Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective

John Renard
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In *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective*, John Renard gives us yet another gem of a book: beautifully written, meticulously researched, and cleverly presented. A comparative study of these two traditions could have easily resulted in a pluralistic muddle of two of the world's most studied religious traditions. Instead, the author gives us a careful examination of theology that forces us to think carefully about categories like religion, faith, and orthodoxy.

The preface begins with a confession of sorts, for Renard notes therein the tension between comparative linkage and religious authenticity that presents itself in such a project. While Islam and Christianity exhibit many of the same themes, nowhere does he put forth the kind of thesis that would yield a "many roads to one mountain" axiom. What makes this book compelling is its careful presentation of two distinct theologies that, although clearly different, exhibit a familial relationship. What is meant by "theology" is quite broad, and Renard seems to suggest that a number of theological languages are at play in these two traditions. *Islam and Christianity* is not the kind of reductionist work that one might expect to see in such an ambitious project; rather, it is a dialog, a conversation among scriptures, hagiographies, poems, liturgies, and ideas.

In the introduction, Renard does both Christian and Islamic scholars an enormous favor by providing typologies of each tradition's various theological schools. For those of us in the latter group of scholars, *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, *isnād*, *madhāhib*, *ijtihād*, and *kalām* are familiar terms, while sacramental theology, Mariology, systematic theology, and practical theology may cause a wrinkling of the brow and an inquiry to a colleague who teaches such matters. In truth, this is his initial stab at interreligious dialogue, during which he lays the foundation for the following 200 pages.

The first chapter focuses on scriptures and their accompanying exegetical traditions, where Renard explains why the Qur'an has echoes of Judaism and Christianity (cleverly called "Biblical resonances"), but does not restate these earlier narratives explicitly. In addition to offering a brief history of the canon (Bible) or compilation (Qur'an), a strong section deals with the disciples, companions, and women important in each tradition. Here we have an element that is so lovely about Renard – his attention to those who are often neglected in such studies. This quality emerges time and again in this volume, particularly in his attention to women, minority theological schools, and oft-forgotten theological crises that impacted future generations of believers.

The second chapter covers the sticky question of religious identity, complicating the question of who belongs to a confessional group, what the author calls "a community of belief" (p. 53). Through time, Muslims and Christians have had different ways of answering this question depending on sect, school of thought, and social location. The framing of Christianity and Islam as global communities is another issue approached here through an examination of the concepts of a global faith community and the ummah.

The role that narratives play in theology is the focus of chapter 3 – those "elements of the content of belief" that shape how believers think about

their faith. Here, the classic Renard use of entertaining stories comes into play, albeit in a minor dose, as opposed to the volumes of tales found in his 2008 work *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood*. The ways in which Jesus's disciples and Muhammad's Companions play similar roles in extra-canonical tales is elevated here through a number of Islamic parables that contain theological kernels drawn out for our benefit; they highlight the importance of signs (*āyāt*) and the preponderance of water in these stories, used as a symbol of the Prophet's wisdom, guidance, and leadership. Creeds are included in this survey of "narrative theology," including the Apostle's Creed and the Hadith of Gabriel.

In chapter 3, Renard also provides a broad and detailed history of both religions' major theological movements. On the Christian side, while covering early theological debates, the Church Fathers, the Franciscans, and other important aspects of Church history, he touches upon the cohabitation of politics and religion. In his discussion of Islam, Renard presents a clear and concise discussion of such movements as the Ash'arites and Mu'talizites, and figures so influential to the Shari'ah's formation as Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), and Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328). While his single paragraph on Shi'i theology, placed before the standard closing comparative piece, is a bit brief, at least it is there (more than one can say of many Islamic scholars who focus on one sub-tradition or another, as if it were the only community in history).

The following two chapters examine more closely the problem of religio-political cohabitation. One sees echoes of Talal Asad's work on disciplinary practices here, which Renard identifies in both traditions, in the governmental structures so apparent at every level. This survey includes the Catholic, Anglican, and Mormon traditions. Using the model of the treatment of the analogy between the Catholic and Shi'i religious structures, Renard makes a comparison between the Protestant and Sunni communities, never overstating the ways in which they reflect each other. Among other topics, he takes on the sticky subject of mysticism; he presents useful language like "intentional religious communities" in a discussion of what many simply call "mysticism," which is not a very useful term given its formation in Orientalist scholarship. Chapter 6 closes with discussions of Catholic and Islamic educational institutions and a far too short section on religious architecture. Like many of the places in this volume that touch upon religious expressions in art, I found myself wishing that the author had elaborated a bit on one of the most important ways in which theology is expressed.

Chapter 7, a rich discussion on theological ethics, begins with a useful explanation (especially for those scholars outside Islamic studies) on how the Qur'an and *aḥādīth* (stories related to the Prophet's life) function as texts of ethical guidance. In his section on moral theology, Renard returns to the subject of systematic theology in an examination of Islamic perspectives on free will, which highlights the contributions of the Mu'talizites and Ash'arites in the context of a larger debate between traditionalists and rationalists. The importance of Jesus and the Prophet is presented as a foundational source of ethical behavior through models of emulation. In chapter 8, Renard continues to explore this theme by analyzing wisdom texts, the story of the crucifixion, the lives of Jesus and Muhammad, and a variety of narratives from both traditions.

The final chapter focuses on prayer as an expression of theology before returning to mysticism, a subject Renard initially treats in chapter 6 where he discusses the "intentional religious communities" that we often describe as mystics. By looking at specific prayers and poems, including favorites of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), John Donne (d. 1631), Sana'i (d. c. 1131-41), and Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235), the author illustrates just how theology operates within personal spirituality. In a lengthy exploration of mystical theology (clearly, a better choice of words than "mysticism"), he gives numerous examples of how religious folks have contemplated their relationship with the Divine, including in mystically oriented exegesis and *tafsīr*, poetry, and more direct theological writings.

Renard ends his book with a much-needed discussion on interreligious dialogue, which is particularly useful to those charged with teaching this subject to seminary students. In his treatment of N. Ross Reat and Edmund F. Perry's world theology (*A World Theology: The Central Spiritual Reality of Humankind* [Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991]) we are presented with one possible model for interreligious dialogue. The question of "Why do dialogue?" is answered by exploring a number of arguments, including the practical (we need to learn to live together) and the religious (told through the Muslim story of Abraham and the Zoroastrian). In closing, he leaves us with the story of a theologian who, against all odds, became a scholar of al-Ghazali (d. 1111), leaving us with a sense that theology can bring us together, even in the most unlikely of circumstances.

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