Overview

In an outline of key principles for interfaith dialogue, Ronald Rolheiser put forward the following as his first two points: ‘All that is good, true and beautiful comes from one and the same author, God. Nothing that is true, irrespective of its particular religious or secular cloak, may be seen as opposed to true faith and religion’; ‘God wills the salvation of all people, equally, without discrimination. God has no favourites. All people have access to God and to God’s Spirit, and the whole of humankind has never lacked for divine providence. Moreover, each religion is to reject nothing that is true and holy in other religions’ (Rolheiser 2015: 43).

It is clear that his principles are infused with the teachings of such Vatican II documents as Nostra aetate and Lumen gentium (Flannery 2014: 653–6, 320–85), together with Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter Ecclesiam suam (Paul VI n.d.; McDonald 2014: 41–102). It is on the first statement in Rohlheiser’s second principle stated here that this essay will dwell.

The theologies of both Islam and Christianity are, at heart, theologies of salvation. Thus, fundamentally, their interfaith theologies must be considered as interfaith theologies of salvation. Interfaith soteriology is therefore conditioned by such questions as who can be saved, what is the telos of salvation and how is that salvation possible. This essay will deploy a simple contrastive textual semiotic approach, theologically rooted and articulated, in an endeavour to highlight these key questions, compare the answers, uncover the possible interplay between Islam and Christianity in their distinctive soteriologies and present a comparative paradigm.

Semiotic substratum

Now the ‘who’, the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of soteriological dogmas, and the resulting theological development of interfaith relations, are deeply conditioned by textual signs. The Qurʾān proclaims that the signs of God are all around, within and without: ‘Soon will We show them Our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth) and in their own souls’ (Q 41:53, trans. Yusuf ’Ali).

The prophets sent by God in the Qurʾān, like Ṣāliḥ and Shuʿayb in Sūra 7, are sent as signs and messengers of divine truth, power and mission.

In the New Testament Jesus berates the crowds for not being able to read the ‘signs of the times’: ‘You know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky. How is it you do not know
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how to interpret these times?’ (Luke 12:56; all Bible references are taken from H. Wansbrough, The New Jerusalem Bible).

As in the Qur’ān, the prophets of the Old Testament ‘were sent to proclaim God’s demand and to be “signs” of this divine will in their own persons. For it is not only the words they speak and the actions they perform that tell of God, but their whole lives’ (Wansbrough 1985: 1158). Thus, in both traditions the road to salvation is clearly marked by signs whose meanings the wise will observe and heed.

**Interfaith soteriology: who can be saved?**

In the New Testament we read of the poignant encounter between Jesus and the rich young man: ‘Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?’ (Matthew 19:16).

Philosophy of religion traditionally makes a division between a pluralist paradigm, an exclusivist paradigm and an inclusivist paradigm (d’Costa 1986). And elements in Christianity and Islam fit neatly into one or more of these paradigms. On both sides prophets bring revealed texts from which doctrines are derived and developed; all, prophet, text and doctrine, are regarded as ‘signs’ which signal the goal of salvation. All may be interpreted absolutely literally or alternatively, and *inter alia*, metaphor, typology, mimesis, allegory and intertextuality may be deployed as exegetical keys (Netton 2014: 113–40). *Tafsīr/exegesis is the key to the text.*

Thus, in the Christian tradition, to take but two examples, the exclusivist paradigm is articulated in the medieval catchphrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Netton 2006: 122–3) on the one hand and the Calvinism of the Protestant Reformation on the other (MacCulloch 2003: 242–3, 795). The paradigm is overturned in *Nostra aetate* (Flannery 2014: 653–6), and *Lumen Gentium* specifically states that ‘the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day’ (Flannery 2014: 335).

Today, certain extremist branches of Islam indulge in *takfīr*, the labelling of one’s theological ‘others’ whose interpretations or practices of Islam may differ from oneself, as *kuffār* (the word is commonly translated as ‘infidels’, but a closer translation would be ‘rejecters’, i.e. of God; Badawi 2011). But the Qur’ān famously stresses that there is to be no compulsion in religion (Q 2:256) and, indeed, notes that the People of the Book (*Ahl al-kitāb*) worship the same God (Q 29:46). Verses such as the one that was later called ‘The sword verse’ (Q 9:5) are historically rooted and need to be taken in context. They are not a licence to kill all non-Muslims but an injunction articulated at a specific historical moment to kill those who killed people after a treaty had been made (Badawi 2011). Thus, the interpretation of the Qur’ān according to its ‘circumstances of revelation’ (*ashāb al-nuzūl*) is an extremely important aspect of Qur’ānic exegesis.

In the light of this, we then note the Qur’ānic verses which accept that people other than Muslims are eligible for salvation: ‘The (Muslim) believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their reward with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve’ (Q 2:62; trans. Abdel Haleem, 2010; see also Q 4:124).

Thus, in both the Islamic and Christian traditions, the primary and secondary texts signal the need for interpretation and a profound awareness of context. That key tool deployed in both traditions signals that salvation is available for all.

Underlying this idea is the stress on God’s love and mercy, rather than any previous stress on God’s justice. We find this in the writings of the contemporary Muslim scholar Mohamed Talbi (Talbi 1990: 93) as well as in the works of the Catholic Cardinal Walter Kasper (Kasper 2014). Both scholars thus fall within what, in terms of interfaith dialogue and theology, may be termed a mutual ‘theology of hope’. With regard to humanity’s salvation, there is a long tradition of such
hope which has not always been acknowledged and stressed by the mainstream faith. Walter Kasper in his seminal work on *Mercy* notes that the teaching of the *apokatastasis*, the redemption and reconciliation of all people, has again become current. . . . Talk of the *apokatastasis* has led some theologians to conclude that, in the end, all people — also the godless, and even the evil spirits — will be taken up into the beatitude of the Kingdom of God, which has been perfected and fulfilled. This teaching was often attributed to the Greek theologian Origen.

(Kasper 2014: 105–6; Kelly 1977: 473–4)

A few decades before Kasper, the renowned Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88) wrote a controversial book entitled *Dare we hope ‘that all men be saved’?* (1988).

On the Islamic side, the medieval theologian Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (873–935) held that the infinite mercy of God meant that Hell could not be eternal for all wicked sinners (al-Ashʿarī 1929–30: 290–7, §§30, 31).

We may conclude from all this that, if, as I have suggested earlier, the theologies of Islam and Christianity are primarily ‘theologies of salvation’, then their interfaith dialogues should inevitably focus on the same topic. In both traditions we find that theological rigidity from the medieval period was challenged even in that early period by means of exegesis/*tafsīr*, allowing us, in the contemporary period, to posit a mutual interfaith *theology of hope*. At least, that is the theory if an adequate exegesis is deployed in and from the primary texts. It is abundantly clear in our own age that the fundamentalist and literalist traditions in both Christianity and Islam have vehemently denied the validity of such exegesis and, as with al-Qaeda or ISIS, have proclaimed a literalist authority whose primary ‘intellectual’ weapon is *takfīr*.

Thus, the nexus of theology and Christian–Muslim relations has become Janus-faced: one face exhibits a ‘theology of hope’ in terms of *who* may be saved; the other rejects and denies interpretation, metaphor and context and separates Muslim and Christian intellectually, theologically — and even physically unto death.

**The telos of the Kingdom and the telos of the Garden**

In the previous paragraphs we have surveyed, in a comparative interfaith fashion, *who* can be saved in the Islamic and Christian traditions. Theologically, we have seen that the answer depends on interpretation of the text/*tafsīr*, which may be rigidly literal, exclusivist, fundamentalist and harsh on the one hand or gentle, welcoming, and inclusivist on the other. The ‘signs’ on the road to salvation are there in the text, but signs always require comment, interpretation and implementation, as well as a need to embed them in a properly structured theology of salvation. We note, for example, how the Qurʿān acknowledges that its verses are of two kinds: ‘It is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Muḥammad]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning (*muḥkamāt*) — these are the cornerstone of the scripture — and others are ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*)’ (Q 3:7, trans. Abdel Haleem 2010). Such verses clearly signal a need for interpretation, despite the warning in the following verses that it is the troublemakers who try to interpret the *mutashābihāt*, whose meaning is only known to God (Q 3:7). This has not prevented Islamic exegetes down the ages from attempting sundry exegeses of such verses.

We now turn to the question of *what* the *telos*, fulfilment, end or goal of salvation is in the two traditions of Islam and Christianity.

The question has a twofold dimension and may be summarised under the headings of the apophatic and the cataphatic. From an interfaith perspective there are interesting theological similarities and differences. Both the apophatic and the cataphatic embrace the nature of God
and the nature of Paradise. We look to the foundational texts of each tradition for illumination. The signs are in the texts.

In its view of God, the Qurʾān presents both the apophatic and cataphatic perspectives. God is the Islamic telos of salvation: on the one hand, ‘there is nothing whatever like unto Him’ (layṣa ka-mithlihi shay) (Q 42:11, trans. Yusuf ‘Ali) and ‘No vision can grasp Him’ (6:103 , trans. Yusuf ‘Ali); on the other, God is close to His servants (2:186; 56:85), indeed, God is closer to man than man’s own jugular vein (ḥabl al-waṛd) (50:16).

Paradise, however, is described in what might be termed very cataphatic and physical terms. The telos of the Garden embraces, inter alia, flowing rivers, ornaments, thrones, shade, women and cups of gold (Q 4:57; 5:122; 15:45–48; 18:31; 22:23; 35:33–5; 36:55–8; 37:41–9; 38:49–52; 43:68–73). But there is no emphasis on the Beatific Vision as in the Christian tradition; indeed, early medieval theologians in Islam agonised over the very possibility, and modality, of the ‘Vision of God’ (ruʿyat Allāh) (Elias 2002: 160). The Ashʿarite view of bilā kayf ([accepting the doctrine] without asking about its modality) eventually prevailed, whereby it was acknowledged that ‘God must have a face and the promise of a vision of God must be true, but God’s face cannot be anything like a human face and vision of him cannot be the same as seeing anything in the created world’ (Elias 2002: 160–1).

The Qurʾān identifies, in this life, those who pray constantly to God and seek His face (yuḥdāna wajhahu) as true believers (Q 18:28); and it stresses that wherever you look is God’s face (wajh Allāh), a phrase which Yusuf Ali renders as ‘the Presence of God’ (Q 2:115; Yusuf Ali 1984: 49 n.118). The divine Face of God, however interpreted, is thus ‘present’, even in this life, and may be sought by His true servants; but the telos of the Garden as articulated in the Qurʾān is more concerned with the delights of the physical furniture of Paradise than with any Beatific Vision. Muslim theologians down the ages, however, have usually appreciated that the principal joy of Paradise will be the presence of God, however that is articulated or imagined, and that the worst pain of Hell, overriding the physical torments described in the Qurʾān, is absence, the absence of God.

When we turn to the Christian tradition, we find the reverse with regard to the delineation of Paradise but similar with regard to the apophatic and cataphatic visions of God.

It is true that the telos of the Kingdom is articulated by Jesus in numerous concrete parables: it is, for example, like ‘a man who sowed good seed in his field’ (Matthew 13:24–5); it is ‘like a mustard seed’ (Matthew 13: 31–2); it is ‘like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through’ (Matthew 13:33); and it ‘is like treasure hidden in a field’ (Matthew 13:44). But there is mystery about the Kingdom as well: elsewhere, Jesus stresses before Pilate: ‘Mine is not a kingdom of this world’ (John 18:36). Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians refers to ‘what no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of man cannot visualise; all that God has prepared for those who love Him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9–10).

The cataphatic view of the nature of God in the Christian tradition is easy to identify. While there has always been a strong apophatic tradition in Christianity (Netton 2012: 15–37; William 2014) – Aquinas famously observed: ‘In Deo quid est dicere est impossible’ (‘About God we cannot say what He is’) (Aquinas 2006: 1a.1.7, 24–5) – the Incarnation and life of Jesus provide an obvious ‘gateway’ to the Father as well as providing ample evidence for the Christian, from a cataphatic perspective, about the nature of God in Jesus’ own life.

In The Gospel of John, Thomas says: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ (John 14:5–6). Jesus’ response is emphatic: ‘I am the Way; I am Truth and Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father too. From this moment you know him and have seen him’ (John 14:6–7).

In such wise does this succinct statement by Jesus merge the cataphatic with the apophatic, with the latter statement illuminating the path to the former.
Three theologies in the dialogue of salvation: how may one be saved?

The modalities of interfaith dialogue are diverse: there are the dialogue of charity, the dialogue of theology, the dialogue of presence and the dialogue of proclamation. Such dialogues for the Christian are not optional (Agius 2002: 19), and we can see such dialogues in action in the work, for example, of the Catholic Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Jukko 2007) and the Anglican Building Bridges Seminar (Ipgrave 2002). Not to undertake such dialogue risks stasis and mutual suspicion at best; terrorism at worst. So the question arises as to how Islam and Christianity have moved from a theology of difference to a theology of presence. We are not talking here about da ṻaʿ or conversion (possible or actual) but rather an ideal dialogue which embraces openness, tolerance, harmony, acceptance and respect. It is suggested here that the ideal dialogical catalyst has been the theology of the bridge.

Interfaith theologies of difference: Reading the signs in the texts, that is, the foundation texts of the Qurʾān on the one hand and the New Testament on the other, Muslims and Christians have readily recognised the profound doctrinal differences that divide them. Apart from the mystical dimension in which the two traditions may be said to come closest (Netton 2011), it is clear that no kind of irenicism, genuine or assumed (Flannery 2014: 416), has bridged the doctrinal gap, yesterday or today. Thus the theology of difference, from a comparative interfaith perspective, is also a theology of gaps. Recognition of difference has become a key component in such paradigms:

- The Qurʾān categorically denies the Incarnation: ‘He begetteth not, nor is He begotten’ (lam yalid wa-lam yuwlad).
  
  *(Q 112:3, trans. Yusuf ʿAli)*

- The Qurʾān vigorously refutes the passion, death and thus any possible resurrection of Jesus: ‘But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them’ (wa-mā qatalūhu wa-mā ṣalābūhu walākin shubbiha lahum).
  

- For the Qurʾān, any concept of Trinitarianism is anathema, however that Trinitarianism is conceived and articulated: ‘They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God’.
  
  *(Q 5:76, trans. Yusuf ʿAli; see Parrinder 1977: 133–41)*

- All in all, the Qurʾān is absolutely clear: Jesus is not God: ‘They do blaspheme who say: “God is Christ the son of Mary”’.
  
  *(Q 5:75; 5:19, trans. Yusuf ʿAli)*

- Neither should he be characterised as ‘the son of God’.
  
  *(Q 9:30; see Parrinder 1977: 126–32)*

By profound contrast, Christianity adheres theologically to an Incarnation (Philippians 2:7), makes the passion, death and resurrection of Christ a central doctrinal plank (Matthew 26:36–27:61), proclaims that if Christ did not rise from the dead, then the whole of Christianity is vain (1 Corinthians 15:16–17; Romans 1:3–4) and, in its mainstream, is thoroughly Trinitarian (Matthew 28:19–20; Revelation 22:1; Wansbrough 1985: 2051 n. a).

The theological semiotics of such verses could not be clearer. Of the differences, perhaps it is the soteriological which are the most important. This was confirmed many years ago by
Hamilton Gibb: Islam, he wrote, ‘is distinguished from Christianity, not so much (in spite of all outward appearances) by its repudiation of the trinitarian concept of the Unity of God, as by its rejection of the soteriology of Christian doctrine’ (Gibb 1964: 69; Parrinder 1977: 116–17 n.1).

In the light of all this, it is clear that Christian and Muslim theologies have confronted each other uneasily over the centuries. That confrontation and that unease have persisted in some quarters on both sides. When opposing theologies collide, quoi faire? How, it may be asked, has interfaith dialogue ever taken place, how can it take place today and what are its prospects for the future? One answer – it is not the only one – to these past, present and future pressing questions lies in what has developed into what I will term the theology of the bridge.

The interfaith theology of the bridge: The nomenclature of this theology is clearly taken from the Anglican Building Bridges Seminar. It may be articulated as an attempt to recognise, identify, cherish and laud those aspects of Islamic and Christian doctrine and teaching which may be held in common. It is not, and never has been, a form of da’wa or subtle conversion technique on either side. To highlight this, we note the prophetic words in the Vatican II document Nostra aetate, a document whose ethos is very similar to that of the Seminar: ‘The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions’ (Flannery 2014: 654).

The Seminar has been proclaimed as follows:

The Building Bridges Seminar, hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, is a unique annual series which brings together Christian and Muslim scholars for intensive study. Texts from the Christian and Islamic traditions are used as the basis for a programme that includes public lectures and private sessions. The seminars have explored many of the most significant themes in the interface between Islam and Christianity: scripture; prophecy; the common good; justice and rights; human nature; interpretation; science and religion; tradition and modernity; prayer.

(Leaflet 2012: 2)

The proceedings of the seminars are published and constitute an excellent resource for interfaith dialogue and, indeed, theological interchange.

In the Introduction to the record of the Seminar gathering at Lambeth Palace on 17–18 January 2002, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, wrote as follows:

We come from many different countries and from a variety of traditions, bringing with us at least one thing in common: a strong commitment to deepen the dialogue and to broaden the understanding and cooperation between our two great faiths – Christianity and Islam. . . . The events of September 11 2001 and their aftermath gave fresh impetus and focus to the shared journey of Christians and Muslims. Those events also highlighted the importance of deepening our dialogue and understanding, not just for the sake of our own faith communities, but also for the well-being and security of the world. . . . Although we met as theologians and religious scholars, we did so in the certain knowledge that our work could have resonance and value way beyond our gathering.

(Ipgrave 2002: ix)

On the Catholic side, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), with its Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims (CRRM), to which the author of this essay was appointed a consultor in 2012, has been no less active. Jukko notes that
The task of the PCID is to promote and carry out serious, objective and scientifically sound studies of other religions so that Christians might arrive at a clearer understanding of the content and practice of other faiths. The preparation of Christians for dialogue has always been one of its primary tasks. Additional tasks are to encourage Catholic communities around the world to see the importance of dialogue, understand its role in Christian faith, and to be stimulated, despite obstacles and initial reservations, to establish good, cordial relations with other religious believers. . . . In some situations, the PCID is to engage directly in dialogue with the followers of other religions.

(Jukko 2007: 18–19)

And various ‘institutionalized dialogue[s]’ have been established at various times with Muslim bodies (Jukko 2007: 20–1). All is ‘pour la promotion du dialogue interreligieux selon l’esprit du Concile Vatican II, en particulier de la Déclaration Nostra Aetate’ (Leaflet n.d.).

Jukko’s study of the PCID concludes that, theologically, ‘there is a continuous interrelationship between philosophy and theology in Roman Catholic theological thinking . . . the doctrine of the Trinity allows Christianity to maintain genuine openness to God in history. . . . In this Trinitarian framework of communion and mutual interdependence, an authentic Christian encounter of the Other, be it Muslim or any non-Christian, becomes possible in dialogue and mission’ (Jukko 2007: 279, 285).

The interfaith theology of presence: The theological tensions at the heart of Christian–Muslim interfaith dialogue remain, whether in the work of the Building Bridges Seminar or the PCID. They have conditioned, and will continue to condition, the forms of dialogue that are possible. They are, however, dialogues of word and pen. Sometimes, the only dialogue possible may be what I will term here as the dialogue of presence, which yields a theology of presence, whose key components are example, quiescence, service and prayer. In this, the faith traditions of Islam and Christianity ‘confront’ each other in mutual harmony, respect – and silence.

The martyred Cistercian Prior of Tibhirine in Algeria, Dom Christian de Chergé (d. 1996), gave voice to the love implicit in, and born out of, this dialogue and theology of presence when he wrote in his Last Testament, addressing his future assassin: ‘And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing, Yes, I also say this ‘Thank-you’ and this ‘A-Dieu’ to you, in whom I see the face of God. And may we find each other, happy good thieves, in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen. In sha’ Allah’ (White Fathers 1999: 11–12; Kiser 2002; Beauvois 2010).

References
Ecclesiam Suam, see McDonald (2014).
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Leaflet (n.d.), *Conseil pontifical pour le dialogue interreligieux*, Rome: PCID.

*Lumen Gentium*, see Flannery (2014).


*Nostra aetate*, see Flannery (2014); McDonald (2014).


Unitatis redintegratio, see Flannery (2014); McDonald (2014).


**Further reading**

The following volumes are all in the Building Bridges Series and record the papers read at a selection of the Seminars.
Igrane, M., ed. (2004), *Scriptures in dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and Qurʾān together*, London: Church House Publishing (stresses that ‘a “dialogue of scriptures” can only be generated through a dialogue of the readers of those scriptures’; ‘twenty contributors (thirteen Christians, seven Muslims) supply their own answers to the question “When, where, how and with whom do I read scripture?”’).
Igrane, M., ed. (2005), *Bearing the word: Prophecy in biblical and qurʾānic perspective*, London: Church House Publishing (surveys the scriptural foundations of prophecy in the two traditions with particular reference to interreligious dialogue; contains important chapters on atheism, scriptural dialogue, Jesus and Muhammad).

Marshall, D., ed. (2011), *Communicating the word: Revelation, translation and interpretation in Christianity and Islam*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press (places particular emphasis on the themes of authority and the complexities of translation in each tradition; Rowan Williams’ words in his *Afterword* are salutary: ‘Islam and Christianity alike give a high valuation to the conviction that God speaks to us. Grasping what that does and does not mean, avoiding the crudity of thinking of scripture as an oracle, is challenging theological work’, p. 179).

Marshall, D. and L. Mosher, eds (2014), *Death, resurrection and human destiny: Christian and Muslim perspectives*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press (goes to the very heart of the relationship between theologies and interreligious dialogue in that it deals with the fundamental *telos* of both traditions, salvation; the two traditions unite in believing in the resurrection of the body at the end of time).