

## New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought

**Afifi al-Akiti and Joshua Hordern**

*University of Oxford*

The focus of our project, *New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought*, concerns the ‘pre-modern’ or ‘long’ traditions of political thought in Islam and Christianity. Readers of *The Muslim World* and *Studies in Christian Ethics* will know that the renaissance in Christian political thought since World War II has not yet witnessed a sustained engagement with Islamic political thought. Meanwhile, the interface of religion and political life has increasingly become a major focus of academic and public discourse. By exploring the varied traditions of Islam and Christianity, this project seeks to retrieve and develop wisdom in political understanding with a view to enriching this discourse.

There are two fields of enquiry with which this research may be usefully juxtaposed: comparative religious ethics and comparative political theory: the former has commonly compared traditions without common sources; the latter has largely focussed on counter-posing Western and non-Western texts, so conceiving the ‘other’ as alien to a predominantly *secular* canon of political thought, emancipated from its theological past.

By contrast, this enquiry is not comparing two alien traditions without any common sources but is alert to how conversation between Christian political thought (from West and East) and the similarly complex (and marginalised) political traditions of Islam show political problems in a new light. Such an enquiry is not an alternative to conversation between Islamic or Christian political thought and self-consciously non-religious political thinking, but rather a necessary complement. It reckons with the problems which occupy comparative political theory—such as a canon narrowly restricted to Western authors—but does so by reaching out beyond (and before) the canon of Western liberalism. It opens up a distinct area of investigation, with its own large body of historic texts and scholarship to be studied on its own terms, not only because of the respective historical contexts that shaped the political thought of Christianity and Islam, but also because of the contemporary importance of these two traditions and their interrelations.

With this in mind, it becomes a real question whether our enquiry should be thought of as simply ‘comparative’ or, rather, in ‘relational’ terms, as a conversation between those

already sharing elements of common tradition. The conception of this project is conversational rather than simply comparative though the latter term helpfully presses one to ask precisely what is being compared: Islam with Christianity, or both with other influences, such as those associated with Persian, Byzantine and liberal democratic cultures. To pay attention to these comparative elements is to channel exploration of differences and similarities between Islam and Christianity through mediating points of reference.

Christians and Muslims are not alien to each other in the sense that someone outside both faiths is alien to each of them. Instead, they share, in highly qualified fashion, common monotheistic stances. Accordingly, discussions about politics in Islam and Christianity will have to confront the question of the theologians and philosophers of religion, namely whether Islam and Christianity worship the same God. But we were clear from the outset of our conversations that this question should not be arrived at too quickly. The diverse monotheisms of Islam and Christianity share similar political and social questions and problems, though not their precise formulations, answers or resolutions. In particular, they share a common question which concerns the ways in which it is possible to conceive of a common political community with those who cannot share in the stance towards the world which they, in their different ways, inhabit. The task here is to clarify what follows about politics for each tradition from its own version of monotheism, bearing in mind the problematic of how any answer to this must deal with historical circumstances and inherited prejudices.

The 'alien' to both Christianity and Islam (in their long traditions) is a secularist strand in Western liberal democracy in which political reasoning is normatively sealed off from religious faith and characteristically inattentive to the affective or emotional dimension of political relations. As Islamic and Christian political conceptions encounter one another, they make normative truth claims which reach backwards into historical traditions and forward to the present day. Their own intrinsic logic requires that specific doctrines which emerge be treated not as neutral objects of study but as contested normative visions of human political life. Encounter will then involve an invested, participative search for true political concepts, for normativity in political life. What may emerge are not only more sophisticated understandings of Islamic and Christian political traditions in their own terms but also lines of common affirmation and critique concerning the political arrangements which best serve human communities today. Our hope is that these conversations between pre-modern forms of the two religions will stimulate wiser interpretations of Islam, Christianity and political life than non-religious or secularist forms of engagement with religion characteristic of much contemporary politics and political philosophy.

The symposia from which this special issue of *The Muslim World* and its companion in *Studies in Christian Ethics* emerged took place in September 2013 in Worcester College, Oxford, and May 2014 in Wolfson College, Cambridge.

The special issue of *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 29, no. 2 (May 2016), a companion to this volume, addresses three interlaced *foci* within one wider conversation about political authority.

First, the nature of authority is addressed in Oliver O'Donovan's exegesis of the emergence of the notion of representation in the Christian West, with particular attention to the role of affective recognition. Sajjad Rizvi's response follows a series of caveats about the precarious context in which any theological conception of representation must operate with a constructive account of comparative political theology, interlinking concepts of representation, sovereignty and legitimacy with affirmations of fellowship, emotional connection and authentic Muslim life. Paul Heck engages in a more directly comparative exercise by considering the work of al-Māwardī (d. 1058) against the background of Augustinian political thought with particular attention to the formation (*adab*) of the soul and the moral coherency towards which affections are attracted. Jonathan Chaplin's response to these three papers makes its own constructive suggestion towards pursuing 'monotheistic democratic constitutionalism', having drawn out four possible points of 'convergence' between the papers: that political authority is not salvific, that authority is to be legitimated by law, that the purposes of limited government may be sought under the shared banner of the common good and that there is a vital role for popular participation.

The second focus concerns legitimacy, authority and sovereignty. Robin Lovin's exploration of these themes considers how the prevailing conditions under which Christianity and Islam emerged — which could have been otherwise — gave rise to distinctive concepts of legitimacy which may be differentiated in part via analysis of Christian martyrdom. Anver Emon's response, starting from Lovin's counterfactual, adopts a robust theological voluntarism in engaging with the theme of sovereignty via both Islamic sources and the work of Carl Schmitt.

The third attends to the 'authority in absence' in the Shi'ite tradition analysed by Sajjad Rizvi, who especially explores how the occultation of the Imam relates to the sacralisation of everyday politics. To this Rowan Williams responds by considering the risks of emphasising sacral authority's clarity in a society's ethic, a risk which Augustinian reserve is well-suited to mitigate.

In the concluding comments, Joan Lockwood O'Donovan and Mohammed Fadel, who have participated from the beginning, reflect on the project thus far and map future research possibilities and modes of conversation into which the project ought now to progress.

As a prequel to the issue of *Studies in Christian Ethics*, both chronologically and conceptually, contributors in this special issue of *The Muslim World*, vol. 106, no. 2 (April 2016) also cluster around three *foci*: first, the kind of the conversations being undertaken in the project; second, issues of nature, law, politics and moral reasoning; and third, questions of loyalty, obligation and duty. The issue ends with a special article which forms an isthmus between the issues by considering arguably the most recognizable political institution in Islam's own long tradition, namely the 'caliphate'.

In the first section, contributors focus on methods and matters arising from conducting the conversations. Robin Lovin begins by arguing that the comparative study of religion and politics in Islam and Christianity can be approached as a problem in

comparative religious ethics. Recent developments in comparative religious ethics suggest that the roots of political action in the contemporary world lie deeper than the modern ideologies and economic interests through which they are usually explained. Instead, close attention to the religious ideas by which each tradition gave shape to politics is required, where in fact this provides a 'bridge concept' between Islam and Christianity by setting a framework for comparison, even when more clearly political conceptions of law, authority, or sovereignty may have developed in the two traditions quite differently. He fittingly argues that a better understanding of these developments within each tradition is a necessary prelude to constructive dialogue between them.

Andrew March then raises the question over the process of conversation itself and asks whether there is a deeper, genuinely transformative potential for learning and transformation among participants of the conversation themselves—an observation he describes as the paradox of comparative political theory. A common justification given for comparative political theory is that we will be morally and epistemically transformed by encounters with our 'others'. He argues that this is a fully warranted and admirable aim for expanded forms of ethical and political theory. However, it also raises some complex questions. Who is the self being transformed? Are we being transformed in reference to an existing repertoire of moral, political and epistemic commitments (say, liberal ones) or in reference to a universal self capable of critical reflection on all core value commitments? In yet another problem, who is our 'other'? How deep do we go in identifying core moral and epistemic commitments that are to be challenged by new encounters? More importantly, when we identify an 'other' with whom we are in 'conversation', are we by definition always just identifying values or commitments that we already have, for otherwise how would we be able to identifying what the 'other' can teach us as being valuable or good?

The final contribution concerning the nature of our conversations analyses one particular case of conversing with the 'other': Edward Said's (d. 2003) *Orientalism*—one of the most influential works in post-colonial studies that also had considerable impact on Christian-Muslim relations. Although Said self-consciously framed his writings as contributions to an explicitly secular form of criticism, they apparently grew out of a theological context. Todd Thompson attempts to recover that theological provenance by exploring Said's relationship with his uncle, the Lebanese Christian philosopher and politician Charles Malik (d. 1987). Over against Said, Thompson argues that not only future criticism of the Orientalist discourse but also constructive, conceptual, and practical engagement with present-day political problems will necessarily involve interaction with the enriching resources of political theology.

Conversations in the second section focus on fundamental issues on law, politics and moral reasoning. Mohammad Fadel starts by examining Sunni conceptions of revelation, nature, the law and the state—showing a broad tradition that comprises diverse theological, philosophical and ethical doctrines. He argues that the dominant Sunni interpretation of law, nature and the state from its pre-modern tradition provides an appropriate basis for productive conversation with Christian interlocutors, especially with respect

to its assumptions regarding the relationship of human reason to divine law, and how fallible human interpretations of revelation are just that—imperfect even if reliable—thus making the revealed law accessible to ordinary human beings. It led distinctively to a conception of the state that eschews the perfectionist demand of rule by the most virtuous in favour of a system of government rooted in the notion of the rule by individuals of ordinary integrity.

On the Christian side of this conversation, Joan Lockwood O'Donovan gives an account of continuity and discontinuity in the pre-modern history of western Christian moral and political thought grounded on the authoritative writings of the canonical Scriptures, mediated by complex contextual and literary influences, received by the Church as the unsurpassable revelation of God's creation, preservation and salvation of the world in Jesus Christ. She locates the unity of the pre-modern tradition in the continuous theoretical discernment within the Biblical text of an unfolding movement of divine law and, co-ordinately, of human freedom, through the theological moments of God's creation, preservation, redemption and sanctification of humankind and the world. Joan Lockwood O'Donovan explains how the nature, purpose, and limitations of political law and freedom have traditionally been determined by situating these within this dynamic totality of divine and human moments. Her consideration of historical developments in the Christian theological handling of human law invites a mutual harvesting of resources within the Christian and Islamic traditions for the sake of critical and constructive engagement in present-day discourse about legal and political affairs, which has become severely impoverished by its detachment from theological and Scriptural sources.

In his response to the interchange between Mohammad Fadel and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, Jonathan Chaplin focusses on their contrasting accounts of how the relation between political authority and creation and/or nature has been conceived in the two classical traditions of Christian and Islamic political thought they addressed. Alert to the distinctly Augustinian tradition from which O'Donovan engages with Islamic thought, Chaplin draws instead on Thomism to indicate both how it differs from Augustinianism with regard to the origins of public judgment in unfallen creation and how its epistemological presuppositions converge rather with Sunni thought as Fadel recounts it, especially with regard to the role of the state amidst normative pluralism. Chaplin's analysis, which should be read alongside his contribution to the companion issue of *Studies in Christian Ethics*, perceives in Sunni thought a powerful premodern account of representative constitutional government and concludes with suggesting three significant areas for further enquiry.

F. Russell Hittinger closes this dimension of the conversation, arguing that dialogue about natural law in particular is best undertaken within and between the great wisdom traditions, which, for more than a millennium, have constituted 'a common patrimony' of moral values. He treats the evolution of such dialogue among Catholic thinkers and authorities, particularly Joseph Ratzinger. On Hittinger's view, Ratzinger's startling analysis of liberalism's 'capsize' of that concept of nature in which reason and nature overlap led him to propose, before he became Pope in 2005, that engagement between

specifically religious ‘wisdom traditions’ which share natural law presuppositions and are open to reality as a whole, was the most viable form of a search for universal ethics.

The political concepts of loyalty, obligation and duty are the focus of the third section. Here Joshua Hordern explores how conversation between the thought of certain Islamic and Christian thinkers, such as Agapetos (*fl.* 527–530), Gregory the Great (d. 604) and Sa’dī (d. 1291), sheds light on how loyalty and obligation function within institutions of kingship and in political experience more generally. Interacting with many of the articles in this issue and its *Studies in Christian Ethics* companion, he argues that a focus on Late Antique notions of kingship leads to a particularly fruitful focus for conversation between Islamic and Christian political thought. The exposition of texts pays particular attention to political concepts’ dependence on salvation historical understanding in order to examine ways of conceptualising and generating the interrelation of obligation and criticism that commonly constitutes the interrelation of peoples with rulers. With Hellenism as the bridging tradition through which diverse forms of Islamic and Christian political thought pass, the argument explores the moral psychology of institutions of kingship, especially affections such as fear and love by which political loyalty and obligation are said to operate. Hordern concludes by developing a notion of ‘good shepherds under law’—evoked both by Christian interpretations of the Davidic tradition and Islamic interpretations of the relation of ruler to ruled, summarised as a ‘pastoral contract’. In exploring the psychology of leadership as an elemental phenomenon of political life, the argument signals beyond the premodern contexts from which the authors discussed are principally drawn towards interpretation of present-day political experience.

In direct conversation with Hordern, Asma Afsaruddin makes clear that the Qur’an does not mandate a specific form of ‘Islamic’ government. However, the Qur’an does espouse certain moral and ethical concepts that may be understood to have considerable socio-political implications as well. These concepts and their role in shaping the early Muslim polity often find clear reflection in Ḥadīth collections, works of exegesis (*tafsīr*), political treatises, and historical chronicles. She usefully discusses the contested implications of these concepts and their treatment in these diverse genres that consider proper governance of the Islamic polity, paying particular attention to the use of the *sābiqa-faḍīla* paradigm to determine the constitution of political authority, the role of fear and reverence in loyalty and more pragmatic developments in the notion of political legitimacy such as development of the concept of the common good in the work of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).

Finally, this section of our conversations concludes with John Kelsay illuminating the Muslim debate regarding *jihād* as an individual duty. He proceeds to situate this discussion historically within the Islamic tradition, and comparatively, by looking at Christian notions of self-defense. A brief conclusion points to the ways Muslims and Christians alike tried to deal with emergencies or exceptional cases, while at the same time maintaining the notion that war should be a rule-governed activity.

Appearing as an isthmus between the two special issues of *The Muslim World* and *Studies in Christian Ethics* is a special article, in which Mohammad Hashim Kamali looks

at the long-standing topic of the caliphate by examining in detail the methods of its investiture and succession as well as issues surrounding the nature of leadership and political authority in Islam. He does this by providing a comprehensive survey of the conception of the caliph from the beginnings of this political institution—eruditely revealing the various turns in history that changed its character—going right up to present-day debates amongst Muslim jurists and authors.

The symposia in Oxford and Cambridge were made possible by the support of, respectively, the University of Oxford's John Fell Fund through the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life, directed by Nigel Biggar, and the McDonald Agape Foundation's funding towards research in Christian Ethics in Cambridge, under the leadership of Sarah Coakley. To these funders and colleagues and to all those who have participated in the project we express our sincere thanks. Finally, as Guest Editors, we owe our thanks to Yahya Michot and Timur Yuskaev, Editors of *The Muslim World*, along with their Managing Editor, Nicolas Mumejian, and Wiley's team headed by Mark Gan, who not only provided us with unstinting and patient professional support, but also the scholarly latitude in allowing us to craft this project as it ought to be, in the full spirit of trust and openness. It is arguably providential for the convenors, a Muslim and a Christian, that a project seeking new conversations between the two great traditions could end up being witnessed by one of the world's oldest academic journals, whose spirit is reflected best in her subtitle, *A Journal Devoted to the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*.

Copyright of Muslim World is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.