

From *Takfīr* to *Takhtī'ah*: Rethinking the Grammar of Monotheism in the Abrahamic Tradition

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Abstract

This article proposes a new theological framework for Muslim–Christian–Jewish dialogue rooted in humility, epistemic openness, and shared reverence for divine mystery. Beginning with the Qur’ānic affirmation of God’s ineffability, it contrasts the distinct yet complementary theological “grammars” of the Abrahamic faiths: Islam’s emphasis on divine attributes (*ṣifāt*), Christianity’s on divine essence (*dhāt*), and Judaism’s on divine action (*af’āl*). The article argues that these divergent emphases reflect not contradiction but divine intentionality, each revealing partial dimensions of the unknowable God. Central to the paper is the recovery of the Qur’ānic principle of *taṣdīq* (confirmation) as a hermeneutical corrective to the polemical use of *naskh* (abrogation), positioning the Qur’ān as a confirmer rather than a canceller of prior revelations. Building on this, the author advances a shift from *takfīr* (excommunication) to *takhtī'ah* (assuming error without exclusion) as a model for intra- and interfaith theological engagement. The article concludes by reframing Christian–Muslim relations as an intra-Abrahamic dialogue grounded in shared pursuit of divine truth, proposing a *maqāṣid*-based theology oriented not toward boundary defence but toward truth-seeking as a spiritual vocation.

Keywords: Monotheism; *Takfīr*; *Takḥī'ah*; *Taşdīq*; Islamic theology; Abrahamic Tradition; *Maqāṣid*; Theology of truth.

Introduction and Methodology

The relationship between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism has long been shaped by a tension between shared monotheistic commitments and deeply contested theological differences. Across centuries, this tension has often been mediated through polemic, apologetics, and boundary-making, where each tradition has sought to preserve doctrinal integrity while responding to the claims of the others. Yet beneath these contestations lies a more fundamental issue: the nature of divine knowledge itself and the extent to which any one tradition can claim to fully comprehend or exhaust the reality of God. In recent decades, the field of comparative theology has sought to move beyond purely defensive or descriptive approaches, instead advocating for a mode of engagement rooted in learning across traditions while remaining grounded in one's own confessional commitments.¹ It is within this broader intellectual and theological landscape that the present article situates itself.

Against this backdrop, the article narrows its focus to a central and pressing question: how can Muslims engage theological difference within the Abrahamic traditions without defaulting to *takfīr* (excommunication), while still maintaining meaningful doctrinal commitments? Put differently, is it possible to articulate a theological framework that recognises error without collapsing into exclusion, and difference without surrendering truth? The article proposes that such a framework is not only possible but already latent within the Qur'ān

¹ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad, 2008), 1–10.

and the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly when read through the lenses of divine ineffability, *taṣdīq* (confirmation), and the interpretive ethic of *takḥṭi'ah*. In doing so, it reframes interfaith theological disagreement as an intra-Abrahamic discourse structured by partial apprehensions of a shared divine reality, rather than as a zero-sum contest of mutually exclusive truth claims.

Methodologically, the article first situates itself within the discipline of comparative theology by adopting what may be described as a confessional yet dialogical approach. Unlike classical comparative religion, which often aims at neutral description, or polemical theology, which seeks refutation, comparative theology begins from within a particular tradition while remaining open to transformation through encounter with the other.² The article reflects this orientation by grounding its inquiry firmly within Qur'ānic theology, while simultaneously engaging Christian and Jewish thought as sources of genuine theological insight. This is evident in its initial move to foreground divine ineffability, not merely as a doctrinal claim, but as an epistemological condition that relativises all human attempts to fully grasp God. By beginning here, the article establishes a shared space across traditions, particularly resonant with apophatic strands in both Christian and Jewish theology, thereby creating the conditions for meaningful comparison without premature judgement.

The second methodological move develops a constructive comparative framework through the concept of distinct “theological grammars.” Rather than comparing isolated doctrines, the article examines how each Abrahamic tradition approaches God through a different primary lens, attributes in Islam, essence in Christianity, and

² Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 9–15.

actions in Judaism. This approach aligns with recent developments in comparative theology that emphasise deep learning across traditions by attending to their internal logics and categories, rather than translating them into one's own conceptual framework.³ By doing so, the article aims to avoid reductionism and instead interprets theological differences as arising from divergent epistemological orientations. This allows for a more nuanced account of disagreement, where apparent contradictions may in fact reflect complementary, though partial, apprehensions of the divine. In this sense, the article positions itself within a strand of comparative theology that seeks not synthesis, but a disciplined attentiveness to difference as a site of theological enrichment.

Finally, the article advances a hermeneutical and normative methodology through its recovery of *taṣdīq* and its proposal of *takḥī'ah* as an alternative to *takfīr*. Here, it combines textual analysis with constructive theology, re-reading the Qur'ānic relationship to prior scriptures as one of confirmation rather than abrogation, and extending this principle into a broader theological ethic. This move reflects what some scholars have described as a “theology of interreligious learning,” where engagement with other traditions is not ancillary but integral to the pursuit of truth.⁴ By drawing on intra-Muslim precedents of tolerated disagreement, the article situates its proposal within the Islamic tradition itself, thereby avoiding the charge of external imposition. At the same time, it contributes to comparative theology by offering a distinctly Islamic model for interfaith

³ James L. Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Paulist Press, 1999), 114–120.

⁴ David B. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 175–182.

engagement, one that balances conviction with humility and reframes theological difference as an opportunity for deeper participation in a shared, though ultimately ungraspable, divine reality.

Divine Ineffability and Theological Awe

The theological foundation from which this paper begins is one not commonly emphasized in contemporary Muslim discourse: the utter unknowability and ineffability of God (Allah). The dominant mode of Muslim theology, especially in post-classical *kalām* traditions, has leaned toward careful articulation of divine attributes, sometimes leading to a presumption that God's nature, while not fully comprehensible, can at least be framed in systematically coherent terms.⁵ However, the Qur'ān itself points toward a far more ineffable vision of God, one that stresses divine transcendence to the point of existential bewilderment. In Q. 20:110, the verse declares, "*He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not encompass Him in knowledge.*" This assertion is not merely epistemological; it is probably also existential. It destabilizes any attempt to domesticate the divine within the categories of human knowledge, whether theological, philosophical, or even mystical. The verse situates the human being in an asymmetrical relationship to the divine: God knows the totality of the human, but the human cannot reciprocate that knowledge. This epistemic limit is not a deficiency but an invitation into a posture of awe, humility, and contemplative surrender.

This emphasis on divine unknowability may invite a common objection: how can such an ineffable conception of God be reconciled with Qur'ānic verses that describe divine proximity, such as being

⁵ Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 403-407.

“closer than the jugular vein” (Q. 50:16), or those that employ seemingly anthropomorphic language? Yet this tension is only apparent if such expressions are read in a strictly literal or corporeal sense. The Qur’ān’s language of nearness gestures toward an existential and epistemic intimacy that does not compromise divine transcendence, while anthropomorphic descriptions function as analogical or pedagogical modes of address, enabling understanding without implying likeness in essence. Rather than resolving the mystery of the divine, these forms of expression preserve it, sustaining a productive tension in which God is at once intimately present and radically beyond full comprehension. It is precisely this tension, between nearness and incomparability, disclosure and concealment, that situates the human encounter with God not in conceptual mastery but in a state of reverent bewilderment, preparing the ground for a deeper reflection on how even the divine name itself evokes this experience.

The very name “Allah” encapsulates this dynamic of awe and unknowability. Classical Arabic lexicographers have noted that the term “Allah” derives from the root *أَلِيَّ* (*aliha*) which carries connotations of being perplexed or bewildered (*waliha*). In Arabic lexicons, this root can be linked to a state of intense longing or bewilderment in the face of the divine.⁶ In this view, “Allah” is not just a proper noun denoting a specific deity but a verbal and emotional invocation of the One who bewilders the heart and intellect due to the immensity of His majesty and beauty. This etymological insight is not peripheral to Islamic theology; rather, it centres the spiritual experience of God not in rational mastery but in *ḥayrah*; a state of

⁶ Edward W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 1 (Williams & Norgate, 1968), 82.

reverent astonishment.⁷ This insight brings Islamic theology into profound resonance with apophatic traditions in Christianity and Judaism, as opposed to cataphatic traditions,⁸ particularly those voices which insist that God is best spoken of in negation and silence rather than in positive assertions. Hence, revelation does not exhaust God; it gestures toward Him in ways that provoke worship and wonder rather than conceptual closure.

By recovering this neglected dimension of divine unknowability in Islam, one also recovers the deeply affective and spiritual grammar that underpins the Qurʾān's language about God. The God of the Qurʾān is not an object to be dissected but a subject who reveals Himself in signs that provoke *taʿajjub* (astonishment). Prophet Muhammad's own reported experience of revelation was marked by awe, physical trembling, and existential dislocation,⁹ experiences that mirror the Gospel's depiction of the disciples' confusion and fear in the face of Jesus's divine authority (cf. Mark 4:41; 6:51). In both cases, divine disclosure is not about comfort but confrontation with the Real. This aesthetic and existential dimension of the divine has often been overshadowed in Muslim polemics against Christian theology. Yet it is precisely here, in the shared grammar of mystery, that Muslim and Christian readings can enter into productive and reverent engagement.

⁷ Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 1 (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), pp. 144–153.

⁸ Adam Afterman, “The Mystical Theology of Kabbalah: From God to Godhead,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Steven Kepnes (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 149–182.

⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Īmān, ḥadīth 2.

When engaging with non-Muslim scriptures, this orientation reframes the questions one brings to the text: rather than asking “Is this compatible with Islamic creed?” the more foundational question becomes, “What aspects of God’s mystery are being unveiled here?” This does not imply uncritical acceptance of Christian or Jewish doctrines but does require an openness to spiritual resonance, a willingness to let the divine Other remain Other. Just as the Qur’ān calls its reader to reflect on the paradoxical signs in creation and history (Q. 51:20-21), so too does the Bible invites the reader into a sacred narrative that cannot be resolved without transformation.

Read alongside the insights of Catherine Cornille, particularly her emphasis on epistemological humility and the interconnection of religious traditions, this posture becomes not merely devotional but also methodological: it acknowledges the limits of one’s own theological formulations while remaining open to the possibility that truth is encountered, though never exhausted, in the other.¹⁰ In this light, *hayrah* is not only a spiritual state but an intellectual ethic, one that resists premature closure and sustains attentiveness to difference without collapsing it. If “Allah” is truly the One who bewilders, who unsettles the illusion of certainty, then reading the Bible as a Muslim becomes not an act of compromise but an extension of fidelity to the God who exceeds all names, means, and categories.

Theological Grammars of Monotheism

While the ambiguity of God’s nature itself stands as a formidable starting point for theological complexity, an even deeper layer of ambiguity emerges from the disparate emphases that the three major monotheistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have

¹⁰ Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 4.

historically placed when approaching the divine. These differing points of focus, God's *attributes* in Islamic theology, God's *essence* in Christian theology embodied in Jesus, and God's *actions* in Jewish theological history, reveal how each tradition forms its own epistemological framework for encountering the divine. This divergence means that theological discourses are often built upon distinct premises, leading to frequent misinterpretations when traditions engage one another. A Muslim theologian might approach divine mercy as one of God's *ṣifāt* (attributes), integrally related to God's will, while a Christian might seek to locate mercy within the triune *essence* or hypostatic union, and a Jewish thinker might consider how divine mercy is demonstrated historically in covenantal *acts*. These contrasting frameworks inherently create interpretative dissonance, as interlocutors are not merely speaking different languages, but inhabiting different metaphysical structures.

Muslim theologians have long been engaged in nuanced debates over the *ṣifāt Allāh*, God's attributes, and whether they are co-eternal with God or created.¹¹ The concern lies in preserving divine unity (*tawḥīd*) while affirming scriptural descriptions of God. The theological balancing act between anthropomorphism and negation becomes central here. Conversely, in Christian theology, especially from the patristic through scholastic periods, the primary concern shifted to the metaphysical structure of God's *ousia* (essence), especially as developed in Trinitarian and Christological doctrines. Debates between *homoousios* and *homoiousios* during the fourth century, for instance, reflect a commitment to understanding God's inner life, a question rarely foregrounded in Islamic *kalām*.¹² This theological

¹¹ Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*, 12-14.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (University

architecture inevitably renders God as a mystery primarily in terms of *being*, rather than *doing* or *manifesting*.

Judaism, as suggested here, often sidesteps ontological speculation in favour of a relational, covenantal model grounded in divine *actions*. The Hebrew Bible and rabbinic tradition focus intensively on what God *does*, acts of justice, mercy, wrath, and redemption, rather than what God *is*. The divine name YHWH is itself interpreted in rabbinic midrashim not as a metaphysical claim, but as a marker of divine constancy in action.¹³ Thus, when Jewish thinkers discuss divine justice or compassion, they often refer to concrete historical interventions or ethical imperatives, not to metaphysical or essential realities. This makes the Jewish God both profoundly present and perpetually enigmatic, not because of ineffable essence, but due to unpredictable acts. The Hebrew Bible's statement that "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways"¹⁴ reflects a theological humility rooted in God's otherness expressed through action.

When interreligious dialogue occurs, these distinctions are often either flattened or misunderstood. A Christian might misread a Muslim discussion of *rahma* (mercy) as implying a changeable God if unaware of the distinction between *ṣifāt dhātīyya* (essential attributes) and *ṣifāt fi'līyya* (active attributes). Likewise, a Muslim might interpret Christian Trinitarian discourse as polytheistic if they are unacquainted with the conceptual difference between *hypostasis* and *essence*. Similarly, a Jewish thinker focused on divine justice through historical suffering

of Chicago Press, 1971), 172–175.

¹³ Jacob Neusner, *The Theology of the Halakhah* (Brill, 2001), 226–227.

¹⁴ Isaiah 55:8 in *The Hebrew Bible*, trans. Jewish Publication Society (JPS, 1985).

might see Islamic or Christian metaphysics as overly abstract. These misreadings are not merely interpretative errors; they are born of divergent theological grammars. The result is often either a projection of one's categories onto the other, domestication, or a total lack of comprehension; alienation.

This multi-dimensionality of theological focus directly reflects the vastness of the divine, a reality all three traditions acknowledge, even as they articulate it differently. The Qur'ānic verse Q. 5:48 speaks precisely to this recognition of plurality and its divine sanction: *"To each of you We have assigned a law and a path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community, but He willed to test you in what He has given you. So vie with one another in virtue"* (Q. 5:48). This verse not only acknowledges theological and legal diversity but suggests that such diversity is divinely intended. The command to "vie in virtue" implies that epistemological humility and ethical excellence, rather than doctrinal uniformity, are the divine expectations. The verse thus functions as both a theological anthropology and an interreligious ethic: humans are inherently diverse in their access to divine knowledge and should live with and through that ambiguity.

Theologically, then, divine ambiguity is not merely a cognitive limit but a revealed reality. God may have chosen to disclose Himself through different modes, attributes, essence, and actions, across traditions, allowing each to access certain dimensions while remaining blind to others. This fragmentation is not a flaw in human knowledge but a feature of divine intentionality. The Qur'ānic verse, when read alongside the Trinitarian mystery in Christianity and the covenantal narrative in Judaism, points toward a plural epistemology of the divine. In this framework, God is not wholly known by any single tradition, but each tradition serves as a prism refracting a distinct colour of the divine spectrum. Thus, interfaith misunderstanding is not simply a

matter of theological error but a reflection of a deeper metaphysical truth: God exceeds the confines of any one interpretive tradition.

The persistence of theological misunderstanding, then, is perhaps not merely a historical or sociological phenomenon but also a doctrinal one. When Muslim theologians read Christian theology through the lens of *tawhīd*, or when Jewish thinkers evaluate Islamic monotheism through the lens of covenant and action, the result is not necessarily an objective evaluation but a cross-pollination often marked by projection and distortion. This occurs because the categories themselves, essence, attributes, actions, are non-transferable without conceptual translation. Yet rather than signalling failure, this disjunction can be read as a testament to divine plenitude. If God is indeed “*closer than the jugular vein*” (Q. 50:16) and yet ungraspable, “*No vision can fully take Him in, but He takes in all vision*” (Q. 6:103), then the multiplicity of theological grammars is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be honoured. Through difference, the unknowable becomes more richly apprehended, not less.

Plural Paths to Knowing God

With this in mind, the theological encounter between the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, ought to begin not with the aim of securing doctrinal superiority but with the mutual desire to know God more deeply. Within the framework of monotheism, it becomes increasingly evident that our traditions are not sealed compartments but part of a shared inquiry into divine reality. Given the earlier starting points, first, that monotheism entails accountability to the same ultimate source, and second, that revelation within each tradition is partial and interpretive; our third trajectory ought to be a humble, dialogical pursuit of God’s self-disclosure. Such diversity is not a weakness of revelation but a testament to the ungraspable fullness of

the divine, which requires multiple lenses to glimpse even partially.

Christian theology has long wrestled with the paradox of God's immanence and transcendence, most vividly expressed in the Incarnation. In this, God's *dhāt*, His very essence, takes on flesh, offering believers a personal and historical encounter with the divine. As Karl Rahner (d. 1984) argues, the self-communication of God is not exhausted in mere propositions, but in "God giving Himself."¹⁵ This encounter does not nullify other forms of divine self-communication but situates the Christian emphasis within a broader divine pedagogy. In Islam, by contrast, the emphasis on *ṣifāt*, attributes such as *al-Raḥmān* (the Merciful) and *al-Ḥakīm* (the Wise), provides a textured understanding of God's nature that discourages anthropomorphism while still affirming relationality. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), for instance, devotes considerable attention to the attributes of God, noting that "understanding them is a pathway to divine closeness."¹⁶ Thus, each tradition bears its own theological weight and vocabulary, but all aim at a fuller knowledge of the one God who transcends our conceptualizations.

Judaism offers yet another mode of divine disclosure by centring God's actions in history, His *af'āl*. God's identity is unfolded through acts such as the Exodus, covenant formation, and prophetic intervention. Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1972) notes that the God of Israel is not a being detached from man but a God of "pathos," intimately involved in history.¹⁷ Unlike the Christian emphasis on essence or the Islamic attention to attributes, Judaism emphasizes

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (Crossroad, 1992), 141.

¹⁶ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, trans. David Burrell (Islamic Texts Society, 2007), 31.

¹⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper & Row, 1962), 48, 82.

divine activity as the locus of encounter and understanding. But these are not mutually exclusive modes. Each tradition, in focusing on essence, attributes, or acts, reflects a legitimate emphasis within a unified divine reality that defies reduction. Rather than resisting these different expressions, it is suggested that we see them as complementary perspectives on the same ineffable divine subject, none of which can claim exhaustive comprehension.

The fragmentation of our theological languages into exclusive truth-claims is more a function of human pride than divine necessity. When we dismiss another tradition's theological articulation as wholly "other," we risk mistaking our limited grasp of God for God's totality. As Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) proposed in his *De Docta Ignorantia*, true knowledge of God begins with the acknowledgment of our ignorance, for every inquiry begins with wonder and ends in mystery.¹⁸ To this end, interreligious encounter should not aim at the elimination of difference but at the cultivation of deeper listening. By engaging one another's understandings of God's essence, attributes, and actions, we are invited to grow in spiritual perception, rather than simply win theological arguments. The multiplicity of God's self-introduction across traditions challenges us to see divine mystery not as a problem to solve but as an invitation to awe.

The division into "religions" has often relied on binaries that categorize traditions in fixed and oppositional terms: monotheist/pagan, Abrahamic/non-Abrahamic, revealed/man-made. These binaries obscure more than they reveal. They reduce the divine narrative to a human taxonomy that neglects the fact that God is always greater than our systems of classification. As Shahab Ahmed

¹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440), trans. Jasper Hopkins (Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990), 4.

(d. 2015) critiques, such binaries often lead to the “imposition of an artificial unity,” and clarity, on what is in reality complex, lived, and interpenetrated.¹⁹ A more fruitful theological methodology would resist the urge to flatten these complexities into binaries and instead recognize that theological boundaries are often porous. Divine revelation is not property but gift, and like all true gifts, it exceeds the possession of the recipient. To remain within our respective traditions is not to reject others’ insights, but to affirm that our own theological frameworks are strengthened by cross-pollination with others who also seek the face of God.

To learn from one another, then, is not an act of theological compromise but of theological courage. It requires the humility to accept that another’s articulation of God might disclose something we have overlooked or undervalued. When a Muslim contemplates God’s mercy through the ninety-nine names of God (*asmā’ al-ḥusnā*), a Christian might find renewed insight into the inexhaustibility of divine love. When a Jew recounts God’s intervention in history as a covenant partner, a Muslim might find resonance with the Qur’ānic narrative of divine guidance. This cross-referential learning does not collapse difference; rather, it dignifies each tradition’s unique orientation while acknowledging that they all direct us toward the same transcendent reality. As David Burrell affirms, the very intelligibility of our talk about God depends on our willingness to learn from how others speak of God, “If our differences show one tradition to be superior to another in certain respects, and others to be superior to one’s own in other respects, then what have we to say except to learn from one another?”²⁰ This theological generosity is a discipline of love and an act of worship.

¹⁹ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 143.

²⁰ David B. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, 180.

Ultimately, our shared inquiry into God ought to be rooted in mystery, not mastery. To speak of God is always to speak from the shadows of the cloud, not from the certainties of the spotlight. Whether God is encountered in essence, attributes, or actions, these are not mutually exclusive but mutually illuminating dimensions of a reality that eludes our grasp and draws us deeper. The mystery of divine self-revelation is not a deficiency but the space in which interreligious encounter becomes possible. In that space, we are not strangers competing for divine attention but companions walking together in pursuit of a God who, in His infinite mercy, has chosen to reveal Himself diversely yet truly. Our traditions are not walls, but windows, through which the light refracts in unique colours, yet all from the same source.

***Taşdīq* as Qur'ānic Hermeneutics**

The principle of *taşdīq*, or confirmation, emerges as a foundational Qur'ānic principle in understanding the scripture's relationship with previous revelations, particularly the Bible. In at least thirteen verses, the Qur'ān repeatedly presents itself as a *muşaddiq* (confirmer) of what preceded it.²¹ For example, in Q. 3:3, the revelation of the Qur'ān is described as one that “confirms what was before it” (*muşaddiqan limā bayna yadayhi*), highlighting a continuity rather than rupture with prior scriptures. Such a stance challenges the dominant classical hermeneutical approach that overemphasizes *naskh* (abrogation), often at the expense of the Qur'ān's own repeated declarations of continuity. This confirms that the Qur'ān's self-perception is not that of a

²¹ Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, “The Qur'ān and the Bible: Abrogation (naskh) or Confirmation (taşdīq)?,” *Religions* 14, no. 7 (2023): 856, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070856>.

superseding revelation but one that validates the core messages of earlier scriptures.

The emphasis on *taṣḍīq* indicates that the Qurʾān assumes a certain epistemological trust in prior scriptures, particularly in their divine origin and ethical guidance. This is reflected in Q. 5:66, which states: “*If they had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was revealed to them from their Lord, they would have been nourished from above them and from beneath their feet...*” This verse underscores the enduring value and legitimacy of earlier revelations, suggesting that their proper observance remains spiritually and materially beneficial. Traditional interpretations often overlook how such affirmations imply a hermeneutical engagement with previous texts, not their erasure.²² The verse implies that the problem lies not in the scriptures themselves but in their misapplication or neglect. Thus, the Qurʾān invites its readers to engage with the Biblical tradition thoughtfully, acknowledging its original divine message while offering corrections or clarifications when necessary; never outright rejection.

This framework of *taṣḍīq* necessitates a serious re-evaluation of the interpretive priority often given to *naskh*, which lacks a solid textual basis within the Qurʾān itself. The verse traditionally often cited in support of abrogation is Q. 2:106, yet even this verse is ambiguously worded and has been interpreted in vastly different ways.²³ Such readings depend more primarily on juridical and polemical developments in Islamic history than on the Qurʾānic text itself.²⁴ By contrast, *taṣḍīq* is a consistently and repeatedly affirmed

²² Abdelnour, “The Qurʾān and the Bible,” 856.

²³ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Nazarāt fī al-Qurʾān* (Nahḍat Miṣr, 2005), 202.

²⁴ Abdelnour, “The Qurʾān and the Bible,” 8.

Qur'ānic concept, making it a more solid foundation for intertextual theological understanding.

Additionally, the Qur'ān's acknowledgment of previous prophets and their scriptures as legitimate and divinely inspired cannot be reconciled with an outright abrogationist approach. Q. 2:136 explicitly instructs Muslims to affirm belief in "what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus." There is no suggestion here of annulment; rather, the verse calls for recognition and continuity. Hence, the Qur'ānic attitude is one of reverence towards previous revelations and that this reverence should guide how differences between the Qur'ān and the Bible are interpreted, not through negation, but through deeper contextual engagement. Such a hermeneutic resists the zero-sum logic of abrogation and fosters a theology of scriptural harmony grounded in divine intentionality.

Moreover, the marginalization of *taṣḍīq* in favour of *naskh* has created a polemical distance between Islam and the People of the Book. While some classical commentators have leaned heavily on *naskh* to assert theological superiority, such moves ignore the Qur'ān's more nuanced and conciliatory tones. The emphasis on *taṣḍīq* opens up space for recognizing the Bible not as a corrupted or outdated text but as a companion in conveying divine truth. For instance, Q. 10:94 advises Prophet Muhammad to consult those who read the earlier scripture if he is ever in doubt; a profound acknowledgment of the ongoing validity and relevance of earlier revelations. This dialogical posture aligns with the Qur'ān's broader theme of confirming and integrating the messages of past prophets rather than erasing them.

The marginalization of *taṣḍīq* also has significant implications for Islamic theology and interreligious ethics. *Taṣḍīq* affirms that the divine message has been historically dispersed across different

communities and texts, fostering a universalism that resists exclusivist theologies. When viewed through this lens, theological differences between the Qur'ān and the Bible become sites for interpretive negotiation rather than negation. Q. 12:111 describes the Qur'ān as a confirmer of previous scriptures and as a clarification (*tafṣīl*) of them, suggesting that differences may emerge from explanatory expansions rather than doctrinal oppositions. This invites scholars and believers alike to engage differences not with the presumption of contradiction but through a hermeneutics of deepening understanding within a shared divine discourse.

Finally, the Qur'ānic principle of *taṣḍīq* restores the legitimacy of the Biblical message in Islamic thought and provides a theological anchor for constructive engagement with the Christian and Jewish traditions. The eclipse of this principle by the more juridically expedient notion of *naskh* has hindered both intra-Muslim and interfaith theological discourse. The restoration of *taṣḍīq* as a central hermeneutical tool reorients Qur'ānic interpretation towards the acknowledgment of sacred continuity. Instead of presuming doctrinal rupture, the differences between the Qur'ān and the Bible ought to be read as dialectical developments within a single divine communicative act. In this light, *taṣḍīq* not only blesses the Qur'ān's position *vis-à-vis* the Bible but also sanctifies the broader Abrahamic tradition as a whole, fostering a more inclusive and textually faithful Muslim theology.

From *Takfīr* to *Takhṭī'ah*

In light of these historical and theological tensions, it is critical to emphasize that the articulation of multiple starting points for Christian-Muslim dialogue should not be misread as a declaration of relativism or mutual correctness. Rather, such an approach is a call to

shift the mode of engagement from *takfīr*, the act of declaring someone a disbeliever, to *takhtī'ah*, the recognition that one might hold an erroneous position without being excluded from the fold of monotheistic faith. The Muslim tradition provides ample precedent for this interpretive generosity. For example, the Ash'arīs and the Atharīs have long held divergent conceptions of God's attributes. The Ash'arīs regard the Atharī affirmation of divine attributes in literal terms as bordering on anthropomorphism, yet this theological critique has not, in normative Sunni discourse, led to the exclusion of Atharīs from the broader community of believers. The disagreement is acknowledged, contested, and even robustly debated, but it remains within the boundaries of *īmān* (faith).²⁵

This precedent underscores an important epistemic humility that was, at times, absent in Islamic history but later recovered. Take, for instance, the case of the Mu'tazilīs' early polemics against Ash'arī theology. The Mu'tazilīs, who emphasized God's unity (*tawhīd*) to the extent of denying any real distinction between God's essence and His attributes, once accused the Ash'arīs of exceeding even the Christians in dividing the divine. "You believe in twenty attributes," they would argue, "while the Christians believe in only three."²⁶ Such rhetorical flourishes were meant to underscore the gravity of theological error. Yet over time, the language of denunciation softened, and a more nuanced conversation emerged.

²⁵ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 115–120.

²⁶ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 246. See also Al-Ḥākīm al-Jishumī, *Risālat Iblīs ilā Ikhwānihi al-Manāḥīs*, edited by Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī (n.p., 1986), 130.

Al-Ghāzalī's *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqah bayna al-Islām wa-al-Ẓandaqah* (The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Between Islam and Heresy) is a reflection of this process of harmonization. Here, al-Ghāzalī systematically complicates earlier tendencies toward rigid classification by distinguishing between different types of doctrinal deviation and the varying epistemic conditions under which they arise. He argues that many apparent theological errors stem not from wilful rejection of truth but from interpretive constraints, linguistic ambiguity, or the limits of rational inference when approaching divine realities. On this basis, he restricts the scope of blanket condemnation and introduces a more graduated understanding of belief, in which disagreement does not automatically entail exclusion from the faith community. What emerges is an epistemology that preserves doctrinal seriousness while simultaneously acknowledging the structural limits of human cognition in grasping metaphysical truths, thereby embedding restraint and discernment within theological judgment itself. This historical shift demonstrates the potential for growth in theological discourse, not by relinquishing critical engagement, but by adopting a posture of respect and forbearance that maintains a commitment to shared belief in God.

This capacity for internal theological pluralism serves as a model for Christian-Muslim engagement. If Muslims can argue passionately over the nature of divine attributes without consigning each other to hell, then surely similar disagreements with Christians over the nature of God can be approached in a spirit of *takḥṭi'ah* rather than *takfīr*. Christians, too, might benefit from adopting such a paradigm in interfaith discussions. The Christian acknowledgment of mystery in the nature of God, most clearly articulated in doctrines like the Trinity, can be a bridge rather than a boundary. As Muslims assert the *tanzīh* (incomparability) of God, Christians affirm the ineffability of the divine nature. Both traditions, in their own ways, admit that God

ultimately transcends full human comprehension. This shared epistemic modesty provides the space to acknowledge difference without foreclosing dialogue.²⁷

On the other hand, to frame Christian-Muslim theological differences as inherently excommunicative is to misunderstand the nature of doctrinal development in both traditions. Neither Christianity nor Islam has ever been monolithic, and both have experienced internal theological ferment that has, over time, reshaped communal boundaries. For example, the Christian debates over *homoousios* versus *homoiousios* in the early councils reflect just how contested the doctrine of God can be, even within a tradition that shares a common credal core.²⁸ Similarly, Islam's own history of *Kalām* reveals a rich tapestry of disagreement that did not always result in mutual anathema. The shift from *takfīr* to *takhī'ah* in intra-Muslim debates was not merely a theological necessity; it was also a moral and social imperative, fostering the conditions for coexistence and intellectual vitality. This same imperative should guide contemporary Jewish-Christian-Muslim theological dialogue.

Moreover, the mutual recognition of God as a mystery invites us to reconsider the nature of theological truth claims themselves. If God is truly beyond the full grasp of human cognition, as both Qur'ānic and Biblical texts seem to attest, then our respective theological formulations are, at best, approximations grounded in revelation, reason, and tradition. The Qur'ān's affirmation that "there is nothing like unto Him" (Q. 42:11) parallels the Christian idea that

²⁷ See David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

²⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1971), 199–205.

God “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16). Such scriptural declarations should humble our polemics and encourage us to approach each other not as adversaries but as fellow seekers after the Divine. This humility does not preclude disagreement, but it does call for a measured rhetoric that distinguishes between error and unbelief, between mistaken conceptions and the wholesale rejection of God.

Christianity as Intra-Abrahamic Dispute

John of Damascus’s (d. 749) characterization of Islam as a Christian heresy, though polemical and somehow dismissive, paradoxically draws attention to Islam’s theological proximity to Christianity. In his *Heresies in Epitome*, John describes Islam as the “heresy of the Ishmaelites,” placing it not outside the Christian intellectual tradition but within its purview as a deviant interpretation rather than an entirely new faith.²⁹ While his framing was designed to delegitimize Islam, it also inadvertently acknowledged a shared theological grammar, monotheism, prophecy, scripture, eschatology, that distinguished Islam from paganism. The very fact that John felt compelled to engage Islam in theological terms, rather than purely as a foreign political threat, suggests that he saw it as operating within a recognizably Abrahamic framework. This shared framework, ironically, may offer a foundation for Muslims to reimagine their relationship with Christianity; not as with an alien faith but with an internally disputed interpretation of divine revelation.

This perspective invites a reversal of John’s polemical move: not in the spirit of marginalizing Christianity, but rather of including it within a broader Islamic theological landscape. If John could frame

²⁹ John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 153.

Islam as a distorted Christian teaching, then Muslims might, without embracing polemics, frame Christianity as an Islamic variant at best or theological misstep, at worst, but all within a wider Abrahamic project. Crucially, this move need not equate to *takfīr* (excommunication), but to *takhtī'ah*, a concept that permits theological error without denying the sincerity or the shared divine referent of the other. Classical Islamic theology made similar distinctions within its own tradition. As indicated earlier, Ash'arīs considered Mu'tazilīs to have erred seriously in their theological premises, especially on divine justice and human free will, but rarely did this amount to labelling them *kuffār* (disbelievers).³⁰ They were mistaken, not malicious; deviant, not damned.

This reconfiguration aligns deeply with the Qur'ānic portrayal of Judaism and Christianity. In Q. 6:156–157, these traditions are not presented as foreign religions but as part of the same divine conversation, merely recipients of earlier revelations. The term *tā'ifatayn*, meaning two parties or factions, is particularly telling. Rather than describing Jews and Christians as followers of fundamentally different religions, the Qur'ān characterizes them as internal components of a single revelatory lineage. Later in Q. 6:159, God condemns “those who divide their religion and become sects,” a verse

³⁰ This generalisation should not obscure the fact that some Ash'arī theologians did, at certain historical moments and in polemical contexts, resort to more severe judgements against the Mu'tazila, including language that approaches or overlaps with *takfīr*; the point here refers to the broader tendency within Ash'arī *kalām* rather than a uniform or consistently applied position across all its representatives. See Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro, and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfīr* (Brill, 2016).

frequently interpreted as a condemnation of intra-Muslim schism. Yet in context, it applies just as aptly, if not more so, to the partitioning of the Abrahamic tradition into mutually exclusive religions. This suggests that the Qur'ān itself resists the stark divisions later imposed between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, seeing them instead as inheritors of the same divine trust, fractured not by essence but by interpretation.

To read Christianity as a Muslim variant, at best, or a Muslim heresy, at worst, in this light is not to denigrate it, but to reabsorb it into the theological family. Such a reading softens the polemical edge often present in interreligious discourse and encourages Muslims to consider Christians as interlocutors within the house of Islam, not outsiders to it. The Qur'ān, while critical of certain Christian theological claims, nonetheless acknowledges the sincerity and even spiritual excellence of Christians, as in Q. 5:82: “...and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, ‘We are Christians.’” Such praise is irreconcilable with an exclusivist model of salvation or belonging. Indeed, the Qur'ān's willingness to praise Christians while simultaneously disputing their doctrines suggests a framework akin to *takhṭi'ah*, in which error and piety are not mutually exclusive.

This framing also resonates with early Islamic intertextuality, particularly in how the Qur'ān presents itself not as a radically new scripture but as a confirmation and correction of what came before (Q. 2:97; Q. 3:3). The Qur'ān's self-understanding as a *muṣaddiq* (a confirmer) rather than a *muḥtil* (a nullifier) of previous scriptures undercuts later tendencies toward exclusivist demarcation. This “corrective continuation” implies that Islam saw itself, at least initially, as part of a shared Abrahamic story. If Christianity erred, it did so within a narrative Muslims also claim. Framing Christian theology in this way rather than a betrayal reflects this nuance: it suggests shared

premises and diverging conclusions, not an essential rupture. In this light, heresy is less a badge of exclusion and more a marker of internal theological debate within a divinely guided trajectory, perhaps similar to how Sunnis would consider Mu'tazilīs heretics but not disbelievers?

The Qur'ān's self-description as *al-Furqān* (the criterion that distinguishes truth from falsehood) complicates, but does not negate, the emphasis on *muṣaddiq*. The key is that these are not competing self-understandings but complementary functions within the Qur'ānic discourse: confirmation operates at the level of continuity with prior revelation, while *furqān* operates at the level of discernment and adjudication within that continuity. In other words, the Qur'ān presents itself as both continuous with earlier Abrahamic revelation and as an authoritative measure for evaluating distortions, misunderstandings, or developments within that shared lineage. That is to say that divergence need not imply rupture, but it does entail judgment within a shared referential field. That is why later intra-Muslim distinctions, such as the Ash'arī critique of Mu'tazilī theology, can be understood in analogous terms of *furqān-like* discernment without necessarily collapsing into exclusionary *takfīr*. The shared premise is continuity of revelation; the differentiating move is evaluative clarification within that continuity, not the abandonment of it.

Moreover, the internal diversity within Islam itself offers further support for this relational approach. Muslims have long coexisted with divergent theological schools, Māturīdīs, Ash'arīs, Mu'tazilīs, and later even philosophical traditions influenced by Neoplatonism and Greek logic. Despite profound disagreements, these traditions often remained within the pale of Islam, demonstrating that the boundaries of theological correctness did not always align with those of communal belonging. This historical pluralism suggests that

Muslims are capable of accommodating a range of theological formulations without resorting to excommunication. Extending this same generosity to Christianity would be consistent with this intra-Islamic ethos. If we can hold that some Muslims are mistaken without being infidels, why not Christians, especially when their mistake is not a rejection of God but a different understanding of divine nature?

Ultimately, this shift in framing offers a theological alternative to the prevailing paradigm of interreligious alterity. Rather than viewing Christianity as an external competitor, Muslims might begin to see it as a disputing sibling within a shared Abrahamic household. This perspective, rooted both in Islamic theological traditions and the Qur'ān's inclusive vocabulary, allows for disagreement without division, error without exclusion. It challenges Muslims to view theological difference not as a threat to be purged, but as a tension to be navigated, just as they have done within their own schools of thought for centuries. Reimagining Christianity as a Muslim variant opens the door to a richer, more capacious understanding of religious otherness, one that remains faithful to Islamic orthodoxy while transcending its narrowest impulses.

I should hasten to say that Christian readers should not interpret this approach as an attempt to reduce Christianity to a mere offshoot or variant of Islam. The intent here is not to collapse theological distinctions or undermine the integrity of Christian faith, but to engage a Muslim audience that often perceives Christianity as wholly alien, even idolatrous. By reframing Christianity as a disputing sibling rather than a hostile outsider, the goal is to foster a more empathetic and theologically grounded Muslim understanding of Christian belief, not to appropriate or redefine it. This gesture of intra-Abrahamic recognition is necessarily asymmetrical, shaped by the

concerns and commitments of a Muslim readership, and should be understood in that context.

Neither Muslims nor Christians need adopt an absolutist stance in their theological claims, for the principle of *takhtī'ah* calls not for wholesale rejection, but for humble discernment. This aligns with the notion of *provisional truth*, as I articulate in *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology* (2022), which urges believers to hold their theological understandings with conviction, yet without conflating human interpretations with eternal, divine truth.³¹ It reflects the humility of Imam al-Shāfi'ī, who said, “*My opinion is correct though it may be wrong, and the opinion of others is wrong though it may be right.*”³² This posture affirms a sincere commitment to truth while recognizing the limitations of human reason in fully grasping it. Christianity, then, is not dismissed but critically engaged, as a serious and heartfelt interpretation of revelation. Such an approach preserves the integrity of Islamic theology while cultivating epistemic humility and dialogical generosity. It resists both relativism and sectarianism, inviting Muslims to see in Christian theology not an alien threat, but a familiar echo, close enough to contest, yet too near in spirit to condemn.

Theology Oriented Toward Truth

This view, while compelling in its intellectual ambition and ethical aspiration, is not an easy one to embrace, even for Muslims. It necessitates a reorientation of deeply embedded assumptions about the role and purpose of theology itself. Traditional *kalām* has long

³¹ Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 65-67.

³² Yusef Waghid and Nuraan Davids, *Ethical Dimensions of Muslim Education* (Springer, 2016), 109.

functioned as an apologetic science; a means by which Islamic doctrines are protected and defended from perceived errors or external threats.³³ To move from this defensive posture to one that earnestly seeks the truth, even in the claims of religious others, is not merely a shift in method but in theological identity. For many, this appears as a concession, a softening of Islam's doctrinal resolve. Yet, such a perception is premised on a misreading of the Islamic tradition, where sincere inquiry and principled disagreement were not just tolerated but institutionalized within the legal schools (*madhāhib*).³⁴ This historical precedent suggests that theological pluralism, grounded in humility and pursuit of truth, is not alien to the Islamic spirit but an extension of its intellectual legacy.

Theological humility, however, demands more than ethical posture; it requires a new epistemological framework. In *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology*, I argue that the *maqāṣid* (higher objectives) of theology should be recast around the pursuit of truth rather than the preservation of it. This paradigm shift positions theology not as a fortress but as a bridge, a means of encountering the divine through sincere engagement with others' experiences of the sacred. This is not suggested as a form of relativism, nor is it one of syncretism. It is, instead, a recognition that truth is not monopolized by one tradition and that Islamic theology should have the courage to confront truth wherever it may reside. This approach mirrors the Qur'ānic ethos of inquiry and reflection (Q. 39:18), which praises those “*who listen to the word and follow the best of it.*” Such an ethos ought to be extended to

³³ Abdelnour, *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology*, 1-2.

³⁴ Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour, “Who Will Be Saved: The Right or the Upright?” *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1119.

interreligious theology, even when it complicates inherited dogmatic boundaries.

Reconfiguring *kalām* in this way exposes an important paradox: traditional Islamic theology, in its drive to defend Islam against external theologies, often ended up ossifying Islam internally. The fixation on orthodoxy turned theology into a matter of boundary policing rather than existential inquiry. This is not to deny the historical necessity of *kalām* in certain contexts, especially during formative periods when Islam confronted robust philosophical and theological challenges. However, the persistence of this posture into our contemporary, pluralistic context betrays a theological atrophy. By making defence its highest objective, *kalām* neglected the Qur'ānic imperative of *ta'āruf* (mutual recognition) and the existential vocation of the human being as a seeker of God. A theology that aspires to serve God should thus be reoriented toward truth, which often emerges at the limits of one's own religious tradition, and sometimes beyond it.

This reorientation also compels Muslims to reconsider their attitudes toward theological difference. While Muslims have long tolerated a spectrum of legal (*fiqhī*) opinions, indeed, even institutionalized them through schools of law, they have often been less generous with theological variance.³⁵ Yet this asymmetry is neither necessary nor consistent with Islamic intellectual history. The theological pluralism that I advocate in *The Higher Objectives* is modelled on the jurisprudential ethos of *ikhtilāf* (difference), which assumed the sincerity and validity of alternative reasoning, even when it arrived at divergent conclusions. This principle can and should apply to theological differences, both intra-Muslim and interfaith. Doing so requires a conceptual shift: from viewing theology as a

³⁵ Abdelnour, *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology*, 35.

zero-sum competition of truth claims to seeing it as a collaborative human endeavour to approximate the divine.

Theological tolerance, however, ought not to be confused with doctrinal indifference. On the contrary, it is precisely those who are most committed to truth who can afford to be generous with difference. If truth is not something we possess, but something we pursue (in accordance with Q. 1:6: “Guide us to the Straight Path”), then the other, particularly the religious other, is not a threat but a potential co-traveller. This perspective transforms Christian-Muslim engagement from an arena of apologetics into a space of mutual discovery. The pursuit of truth thus becomes dialogical rather than confrontational. This is an important departure from the classical polemical tradition, which tended to treat Christian doctrines as errors to be refuted rather than testimonies to be understood. By contrast, the *maqāṣid*-based paradigm invites Muslims to consider what elements of truth may be embedded in the doctrinal expressions of others, even if they do not cohere entirely with Islamic theology.

This vision is admittedly difficult because it forces Muslims to relinquish the comfort of exclusivist certainty without abandoning their theological convictions. The pursuit of truth as a higher objective challenges the hegemony of inherited categories and demands a critical openness that many fear may lead to doctrinal erosion. Yet this fear is based on a misunderstanding of how faith operates. Certainty in Islam (*yaqīn*) is not the absence of doubt but its transcendence through sincere struggle and reflection (Q. 2:260). In this light, engaging the theological claims of Christians, or any other faith community, is not a threat to Islamic belief but a means of deepening it. The Qur’ān itself affirms that among the People of the Book are “those who have faith in God and the Last Day... and they will have their reward with their Lord” (Q. 2:62). To take this verse seriously is to open

theological space for the recognition of truth beyond one's own religious borders.

Ultimately, the call to pursue truth rather than defend boundaries is a call to reimagine Islamic theology for our globalized, interreligious age. This does not entail abandoning the core tenets of Islam; it entails situating them within a larger epistemic horizon that honours both the particularity of revelation and the universality of truth. It is a difficult path, one that requires intellectual courage and spiritual humility. But it is also, I contend, the only path that allows Islamic theology to remain faithful to its deepest Qur'ānic impulses while engaging responsibly with the religious other. The *maqāṣid* approach I outline in *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology* provides the theoretical scaffolding for this transformation, offering a vision of theology that is at once faithful, critical, and open to truth, wherever it may be found.