

**A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH ON THE ISLAMIC
CONCEPT OF JESUS AS THE SPIRIT
AND WORD OF GOD:
From Polemics towards a Comparative Theology**

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People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him. (Al-Quran 4:171)

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." (Mark 8:27-29)

I. Introduction

Mark Allan Powell wrote an excellent introductory book on the historical Jesus. This book is an overview of modern Jesus scholarship, from its beginning to contemporary. Yet, some readers may feel perplexed by many Jesuses depicted in this book: about what he did, said and aimed. Thus, which one is the "real" Jesus?

In much debates about the identity of Jesus in Christian scholarship, there are also non-Christian views about the same person, especially that of Islam.¹ Islam presents Jesus in its holy Qur' n—the only religious tradition besides Christianity to do so. The presentation of Jesus in Islam makes an obligation for Christians to explore other perspectives of his identity and aims. Chistians, however, must be ready to be challenged and transformed by these encounters. I contend that without any openness to other perspectives, one will be trapped in a rigid dogmatism. There will not be new learning about Jesus Christ, either from

¹ An anthology edited by Gregory A. Barker is a good concise introductory on this theme. See Gregory A. Barker, ed., *Jesus in the World's Faith: Leading Thinkers from Five Religions Reflect on His leMeaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005).

history or from other faith traditions. This attitude is contrary to the aims of Jesus, especially when he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

There are many publications that study Jesus from Islamic perspective or in comparison with Christian perspective. Many aspects of the identity of Jesus can be studied from Islamic perspectives. This paper will focus on the notions of Jesus as the word and the spirit of God as stated in the holy Qur’ n. Indeed, these attributes are vital in Christian doctrines. Yet, the meaning of these attributes can be totally different in Islam. My task in this paper is to analyze how the two religious traditions expound these attributes in their theologies.

I begin with introduction which outlines the methodology of the paper. I shall elaborate this paper through an approach called comparative theology which looks to persuade Christian theologians to dig deeply into other religious traditions outside Christianity, instead of building an assumption about other faiths solely from Christian grammars.² The goal is not to intermingle any opposing views, but to make the topic more discernible and clearly conveyed in both religious traditions. When one comes to learn other’s perspective, one’s theological understanding will be stretched and transformed.³ Thus, comparative theology fits interreligious discourse, even when it touches some polemical issues. I assert that Muslim-Christian polemics should incorporate comparative theology, so that Christians may learn from Muslims, and vice versa.

II. Beyond Polemics

The terms “spirit of God” and “word of God” attributed to Jesus in Islam can raise ambiguity for Christians who do not know (or ignore) their context and background. A number of polemic literatures may illustrate this reality. In the *Letter from Cyprus*, Ibn Taymiyya⁴ and Muhammad Ibn Ab T lib al-Dimashq⁵ engaged in polemics through treatises. The author of the Cypriot letter used Paul of Antioch’s apologetic ideas. It also coined some Islamic teachings and quotations from the scripture in order to persuade Muslims to believe that Jesus Christ, as the spirit and word of God in Islam, is therefore the second Person of the Trinity. The

² James L. Fredericks, introduction to *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, Francis X. Clooney, ed. (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), xiv.

³ Francis X. Clooney, “Reading the World in Christ: From Comparison to Inclusivism,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D’Costa, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 66, 70.

⁴ Ibn Taymiyya wrote *Al-Jaw b al-Sah h li-Man Baddala D n al-Mas h* as a response for his Muslims fellow in the year 1316/1317. See Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s Al-Jaw b Al-Sah h* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1984).

⁵ Al-Dimashq received the letter in the year 1321 and wrote a reply treatise around the same year; the addressee were Christians, possibly the sender was one of them. The translation of *Letter of Cyprus*, the treatise of Paul of Antioch and the elaboration of Al-Dimashq’s treatise can be found in Rifaat Y. Ebied, David Thomas eds., *Muslim-Christian Polemic During the Crusades: The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Ab T lib al-Dimashq’s Response* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

goal was to convince Muslims to embrace what Christians believed.⁶ Below is one of the arguments:

Paul of Antioch states: In the Qur'an which this man brought it says: "The Christ, Jesus the son of Mary, is the messenger of God, His word which He sent down upon Mary, and a Spirit from Him" (4:171). This agrees with our view, since it bears witness that he is a man like us in his human nature which he took from Mary, and the Word of God and His Spirit united in him, except that the Word and the Spirit of God is creative, while we are creatures.⁷

Such an imposing motive also appears in modern-day debates. Neal Robinson gives two examples: Charles J. Ledit⁸ and R.C. Zaehner.⁹ These authors incorporate the Qur'anic terms "word of God" and "spirit of God" attributed to Jesus to support their Christian understandings; in so doing, they neglect the Islamic perspectives. They reinvigorate the early polemical approach.¹⁰ It is obvious that such apologetics has kept the Christians away from knowing and embracing what Muslims really believe about Jesus Christ. These authors ignore the process of engaging a genuine dialogue with Islam in order to build a better relationship between the two faith traditions. For a more constructive and fruitful discussion, I shall elaborate the conception of Jesus as the word and the spirit of God in Islam; then, using comparative theology, I shall move beyond polemics to offer a constructive proposal for Christian-Muslim relationships.

III. Images of Jesus as the Spirit and Word of God in Islam

A. The Qur'anic Portrait of Jesus

Qur'an depicts Jesus as a messenger of God, just like the other prophets before him, with a special message, the Gospel (Q. 57:27, 19:30). Unlike Christian basic tenet, however, he was not the incarnation of God. In the Qur'an, Jesus denied that he had taught the people to believe that he and Mary, his mother, are two gods (Q 5:116-117). Thus, the Qur'an reminds Christians that, although there are notions of Jesus as "word" and "spirit," they must not regard Jesus as divine:

⁶ The Cypriot author revised Paul of Antioch's polemical writing against Islam to make it more suitable for mission purpose to Muslims. Paul of Antioch was a Melkite Bishop of Sidon. He wrote his treatise near the end of the twelfth century. David Thomas suggests that the letter was part of the crusading effort, so probably written in 715/1315. *Ibid.*, 247-255.

⁷ This saying is quoted by Ibn Taymiyya in *Al-Jawab al-Sahih*. See Michel, 303-304.

⁸ Charles J. Ledit, *Mahomet, Israël et le Christ* (Paris: La Colombe, 1956), 152.

⁹ R. C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times: An Essay in the Comparison of Religions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 201.

¹⁰ Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 12.

People of the Book, do not go to unwarranted lengths in your religion and get involved in false utterances relating to God. Truly Jesus, Mary's son, was the messenger of God and His word – the word which He imparted to Mary – and a spirit from Him. Believe, then, in God and His messengers and do not talk of three gods. You are well advised to abandon such ideas. Truly God is one God. Glory be to Him and no 'son' to Him whose are all things in the heavens and the earth, their one and only guardian!" (Q. 4:171)¹¹

Then, Qur'an describes that miracles of Jesus support his role as a prophet of God. This is different from what Christians believe. In Christianity, all miracle stories around his birth, life, death, and resurrection are signs of his divine sonship. Yet, in the Qur'an, miracles never point out to his being in the likeness of God. For instance, the miraculous birth of Jesus is not the first miracle which God did in Jesus' life. God had done miracles in the birth and life of Mary, his mother, as a preparation for God's plan (Q. 3:36-37). God had supplied Mary with food whenever she was staying in her sanctuary; that provision surprised Zechariah, the father of John (Q. 3:37). The birth of Jesus is called miraculous since no man had touched Mary; it was God's Spirit who appeared before her in the form of a man (Q. 19:16-21).¹² After his birth, when Mary was blamed of committing fornication for delivering a baby without marriage bond, the baby Jesus pled: "I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet; made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to cherish my mother (Q. 19:27-31)." There are no other birth stories in the Qur'an which equal to the miraculous birth of Jesus.

In his childhood, Jesus received some miracles; the most famous one is the forming of a flying bird from clays. This story resembles a story in non-canonical Christian literature. Later in his life, Jesus also said that he would heal the blind, and the leper, and bring the dead to life (Q. 3:49, 5:110). All miracles in Jesus' life were signs from God that Jesus was a messenger of God.

The other miracles need to mention here are about the last day. In contrast to the Bible, the Qur'an does not say that Jesus was crucified, resurrected, and ascended to heaven. Surah 4:157-159 clearly states that the claim of the Jews that they had killed Jesus was false, because God saved Jesus and raised Jesus to Himself. Yet, this polemical theme needs further explorations beyond the scope of this paper.¹³ Furthermore, Jesus predicted the coming of another prophet after him

¹¹ All translations of the Qur'an used here are from Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985), 25.

¹² In other Islamic traditions, it was an angel who came to Mary and breathed in the spirit of God into her womb.

¹³ Many Qur'an commentators give an explanation about what happened on that event and how the Jews crucified wrong person. For further explanation see Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). Mahmoud Ayoub argues for different perspective from most of Qur'an interpreters that the Qur'an does not deny the death of Christ, see Mahmoud Ayoub, "Toward an Islamic Christology II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion – a Study of the Death of Jesus in *Tafsir* Literature," in A

whose name would be Ahmad (Q. 61:6).¹⁴ This verse strengthens Muslim argument that Jesus really had foretold the coming of the prophet Muhammad. By doing so, Jesus has completed his role as a faithful messenger of God.

Thus, Christ is seen as solely human in Islam, despite his special status as the “spirit of God” and the “word of God.” The Qur’ n presents, as Mahmoud Ayoub asserts, “a christology of the human Christ, empowered by God and fortified with the Holy Spirit.” (Q. 2:87, 253)¹⁵

B. Theological Notions of Jesus as the Spirit of God and Word of God

Having described the Qur’ nic portrait on Jesus, I shall discuss theological perspectives of three Islam scholars on Jesus as the spirit and the word of God.

1. Jonas Adelin Jørgensen: *Divine Otherness and Absolute Transcendence*

According to Jørgensen, Qur’ n criticizes the Christian notion of the divinity of Jesus, and insists on divine otherness and absolute transcendence.¹⁶ The title “word of God” is attributed to Jesus in several places. Jørgensen gives two instances: when John the Baptist announced a *kalima*¹⁷ from God which refers to Jesus, and when an angel announced that Mary would receive a “word” whose name was *al-mas h* or messiah. The “word” in the Qur’ n does not have any relation to Christian notion of *logos*. “Word” in Qur’ n, referring to Jesus’ divine inspiration, is used in a poetic sense.¹⁸ George Patronos affirms that *kalima*, when used in reference to God, means “a certain law or provision, a source of blessing, or even a marvelous and essential revelation.”¹⁹

Furthermore, Christianity and Islam have different views of Jesus as the “spirit of God.” In Christianity, Jesus is not fully identified with the Holy Spirit of God, because Christ is the second person in the Trinity while the Holy Spirit is the third. Thus, the title “spirit of God” attributed to Jesus Christ is not found in many teachings of the church fathers. However, there are ideas in the Bible which connect Jesus with the “spirit of God.” For example, Mary heard the angel brought the news that “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High

Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue, Irfan A. Omar, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 168.

¹⁴ Literallyspeaking, Ahmad means highly praised.

¹⁵ Ayoub, “Toward,” 158.

¹⁶ Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, "'Word of God' and 'Spirit of God' in Christian and Islamic Christologies: A Starting Point for Interreligious Dialogue?" in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4, 2009: 393.

¹⁷ *Kalima* is an Arabic term for a word, a speech, or a poem. See George Patronos, “Jesus as a Prophet of Islam,” George C. Papademetriou, trans., in *Two Traditions, One Space: Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*, George C. Papademetriou, ed. (Boston: Somerset Hall Press, 2011), 26; Mahmoud Ayoub, “The Word of God in Islam,” in *Orthodox Christians and Muslims*, N.M. Vaporis, ed. (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1986), 70.

¹⁸ Jørgensen, 394.

¹⁹ Patronos, 26.

will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

In Islam, the Qur’ān relates the “spirit of God” not exclusively to Jesus. The *rūh* Allah breathed into Adam so that the first human lived (Q. 15:29). The birth of Jesus also happened by such an inspiration of the *rūh* Allah, as one verse says, “Remember the one who guarded her [Mary’s] chastity. We breathed into her from Our Spirit and made her and her son a sign for all people” (Q. 21:91). Jesus is also identified as a “*rūh* from Allah” (Q. 4:171). Further, Muhammad received the same *rūh* to sustain his mission from God (Q. 26:163). Jørgensen contends that “spirit” in Islam is a special gift from God for prophetic services, and is not an entity in itself.²⁰

Jørgensen concludes that the Qur’ān rejects any special connection between Jesus and God. It implies that all ideas about Jesus must be understood in relation to his prophethood. Thus, the person of Jesus has significant role in Islam as the predecessor of Muhammad and as supporter of the message which Muhammad would bring.²¹

2. Mahmoud M. Ayoub: Jesus as a Savior in a Different Way

According to Mahmoud Ayoub, the term *kalima* in relation to God has three aspects: decree or ordinance (Q. 10:33), source of blessing or judgment (Q. 7:137), and revelation (Q. 2:37, 2:124).²² The revelation in Islam is of much importance for humanity: the way to salvation and return to their original state; it happens at the place and moment when humans realize the one and only God to be worshipped.²³ Ayoub describes that in Islam, there is no concept of the original sin, because Adam repented before God after being tempted by Satan. After that, Adam received a revelation from God which made him the first prophet. Thus, there is a paradox in Adam: the first sinner, yet also the first prophet.²⁴ Adam became a prototype for his descendants to play out this paradox.²⁵ Human beings can commit a sin, but also can repent through embracing the revelation through which the prophets have brought in submission to God. All the prophets after Adam went through this paradox.

Jesus Christ, then, was a special case among the prophets: he did not receive the revelation, the word of God, as a divine communication; but as Christ, he was the very “word of God” sent to Mary.²⁶ However, this does not mean, again, that Jesus was a divine being as the incarnation of God, because Jesus was created through the same process as Adam, from God’s direct command (*amr*) out of

²⁰ Jørgensen, 394.

²¹ Jørgensen, 394

²² Ayoub, “The Word,” 70

²³ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

nothing.²⁷ Theologically, this is the first special relation between Jesus and Adam; both had the original being.²⁸ Further, in Jesus and Adam, there was a manifestation of the divine power to bring humanity back to God.²⁹ However, there is one distinction between Adam and Jesus. Adam was a sinner and a prophet, but Jesus was a prophet without sin, so that Jesus fulfilled the lack of Adam.³⁰

Related to the salvific role of Jesus in Islam, Mahmoud Ayoub asserts an interesting point of view. Jesus is seen as a fully human being, but the miracles which he performed to fulfill his prophetic mission, such as healing the blind and touching the lepers, indeed were the manifestations of salvation from God. Ayoub says, "A savior is not simply one who dies for the sins of others but also one who heals the sickness of the human soul; one who infuses life into dead spirits by his own life and spirit. The original meaning of salvation is 'to be healed,' 'to be made wholesome,' 'to be restored to life.'"³¹

In Islam, the salvific role of Jesus must be read in juxtaposition to his prophethood. The Qur' n rejects Christian view that Christ as the word of God is crucified by the Jews, because God manifested magnificent power in Jesus as God's word. In the words of Ayoub, "Thus, the denial of the killing of Jesus is a denial of the power of human beings to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious."³² Moreover, the same passage which describes that the Jews did not kill Jesus also asserts that the killing only appeared that way. Thus, it tries to correct Christian idea of the real crucifixion. Taking it deeper, this correction symbolizes that human could not posit a power against God; the crucifixion is just a mere human illusion.³³ Jesus as the word of God reminds humanity to lay down arrogance and pride; and then, to follow God's path.

3. *Fazlur Rahman: Spirit of God as Revelation and Divine Guidance*

Fazlur Rahman suggests an interesting view on the spirit of God.³⁴ The Spirit of God is the medium or agent of revelation (*wahy*) from God to Muhammad, thus transmitting the Qur' n.³⁵ Against popular teachings, he argues that angel is not an agent of revelation to Muhammad, because the bearer of revelation is always a spirit or spiritual messenger. An angel could receive the revelation, as well as give support to believers; but angel could not herald the revelation (Q. 8:12, 40:15,

²⁷ Ibid.; Ayoub, "Toward," 158.

²⁸ Ayoub, "Toward," 158.

²⁹ Ibid., 158.

³⁰ Ayoub, "The Word," 172.

³¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Miracle of Jesus: Muslim Reflections on the Divine Word," in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, Irfan A. Omar, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 115.

³² Ayoub, "Toward," 176.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The use of capital "S" in the word "Spirit" comes from Rahman. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur' n* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980).

³⁵ Rahman, 95.

58:22).³⁶ As noted above, the lives of Adam and Jesus were brought about by the spirit. Adam was breathed in with the spirit after God built a fleshly body. Mary, the mother of Jesus, conceived and bore a child by the spirit.³⁷ Nevertheless, the distinction between the angel and the spirit should not be exaggerated. Rahman states that “there is probable that the Spirit is the highest form of the angelic nature and the closest to God”³⁸ (Q. 81:19-21). Thus, it is quite clear that for Rahman, the spirit is close to the notion of archangel.

Rahman also suggests that the Spirit is the real form of the revelation (Q. 42:52, 40:15): “Perhaps the Spirit is a power or a faculty or an agency which develops in the Prophet’s heart and which comes into actual revelatory operation when needed, but it originally does ‘descend’ from ‘above.’”³⁹ Based on several Qur’anic passages as authority (Q. 16:2, 17:85, 40:45, 42:52, 97:4), he analyzes the relation between the Spirit and the “command” (*amr*) of God. The spirit is the “Preserved Tablet” or the “Mother of all Books” identified with every “command,” because the spirit contains every will of God. Thus, the spirit of God came into the heart of the prophets to bring this “command.” In other words, the “Preserved Tablet,” including the Qur’ān, is higher in position than all angels.⁴⁰

To conclude, Rahman asserts that from a Qur’anic perspective, all God’s prophets and messengers are bearer of God’s power, emanating from God himself. Thus, the spirit guides and enlightens them to walk in the right way.⁴¹ This spirit cannot die and always renews itself in order to fulfill its task as the agent of God. The implication is that whenever humanity falls into a miserable moral condition, there is always hope for rescue and renewal.⁴² Furthermore, the Spirit worked as guidance for Muhammad in his times of struggle.⁴³ The Spirit also plays a role as divine guide for all humanity through the prophets and messengers.

IV. Christian Response to the Islamic Notions of Jesus as the Word and Spirit of God

Having touched upon three perspectives on Jesus from Islamic perspectives, especially on the word and the spirit of God, I shall now highlight some responses. It is to be admitted by both Christians and Muslims that there are differences, if not dire contrasts, of the Islamic notion of Jesus to Christian one. Jørgensen has shown that Islam emphasizes God’s absolute transcendence and divine otherness. There is no divine being beside God, neither is Jesus Christ. The word of God refers to Jesus’ divine inspiration as a gift from God for prophetic service rather than as an

³⁶ Ibid., 95-96.

³⁷ Ibid., 96.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 99.

⁴³ Ibid., 100.

entity in itself. Thus, Jesus has nothing to do with divine being. Jesus was a prophet and messenger who brought the will of God. This role is congruous with all prophets before him and especially with Muhammad, the final prophet.

Now, first, how does this concept of the word and spirit of God relate to Godself? Does it mean that in Islam one finds a distinction between God and His word and spirit? It is true that in Christianity, the word and spirit of God are the integral parts of God's essence, albeit can be differentiated in three persons. At this point, one must realize that in Islamic theology, God's attributes, which are many, are not completely the same as His essence. Each of God's attributes is contingent to God's essence, but not vice versa—God's essence is absolute. Christians, nevertheless, can still agree with the Islamic notion of God's absolute transcendence and divine otherness, since Christians regard Christ, Father, and the Holy Spirit as the triune God. It means that Christians should not elevate anything else over or beside God as the central authority in his or her life, such as money, pride, power, religious authority, and so on. The Christian Bible concurs with this idea.

As also mentioned by Ayoub, humans cannot exceed the power of God. He explores this theme in an elaboration of the Islamic rejection of Jesus' crucifixion. The denial of the crucifixion contains human limitation before God: a human cannot destroy the word of God in Jesus Christ. Humans cannot elevate themselves to the level of God; instead, humans should be subjected to God's authority. Thus, Ayoub reminds Christians to let God alone be God, not only as a Creator of the universe, but as the head of human lives.⁴⁴

Second, other comparative theme needs of exploration here is the connection between Adam and Jesus in Islam. In Islamic theology, the connection is strongly related to the concepts of sin and original creation. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not have a concept of original sin. Ayoub mentions the paradox in the self of Adam: as the Qur' n states, Adam was the first sinner, but also the first prophet. The Qur' n does not deny the sin of Adam, but instead emphasizes God's forgiveness to Adam who repented after the fall. Because of this repentance, Adam was glorified as the first prophet. Jesus and Adam, therefore, have a special relationship as they were born of the spirit of God. However, Christ fulfills Adam in the sense that Jesus never committed a sin. Nevertheless, both prophets carry the same unique task: to bring humanity back to God. Thus, Islam puts emphasis on mercy and forgiveness based on the revelation through the prophets who brought it to the world. God does not let humanity go astray with their incapability; rather God always cares for and loves them, and would receive those who repent.

In Christianity, the state of Adam after the fall is still a sinner. He received punishment from God—being expelled from Eden—yet the sin remains. The sin of Adam becomes an archetype for all human beings after him. Every human is capable of committing sins. The first Christian theologian who developed this idea was the apostle Paul. He wrote: "Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and

⁴⁴ Ayoub, "Toward," 177.

life for all” (Rome 5:18). Here, Paul analyzes the original sin that came from Adam as the first sinner, and the necessity of Christ’s atonement to diminish the power of sin as the consummation of God’s plan. Christ’s nature must be divine-human in order to fulfill this role.

Islam and Christianity emphasize different views on salvation of humanity. Islam posits that salvation comes through prophethood and revelation, while Christianity claims it is through Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, both religions converge in God’s compassion, mercy, and forgiveness towards the world and humanity. In Islam, the denial of the crucifixion is the way to uphold the sovereignty of God over human follies (as Ayoub has said); yet in Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the manifestation of God’s saving power. Humans must repent from their transgressions and pride. Hence, seeking the correct answer to the ongoing polemics over the crucifixion of Jesus in Islam and Christianity is not substantial. Rather, Christians cannot simply judge that God’s mercy and forgiveness are absent in Islam. On the other hand, Muslims should not judge Christians for what they believe about Jesus—the crucifixion and resurrection—before examining the concepts thoroughly.

Third, the status of Jesus as the word and spirit of God also needs further exploration. Ayoub notes that Jesus, through his miraculous works in helping people, proclaimed God’s salvific power. His miracles gave impact on wider society, especially that of the healing of the sick. Restoration to wholeness should remind Christians the reality of salvation on this present world. Thus, the after-life salvation is only one aspect of salvation taught in Christianity.

This idea has a close affinity to how Christians see Jesus Christ. A number of scholars teach the difference between the “high Christology” and the “low Christology.” The high Christology examines the divine nature of Jesus as Logos, the second Person of the Trinity, and so on; while the low Christology examines the historical figure of Jesus: what he did, said, and aimed. This categorization should not be overemphasized since the two are interrelated in depicting who Jesus was and is. The categorization could help mapping out the vast area of Jesus studies.

The first and the second comparative explorations above are more related to the “high Christology”; but the third, touching with salvation of the world, relates to the “low Christology.” The insights of Ayoub find parallels to two Christian scholars, Bruce J. Malina and Kosuke Koyama. Malina analyzes the Jewish society in the time of Jesus; while Koyama, an Asian theologian, examines Christ on the margins.

The Jewish society in the time of Jesus was a hierarchical society which bases its life on the purity system.⁴⁵ Most people to whom Jesus dedicated his life and teachings were those who live on the margins of society: the lepers, the blind,

⁴⁵ Bruce J. Malina uses Mary Douglas anthropological approach to discern the Jewish society’s system which is very different from modern/postmodern world. See chapter 6 for elaboration of the purity system. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta, Ga: John Knox Press, 1981).

women, prostitutes, children, non-Jews, and so on.⁴⁶ Religious leaders run the society along with the kings and the Roman governments. These people are at the center of the society. By doing miracles, Jesus gave back their place in the society. The same case applies to the woman who was bleeding for many years. According to Jewish culture at that time, this affliction rendered her impure. Such was the situation faced by Jesus. Jesus turned the society upside down by proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God. It was not the purity system which ruled the society, but God through divine justice and compassion.

Koyama articulates this concept by asserting that Christ put the cross, the symbol of the coming kingdom, on the margins where the oppressed people were isolated by a system of injustice.⁴⁷ In his own words, "The crucified Christ who is the center is always in motion towards the periphery, he challenges the power of religious and political idolatry."⁴⁸ Putting the cross at the margin, Jesus established a new center that began from the margin; while those who were at the center began to desecrate to the margin. The kingdom of God, therefore, offers a new paradigm in a new system where ethical standards of compassion and justice prevail.⁴⁹ It might be said that all people who are willing to follow those standards, the poor and marginalized, are now located at the center. Yet the religious authority, losing their privilege at the center of the society, still can move to the cross, the new center. Thus, liberation is not only for the poor and the oppressed, but also for the oppressors who are willing to repent. It means that salvation is liberation. People are invited to embrace the kingdom of God in its wholeness.

Salvation as wholeness does not neglect the afterlife aspect of salvation. Some Christians spend energies and time only for the afterlife aspect of salvation, yet this teaching might neglect the present reality: this world also needs salvation! Thus, salvation should be recognized in its fullness.

Finally, I shall consider Rahman's suggestion concerning the spirit of God. He asserts that the spirit is divine guide for human beings. The spirit empowered the prophets in proclaiming the will of God. The spirit symbolizes God's wide mercy to embrace humans despite their tendency to rebel against God. It is also a symbol of hope for humanity, that all humans can find rescue and renewal; God sends revelation through prophets and messengers from the beginning until the end of the universe.

Rahman posits an understanding which resembles the role of the Holy Spirit in Christianity. The difference lies in the distinctive figures of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In Christianity, the two are regarded as the second and third persons of the Trinity. Meanwhile, the Qur' n does not emphasize the distinctiveness of the Christ and the Spirit. Rahmat cites some verses from the Hebrew and Christian

⁴⁶ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁷ Kosuke Koyama, "The Asian Approach to Christ," in *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XII, No. 4, October (1984): 445; Kosuke Koyama, "The Crucified Christ Challenges Human Power," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 158-159.

⁴⁸ Koyama, "The Crucified," 153.

⁴⁹ Koyama, "Asian Approach," 446.

Scriptures to support his argument. The Holy Spirit inspired many figures and prophets in discerning the will of the true God, YHWH. In the Gospels, then, Jesus Christ, as the incarnation of God, was guided by the Holy Spirit in his works to fulfill his role as the culmination of divine revelation. In several passages, Jesus is portrayed as having special relationship with God and the Holy Spirit in a triune communion. Before his birth, an angel announced to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Furthermore, in his baptism by John the Baptist, the triune pattern occurs again (Matthew 3:16-17). The fasting for forty days as a preparation for ministry also was supported by the Spirit (Matthew 4:1). After his ascension to heaven, on the Pentecost day, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the disciples and other believers as a sign of the continuation of God's guidance and providence (Acts 2). This understanding of the Holy Spirit as divine guidance has a parallel in Rahman's elaboration. Thus, it can be concluded that Islam is not a strictly legal religion which seeks salvation through good deeds and keeping from evil deeds. This misunderstanding, as I observe, is very common among the Christians. In fact, as Rahman suggests, Islam depicts God not as a sovereign monarch who gives a set of rules through a system of reward and punishment. Rather, the Islamic teaching highlights God's compassion and guidance through the Holy Spirit to give hope for all humanity.

V. Conclusion

This paper portrays a figure of Jesus in Islam as the word and the spirit of God through comparative theology. This method is very different from polemical approaches which impose Christian perspectives on the Islamic understanding of those two titles. I contend that some polemical approaches to be unfruitful and will not enhance mutual recognition between the two faith traditions. When Christians learn different view of Jesus Christ, such as from Islam, then a better relationship of faith traditions can be reached. Moreover, comparative theology approach can deepen Christian commitment. I hope I succeeded in outlining a sample of comparative theology to encourage Christian commitment.

The initial question explored in this paper is about a spiritual journey to meet the "real" Jesus. The depiction of Jesus in Islam might make this question more difficult to answer. I would suggest that the attempt to address the problem is not merely by academic explorations. It is a matter of faith and responsibility of all followers of Jesus Christ. It is also a privilege and a vocation to be able to answer his call, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter's answer was not put in logical propositions; yet, Jesus justified Simon's words. The words of Simon were said out of pure intention to grasp Jesus' invitation to answer out of one's heart, not as many people have said. This paper is a small step in a journey towards the full answer.

About the author

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