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## **The Specter Still Haunting a Christian Theology of Islam: Can Comparative Theology Save Us from Polemics?**

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I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the organizers of this conference for their kind invitation to be here today. I confess I had to overcome my initial reluctance to accept the invitation because of my concern of not offering a worthy contribution to such a prestigious event. In effect, since I became President of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, I have had very little time to focus on writing.

My research so far has focused on the intellectual history of Christian-Muslim relations. By “intellectual history” I mean how Christians and Muslims have written about one another. This history has been fundamentally a confrontational one, a history of polemics. The “default” position was one of suspicion and antagonism, on both sides. My research, however, is not purely historical or academic. I am also interested in the continuing reciprocal theological constructions that this history has bequeathed to Christians and Muslims today. I seek to develop the conditions for a Christian-Muslim theological conversation that may help set the relationship between these two faiths on a less confrontational course than that which has characterized most of their shared history. Put it differently, I am committed to fostering better understanding between Christians and Muslims. It is this commitment that is at the basis of my study of the history of Christian-Muslim relations and it would be dishonest to invoke a purely intellectual curiosity, even if the latter is also present and enhances the former. Lastly, let me add that I speak as a Roman Catholic committed to the vision of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). My tendency to identify Christianity instinctively with the Catholic Church is in no way intended as a diminishing of other expressions of Christianity.

That much said by way of prologue, I now turn to a quote by Charles J. Adams (1924-2011), taken from an article he published 35 years ago entitled “Islam and Christianity: The Opposition of Similarities.” The quote is actually the conclusion of the article and is pessimistic about the prospects of Christian-Muslim theological conversation. Adams writes:

To the extent that similar doctrines or positions prevent us from seeing the more far-reaching differences inherent in the way in which doctrines and concepts combine into an integrated whole to form a perception of man, of God and of their relations with one another – to precisely this extent – such similarities obstruct understanding. The matter of importance is the thrust of the whole, its distinctive character. Here the difference is so great that one may well ask whether in truth there is any hope of Christian-Muslim dialogue ever progressing beyond the stage of registering the differences with one another. [Charles J. Adams, “Islam and Christianity: The Opposition of Similarities,” in *Logos Islamikos*, ed. R. M. Savory and D. A. Agius (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), 287-306, here 306.]

For those who are not familiar with the name, Charles J. Adams was a distinguished American academic, born in Houston, Texas. In 1955, he received his PhD in the History of Religions from the University of Chicago, where he had studied with the famous Joachim Wach, one of the fathers of the discipline. In 1964, Adams, who had become increasingly interested in Islam over the years, succeeded Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) as Director of McGill’s Institute of Islamic Studies, a post that Adams held until 1980.

In the article I quoted, Adams cautions would-be comparativists that a focus on specific elements of the religious traditions under study may lead a scholar to emphasize similarities across traditions. However, when Islam and Christianity are viewed “as it were, from a great distance”, when we zoom out to get the widest possible view, then this view reveals that, despite the many similarities and close relationships between the two, Islam and Christianity are two religious entities of quite different outlines, characters, and structures.

For Adams, this fundamental difference, if not opposition, explains why historically Muslims and Christians have been unable to enter sympathetically into the worldview of one another, in spite of the existence in both their symbolic lexicons of shared fundamental concepts and understandings. “For most of their history”, he writes, “the two communities have exhibited a greater or lesser degree of outright hostility towards one another. There has seldom enough been even the effort to understand the viewpoint of the other, not to speak of success in doing so.” Without denying that political and other factors need also be taken into account, for Adams the antagonism that characterizes the intellectual history of Christian-Muslim relations is fundamentally theological.

Practically speaking, according to Adams, comparative studies on Islam and Christianity should avoid “the kind of thinking that contents itself with considering, for example, the role of prophecy or some other shared doctrine in each tradition, even with all the variations that are exhibited in each context”, because such kind of thinking is likely to miss something important. For Adams, “the factor which gives flavor or character to Islam or Christianity in general is the way in which the various symbols and expressions and ideas fit together to form a whole”. By focusing on “isolated details”, moreover, one is constantly tempted “to read into the understanding of the other one’s own insights and preferences”. Thus, paradoxically, the very existence of similar symbols and concepts within the two religious traditions can “render the task of appreciating the peculiar and unique character of each religious orientation more difficult”. Adams contended that symbols such as prophecy, revelation, Scripture, the Last Judgment, etc., though apparently very much alike in the thinking of Muslims and Christians, “have in fact quite different meanings and especially so when considered in the light of their mutual inter-relationships and the whole religious complex which they serve to form.”

In the rest of the article, Adams attempts to give “a view of Christianity and Islam that ignores the specifics of similar doctrines, symbols, and expressions in favor of a broader view”, to establish, as he puts it, “the spirit of Islam and of Christianity in comparative juxtaposition”, to sketch “the ethos of two faiths in the sense of their most general views of man and the world”, while acknowledging that such broad pictures are intellectual

abstractions, since in its historical reality religiousness is always embodied in particular individuals in particular situations.

With this view in mind, Adams poses three fundamental questions and attempts to answer them from first a Christian and then an Islamic perspective. The questions are these:

- (1) What is the human problem or the human situation that calls the religious response into existence and to which the religious man is seeking an answer?
- (2) By what means is the human problem solved?
- (3) To what kind of state does the solution of the problem lead?

Or, in soteriological terms:

- (1) salvation from what?
- (2) salvation by what means?
- (3) salvation to what?

For Adams, the answers to these questions “should tell us what Islam and Christianity are truly all about.” This exercise leads him to conclude that, despite the common allegiance of Christianity and Islam to specific doctrines and religious vocabulary, “[t]he two communities differ radically concerning the structure of the religious life. Indeed, they appear to be addressing themselves to entirely different problems, not so much contesting one another’s insights as talking about quite different things”. From this springs the quote that concludes the article:

To the extent that similar doctrines or positions prevent us from seeing the more far-reaching differences inherent in the way in which doctrines and concepts combine into an integrated whole to form a perception of man, of God and of their relations with one another – to precisely this extent – such similarities obstruct understanding. The matter of importance is the thrust of the whole, its distinctive character. Here the difference is so great that one may well ask whether in truth there is any hope of Christian-Muslim dialogue ever progressing beyond the stage of registering the differences with one another.”

Notice the final note of pessimism. Charles Adams doubted that Christian-Muslim conversation would ever be able to pass beyond the stage of acknowledging the fundamental differences that separate these two faith traditions. This conclusion, formulated in the mid-1980s, somewhat anticipated a mood that became widespread in the 2000s in the Catholic world, signaling a general loss of enthusiasm about the prospects of Christian-Muslim theological conversation.

As you all know, the Second Vatican Council was a watershed moment in the history of the way Catholics view other religions. For the first time, the official teaching of the Church spoke respectfully about other religious traditions in general and Islam in particular. To appreciate this shift, it suffices to remember that only in 1959 – six years before *Nostra Aetate* was promulgated – did the Vatican suppress a paragraph from Pope Pius XI's 1925 'Consecration of the human race to the Sacred Heart of Jesus', to be used on the Feast of Christ the King, in which the Catholic faithful entreated Christ, among other things, to be "King of all those who are still involved in the darkness of idolatry or of Islamism, and refuse not to draw them into the light and kingdom of God." The new conciliar orientation found almost immediate expression in numerous initiatives of Christian-Muslim encounter. Many of these were promoted, on the Catholic side, by a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with believers of other religions established in 1964, subsequently renamed the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. The enthusiasm was high and many were truly convinced that the hostility and suspicion of past centuries could be definitively replaced by a fraternal desire to know each other and work together for the sake of a brighter future.

The last two decades or so, however, have seen an ever-growing disenchantment with the tangible results (or lack thereof) of post-conciliar Christian-Muslim engagement. It is not infrequent nowadays to meet a strong skepticism among Catholics with regard to the Church's engagement in interreligious dialogue in general, and especially, with Islam. This skepticism, at times open opposition, revolves around two major objections: first, interreligious dialogue is seen as an abandonment of the task of evangelization thereby posing a threat to the Church's own sense of identity; and, second, interreligious dialogue is simply inefficacious, not producing the desired fruit.

Thus, it is no surprise that many saw a manifestation of this disenchantment taking place when the Vatican announced in March 2006, almost a year after the beginning of Benedict XVI's pontificate, the decision to place the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue under the leadership of the Cardinal President of the Pontifical Council for Culture. Interestingly, the President of the latter council linked the decision with the difficulty of holding a "meaningful" doctrinal dialogue with those who do not share the Christian faith in Jesus Christ. He said:

For those who are very familiar with Benedict XVI's thought, this choice [of bringing together interreligious and intercultural dialogue] is logical. In fact, when one speaks of interreligious dialogue, one often thinks of a reflection of a doctrinal nature on common religious topics, such as the idea of God, sin, salvation, etc. However, this doctrinal dialogue calls for a common foundation, and this is not always the case with other religions. [...] Doctrinal dialogue is meaningful among Christians of various confessions with whom we share faith in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, with believers of other religions dialogue is always possible on the basis of culture. ["Christ and Religions, According to Cardinal Poupard," Zenith, March 17, 2006, <https://zenit.org/articles/christ-and-religions-according-to-cardinal-poupard>.]

This statement is taken from an interview that Cardinal Paul Poupard gave to a news agency and it should therefore not be given more weight than it can bear. As it happened, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was restored to its previous status in June 2007. Even so, some voices have continued to question the possibility of a real theological conversation between Christianity and Islam and to point out the meager results that post-conciliar dialogical engagement with Muslims has produced. It has been argued that there cannot be a properly theological dialogue with Islam, except in the broad terms of moral values. Christianity and Islam are two religious visions so profoundly different that the chances of finding common ground are greater in the terrain of culture and social concerns than on theological issues.

Should we take this loss of enthusiasm, hardly a few decades after Vatican II, as a confirmation that theological dialogue between Christianity and Islam is indeed

impossible, an illusion? Must we accept the paradox that these two traditions, despite their many similarities and close relationships, represent in fact two radically opposing conceptions of the human-divine relationship destined for perpetual disagreement, as Charles Adams' "view from the blimp" suggests?

The insights of comparative theologian Hugh Nicholson can be very helpful in understanding the sense of stagnation that currently surrounds Christian-Muslim theological dialogue. Nicholson has developed an insightful analysis of the modern history of religious discourse in the West. He focuses on what he calls "the inescapability of the political" in religious discourse, by which he means the exclusionary – the 'us' versus 'them' – dimension of religious identity. It is precisely this inevitable political dimension of religion that the tradition of liberal theology has vainly sought to overcome since the Enlightenment. Liberal theology sought to rid religion of all the characteristics that made it despicable in the eyes of religion's "cultured despisers" to whom Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, addressed his famous *Speeches* in 1799, namely, that religion "is bent on persecution and spitefulness, that it wrecks society and makes blood flow like water." [Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27-8].

This effort of liberal theology to defuse the conflictive potential of religion explains the rise of comparative theology in the nineteenth-century as opposed to traditional apologetics; this also explains the twentieth-century development of pluralism in the Christian theology of religions as opposed to both exclusivism and inclusivism. On the terrain of the academic study of religion, a parallel desire to eliminate antagonism from religious discourse could help account for the unwillingness of many a scholar of religion today to engage in comparisons, invoking the incommensurability of religious traditions and/or the perverse effects of cultural hegemony, the "the constant temptation to read into the understanding of the other one's own insights and preferences", as Charles Adams puts it.

Nicholson, however, rightly questions the tendency to take religious differences as simply substantive, rather than contrastive, that is, to presume that they "are simply

‘there,’ rather than being the contingent products of the complex processes of selection, emphasis, and recognition through which religious communities situate themselves ‘politically’ in relation to proximate rivals.” [Nicholson, “The New Comparative Theology,” 57.] This is an essential point to which I shall return.

Nicholson’s analysis can also be fruitfully applied to the question of Christian-Muslim relations. In effect, much of the post-conciliar Christian engagement in this area appears as a conscious or unconscious attempt at ‘depoliticizing’ the relations between the two faith communities either by emphasizing commonalities or, more recently, by attempting to move away from the doctrinal to supposedly less problematic terrain such as culture or moral values. If Nicholson is right, however, the oppositional dimension of religious belonging does not disappear by simply ignoring it or trying to bypass it. Post-conciliar supporters of Christian-Muslim dialogue thought, perhaps a bit too ingenuously, that a change of attitude on the Christian side, together with an invitation to Muslims to do the same, would suffice to lay to rest once and for all centuries of mutual suspicion and antagonism. Nicholson helps us see that the issue is larger and more complex than just a question of attitude (readiness to forget historical grievances versus attachment to historical grudges), or a new theological perspective (inclusivism versus exclusivism; or pluralism versus inclusivism) from which to evaluate other religions in general.

My own study of the intellectual history of Christian-Muslim relations leads me to contend that there is something deeply entrenched in the very processes by which Islam and Christianity came to define themselves in relation to one another that, if ignored, will necessarily thwart any attempt at bringing Christians and Muslims together. There are, however, ways of softening some of the sharpest edges of Christian-Muslim oppositional discourses while developing an outlook that sees the others not as enemies to be neutralized (theologically speaking, which is the aim of polemics), but as believers deserving respect. It is here that the new comparative theology can play a salutary role.

The new comparative theology constitutes the most remarkable attempt to reunify theology and the comparative method. It needs to be recalled here that the adoption of the comparative method by the nineteenth-century comparative theology was a short-lived trend within the modern history of theology. The new comparative theology centers



on the process of comparison and distinguishes itself from the project known as “theology of religions”. This latter approach easily leads to one-size-fits-all positions that, a priori, either reject religions as human expressions of unbelief or accept them as equally valid ways of salvation without considering that religious visions are extremely varied and sometimes mutually incompatible. Hence the appeal to comparison as a constituent element of this new type of theologizing: “Comparative theology,” writes James Fredericks, “entails the interpretation of the meaning and truth of one’s own faith by means of a critical investigation of other faiths.” [James L. Fredericks, Introduction to *The New Comparative Theology*, ix.] It is thus clear that [confessional] comparative theologians understand their work as theological in character and, therefore, rooted in a particular faith tradition. More profoundly, the theological character of this discipline is seen in the aims that comparative theologians propose for their work of comparison, namely the rectification of theological perceptions of the uniqueness of one’s faith and of previous evaluations of the religious texts and practices of others. Nineteenth-century comparative theology set out to explore other religions with the aim of confirming ‘scientifically’ what was already held as a conviction of faith, namely the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity. The vulnerability to the truth of other religions and the readiness to revisit long-held assumptions about one’s faith – a vulnerability and readiness that Francis Clooney posits as the hermeneutical requirements of comparative theology – would have seemed rather eccentric demands to his nineteenth-century predecessors. [Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, *passim*.]

As a point of fact, the first wave of Christian comparative theologians has chosen to engage with religious traditions that originated in Asia. More proximate others, such as Judaism and Islam, have been largely neglected. Following the call of some scholars to include the Abrahamic monotheisms within the purview of comparative theology, I suggest that attention should also be paid to the main texts in the history of Christian-Muslim polemics. The authors of these texts held high status in their respective traditions and these texts achieved great popularity as literary compositions. Thus, polemical texts have played and continue to play a decisive role in building up the mutual perceptions of these two religions. These texts are worthy of attention precisely inasmuch as they

contain an intensification of the political, the ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ that features in all religious discourse.

Now, to insist on the contrastive, relational character of religious discourse in connection with the history of Christian-Muslim relations in no way implies that there is no more to Christianity than its relation to Islam and vice versa. And yet, by reason of their historical connection and geographical contiguity, both religions have made important theological choices through which they defined themselves ‘politically’ in relation to one another. And how could it be otherwise, given that Islam understood itself, since its initial phase, as the restoration of the Abrahamic faith to its pristine purity and thus as a correction of both Judaism and Christianity? The ‘true incubator’ of Islam, in which it grew to maturity, was the rich civilization of the Near East. The main accomplishments of the Islamic civilization were the product of the creative interaction of Muslims with the Mediterranean religious and cultural environment, the result of a complex process of appropriation and elaboration – continuity and discontinuity – through which the Islamic community developed its self-understanding over and against other existing religious communities.

The German orientalist Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933) was one of the first scholars to point out the extent to which key issues relating to the history of Islamic dogma were connected with Christian polemics against Islam. In a famous article originally published in 1912, Becker argued that the influence of two early Christian writers, John of Damascus (d. ca. 749) and Theodore Abū Qurra (d. ca. 830), could account almost single-handedly for the terms in which early Muslim theologians discussed the issues of free will, the createdness of the Qur’ān, and the divine attributes. [See Carl Heinrich Becker, “Christliche Polemik und islamische Dogmenbildung,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete* 26 (1912): 175–95. English trans. “Christian Polemic and the Formation of Islamic Doctrine,” in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. R. Hoyland (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 241-57.]

One problematic aspect of Becker’s exposition, however, is that he portrays the relationship between Christian apologetics and polemics against Islam, on the one hand, and early Islamic dogma, on the other, exclusively in terms of lending and borrowing,

with Islam always on the receiving end. Becker thus oversimplifies a process that was certainly more complex. Becker was right in saying that the transfer of ideas between religions surely results, more often than not, from polemic and disputation, but he failed to notice that no side is left unaffected by the process. For instance, he writes in connection with the question of free will: “Indeed, John of Damascus describes determinism as the epitome of Islamic dogma, contrasting this with the specifically Christian doctrine of free will.” [p. 248.] But to what extent can we say that the doctrine of free will is *specifically* Christian? It is not difficult to name Christian theologians who upheld strongly predestinarian views that they found compatible with their faith. Unlike John of Damascus, however, those theologians were not theologizing in a milieu characterized by the ascendancy of Islam. Thus, it would be worth exploring whether John’s concentration on determinism as the defining feature of Islamic dogma is not a case of “double metonymy,” in which a group “confuses some part of its neighbor with its neighbor, and a piece of itself with itself, and construes each in terms of the other.” [William Scott Green, “Otherness Within: Towards a Theory of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism,” in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us’: Christians, Jews, ‘Others’ in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 50.]

For their part, those Muslims who wanted to emphasize the overwhelming character of God’s decree were willing to accept the identification of Christianity with the doctrine of free will and attack Muslims who supported free will precisely as crypto-Christians. The same dynamic – double metonymy – can be seen at work throughout the intellectual history of Christian-Muslim relations at different times and places.

A more helpful way of looking at early theological exchanges between Christianity and Islam is to realize that they were not unidirectional. Sidney Griffith and others have explored how Christian writers writing in Arabic developed their own theological discourse and articulation of Christian doctrines “in parallel, almost in tandem, with the evolving patterns of Islamic religious thought in the same period” [Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 75.] The tandem metaphor is indeed a better image to describe Christian-Muslim theological conversation during the formative centuries of Islam than the categories of lending and borrowing. To give another

example, responding to the Islamic claim that Muhammad was the seal of a line of prophets that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, these Christian writers constructed a scheme of negative criteria “devised specifically in the effort to exclude Islam from any claim to be the true religion.” [Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow*, 98.] Some of these criteria – such as the requirement that prophets be authenticated by miracles – affected in turn Muslims’ own vision of Muhammad, eventually transforming him into a worker of miracles comparable or even superior to those of the previous prophets. But also important for our purpose here is that these criteria in themselves reflect the fact that Christians were already thinking interreligiously and rectifying previous positions. The strong rejection of the ‘sword’ on the part of these Christian apologists as being incompatible with the true religion contrasts with the apparent ease that earlier churchmen like Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) or Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) showed in welcoming the Christianization of the Roman Empire as a sign of divine favor and as a platform for spreading the Christian message.

The point I would like to emphasize is that Islam and Christianity have always understood themselves in theological opposition to one another. This has happened both in times of political and military confrontation and in periods of social *convivencia*. And it is no less true in today’s globalized world than it was in ninth-century cosmopolitan Baghdad or eleventh-century multi-religious Cordoba. In this regard it is revealing that Pope John Paul II, a strong advocate of Christian-Muslim dialogue, should nevertheless have this to say about Islam:

Whoever knows the Old and New Testaments, and then reads the Koran, clearly sees the process by which it completely reduces Divine Revelation. It is impossible not to note the movement away from what God said about Himself, first in the Old Testament through the Prophets, and then finally in the New Testament through His Son. In Islam all the riches of God’s self-revelation, which constitutes the heritage of the Old and New Testaments, has definitively been set aside. Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to the God of the Koran, but He is ultimately a God outside the world, a God who is only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God-with-us. Islam is not a religion of redemption. There is no room for the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is

mentioned, but only as a prophet who prepares for the last prophet, Muhammad. There is also mention of Mary, His Virgin Mother, but the tragedy of redemption is completely absent. For this reason not only the theology but also the anthropology of Islam is very distant from Christianity.” [John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 92-3.]

As one can see, the statement is highly ‘political’ in the sense used by Nicholson, in that the Pope clearly defines Islam as a ‘them’ which is different from ‘us.’ He is not simply saying that Islam happens to be substantially different from Christianity, but he manifestly interprets those differences in contrastive terms. Thus, the Qur’ān appears in his eyes as a reduction in the process of divine revelation, an interruption of the ever-deepening process of divine self-disclosure contained in the biblical tradition. This type of strongly normative evaluations of Islam was precisely what many Catholics who engaged in Christian-Muslim relations in the wake of Vatican II sought to avoid, preferring instead to focus on commonalities such as our shared spiritual bond in Abraham. In context, John Paul II’s gestures of friendship towards Muslims throughout his long pontificate preclude any intention to be disrespectful when he expressed the view of Islam just quoted. It proves that one can be aware of the deep theological differences between the two religious traditions and nevertheless see the other as someone who deserves respect and whose friendship is worth seeking. The Pope’s words truthfully represent a long-standing Christian theological evaluation of Islam and it would be intellectually dishonest to write or act, even with the best of intentions, as if such evaluation did not exist or need not be repeated. An approach to interreligious dialogue that is forthright about each side’s views of the other has better prospects for future advance than disregarding the oppositional identities of Christianity and Islam. That said, we can do more than simply acknowledge our mutual doctrinal assessments. As already suggested, we can apply the hermeneutical stance of the new comparative theology to Christian-Muslim polemical texts in order to refine and perhaps correct aspects of that theological view of the other that we have inherited. Furthermore, study of these texts reveals the breakdown in communication that results from taking one’s theological categories as axiomatic and universally applicable. It helps us realize that those categories are themselves the historical products of the complex processes of

identity construction through which Muslims and Christians have situated themselves politically in relation to each other. To become aware of this is already to progress beyond the stage of registering the differences with one another.

Christians might discover, for instance, that Judaism was often the implicit (and sometimes explicit) third party in their evaluation of Islam. As Sidney Griffith has shown, early Christian apologists consistently characterized Islamic practices and beliefs (particularly in the area of Christology) as Jewish, or at least as influenced by Jewish ideas. The point of these writers was that Islam, in religious terms, amounted to what they saw as discredited Judaism. [Sidney H. Griffith, "Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century," *Jewish History* 3, no. 1 (1988): 65-94.] Additionally, there has been a tendency to assimilate Islam with the legalistic Judaism that Jesus is thought to have rejected. Supersessionist views of Judaism were thus brought to bear in the evaluation of Islam. If this connection can be made more evident by the study of the relevant literature, we can expect that the reassessment of Judaism that is taking place in Christian theology may have repercussions for a Christian theological understanding of Islam.

Finally, it is worth recalling Nicholson's distinction of two moments in the formation of religious identity. The first is the proper *political* moment of exclusion, the 'we are not like them.' This relational nature of identity is then obscured in a second *ideological* moment of naturalization, in which a discourse which in fact represents a highly partial claim is presented as natural and incontrovertible. Religious intolerance, contends Nicholson, stems from this second moment of naturalization, which allows 'us' to declare 'them' as deviant and therefore unworthy of respect. The real danger of religious intolerance lies in this process of naturalization, and attempts to reduce intolerance must attend to that second moment in the formation of religious identity. [Nicholson, *Comparative Theology*, 12.] Nicholson's argument illustrates why Christian-Muslim polemical texts deserve attention today: because in these texts Christians and Muslims have come closest to religious intolerance by portraying the other not only as a mirror against which we construct our identity, but as blind and inimical to truth.

To conclude, the study of polemical texts can be an enriching intellectual project of historical research, in need of no other justification, but it can also be conceived as a theological venture. Francis Clooney speaks of purification and intensification of the theologian's faith as two desirable results from the practice of comparative theology and I believe that both may also result from the type of approach I am proposing here. In the first place, attentive cross-reading of Christian-Muslim polemical literature can play an important corrective role by helping theologians to discriminate between interpretations of the differing religion that were shaped by a prior concern to establish one's truth and other theological evaluations that were made after an honest effort to listen to the adherents of the differing religion. As for the intensification of the theologian's faith, it may be the result of coming to see the truth claims of the other believer in unexpected ways. Simplistic reasons for not paying attention to their critiques may evaporate once these critiques are seen to carry some theological weight.

Adams's "view from the blimp" comparative approach corresponds to John Paul II's theological assessment of Islam. This approach is static and tends to think of the present state of affairs as a constant in history: this is what Islam has always been and this is how Christians should think of it. Instead, the kind of attentive scrutiny of specifics that the new comparative theology favors, as well as the hermeneutical stance it proposes, helps us develop a more dynamic view of how Muslims and Christians have situated themselves 'politically' in relation to each other through contrastive theological choices. There is no denying that there are important theological differences between Christianity and Islam. But we should be aware that some of these differences are largely the result of the "othering" that has characterized the history of Christian-Muslim polemics: a view of the other as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself and that deliberately widens the theological gap between the two faith traditions. Awareness of this reality should help revise our adversarial conceptions of the other, reinforcing the reasons for mutual respect and recognition.