

THEOLOGIES RESPONSIVE TO ISLAM—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	Revelation and Prophecy
Convenor:	Daniel A. Madigan, Georgetown University
Moderator:	Marianne Farina, Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology
Presenters:	Sidney H. Griffith, Catholic University of America
Respondents:	Leo Lefebure, Georgetown University, Wilhelmus Valkenberg, Catholic University of America

Sidney H. Griffith began his presentation, “The ‘*Sunnah* of Our Messengers’: the Qur’an’s Paradigm for Messengers and Prophets” with the observation that discussions of the Qur’an’s prophetology have for the most part been conducted in dialogue with scholarly literature on biblical notions of prophecy, by which the Qur’an’s views are assumed to have been inspired; however, less scholarly attention has been paid specifically to the Qur’an’s own presentation of the distinctive career pattern (*sunnah*) of the messengers and prophets whose stories it so often recalls as the paradigm within which Muhammad is encouraged to consider his own vocation. The distinctiveness of the Qur’an’s prophetology was not so much in the idea of prophecy or messengership as such, or even in the idea of a sequence of messengers and prophets, but in the structure of the sequence and in the comprehension of the message, identical in each instance, along with the paradigmatic pattern according to which the messengers and prophets delivered warnings—summonses to fear the one God—and did so in the face of opposition, resulting in their eventual vindication by God. This paradigm pares down the prophetic profile familiar to Jews and Christians and focuses it more intensely on the Qur’an’s own message.

Based on a close reading of Sura of the Poets (Qur’an 26), Griffith identified the following characteristics of its prophetology: it is *catholic* (God’s messengers have come to both biblical and non-biblical people in their own language; it is *recurrent* (the pattern of the experience of prophecy recurs in the sequence of prophets); it is *dialogical* (the prophets interact in admonitory dialogue with the people to whom they are sent); it is *singular in its message* (the one God, who rewards good and punishes evil on “the Day of Judgment”; no divinizing of creatures; no talk of God having offspring); it is *vindicated* (God vindicates His messengers and prophets in their struggles). This prophetology suggests that the composer of the Qur’an has employed the vocabulary and syntax of messengership and prophethood, readily available in the Late Antique milieu, both to critique and to correct current ideas about the messages of the earlier prophets, and clearly to present its own teaching about the one God, with whom other contemporary communities persist in associating creatures as divine equals—principally those who say that God has a Son. The Qur’an proposes its own distinctive, exegetical model for reading the scriptures that came before it, one that sees them as providing a kind of *praeparatio coranica* for anyone who would understand them aright, that is, from the Qur’an’s point of view.

Leo Lefebure noted that Griffith’s framing of his discussion in terms of a paradigm shift recalls the model of Thomas Kuhn’s philosophy of science. Kuhn argued that a scientific paradigm is never falsified from nature alone; it is overthrown only when a new paradigm demonstrates that it can interpret the data more

effectively. Griffith rejects Christian attempts to judge the Qur'anic paradigm by the biblical models, arguing that traditional Christian critiques of Islam's prophetology are hermeneutical and exegetical mistakes. However, In Lefebure's opinion he did not propose a new paradigm for a constructive Christian response to Islam's prophetology, one that will help move beyond traditional polemics. The fundamental theological question facing us, according to Lefebure, is how we handle the competing paradigms of prophetology in Christianity and Islam. He asked whether we can coherently acknowledge the legitimacy of more than one paradigm at the same time? He suggested that the Qur'an's view of the earth as a "sign" may be a starting point for reflecting on the biblical wisdom tradition and the relation between prophetology and the manifestation of God offered in creation.

The question of the acknowledgement of diverse paradigms of prophecy—or continuity and discontinuity—was taken up by Pim Valkenberg in his response. He outlined what a Christian reflection on Jesus as "Prophet & More than a Prophet" could look like along the lines of prophecy sketched by Griffith; and then on Muhammad and Jesus as models of living according to Scripture—Qur'an and Torah respectively. Jesus functions as a sign of continuity with Judaism, as a prophet who explains the Jewish Scriptures in a way that functions as a model for the first Christians, in much the same way as the *Sunnah* of Muhammad functions as a model for the first Muslims. In that sense he would say that both prophets function similarly for their followers. The texts that indicate the special authority of Jesus in interpreting the Scriptures, and culminate in the Johannine "I Am" sayings, indicate a discontinuity with Judaism and Islam insofar as Jesus is much more than a Prophet. It is these continuities and discontinuities that make comparative theology both possible and invaluable.

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