



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Methodology of Comparative Theology in Transcendental Wisdom (Hekmat-e Mota'aliyeh)

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Abstract

The contemporary encounter with religious diversity poses critical challenges for theologians in their engagement with the “religious other,” frequently resulting in theological exclusivism and hermeneutical impasse. Within this context, Comparative Theology emerges as a distinctive and transformative theological approach that, while remaining deeply rooted in one’s own faith tradition, deliberately pursues profound learning from other religious traditions. Such engagement enriches faith and understanding by refining existing doctrines, illuminating shared moral and metaphysical insights, and ultimately extending the classical definition of theology, *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”), beyond rigid confessional boundaries. Given the remarkable and systematic development of Comparative Theology within Christian contexts, together with the profound intellectual and theological resources of Islam, it becomes imperative to articulate a corresponding and authentically grounded model within Islamic thought. Imported methodologies, although valuable, often fail to address the indigenous philosophical and theological concerns inherent to Islamic intellectual traditions. This dissertation advances the thesis that Mulla Sadra’s Transcendental Wisdom (*Hekmat-e Mota’aliyeh*) provides the most comprehensive and coherent theoretical and methodological foundation for constructing an Islamic Comparative Theology. Through a systematic analysis of its integrative methodology, sophisticated ontology, dynamic epistemology, and interpretive theology of religions, the study shows that Transcendental Wisdom offers essential grounding principles, including Methodological Integration and Comprehensiveness, the hierarchical gradation of existence (*Tashkik al-Wujūd*) which accommodates non-reductive truth claims, and esoteric hermeneutics (*Ta’wīl*), all of which are necessary for developing a rigorous and dynamic model of genuine interreligious learning.

Keywords: Comparative Theology; Transcendental Wisdom (*Hekmat-e Mota’aliyeh*); Mulla Sadra; Methodology; Interreligious Dialogue; Theology of Religions; Hermeneutics.

Background and Research Context

Few Comparative Theology has now emerged as a distinct theological discipline within Western academia, primarily due to pioneering work undertaken within the Christian tradition. Foundational scholars such as Catherine Cornille, Francis X. Clooney, and Klaus von Stosch have systematically addressed key methodological questions: how to engage faithfully with the religious other, how to interpret texts hermeneutically, and what processes a theologian must follow to achieve authentic interreligious learning. Their research has established clear procedural models and methodological arguments for Christian theologians, emphasizing the necessity of deep confessional grounding combined with radical openness toward the religious tradition being studied.

This sustained engagement in the West has secured Comparative Theology's status as a vital theological endeavor that moves beyond descriptive or dialogical accounts toward genuine theological transformation. In contrast, within the Islamic theological domain, a significant research gap remains concerning this specific discipline. Although Muslim scholars have produced extensive works on interreligious dialogue, often focusing on political or social coexistence, and profound studies in classical Islamic philosophy and theology (kalam), these efforts have not yielded the kind of detailed and systematic methodological framework required by modern Comparative Theology.

Specifically, a rigorous dissertation dedicated to constructing an indigenous methodology for Comparative Theology, one explicitly rooted in a foundational Islamic philosophical framework such as the post-Avicennan tradition, remains critically absent. This absence renders Islamic theology vulnerable to dependence on imported, and often reductionist, Western models that risk distorting its distinctive metaphysical and epistemological orientations. The present research directly addresses this lacuna by turning to Mulla Sadra's Transcendental Wisdom (Hekmat-e Mota'aliyeh) to establish a coherent methodological and theoretical foundation, thereby contributing a vital and original dimension to the ongoing renewal of Islamic theology.

Objectives and Research Questions

The principal objective of this study is to systematically develop and articulate a coherent methodological model for Comparative Theology that is philosophically grounded in Mulla Sadra's Transcendental Wisdom.

Guiding Research Questions:

- What ontological and epistemological principles within Transcendental Wisdom (Hekmat-e Mota'aliyeh) can serve as the fundamental prerequisites for Comparative Theology?
- How can Mulla Sadra's tripartite approach to knowledge, i.e. reason, intuition, and revelation, be synthesized into an integrated and comprehensive methodology for interreligious learning?
- What specific, step-by-step process should an Islamic theologian follow to implement a comparative study based on the Sadrian model?
- In what ways does this newly articulated methodology contribute to the dynamism and renewal of contemporary Islamic theology?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical method, employing the core tenets of Mulla Sadra's Transcendental Wisdom as its theoretical foundation. The principal philosophical pillars include the ontological doctrine of the Gradation of Existence (Tashkik al-Wujūd), which articulates a hierarchical yet unified view of reality, and the epistemological principle of Substantial Motion (Harakat-e Jawhariyyah), which affirms the dynamic and progressive nature of human knowledge and spiritual perfection.

At the methodological level, Sadra's framework synthesizes reason (burhān), intuition ('irfān), and scripture (the Qur'an and Hadith). This study refers to this synthesis as Methodological Integration and Comprehensiveness to emphasize the holistic and non-fragmented application of diverse epistemic tools within a unified philosophical system, thereby avoiding confusion with concepts associated with religious pluralism.

Within this framework, the process of conducting Comparative Theology unfolds through a rigorous threefold path. First, the theologian must establish a shared ontological foundation for comparison, guided by the principle of the Gradation of Existence, which posits that all beings and theological realities are manifestations of a single, graded Reality. This provides a universal, non-reductive basis for understanding the theological claims of other traditions. Second, the theologian engages in deep, empathetic study of the target tradition's core concepts through hermeneutical interpretation (ta'wīl). This stage requires the active application of Methodological Integration and Comprehensiveness, employing Sadra's unified approach that harmonizes rational, intuitive, and textual analysis. Third, the theologian performs a theological return (rujū') to their own Islamic tradition, incorporating the insights gained

from the comparative process to enrich, renew, and deepen their understanding of Islamic theological truths.

Findings or Main Arguments

The research demonstrates that Transcendental Wisdom provides four major theological principles that effectively ground Comparative Theology and ensure both the intellectual integrity and theological fidelity of the comparative process.

1. Ontological Foundation (Tashkik al-Wujūd)

The doctrine of the gradation of existence establishes a non-exclusive universal truth claim by affirming that Reality is singular yet possesses infinite degrees of perfection. It allows the theologian to acknowledge the presence of religious truth within other traditions, viewing their doctrinal and spiritual insights not as errors or mere equivalents but as partial, lower-grade, or more veiled manifestations of the ultimate Reality, which finds its complete and perfect expression within Islam. This hierarchical vision prevents the reduction of other faiths' claims while maintaining the theologian's confessional commitment and epistemic stability. Sadrian principle of Tashkik al-Wujūd therefore provides a robust metaphysical framework within which diverse theological claims can coexist and be meaningfully compared without being reduced to a common denominator.

2. Epistemological Grounding (Harakat-e Jawhariyyah)

The principle of Substantial Motion supports the notion of continuous theological transformation and spiritual renewal. By positing that existence itself, including the soul and its knowledge, is in perpetual motion, it renders the theologian receptive to “deep learning,” a key aim of Comparative Theology. This dynamism justifies the transformative process that occurs through engagement with other traditions, ensuring that the insights gained do not merely accumulate externally but lead to internal intellectual and existential growth. In this way, Substantial Motion offers a philosophical justification for *tajdid* (renewal) as it emerges from genuine interreligious encounter.

3. Methodological Integration and Comprehensiveness

The unified application of demonstration (reason and logic), intuition (mystical insight), and revelation (sacred texts) equips the theologian with a comprehensive methodological toolkit. This integration enables a deep and multidimensional engagement with another tradition, encompassing the analysis of rational doctrines (philosophy and theology), the appreciation of mystical experience (spirituality and

practices), and the interpretation of sacred texts (hermeneutics). For instance, in examining a complex Christian Christological claim, the theologian may use reason to analyze its logical structure, intuition to apprehend the spiritual experience it conveys, and revelation to interpret its scriptural roots. This integrated approach provides a holistic understanding that cannot be achieved through any single epistemic mode.

4. *Theology of Religions (Ta'wīl)*

The Sadrian hermeneutic of *ta'wīl* (esoteric or symbolic interpretation) functions as a key theological mechanism for uncovering the shared, essential, and supra-literal dimensions of religious concepts. This interpretive process is crucial for Comparative Theology, as it enables the theologian to move beyond external and often conflictual differences, such as variations in ritual or law, and to discern the underlying universal principles that unite seemingly divergent doctrines. *Ta'wīl* thereby facilitates a genuine cross-cultural and cross-theological understanding without necessitating doctrinal compromise or conversion.

The ultimate finding of this study is the articulation of a comprehensive methodological model characterized by three interrelated stages: ontological establishment, comprehensive engagement, and theological return. This model is deeply rooted in Islamic philosophical and theological traditions while remaining universally open to non-reductive interreligious learning. It effectively addresses the contemporary need for an authentic, rigorous, and dynamic Islamic Comparative Theology.

Discussion and Significance

The methodology proposed in this research holds profound significance because it moves beyond descriptive comparison, which often remains at the level of external similarities, and surpasses the limitations of political or diplomatic interfaith dialogue. Instead, it integrates the comparative process into the very core of theological reflection, transforming the theologian's understanding of their own tradition through genuine encounter. A key advantage of this approach is that, unlike many Christian models that rely on pluralistic or externally borrowed frameworks, the Sadrian model offers a single, organically unified philosophical system, i.e. Transcendental Wisdom, that integrates ontology, epistemology, and methodology. This coherence ensures that the comparative approach is not an external methodological addition but an intrinsic expression of Islamic philosophical thought. Such internal consistency grants the model both stability and depth, enabling it to serve as a powerful instrument for theological renewal.

The significance of this research for contemporary Islamic studies lies in its provision of a concrete and philosophically sophisticated framework for theological development. By incorporating critically evaluated insights derived from empathetic engagement with other faiths, for example, comparing the Sadrian notion of the walī (spiritual master or saint) with the Christian understanding of sainthood or with the Bodhisattva ideal in Buddhism, the theologian can re-examine traditional Islamic conceptions of spiritual authority and perfection. This comparative process deepens doctrinal understanding and expands the interpretive horizon of Islamic theology. Moreover, the systematic and conceptually precise nature of the model creates an essential academic bridge, allowing Muslim scholars to participate in global discourses on Comparative Theology with a clearly defined, indigenous methodology. This transition marks a pivotal shift: from reacting to Western-developed theological frameworks to contributing an original, philosophically grounded, and theologically coherent voice. In doing so, it strengthens the Islamic contribution to interreligious understanding and global academic engagement.

Conclusion

This dissertation concludes that Mulla Sadra's Transcendental Wisdom provides a rich, methodologically rigorous, and theologically coherent foundation for the practice of Comparative Theology within a Shi'i context. By applying its distinctive ontological and epistemological principles, particularly the gradation of existence and substantial motion, it offers a framework for profound and transformative learning from other religious traditions while maintaining fidelity to the core tenets of Shi'i theology. The study advances a model of gradational inclusivism that simultaneously upholds the particularity of Islam and acknowledges the possibility of truth and salvation beyond its explicit boundaries. Its principal contribution lies in articulating a distinctly Sadrian methodology that can both invigorate Shi'i theology and foster meaningful interreligious understanding. Future research may apply this model to specific comparative case studies between Shi'ism and other traditions, such as the parallels between Sadrian notions of sainthood and Christian mysticism or Advaita Vedānta, and explore the broader practical implications of this approach for contemporary interfaith relations.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in February 2023 at Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.

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