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The Crisis Of Intellectual Veracity In The Study Of Religions



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The demand for neutrality and impartiality in the modern study of religions has challenged the role of theology in defending religious truth. As post-modernity emerged, its philosophy sought to deconstruct modern philosophy and everything under its shell. The post-modern philosophy is sceptical against the notion of objectivity and favour for relativism. Despite the increasing awareness of religious diversity, study of religions in modern and postmodern context resumes into reducing religion as human subjective experience. This paper, therefore, seeks to discuss the dilemma concerning religious truth that marked the gap between the contemporary study of religions and theology. The author alluded to the views of contemporary theologians who struggled to reform the way theology has been taught during modernity and post-modernity under the various nomenclatures; comparative theology, world theology, and global theology. Nevertheless, does the new theology embrace the passion for religious truth? Using the interpretive and the qualitative research paradigm, the paper examines the question of religious truth by referring to a selected theme under Kalam from within the


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Introduction

It has been almost two centuries after Friedrich Max Müller's (1823-1900) influential school of Religionswissenschaft marked a breakthrough in the study of religions. He introduced many enthralling terms that sustained in the discipline of religious study as taught today, such as neutrality, scientific, objectivity, and non-bias. Müller famous captions were "to study religion as it is" and that one has to study religions other than his own for "he who knows one knows none". When the phenomenological school emerged in the early nineteenth century, it added another influential concept to the study of religions which is epoch or epoché, 'bracketing', or suspension of judgment.

To date, there are a number of established nomenclatures which represents many forms of religious study based on their distinct methods and approaches. Francis X. Clooney listed them with a brief explanation: comparative religion, theology, theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, dialogical/interreligious theology, and comparative theology (Clooney, 2010). Prominent pluralists offered more defined nomenclatures: world theology (Smith, 1989), global theology (Ambler, 1990) and global ethic (Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993). There are also unique nomenclatures formulated within an identified framework or premises such as meta-religion (Al-Faruqi, 1986a) and transcendent unity of religions (Schoun, 1984).

In contradiction to all the above-mentioned modern study of religions is theology, a traditional and normative discipline peculiar to the Abrahamic religions. It was in theology that one's religious truth is defended and others' religious truth is challenged. Jacques Waardenburg however accused theology as polemical (Waardenburg, 1999) and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi charged it as polemic and apologetic (Al-Faruqi, 1986b). In fact, it is claimed that the rivalry between theology and study of religions can still be felt in some


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methodological struggle between theology and the study of religions. They promoted comparative theology as a reconciliatory discipline between the two disciplines. Hence, comparative theology is committed to intercultural study of religions and normative judgment will be embarked only after an extended and deep reflection on the texts and practices of the religion under comparison has been attempted (Clooney, 2010).

This may not be the case in most of the Islamic studies faculties or departments. As the former establishes the gap between the two disciplines, the latter seems unaffected by the gap. Muslim theologians were therefore challenged to emulate al-Ghazali's bold move in developing an epistemological and critical methodology in the study of religions (Khorchide & Topkara, 2013). This is not entirely a new challenge. As a matter of fact, almost three decades ago, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi adapted the Ghazalian revolutionary scholarship when he formulated the meta-religion principles and adopted them in his analysis of Christianity (Al-Faruqi, 1967). Nevertheless, despite the bravery and the subtlety of his method, meta-religion fails to capture sufficient interest even among the Muslims academia.

Religious Truth and Intellectual Veracity

Peter Jonkers maintains that the notion of truth cannot be dismissed as it dominates the academic debate among the philosophers of religion, as well as the public (Jonkers, 2012). Modern philosophy of religion, however, plays a significant role in seizing the question of religious truth away from theology. Jonker criticizes that modern theism in the philosophy of religion is too obsessed with the foundational and epistemological question instead of religious truth. In the end, modern theism abandoned many questions that pertain to religious truth on the view that they are not susceptible to the scientific proof. In his defence of religious truth, Donald Wiebe stressed that an ultimate divine truth is against the ordinary truth perceived by human intelligence and senses. Religious truth provides the ultimate significance for one's meaningful existence. Hence, the only way to find it is primarily in religious doctrines and beliefs in the forms of metaphysical statement (Wiebe, 1981). Ironically, philosophy or religion, speaks of propositional truth and not metaphysical truth. Wiebe speaks of religious truth as gained in intuition that concerns the divine realm and transcends the natural realm. Wiebe reclaims theology to find its way back in the modern intellectual undertaking.



Nevertheless, the notion of religious truth as personal and relative may exist in harmony with the postmodern philosophy of relativism. Jonker illustrates this by relating religion to the postmodern consumerism culture and religious supermarket. In such conditions, he imagines that religious belief is perceived as commodities displayed in the religious supermarkets to seduce the customers. There is no need to consult the customers in helping them to make the 'right' choice since choices are subjective affairs and there is no objective standard to the customers' liking (Jonkers, Quarido, & Besseling, 2009).

Hendrik M. Vroom blamed that in addition to the philosophy of religion, the introduction of comparative religion has made the question of truth becoming a more complex issue for it denies the possibility of arriving at a conception of religious truth in terms of one's own cultural and religious tradition (Vroom, 1989). Earlier, Wiebe condemned the founding fathers of the study of religions for tolerating religious truth, hence, inventing descriptivism in the study. As such, in his opinion, it is a form of methodological dogma (Wiebe, 1981). Jonkers, however, tried to reconcile this methodological uncertainty by exerting his view that religious truth has to be regarded as a tradition of wisdom owned by all religions and secular worldview. Such wisdom in his opinion is a trans-cultural and universally human character (Jonkers et al., 2009). He seems to echo the perennials' call for recognition of perennial wisdom submitted by the prominent esoteric scholars such as Frithjof Schuon, William C. Chittick, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Nevertheless, his proclamation of the shared tradition of wisdom though fascinating is outside the scope of this work.

The debate on the meaning of 'truth' may also possibly lead us into the loop of modern versus postmodern truth's ontological debate. The postmodern philosophy affects the modern notion of truth in the sense that its ontological meaning and certainty is contested. Prominent scholars of postmodern philosophy such as Jean Franois Lyotard is known for his famous postmodern critic to modern philosophy as 'the end of grand narratives or metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1989). The postmodern philosophy denies the possibility of objective knowledge and the possibility of truth. Lyotard accused modern sciences as a metanarrative and he challenged such a transcendent status. Ernest Gellner submitted that postmodernism is relativismus uber Alles which means 'relativism above everything' and that truth is elusive, polymorphous, inward, and subjective (Gellner, 1992). Given that the two philosophies as thesis and antithesis, the challenge for a subtle



intellectual discourse?

The Quest for an Appropriate Methodology in the Study of Religions

Francis X. Clooney's proposal for keeping theology, comparative religion, and interreligious learning together has captured our interest given his vigorous attempts in reconciling theology and comparative religion. He introduced comparative theology, a discipline he regards as mandatory to the present theologians as they are expected to be inter-religiously literate and able to understand diversity with the eyes of faith (Clooney, 2010). Hence, comparative theology is introduced as a discipline rooted in theological concerns with actual study of another tradition. It requires a combination of one's intellectual and spiritual response to diversity. Its prerequisite is to omit the traditional and exclusive understanding of diversity. Clooney highlighted the importance of combining one's intuitive and rational insight, reflective, and contemplative endeavour seeing the other in the light of one's own, and our own in light of the other (Clooney, 2010). There may be some complexities with regard to the acceptance of this discipline as Ulrich Winkler recognized the differences between the context in the United States of America and Europe, in particular Germany (Winkler, 2012). The former treats religion as a public item but officially separates it from the state unlike Europe and the German-speaking countries. In the latter case, despite the separation, there are concordats between the state and the Vatican and other forms of church leadership. For example, the government funded the education of the clergy in public university and also equips theological faculties. As a matter of fact, the church has the right to decide on the appointment of professors at theological faculties (Winkler, 2012). In the latter context, the establishment of comparative theology in the academia is possible though it is still limited to the Protestant and Catholic theologies. However, it is claimed that some efforts are taken to include other religious theologies.

Earlier in history in 1967, from within the Muslim intellectual circles, there was an initiative from Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, on reforming the method in the study of religions. He called it the meta-religion principle, a universal rational principle that goes beyond the different forms of religion. Unlike Clooney



has finally resorted to the universal rational principle to help in the judgment process on the religion being studied. He dedicated the method in his study of Christianity that led to the publication of *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Ideas*. Unlike Clooney who has received more institutional and scholarly support for his ideas of comparative theology, al-Faruqi's call for methodological reform failed to wake at least his fellow Muslims scholars.

Problem Statement

The question of religious truth in the study of religions is the real hurdle in the reconciliatory project between theology and comparative religion. Perhaps, such a reconciliatory measure may not be the best solution. Theology being a traditional religious discipline is essentially dependent on metaphysics and logic. On the other hand, comparative religion a widely known discipline as one of the brainchild of modern sciences, is excluding metaphysics. Theology acts as the armour of faith and religious truth is its accountability. On the contrary, comparative religion abandoned religious metaphysics for it is only interested in the rational and empirical truth as experienced by man. Comparative religion bothers theology in the sense that the former conforms to religions' plural truth-claim in the name of empathy and engagement. Theology bothers comparative religion in the sense that it is judgmental towards the idea of religious truths. Both disciplines are antithetical to each other. Having exerted these contradictions and the unfeasibility of reconciliatory method, it is perhaps advisable to recognize the disciplines as they are. Theology, being the traditional discipline of faith prevalent in the Abrahamic religions, deserves recognition for the role it has played in defending and verifying religious truth. In this regard, Kalam which refers to a distinctive method in theology was in fact, a shared tool among the Muslims, Christians, and Jewish scholars in the vindication of their faith, metaphysics, and ethics. It is interesting to uncover that despite the plain contradicting truth-claim that religions demonstrate, they alluded to a common salient fact which is the Sovereignty of God; a neglected truth in comparative religion but found its advocate in theology through the traditional method of Kalam.



Kalam or loosely translated as 'speculative theology' refers to a systematic dialectical and argumentative method in theology developed in the form of dialogue to contest or defend one's religious doctrines and creeds, by means of rational argumentation. On the other hand, comparative religion is a science of other religions that adopts 'modern scientific approach' in order to attempt a neutral and unbiased study of the world religions. Modern scholars regarded theological approaches as polemical, therefore, a biased approach to the study of religions. As a result of such allegations and the promotion of Comparative Religion and other modern approaches in the study of religions, Kalam and its legacies were sidelined from the intellectual mainstream of religious studies.

In reality, Kalam has been ventured by the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish theologians from the sixth to the twelfth centuries. Scholarly inquiries into inter-religious issues were attempted with a strong element of debate (jidal) instead of dialogue. In fact, Kalam is also embedded with the Greek logic and Islamic logic (al-mantiq) that stimulate for intellectual openness in interreligious discourses. Interestingly, some of the themes debated in Kalam are extensively discoursed today under a different academic purview. For example, the issue of free will and predestination, and the issue of good and evil were originally theological issues but are deliberated under moral/ethical issues at present time. The contemporary debate of human right and freedom, intrinsic values, and extrinsic values of morality when discussed under theology are geared towards theocentric objective, hence, the exertion on God sovereignty. In comparison, when they are discussed under Comparative Religion, they are geared toward anthropocentric objective, hence, the exertion on justice, human right and tolerance.

Nidhal Guessom made an interesting demand for the revival of Kalam making it necessary to engage Kalam with modern science. He challenged the contemporary theologians to deal with the scientific study of nature which falls under the purview of natural theology that discuss the problem related to the creation of the world via the design theory or the teleological argument. Such issue was well-deliberated by the Greek philosophers, Muslim, and Christian theologians in the past. This intellectual tradition, however, was suppressed by modern scientists such as David Hume and Charles Darwin. Both scientists relied upon the principle of methodological naturalism which insists that science only admit explanations of natural phenomena that rely solely on natural causes and leave out entirely any appeal to supernatural



science, thus, justifying the demand he made for the revival of Kalam . This, according to him, is not impossible as he pointed out in a work titled One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology by John C. Polkinghorne, a physicist-turned-priest that explored the possibility of relating theology to modern science. The latest work by Basil Altaie titled God, Nature and the Cause reiterates the call made by Guessome and dismissed the allegation that Kalam is outdated or impractical in the current context. As a matter of fact, he insisted that Kalam has much to offer on contemporary natural philosophy. Altaie substantiated his claim throughout the chapters of his book which discussed the theology (daqiq al-Kalam) which pertains to the issues of laws of nature, laws of physics, causality and the question of divine action, the size of the universe and also the question of fate. (Altaie, 2016).

Guessom called for contemporary Muslim theologians to engage in dialogue with scientists, philosophers, and thinkers on issues ranging from the concept of creation (of time and space, of the world/universe/multiverse, of life, of humans); the question of evolution (of life, of humans, of intelligence, of consciousness, of morality), and God's role in it; the place of humans in the universe; divine action in the world; the question of miracles; extra-terrestrial life and intelligence; artificial intelligence. He figured out potential issues that intersect between science and theology, prevalent at the contemporary western discourse mainly discussed by the Christians theologians. Those issues are:

- Creation of the World/Universe/Multiverse
- The Place of Man in the Universe
- Creation/Evolution of Life and Humans
- Divine Action in the World
- The Question of Miracles

Having listed the issues, it is necessary that we demonstrate the applicability of the issues in interreligious discourses and deal with the question of truth in religion. To further illustrate, taking the questions of free will and predestination and the justice of God, Muslims theologians of the competing



and evil) and that he deserves reward and punishment for what he did in the world to come. In this regard, God is guarded from association with anything evil or wrong or with any act of unbelief or wickedness because if He created the wrong, He would be wrong and if He created righteousness (justice), He would be just (Sweetman, 1945). On the other hand, the Asharites tried to mediate the views between the Jabarites and the Mu'tazilites. The Asharites emphasized that man has freedom to act according to his will but it is God who creates (realizes) his action. The Asharites' view is deemed as orthodox, perceived to assert freedom of action to men, and equivalent to claiming man as a second creator (Sweetman, 1945). The Asharites coined the theory of kasb or iktisab which implicates the idea that "the action of a creature is created, originated, and produced by Allah but it is acquired (maksub) by the creature, by which it means its (the action) being brought into connection with His power and will without resulting any effect from Him in it or any introduction to its existence, only that he is a locus (mahall) for it" (Sweetman, 1945). This means that with regard to the actualization of the action, man is merely an agent and not the creator of the action. Despite the seemingly conflicting views, all these schools were defending the Sovereignty of God; the Jabarites insisted that God is the Creator of everything including man's action, the Qadarites were defending God's Justice, and the Asharites struggled to defend God as the Creator who is also just.

The debate over predestination among the Christian theologians was also as zealous as the Muslim theologians. Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine were in support of predestination. There was a slight difference in the way they interpreted predestination compared to the Muslims. According to these theologians, God knows what He predestines and He always predestines good. It is the absence of the good virtue that constitutes sin (Sweetman, 1945). The Pelagius School, however, took a different direction. Pelagius held to the justice of God and that all He does is good, the knowledge of good and evil was obtained by reason not predetermined by God. Pelagius was followed by the school of Antioch and the Nestorian. John of Damascus (675/5-749 CE) plainly affirmed that even though God knows all things beforehand, He does not predetermine all things (Sweetman, 1945). He implanted virtue in man for He is the source of all good. But, man has and uses his power to realize the virtue or to withdraw from it. In reality, wickedness is the result of the absence of virtue. On the surface, the two positions are against each other. A deeper analysis on both positions alluded

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the dominant position in Judaism is the belief in free will for they defended the unity of God and His justice. It was also claimed that this position was due to the influence of the Mu'tazilites and the Asharites (Wolfson, 1967). Maimonides argued for human free will and condemned predestination as pagan beliefs. Human free will justifies for human responsibility, reward, and punishment. His expositions on the problem of free will and predestination are gathered in his two works, namely, *Misheh Torah* and *Moreh Nebukim* which represent the views of the Jews living in Muslim countries during his time (Wolfson, 1967).

Having presented the diverse views from the Abrahamic religions on the question of free will and predestination, it is interesting to infer that the Abrahamic theologians were more inclined to uphold the Divine Sovereignty/Omnipotence/Justice in the way relevant to their religions. Despite the conflicting details they held, it was in Kalam that the Abrahamic theologians demonstrated a profound interreligious encounter within intellectual subtlety in the service of God. Regardless of their religious affiliations, it is evident that the Abrahamic theologians were constantly in defence of God. Such is a unique feature of the middle age theology shared by the Abrahamic faith. In comparison to the contemporary study of religions in its diverse nomenclatures, taking religious plurality as a posteriori, they set aside religious truth from the domain of cognitive truth in the name of tolerance and coexistence. Hence, the growing ideas and support for world theology, global theology, global ethic, and religious pluralism. It is ironic that the study of religions today has become a subset to humanities study which automatically takes into account the political, social, historical, economic, and even religious background at the level of human experience as the point of departure.

One of the ways out from such a methodological dilemma is to restore Kalam on the view that it has a more solid ground in terms of its history that are deeply rooted in the Greek civilization and the religious tradition of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In addition, Kalam is in harmony with modern science in the sense that it accepts rational and empirical inquiry and on top of both is metaphysics. At this point, the famous saying of Albert Einstein that is "religion without science is blind and science without religion is lame" is an eye opening (Einstein, 1940).

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...of intellectual attempt to examine and to make sense of the religious plurality phenomenon. Nevertheless, with an exception to theology, most of them are not interested in examining the truth-claim put forward by religions despite it being the most salient feature in all religions. For example, religious pluralism simply negated religious truth-claim and regarded it as a form of exclusivism, hence, intolerance to religious diversity (Ibrahim, 2016a). A closer examination of modern study of religions reveals that there is hardly provision for validation of religious truth. If such is the case, would there be any possibility to defend religious truth in the study of religions? Given that neutrality is the fundamental trait of the modern study of religions; would intellectual veracity be relevant at all? Does human awareness of plurality affect the way religious truth is perceived and studied? Does objective religious truth exist in any way? The answers to these intricate questions may involve a prolong debate but they will at least assist in providing insights with regard to the notion of truth in the study of religions.

Purpose of the Study

This paper, seeks to examine the question of religious truth and intellectual veracity being the source of gap between theology and the study of religions. In doing so, it revisits Kalam , a distinct method in theology prevalent in the Abrahamic religions, be recognized as a credible method in defence of religious truth in the study of religions at the contemporary time.

Research Methods

A research titled The Relevance of Kalam to Comparative Religion has stimulated this analytical study of Kalam and the study of religions. The research is confined to library research and it is qualitative and philosophical in nature. It adopts an interpretive and constructivist approach as its research paradigm. It seeks to demonstrate the best mean to understand religious truth. Therefore, it examines the viability of approaches in the study of religions in the past and at present. For data analysis, the researcher has employed a comparative analysis method to analyse the classical and modern texts on theology, Kalam and comparative religion.

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to be normative or not. The former holds that the religious truth is beyond cognition. It strives to be neutral and it depends on a reduced version of methodological tools for knowledge inquiry. On the other hand, theology maintains the dialectical method contesting against or in defence of one's religious doctrines and creeds, by means of rational argumentation. The modern study of religions in its many forms are developed on the basis of modern philosophy is also vulnerable to the challenges of postmodern philosophy in particular the philosophy of relativism. Its failure to acknowledge religious truth and the insistence on neutrality and openness run the risk of subjectivism which indeed, a matching partner of relativism. There were Christian theologians who took the challenge to reconcile theology and comparative religion which led to the introduction of comparative theology as a credible discipline in the face of plurality and relativism. This, however, requires intervention from the state and formal institutions which may not be the case in many secular states in the world. Even philosophical subtlety and a tangible proof like the one attempted by al-Faruqi is not able to bridge the methodological gap or reconcile theology and comparative religion. Perhaps, the better alternative is to leave and appreciate the discipline as it is. This paper calls for a return to theology and also to revive Kalam in the study of religions considering its role, contribution, and commitment to religious truth are equally shared by the Abrahamic religions. As a matter of fact, theology is an established tradition within the Abrahamic religions, a witness of the intellectual tradition prevalent among its theologians. Theology and Kalam being its tool, makes intellection exercises possible and intellection verification mandatory. Despite the contested religious truth, such intellectual commitments pursue in the forms of dialectical arguments and survive throughout the history in the works of the theologians, most of the time with language sophistication and refined logical verdicts. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to say that the revisit of theology and Kalam in the study of religions should not be limited to the intellectuals from the Abrahamic religions. In fact, followers of other religions should learn Kalam in order to appreciate its practice of intellection exercise and verification in the service of God.

Conclusion



discourse since Kalam is loaded with intellectual vocation that deters dogmatism in religion. In the context of Abrahamic religions, it is crucial that theology and Kalam being its component, to be taught, and applied in the contemporary study of religions. The fear that it nurtures biases should cease at it was in Kalam that the Abrahamic theologians developed their interreligious discourses with intellectual openness and veracity. Kalam being the discipline that reconciles Islamic tradition with the Greek and the Christian intellectual philosophy has showcased the flexibility of Islam in accepting goods from other traditions and civilizations. Even the Jewish intellectualism could not resist the subtlety of Kalam . In addition, intellectual openness which is sought after in the discipline of comparative religion is, in fact, the trait of theology, and Kalam . Without intellectual openness, there can never exist a collection of theological treatises written by the Abrahamic theologians in defence of their religious truths. Intellection exercise and intellectual veracity are crucial in theology for otherwise, the notion of God will fall into dogmatism. Scholarly revisions on the definitions of intellectual openness and objectivity are direly needed for otherwise, the legacies of theology in the study of religions will remain marginalized despite the foundational role it has played in the early history of interreligious encounter.

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