

# New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought

Editorial

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## Abstract

The focus of this project, *New Conversations in Islamic and Christian Political Thought*, concerns the 'pre-modern' or 'long' traditions of political thought in Islam and Christianity. 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.

## Keywords

Christian political thought, Islamic political thought, comparative political theory, comparative religious ethics, premodern, political liberalism

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 this journal 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 *Studies in Christian Ethics* and its companion in *The Muslim World* emerged took place in September 2013 in Worcester College, Oxford, and May 2014 in Wolfson College, Cambridge. In the special issue of *The Muslim World*, vol. 106, no. 2 (2016), contributors examine first, the kind of the conversations being undertaken in the project including the background of 'Orientalism'; second, issues of nature, law and reasoning; and third, questions of loyalty and obligation. In continuity, the articles presented in this volume reflect 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-Mward, (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.

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