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Editorial Foreword

Difference, Reflexivity, and the Making of Comparison: Introducing Dissertia Research Reviews

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Comparative, cross-regional, and cross-cultural inquiry has become indispensable for any discipline seeking to understand culture and society beyond the narrow horizons of single traditions or nation-states. As scholars increasingly acknowledge the limitations of WEIRD-centered knowledge production (Henrich et al. 2010), and as the social sciences respond to a growing demand to extend research data collection beyond such Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations, the systematic widening of empirical and conceptual frames across diverse social worlds has produced more robust theories of human meaning, practice, and social order (Broesch et al. 2020). Cross-cultural research in the social sciences demonstrates that extending inquiry across heterogeneous settings enhances the external validity of theory, sharpens sensitivity to power asymmetries, and improves our ability to interpret how communities negotiate mobility, inequality, and contested identities (McCaffree 2024, in an interview with Alan Fiske). In many domains of social sciences, symbolic and practice-oriented approaches, especially as rooted in Clifford Geertz's insight that societies are organized by context-specific "webs of meaning," show that sustained comparisons across multiple locales can illuminate how global processes are locally appropriated and transformed. A scholarly platform committed to comparative and cross-regional studies therefore becomes a necessary site for staging exhaustive, ethically attuned analyses of an interconnected yet asymmetrical world.

Within this broader horizon, the study of religion offers one of the most sophisticated laboratories for comparative thinking. Comparison here is not the search for timeless essences but, following Jonathan Z. Smith, a disciplined, reflexive scholarly operation that constructs its own categories and alignments rather than "discovering" ready-made religions awaiting juxtaposition (Smith 1990). As Smith and Robert A. Segal both emphasize, the analytic power of comparison lies in holding similarity and difference in

productive tension. It is “axiomatic,” Smith writes, “that comparison is never a matter of identity,” for its very interest depends on “the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting” (Smith 1987). The strongest comparative work therefore avoids both the old comparativism’s quest for universal sameness and postmodernism’s dismissal of comparison as inherently reductive. Instead, it seeks similarities and differences, recognizing that heuristic commonalities make comparison possible while significant divergences make it meaningful. Segal argues that comparison serves not to erase differences but to illuminate them: while every comparative inquiry must begin by noting certain resemblances, its real value lies in uncovering the distinctive contours that set each case apart. The intellectual force of comparison, he suggests, emerges precisely from the divergence that becomes visible through this process, even as shared features provide the initial scaffolding for analysis (Segal 2005). Viewed in this way, comparative religion becomes a disciplined practice of constructing deliberate juxtapositions through which recurrent patterns come into focus, categorical assumptions are tested, and the cultural and historical particularity of religious phenomena can be discerned with greater precision. Comparison in this context is a creative, deliberate scholarly craft that generates new knowledge and new relationships between bodies of knowledge, while always remaining a partial, interpretive construction rather than a direct representation of lived religious experience (McClymond 2018).

It is therefore symbolically fitting that the inaugural issue of *Dissertia Research Reviews* (DRR-HASS) is devoted to Comparative Religion. With this first volume (Vol. 1, No. 1, November 2025), we do not merely introduce a new journal: we invite our readers into a particular line of scholarship, i.e. comparative, dialogical, and critically reflexive, attentive to voices and locations often marginal to dominant academic conversations. *Dissertia Research Reviews* is conceived as a platform for publishing extended abstracts, essays, reviews, data and discussion papers, as well as dissertation summaries from diverse disciplines and languages. We aim to render visible the intellectual labor of graduate researchers and early-career scholars, especially those working outside the Euro-Atlantic centers of research and knowledge production. This Special Issue on Comparative Religion thus inaugurates our commitment to a globally attentive, methodologically rigorous, and epistemically inclusive vision of the study of society, culture, and religion, across disciplines in Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences.

The contributions in this issue collectively demonstrate how the study of religion today unfolds across a wide spectrum of themes, ranging from cosmology, metaphysics, and theology to gender, interreligious encounter, cultural policy, and spirituality, each

employing distinct theoretical frameworks and methodological strategies. This diversity of questions and approaches is precisely what renders comparison indispensable: by tracing both similarities and differences across traditions, contexts, and intellectual trajectories, comparative inquiry reveals how religious meaning is shaped through complex entanglements of culture, history, and power. The issue's cross-regional focus, particularly its grounding in Iranian, Turkish, and wider West Asian scholarly contexts, further underscores the importance of listening to local cultures of understanding religion and spirituality – as contexts that are often underrepresented in global academic conversations yet vital for expanding our conceptual horizons. Together, these studies exemplify how a reflexive, multi-voiced comparative practice can illuminate the richness and plurality of religious life today. It is our hope that this Special Issue on Comparative Religion will be the first of many steps in that direction.

November 2025
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Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Review and Criticism of Thomas Luckmann's Theory of Invisible Religion

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Abstract

This study examines the place of religion in modern societies and explains the mechanisms of its transformation by drawing on Husserl's phenomenological thought alongside a reinterpretation of Thomas Luckmann's sociological approach. It shows how Alfred Schutz introduced concepts such as the lifeworld, intersubjectivity, the constitution of consciousness, and mental representation into the sociology of religion, and how these concepts later became foundational to Luckmann's analysis of "invisible religion." Methodologically, the research relies on documentary analysis, theoretical critique, and conceptual analysis to explore the relationship between social structures and new forms of religious meaning-making. The findings indicate that religion in the modern era has neither disappeared nor remains exclusively identifiable through traditional institutions; rather, at an individual and privatized level, it continues to provide meaning. The study further argues that many criticisms of Luckmann's theory of "privatization" stem from inattention to its conceptual foundations or from hasty generalizations. Ultimately, the research contends that careful attention to social and historical contexts enables the prediction of patterns of religious transformation across different societies. The contribution of this study lies in its critical re-reading of Luckmann's approach and in highlighting its utility for understanding religion in the modern age.

Keywords: Lifeworld; Intersubjectivity; Invisible Religion; Social Construction of Reality; Phenomenology; Meaning-Making; Modernity.

Background and Context of the Study

Structural transformations associated with modernity have made religion less readily identifiable solely within the framework of traditional institutions. In recent decades, the sociology of religion has confronted foundational questions: Does modernity lead to the decline of religion? Is secularization a universal principle? And if religion is being transformed, what are its new forms? In this context, Husserl's phenomenology, by introducing concepts such as the lifeworld and intersubjectivity, emphasizes that religious consciousness and experience are formed within a matrix of social and cultural meanings. Schutz brought these concepts to bear on the understanding of everyday reality, and Luckmann, by developing them in the realm of religion, proposed the concept of “invisible religion,” also described as “privatization.”

At the same time, the literature in the sociology of religion highlights two dominant approaches: one that reduces religion to the institution of the church, and another that neglects its private functions. Addressing an important research gap, the present study underscores the necessity of understanding religion at the level of individual, symbolic, and market-oriented experiences. A review of criticisms shows that opponents of privatization theory tend to emphasize substantial definitions of religion and pay comparatively less attention to its meaning-making function in everyday life. In this light, the present study argues that understanding religion in the modern era requires an interpretive, phenomenological approach that moves beyond classical institutionalism.

Objectives and Research Questions

Objectives

- To explain the phenomenological foundations of the theory of invisible religion.
- To examine the role of the lifeworld and intersubjectivity in religious meaning-making.
- To analyze the relationship between social structure and various forms of religiosity.

Research Questions

- How is religion defined in Luckmann's thought, and how does this differ from substantial definitions?
- What effects does modernity have on forms of religiosity?

- What alternatives to religiosity exist in the modern age, and how do they create meaning?
- On what grounds are criticisms of the privatization of religion based?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical basis of this research is rooted in Husserlian phenomenology. Intentionality, namely, that consciousness is always “consciousness of something,” shows that religious experience is formed within mental representation. Husserl’s concept of “constitution” explains how phenomena acquire meaning within consciousness and thereby grounds the concept of the “lifeworld,” a pre-given world upon which experience is based. Building on these concepts, Schutz distinguished between different domains of meaning and, through the notion of intersubjectivity, showed that understanding the “other” is an interactive and symbolic process. Developing these ideas further, Luckmann conceptualizes religion as a meaning system linking mental experiences to social realities. Methodologically, this study employs documentary analysis, theoretical critique, and historical comparison to analyze the transformation of religion in relation to social structures. Reliance on classical sources and contemporary critiques enables a sustained discourse on invisible religion.

Findings

- **Transformation rather than decline:** In modern societies, religion has distanced itself from public institutions yet remains present at an individual, meaning-giving level. This transformation is related to increasing social complexity.
- **Invisible religion:** In this model, the individual becomes central, and personal experiences acquire sacred significance. Elements such as autonomy, self-actualization, and familism form a new semantic structure.
- **Market of meaning:** Religious content is offered under conditions of supply and demand and is shaped by competition. No single official institution exclusively provides religion.
- **Critique of institutionalism:** Luckmann helps to free the sociology of religion from an excessive focus on the church, directing attention to individuals’ lifeworlds.
- **Limits of criticisms:** Many critiques overlook Luckmann’s theoretical foundations and rely on hasty generalizations.

- **Predictability of change:** Analyzing social context enables the modeling of future forms of religiosity.

Discussion and Significance

The results show that modernity has transformed religion rather than eliminated it. The distinction between institution-centered and experiential religion provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding meaning-making in everyday life. The significance of Luckmann's theory lies in its phenomenological account of religious experience, which reveals a generative relationship between symbolic systems and social structures. The principal limitation of the theory is the ambiguity in distinguishing religion from other meaning systems, an issue emphasized by critics. Even so, the focus on individual centrality and the semantic flexibility of religion makes this approach especially useful for analyzing pluralistic and post-secular societies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Luckmann's theory of invisible religion offers an important tool for understanding emerging forms of religiosity in modern societies. Although religion has shifted from the public sphere to the private realm, it continues to fulfill a meaning-making function. The centrality of the individual, the plurality of symbols, and the market of meaning constitute the principal elements of this transformation. A review of critiques suggests that understanding religion today requires moving beyond institutionalism to attend to lived experience. Future research should develop predictive models of religious transformation based on systematic analyses of social structures.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in September 2022 at the Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.

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 **Open Access**

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Puranic Cosmology in Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana Compared with the Qur'anic Cosmology

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Abstract

The beginning and end of the world, together with its constituent elements, occupy a significant position in teachings of religions and their sacred scriptures. Cosmological concepts have held a central place within comparative religion studies. Both Islam and Hinduism have frequently addressed such cosmological questions in their canonical texts. This dissertation adopts a phenomenological approach to examine cosmological ideas in Islam and Hinduism. Within the Puranic literature of Hinduism, especially from classical era (after 200 C.E.), five main thematic areas are discernible; three of which relate directly to creation of the world, its destruction, and cycles of cosmic renewal. The Qur'an also presents distinct cosmological perspectives. Puranas, composed in praise of three deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, form a major corpus of Hindu sacred literature. Among them, the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, representing Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions, respectively, contain particularly detailed cosmological narratives. These two texts, therefore, constitute the principal focus of the study. The research first outlines the general cosmological ideas of Hinduism and their intellectual background, then examines the Puranic cosmology, particularly in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, and subsequently explores the cosmological concepts of the Qur'an based on exegetical sources. We conclude by identifying the similarities and differences between these two sacred cosmologies.

Keywords: Puranic Cosmology; Qur'anic Cosmology; Visnu Purana; Vayu Purana; Cosmos.

Background and Research Context

Questions concerning the origin and destiny of the world have always occupied a fundamental place in religious thought. Narratives of creation and eschatology across different faiths reveal each tradition's understanding of the cosmos and its ultimate purpose. Within comparative religion, the study of cosmogony and eschatology has been a key field of inquiry, and scholars have often compared creation myths and end-time narratives across civilizations. Nevertheless, comprehensive comparative research on the cosmological ideas found in Islamic and Hindu scriptures remains rare. The Hindu Puranic texts, in particular, offer one of the richest mythological accounts of the universe's creation and destruction, portraying an immense and cyclic cosmological vision. In contrast, the Islamic worldview, rooted in the Qur'an and its interpretive traditions, presents a monotheistic and linear conception of time and creation. Within this intellectual context, the present research investigates the shared grounds and distinctive characteristics of cosmology in two major traditions: Hinduism, represented by Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, and Islam, represented by the Qur'an.

Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to compare the cosmological frameworks of the Hindu tradition (as presented in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana) with those of the Islamic tradition (as articulated in the Qur'an) and to elucidate their similarities and differences. The study seeks to address the following key questions:

- What are the central cosmological concepts and teachings in the Puranic texts, with particular emphasis on the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana?
- Upon what fundamental principles and elements is the Qur'anic cosmology based?
- What similarities and differences can be identified between the Puranic and Qur'anic cosmological systems?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research employs a phenomenological framework within the study of religion. The phenomenological approach requires religious phenomena to be described and analyzed from the internal perspective of believers, without external value judgments regarding their truth or falsity. Accordingly, this study approaches Islamic and Hindu cosmologies as distinct yet comparable religious phenomena. The research is qualitative and relies on content analysis of primary texts and interpretive sources. For the Hindu

side, it examines Puranic literature, especially the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, to identify and explicate the major elements of Hindu cosmology. These texts were chosen as representative of two key theological currents, i.e. Vaishnavism and Shaivism, thereby encompassing a broad range of Hindu cosmological views. For the Islamic side, relevant Qur'anic verses on the creation and structure of the universe, together with authoritative exegetical works and prophetic narrations, were analyzed to construct a coherent picture of the Qur'anic cosmology. Through a comparative procedure, major cosmological themes, such as the origin of creation, the structure of the cosmos, the nature of cosmic time, and the end of the world, were examined side by side to highlight convergences and divergences. Employing a comparative method within a phenomenological framework made it possible to describe both worldviews neutrally and to compare them on equal theoretical grounds.

Findings and Main Arguments

In the Hindu cosmological worldview, as reflected in the Vishnu Purana and Vayu Purana, the universe is cyclical and multi-layered. It undergoes perpetual cycles of creation, dissolution, and re-creation over immeasurable spans of time. Cosmic time is divided into distinct epochs, i.e. yugas, mahayugas, manvantaras, and kalpas. Creation is generally attributed to Brahma, the creator deity, who emanates from the supreme divine reality (such as Vishnu in the Vaishnavite system). Each cosmic era ends with dissolution, often under the agency of a deity of destruction, after which a new creation begins. The Puranas also describe a hierarchically structured cosmos comprising multiple realms of heavens, earths, and underworlds. In this way, Puranic cosmology presents a dynamic and recurring universe without an ultimate beginning or end in absolute time.

By contrast, the Qur'anic cosmology is linear and unrepeatable. The Qur'an declares that the one God created the heavens and the earth in six periods (or "days") and established order within creation. While the Qur'an refrains from mythological elaboration, it underscores divine omnipotence and the manifestation of God's signs in nature. The structure of the cosmos is described through references to "seven heavens," yet the Qur'an avoids the highly stratified cosmic geography characteristic of the Puranas. The Islamic vision of history begins with the initial act of creation and concludes with resurrection and the Day of Judgment, when the current world will end and a new eternal order, i.e. the Hereafter, will be instituted. Unlike the cyclical Hindu view, Islamic cosmology understands time as linear, purposeful, and finite, leading toward divine judgment.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that although both systems affirm a divinely originated universe and an eventual cosmic termination, they diverge fundamentally in their conceptions of creation and eschatology. The Puranic cosmology, with its polytheistic framework and recurring cycles, envisions a cosmos without an absolute temporal beginning or final conclusion; each dissolution is followed by another creation. The Qur'anic cosmology, grounded in strict monotheism, posits a single creation and a definitive end of time. Similarly, while Hindu cosmology incorporates the doctrine of transmigration and cosmic renewal, Islamic teachings maintain a one-time earthly existence followed by resurrection and eternal life. Despite these differences, both traditions employ cosmological symbolism to convey theological and moral ideas: Hindu cosmology, through cyclical time, illustrates the maintenance of cosmic order (dharma), while Islamic cosmology, through the final judgment, emphasizes divine justice and moral accountability.

Discussion and Significance

The findings show that each tradition expresses its distinctive worldview through its cosmological schema. The cyclical temporality of Hindu cosmology accords with the doctrine of reincarnation and the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, reflecting a universe that is eternal in essence though subject to endless transformation. Conversely, the linear temporality of Islamic cosmology corresponds to the doctrines of prophethood and the final judgment, emphasizing purposeful history, divine will, and human moral responsibility. This comparison is significant in revealing how the central theological concepts of each faith, such as karma and dharma in Hinduism, and *tawhīd* (divine unity) and *ma'ād* (resurrection) in Islam, shape their respective narratives of cosmic origin and destiny. By delineating the commonalities and distinctions between these two traditions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of both and fills an evident gap in comparative religion.

From a scholarly standpoint, this dissertation advances interdisciplinary research in comparative cosmology and provides a framework for further exploration in comparative theology, philosophy of religion, and scriptural studies. Moreover, by elucidating differing cosmological visions, it may also promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, promoting mutual respect and comprehension between adherents of diverse faiths.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that although the Puranic and Qur'anic cosmologies share thematic correspondences, such as belief in a divine origin of creation and the notion of an end-time, they differ profoundly in their structure of cosmic time, metaphysical hierarchy, and theological orientation. Through a comparative phenomenological analysis, both systems were evaluated within their own symbolic and doctrinal contexts. The study highlights how each tradition integrates cosmological thought with its theological and ethical vision: Hinduism through its endless cycles of cosmic renewal, and Islam through its linear movement toward divine judgment. The principal contribution of this dissertation lies in its detailed and balanced examination of Hindu and Islamic cosmologies as reflected in the Puranas and the Qur'an. It establishes a solid foundation for future research in comparative theology and enhances understanding of how cosmological ideas function as expressions of faith, myth, and metaphysical insight.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in September 2016 at the Department of Comparative Religions, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

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 **Open Access**

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Theology of Tourism: Foundations and Functions

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Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of a new theology of tourism in Christianity, addressing the challenges and opportunities presented by the tourism industry. Utilizing a qualitative-exploratory approach, the research analyzes theological responses to tourism's rise since the late 19th century, a period marked by threats to traditional religious authority. Key findings reveal that while tourism poses significant challenges, such as moral laxity and desacralization, it also offers opportunities for enhanced religious visibility and new pilgrimage practices. This research contributes to the understanding of how religious institutions can adapt to contemporary societal changes, emphasizing the need for a proactive theological response.

Keywords: Theology of Tourism; Catholic Church; Religious Authority; Pilgrimage; Moral Challenges; Desacralization; Tourism Industry.

Background and Research Context

The intersection of tourism and religion has garnered increasing attention in scholarly discourse, particularly in the context of globalization and cultural exchange. The rise of the tourism industry since the late 19th century has transformed not only economic landscapes but also social and cultural practices, including religious observances and institutions. In this evolving context, the Catholic Church faces significant challenges, including the desacralization of sacred spaces, the commodification of religious experiences, and moral challenges associated with tourism, such as the promotion of sexual tourism and the potential for exploitation of local cultures and communities.

Despite the growing body of literature addressing tourism's impact on various religious traditions, there remains a notable gap concerning the emergence of a specific theology of tourism within Christianity, particularly within the Catholic Church. Most existing studies focus on the sociological or economic aspects of religious tourism, often neglecting the theological implications and the church's responses to these developments. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how the Catholic Church navigates the complexities of tourism, articulating a theology that addresses both the challenges and opportunities presented by this phenomenon.

The rationale for this study stems from the need to understand how religious institutions can adapt their theological frameworks to engage with contemporary societal changes, particularly in light of the increasing prominence of tourism as a global phenomenon. By investigating the theological discourse surrounding tourism, this research seeks to provide insights into how the Catholic Church can reclaim its authority and relevance in a rapidly changing world, fostering a more nuanced understanding of faith in the context of modern travel and pilgrimage. This exploration not only contributes to academic scholarship but also offers practical implications for church leaders seeking to engage meaningfully with the tourism industry.

Objectives and Research Questions

Main Objectives:

To explore the theological responses developed by the Catholic Church in light of tourism's growth and its implications for faith practices, focusing on how these responses can help the Church navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining its core teachings.

Research Questions:

- What are the primary challenges of tourism as perceived by the Catholic Church, particularly regarding moral and ethical concerns, and how do these challenges affect the Church's authority and teachings?
- In what ways can the Catholic Church adapt its theology to effectively engage with the phenomenon of tourism, ensuring that it remains relevant in a rapidly changing cultural landscape?
- How does the development of a theology of tourism reflect broader trends in modern Christianity and its interaction with contemporary society, including issues of globalization, cultural exchange, and the commodification of faith?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study is grounded in constructivist-interpretive theory, which posits that meaning is socially constructed through interactions within cultural and religious contexts. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for exploring the intersection of tourism and theology, as it allows for an understanding of how religious beliefs and practices evolve in response to societal changes, including the rise of the tourism industry. By employing this lens, the research aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which the Catholic Church interprets and responds to the challenges and opportunities presented by tourism.

Methodology:

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative and exploratory, utilizing a multi-faceted approach to gather rich, contextual data. The primary data sources include:

- Theological Writings: Analyzing key documents, encyclicals, and pastoral letters from Catholic leaders that address the themes of tourism, pilgrimage, and moral authority. This literature provides insight into the Church's official stance and theological reasoning regarding tourism.
- Church Documents: Reviewing guidelines and policies issued by the Catholic Church related to tourism and pilgrimage, which reflect institutional responses to the evolving landscape of faith practices.
- Literature Review: A comprehensive review of existing scholarly literature on tourism and religion, focusing on gaps related to the Catholic Church's theological responses. This review helps contextualize the research within broader academic discussions.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis will be employed to identify key themes and patterns across the data sources. This involves coding the data to highlight significant concepts related to the Church's challenges and opportunities in the context of tourism. The analysis will also explore how these themes inform the development of a theology of tourism, revealing the interplay between faith, culture, and the tourism industry. By synthesizing these insights, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the Catholic Church can navigate the complexities of modern tourism while remaining true to its theological foundations.

Findings and Main Arguments

This study presents several key findings regarding the relationship between the Catholic Church and the tourism industry, highlighting both challenges and opportunities that shape the Church's theological responses. The core results are as follows:

Challenges of Moral and Ethical Concerns:

The Catholic Church perceives tourism as posing significant moral challenges, including issues such as sexual exploitation, environmental degradation, and the commercialization of sacred spaces. These concerns threaten the sanctity of religious sites and the integrity of faith practices. The commodification of religious experiences can dilute the authenticity of spiritual engagement, leading to a crisis of faith among believers who may feel that tourism prioritizes profit over piety.

Opportunities for Enhanced Visibility and Engagement:

Despite its challenges, tourism presents the Catholic Church with opportunities to enhance its visibility and outreach. Pilgrimages and religious tourism can attract new followers and re-engage lapsed Catholics by offering immersive spiritual experiences. The Church can leverage tourism to promote its teachings and values, using sacred sites as platforms for evangelization and education about Catholic doctrine.

Development of a Theology of Tourism:

The research reveals a growing recognition within the Church of the need to articulate a theology of tourism that addresses both the benefits and drawbacks of the tourism phenomenon. This theology emphasizes the importance of stewardship, respect for sacred spaces, and the promotion of ethical tourism practices. By developing a coherent theological framework, the Church can guide its members in navigating the complexities of tourism while remaining rooted in its spiritual mission.

Adaptation and Innovation in Faith Practices:

The findings suggest that the Catholic Church is increasingly adapting its practices to incorporate elements of tourism. New forms of pilgrimage, such as virtual pilgrimages and themed retreats, reflect an innovative approach to engaging with contemporary believers. The Church's adaptation also includes fostering partnerships with local communities to ensure that tourism benefits both the Church and the surrounding environment, promoting sustainable practices that honor the cultural and spiritual significance of religious sites.

Broader Trends in Modern Christianity:

The development of a theology of tourism within the Catholic Church reflects broader trends in modern Christianity, where faith communities are increasingly engaging with societal changes, globalization, and cultural exchange. This engagement highlights the Church's ability to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world, demonstrating that it can adapt its theological discourse to address contemporary issues while fostering a deeper connection with its followers.

Practical Implications for Church Leadership:

The study emphasizes the need for church leaders to actively engage with the tourism industry, developing strategies that promote ethical tourism, protect sacred spaces, and enhance the spiritual experience of pilgrims. By embracing a proactive approach, the Catholic Church can reclaim its authority and relevance, ensuring that it serves as a guiding force in the lives of believers amidst the complexities of modern tourism. These core results underscore the intricate relationship between the Catholic Church and the tourism industry, revealing both the challenges it faces and the opportunities it can harness to further its mission in the contemporary world.

Discussion and Significance

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between the Catholic Church and the tourism industry, revealing both the challenges and opportunities that shape contemporary faith practices. The identification of moral and ethical concerns highlights the Church's struggle to maintain the sanctity of sacred spaces in an increasingly commercialized environment. However, the recognition of tourism as a vehicle for outreach and engagement underscores the potential for revitalizing faith among believers, particularly through innovative pilgrimage practices.

Significance:

The significance of these findings lies in their implications for the Catholic Church's future engagement with tourism. By developing a coherent theology of tourism, the Church can guide its members in navigating the moral complexities associated with travel and pilgrimage. This theological framework not only addresses immediate concerns but also positions the Church as a relevant voice in discussions about ethical tourism and cultural preservation.

Limitations:

Despite the insights gained, this study has limitations. The qualitative nature of the research may restrict the generalizability of the findings across different cultural contexts within the global Catholic Church. Additionally, the focus on theological responses may overlook other critical dimensions, such as economic impacts and the perspectives of local communities affected by tourism.

Interdisciplinary Relevance:

The study's interdisciplinary relevance is significant, bridging theology, sociology, and tourism studies. It invites scholars from various fields to consider how religious beliefs shape and are shaped by cultural practices, particularly in the context of globalization. By fostering dialogue among theologians, sociologists, and tourism professionals, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the role of faith in contemporary society, encouraging collaborative efforts to promote ethical and sustainable tourism practices that respect both religious traditions and local cultures.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to scholarship by exploring the intersection of Catholic theology and tourism, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that arise within this dynamic relationship. By articulating a theology of tourism, the research provides a framework for the Catholic Church to navigate the complexities of modern travel while maintaining its spiritual integrity. This exploration not only enriches theological discourse but also offers practical insights for church leaders seeking to engage with contemporary societal issues.

Future research should expand on this foundation by examining the perspectives of local communities impacted by religious tourism, assessing how their experiences shape and are shaped by the Church's engagement with tourism. Additionally, comparative studies across different religious traditions could provide a broader understanding of how

various faiths respond to the challenges of tourism, facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue. Finally, investigating the role of digital technology in shaping modern pilgrimage experiences presents a promising avenue for further exploration, particularly in light of the increasing importance of virtual engagement in contemporary religious practice.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in July 2019 at the Department of Abrahamic Religions, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran.

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 **Open Access**

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī's Love for the Ahl al-Bayt and His Sufi Views

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Abstract

There are notable differences between Sunni and Shi'a perspectives concerning the identification and theological interpretation of the Ahl al-Bayt. The attitude of Sufis affiliated with the Sunni tradition represents a distinct and independent stance. Since many Sunni Sufis attribute profound spiritual status and reverence to 'Alī (d. 40/661) and his descendants, similar in some aspects to Shi'a thought, some scholars have argued that this approach may have been shaped under Shi'a influence. Nevertheless, the conception of the Ahl al-Bayt that developed within the teachings of Yahyā Shirvānī (d. 1466), regarded as the second founder of the Khalwatiyyah order, one of the most influential Sufi orders among Sunnis, did not arise from Shi'a sources. Instead, it originated from the Sunni Sufi tradition, which faithfully preserved the Prophet's sunnah and spiritual heritage in its complete sense. Therefore, the Sufi perception of the Ahl al-Bayt neither fully aligns with the as a sect of Sunni Islam nor the Shi'a interpretations but rather reflects a unique spiritual perspective grounded in its own metaphysical framework. This research, which provides a reinterpretation of the notion of the Prophet's Sunnah, reveals through various historical records that the Sufis functioned as a spiritual mediator between the two sects, grounded in their love for the Ahl al-Bayt. Furthermore, in this study, the works of Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī have been analyzed for the first time from this interpretive angle, examining both his views on the Ahl al-Bayt and his broader Sufi doctrines in depth.

Keywords: Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī; Khalwatiyyah; Sufism; Ahl al-Bayt; Shi'ism; Sunnism; Caliphs.

Background and Research Context

Throughout history, Azerbaijan has been one of the major centers of various religions. Following the arrival of Islam in the eighth century, the region became home to numerous Sufi masters and orders that guided the spiritual life of its people. Although Azerbaijan initially adopted the Sunni school of Islam, over time Shi'ism began to spread and was eventually recognized as the official sect of the land. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī, who was born in such a transitional period, positioned himself regarding the Ahl al-Bayt, and how his geographical and cultural context enabled him to act as a spiritual bridge between Shi'ism and Sunnism through his devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. The research also investigates how this devotion shaped the concept of spiritual journey (sulūk) in his mystical thought, as well as his influence and position within the history of Sufism. As a pioneering work, this study presents significant findings concerning the religious history of Azerbaijan, the Khalwatiyyah order, and Islamic intellectual history more broadly. As is well known, in Islamic history, numerous points of contention have arisen between Ahl al-Sunnah and Shi'a, particularly regarding the definition and interpretation of the Ahl al-Bayt. From this perspective, the present research sheds light on these historical debates by examining, for the first time through the example of Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī, the shared domain between both traditions, namely, the love and veneration of the Ahl al-Bayt.

Objectives and Research Questions

- How does a Sunni Sufi perceive and express love for the Ahl al-Bayt while living in a geography shared by both Ahl al-Sunnah and Shi'a communities?
- What are the converging and conflicting dimensions of this affection in relation to Sunni and Shi'a theology?
- How could a Sufi belonging to the Sunni tradition articulate his devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt through the language and terminology of Shi'ism?
- In what ways did he utilize both Sunni and Shi'a sources in his writings?

Through this study, we have observed that this subject has not been adequately addressed in the existing literature, and there are significant gaps in scholarly research. Therefore, our research seeks to provide answers to these fundamental questions and to fill the existing void within the field.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

- Recent archaeological and historical studies conducted in Azerbaijan have contributed significantly to the originality of this research.
- During the examination of the available sources, discussions were held with authors and field specialists, allowing the subject to be explored from multiple scholarly perspectives.
- Moreover, the study establishes connections between previously disconnected strands of literature and, through this analytical pattern, introduces new findings and interpretations to the field.

Findings and Main Arguments

This study makes several significant contributions to the scholarship on 'Umar al-Khalwatī and his successors by drawing on newly accessed and critically examined sources. Through consultation of the Baku manuscript copy, the research incorporates a set of ghazals and na't al-sharif poems found exclusively in that version, thereby expanding the known corpus of Khalwatī poetry. Furthermore, the study locates and utilizes the Ottoman Turkish translation of *Bayān-i Usūl-i Atwār-i Sab'a* (The Exposition of the Seven Stages of Spiritual Discipline), originally composed in Persian but no longer extant in its original form. On the historical level, the research precisely identifies both the burial site and the year of death of 'Umar al-Khalwatī, while also documenting updated information regarding the khānqāh (Sufi lodge) of Dede 'Umar Rūshanī in Karabakh. A critical examination of the silsilah (chain of transmission) composed by Yūsuf al-Muskūrī further illuminates the classical Khalwatiyya lineage, which includes key figures such as Abū Shaykh Aḥmad and Ibn Abī al-Qāsim. The study also addresses long-standing misconceptions about the sectarian orientation of the Khalwati Sufis: while their terminology occasionally resembles Shī'ī expressions, the underlying meanings remain firmly within the doctrinal framework of Ahl al-Sunnah. Indeed, both Sunni and Shī'ī sources were drawn upon in the Khalwati tradition, producing a middle path centered on shared love and devotion for the Ahl al-Bayt. Most importantly, for the first time, the mystical doctrines of Shirvānī are analyzed through the lens of spiritual wayfaring (sulūk), understood as a process that can only be undertaken under the guidance of a murshid who embodies the spiritual station of 'Alī—the true inheritor of the Muḥammadan Reality (al-ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyyah).

Discussion and Significance

Throughout history, some Sunni and Sufi scholars have been accused of being Shi'a due to their profound love for the Ahl al-Bayt, and one notable example of this is Shirvānī. In this context, the Sufis' devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, which appears superficially similar to the Shi'a perception shaped by political factors, has often been misunderstood. Accordingly, this study examines the issue through the example of Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī.

First, the study outlines the perspectives of Ahl al-Sunnah and Shi'a regarding the Ahl al-Bayt, demonstrating that the historical disputes between the two sects were largely rooted in political considerations. Based on these findings, it is observed that the Sunni tradition tended to keep its devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt in the background, in order to avoid being perceived as Shi'i, whereas the Shi'a understanding, heavily influenced by political agendas, does not always align with the essence of Islam. In this context, it has been established that the Sufis' love for the Ahl al-Bayt originates inherently from the essence of Islam, rather than the Shi'a conception of Ahl al-Bayt as a tool for political authority. Consequently, the Sufis did not limit the Ahl al-Bayt to the twelve Imams, as in Shi'ism, but recognized that the inheritors of the Muhammadan Reality also occupy the station of 'Alī. Another important aspect is that members of the Ahl al-Bayt themselves, such as Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Jā'far al-Ṣādiq, 'Alī al-Riḍā, and Ḥasan ibn Ḥasan ibn 'Alī, adopted a firm stance against those who distinguished between Sunnis and Shi'a or spoke against the caliphs. This attitude aligns with the principles embraced by the Sufis, further underscoring their spiritual and doctrinal independence from political or sectarian affiliations. Although Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī was descended from the Ahl al-Bayt, he did not consider this lineage as a source of personal superiority; rather, he maintained that even the descendants of noble lineages could be deceived by Satan. At the same time, by using the title Yahyā al-Ḥusaynī in his writings, he signaled his affiliation with Ḥusayn, an aspect that should be understood within the context of the geography in which he lived. Accordingly, Shirvānī neither boasted of his sayyid status nor allowed this distinction to create division; instead, by acknowledging his lineage, he performed a mediating role between Sunnism and Shi'ism in terms of devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, demonstrating that followers from both traditions could benefit from this shared source of spiritual guidance. Although Shirvānī, who was sometimes accused of being Shi'a, shared certain views with the Shi'a, such as his profound love for the Prophet Muḥammad and the Ahl al-Bayt, his perception of himself as their devoted servant, and his belief that those who rejected them would face Hell, other aspects of his thought clearly indicate his alignment with Sunni Sufism. His deep respect for the four caliphs, the praises he composed in their honor, and the sources he employed in his writings all

demonstrate that he was a Sufi who embraced Sunni orthodoxy. Shirvānī emphasizes that the true Ahl al-Sunnah are those who integrate both the exoteric and esoteric sciences, and he recognizes 'Alī, and thereby the Ahl al-Bayt, as the inheritor of these spiritual sciences. In this regard, Shirvānī views the Ahl al-Bayt as guardians of Sunni orthodoxy, a perspective that is entirely distinct from the Shi'a understanding. Moreover, several features in Shirvānī's works provide clear evidence of his Sunni Sufi identity. These include his frequent use of Sunni sources alongside references to 'Alī and Jā'far al-Ṣādiq, his engagement with the views of the four madhhab imams, and his adherence to the paths of Sufis aligned with Sunni thought. He also refers to 'Ā'isha as "my respected mother", emphasizes that the Ahl al-Sunnah are on the true path, and declares those who do not follow this line to be people of innovation (bid'ah). In this context, Shirvānī served as a bridge in Azerbaijan, a region representing the intersection of the two sects, through the shared devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt, which constitutes a point of convergence between Sunni and Shi'a. His role continues to this day, as evidenced by the fact that both Sunni and Shi'a adherents visit his tomb, maintaining the legacy of his mediating function.

As a result of our research, we have identified new findings both regarding Shirvānī's works and the Khalwatiyya order. Previous studies on Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī have mostly focused on the manuscript copies of his works available in Turkey. In this study, however, we accessed the Baku manuscript copies of his Persian works, and included in our research the ghazals and na't al-sharīf poems that exist exclusively in this manuscript, evaluating them in relation to our topic. Furthermore, we obtained the Ottoman Turkish copy of his Persian work, *Bayān-i Usūl-i Atwār-i Sab'a*, and utilized the information contained therein, thereby contributing this material to the scholarly literature. Within the scope of our study, it has been established that the primary focus of Shirvānī's writings is on union with the Divine and serving as a guide for the spiritual traveler (sālik). Moreover, his treatment of the stages of the heart, the rivers flowing within the heart, and the use of metaphors to describe the heart, as well as his engagement with Bayāzīd al-Bistāmī's *Risālah fī al-Qalb*, demonstrate significant originality and distinct contributions to the history of Sufism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī occupies a pivotal position in the intellectual and spiritual history of Islam, particularly as a mediator between Sunni and Shi'a traditions through his profound yet balanced devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt. His writings and teachings reveal that the veneration of the Ahl al-Bayt within the Khalwati Sufi framework was not derived from Shi'a doctrine but was deeply

rooted in the Sunni mystical heritage that sought to preserve the Prophet's sunnah in its most complete spiritual sense. By integrating Sunni orthodoxy with an inclusive love for the Prophet's family, Shirvānī constructed a unifying spiritual vision that transcended sectarian divides, positioning Sufism as a bridge of reconciliation in a region historically shaped by both traditions. The discovery and analysis of previously unstudied manuscript materials, including the Baku copies of his ghazals and *na't al-sharīf* poems and the Ottoman Turkish translation of *Bayān-i Usūl-i Atwār-i Sab'a*, have expanded our understanding of his thought and literary legacy. Ultimately, this research establishes Shirvānī as a major figure who redefined Sunni Sufi engagement with the *Ahl al-Bayt*, offering a model of spiritual universality grounded in the ethics of love, humility, and guidance; a model that continues to inspire both Sunni and Shi'a devotees who venerate him today.

Dissertation Information

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 **Open Access**

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Muslim-Christian Theological Controversies about the Trinity during the First Centuries of the Hegira

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Abstract

The doctrine of the Trinity has long been a source of controversy within the Christian world. Over time, this belief also became one of the central topics in theological debates between Christians and Muslims. During the first five centuries of the Islamic era, Christian theologians living in the Muslim world, such as the Melkite Theodore Abū Qūrrāh (d. ca. 829), the Nestorian ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī (d. ca. 850), and the Jacobite Abū Ra’ītah al-Takrītī (755–835), wrote numerous works in defense of the Trinity. Through various methods and arguments, they sought to present themselves as monotheists. To this end, they attempted to explain the Trinity using Islamic theological methods and concepts. In response, Muslim Mu’tazilite theologians such as Abū ‘Isā al-Warrāq (d. 247/861) and ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), along with many other heresiographers and apologists, composed treatises refuting the doctrine of the Trinity. They rejected and refuted all the arguments advanced by Christian writers in its defense, striving to demonstrate that Christians were, in fact, tritheists. This thesis first explains the evolution of the concept of the Trinity within mainstream Christianity up to the Council of Chalcedon. It then turns to the idea of the Trinity among the so-called heretical Christian sects and apocryphal gospels. The study also examines how the Qur'an, Muslim exegetes, historians, and heresiographers viewed the Trinity and related concepts. Throughout this work, we have sought to analyze Muslim understandings of the Trinity and other Christian doctrines as objectively as possible, employing a phenomenological approach combined with critical analysis.

Keywords: Trinity; Theological Controversies; Union; Incarnation; Arab Christians; Muslim Polemists.

Background and Research Context

The theological relations between Christianity and Islam have long attracted scholarly attention, and numerous studies have been written on this subject (e.g., Sweetman 1942; Accad 2003; Beaumont 2000; Goddard 2000; Griffith 1994; Husseini 2011; Keating 2003; Mikhail 2013; Swanson 2007; Thomas 2002). In this study, however, we aim both to present the understanding of the Trinity held by Christians within the Islamic world and to analyze the interpretations of this doctrine offered by Muslim thinkers. We seek to demonstrate, first, the methods and arguments employed by Christians to defend the doctrine of the Trinity against Muslim critiques, and the conceptual frameworks through which they sought to communicate this belief to Muslim audiences. Second, we endeavor to examine the challenges posed by Muslim theologians, whether Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, or Zaydī, to the doctrine of the Trinity during the first five centuries of the Islamic era.

Objectives and Research Questions

- Did the interpretation of the Trinity advanced by Christian apologists in the Islamic world contribute to the development of Christian theology?
- What sources and arguments did Muslim theologians employ to refute and invalidate the doctrine of the Trinity, and what was the meaning of the Trinity from their perspective?
- What were the outcomes of the Trinitarian debates between early Islamic and Christian theologians during the first centuries of the Hijra? Did those theological disputes represent a form of religious dialogue or rather a religious confrontation?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In this research, we first sought to meticulously study the sources of both Christian and Muslim theologians in Arabic and ancient Greek. Subsequently, we reviewed and examined the works written by other scholars in this field. Finally, relying on a phenomenological approach and devoid of any prejudice, we analyzed the perspective and understanding of the theologians of both religions as documented in their respective works.

Findings and Main Arguments

The Christian theologians in the Muslim world predominantly belonged to the Melkite, Nestorian, and Jacobite denominations, and these Christians had been living in the Arab world for several centuries prior to the advent of Islam. However, following the rise of Islam, they found themselves in a minority position, compelling them, when confronted

with the theological challenges posed by Muslims, to both defend the Trinity and demonstrate that, contrary to Muslim accusations, they were monotheists, not tritheists. To achieve this aim, these apologists appealed to various arguments, the majority of which had a precedent in mainstream Christian theology. Their innovation and creativity, however, lay in their attempt to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity within the theological framework of the Mu'tazilites. Conversely, Muslims, drawing upon the Qur'an, oral traditions, and the written works of the Christians themselves, were determined to challenge the Christian arguments regarding the Trinity, including their allegories, traditional proofs, and rational arguments, and to demonstrate that the Trinity is incompatible with Tawhīd (monotheism).

Discussion and Significance

Although the use of kalām methods and concepts by Christians to prove the Trinity did not yield significantly important achievements for them, it nevertheless provided a common basis for discourse. The adoption of the Arabic language, citation of the Qur'an, and reference to kalām were the three principal and essential factors in bringing the adherents of the two religions closer together. The Christians' action in explaining the Aqānim of the Trinity within the framework of Mu'tazilite kalām led the Mu'tazilite theologians to feel a certain conceptual commonality between themselves and the Christians. As a result, they were able to engage in the transmission and refutation of Christian Trinitarian doctrines within the structure of their own rational theology. And this, in turn, led to a kind of religious dialogue during the said centuries.

Conclusion

Although various Christian sects were present in pre-Islamic and even post-Islamic Arabia, the surviving literature primarily originates from the great figures of the Melkite, Jacobite, and Nestorian churches. Among these three groups, the Melkites were the first to adopt Arabic as their second language, enabling them to defend their doctrines in this tongue and even to utilize the Qur'an in support of their teachings. Subsequently, the leading figures of the Jacobite and Nestorian traditions also adopted Arabic as a second language. It is highly probable that the Muslim understanding of Christian beliefs during the first two centuries of the Hijra was based on the Qur'an and oral sources. However, in the third century AH, Christian theologians authored numerous works, which led Muslims to acquire information about Christian doctrines directly from Christian sources. Beyond language, all Christian theologians also adopted Muslim concepts and methodologies. This approach is evident in the *Risālah fī Tatlīt Allāh al-Wāhīd* (Treatise on triune of God), the most pioneering work from the Melkites. Theodore Abu Qurrah,

another prominent Melkite figure, referenced the Qur'an over sixty times in his disputation with Muslim theologians to demonstrate that core Christian teachings, such as Sonhood, the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the divinity of Christ, were affirmed by the Qur'an. The reliance on textual evidence, or referencing the Qur'an, to prove the Trinity is also found in the works of *Abū Ra'iṭah al-Tikrītī*, a Jacobite theologian, as well as Timothy the Nestorian (who even interpreted the disconnected letters of the Qur'an as indicative of the Trinity) and *'Ammār al-Baṣrī* of Nestorian disposition. In a sense, therefore, Christian theologians functioned as biblical scholars who utilized not only the Old and New Testaments but also the Qur'an to advance their theological objectives. A crucial point in the theological considerations of the theologians of all three Christian sects is their thorough awareness of the *kalām* discussions of Muslim theologians, especially the *Mu'tazilites*, concerning the divine Essence (*dhāt*) and Attributes (*ṣifāt*). In an attempt to explain the Trinity to Muslims in any possible way, they endeavored to frame it within the structure of Islamic *kalām*. Furthermore, by citing numerous analogies, they sought to demonstrate that natural phenomena also contain triune entities that constitute a single being (such as the sun, heat, and light, for instance). The primary representatives of the three sects, namely, Abu Qurrah, *Abu Ra'iṭah*, and *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, interpreted the *aqānīm* (Persons) of the Word (the Son) and the Spirit as corresponding to the divine attributes of Knowledge (Speech/Logos) and Life, respectively, by employing Muslim theological concepts. In other words, they believed that just as God possesses an Essence and Attributes in Islam, according to Christianity, He also possesses a Substance (*jawhar*) and *Aqānīm*(persons). Among these three theologians, Abu Qurrah utilized biblical testimonies more extensively than *Abu Ra'iṭah* and *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*. Moreover, *'Ammār* made the greatest effort to explain the Trinity within the framework of Islamic *kalām*. At times, he was determined to challenge the *Mu'tazilite* understanding of God's Essence and Attributes, thereby affirming the Christian reading of God's Substance and *Aqānīm*.

Consequently, the *Mu'tazilite* theologians were the most frequent audience for the Christian writers in the first centuries of the Hijra. Nevertheless, a point that should not be overlooked is that the Christians' appeal to *Mu'tazilite* *kalām* discussions in explaining the Trinity ignited further questions and challenges for which the Christian theologians could never provide definitive answers. They were aware that the *Aqānīm* could not be precisely equated with the divine Attributes in the technical sense of *kalām*. Therefore, they declared that the *Aqānīm* are similar to the Attributes but are not the Attributes themselves. This, in turn, led Muslims to accuse them of contradiction. The differing conceptions of God held by Christians and Muslims meant that the arguments put forth

by the Christian theologians failed to persuade their Muslim audience. Christians used the term *jawhar* (substance) in reference to God, considering it to be immaterial, spiritual, and simple in their Trinitarian discussions, while simultaneously affirming its shared existence among the *Aqānīm*. In contrast, all Muslim theologians believed that if *jawhar* was divisible or capable of receiving something, it must, by definition, be material. Consequently, they viewed the Christian understanding of *jawhar* as implying corporeality and susceptibility to accidents, and they rejected the application of the term *jawhar* to God in this sense. *Abū Īsā al-Warrāq*, and subsequently *Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī* and *‘Abd al-Jabbār*, directed the most significant criticisms toward the concept of *jawhar*, concluding that the Christian conception of God presented Him as a “corporeal being.” Underlying the proofs offered by *al-Warrāq* and the theologians who followed him was the idea that the Christian concept of God implied four distinct entities: the Essence (*jawhar*) and the three *Aqānīm*. On the other hand, although the Christians’ attempt to explain the Trinity within the framework of Islamic *kalām* can be considered a form of “creative reaction,” their endeavor in this area ultimately proved unsuccessful. Their goal was to present themselves as monotheists, similar to Muslims, but not only did they fail to achieve this, but they were also met with serious criticisms and objections from the Muslim theologians.

In conclusion, it must be noted that a large number of Christians, including John of Damascus, Theodore *Abū Qurrah*, and Leo III, displayed a highly negative approach toward Islam and Muslims in their writings. John of Damascus, in particular, was the founder of negative attitude toward Islam among Christians throughout the Islamic world. His student, Theodore *Abū Qurrah*, was able to easily defend his doctrines and question Muslim teachings in the presence of *al-Ma’mūn* and other theologians. *Tīmūti al-Nastūrī* presented his arguments in defense of the Trinity before the Caliph *al-Mahdi al-‘Abbāsī* without any hindrance and sometimes easily challenged Islamic doctrines. Both the safety of the debating Christian theologians and that of their followers were guaranteed when they engaged in disputation before the Caliph. However, none of the Muslim theologians resorted to vituperation against the Christians in their compositions. All of them endeavored to refute Christian doctrines using argumentation and logic. The Muslim theologians sought first to transmit the doctrine of the Trinity as it truly was and then to refute it. In contrast, the tone and pen of the Christian theologians most often departed from the form of dialogue and adopted a shape of insult and slander. None of the Christian theologians buried their works out of fear. For example, the treatise *The Story of Bahīrā* was widely circulated among Christians in the Islamic world despite its anti-Islamic content. In contrast, the Gnostics of the Byzantine world were forced to

conceal their writings due to the fear of mainstream Christianity. All these factors point to the “Golden Age” and the peaceful coexistence of adherents of different religions in the history of the Islamic world – an era which, due to the tolerance of the 'Abbāsid Caliphs and the rationalism of the Mu'tazilite theologians and thinkers, led to the emergence of the tradition of “Interfaith Dialogue” in its precise sense.

Dissertation Information

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 Open Access

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

The Role of Women in Jesus Christ's Religious Movement with an Emphasis on Mary Magdalene

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the status and representation of women in early Christianity, with a specific focus on Mary Magdalene as reflected in both canonical and apocryphal texts. Within the broader field of Christian studies, feminist theology provides a renewed interpretive framework for reading the Bible and early Christian writings. By analyzing the Gospels alongside selected noncanonical sources, this study investigates how Jesus' teachings introduced reformative perspectives on women's roles within the patriarchal context of Jewish society. The research highlights the distinctive portrayal of Mary Magdalene in apocryphal works such as the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, and Pistis Sophia, in which she is depicted as a figure of wisdom, leadership, and spiritual authority. Although the institutional Church later rejected these texts, they nonetheless reveal the intellectual and theological engagement of early Christian communities with questions of gender and discipleship. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how feminist reinterpretations of these sources can shed new light on the evolving position of women in both early Christianity and contemporary faith contexts.

Keywords: Mary Magdalene; Women in Christianity; Feminist Theology; Early Christian Texts; Jesus Christ; The Bible; Apocrypha.

Background and Research Context

The study is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of early Christian studies, biblical hermeneutics, and feminist theology. In recent decades, scholarly attention to women's roles in the formative stages of Christianity has grown significantly. Yet the portrayal of key female figures, particularly Mary Magdalene, continues to be shaped by centuries of theological, cultural, and institutional reinterpretation. Traditional readings of the canonical Gospels have often marginalized women's participation in Jesus' ministry, emphasizing male apostles as the primary bearers of authority and revelation. Contemporary research in both historical and feminist biblical studies has reopened this discourse by reassessing the evidence found in apocryphal and noncanonical writings. Feminist theologians argue that patriarchal interpretations have historically obscured female perspectives, necessitating a reconstruction of early Christian history that centers women's experiences and agency (Fiorenza 1994). These texts, once excluded from ecclesiastical orthodoxy, reveal a more diverse and inclusive understanding of discipleship, in which Mary Magdalene emerges as a central and authoritative voice. This project builds upon that evolving academic context, addressing the critical gap between canonical representation and extracanonical evidence. By situating the inquiry within feminist theological frameworks, it contributes to the re-evaluation of women's spiritual and intellectual authority in the earliest Christian communities. Ultimately, the research seeks to illuminate how early Christian narratives, canonical and apocryphal alike, reflect the complex processes through which gender, authority, and sacred knowledge were negotiated in the nascent Jesus movement.

Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to explore how Jesus Christ's movement transformed women's status in early Christianity and how such transformation can serve as a model for feminist theology. The research examines the social and religious position of Jewish women before Jesus' ministry, their participation in his movement, and the distinctive role of Mary Magdalene as a leading female disciple. By integrating feminist theological perspectives, it seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on gender and religion.

Research Questions:

1. What was the position of Jewish women before the rise of Jesus' movement?
2. Which women are identified in the New Testament as followers of Jesus, and what roles did they play?

3. How is Mary Magdalene represented as a significant female figure in this movement?

Hypotheses:

1. Jesus redefined the perception of women's roles within a patriarchal Jewish society.
2. Mary Magdalene held a distinctive and possibly leading role among Jesus' followers.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research is anchored in the intersection of feminist theology, historical-critical biblical studies, and gender theory. Feminist theology provides the primary theoretical foundation, emphasizing the reinterpretation of Christian scripture and tradition through the lived experiences, agency, and spiritual authority of women. Building on Fiorenza's argument that feminist reconstruction destabilizes patriarchal historiography (Fiorenza 1994), the study treats feminist theology not merely as a corrective but as a full hermeneutical paradigm for reading both canonical and extra-canonical texts. Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (Ruether 2004) have highlighted how patriarchal readings of the Bible historically marginalized women's voices, inspiring the present study's effort to recover female perspectives within early Christianity and to highlight how these perspectives redefined religious participation and leadership. The study also draws on sociological and hermeneutical approaches to understand the socio-religious structures of first-century Jewish society in which Jesus' movement emerged. By contextualizing Jesus' reformative message within this patriarchal environment, the research identifies how his teachings subverted traditional hierarchies and opened new pathways for women's active discipleship.

Methodologically, this dissertation employs qualitative textual analysis that combines historical-critical and comparative readings of canonical and non-canonical sources. Canonical texts such as the four Gospels are examined alongside apocryphal writings, including the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, and Pistis Sophia, to trace variations in the representation of women. Attention is given to language, symbolism, and theological motifs related to authority, purity, and revelation. Through this integrated framework, the study seeks not only to reconstruct the historical role of women in Jesus' movement but also to engage with contemporary feminist hermeneutics that reinterpret these texts as empowering models for gender equality. This methodological synthesis

ensures a balanced inquiry that is both historically grounded and theologically relevant, bridging early Christian discourse with ongoing feminist reflections in modern theology.

Findings and Main Arguments

Analysis of the canonical and apocryphal texts reveals several key dimensions of women's roles in Jesus Christ's movement. First, the canonical Gospels depict women as active participants in Jesus' ministry, often accompanying him on his journeys, providing support, and witnessing critical events such as the resurrection (King 2003). Their presence challenges the patriarchal norms of first-century Jewish society, indicating that Jesus' approach to discipleship was inclusive and transformative.

Second, apocryphal writings such as the Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Thomas, and Pistis Sophia highlight women not only as followers but as authoritative interpreters and leaders within early Christian communities (Marjanen 1996). Mary Magdalene, in particular, is consistently portrayed as a figure of spiritual insight and leadership, sometimes surpassing male apostles in understanding and devotion. These texts illustrate an alternative narrative where women are central to theological discourse, suggesting that early Christian communities grappled with the tension between gender inclusivity and emerging patriarchal structures.

Third, a comparative reading of canonical and non-canonical sources reveals that while the official Church eventually marginalized women's public roles, these apocryphal accounts preserve a memory of female agency and intellectual authority. They offer insight into the contested space women occupied, both theologically and socially, and demonstrate the potential for feminist reinterpretation to recover these marginalized perspectives.

Overall, the research argues that Mary Magdalene and other female disciples were central not only in supporting Jesus' mission but also in shaping the theological and communal ethos of early Christian movements. Recognizing these roles challenges patriarchal historiography and contributes to broader feminist theological discourse, offering new insights for contemporary scholarship on women in religion.

Discussion and Significance

The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that early Christianity, particularly within the movement led by Jesus, contained a transformative vision for women's roles in religious and social life. By elevating women such as Mary Magdalene to positions of spiritual authority, the texts reveal a subversive challenge to prevailing patriarchal norms in first-century Jewish society. This suggests that debates over women's

participation were central to early Christian communities and that the marginalization of female voices was a later development associated with institutional consolidation (Laffey 2001).

The study underscores the interdisciplinary relevance of these findings. From a historical perspective, it reconstructs the social and religious contexts that enabled women's active discipleship, highlighting their engagement not only in communal practices but also in theological reflection. From a theological standpoint, the research illuminates how feminist readings of canonical and apocryphal texts can correct long-standing interpretive biases, offering a more inclusive understanding of early Christian spirituality.

Furthermore, the research has contemporary significance. By reclaiming the authority and contributions of women in the Jesus movement, it provides a model for re-evaluating gender dynamics in modern faith communities. These insights challenge churches and religious scholars to consider how historical erasures have shaped contemporary perceptions of female leadership, offering avenues for greater inclusivity in both academic and religious settings.

Finally, the dissertation identifies limitations and areas for further research, including the need to explore additional apocryphal texts and regional variations in early Christian communities. Future studies could expand comparative analyses to other religious movements of the period, enhancing understanding of women's leadership across early spiritual traditions.

Conclusion

This dissertation concludes that early Christian narratives, both canonical and apocryphal, preserve significant traces of women's active participation and theological influence, which were gradually obscured as patriarchal authority solidified within the institutional Church. The research highlights how the transition from inclusive discipleship to male-dominated hierarchy unfolded across successive interpretive layers. Early Christian women not only accompanied Jesus and the apostles but also transmitted teachings, performed acts of faith, and shaped community life. Yet, as orthodoxy was defined, their presence was diminished and their voices confined to marginal texts. This process mirrors a broader socio-religious evolution observable in the centuries following the rise of Christianity.

By recovering these suppressed narratives, the dissertation contributes to a reconstruction of early Christian gender history, emphasizing that the silencing of

women was not inherent to the faith's origins but a later distortion. The study thus provides new foundations for feminist theology, offering a more inclusive vision of spirituality rooted in historical evidence. Ultimately, the research opens pathways for re-evaluating how women's religious authority might once again inform and renew contemporary understandings of faith and leadership.

Dissertation Information

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 **Open Access**

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

A Comparative Study of Cultural Policy-Making Models of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī Based on Strategic Documents and Cultural Activities

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Abstract

The Catholic Church and Shi‘ism represent two historically rich currents within the great religions of Christianity and Islam. The Vatican, as the central authority of the Catholic Church, possesses the most extensive and organized religious structure in the world. Conversely, within the Shi‘ite tradition, Āstān Quds Rażavī (the Custodianship of the Shrine of Imam Riżā) can be regarded as the most dynamic and active religious center of Shi‘ism. From the Safavid period onward, Āstān Quds Rażavī developed into a vast and influential institution within both the Shi‘ite and broader Islamic world, and after the Islamic Revolution, it emerged as the most impactful religious and cultural organization at national and transnational levels of Shi‘ite life. The Vatican serves as the permanent seat of the Popes and functions as the administrative and spiritual headquarters of the Catholic Church, whereas Āstān Quds is an Islamic institution centered on the sacred shrine of Imam ‘Ali ibn Mūsā al-Riżā. Both institutions conceive their primary mission as cultural and have, in pursuit of this vocation, undertaken the formulation and codification of cultural policies and strategic orientations. The principal focus of this research is to comparatively analyze the models of cultural policy-making developed by these two institutions on the basis of their official strategic documents and cultural activities. The study first provides a comprehensive introduction to both institutions, with particular emphasis on their strategic documents, and then identifies their dominant approaches and policy-making models to conduct a comparative examination of their frameworks, structures, and guiding principles.

Keywords: Comparative Study; Cultural Policy-Making; Vatican; Āstān Quds Rażavī; Strategic Documents.

Research Context and Objectives

A comparative analysis of two institutions that simultaneously function as custodians of sacred space and as centers of religious authority within the distinct traditions of Islam and Christianity can, despite their differing religious, cultural, historical, and geographical contexts, facilitate the exchange of valuable experiences and contribute to the reform, expansion, and enhancement of their cultural activities. Reciprocal collaboration, which was not a widely recognized concept prior to the expansion of global communications in the modern era, has now become an inevitable necessity. Through an examination of the strategic documents, institutional structures, and diverse cultural activities of both the Vatican and *Āstān Quds Rażavī*, this study seeks to propose recommendations for reorientation and improvement of their respective cultural approaches. The comparative perspective allows for the identification of both successful and unsuccessful experiences, providing a foundation for constructive institutional learning. A comparative study of these two organizations, given their shared functional domains as well as their unique institutional characteristics, opens avenues for fruitful cross-religious engagement and sustained cultural interaction.

Since the subject of this dissertation belongs to the domain of comparative and interdisciplinary studies, no prior research offering a comparative analysis of these two institutions has been identified in the existing scholarly literature. Accordingly, the research pursues the following objectives:

1. To compare and analyze the strategic documents, structures, and cultural activities of both religious institutions;
2. To identify similarities and differences through a critical analysis of their respective strengths and weaknesses;
3. To apply the Vatican's successful experiences in cultural activity to the context of *Āstān Quds Rażavī*;
4. To learn from the Vatican's less effective policies across the history of Christianity;
5. To propose revisions to the macro-level policies and orientations of *Āstān Quds Rażavī* in light of the study's findings;
6. To discern and compare the cultural perspectives and orientations of both institutions;
7. To identify potential areas of interaction in religious and cultural dimensions;

8. To foster mutual understanding between the two institutions and facilitate joint cooperation by drawing upon their capacities and accumulated experiences.

Research Questions

1. Do the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī recognize the politicizability of culture; that is, do they adopt a Platonic view of culture as necessary for strict control and moral censorship to maintain social order, or an Aristotelian view of it as necessary for the public education and psychological catharsis required for citizens' virtuous flourishing within the state?
2. Upon which established model(s) of cultural policy-making are the cultural policies and strategic orientations of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī based?
3. To what extent are the cultural activities of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī influenced or determined by their official strategic documents?
4. What means and instruments do these two religious institutions employ to communicate and transmit their cultural and religious messages?
5. Is there a discernible correspondence between their cultural and missionary activities and the nature of their target audiences?
6. How do the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī engage with the issues and needs of the contemporary human being?
7. What are the respective institutional and theological approaches of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī toward pilgrims and the practice of pilgrimage?
8. What is each institution's conceptual approach to culture, i.e. a minimalist or a maximalist understanding?

Hypotheses

- The cultural policies, strategies, and activities of the Vatican are grounded in a realist model of cultural policy-making, whereas those of Āstān Quds Rażavī follow an idealist model within the same theoretical spectrum. The Vatican's cultural engagement is shaped by a coherent strategic framework, most notably articulated through the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), which provides a consistent doctrinal and operational foundation for its cultural initiatives. By contrast, the cultural activities of Āstān Quds Rażavī are only partially aligned with its overarching institutional policies and often display discontinuity across administrative periods.

- The Vatican encounters a duality between the pilgrim and the tourist. In practice, the Vatican functions more as a site of religious tourism than of pilgrimage, whereas the Rażavī Shrine primarily embodies a space of pilgrimage and worship, with limited emphasis on its artistic and historical dimensions as a potential cultural tourism destination. Despite its architectural and artistic uniqueness within the Islamic world, the shrine's heritage and aesthetic aspects have received comparatively little systematic attention in policy planning.
- Both the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī adopt a maximalist conception of culture, viewing it as a comprehensive sphere encompassing all dimensions of human and institutional life. However, their operational roles differ substantially. Āstān Quds Rażavī assumes a directive and executive role, functioning primarily as an implementing (or “frontline”) institution in cultural affairs; whereas the Vatican fulfills a leadership and supportive role, operating as a coordinating (or “central”) institution in the cultural domain. This distinction between executive versus guiding functions represents the core institutional divergence in their cultural policy models

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical, comparative, and applied research design. Initially, a descriptive method was used to introduce and contextualize both Āstān Quds Rażavī and the Vatican. Given the author's professional responsibility within the cultural leadership departments of Āstān Quds Rażavī and his lived experience in this institution, a qualitative self-ethnographic approach was adopted to describe and analyze its cultural policies from an insider perspective. Subsequently, analytical and comparative methods were applied to examine and contrast the cultural policy-making models of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī, allowing for both structural and functional evaluation within a cross-religious framework.

Findings and Main Arguments

The Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī are two religious institutions that share common objectives. In the theoretical bases of their cultural policy-making, both understand culture in its maximalist sense, i.e. culture as a way of life that influences all other spheres. Accordingly, both deploy culture as an instrument for comprehensive development. Each institution has turned to culture to promulgate its religious teachings. According to the strategic documents of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī, the foundational values of both are closely aligned due to their religious nature and functions. Likewise, broad participation, avoidance of direct executive control, the

principle of transparency, and synergy are shared strategic aims. At the same time, they pursue distinct approaches to cultural policy and planning. The Vatican employs a realist planning model in formulating policies, orientations, programs, and activities; *Āstān Quds Rażavī* follows an idealist planning model. The principal operational difference between the two lies in the contrast between leadership versus executive roles: the Vatican adopts a supportive and guiding posture, whereas *Āstān Quds Rażavī* assumes a direct executive and interventionist posture. Centralization prevails in the structure and activities of *Āstān Quds Rażavī*, while the Vatican defines decentralization as a vital strategic principle.

In this research, the macro-structure and governance of the Holy See and its central government (the Roman Curia), together with *Āstān Quds Rażavī*, were first examined comparatively. The study then turned to a comparative analysis of the cultural arena, the strategic documents, and the cultural policy-making models of these two institutions; since each institution's cultural domain is shaped by its overarching structure.

*1. Saint Peter and Imam al-Riżā: The Ontological Rationale of the Vatican and *Āstān Quds**

Saint Peter (d. 64 CE), as Pope, and Imam 'Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riżā (148–203 AH / 766–818 CE), as Imam, hold eminent positions within the two great religious traditions of Christianity and Islam and are venerated as saints. They provided the historical basis for the emergence and development of two major religious institutions in the Christian and Islamic worlds; more precisely, these distinguished religious figures constitute the existential foundation of the Vatican and *Āstān Quds Rażavī*. The Vatican is the permanent seat of the Popes, successors to Jesus Christ and Peter, and the administrative center of the Catholic Church; *Āstān Quds Rażavī* is an Islamic institution centered on the sacred shrine of Imam al-Riżā.

2. Formation and Development of the Vatican and the Rażavī Shrine

The formation of the Vatican and the Rażavī shrine began from the burial grounds of Saint Peter and Imam al-Riżā, respectively, and gradually expanded across historical periods into their present monumental forms. The apex of the Vatican's religious architectural development occurred from the mid-fifteenth to the early sixteenth century (1450–1515 CE), a period corresponding to the late Timurid era and the early Safavid dynasty, during which the Rażavī shrine also underwent major expansion. A heritage-oriented, historical, and artistic outlook governs Vatican City rather than a primarily devotional orientation; by contrast, at the Rażavī shrine, a devotional and liturgical orientation predominates.

3. Synchrony in Organizational Transformations of the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī

Most of the Vatican's executive bodies took shape in the sixteenth century, specifically between 1542 and 1588 CE; i.e. the same period in which the Safavid state was established in Iran and the bureaucratic structure of Āstān Quds Rażavī assumed formal contours, especially under Shah 'Abbās I. Parallel developments are also observable in the post-Vatican II era and during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as well as in the concurrent custodianship of 'Abbās Wa'iz Ṭabassī (1979–2016) and the papacy of John Paul II (1978–2005), when both institutions experienced far-reaching reforms.

4. Leadership and Structure

In both institutions, the supreme authority, i.e. Pope and Custodian, bears ultimate leadership and decision-making responsibility. Although advisory councils exist in each case, they possess no juridical force and remain consultative; the validity of decisions is contingent upon issuance, approval, or ratification by the supreme authority.

5. Role of Clergy and Non-Clergy in Macro-Governance

At the Vatican, senior managers and members of congregations and other bodies are cardinals, archbishops, or bishops; priests and laypersons occupy comparatively fewer executive posts, though lay specialists from various academic fields serve as consultants. By contrast, senior administrators at Āstān Quds Rażavī are predominantly lay professionals, with university-trained experts more prominent than seminarians. The Vatican's leadership-and-support model versus Āstān Quds Rażavī's executive model largely explains this difference.

6. Comparative Analysis of Cultural Policy-Making at the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī

Both institutions rely on culture to disseminate religious teachings. According to their strategic documents, their core values converge, owing to their religious nature and functions; and include broad participation, avoidance of executive overreach, transparency, and synergy. Yet their policy models diverge: the Vatican follows a realist planning paradigm (as exemplified by the opening ten sections of *Gaudium et Spes*, addressing the challenges of modern humanity), whereas Āstān Quds Rażavī exemplifies an idealist planning paradigm, evident in superlative formulations such as “the most dynamic” and “the supreme source” of pilgrimage destination. Papal constitutions issued by John Paul II and Francis advance Vatican II's aims without revisiting theological first principles, indicating programmatic continuity. In Āstān Quds Rażavī, however, changes in custodianship often lead to the replacement of prior strategies with newly authored documents, signaling programmatic discontinuity.

Two policy orientations are particularly salient. A “top-down, elite-driven” approach seeks to expand cultural consumption through subsidizing state-favored culture and providing low-cost or free opportunities, often overlooking many cultural identities. A second, “bottom-up, participatory” approach emphasizes public involvement in producing and distributing cultural activities and artifacts, with the state’s role defined as ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens to express their cultural identities. In practice, the Vatican’s support for cultural innovation across diverse forms and civilizations reflects a bottom-up posture. *Āstān Quds Rażavī* tends toward executive production of cultural works and activities, granting the public limited participatory roles and primarily treating them as consumers.

Both institutions pursue the fundamental goal of articulating and promoting religious teachings and view culture as a means to that end and to comprehensive development. Each employs diverse instruments and media to reach its audiences. The Vatican has made particularly effective use of the arts and the digital sphere, whereas *Āstān Quds Rażavī*, despite the shrine’s outstanding artistic and architectural assets, has engaged less with the arts as a central medium of cultural communication.

Operationally, the Vatican’s supportive and guiding role contrasts with the direct executive intervention of *Āstān Quds Rażavī*. Centralization characterizes *Āstān Quds Rażavī*’s structure and activity, while decentralization is a defining strategic principle of the Vatican, explicitly affirmed in the preface to Pope Francis’s apostolic constitution. The Vatican treats cultural diversity and minority communities as opportunities aligned with its mission, a stance not yet clearly articulated in *Āstān Quds Rażavī*’s strategic documents, despite some recent, scattered initiatives. Owing to its international status, the Vatican fully leverages participation in global institutions, whereas *Āstān Quds Rażavī* maintains limited memberships even domestically. The Vatican’s attention to pressing global issues, responsiveness to contemporary human needs, collaboration with civil society, and context-sensitive program diversification further distinguish its model.

Final Discussion and Conclusion

This comparative inquiry into the Vatican and Āstān Quds Rażavī has demonstrated that, while these two institutions emerge from distinct theological, historical, and cultural contexts, they share a profound conviction that culture is not peripheral to religion but constitutive of it. Both conceive culture in its maximalist and civilizational sense, as a comprehensive framework shaping belief, ethics, aesthetics, and social life, and thus employ cultural policy as an instrument of religious communication, education, and transformation. Yet, beneath this shared axiom, their respective institutional trajectories and operational modalities disclose two markedly different models of religious cultural governance: the Vatican's realist, decentralized, and dialogical paradigm, and Āstān Quds Rażavī's idealist, centralized, and executivist framework.

The Vatican's model of cultural policy-making, rooted in the post-Vatican II theology of engagement articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, reveals an institution that has progressively reconceptualized itself as both guardian and dialogue partner in the modern world. Its cultural strategy is characterized by structural continuity, subsidiarity, and responsiveness to global concerns. Through its Pontifical Councils, commissions, and curial reform initiatives, the Vatican operationalizes a participatory, bottom-up approach that affirms cultural pluralism and the creative agency of the faithful. Culture here functions not merely as heritage but as a living medium of theological communication, a locus where faith and reason, sacred and secular, converge.

Āstān Quds Rażavī, by contrast, exemplifies a model deeply embedded in the post-revolutionary Iranian context, combining custodianship of sacred heritage with direct engagement in socio-religious and economic fields. Its idealist orientation has produced visionary yet often discontinuous policy frameworks shaped by leadership transitions and institutional centralization. The predominance of executive management, together with limited public participation, reflects a top-down logic of cultural production that prioritizes administrative control over dialogical exchange. Nonetheless, Āstān Quds Rażavī's vast material, artistic, and ritual resources situate it as a unique laboratory for developing integrative models of Islamic cultural policy that could, with structural reform, align more closely with participatory and internationally networked paradigms of religious governance.

Comparatively, the study illuminates a dialectic between institutional centralization and decentralization, idealism and realism, and executive control and cultural subsidiarity, which together define the distinctiveness of each model. The Vatican's effectiveness lies in its ability to sustain theological coherence while adapting to global complexity through

decentralization and interreligious dialogue. *Āstān Quds Rażavī*'s strength lies in its devotional intensity and organizational reach, yet its future vitality may depend on its capacity to move from custodial administration toward strategic facilitation of cultural creativity and transnational collaboration.

Beyond institutional comparison, this research contributes to the emerging field of comparative religious cultural policy studies. It demonstrates that religious institutions, when viewed as cultural actors, not only transmit faith but also shape public ethics, aesthetics, and civic imagination. Their models of cultural governance mirror their underlying theological anthropology: the Vatican's humanistic universalism versus *Āstān Quds Rażavī*'s eschatological idealism. Both can serve as instructive interlocutors in the global debate on the role of religion in cultural development, inter-civilizational understanding, and peacebuilding.

Ultimately, the study argues that sustained dialogue and knowledge exchange between the Vatican and *Āstān Quds Rażavī* could inaugurate a new phase of interfaith cultural diplomacy. Such engagement, grounded in mutual respect and policy learning, could transform these two historically inward-looking institutions into exemplary models of how faith traditions can cooperate in addressing the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual needs of contemporary humanity. By reimagining cultural policy as a shared theological endeavor, the Vatican and *Āstān Quds Rażavī* might contribute not only to the enrichment of their own traditions but also to the broader cultivation of a global culture of meaning, dignity, and peace.

Dissertation Information

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Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

A Critical Review of Peter L. Berger's Approach to Religion

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Abstract

This article presents a critical and integrative review of Peter L. Berger's approach to religion across his sociological and theological corpus. It reconstructs Berger's central conceptual framework, grounded in Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology and the sociology of knowledge, and demonstrates how it mediates the classic Weber–Durkheim divide through the dialectic of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The analysis then turns to Berger's substantive definition of religion as cosmos construction in a sacred mode, his account of the anthropological foundations of religion in the lifeworld and in human biological “incompleteness,” and his distinctive thesis that religion operates as a plausibility-conferring “sacred canopy.” The second part of the article traces Berger's evolving interpretation of modernization: from his early endorsement of the secularization thesis, through his decisive turn toward the theory of desecularization, to his later emphasis on pluralism as the inescapable religious condition of modernity. The discussion further evaluates Berger's proposed theological strategies, i.e. deductive, reductive, and inductive, emphasizing his preference for an inductive, experience-centered method in plural contexts, while critically addressing unresolved issues such as the criteria for authentic religious experience, the risks of relativism, and the tensions between experiential theology and confessional exclusivism. The article concludes that Berger's thought remains indispensable for understanding the dynamics of religion under modern conditions: secularization appears as a contingent rather than universal process, pluralism emerges as a structural feature of modernity, and belief increasingly assumes the form of reflexive choice rather than inherited certainty.

Keywords: Peter L. Berger; Sociology of Religion; Sacred Canopy; Secularization; Pluralism.

Introduction

Few twentieth-century scholars shaped the vocabulary of the sociology of religion as decisively as Peter L. Berger. Trained in both sociology and theology, Berger wrote with unusual clarity and intellectual range, synthesizing Weberian interpretive sociology, Durkheimian attention to social facts, and Schutz's phenomenology of the lifeworld. His collaboration with Thomas Luckmann produced "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966), a foundational text in the sociology of knowledge; "The Sacred Canopy" (1967) introduced a lasting metaphor for religion's world-making power; and "A Rumor of Angels" (1970) together with "The Heretical Imperative" (1979) examined the fate of transcendence and belief under modern conditions. This article reconstructs and critically appraises Berger's approach to religion. The aim is twofold: first, to present a coherent map of Berger's key concepts, i.e. his definition of religion, its origins, functions, and its relationship to modernity; and second, to evaluate the strengths and limitations of his proposals, particularly his later revisions to the secularization thesis and his advocacy of an inductive theology suited to plural societies. Beyond its theoretical contribution, such an appraisal is especially relevant to contexts like contemporary Iran and broader West Asia, where debates on modernization, public religion, pluralism, and the meaning of faith in media-urban settings remain pressing. The discussion proceeds in six steps: (1) methodological background; (2) religion as phenomenon and Berger's substantive definition; (3) the origin of religion in the lifeworld; (4) the functions of religion as legitimization and canopy; (5) modernization, secularization, and pluralism; and (6) a critical appraisal followed by concluding reflections.

Methodological Background

Berger's project is best understood as a strand within the sociology of knowledge, as an inquiry into how human meanings are produced, stabilized, and transmitted through social processes (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Two intellectual sources are decisive in shaping this framework. First, following Max Weber, Berger adopts an interpretive orientation (*Verstehen*), whereby the sociologist seeks to comprehend the meanings that actors attribute to their actions and institutions. This entails adherence to what Weber termed "value freedom," namely the bracketing of the researcher's own normative or theological commitments to ensure that sociological analysis does not collapse into advocacy or confession. Second, drawing on Alfred Schutz, Berger incorporates a phenomenology of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the taken-for-granted realm of everyday interaction in which typifications, routines, and common-sense knowledge constitute the shared fabric of reality.

The central mechanism of Berger's synthesis is his threefold dialectic: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Through externalization, humans project meanings into the world by way of action and institution-building. Through objectivation, these projections crystallize into seemingly independent structures, i.e. laws, roles, symbols, and traditions. Through internalization, individuals are socialized into these structures, which in turn shape their identities. In Berger's concise formulation: society is a human product; society becomes an objective reality; and humans are themselves social products (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This dynamic allows Berger to mediate between Weber's concern for subjective meaning and Durkheim's emphasis on the coercive power of social institutions.

Methodologically, when Berger turns to religion, he supplements this framework with what he calls "methodological atheism." The sociologist, he insists, should not adjudicate the truth of transcendental claims but rather analyze their human dimension, i.e. the symbols, institutions, practices, and legitimations through which religious meaning is socially constructed. This is not a metaphysical denial of transcendence but an analytic discipline designed to safeguard the empirical integrity of sociological inquiry.

Religion as Phenomenon

Berger maintains that sociological inquiry requires a clear and operational definition of religion. He rejects crude reductionisms, such as interpreting religion merely as pathology, illusion, or ideology, that dissolve the phenomenon into categories of non-religion. Equally, he cautions against purely functional definitions that classify any totalizing system of meaning or loyalty as "religion," thereby stripping the term of its distinctive analytical content. His own approach is substantive: religion is world-building in a sacred mode. The decisive differentiator is the sacred, that which signifies "more than" ordinary meaning, experienced as an order that is radically other and normatively binding. In his early writings, Berger used "the sacred" and "the supernatural" interchangeably; later, he distinguished between them and eventually represented their relationship as overlapping circles: the properly religious domain is where experiences are both sacred and supernatural.

Drawing on Schutz, Berger conceives religious experience as a movement into a finite province of meaning, a sphere that temporarily suspends the paramount reality of everyday life. Within this altered horizon, the self encounters a dimension of reality that reorients identity through what Rudolf Otto described as a numinous ambivalence of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, simultaneous awe and attraction (Otto 1958). Yet, as

Berger notes, such ecstatic experiences inevitably fade. To sustain them, religion requires mediations:

1. Experience: the first-order encounter with the sacred;
2. Tradition: the institutions, narratives, and rites that “objectify” the sacred within collective memory; and
3. Thought: theologies and philosophies that legitimate the tradition once its taken-for-granted status erodes.

The result is a coherent analytic program: define religion substantively; describe religious experience phenomenologically; trace its institutional mediations; and preserve an interpretive, value-suspending, and methodologically atheistic stance throughout sociological analysis.

The Origin of Religion

Why is there religion? Berger’s answer is both anthropological and social. Human beings, unlike most animals, are biologically “unfinished”: our instincts are under-specified, and our behavior is not determined by fixed genetic programming. We survive by constructing a stable world of meaning and order, what Berger, following Durkheim, calls *nomos*. Through externalization, we project meanings into the world; through objectivation, these meanings crystallize into institutions and symbolic systems; and through internalization, they become part of personal identity (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Yet humanly constructed worlds are inherently fragile. *Marginal situations*, especially suffering, death, and existential crisis, threaten to dissolve the coherence of meaning. Religion responds by extending the human *nomos* into a cosmic one: a sacred canopy under which the social world appears grounded in ultimate reality (Berger 1967). Institutions now mirror cosmic law; biographies are inscribed within trans-individual narratives; and chaos is tamed through theodicies that render misfortune meaningful and sustain hope. In this sense, religion represents humanity’s boldest strategy of meaning-making: it secures the social world against ultimate threats by sacralizing it.

This account does not imply that religion is a “mere” projection or illusion. Methodologically, the sociologist suspends judgment as to whether religion corresponds to an actual metaphysical order. Substantively, Berger allows that religious claims may indeed be true; he simply maintains that questions of truth belong to theology, not sociology.

The Functions of Religion

Berger analyzes religion's social consequences without presupposing its truth or falsity. Three primary functions are central to his account.

1. Social Structuration: Religion patterns and legitimates the architecture of social life, its statuses, roles, and boundaries, by embedding them within a cosmic frame. Classic examples include cosmogonies that ground political authority or kinship in primordial divine acts.
2. Social Control: By sacralizing norms and institutions, religion reinforces compliance, so that moral injunctions acquire divine authority, rulers act under divine mandate, and extraordinary commitment can be mobilized in times of crisis.
3. Symbolic Integration: Religion integrates disparate experiences, including marginal and threatening ones, into a coherent and meaningful whole. This is the “sacred canopy” in operation: a symbolic universe stretched over institutions and biographies that renders life ultimately plausible (Berger 1967).

Legitimation operates on several levels, from proverbial wisdom and moral codes to comprehensive symbolic systems. Its effectiveness depends on the interiorization of these legitimations through processes of socialization. What Berger calls “mystification,” as the masking of the human origins of institutions, is not necessarily a form of deceit; rather, it is the very mechanism through which meanings acquire an extra-human weight, commanding allegiance and enabling individuals to endure suffering with a sense of purpose.

Theological Landscape under Modern Conditions

1. Modernization as Situation

For Berger, modernity is not merely a historical period but a *situation*—a distinctive configuration of institutions and consciousness. Industrial production, technological rationality, bureaucratic organization, and mass mediation collectively generate a characteristic *modern consciousness*: future-oriented, governed by instrumental reason, marked by individualization, and accompanied by a progressive loosening of traditional plausibility structures. Modernization thus signifies both an institutional transformation and a corresponding reshaping of subjectivity.

2. *Early Secularization Thesis*

During the 1960s and 1970s, Berger maintained that modernization inevitably entailed secularization. As societies modernize, religion withdraws first from the public sphere (*objective secularization*) and subsequently from individual consciousness (*subjective secularization*), becoming increasingly privatized and optional (Berger 1967; 1970). For Berger, belief continues to exist, yet as a matter of personal preference rather than as a taken-for-granted certainty. Religion, once embedded in the fabric of social institutions, is displaced into the sphere of private choice.

3. *The Turn to Desecularization*

By the 1980s and 1990s, empirical realities forced Berger to revise his position. Contrary to expectations of a universal religious decline, the world witnessed vigorous religious revivals: the Islamic resurgence, the rapid expansion of evangelical and Pentecostal movements across the Global South and East Asia, and widespread religious renewal in post-Communist societies. Berger conceded that “the world is as furiously religious as ever,” with two significant exceptions: much of Western Europe and a thin, transnational “international intellectual subculture” (Berger 2002). Secularization, he now argued, is not a universal process but a regional and historically contingent one.

4. *Pluralism as the True Correlate of Modernity*

The more enduring and universal correlate of modernity, Berger contends, is pluralism. Urbanization, education, social mobility, and mass media produce an unprecedented proliferation of worldviews. Under conditions of pluralism, no single tradition enjoys automatic plausibility; faith becomes an exercise in reflexive choice. Religious monopolies yield to competitive “markets” of belief; persuasion replaces coercion; and religious institutions increasingly adopt rationalized and bureaucratic forms to sustain participation. Doctrines adapt to audience expectations, and belief itself undergoes subjectivization, shifting from inherited conviction to consciously chosen preference (Berger 1979).

Pluralism erodes certainty but does not necessarily engender unbelief. On the contrary, it may stimulate religious creativity, innovation, and the emergence of hybrid forms of faith. Berger’s late synthesis is succinct and influential: modernization does not abolish religion; rather, it reconfigures its social location. Secularization is contingent; and, pluralism is structural.

Three Theological Strategies

In “The Heretical Imperative” (1979), Berger outlines three theological strategies available to faith in a secular and plural age: deductive, reductive, and inductive. Each represents a distinct way of negotiating revelation, tradition, and modern consciousness.

- Deductive (Barthian): This approach begins from revelation and seeks to reinforce the authority of tradition. Its strength lies in doctrinal clarity and fidelity to confessional sources; its risk is the loss of plausibility within publics skeptical of external or heteronomous authority.
- Reductive (Bultmannian): This strategy translates the language of tradition into the categories of modern consciousness, demythologizing religious symbols to render them existentially intelligible. Its advantage is accessibility and relevance; its danger is the evacuation of transcendence, reducing theology to a form of secular humanism.
- Inductive (Schleiermacherian): This approach begins from human experience, i.e. everyday life and what Berger calls signals of transcendence such as order, play, hope, humor, and guilt, and interprets these phenomena as pointers toward God. Its strength is dialogical plausibility within pluralistic publics; its vulnerabilities include uncertain criteria for authentic experience, the risk of relativism, and tension with confessional exclusivism.

For the conditions of late modernity, Berger favors the inductive strategy. It respects the experiential starting point of modern agents while still leaving interpretive space for transcendence. Theological reflection, in this mode, becomes a hermeneutical venture that engages human experience as both locus and medium of revelation.

Religious Pluralism

Pluralism, for Berger, dissolves religious monopolies and introduces market-like dynamics into the religious field. Denominations and movements compete for adherents; doctrinal and ritual “products” are adapted to shifting constituencies; and ecumenical “cartels” may emerge to stabilize the competitive environment. Bureaucratic rationalization, manifest in practices of fundraising, public relations, and quantitative metrics, becomes widespread. The sources of financial support also matter: state funding fosters political bureaucracies, whereas voluntary contributions encourage economic bureaucracies, each shaping the structure and strategy of religious institutions.

More profoundly, pluralism relocates religion within consciousness. When social confirmation fragments, belief loses its automatic self-evidence. Faith becomes a matter of choice, and indeed of continuous choosing. Berger names this the normalization of “heresy” (from Ancient Greek *hairesis*, “to choose”). The condition is existentially ambivalent: freedom expands as certainty contracts. The believer now carries faith more deliberately, but also more precariously.

Critical Appraisal

Strengths

1. **Durkheim-Weber Bridge:** Berger’s dialectical model of externalization–objectivation–internalization remains a powerful bridge between meaning-oriented and structure-oriented sociology. It avoids circular explanations, such as “religion exists because society needs cohesion,” by grounding religion in the lifeworld before tracing its social and institutional effects (Berger and Luckmann 1966).
2. **Substantive Clarity:** By distinguishing between sacred–supernatural religion and secular “quasi-religions,” Berger preserves analytical precision and prevents the conceptual sprawl that results when “everything becomes religion.”
3. **Methodological Discipline:** Berger’s integration of interpretive analysis, value-suspension, and methodological atheism enables a balanced description of religion, neither devotional nor debunking. It exemplifies a methodological posture that allows for empathetic understanding without collapsing into theological advocacy or reductionist critique.
4. **Empirical Responsiveness:** Berger’s public revision of the secularization thesis demonstrates exemplary scholarly humility: his theory follows the evidence rather than defending its initial premises. His later writings provide a more globally adequate account of religion’s persistence and transformation under modernity (Berger 2002).
5. **Actionable Theological Typology:** The typology of theological responses, deductive, reductive, and inductive, offers a lucid conceptual map for theological engagement within pluralistic publics, even for those who question Berger’s preference for the inductive strategy.

Weaknesses / Open Problems

1. Early Asymmetry: If religion is anthropologically grounded in the lifeworld as a response to marginal situations, Berger's early confidence in wholesale secular decline underplays religion's resilience; precisely the feature he later recognizes.
2. Criterion Problem in Induction: Berger invokes "reason" to sift genuine from spurious experiences of transcendence but offers no robust criteria. Without such standards, the inductive route risks sliding into subjectivism or accommodating any experience dressed in sacred language.
3. Relativism and Confessional Tension: An inductive, plural-friendly theology can blunt sharp doctrinal claims. Traditions that stake salvation on exclusive truth may see Berger's approach as covertly reductive.
4. Power and Inequality: Berger's market metaphor for pluralism illuminates competition but can understate how power, regulation, and media ownership shape the religious field. Not all "choices" are equally available or visible.
5. Post-Secular Politics: Berger's focus is plausibility and meaning; less attention is given to the legal-political architectures (religious freedom regimes, party systems, welfare states) that condition religious vitality and public presence.

Conclusion: Berger After the Turn

Peter L. Berger's enduring contribution lies in his ability to show how religion can be both socially constructed and existentially weighty. His central insight, that human beings, biologically unfinished and existentially exposed, must construct a meaningful world, and that religion historically extends a sacred canopy over this world, continues to orient sociological and theological debates alike. Berger's account of modernization now reads as a twofold lesson: secularization is real but regional and reversible, while pluralism is pervasive and enduring. Within plural societies, belief persists as reflexive choice; lighter in authority yet heavier in deliberation.

For scholars and practitioners alike, the implications are double. First, analyses of contemporary religion should not presume decline; they should presume competition, hybridity, and continuous legitimization. Second, public theologies seeking credibility within plural publics may require an inductive posture; one attentive to shared human experiences such as hope, suffering, conscience, play, and humor as potential bridges to transcendence, without surrendering either the critical standards for assessing truth claims or the moral seriousness of theological discernment.

Future research can advance Berger's framework in three interrelated directions:

1. Criteria for authenticity: developing normative yet non-authoritarian methods for distinguishing genuine religious experience from its simulacra;
2. Power-critical analysis: examining how states, markets, and digital platforms structure visibility, authority, and access within the contemporary religious “market”; and
3. Phenomenology of the digital lifeworld: tracing how algorithmically curated environments reshape plausibility structures and the dynamics of belief.

Berger's framework does not resolve these questions, but it continues to chart the terrain. Under the fractured skies of modernity, his work reminds us that the human search for ultimate meaning does not cease; instead, it merely changes its form, seeking new canopies under which life can once again appear intelligible, connected, and whole.

Dissertation Information

This essay is based on a doctoral dissertation that was successfully defended and refereed in August 2006 at the Department of Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology, University of Tehran, Iran.

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 **Open Access**

Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

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

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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’aliyah*) 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’aliyah*); 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'aliyah) 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‘aliyah) 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 *tajdīd* (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'wil)*

The Sadrian hermeneutic of *ta'wil* (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'wil* 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

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Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

The History and Teachings of Christianity in Shi'a Hadith Heritage: The Case of Bihār al-Anwār by Muhammad-Bāqir Majlisi

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Abstract

The examination of how Christianity's history and teachings are represented within the Shi'a hadith corpus, viewed as a hermeneutical commentary that engages, from within the Islamic worldview, with themes found in the canonical Gospels, opens an important yet underdeveloped field in religious history and comparative theology. Owing to the complex historical, theological, and cultural interrelations between Islam and Christianity, this topic offers rich potential for uncovering deeper layers of intellectual, epistemological, and spiritual engagement between the two traditions. Although the Four Gospels are recognized as the central textual witnesses to the life and message of Jesus, their diverse portrayals have long inspired theological reflection and comparative inquiry. The Islamic, and specifically the Shi'a, hadith corpus provides an interpretive lens through which Muslim thinkers have engaged the figure of Jesus, articulating perspectives that reflect distinctive epistemological and theological commitments. This study focuses on *Bihār al-Anwār* by 'Allāmah Muhammad-Bāqir Majlisi, examining its narrations concerning Jesus, son of Mary (peace be upon him), and his teachings. Given its thematic diversity and encyclopedic scope, *Bihār al-Anwār* offers a unique window into the Shi'a theological and historical perception of Christianity. The research ultimately constructs a coherent portrayal of the Shi'a understanding of early Christianity and contributes to the cultivation of deeper interfaith comprehension between Islam and Christianity.

Keywords: Shi'a Hadith; Christianity; Bihār al-Anwār; Muhammad-Bāqir Majlisi; Interfaith Dialogue; Comparative Religion; Jesus in Islam.

Background and Research Context

This study is situated within the disciplines of comparative religion and intertextual analysis of the Abrahamic traditions. While the Four Gospels constitute the canonical sources of Christian teaching, the Shi'a hadith corpus preserves a distinctive body of narratives concerning Jesus that has seldom been examined through systematic academic comparison. These narrations reveal the presence of historical, theological, and spiritual encounters between Islamic and Christian thought worlds. Contemporary scholarship has tended to emphasize the polemical dimensions of Islamic engagement with Christianity, often overlooking the interpretive and constructive dimensions embedded within the Shi'a tradition. In view of the limited number of cross-comparative studies between *Bihār al-Anwār* and the Gospels, this research addresses a critical scholarly gap by exploring how the Shi'a narrative tradition constructs an understanding of Jesus as both prophet and eschatological figure.

Objectives and Research Questions

The study seeks to develop a systematic comparative analysis of Jesus-related narrations in the Shi'a hadith tradition and the canonical Gospels. Its specific objectives are:

- To identify and thematically categorize all hadith references to Jesus in *Bihār al-Anwār*.
- To compare these narrations with parallel accounts in the Four Gospels.
- To examine theological, ethical, and eschatological points of convergence and divergence.
- To analyze Majlisi's method of compilation and exegetical commentary.
- To consider how Shi'a narratives concerning Jesus may contribute to contemporary interfaith dialogue.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The research adopts a combined textual-comparative and hermeneutical approach situated within the framework of interreligious theology. Its theoretical basis draws upon comparative theology, narrative criticism, and historical hermeneutics. Primary sources include *Bihār al-Anwār* and the canonical Gospels, supported by secondary Shi'a and Christian exegetical literature. Methodologically, all narrations relating to Jesus were identified, thematically classified (birth, miracles, teachings, disciples, and eschatology), and analyzed in parallel with Gospel passages. This dual reading enabled the identification of theological motifs, semantic correspondences, and interpretive developments across traditions. The analysis also incorporates contextual theology to

elucidate Majlisi's intellectual orientation and his position within the Safavid scholastic milieu.

Findings and Main Arguments

A close examination of the narrational corpus under study suggests that the Shi'a portrayal of Jesus exhibits notable points of convergence with the normative depictions found in the New Testament. However, attending to the shared ethical and spiritual teachings, as reflected both in Shi'a hadith literature and in the canonical Christian tradition, may help illuminate a broader historical intuition present in both communities: namely, that the prophets are understood as spiritually aligned figures who exemplify similar moral and theological virtues and who, across traditions, convey resonant ethical teachings. In theoretical terms, these parallels point to the degree of awareness among Shi'a Imams and scholars regarding the figure of Jesus, thereby contributing to historical studies of how Muslims conceptualized this prophet and his religious message, and enriching scholarly understanding of Christianity and Shi'a Islam alike.

On a practical level, these areas of overlap have the potential to foster empathy, solidarity, and forms of constructive coexistence among the adherents of these two Abrahamic religions, particularly in an age marked by secularization and global religious disaffiliation. A well-known early example of such mutual recognition appears in the encounter between the Muslim delegation led by Ja'far b. Abī Tālib and the Christian king of Abyssinia. As reported in the Islamic tradition, Ja'far described the Prophet's message in terms of monotheism, prayer, almsgiving, justice, and moral rectitude; upon hearing this, the Negus is said to have responded that such teachings are consonant with the message brought by Jesus.

Similarly, for Muslim readers, the moral and spiritual attributes ascribed to Jesus in Shi'a hadith literature may evoke parallels with the ethical dispositions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. Conversely, for Christian readers, familiarity with the teachings and comportment of the Shi'a Imams may recall aspects of the life and character of Jesus. A related narrative reinforces this dynamic: in a reported dialogue between a prominent Christian figure and Hishām, a student of Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq, the Christian interlocutor asks Hishām to describe the qualities of the Imam. Hishām's response emphasizes virtues such as infallibility, generosity, courage, divinely granted knowledge, justice, forbearance, and fidelity to prophetic inheritance. After hearing this description, the Christian is said to have remarked that the attributes ascribed to the

Imam correspond strikingly to those traditionally associated with Christ, though, of course, each figure remains distinct in identity and status.

These examples demonstrate the broader findings emerging from a detailed analysis of the Shi'a narrational corpus on Jesus, suggesting that these materials preserve both a theological portrait of Jesus and resources for contemporary interreligious reflection. Building on this foundation, the principal findings may be summarized as follows:

1. *Theological Characterization of Jesus*

The Shi'a hadith tradition presents Jesus son of Mary ('Isā ibn Maryam) as a divinely inspired prophet endowed with 'ilm ladunnī (divine or immediate knowledge) and access to the unseen realm. This portrayal aligns with Qur'anic depictions while also introducing distinct Shi'a emphases on spiritual authority and moral exemplarity.

2. *Systematic Coherence in Majlisi's Compilation*

Majlisi's organization of narrations in Bihār al-Anwār exhibits a degree of coherence and theological framing that differs from the more diverse and textually layered structure of the canonical Gospels. His compilation thus offers a structured Shi'a interpretive lens through which the figure of Jesus is presented.

3. *Ethical and Spiritual Resonances Across Traditions*

Significant overlap emerges between Shi'a hadith teachings and New Testament moral themes, especially compassion, ascetic discipline, humility, reliance on God, and the call to moral reform. These parallels highlight shared Abrahamic ethical foundations and reflect the broader intellectual awareness of Christian moral discourse within the Shi'a tradition.

4. *Expanded Eschatological Role of Jesus*

Shi'a narrations broaden the eschatological dimension of Jesus' mission, portraying him as a participant in the establishment of justice at the end of times in collaboration with the Mahdī. This vision aligns with the strong eschatological emphasis in Shi'a theology while maintaining continuity with early Christian eschatological expectations.

5. *Historical Awareness of Christian Traditions*

The narrations suggest that early Shi'a scholars and transmitters possessed a notable degree of familiarity with Christian ideas and symbols. Rather than employing these materials primarily for polemical critique, they often integrated them into constructive theological reflection. This dynamic enriches historical studies of Islam–Christianity interactions and provides conceptual bridges that can support contemporary interfaith understanding.

Taken together, it can be argued that these findings show how the Shi'a hadith corpus, especially as curated in *Bihār al-Anwār*, offers an internally coherent and historically significant portrait of Jesus that resonates with aspects of Christian tradition while reflecting distinctive Shi'a theological commitments. This corpus provides valuable material for comparative theology and invites renewed scholarly attention to areas of convergence that can foster mutual understanding between Muslim and Christian communities.

Discussion and Significance

The results highlight the intellectual and spiritual engagement between Islam and Christianity as significantly reflected in the Shi'a hadith heritage. Rather than reinforcing reductive or oppositional frameworks, this engagement underscores the interpretive and dialogical potential within both traditions. It reveals an epistemological openness grounded in revelation and mystical insight, suggesting possibilities for renewed interreligious conversation.

The study's interdisciplinary relevance extends across religious studies, theology, intercultural dialogue, and Middle Eastern intellectual history. While the research focuses primarily on *Bihār al-Anwār*, future comparative work may broaden the scope to include Sunni hadith sources and apocryphal Christian texts, thereby enriching the contextual and cross-traditional analysis.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the Shi'a hadith tradition offers an integral yet understudied perspective on Jesus, one that contributes to bridging theological and historical divides between Islam and Christianity. By reconstructing a coherent Shi'a understanding of Christ characterized by divine mercy, prophetic continuity, and eschatological unity, the research contributes to the growing field of comparative theology. Future investigations may apply this model to parallel figures across other traditions, further advancing interfaith understanding and theological reflection.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in September 2022 at the Department of Comparative Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Theology and Islamic Studies, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran.

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Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

The Role of Culture as a Variable in Christian–Muslim Dialogue

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Abstract

This article examines culture as a central analytical category in Christian–Muslim dialogue, addressing a significant gap in interfaith studies where theological commonalities often overshadow the formative role of cultural and ethnic differences. Recognizing the deep interrelation of religion and culture, the study argues that cultural configurations shape how beliefs are expressed, rituals performed, and sacred texts interpreted, thereby influencing both the possibilities and constraints of interreligious engagement. Using examples from diverse Christian and Muslim settings, the analysis demonstrates that variations in communicative style and interpretive expectation are frequently rooted in cultural divergences. The conceptual framework integrates Qur'anic perspectives with insights from Shi'i thinkers 'Allāmah Hasanzādah Āmulī and 'Allāmah Sha'rānī, who view religion as a comprehensive and identity-forming system. Edward Tylor's classical definition of culture and Victor Kozlov's model of ethnicity further clarify how cultural and ethnic identities intersect with religious belonging. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action provides an additional lens for evaluating the conditions necessary for constructive intercultural dialogue. Institutional analyses of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and Iran's Center for Interreligious Dialogue, along with case studies from Myanmar and Nigeria, reveal the decisive impact of cultural variables on dialogical outcomes. The study concludes that interfaith dialogue gains depth and effectiveness when cultural and ethnic contexts are explicitly acknowledged and incorporated into its design.

Keywords: Christian–Muslim Dialogue; Culture and Religion; Ethnicity; Intercultural Communication; Interreligious Studies.

Research Overview and Problem Statement

This study examines the role of culture as an independent analytical variable in Christian–Muslim dialogue, highlighting cultural dynamics as a crucial yet often neglected dimension in the analysis of interreligious encounters. Existing scholarship in interfaith studies frequently privileges doctrinal or theological commonalities, while giving far less attention to the ways in which cultural and ethnic distinctions structure communication, shape interpretive frameworks, and influence the outcomes of dialogue. The present research identifies this imbalance as a substantive gap, noting that insufficient engagement with cultural variables can limit conceptual clarity, reinforce misunderstandings, and diminish the transformative potential of dialogical initiatives.

The inquiry is premised on the observation that religion and culture are profoundly interrelated within all human societies. A nuanced appreciation of this interrelation reveals that cultural configurations substantially inform the articulation of beliefs, the performance of rituals, and the interpretation of sacred texts. By drawing on illustrative examples from diverse Christian and Muslim contexts, the study demonstrates that cultural divergences play a determinative role in shaping the contours of interreligious interaction.

Key Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

The conceptualization of religion in this study draws upon Qur'anic perspectives alongside the reflections of two influential twentieth-century Iranian Shi'i theologians, 'Allāmah Hasanzādah Āmulī (1928–2021) and 'Allāmah Sha'rānī (1902–1973). Within this framework, religion is understood not simply as a collection of doctrinal propositions, but as a comprehensive and identity-shaping system that organizes human life, grounds ethical orientations, and provides a hermeneutical structure through which social reality is interpreted and inhabited.

The discussion of culture is grounded in Edward Tylor's classical formulation, which conceptualizes culture as a complex totality encompassing knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and the full range of capacities acquired by individuals as members of society. Emphasis is placed on the acquired and socially transmitted character of culture, which enables a more precise account of how cultural patterns shape religious understanding and guide interpretive processes.

The concept of ethnicity is examined in light of contemporary sociological literature, with particular reference to Victor Kozlov's analytical model. Ethnicity is defined as a historically constituted social formation rooted in shared language, cultural practices,

values, kinship ties, and territorial continuity. Such a definition allows for a more rigorous assessment of how ethnic identity interacts with religious belonging in interfaith settings.

The principal research question explores how cultural and ethnic differences influence both the theoretical dimensions and practical outcomes of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. This central question is further articulated through four subsidiary inquiries that investigate:

- Variations in modes of reasoning across cultural contexts;
- The significance of recognizing culturally embedded belief structures;
- The contribution of divergent cognitive styles to misunderstandings in dialogue;
- The degree to which formal interfaith encounters acknowledge and integrate participants' cultural backgrounds.

Theoretical Literature

This section outlines the theoretical foundations of the research. In examining cultural theories, attention is given to both classical and contemporary perspectives, with particular emphasis on Edward Tylor's formulation. Tylor, who treats culture and civilization as synonymous, conceptualizes culture as the totality of human social life. Although culture is acquired, it is also understood to possess deep roots in the human unconscious. This conceptualization provides an effective analytical lens for interpreting the dynamics of interreligious dialogue.

The discussion of ethnicity engages major sociological theories, drawing specifically on Abramson's six defining features of ethnic groups. These features include a shared historical experience, cultural and social distinctiveness, embeddedness within broader social systems, formation at scales larger than local communities, variable meanings across social contexts, and the possession of recognizable names and labels. Through analyzing these characteristics, the study delineates a framework for understanding ethnicity as it intersects with religious identity.

An important part of this section examines the dialectical relationship between religion and ethnicity. Building on Andrew Greeley's typology, two primary trajectories are identified: the interpretation of religion through ethnic belonging, and the preservation of ethnic identity through religious structures. Illustrative examples from different historical and geographical settings demonstrate how these two dimensions have been intertwined, often shaping communal worldviews, ritual practices, and patterns of social cohesion.

In the area of intercultural communication, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action is adopted as the principal conceptual framework. The analysis highlights three central dimensions of this theory: the pursuit of peace and nonviolence, the cultivation of knowledge and respect for the religious other, and the fostering of culturally informed dialogue. These elements offer a coherent approach for analyzing the communicative dynamics present in interfaith interactions.

The section concludes with an examination of key models of interreligious engagement, organized into four main categories: the dialogue of life, action-oriented dialogue, theological dialogue, and the dialogue of spiritual experience. Each form is presented with illustrative examples and conceptual clarification, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the varied modalities through which Christian–Muslim dialogue may be conducted.

Analysis of Cultural and Ethnic Variables in Interreligious Dialogue

This section presents a field-based analysis of interreligious dialogue initiatives within three major international institutions. The first part examines the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican, tracing its historical formation and subsequent developments. A close reading of the Council's documents and official statements indicates a gradual movement within the Vatican from positions characterized by exclusivist tendencies toward more inclusive orientations. Although the Council has made significant contributions to promoting dialogue, it has not yet fully integrated cultural considerations as a central component of its dialogical framework.

The activities of the World Council of Churches in the domain of interfaith engagement are analyzed with particular reference to their emphasis on social issues. An examination of the Council's records shows that a focus on shared social concerns has created conducive conditions for interreligious communication. Compared to the Vatican, this institution has placed stronger emphasis on cultural dimensions and has frequently prioritized culturally and socially embedded themes in shaping its dialogue agenda.

The section then considers the Center for Interreligious Dialogue in Iran, focusing on its collaborations with various Christian institutions. An analysis of the Center's programs and statements highlights the importance accorded to cultural and civilizational factors within the Iranian approach to interreligious engagement. In selecting topics and structuring its dialogical practices, the Center has consistently taken into account the cultural and historical backgrounds of the participating communities.

Across the three institutions, four recurring thematic orientations in dialogue are identified: an emphasis on shared social issues, selective engagement with theological questions, collective responses to secularization, and forms of convergence shaped by encounters with the West. The analysis shows that attention to cultural variables significantly influences both the selection of topics and the outcomes of dialogue. For instance, in conversations with Eastern Orthodox churches, recognition of civilizational and cultural affinities has contributed to the creation of a more productive and receptive dialogical environment.

The Significance of Culture and Ethnicity in Interreligious Dialogue

This section presents the final synthesis of the study. By examining two prominent cases of religious and ethnic conflict in Myanmar and Nigeria, the analysis demonstrates that many contemporary interreligious challenges are deeply rooted in cultural differences. In the context of Myanmar, tensions between Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslim community reflect not only a religious divide but also a cultural and ethnic confrontation linked to the legacies of colonial border formation and historical patterns of exclusion. In Nigeria, conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities similarly contain strong cultural and ethnic dimensions and are intertwined with economic and political grievances.

An examination of interviews conducted with scholars active in the field of interfaith dialogue indicates that insufficient attention to cultural factors remains one of the most significant obstacles to effective engagement. Many interviewees stressed that formal dialogues often prioritize theological commonalities while neglecting the cultural divergences that shape participants' identities, interpretive frameworks, and communicative expectations.

The study's concluding assessment affirms that interreligious dialogue is most effective when the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the participants are taken into account, when conversations extend beyond theological overlap, and when cultural differences are approached as potential resources rather than impediments. Future dialogues are encouraged to focus on three principal dimensions: greater sensitivity to cultural contexts, attention to shared social concerns, and the cultivation of civilizational commonalities.

Final Reflections and Research Contributions

This research, adopting an interdisciplinary perspective and integrating both qualitative and comparative approaches, contributes to the contextualization of interreligious

dialogue studies by foregrounding cultural and civilizational dimensions. Among its principal contributions are the formulation of a theoretical framework for analyzing the cultural foundations of interreligious communication and the articulation of a dialectical understanding of the relationship between religion and culture.

Through the combination of textual, field-based, and institutional analysis, the study offers a comprehensive assessment of how cultural variables influence dialogical processes. The comparative examination of three major international institutions and the identification of core thematic orientations in their activities further underscore the significance of cultural analysis for the future of interfaith engagement.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in July 2021 at the Department of Abrahamic Religions, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran.

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Book Review

Ostūreh-ye Sophia: Tajallī-ye Zanāneh-ye Hekmat-e Elāhī (The Myth of Sophia: The Feminine Manifestation of Divine Wisdom),
written by Maryamalsadat Siahpoosh; originally published in Persian, Tehran, Pileh Publishing, 2nd ed., 2021, 152 pp., ISBN 978-622-7620-04-7.

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Introduction and Context

Originally published in Persian, *Ostūreh-ye Sophia: Tajallī-ye Zanāneh-ye Hekmat-e Elāhī (The Myth of Sophia: The Feminine Manifestation of Divine Wisdom)*, authored by Maryamalsadat Siahpoosh and prefaced by Dr. Leila Hooshangi, is positioned within the field of feminist theology. Siahpoosh represents an emerging yet substantive voice in Iranian feminist theological studies. Her engagement with the field began during her university training, where she developed a particular interest in feminist approaches to theology within the broader discipline of comparative religion, with an emphasis on Christian traditions. The present volume expands upon her master's thesis and further reflections undertaken during her doctoral research, which focused on the figure of Mary Magdalene. Over the past decade, she has produced several scholarly works, both articles and monographs, on feminist theology and gender studies. She now works as an independent researcher based in Canada, concentrating on feminist theology and gender studies in the context of interreligious dialogue.

The book's primary scholarly domain is feminist theology, with a specific focus on the feminine dimension of divine wisdom. It is situated within the subfield of Sophiology and centers on the myth of Sophia as an expression of divine wisdom in feminine form. Since the 1970s, feminist theologians have examined the gendered aspects of wisdom literature and the conceptualization of the divine in feminine terms. Building on this trajectory, Siahpoosh broadens the inquiry by tracing comparable manifestations of feminine divine wisdom in a variety of religious traditions, including Hinduism,

Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism. The contemporary relevance of the study stems from the renewed interest in the Sophia figure within feminist theology. Siahpoosh's analysis provides a framework for reassessing women's roles in theological discourse and in the religious imagination more broadly. By engaging multiple religious traditions and doctrinal sources, the work seeks to illuminate interpretive possibilities for recovering and rearticulating women's roles in theology and in the social history of religions. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing feminist efforts to develop constructive theological models grounded in both textual traditions and intercultural perspectives.

Structure and Main Arguments

The Myth of Sophia is structured into four chapters, each developing a distinct dimension of the study's broader theological and comparative inquiry. *Chapter One* introduces the theoretical foundations of the work by situating feminist theology within the wider landscape of religious feminism. It outlines the historical development of feminist theological thought, examines its principal methodological approaches, and highlights core thematic concerns such as female embodiment, the significance of women's culture and lived experience, and the critical function of religious language and literature. This chapter establishes the conceptual framework that undergirds the rest of the study.

Chapter Two turns to the principal focus of the book: the feminine dimension of divine wisdom within Judaism and Christianity. It surveys relevant developments in Gnosticism, explores debates concerning the gender of God in Jewish and Christian thought, and examines key figures of feminine divine wisdom such as *Hokhmah* or *Chokmah* and the *Shekhinah* in Jewish tradition, as well as the various manifestations of Sophia in Gnostic Christian texts.

Chapter Three examines Sophia more directly, addressing the theological and symbolic issues associated with her figure. The chapter analyzes the role of Sophia within feminist theology and investigates her relationship to Mary Magdalene, drawing on a range of textual portrayals. It further discusses Christological implications of the Sophia myth and incorporates Jungian perspectives on archetypal symbolism to expand the interpretive horizon.

Chapter Four broadens the scope of the inquiry by exploring expressions of feminine divine wisdom in other religious traditions. This includes Eastern traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, alongside Western religious currents including

Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism. By tracing these comparative parallels, the chapter situates Sophia within a wider cross-cultural and intercultural context.

A central argument of the book is that the myth of Sophia, understood as the feminine manifestation of divine wisdom, provides a productive framework for reassessing women's status in theological discourse and the social history of religions. Siahpoosh argues that feminist theologians, by foregrounding feminine wisdom and the female embodiment of the divine within the Judeo-Christian tradition, aim to articulate a "women's theology" that challenges patriarchal theological models. By extending this analysis to other religious traditions, the book suggests that the feminine dimension of divine wisdom is neither confined to nor unique within these traditions; rather, it appears in diverse forms across different religious worlds.

A substantial portion of the study is devoted to Gnosticism, reflecting the author's premise that the Sophia myth emerges most distinctly within Gnostic Christian mythology and has thus become central to feminist theological reflection. Mary Magdalene is given particular attention, not only as a historical figure associated with Jesus but also as a symbolic embodiment of Sophia. This interpretive move supports the book's broader aim of envisioning more egalitarian perspectives on gender within religious systems.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative-analytical approach grounded in the close reading of sacred texts and the examination of their socio-historical contexts. Early Christian Gnostic writings, especially those discovered at Nag Hammadi, constitute the primary textual corpus. By engaging these sources, the author seeks to reconsider interpretive traditions that have historically marginalized or distorted women's roles, thereby opening space for alternative theological constructions.

Critical Evaluation and Scholarly Contribution

The work demonstrates a coherent and methodologically consistent argument by grounding its analysis in feminist theology and, more specifically, in the subfield of Sophiology. Its central objective, to reconsider and restore women's roles through engagement with religious traditions and doctrinal sources, is pursued throughout with a sustained focus on the feminine manifestations of divine wisdom. The book's core claim that the Sophia myth serves as an interpretive framework for reassessing women's status in theology and in the social history of religions is articulated clearly and developed systematically.

A notable scholarly contribution of this study is its expansion of the scope of Sophialogy beyond the Judeo-Christian corpus, which has historically been the primary focus of feminist theological inquiry. By tracing parallel expressions of feminine divine wisdom in traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism, the author introduces a valuable comparative dimension that enhances the intercultural depth of the field. This broader analytical lens allows the study to highlight recurring patterns and symbolic resonances that transcend specific religious boundaries.

The evidentiary base of the work is particularly strong. Siahpoosh engages extensively with early Christian Gnostic texts, including those from the Nag Hammadi library, whose diverse and multifaceted narratives provide fertile ground for exploring alternative representations of Sophia. Her reinterpretation of Mary Magdalene as an embodiment of divine wisdom is especially noteworthy, demonstrating how these sources can illuminate marginalized or overlooked perspectives on women's roles within early Christian movements.

One of the study's most significant contributions lies in its effort to recover and reinterpret women's roles within theology and the religious imagination. By challenging dominant androcentric symbols and proposing a more balanced representation of the divine, the book offers critical resources for feminist theological reflection. Its attention to female embodiment and to women's cultural experiences provides a constructive starting point for reshaping theological discourse and for reexamining the gendered dimensions of religious history.

The limitations of the work stem primarily from the nature of the sources on which it relies. Gnosticism, having been condemned by the institutional Church and excluded from mainstream Christian theology, occupies a contested position within Christian intellectual history. Heavy dependence on Gnostic materials, whose cosmologies are often dualistic and whose theological claims were vigorously critiqued by the Church Fathers, raises questions concerning the normative status of these sources within Christian theology. Additionally, debates surrounding the gender of the divine remain philosophically and theologically complex, and the study touches on issues that continue to provoke considerable scholarly disagreement.

Thematic Significance

This book positions itself as a substantial contribution to contemporary feminist theology by foregrounding Sophia as a central thematic concern. In doing so, it engages

one of the most enduring questions in feminist theological discourse: how the feminine dimension of divine wisdom can be recovered, reinterpreted, and integrated into constructive theological reflection. Its comparative breadth, spanning Judeo-Christian, Eastern, and ancient Near Eastern traditions, distinguishes it from studies that limit themselves to textual critique within a single religious framework. Through this wider lens, the book provides feminist theologians with a conceptual and methodological space in which to articulate new interpretations of the feminine divine.

Rather than confining its inquiry to a single tradition, *The Myth of Sophia* adopts an approach that resembles the careful uncovering of layered intellectual histories. It retrieves often-neglected mythological and theological motifs surrounding feminine divine wisdom, motifs that have been overshadowed by centuries of patriarchal interpretation, and brings them into renewed scholarly visibility. This process of recovery, while textual in nature, has clear implications for contemporary debates on religious identity, symbol formation, and the representation of the divine.

By broadening the horizons of Sophialogy beyond its traditional Judeo-Christian focus, the book demonstrates that feminine expressions of divine wisdom are neither isolated nor anomalous. Its examination of Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Mandaean materials equips scholars with a comparative framework for tracing convergences and divergences in global configurations of the feminine divine. From this vantage point, Sophia is not treated merely as an abstract symbolic construct but as a conceptual tool capable of informing discussions on women's religious roles and contributing to broader attempts to recalibrate the gendered dimensions of theology.

The book's broader intellectual significance lies in its sustained challenge to the patriarchal structures that have shaped traditional theological discourse. By highlighting feminine imagery, female embodiment, and women's cultural experience, the study marks an important point of departure for feminist theological reflection. Its reconsideration of figures such as Mary Magdalene, interpreted not only historically but also symbolically as embodying Sophia, enriches ongoing debates concerning women's authority and status within Christian communities and more broadly within religious society.

Siahpoosh's use of specialized sources, particularly the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts, adds a further layer of scholarly rigor. These sources provide complex narrative traditions through which alternative visions of the feminine divine can be explored. The author's interpretive engagement with these materials showcases both methodological diligence and creative hermeneutical openness, aiming to correct longstanding distortions in the

reception history of women's religious roles. In this sense, the study maintains a careful balance: it brings substantial textual evidence into conversation with a hermeneutics oriented toward gender equality, thereby contributing to the gradual rebalancing of theological discourse.

Situated within the fields of feminist theology and Sophia-study, this book offers significant value for advanced teaching and research. Its comparative framework, theoretical clarity, and engagement with marginalized textual traditions make it a meaningful resource for scholars and students concerned with the intersections of gender, theology, and the history of religions.

Use and Relevance for Teaching and Research

This study offers considerable value for teaching and research across several disciplines. Its analytical and comparative approach, extending the figure of Sophia beyond the Judeo-Christian corpus to include Eastern and other Western religious traditions, renders it a particularly useful resource for courses and research projects concerned with feminist theology, comparative religion, and interreligious dialogue. The breadth of its textual engagement makes it suitable for academic research centers, seminar discussions, and upper-level university courses that address questions of gender, symbolism, and theological anthropology.

The book's sustained attention to the reinterpretation of women's roles in religious history and its critical analysis of Gnostic sources make it especially relevant for discussions of religious language, the symbolic construction of the divine, and the gendered dynamics of theological discourse. Its exploration of Mary Magdalene as an embodiment of Sophia, for instance, provides a productive entry point into debates on women's authority, agency, and representation in Christian traditions.

The following groups in particular may benefit from its insights:

- Theologians and scholars of religion, for its contribution to Sophia-study and its effort to develop a more balanced understanding of divine gender;
- Students and instructors in Women's Studies, History of Religions, Comparative Religion, and Feminist Theology, given its interdisciplinary reach and solid theoretical grounding;
- Philosophers and readers interested in mystical and mythological traditions, including those working with Gnostic sources and Jungian archetypal analysis.

Overall, the book serves as a versatile teaching and research tool, offering conceptual clarity and intercultural perspective for scholars engaging questions of gender, symbolism, and religious meaning.

Conclusion

The Myth of Sophia: The Feminine Manifestation of Divine Wisdom represents a noteworthy contribution to feminist theology and the study of Sophia. Through a comparative-analytical methodology, Siahpoosh traces the figure of Sophia, the feminine dimension of divine wisdom, not only within the Judeo-Christian tradition but also across several Eastern and ancient Western religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mandaeism. This expanded scope enriches existing discourse by illuminating recurring patterns of feminine divine symbolism and providing a more nuanced framework for understanding the gendered aspects of the divine.

The enduring significance of the work lies in its use of Sophia as a conceptual lens through which to reassess women's roles in theology and in the religious imagination. By foregrounding feminine divine imagery and reinterpreting figures such as Mary Magdalene, the study offers new avenues for evaluating gender dynamics within religious systems. Its engagement with Gnostic texts further strengthens its contribution by retrieving alternative narratives that challenge historically dominant patriarchal interpretations.

This book is recommended for scholars in theology, philosophy, women's studies, comparative religion, and related fields. It offers a compelling and intellectually rigorous framework for rethinking feminine wisdom within the global history of religions and contributes meaningfully to contemporary conversations on gender and the divine.

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