By Alexander S. Lee

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Alexander S. Lee *is a third-year Cantonese Canadian PhD candidate in Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary.*

Introduction

In his introduction to Fuller Seminary's Missiology Lectures on the theme, "Evangelism in a Post-Christendom Era," Korean American evangelical scholar Soong-Chan Rah speaks of a "truth pursued" approach as an alternative to a "truth possessed" approach to evangelism (2023). The latter believes the task of evangelism to be that of *dispensing* truth, as though it were a commodity one could possess, while the former seeks to follow truth in community, wherever truth might lead. As Rah argues, a "truth possessed" approach is typical of despotic rulers and colonial regimes, while a "truth pursued" approach maintains the ontological reality of truth—and even specifically of truth incarnate (John 14:6)—but believes that such truth beckons us always beyond ourselves. In this paper, I argue that the 'new' comparative theology (hereafter CT) is a mission practice at the frontiers of evangelical missiology that accords well with a "truth pursued" approach to evangelism and mission. To make my case, I explore the need for CT, considering the persistence of non-Christian religions; its history and distinguishing features, defined by a 'bold humility' toward religious Others; its function as a mission practice facilitating two-way contextualization; and its potential as a form of Christian witness, illustrated through an example of the 'new' CT in the longstanding Christian-Muslim debate about the nature of divine revelation.

I. Why Do We Need CT?

Let us begin by grounding ourselves upon a simple definition. Comparative theology is a confessional discipline of interfaith inquiry that "[rethinks] aspects of one's own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition" (Clooney 2007, 654). We will unpack this definition in due course. For now, let us consider that in the *Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies* (2022)—an impressive compendium of over 40 contributions from diverse global and ecumenical missiologists—the editors name the

enduring desire to live faithfully alongside and engage productively the non-Christian religions as a leading edge of mission studies for Christianity's third millennium. In light of this, the editors assert that "comparative theological analysis remains a priority among missiologists" (Kim and Fitchett-Climenhaga 2022, 11). While the observation is significant, it prompts us to ask why doing theology comparatively should hold such priority. If Christians have been practicing theological reflection for centuries without an explicit need for cross-religious comparison (as the story goes) then why would we need it now? Furthermore, and more to the point of this paper, in what ways is comparative theological reflection a *missional* practice in a specifically *evangelical* sense? In other words, why do evangelical missiologists need CT? Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen responds, "The simple answer to this question is that we need comparative theology because the world in which we live in the beginning of the third millennium is deeply and widely religious!" (2020, 1). Let us unpack this assertion with some data.

The Context for Comparative Theology: The Persistence of Non-Christian Religions

The data indicate that the Christian population vis-à-vis world population has changed little since 1910 – the year of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference – holding at roughly one-third of the world population. In fact, the numbers have declined slightly over time, from 34.5% in 1900 to 33.2% in 1970, and further to 32.3% by mid-2021 (Zurlo and Johnson 2022, 731).[1] This has rightfully dampened the triumphalist tone of the World Missionary Conference's motto, "The evangelization of the world in this generation!" Consider the statistics more closely: by consulting the most recent data from the *World Christian Database* (Zurlo and Johnson 2024), one discovers that while about a third of the world's population count themselves within the Christian church (2.55 billion), nearly a quarter belong to the Muslim *ummah* (1.93 billion). Hindus, numbering 1.1 billion, account for about 14 percent of the global population, followed by Buddhists at slightly less than half that figure. Jews number fewer than 15 million (0.2% of the global population), while a much larger number—828 million (10.6% of the global population)—adhere to what some have called 'folk religions.'[2] While those who identify as atheists and agnostics account for 11.4% of the global population (891 million), many hold some form of spiritual belief or engage in spiritual practices. This data corroborates Kärkkäinen's assertion that our world is currently more religious than ever, even if forms of secularism are also flourishing (2020, 2).

[1] Although several keynote speakers at the recent Fourth Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Seoul-Incheon, South Korea (September 22-28, 2024), expressed concern that the Christian share of the global population is declining, this trend is not a recent development.

[2] Using the *WCD* for the year 2020, I have included in this count 'Chinese folk-religionists,' 'ethnic religionists,' 'new religionists,' and 'spiritists.'

Religions are experiencing growth and vitality, and they are in continuous interaction with one another. Despite three-quarters of religionists living in regions where their religion holds a majority position, such as Hindus in India, religions do not exist in isolation. Followers encounter one another in various settings, including homes, workplaces, markets, schools, and places of worship. Moreover, globalization and migration have brought religious Others into closer proximity to Global North Christians than ever before; the new frontier of interreligious engagement thus lies no longer on a distant mission field but within our own neighborhoods. Therefore, the desire to engage robustly with other religions remains of central missiological significance, even as fresh approaches are needed.

This reality underscores the need for Christian ministers, theologians, and missiologists to cultivate a capacity to know about other faiths and the ability to compare perspectives with both rigor and empathy. The brief statistical analysis serves as a clear call to action for missiologists and theologians alike to earnestly delve into the views, practices, and doctrines of other religions. The 'new' CT offers one such approach to interreligious engagement while reimagining (faithfully, I argue) Christian witness among the religions. It is a demanding yet crucial missiological practice that involves a measure of commitment to learning about at least one religion other than Christianity. But as Kärkkäinen observes, "Willingness to do that takes the theologian out of the safe zone of her own tradition and makes her vulnerable, but at the same time it opens up whole new ways of engaging the complex world around her" (2020, 2). It is time to take a closer look at the vulnerable yet expansive practice of comparative theology.

II. What is the 'New' CT?

Historical Development of Theological Comparison

To be sure, comparative learning is not a new phenomenon; interreligious exchange is fundamental to Christianity's biblical roots and early development. According to the narrative in Acts 17, St. Paul sought to establish common ground at the Areopagus for his gospel witness. In doing so, the apostle honored Greek religion in his own way. Similarly, the theologians of Christianity's earliest centuries were often steeped in their knowledge of Greek and Roman philosophy and religion. While often pugnacious, their articulation of Christian distinctiveness was nevertheless mediated through a deep appropriation of the intellectual and spiritual imagination of their Hellenistic context.[3]

[3] Indeed, some theological circles now commonly criticize the extent of Hellenic influence on early Christian theology.

For instance, as is well-known, the theological term *homoousios* (‘of the same substance’) emerges as a philosophical construction not found in the New Testament but which became instrumental for making sense of Christ’s eternal sonship. This blend of external appropriation and internal critical debate has been integral to the development of Christian thought, starting from its earliest encounters with Greek philosophy.

It is evident, then, that embracing insights and practices from beyond the Christian tradition doesn't necessarily diminish Christian beliefs or worship but can rather serve as a catalyst for innovative and enriched expressions of faith. Indeed, the history of Christian missionary encounters with other religions is marked by deep reflection upon, and thoughtful appropriation of, insights from other religious traditions in the promulgation of the Christian message. Drawing upon a long list of exemplars, the 16th century Jesuit Matteo Ricci, 19th century Baptist missionary Hudson Taylor, and the 20th century Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones, can be seen as case studies in this regard.

Distinguishing Features of the ‘New’ Comparative Theology

However, in the decades after Vatican II (1962-65), an invigorated theological openness among Catholic thinkers to the teachings and practices of other religions proved fertile soil for a ‘new’ genre of religious comparison that came to be referred to as the practice of comparative theology. This ‘new’ CT is defined by the Jesuit Francis Clooney, a pioneer in the practice, as…

> acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is done for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition. (Clooney 2010, 10)

What makes this form of theological comparison novel is its degree of vulnerability toward other religions, distinguishing it from the conversion-centric engagement of traditional missionary practice (Lee 2024, 220–21). At the same time, Clooney emphasizes the *confessional* nature of comparison. The task is undertaken in an Anselmian sense of “faith seeking understanding” that involves a process of reflection upon the sources of other religions from within the theological framework of the theologian’s “home” tradition. The explicit foregrounding of the theologian’s religious commitments distinguishes CT from the earlier field of comparative religion, which

purports to take up a positivist and 'objective' view of religions rooted in scientific observation rather than confessional theological commitment. In CT, by contrast, the confessional dimension constitutes a prerequisite for venturing forth across interreligious borders.

Methodologically, Clooney forefronts the "seeking" dimension of faith, rather than faith in terms of what is certain, non-negotiable, or absolute. Comparative theology is thus a *constructive* task that embraces the possibility of attaining "fresh theological insights" through making extended visits, as it were, as guests to the "homes" of other religious traditions. This openness allows for a *vulnerable* encounter with the religious Other, without which constructive reflection would be greatly hindered. According to comparative theologian Marianne Moyaert, "Vulnerability is one of the key words in Francis Clooney's comparative theology project" (Moyaert 2012, 1144). She observes that the vulnerability central to CT disrupts the defense mechanisms that obstruct the possibility of being affected and touched by the other religion. Such vulnerability, I argue, building on Moyaert's point, serves as an alternative to a classic theology of religions in which a liberal pluralism, on the one hand, flattens out genuine difference among religions, while a conservative exclusivism, on the other hand, rejects the possibility of discovering salvific insight among other religions. According to both views, the religious Other is seen as a problem that can and should be solved, either by retreating to the security of sameness (pluralism) or by distancing otherness (exclusivism). Both approaches, then, can be seen as "exponents of a desire for control" that minimizes opportunities for vulnerable relational exchange. In contrast to this, "comparative theology can be regarded as a form of vulnerable theology" (Moyaert 2012, 1145).

In this regard, rather than a popularly held view of vulnerability in the modern West as a weakness to be overcome, vulnerability here denotes "the common human *capacity* to be affected and affect in turn," whereas to be invulnerable is to be "*indifferent, irresponsible, inaccessible, inapproachable*…inhuman" (Moyaert 2012, 1146; emphasis is Moyaert's). That human aspect of vulnerable theology—and also of comparative theology—is marked here by its *affective* component. For instance, in a Muslim approach to CT, Mona Siddiqui demonstrates this capacity to be affected through her encounter with the Christian Other by reconstructing why the cross is so important to her Christian friends as a revelation of God's kenotic love. She then reflects: "The cross in front of me speaks to me personally, emotionally and intellectually" (2013, 246). This is the case even if in the end Siddiqui cannot accept this concept and maintains God's thoroughgoing transcendence. Still, she is touched by the self-emptying love revealed

by the cross at an existential level, leaving herself open to the affective impact of Christian devotion (a witness in itself!) even after her comparative project has ended. Thus, through the comparative process, one comes to feel more rightly about the other religion (at least) and perhaps also (more daringly) about God. This point is particularly salient to the missiologist since, as Malaysian-American theologian Amos Yong has argued, "if the other touches not just one's head but also moves one's body and even the depths of one's soul, then one is not just transformed intellectually but converted personally in some sense" (2014, 174). Not only is the religious Other no longer the rival of our fearful imagination to be confronted and conquered polemically. They have become a fellow wayfarer and even source of our own conversion (in a limited yet real way). Thus, while perhaps not conversion-centric in a traditional sense, CT holds the promise of conversion at an affective level, the result of being "touched" by the other religion and coming to feel more rightly about it and, guided by a cautious yet curious discernment, perhaps also about God. Even so, while affective conversion is located foremost in the comparative theologian's home tradition (as in Siddiqui's case) yet for the evangelical practitioner of CT it cannot but also suggest the possibility of a clearer, more faithfully contextualized expression of evangelistic witness—one that integrates both intellectual and affective dimensions of conversion in a holistic way.

Having described CT as a discipline marked by its confessional, constructive, vulnerable, and affective characteristics, we now turn to explore three ways in which CT can be understood as a new frontier in mission practice.

III. How Does CT Function as a Mission Practice at the Frontiers of Interreligious Engagement?

CT as Bilateral Gospel Contextualization

As we have charted historically, critical theological appropriation is a prerequisite to the successful contextualization of the gospel into new cultural contexts. As we have also hinted at, the capacity to be affectively touched by another religion's beliefs and practices may be another often overlooked but crucial factor in effective, holistic, and contextualized witness, however risky that may feel. The tension between the boldness of the former and the vulnerability of the latter is a constructive tension that is sustained and nurtured—not snapped—by CT. In my reading, this maps well onto what the renowned South African missiologist David Bosch termed the "creative tension" between dialogue and mission among people of other living faiths, a tension which issues forth in a missiology marked by a "bold humility" or "humble boldness" (Bosch 2011 [1991], 494–501).

Within such a boldly humble framework, gospel contextualization is never simply a unilateral process moving from the missioner to the missionized. Such a unilateral approach to contextualization mirrors an understanding of teaching critiqued convincingly by Brazilian educator Paolo Freire in his 1968 classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire criticized a "banking" model of education in which students are receptors of intellectual deposits from their benevolent teachers. Within this framework, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those who they consider to know nothing" (1996 [1968], 53). Freire asserted that, despite the best intentions, such a concept of education perpetuates the oppression rather than liberation of the marginalized. More recently, Indigenous (Cherokee) missiologist Randy Woodley argues that what Freire said of teachers can also be said of many Christian missionaries, especially those in the colonial mission toward Indigenous North Americans. Substituting the words *missionary* and *missionized* for Freire's use of *teacher* and *student*, Woodley observes a worrisome overlap in the descriptions: "The [missionary] teaches and the [missionized] are taught… The [missionary] is the subject of the learning process, while the [missionized] are mere objects" (2022, 36). Woodley argues that missionaries, presuming their own superiority, believed they possessed absolute truth in contrast to the Indigenous Other. However, beginning in 2021 in Kamloops, British Columbia, the discovery of unmarked graves at residential schools in Canada and the U.S.—sites where the 'banking' model of evangelism and education was implemented to its fullest degree—starkly illustrated the devastating consequences of treating evangelism as the mere distribution of a 'truth possessed,' as discussed above.[4]

Despite these lowest of nadirs in mission history, it remains axiomatic that the gospel does not belong to any particular culture (see Acts 15). No culture on its own can fully apprehend the height, width, breadth, and depth of it, nor the love of God which it proclaims. Every culture is Pauline in the sense that it sees through a mirror darkly. Thus, it is not only possible but vital to Christian mission that the practice of contextualization should cut both ways. Even as the missioner attempts to communicate theological truth in a receptor-oriented manner, it is also the case that, by that very process, the gospel gets re-articulated and re-presented from fresh global perspectives that should also be re-received by all parties involved in contextualization. More to the point, the missionized prove in fact to be equal partners and agents in contextualization as it is they who supply the resources for re-articulating the gospel such that it becomes an ever-clearer evangel that leads missioners themselves to a deeper conversion to the lordship of Christ and more faithful participation in the

[4] Celia Haig-Brown's ethnographic account featuring interviews with former students of the Kamloops Indian Residential School was revised and expanded in the aftermath of the harrowing discoveries (2022).

mission of God. In light of the dangers of failing to do otherwise, how might CT facilitate a shift from theory to practice in bilateral contextualization?

CT as Rehabilitating "Syncretism" and Missionaries as "Double Agents"

To address the question, I retroactively read an implicit practice of CT in order to imagine its explicit potential in the years to come. In 2015, the late Lakota theologian Richard Twiss urged readers to "rescue the gospel from the cowboys," that is, from a Euro-American theological discourse that had lost sight of its own parochialism while assuming its universal normativity. While Twiss does not explicitly discuss CT, he does address syncretism—a perennial concern shared by many evangelicals about contextualization practices.[5] Twiss argues that discussions about syncretism should be extricated from the dominant Western discourse that elides the politics of power inherent to determining what is, and what isn't, a 'true' account of Christian faith. He asserts that "mixing is a normative process of positive change and transformation—and not always so clear" (2015, 27). While calling out the real dangers of a "counteractive syncretism" that diminishes, resists, or stops one's journey as a follower of Jesus—American nationalism being his key exampleTwiss' desire to reopen the discussion on what is and is not syncretism points to the possibility of CT which, by definition, is a critical practice of careful and limited comparison rooted confessionally in one's home tradition.

More recently, Woodley (2022), with whom we have engaged above, goes one step further than Twiss in teasing out the implications of a cautious and discerning theological "mixing" for intercultural and interreligious formation. While serving as an evangelical missionary among Indigenous North Americans, Woodley came to realize that he was given a "converse mission appointment from Native America back to the dominant white Western culture." He was, in his words, a "double agent"—a "bridge" that facilitated a two-way exchange rather than a unilateral transmission. Importantly, Woodley's conviction was clarified through his active practice of gospel contextualization: "By attempting to discover Indigenous context for mission we came to realize that we were the ones who needed the truth and beauty found in Native America as much or more than Native American people needed to hear the truth of the Jesus story." This is a bold statement and, perhaps, assuming a primarily evangelical readership Woodley might permit audiences to read some measure of hyperbole in his words; perhaps not. At the least, Woodley's point is that genuine gospel contextualization results not only in the transformation of the 'receptors' of the gospel but the 'transmitters' as well. As a result, as he comes to affirm, "both conversions were

[5] For a recent outcome-focused approach to the issue, see Brotherson (2021).

possible"—that is, the missionized and missioners alike are converted to seeing Jesus Christ more accurately, and following him more faithfully (2022, xv). Despite much bewilderment, the missionized offer not only cultural resources but spiritual and theological ones for the global church to deepen its Christian discipleship.

What Twiss and Woodley imply is that the need for one culture (especially the dominant one) to learn from another is not optional but central to the practice of both faithful witness and faithful discipleship. Given the unresolved tension between the gospel's embeddedness in specific contexts—the particularity of the incarnation confirms this—and the liability of all Christian communities to some degree of captivity to cultural conditioning (Rah 2009), the "cultural other" (to use Woodley's term) becomes a necessary source for refining—and at times correcting—one's understanding of, and witness to, Jesus Christ. One of contemporary theology's leading voices, American Anglican Kathryn Tanner, has similarly argued that Christian theology has always taken up and yet recreated the existing cultural, philosophical, and linguistic discourses and thoughts of its environment. Nevertheless, according to Tanner (1997), the transformation was always mutual, renewing not only culture but also the church. Borrowing from other cultures therefore does not entail Christian appropriation alone:

> Borrowed materials should not, then, always be subordinated to Christian claims; they should be permitted, instead, to shake them up where necessary. If Christianity's having the upper hand over non-Christian materials is made into a rule, this only encourages the Word's enslavement to the human words of Christians. (1997, 150)

To resist the cultural enslavement of the divine Word to human words requires the humility and vulnerability on the part of Christians to be corrected, when necessary, by *other* cultures. Tanner thus offers further theological warrant for identifying mission practitioners as "double agents" with a dual sense of mission that is both outward to the religious Other and inward to the church which, as the Reformed tradition puts well, should remain always reforming.

CT as Presaging the Redemption of Tongues, Cultures…and Religions?

What the foregoing two subsections imply is the possibility that, despite much bewilderment and surprise, the redemption of peoples and their cultures includes the religious depth dimensions of the latter. Yet how can one entertain even the possibility of this as an evangelical missiologist? While the scope of the question far exceeds that of this paper, some initial reflections are warranted. We begin by turning to the great

missionary statesman, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who observed the entangled nature of religion with culture:

> In most human cultures religion is not a separate activity set apart from the rest of life…The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture. (Newbigin 1989, 131)

Newbigin's observation is echoed in Woodley's experience of Indigenous culture: "Spirituality is inseparable from Indigenous life and thought. It is woven into the very fabric of being Indigenous" (2022, 98). Defining an area called 'religion' is typical of a Western approach to life inasmuch as it requires compartmentalizing one aspect of life from others. However, to engage Indigenous North American culture—among many other cultures of the world—is to simultaneously engage the spiritual practices and beliefs that form its warp and woof.

Pentecostal-evangelical scholar Amos Yong agrees with Newbigin but amplifies further the significance of the culture-religion conjunction by situating it within the biblical context of the Pentecost narrative, where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit enables each one to give witness to "the wondrous works of God" in and through the diversity of languages (Acts 2:11). Reminiscent of Newbigin, Yong comments: "Because the phenomenon of language and of culture cannot be arbitrarily separated from that of religion, the principle of linguistic and cultural diversity necessarily includes that of religious diversity" (2005, 177). Hence, according to Yong, the biblical Day of Pentecost can be understood to redeem not only human languages and cultures, but also human religiosity. Yet, like Woodley's earlier statement, Yong's suggestion seems bold for an evangelical scholar—but he is not finished. Yong interprets the outpouring of the Spirit as, in fact, determinative of what theological method and interreligious engagement should look like in the third millennium of Christianity, since "the Spirit who gives the capacity to speak in a foreign language also can enable, by extension, participation in a foreign culture and even a foreign religion, so that one can experience those realities to some degree 'from within.'" In other words, Pentecost makes possible a dialogical method of both witness *to* cultural-linguistic-religious Others and theological reflection spurred on by resources *from* the Other. Yong then applies this pneumatically sourced dialogical method to a missiology that is comparative through and through. "May I suggest that the same Spirit whose outpouring on the Day of Pentecost enabled the speaking in foreign tongues also today enables genuine cross-over into and return

from other faiths so as to engage in their claims to truth?" (2005, 180). Yong's method of cross-over and return anticipates Clooney's definition of CT, yet it is anchored within a distinctly pneumatic power source and *raison d' être*. For Yong, in other words, to practice CT is to participate in the *missio Spiritus*. It is thus no surprise that Yong (2012) contributes one of the earliest pentecostal-evangelical forays into the field of CT, inquiring into what ways the Spirit might blow through the 'middle way' of Buddhist tradition.

It is also worth emphasizing that, since it is the "Spirit poured out on all flesh" who enables such cross-over into other cultures/religions, the practice of CT—demanding as it is as an academic discipline[6]—reaches beyond the academy (and does not always begin there!) to include the realm of mission practice at the ground level. After all, CT at its best emerges out of interreligious relationships where the practitioner-as-guest is welcomed by another religio-culture to a long-term journey of mutual learning and witness. This is the fertile soil in which the gospel gets continually recontextualized, such that its meaning and power are never understood to have been exhausted by any single culture's articulation of it. To summarize this section, by fostering a two-way gospel contextualization, CT results not only in non-Christians perceiving more accurately the work of Jesus Christ among them but also in Christians realizing and rejoicing in the very same.

IV. What Does CT Achieve? An Example from Christian-Muslim Debates on the 'Word of God'

What does this all look like in practice? In what follows, I offer a brief exercise in CT by considering how Christian engagement with the theological concept of divine revelation may be intensified[7] in conversation with Islam, resulting in a more holistic Christian witness among Muslims.

Joshua Ralston, a specialist in Christian-Musim CT, observes that "one of the most productive turns" in recent Christian-Muslim theological dialogue occurs at the points of resonance in Christian and Muslim thought about divine transcendence and divine revelation (2022, 127). Nearly sixty years ago, Iranian Islamics scholar Seyyed Hossein

[6] Even Clooney admits that its practice can be seen as elitist – by and for the few (2010, 65).

[7] Catherine Cornille lists various types of learning in CT, including *intensification* of religious meaning or experience; *rectification* of one's understanding; *recovery* of figures, teachings, or practices that were neglected or marginalized; *reinterpretation* of one tradition through the categories of another; and *appropriation* by one tradition of new elements derived from another (2019, 115–47).

Nasr recognized that it was a categorical mistake to compare the Qur'an with the Bible: "The word of God in Islam is the Qur'ân; in Christianity it is Christ" (Nasr 1979 [1966], 43). About a decade later, American historian of philosophy Harry Austryn Wolfson coined the term "inlibration," a notion that divine revelation in Islam occurs in book form, or as Wolfson tersely describes it, "embookment" (Wolfson 1976, 246). Under this rubric, the Qur'an functions as a theological counterpart to the Christian understanding of Jesus as God's Word made flesh in the incarnation. Indeed, Wolfson asserts that classical Muslim debates on the relationship of the uncreated Word of God to the revealed Qur'an are analogous to early Christian debates about the relationship of the uncreated Logos of God to that of the birthed Jesus (1976, 244-48).

This demonstrates that getting the comparative categories straight is an imperative first task of CT, so that one isn't left trying to compare apples with oranges.[8] Once it becomes clear that the category of "divine revelation" and "word of God" map most accurately to Jesus Christ in Christianity and Qur'an in Islam, then it becomes possible to proceed with theological cross-over and comparison equipped with a common language to express more accurately points of similarity and difference. With this category in mind, Daniel Madigan, SJ, argues that on the one hand, words in a book may be less prone to misinterpretation than "flesh" when the message consists of instruction and direction—the more straightforward the language, the better. "If, however," writes Madigan, "the message is of love, forgiveness and reconciliation, then we can all recognize, whether we are Muslims or Christians, that body-language—our gestures, our actions, our vulnerability—speak much more clearly than the finest of words" (2007, 93). Though it may not have been his explicit aim, Madigan presents a good example of CT at work in Christian contextualization of the evangel in Muslim contexts. Through a comparison of Muslim and Christian understandings of divine revelation, Christians may assert with clearer precision (and perhaps more effective persuasion?) that what distinguishes the Christ event theologically from the qur'anic revelation is that there are some attributes of God that may be more effectively revealed to humanity through body-language (i.e., incarnation) than through either speech or the written word (i.e., inlibration).

However, Wolfson's concept of inlibration appears to me an insufficient theological description of a Muslim's experience with the Qur'an, especially as the latter is engaged in the day-to-day spiritual formation of Muslims through ritual prayer (*ṣalāh*). Jane McAuliffe, Qur'an scholar and president emerita of the American Academy of Religion,

[8] For the methodological importance of identifying suitable comparative categories, see Neville (2013).

summarizes a Muslim's relationship with the Qur'an as encompassing three aspects: the carnal, conceptual, and communal. While all aspects are equally important, it is the carnal component that interests me most at this juncture. McAuliffe explains that for most Muslims, the Qur'an is "heard, viewed, touched, and sometimes ingested, long before it is ever read," and it is generally "'embodied' within Muslim life and material culture" (McAuliffe 2005, 621). The carnal dimension should therefore not be overlooked, as is sometimes the tendency in Western academic spaces that privilege a predominantly conceptual approach to learning centered around texts. It thus also stands to reason that Christian witness to the Word incarnate must also somehow 'speak' not only to the *conceptual* (verbal and textual) but also *carnal* dimensions of Muslim religiosity if it is to be effectively communicated.

If one examines more closely the practice of Muslim ritual prayer, one finds that the use of the Qur'an engages not a disembodied mind but the eye (through calligraphy), the hands (through touching the Qur'an and the ritual ablutions required to do so), and especially the ear and tongue of the worshiper (through Qur'an audition and cantillation). Moreover, Muslims prostrate themselves in response to Qur'an recitation, repeatedly placing their feet, knees, palms, nose, and forehead against the ground. Thus, the 'carnality' of Muslim engagement with the Qur'an problematizes the notion of inlibration, showing that it is reductionistic to conceive of the Qur'an as a mere book to be read and studied. Rather, in the carnal aspect of its relationship to the worshiper, I argue that the Qur'an appears to take on an 'incarnational' function as well – albeit, of course, differently understood than in Christian theological terms. According to Vietnamese-American Muslim theologian Martin Nguyen, "The Qur'an…is not just a textual phenomenon but embodies more comprehensively a speech act possessing both existential force, such that it is in the world, and an experiential structure, such that it transforms those who engage with it" (Nguyen 2018, 105). Nguyen's point is particularly suggestive because, by referring to the Qur'an as a speech act possessing its own agential force, he reminds readers of the living quality of divine self-revelation, a quality that, according to Muslims, is articulated anew with each qur'anic recitation. Moreover, since the agent in this case is believed to be God, the encounter between human reciter and the God who reveals/speaks is particularly intimate and intense, collapsing as it were the chasm between Creator (Revealer) and creation (reciter) while still maintaining the ontological distinction that is so central to Islamic belief (*tawḥīd*). Thus, while Wolfson's notion of inlibration may continue to hold conceptual cachet if the Qur'an is studied in isolation from its ritual use, it appears to me too passive a term to describe accurately the lived engagement of Muslims with the visual, tactile,

auditory, recitative Qur'an – in short, the carnal Qur'an. As a book, the Qur'an is certainly to be studied and analyzed; as an oral tradition, it comes alive to Muslims as an ever-living divine speech act articulated through the bodies of its hearers and reciters.

Emphasizing the embodied dimensions of Qur'an engagement is to simultaneously critique practices of theological dialogue that privilege textual comparison, such as Scriptural Reasoning (Avcı 2018), as well as practices of CT that isolate textual comparison from religious ritual and material practices (Moyaert 2018). Yet from a missiological perspective, does not this brief comparative theological reflection on the carnal Qur'an also suggest the limitations of concepts-driven, text-centered approaches to Christian evangelism among Muslims? Is there not a more en*fleshed* way to proclaim the divine Word-made-flesh? If this is the case, then, thinking constructively, perhaps there is something to be learned *by Christians* about the way divine revelation is accessed, sensed, and materially engaged through Muslim practices of worship. Methodologically, such comparative theological proposals bracket any *a priori* judgment that incarnation is theologically superior to inlibration in order that the comparison might remain vulnerable and constructive. For example, while Madigan is correct to view Christian incarnation as God's "body language," the point is that it is still worth asking in what ways *ṣalāh* prayer facilitates not only reaching out to but perhaps also receiving back from God through the human body's participation in prayerful engagement with the carnal Qur'an. The results of comparison may lead to further refining the theological concepts used by Christians and Muslims to describe divine revelation. Missiologically speaking, such cross-over and return may also enable Christians to witness more clearly—more carnally?—to the ways in which divine incarnation reaches not only the intellect but also the bodies, emotions, and desires of worshipers.

Conclusion: Fellow Pilgrims on the Emmaus Road

The renowned evangelical Islamicist and missiologist J. Dudley Woodberry edited a volume in the late 1980's entitled *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*. In it, he asserts: "Any meaningful dialogue with Muslims needs to start by walking with them, listening to them, and asking them questions" (1989, xiii). The story in Luke 24 of travel companions wrestling with difficult questions about a Jesus who graciously draws near yet remains indistinct offers a compelling metaphor for CT. I have argued in this paper that the vulnerable practice of CT accords well with a 'truth pursued' approach to

mission in dialogue with fellow pilgrims from other faiths—faiths that, according to the data, are not going anywhere soon. To practice CT means not walking *behind* our travel companions on the Emmaus Road—a position that purports to see events with great perspicacity—but *alongside* them as fellow pilgrim-disciples along the way.

Pilgrims, recalling what Rah said in our opening, are those in continual pursuit of truth, not those who believe they have come to possess it in an absolute manner. In the Gospels, we see 'truth pursued' not only along the Emmaus Road but in Jesus' initial invitation to the fishermen to come follow him and learn to fish for people (Matthew 4:19). But the pursuit of Truth incarnate is never ended this side of the eschaton, even for the Twelve who followed after Jesus so closely. Much later in the gospel narratives, right before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, we read the following in Mark 10:32: "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid." While we boldly assert that Christians are called to participate in the mission of God, the practice of CT reminds us that we also humbly participate in the mission of pilgrims *toward* God who, though he has tabernacled among us, sometimes still walks a few steps ahead (cf. Sebastian 2012). There may be much bewilderment and surprise along the way, and indeed perhaps a genuine fear of the unknown. But the astonished disciples, trailing behind a Jesus whom I imagine appears somewhat unrecognizable in his resolution to go where most did not elect, reminds us that there exists a reverent fear apropos to the pursuit of Jesus. The confessionally rooted yet vulnerable task of comparative theology, which I have argued stands at the frontier of evangelical mission practice today, is likely to evoke a similar apprehension in its practitioners as they engage, with humble boldness witnessing to a truth pursued, those who are different from themselves. The question is: can Christian mission and discipleship do without this reverent fear? For from it may emerge the surprise—the awe of hearing God's works declared anew, not only in unfamiliar languages but also in new accents and nuances within the tongues we thought we knew so well.

Alexander S. Lee *is a third-year Cantonese Canadian PhD candidate in InterculturalStudies at Fuller Theological Seminary. For his dissertation, Lee is conducting a comparative theology of Anglican and Sunni ritual worship in Toronto. His first academic article, on the legacy of the evangelical Islamics scholar J. Dudley Woodberry, was published in the April 2024 issue of* International Bulletin of Mission Research.

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