are light—they are the ones who have lost themselves.” (Surah Al-Mu‘minūn, 23:102–103)

﴿إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ لَفِي نَعِيمٍ وَإِنَّ الْفُجَّارَ لَفِي جَحِيمٍ﴾

“Indeed, the righteous will be in pleasure, and indeed the wicked will be in hellfire.” (Surah Al-Infīṭār, 82:13–14)

The first verse affirms death as universal and return to God as inevitable, establishing individual accountability. The second verse introduces the metaphor of scales (mawāzīn) weighing deeds—a literal or metaphorical representation of divine justice. Mu‘tazilah insisted on scales as metaphorical for justice, while Atharīyah affirmed physical scales. The third verse presents a binary outcome: paradise for the righteous (abrār), hell for the wicked (fujjār). Comparatively, the absence of original sin in Islamic theology means humans are born in a state of fiṭrah (natural disposition toward God) and are accountable only for their own deeds. Western theology’s doctrine of inherited sin (Augustine, Calvin) means even infants require grace for salvation.¹⁹ This difference produces divergent pastoral approaches: Islamic emphasis on works and mercy, Christian emphasis on grace and faith. A critical evaluation suggests that Islamic eschatology avoids the logical problem of inherited guilt—how can Adam’s sin be justly imputed to all humanity?—but faces the problem of whether works alone suffice given human weakness. Christian theology resolves the latter through grace but struggles with the justice of eternal



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punishment for those never hearing the gospel. Both traditions affirm God’s justice and mercy, but their theological anthropologies produce different eschatological frameworks.

Section Four: Methodologies

1. Rational vs Traditional Approaches

The rationalist-traditionalist dichotomy structures Islamic theological methodology. Rationalists (ahl al-ra’y) prioritize qiyās (analogical reasoning) and ta’wīl (allegorical interpretation) to harmonize revelation with reason. Traditionalists (ahl al-ḥadīth) prioritize naql (transmitted texts) and reject speculative theology (kalām) as innovation (bid‘ah).²⁰ The Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools represent middle positions: they engage rational arguments but subordinate them to scriptural primacy. In Western theology, the rationalist-traditionalist tension appears in the conflict between scholasticism (Aquinas, Anselm) and fideism (Tertullian, Pascal, Kierkegaard). The Enlightenment intensified this tension, producing deism (reason alone) and biblical literalism (tradition alone). Contemporary Western theology largely embraces critical realism—reason and tradition in dialectical tension.

﴿فَبَشِّرْ عِبَادَ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَمِعُونَ الْقَوْلَ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ أَحْسَنَهُ﴾

“So give good news to My servants who listen to speech and follow the best of it.”
(Surah Az-Zumar, 39:17–18)

﴿وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا﴾

“And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided.”
(Surah Āl ‘Imrān, 3:103)

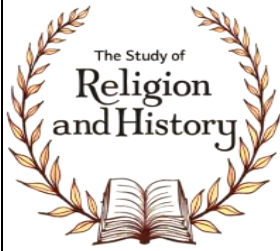
﴿فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ﴾

“Ask the people of the message if you do not know.” (Surah Al-Anbiyā’, 21:7)

The first verse encourages evaluation of competing claims, selecting the “best” (ahsan), which rationalists interpret as rationally superior. The second verse commands unity, which traditionalists interpret as adherence to textual consensus. The third verse establishes epistemic authority (ahl al-dhikr), traditionally identified as scholars of revelation. The critical question: can rational methods produce unity or do they produce fragmentation? Islamic history shows rationalist schools (Mu‘tazilah) falling into multiple sub-schools, while traditionalism (Hanbalism) maintained greater internal coherence.²¹ However, traditionalism risks intellectual stagnation and inability to address new problems. Western theology’s engagement with modernity demonstrates both the possibilities and perils of rationalist adaptation: feminist theology, process theology, and liberation theology emerged from rationalist-critical methods but often moved far from traditional orthodoxy. The optimal methodology likely involves what Khaled Abou El Fadl calls “moderate traditionalism”: respect for precedent with rational inquiry within defined parameters.

2. Philosophical Influence (continued from previous page)

The philosophical influence debate centers on whether extra-revelatory frameworks (Aristotelian categories, Neoplatonic emanation) constitute “breaking the covenant” by imposing foreign categories onto scripture. Al-Ghazālī argued that certain philosophical doctrines (eternity of the world, denial of bodily resurrection, God knowing universals but not particulars) contradict explicit revelation.²³ Ibn Rushd countered that philosophical interpretation (ta’wīl) is not only



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permissible but obligatory for those with rational capacity, provided it does not violate scriptural plain meaning for the masses. The great Hanbalī theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) adopted a more nuanced position, rejecting Greek metaphysics while affirming rational argumentation grounded in scriptural premises.²⁴

Allah Almighty states in Surah Āl ‘Imrān, “Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for those of understanding.” (Surah Āl ‘Imrān, 3:190)

﴿إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Baqarah, “And those who break the covenant of Allah after contracting it.” (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:27)

﴿وَالَّذِينَ يَنْقُضُونَ عَهْدَ اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مِيثَاقِهِ﴾

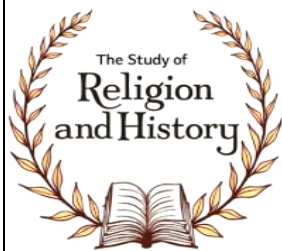
Comparatively, Western theology’s appropriation of Aristotle by Aquinas (the “baptism of Aristotle”) mirrors Ibn Rushd’s project, though Aquinas avoided the double-truth theory sometimes attributed to Averroes. The contemporary Catholic theologian David Bentley Hart argues that Greek philosophical categories are not alien impositions but necessary conceptual tools for articulating Trinitarian orthodoxy.²⁵ Conversely, the Protestant theologian Karl Barth rejected natural theology entirely, viewing any philosophical foundation for theology as an idolatrous human construction. From an Islamic critical perspective, the Ash‘arī position—that rational arguments are valid only when their premises derive from revelation—offers a via media between rationalist excess (Mu‘tazilah, falsafah) and traditionalist rejection (Hanbalī extremists). The contemporary Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson argues that Islamic theology must engage modern Western philosophy not as a master but as a conversation partner, extracting useful analytical tools while maintaining Islamic first principles.²⁶ This balanced approach recommends itself for future comparative theological work.

3. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics—the theory and methodology of textual interpretation—represents a crucial methodological divergence between Islamic and Western theology. Classical Islamic hermeneutics developed four principal methods: tafsīr bi-al-ma‘thūr (interpretation based on transmitted reports from the Prophet and companions), tafsīr bi-al-ra’y (interpretation based on reasoned opinion), ta’wīl (allegorical or esoteric interpretation), and tafsīr ishārī (mystical interpretation).²⁷ The principle of abrogation (naskh) allows later verses to supersede earlier ones where conflict exists. Western hermeneutics, particularly after Schleiermacher (d. 1834), developed into a general theory of understanding encompassing authorial intent, historical context, and reader reception. Contemporary Western hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ricoeur) emphasizes the fusion of horizons (Horizontverschmelzung) between text and interpreter, rejecting the possibility of purely objective reading.

Allah Almighty states in Surah Āl ‘Imrān, “It is He who has sent down to you the Book; in it are verses [that are] precise (muḥkamāt)—they are the foundation of the Book—and others unspecific (mutashābihāt).” (Surah Āl ‘Imrān, 3:7)

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُّحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ﴾



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Allah Almighty states in Surah An-Nisā', "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger." (Surah An-Nisā', 4:59)

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولِي الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِن تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ

وَالرَّسُولِ﴾

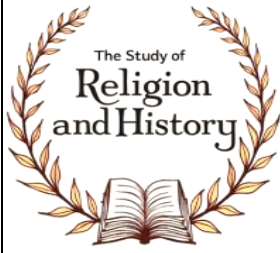
The first Qur'ānic citation establishes a hierarchy within scripture itself: muḥkamāt (clear, unambiguous verses) serve as the interpretive key for mutashābihāt (ambiguous verses). This principle limits allegorical interpretation, preventing the kind of radical hermeneutical freedom found in some Christian Gnostic or postmodern readings. The second citation establishes a hermeneutical authority structure: scripture (Allah) and prophetic tradition (the Messenger) are the ultimate arbiters of interpretive disputes. The early Muslim scholar Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) insisted that tafsīr must be grounded in authentic reports from the Prophet, companions, and successors, rejecting purely rationalist interpretation.²⁸ In contrast, the Mu'tazilī theologian Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144 CE) employed grammatical and rhetorical analysis to support Mu'tazilī theological positions, demonstrating that even traditionalist hermeneutics cannot escape doctrinal presuppositions.

Western theological hermeneutics underwent a radical transformation with the Enlightenment. Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed that understanding requires entering the author's psychological state (divinatory method) combined with grammatical comparison.²⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey extended hermeneutics to all human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften). Martin Heidegger transformed hermeneutics into existential interpretation of Dasein's being-in-the-world. Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that all understanding occurs within tradition and language, rejecting methodological objectivism.³⁰ Paul Ricoeur introduced the concept of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud), wherein texts conceal as much as they reveal. From an Islamic critical perspective, Western hermeneutics offers sophisticated tools for understanding how interpretation functions, but its rejection of authorial divine intention (where the author is God) is theologically unacceptable. The contemporary Muslim scholar Muhammad Arkoun (d. 2010) attempted to apply Ricoeurian hermeneutics to the Qur'ān, generating controversy for questioning the closure of official interpretation.³¹ The majority orthodox position remains that valid hermeneutics must be governed by prophetic tradition and scholarly consensus (ijmā'), though the mechanisms of consensus themselves require hermeneutical negotiation.

Section Five: Comparative Analysis

1. Similarities

Despite their foundational divergences, Islamic theology and Western theology share significant common ground. Both traditions affirm: (a) the existence of one supreme, personal God who is creator and sustainer of the universe; (b) the possibility and reality of divine revelation communicated to humanity; (c) the authority of scripture as a normative source for faith and practice; (d) human moral accountability and eschatological judgment; (e) the value of reason in theological discourse, however differently its scope is defined; and (f) the necessity of community (ummah / ecclesia) for preserving and transmitting theological knowledge.³² Both traditions have



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developed sophisticated responses to philosophical challenges (the problem of evil, free will vs. determinism, divine attributes). Both have produced mystical traditions (Sufism and Christian mysticism) that prioritize experiential knowledge of God over propositional formulation.

Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Baqarah, "The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and [so have] the believers. All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, 'We make no distinction between any of His messengers.'" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:285)

﴿أَمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِّن رُّسُلِهِ﴾

Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-'Ankabūt, "And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best." (Surah Al-'Ankabūt, 29:46)

﴿وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ﴾

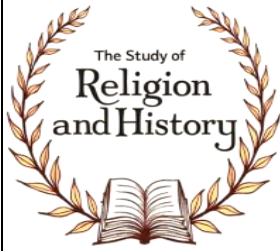
The first citation demonstrates Islamic affirmation of previous prophetic traditions, providing a basis for recognizing shared theological heritage with Christianity and Judaism. The second citation mandates respectful interfaith dialogue, acknowledging that theological disagreement need not preclude charitable engagement. The medieval Muslim scholar Al-Ghazālī, in his *Fayṣal al-Tafriqah* (The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Heresy), argued that non-Muslims who sincerely seek truth but fail to recognize Muḥammad's prophethood due to inadequate evidence may be excused by divine mercy.³³ Similarly, the contemporary Catholic theologian Hans Küng argued that Muslims and Christians worship the same God and share eschatological hope, despite irreconcilable Christological differences.³⁴ Both traditions also share a recent history of engagement with secularism, religious pluralism, and modernity, producing analogous internal debates between liberal, conservative, and fundamentalist factions.

2. Differences

The differences between Islamic and Western theology are more numerous and profound than their similarities. The most fundamental difference concerns the doctrine of God: Islamic *tawḥīd* (absolute unity) versus Christian Trinity (one essence in three persons). Relatedly, Christology constitutes an irreconcilable difference: Islam rejects the Incarnation, divinity of Jesus, and atoning crucifixion, affirming Jesus as a human prophet and messiah who was not crucified but raised to heaven.³⁵ Soteriology differs radically: Islamic salvation requires faith and works within divine mercy; Christian salvation requires faith in Christ's atoning death and resurrection. Scripture differs: the Qur'ān is verbatim divine speech revealed to a single prophet; the Bible is a collection of texts by multiple human authors over centuries. Prophethood differs: Muḥammad is the final prophet in Islam; Christ is the final revelation in Christianity. The role of law differs: *sharī'ah* remains central to Islamic theology; Christian theology (excepting some traditions) separates law from gospel.

Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Mā'idah, "They have certainly disbelieved who say, 'Allah is the Messiah, the son of Mary.'" (Surah Al-Mā'idah, 5:72)

﴿لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ﴾



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Allah Almighty states in Surah Al-Mā'idah, "And [for] their saying, 'Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.' And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them." (Surah Al-Nisā', 4:157)

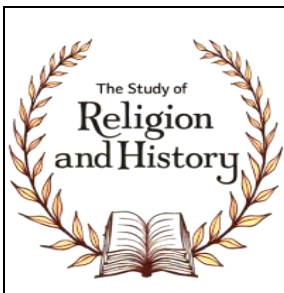
﴿وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا الْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَبُوهُ وَلَكِنْ شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ﴾

These two citations directly contradict core Christian doctrines. The first denies Jesus' divinity, categorizing it as disbelief (kufr). The second denies the crucifixion—the central event of Christian soteriology—asserting instead a substitutionary theory (shubbiha lahum). From a Christian critical perspective, these Qur'ānic claims lack historical evidence external to the Qur'ān itself and contradict first-century Jewish and Roman sources.³⁶ From an Islamic perspective, the Qur'ān as divine speech supersedes historical evidence, and the Gospel texts are understood as corrupted transmissions of Jesus' original message. This impasse cannot be resolved through historical-critical methods alone; it requires theological first principles about scripture's authority. The contemporary Muslim scholar Mustafa Akyol argues that Muslim denial of the crucifixion may be based on a misinterpretation of the Qur'ānic text, suggesting that "it was made to appear so" could mean the Jews' perception was mistaken without denying the event itself.³⁷ This minority position, however, remains outside orthodox consensus. The difference on this point exemplifies how foundational presuppositions produce irreconcilable doctrinal conclusions.

3. Critical Evaluation

This critical evaluation assesses the comparative strengths and weaknesses of Islamic and Western theological methodologies without claiming final superiority for either tradition. Islamic theology's strength lies in its rigorous preservation of prophetic authority and scriptural text. The Qur'ān's stable transmission, memorization by millions, and linguistic inimitability provide objective grounds for claims of divine origin.³⁸ The integration of theology with law (sharī'ah) produces a holistic worldview wherein belief and practice are inseparably united. The doctrine of tawhīd offers a conceptually elegant monotheism avoiding the logical difficulties of Trinitarianism. However, Islamic theology's weaknesses include: (a) difficulty accommodating historical-critical methods without undermining claims of divine preservation; (b) unresolved debates between literalist and allegorical interpretation of anthropomorphic divine attributes; (c) the problem of reconciling divine decree with human free will (al-qadā' wa al-qadar); (d) underdeveloped engagement with modern scientific worldviews outside neo-creationist frameworks; and (e) the challenge of religious pluralism—how to affirm the finality of Muḥammad's prophethood while acknowledging possible salvific paths for non-Muslims.

Western theology's strengths include: (a) sophisticated integration of philosophical reasoning with theological reflection; (b) developed hermeneutical methods that engage historical criticism without necessarily abandoning theological commitment; (c) robust responses to the problem of evil through free will theodicy and soul-making arguments; (d) fruitful engagement with modern science, evolution, and historical biblical criticism; and (e) theological resources for religious pluralism (e.g., Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christian").³⁹ However, Western theology's weaknesses include: (a) the logical and philosophical difficulties of Trinitarian and Christological doctrines; (b) the problem of atonement theories—how does one person's sacrifice satisfy divine

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justice for others' sins? (c) the historical reality of violent sectarian conflict (Catholic-Protestant wars, Inquisition) justified by theological claims; (d) declining institutional authority and fragmentation into competing denominations; and (e) the challenge of biblical textual variations and historically anachronistic claims (e.g., dating of Gospels, authorship of Pauline epistles).

The classical Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyyah argued that valid theological methodology must begin with divine revelation (al-bidāyah bi-al-waḥy), employ reason as a tool (al-‘aql ālah), and reject foreign philosophical presuppositions.⁴⁰ The contemporary Western theologian Alvin Plantinga developed an “Reformed epistemology” arguing that belief in God is properly basic—not requiring propositional evidence—which resonates with the Islamic concept of fiṭrah (innate human disposition toward God).⁴¹ These convergences suggest that future comparative theology should move beyond polemical confrontation toward mutual enrichment, recognizing that each tradition has developed tools addressing different aspects of the theological task.

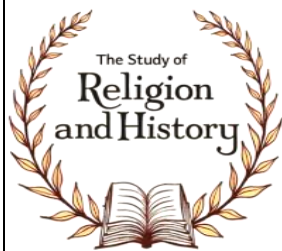
Conclusion

This comparative and critical study of Islamic theology and Western theology has examined their principles, methodologies, and intellectual foundations across five major domains. The nature and foundations of theology differ significantly: Islamic Kalām prioritizes defense of tawḥīd through rational articulation of revealed premises; Western theology integrates natural and revealed theology within Trinitarian frameworks. Sources of knowledge reveal both overlap and divergence: revelation (waḥy) in Islam is propositional and linguistic; revelation in Christianity is both propositional and personal (incarnational). Scripture in Islam is verbatim divine dictation; scripture in Christianity is human-divine collaboration. Reason functions as a subordinate tool in Islamic theology (except Mu‘tazilah) and as a co-equal partner in much of Western theology.

Core doctrines demonstrate irreconcilable differences: the concept of God as absolutely one versus triune; prophethood as culminating in Muḥammad versus subsumed in Christ; afterlife as judgment based on faith and works versus salvation through grace and atonement. Methodologies diverge on rational versus traditional approaches, philosophical influences, and hermeneutical frameworks. The comparative analysis identified similarities (monotheism, revelation, scripture, accountability, reason, community) and differences (Trinity, Christology, soteriology, scripture, prophethood, law) with critical evaluation highlighting strengths and weaknesses of each tradition. The final academic position of this research is that Islamic theology and Western theology represent two distinct theological paradigms shaped by different revelatory events (Qur’ān vs. Bible/Incarnation) and different philosophical inheritances (Islamic engagement with Greek philosophy mediated through Syriac and Arabic vs. Western engagement directly through Latin Christendom). Neither paradigm can be reduced to the other without loss of essential commitments. However, mutual understanding is possible through rigorous comparative study that respects each tradition’s internal logic while subjecting both to critical scrutiny.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following practical suggestions and future research directions are proposed:



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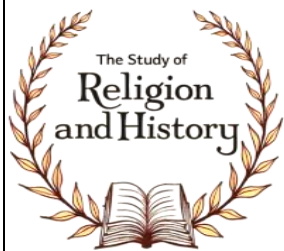
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1. **Curriculum Development:** Islamic seminaries (madāris) and Western divinity schools should incorporate comparative theology as a required component of theological education, moving beyond polemical apologetics toward analytical comparison.
2. **Joint Research Initiatives:** Muslim and Christian theologians should collaborate on shared theological problems—theodicy, religious pluralism, science and religion, hermeneutics—producing jointly authored works that articulate positions from both traditions without forced consensus.
3. **Translation Projects:** Classical Islamic theological texts (Ash‘arī, Māturīdī, Mu‘tazilī, Atharī) should be translated into Western languages with critical apparatus, and classical Christian texts (Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Barth) should be translated into Arabic and major Islamic languages.
4. **Methodological Refinement:** Future comparative theology should distinguish more clearly between descriptive comparison (what each tradition says), normative comparison (which position is rationally superior), and constructive theology (synthesizing insights from both traditions).
5. **Addressing Contemporary Challenges:** Research should focus on how Islamic and Western theologies respond to secularism, religious violence, gender justice, bioethics, and environmental ethics, identifying points of convergence for shared action.
6. **Historical Reassessment:** Archival research on Muslim-Christian theological exchanges in Andalusia, the Abbasid translation movement, and Ottoman millet systems may reveal forgotten models of productive theological engagement.
7. **Graduate Training:** Universities should establish joint PhD programs in comparative Islamic-Christian theology, requiring advanced language training (Arabic, Greek, Latin, Hebrew) and extended residence in both Muslim-majority and Western contexts.
8. **Public Theology:** Scholars should produce accessible comparative works for educated lay audiences, countering Islamophobic and anti-Christian polemics with accurate, charitable, critical analysis.

Footnotes

- ¹ Al-Shahrastānī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1990), 1:45.
- ² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtisād fī al-‘Itiqād* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jīl, 1972), 12.
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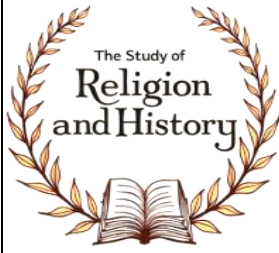
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