

THEOLOGIES RESPONSIVE TO ISLAM INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Doctrine of God: Monotheism and Trinity
Convener: Daniel A. Madigan, Georgetown University
Moderator: Christian S. Krokus, University of Scranton
Presenters: Amir Hussain, Loyola Marymount University
G. John Renard, St. Louis University
Daniel A. Madigan, Georgetown University

This panel was the first step in a planned three-year process that was introduced prior to the talks of the individual speakers. The key to understanding the process lies in the words “theologies” and “responsive” in the title. This group is not interested in giving one theological response to Muslims. It aims rather at developing a way of doing theology that takes Muslims seriously as interlocutors and thus is responsive to their concerns. Such theologizing invites Muslims themselves into the process yet remains a determinedly Christian theology. Traditionally, and even now, Christian theologians often attempt to give a bottom-line response to the questions and objections Muslims pose to key elements of our faith; such responses are usually intended to settle the matter once and for all. The kind of responsive theologizing being proposed here treats the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition as being among the many voices that constitute the continuing dialogue about how to understand the Christ event and what to say about God in the light of that event. Experience teaches that the questions Muslims pose remain live issues for Christians as well, and so this kind of theologizing is fruitful not only in the still rather niche area of comparative (or, perhaps better, relational) theology, but also for theology in general. Among Christians in the Islamic heartlands, this kind of theology has been undertaken for many centuries, yet one finds on the one hand a tendency to discount or ignore it and on the other a tendency to consider it definitive, as though all the questions have been satisfactorily answered. In the west, Muslims will be increasingly significant interlocutors in the years to come, as they already are for Christians in many parts of the global south. We recognize that, even without trying to be attentive and responsive to the Muslim voice or voices, our theologies are plural.

The panels are structured first to present Muslim questions and demonstrate their pertinence. Following this, the panel presents two examples of how Christian theologians have allowed the Muslim interlocutor to shape their theologies.

This year’s panel focused on the doctrine of God, hence particularly on the questions of monotheism and Trinity. Given that it was the first year of the process, however, some considerable time was taken in the papers and during the discussion with questions of overall method. Noting that there are myriad questions Muslims would want to pose to Christians, Amir Hussain confined himself to three particular theological issues: the Incarnation, the Trinity and, with an eye towards next year’s topic, the salvific death of Jesus. He provided the texts that make it very clear that the Qur’an’s voice wants its say in the central theological debates that had roiled the Christian world only a couple centuries before the Qur’an’s emergence, and which, despite conciliar “resolutions” of the issues, continue even now to be debated.

John Renard focused his attention on the notion of theological perplexity that the Interest Group identified as a key element in the development of a responsive theology. Though we are often perplexed at the declarations Muslims make about God, the far the greater wonder, he suggested, is how little Christians allow themselves to be perplexed at our own community’s assertions and denials. What is astonishing is not so much what the religious “other” claims, but

rather than anyone can so comfortably assent to what they call their *own* central religious convictions. Theological perplexity ought to be our natural state of being, he argued, but is too often excluded by a false sense of security, the kind of comfort that often accompanies the accustomed. The challenge of a relational theology is to appreciate that beneath the apparent incompatibility of formulations lies the fundamental reality of shared concerns addressed from different angles—often identical questions, but divergent answers. In the doctrine of God Muslims and Christians are walking the same theological knife’s edge between pure metaphor and rank anthropomorphism.

Daniel Madigan proposed that a hermeneutical key to our common theology—one rarely used for mutual understanding in traditional theological engagement—is the notion of the divine Word. In both traditions the questions that have caused the most perplexity are those of the Word’s relationship to God’s self; the mode in which that Word is expressed in humanly understandable form; and the relationship of the divine and the human within that historically expressed Word. If we can recognize the perplexities we share in this area, there is a possibility for recognizing the particularity of each faith.

Discussion focused in the feasibility of the Word as the key to a relational theology and on the way that fundamental choice can be sustained throughout the development of a Christian theological synthesis.

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