



# COMPARATIVE THEOLOGIES IN ISLAMIC CONTEXTS

## Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies

26 May 2023

### PROGRAMME

**VENUE:** Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies, Maria Theresia College,  
St. Michielsstraat 6, Leuven, Room **MTC 00.07**

- 9.30            **Arrival with coffee**
- 10:00-10:30   **welcome & opening remarks** – *Carool Kersten* (KU Leuven)
- 10:30-11:15   **Comparative theology beyond religionization** - *Marianne Moyaert*  
(KU Leuven)
- 11:15-12:00   **Comparative Theology as a new interreligious learning: An Islamic  
perspective** - *Esra Akay Dag* (Sakarya University)
- 12:00-12:45   **Christian prophetology responsive to the Qur'an** - *Klaus von Stosch*  
(University of Bonn)
- 12:45-13:30   **Sandwich lunch**
- 13:30-14:15   **Comparative theology and the higher objectives of Islamic theology** - *Gamal  
Abdelnour* (University of York / Al-Azhar Islamic University Cairo)
- 14:15-15:00   **"Letting all voices speak?" De/colonizing politics of representation in  
Intercultural theology** - *Judith Gruber* (KU Leuven)
- 15:00-15:45   **Bearing witness: Testimony and counter-testimony as a framework  
for Christian-Muslim comparative theology** - *Joshua Ralston* (University  
of Edinburgh)
- 15:45-16:15   **coffee break**
- 16:15-17:00   **Elements of a comparative theology of nonviolence** - *Adnane Mokrani*  
(Fondazione per le scienze religiose, Palermo / Pontifical Gregorian University,  
Rome)
- 17:00-17:45   **Can comparative theology correct interreligious misunderstandings?** -  
*Betul Avci* (Ibn Khaldun University, Istanbul)
- 18:30 -        **Dinner**

## **TRAVEL & ACCOMMODATION INFORMATION**

**Leuven** is just a 15-minute train ride away from **Brussels Airport** (Zaventem) or, when traveling with the Eurostar, 30 minutes by train from Station **Brussels-Midi** (take trains in the direction of Liège-Guillemins).

Rooms (including breakfast) have been reserved in **Hotel Ibis Leuven Centrum**, located at Brusselsestraat 52, just past the St. Pieterskerk (*not* to be confused with Hotel Ibis Budget, behind the railway station!). It is about a 15-minute walk from the railway station and less than 10 minutes from the venue of our colloquium.

Once you are at Maria Theresia College, enter through the green gate and walk along the wing with classrooms on your righthand side until the end of the square. Enter through the last door and coffee will be awaiting you there.

## **ABSTRACTS**

### **Comparative Theology and the Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology**

*Gamal Abdelnour*

In this presentation, I aim to the key questions, connections, and correlations between my first monograph (*A Comparative History of Catholic and Aš'arī Theologies of Truth and Salvation*, 2021) and my second monograph (*The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology*, 2022). The key questions are: How did Comparative Theology lead me to have a constructive position on Islamic theology? Is Islam a religion of orthopraxy exclusively, as compared to Christianity? Why did Islamic theology fail to develop a systemic genre of *Maqāṣid al-'Aqīda* (Higher theological objectives)? How do we chart out a map to guide the process of founding such an area? How may the area of *Maqāṣid al-'Aqīda* impact the Islamic theology of the “other”?

### **Comparative Theology as a New Interreligious Learning: An Islamic Perspective**

*Esra Akay Dag*

This study proposes a novel approach to embracing religious diversity through comparative theology. It focuses on methodological, practical, and theological bases for comparative theology within Islamic tradition. Firstly, the theology of religions discourse in Islam appears inadequate for practical engagement. It is acknowledged that pluralistic theory has been significant in promoting interreligious dialogue with others. However, the discourse places too much emphasis on theorizing other religions, to the extent of even theorizing the concept of learning from others. It is important to note that theorizing other religions alone does not suffice as a learning process. While the willingness to learn from others is necessary, actual learning can only be achieved through engagement. Hence, the study proposes the use of comparative theology as a more effective means of achieving this.

Secondly, It is an undeniable reality that the Islamic tradition has evolved in interaction with the practices and beliefs of other religions. Thus, this work presents three practices of comparative learning within the Islamic tradition, demonstrating how engaging with diverse worldviews helped Muslims better understand themselves throughout history.

Finally, this work also highlights the theological need for comparative theology by engaging with the Qur'ān. By using the method of comparative theology, which involves deep learning from other religious traditions, Muslim theologians can obtain a more nuanced understanding of religious others. Through real engagement, a willingness to learn from others' texts and teachings, and being challenged by new learnings, Muslims can gain a better understanding of religious others and their differences, as well as themselves. Therefore, this work argues that the area of comparative theology offers a promising path toward a better Islamic perspective of religious diversity.

### **Can Comparative Theology Correct Interreligious Misunderstandings?**

*Betul Avci*

In my contribution I plan to share my current research in the field of comparative theology. First, by scrutinizing grace-law dichotomy in the context of Muslim-Christian relations, I argue that such a dichotomy is based on early and later Christian typological approach to Mosaic Law in contradistinction to the Incarnation of Christ. As I contend, Christian criticism of Jewish legalism is later projected upon Islam. Therefore, such a misunderstanding reinforced by modern Orientalism is the product of medieval Muslim-Christian polemics. Second, in a distinct work, I argue that the Qur'anic view of revelation is not progressive parallel to revealing of God in the person of Christ as preached by Early Church Fathers. Therefore, such a European-Christian juxtaposition upon the Qur'anic view and the thought of medieval Muslim theologians is not applicable. However, in modern Muslim exegesis we witness a similar progressive revelation history as in the case of Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905). It is also intriguing to see that such a modern approach within the Islamic tradition is reinforced by modern European progressivism (most probably through Comte and Spencer). This last instance proves differing lines of thought within a religious tradition. In the end, in my comparative approach in both projects I try to correct European-Christian misunderstandings. After problematizing such misconceptions I try to establish the Islamic view on the issue and also examine the genealogical backdrop of such a misconception.

In the context of my research I will try to answer the following questions: (1)As a Muslim and a scholar working in the field of Muslim-Christian relations working with a comparative method, what makes my substantive work comparative theology rather than comparative religion or vice versa?(2) In order to undertake a comparative study based on the Qur'an, is it necessary to acquire a non-supersessionist approach? While answering this question I will engage with Vahid Mahdavi Mehr's contribution in *A Companion to Comparative Theology* (Valkenberg 2022).

### **“Letting all Voices Speak?” De/colonizing Politics of Representation in Intercultural Theology**

*Judith Gruber*

Theological approaches to inter- and intrareligious plurality, such as Comparative Theology, are often framed as an exercise of inclusion and recognition. The goal is to account for imperialist legacies in the encounter of religious traditions, and to expand the chorus of voices that can contribute to theological reflections. In my contribution, I will to look at Intercultural Theology in order to interrogate the politics of representation that underpin this project of inclusion. Developed in the wake of decolonisation movements in the middle of the 20th century, Intercultural Theology often conceives of itself as a decolonising approach: many approaches in the field want to give a critical account of the violent entanglements of of missionary and colonial histories, and aim to develop forms of theology that resist, rather than subscribe to, colonial power. A central insight of postcolonial theory has been crucial to this endeavour: Empires are regimes of power/knowledge that establish their sovereignty through the erasure of subaltern voices. In other words: Colonial

power is founded on epistemic violence that either appropriates or excludes other positions. Searching for trajectories for a post-colonial theology, intercultural theology aims to resist this totalitarian logic of empire, and very often this is pursued through the ideal of "letting all voices speak". The aim is to give space to previously silenced voices in intercultural theological conversations. My contribution will critically question this project of recognition and inclusion and show that it does not necessarily have a decolonising effect, but - on the contrary - continues to be based on a colonial logic of expansion. The guiding question is: (How) can erased voices speak in a way that has decolonial effects?

## **Elements of Comparative Theology of Nonviolence**

*Adnane Mokrani*

While writing my book, *Toward an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence: in Dialogue with René Girard*, I did not realize I was doing comparative theology. After meeting Prof. Dr. Klaus von Stosch, who introduced me to this discipline, I began reading my work differently. Girard's mimetic theory influenced the modern theological debate, even from an interreligious and comparativist point of view. My task is to analyze the theory in the light of Islamic theology, particularly mystical narrative theology, and facing historical narratives used to glorify or justify violence. Girard ascribes to religions a mission of peacemaking, including the so-called pagan religions that carry out the mimetic cycle: escalation, murder of the innocent victim, and, eventually, divinizing the victim. The problem is that this peace is temporary, pending a new escalation. The radical remedy, according to Girard, lies in Christianity, which proclaims the innocence of the victim par excellence, Jesus Christ, and his divinity. According to him, the Hebrew Bible, and by implication, the Qur'ān does not contain a complete cycle; the third phase is missing, which makes them unable to dismantle the pagan mythology totally.

I propose a new understanding of the mimetic cycle in general and its Christian form in particular, looking for the theoretical and narrative elements in the Qur'ān that can confirm and develop the mission of humanization and peacemaking. It is a "border theology" which seeks to transform lines of separation into potential areas of encounter. Nonviolence theology aims to liberate theology from power ambitions and orient it to all humanity's service. Nonviolence is intended here as an all-inclusive way of thinking and living that includes disarming theology.

## **Comparative Theology Beyond Religionization**

*Marianne Moyaert*

In the scholarly literature, a distinction is often made between old and new comparative theology. Old comparative theology intends (a) to affirm the superiority of the Christian tradition (b) while disregarding the self-understanding of the other tradition. (c) It is a form of comparing that *knows* in advance what insights (truths) the comparison will yield. One could say that old comparative theology takes root in the twofold imaginary process of *selfing* (the constructing of Christian identity) and *othering* (the construction of the alterity). Christianity's others are projected as the counter-image of normative Christianity. Generally speaking, the aim of new comparative theology is to undo and overcome some of the problems of old comparative theology by centering in-depth study of other traditions and recognizing the latter as theological conversation partners. In this paper, I consider a change of terminology to depict the way Christians, throughout history, have sought to "map the world" of religious diversity. Rather than *broadening the scope of old comparative theology*, I suggest using the notion of *religionization* for the way Christians throughout history have projected deficient religion onto others, while claiming true, good, normal, and proper religion for oneself. The term religionization highlights the sense of process, the coming into being that underlies

the perception of religious difference. Furthermore, this term, much more than that of (old) comparative theology, captures that the way Christians have imagined the world and its people was not simply a *theological endeavor*, but was profoundly *political*, this means that it was related to things people do to gain or keep power or an advantage within their group. My suggestion to introduce the notion of religionization is also a call for *new comparative theology* to become more *political*. Rectification ought to start with attending to various processes of religionization in the past and present.

### **Bearing Witness: Testimony and Counter-Testimony as a Framework for Christian-Muslim Comparative Theology.**

*Joshua Ralston*

Two assumptions dominate most approaches to Christian-Muslim theological dialogue. First, theological differences over God, Jesus, and Muhammad are viewed as the main problem facing Christian-Muslim relations. Based on this claim, the chief aim of interfaith dialogue becomes addressing the problem of difference through seeking out areas of commonality and theological consensus. This paper challenges both assumptions by presenting a vision of Christian theological engagement with Islamic thought where the primary aim is not agreement, but mutual learning through non-apologetic witness, honest contestation, and theological clarification. Rather than seeking a shared theological foundation or an a priori agreed upon notion of just action, I expand on ideas in my first book on law to propose a model of witness/*shahid* as a productive non-foundational framework for Christian-Muslim theological exchange. While the category of witness is indigenous to both religious traditions, the term is supple enough to not presuppose a shared agreement about God, justice, or Scripture. In fact, one of the benefits of considering Christian-Muslim encounter through the lens of witness is that it remains open-ended and dynamic. Drawing on recent work in feminist philosophy of testimony and legal studies of testimony, I offer an amended framework for comparative theology. To bear witness is to give an account or a testimony, but one that is inherently contestable and thereby leaves room for cross-examination, debate, and mutual learning.

### **Christian Prophetology Responsive to the Qur'an**

*Klaus von Stosch*

The Qur'anic approach to prophecy challenges Christian perspectives for different reasons. First of all, the proclaimer of the Qur'an seems to have some concrete features of prophets in mind which are not completely coherent with the Biblical tradition. Moreover, it is the selection of prophets within the Qur'an which is irritating. On the one hand, some of the most important Biblical prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah do not appear, at least not by name. On the other hand, Biblical figures are called prophets, which are not recognizable as prophets in the Bible. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for example are more considered as patriarchs than prophets, David and Salomon as kings.

However the selection of the prophets in the Qur'an might be explained by the dialogue with Rabbinic literature and with the Syriac *Mêmrê* especially from Jacob of Sarug. The Qur'an is obviously deeply intertwined in interreligious debates in late antiquity and our understanding of the historical meaning of the Qur'anic intervention still has to be deepened. But even if we understand better the historical way how the ideas of the Qur'an develop, there will stay the challenge of its contents. The Qur'an seems to react to the typological readings of the prophetic figures in the preaching of the church fathers and seems to establish prophetology as a kind of counterdiscourse to Christology. Many Christians today are aware of the fact that the typological reading of the prophetic literature can easily be understood in a supersessionist way. Hence the Qur'anic typological reading of the

Biblical tradition is not only a challenge for Christian tradition, but might also be understood as a call for a new understanding of the role of the prophets.

Currently there is no systematic theological attempt to develop a prophetology that associates the proprium of Christian theology with the prophets and at the same time keeps in mind the intrinsic value of prophecy by continuing the insights of Israel-theology. The aim of such a Christian prophetology should be to find potentials of prophets who are able to broaden the Christian view of Jesus Christ. In my talk I will present some findings and questions within this ongoing research project of mine.