**Abdelnour, Mohammed Gamal, A Comparative History of Catholic and Ašʿarī Theologies of Truth and Salvation Inclusive Minorities, Exclusive Majorities, 2021.**

*‘Salvific theories and practices have been of utmost important in soteriolgical systems. Any devout believer is not only concerned about his salvation but also of his kins and relatives at large.’*

In the present book Abdelnour tries to bring two traditions namely Catholic and Ašʿarite in a comparative dialogue on the problem of Salvation. The author aims to illustrate the historical growth in Catholic belief in Church’s discourse and a ‘longitudinal analyses of Muslim position on soteriology (2). Throughout this work, he emphasizes on the gradual changes in the abovementioned traditions regarding the redemption of the religious *Other,* that marked the shift from medieval suppersationist approach to a more inclusive approach in present times. He acknowledges in advance that the issue of salvation is maybe one of the shared elements among these theologies. Therefore, he views his work as a step forward for theologies of salvation to assess their recourses and self-examine their discourses on the topic.

The author firmly believes that by identifying overarching patterns, causal relationships, and meaningful connections, the fragmented and unexplored theological elements in Christian and Muslim traditions can be synthesized into what he refers to as a ‘theological theory’ (11). He invites the reader to explore salvific positions between Catholicism and Ašʿarite Theology. The monograph holds significant value for both students and professional researchers due to its dense referencing i.e., biographical, apocryphal and canonical literature along with the insertion of relevant quotations from both traditions. He chooses the most relevant writings from each side and ‘let them speak for themselves’ (22), creating a certain form of dialogue between different positional narratives. In a similar vein, the author is aware of the issues with inflexible Arabic and Latin terms and framing, which he rightly focuses to elucidate in the foot notes. Whereas Abdelnour accepts that there are Arabic terms that, due to the breadth of their meaning, could never be totally equivalent in English. He asserts that the concept of redemption is not only widespread, but also indispensable in numerous belief systems. Although the specifics of what happens after death are uncertain, believers nonetheless strive towards salvation as an ultimate objective.

The monograph focused on a commonly accepted but insufficiently explored aspect of religious theology i.e., Jesus Christ, rather than the Bible, is the central figure in Christianity, whereas the Quran, not Prophet Muhammad, holds the central position in Islam. Abdelnour firmly believes that this reality should be included in popular discourse to benefit Christian and Islamic theologies. He expresses that due to Islam's focus on textual sources, Muslim theologians interpret Christianity using a similar approach, simplifying it to a written document (the Bible). Consequently, Muslim theologians’ priorities the genuineness of the Bible over the significance of Jesus in Christianity or Islam. Likewise, the central position of Jesus in Christianity might have shaped Christian understanding of Islam as a religion focused on Muhammad as a central figure (163).

The author begins with a perceptive preamble to the crucial subject of "theologies of religions," and then proceeds to shed light on the significance of such a study in the field of contemporary theological studies. He offers a landscape of a 'three-fold typologies' concerning Christianity and Islam namely Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism. The each of these threefold-typology further demands various positions on a larger salvific spectrum as detailed in the footnotes (3-5). The problem with such typology is its deep involvement and birth out of Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions which sort of leaves non-semitic and far Eastern traditions out of reach and inclusion (9). The author intentionally precludes other traditions that address similar themes related to soteriology and the theology of salvation but rather openly indicates that a more comprehensive study on the trajectory of Theologies of Religion would potentially open up the possibility of new avenues of dialogue between the Judeo-Christian-Islamic sources and the Eastern traditions of Hindu Vedanta, Mahāyāna Buddhism, and Confucianism.

The argument that the author introduces in the very introduction quoting Hanifi Özcan demonstrated al-Māturidī as a pluralist/inclusivist (5), Atay stating the Turkish theologian Süleyman Ateş as inclusivist (6) or Mohammad H. Khalil that the dominant position in Islamic scholarship have been of inclusivism yet they did not deny the supersessionism, is worth remembering and exploring (7). One could read Muhammad ʿAbduh on the same trajectories. However, it is important to reconcile the political-imperial power structures under which these scholars developed their typology. The path that Muhammad ʿAbduh took to reconcile himself with the Scriptural authority, hadith and sunnah-based tradition, and political atmosphere may have a crucial impact on his approach from a rather exclusivist to a relative inclusivist. ʿAbduh was elaborated by his expert readers as such the author himself for a more refined readership and depict him of inclusivist cam However, in later chapters it is well explained that ʿAbduh was initially put into Māturidī, Ašʿarite and as well as into neo-Muʿtazilī camps (134). As in critical evaluation of such readings the author articulates, “who is classified as an exclusivist by some, might be classified as an inclusivist by others” (9) showing a possibility of different readings and identifying the ‘space between’ the traditional schools and their intersections.

This difference in reading is crucial and seminal in influencing the new generation of scholars, who must invest in these multitudes of readings and venture for the *rationale* behind such categorizations. Giving theological schools primary focus where help the expert read in the field might have a misleading function for a non-confessional reader. Indeed, Abdelnour’s work tries to ‘fill an epistemic gap’ (9) and consolidate between these theologies, it also shows the blank spots that must be considered in further research. Author is aware of difficulties and ‘normative theological judgements’ that would arise from such a reading of both traditions. For one, he highlights the methodological risks associated with making such a comparison. Firstly, the matter of chronological sequence arises. The theologians exhibit a considerable degree of ambiguity in their categorization of each time, namely the early, middle, and contemporary periods, due to the division of the work into three main periods.

**Part I:** Salvation in Early Catholicism and Early Ašʿarism

The author divides the Islamic salvific theory into three main layers; (a) Early Ašʿarite Theology of Salvation, that is elaborated as *Firqah-based.* It connotates to the famous hadith author put forward and elaborates on it (53), (b) al-Ġazālī’s Theology of Salvation: Sunnah-Based (86), and (c) Modern Ašʿarite Theology of Salvation: Al-Azhar and the Quran-Based Theology (132). One may investigate the issues and repercussions of such a modification on theology of salvation within the Ašʿarite Theological system. Here, one may wonder that if the Quran is described as a mercy, a source of compassion (Q. 17:82), and the divine message that guides towards salvation for Muslims then what socio-historical or political factors contributed to the exclusion of a Quran-based theology and preferred Hadith or Sunnah-based theology during the early period of the Ašʿarite school.

This work is equally useful for students of Muslim and Christian theologies. It would give students a broader understanding of religious typologies and social patterns that arose during each abovementioned period. In addition, one may be interested in examining the political aspects, such as Cyprian's escape from Decian persecution (32), movements driven by religious devotion, fervent believers, and the occurrence of early martyrdoms. The Catholic church witnessed significant shifts in their theological discourse during their ecclesiastical ministries such as excommunications (76) and inquisitions (103). The author barely addresses Muslim inquisition period (*Mihna*) or its impact on Muslim theology of salvation, leaving the reader craving for more details.

The book ignites the reader's interest in further researching alternate methods of reading theological histories, such as how salvific exclusivism and supersessionism arose and what kinds of power relations emerged from such in-group dynamics of church and *Ummah*. Such a relationship may be valuable in and of itself. The author highlights the value of Vatican as guiding the Catholic Church and al-Azhar as important markers of Ašʿarite theology. Perhaps, it is also possible to investigate the analogy of Church and *Ummah* as a categorical *Ecumene* on the parallel lines.

The initial chapter explores the utilization of the patristic era and provides insight into St. Paul (22) and Justin Martyr (23) along with other important figures. The issue of original sin and the manner in which Christ's atonement provided a path for the salvation of all believers and humanity is being discussed in a conventional framework. The primary issue arose over the treatment of non-Christians (such as Pagans, Gentiles, Heretics, etc.) in the context of Christo-centric redemption. The Pauline letters as the earliest sources providing an extensive reflection of the problem, author maintains, are subject to various readings in this context (23). This stage could perhaps be referred to as a period of Christ-based universal posthumous salvation (*apokatastasis*) (44). Given that numerous recent converts were well-acquainted with Greco-Roman culture, it is likely that this cultural impact had a significant role in the process of Hellenization of Christianity (27). This effect is evident in the categorization of Christian scripture as the "New Testament," a term prominently used by Clement of Alexandria. Origen's response in the first Christian theology of the Other, as shown on (29)[[1]](#footnote-1). But to remember the so-called earlier period (3rd and 4rth century CE) the concept of universal salvation *(apokatastasis)* is not fully formed into a concrete doctrine. For instance, Origen and his disciple Gregory of Nyssa propagated the overarching God's grace and Christ's apocalyptic descent into hell to intercede for lost souls as some kind of inclusivist approach (46). The author also provides a comparative relation with Ašʿarite tradition of intercession (*al-Šafā*ʿ*a)* of Prophet Mohammed(64)**.**

The thesis Abdelnour rightly presents has a range of methods to capture the reader's interest in the Catholic Church and Azharite hierarchal structure and in the social factors that supported one theological schism over another, in terms of rationale and dedicated adherence (21). Comprehending the salvific epistemologies of early Church patriarchs is of utmost importance, as the author emphasizes the ambiguity between epistemology and soteriology. Likewise, one can find the interesting difference of opinion on the nature of torments in hellfire, Hades, Gehenna (48) and the problem of longevity of the torments i.e., temporary punishment or an eternal torment. The similar issue one can come across in Muslim theological tradition. Perhaps there one recalls the necessary steps taken by Muslim theologian al-Ašʿarī to reduce the chances of *takfīr* practice among Muslim society. On the other hand, exclusivism can be seen in the writings of Tertullian, Ignatius, and John Chrysostom. However, author reveals that by the time of St. Augustine, there was no standard theology of salvation that entertained the eschatological status of those who have not received the Gospel (50).

**Part II:** Salvation in Mediaeval Catholicism and Mediaeval Ašʿarism

A noteworthy point is of the origins and distinguishing features of theological schools, particularly within a single religious tradition i.e., Ašʿarite or Māturīdite and the problem of legitimacy (23). associated with it**.** In case of Islam the absence of any Church as the sole protector or representor of faith was not possible. Whereas in Catholicism there is a legacy of church councils from her formative periods addressing specific doctrinal matters requiring resolutions and salvific directions under supervision of pope or an imperial. Another significant aspect to consider is the origins and distinctive characteristics of theological traditions, especially within a specific religious atmosphere, such as the issue of legitimacy (23). 'There is no salvation outside the church' the Cyprian axiom could be related in comparison to al-Ašʿarī’s famous saying reminds us to not to make takfir of *People of the Qiblah* because ‘they all refer to one God’ (54). In *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn,* for instanceal-Ašʿarī’s does not fully endorse the hadith with exclusivist intentions however, he much like other scholars of his time divides his works on Muslim denominations and schisms to meet the exact “Seventy-three” denomination. Given that the Prophetic report is found in four of the six “canonical” Sunnite collections of hadith corpus namely in Ibn Mājah, abū Daʾūd, al-Tirmiḏī, and al-Nasāʾī (16 n11). The authority of the prophetic tradition must be criticized not only on chain of narrators (*Isnad*) but perhaps also in its content.

Al-Baġdādī (d. 429/1037) introduces the term "*al-Firqah al-nājiyah*" (the denomination that shall be rescued) in his heresiographic work *Al-Farq bayna al-Firāq* to delineate one of the 73-divisons of Muslims. He states that the only valid path to salvation is of Ašʿarīte denomination (64). Therefore, the designations "sect" and "denomination" were applied to factions or ideological groups that departed from the prevailing and majoritarian faith of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa-al-jamāʿah* (57). It is conceivable that the formative and middle periods of Ašʿarite theology were characterized by noteworthy social and political connotations. An illustration of the impact that salvific theologies in the Muslim world bear the literary-political movement *Shuʿūbiyyah* and the inquisition and persecution of the *Mihna* period are discernible. This can be attributed to the lack of any councils consisting of scholars as of Christianity that would address specific doctrinal matters that required evaluation or summoning by the imperial court. While the monograph solely concentrated on Azharite Ašʿarism, the book notably omitted to address the transitions between different denominations of same religion.

The second section of this chapter examines the emergence of inclusivism within the Ašʿarite school, which was shaped by the transformative endeavors of al-Ġazālī. Despite the presence of numerous renowned academics within the Modern Ašʿarism school, the author's selection of Mohammad ʿAbduh or al-Ġazālī in this particular stream is also of importance. The author provides a detailed explanation of Ġazālī's theological viewpoint about sects and denominations. As Ġazālī revised the provided hadith and reducing its significance, opting not to rely on it exclusively. The renowned account of the 73-divisons tradition should be assessed using alternative methodologies and not unquestioningly accepted as a reliable source. One may question the factors that rendered this Hadith a credible basis for doxographic investigation, as observed in the works of Sharistanī or al-Baghdadī. It appears that historical records imposed this narrative on a vibrant society that spanned well beyond the Arabian Peninsula already in middle period. One might wish to examine the language of the renowned report from the perspective of Hanafīte principles in order to determine the specific conditions under which the Prophet Mohammed made certain remarks or were attributed to him. What would have been his motive for recounting this numerical concern? Was it perceived as a self-fulfilling prophecy by theologians and historians of the time. Author notes the modern criticism in the *Ḥalīm’s Theology of Muslim Denominations* (153). Alternatively, it could be interpreted as a cautionary message emphasizing the importance of conformity and unity among the early believers to prevent disintegration of newly community. In my opinion, another significant issue that appears to have been overlooked is the reason why previous theologies within Islam were not founded entirely on the Quranic hermeneutics, the God's verbatim revealed to Mohammed, but instead relied on the reports, local practices and procuring them under the theologically loaded terms of Hadith and Sunnah, as reliable sources of guidance for a millennium until ʿAbduh's time.

The author emphasis another important marker in intra-Muslim theology that is worth mentioning, as al-Juwaynī stated that if a person had the opportunity to reflect on the 'truth' but chose not to, even though there were no obstacles preventing him from doing so, his ultimate fate will be eternal punishment (63). Such proclamations demand a further investigation into the understanding of theological positions. That what must be the ultimate expression of the realization of truth, as a mere verbal proclamation, or it would necessitate a thoroughly virtues life.

The second part of this chapter focuses further on the rise of inclusivism within the Ašʿarite school, which was influenced by the transformative actions of al-Ġazālī. The author elucidates on Ġazālī's theological perspective on sects and denominations. He redefined the given hadith and diminished its importance, instead of depending on it solely. He successfully clarified the parameters that determine whether Ġazālī may be considered an exclusivist or an inclusivist. It is important for the reader to be aware of the issue with comparative readings. The perspective of the reader can be misleading allowing them to unintentionally categories names such as al-Rāzī, al-Ījī, and al-Suyūṭī, or ʿAbduh, into a single definitive category, either absolute inclusivist or absolute exclusivist (145). During the early and middle periods of Ašʿarism, it was considered that virtuous actions had little meaning in the hereafter unless they were accompanied by strong religious belief. ʿAbduh’s conviction where is a turn from the theological position of al-Juwaynī, it helps to witness the major difference in theology of salvation, paraphrasing Abdelnour, that any good deed done with good intentions is deserving of reward in the hereafter, regardless of the individual's faith convictions (142).

The author substantiates the existence of diverse interpretations by experts, which depend on the political preferences of the readers. Undoubtedly, this does not imply that every kind of classical research can be simplified to complete relativism. He indulges in a comparative engagement and a careful examination of the salvific genre and encourages in making accurate evaluations based on the textual and historical context (141).

According to Abdelnour, theologians' first attempt to stop the atrocities committed during the first civil wars (*fitna*) in the early Muslim community was initiated by Murjiʾites; the pioneers of non-violence and certain intra-Muslim inclusivity. They had the belief that believers in God who refrain from idolatry should not be punished for any wrongdoing they commit (59). The echoes of their Soteriology were subsequently adopted in al-Ījī's remarks, who was a post-Ġazālian Ašʿarite scholar, stating that 'we abstain from making accusations of apostasy (*takfir*) towards any member of *Ahl al-Qiblah*, save for those who reject the reality of the 'Omniscient Omnipotent Designer/Maker' (100). Henceforth, deviant believers may be accused of heresy, but they cannot be prosecuted with a lack of belief.

The monograph also explores the challenge posed by philosophical traditions and the rational evaluation of beliefs. For instance, St. Augustine built his own philosophical and theological framework, integrating various viewpoints and concepts from contemporary Christianity. The significance of Christian sacraments, such as Baptism, is of utmost importance due to Christ's intercession on behalf of newborns (40). The Church's perception of itself, as expressed in the well-known saying "there is no salvation outside the church,"(41) bears a remarkable similarity to the communal unity found in the Ašʿarite denomination's concept of salvation. Likewise, parallels could be drawn between Augustinian exclusivism and its connection to predestination to the Ašʿarite dilemma of *Qadr* (decree of predestination). According to the author, the Catholic church maintained Augustinian exclusivism as an official proclamation from the time of Augustine until the Thomistic period (70). The author presents the significant dialogues, debates, and objections in their original form.

The Catholic Church is built upon the belief in Christ, which serves as its fundamental basis. Additionally, the Church emphasizes the importance of observing the Sacraments. However, prior to sacraments perhaps is Aquinas’s assertion that faith in Christ is crucial for one’s salvation (71). Furthermore, the gradual perspective shifts and concerns on salvific theory can be witnessed in the early and later stages of Thomistic theology. Abdelnour pinpoints the crucial influence of Augustinian soteriology on Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas adopted the Augustinian salvific theory during his lifetime because he realized that not just solitary individuals in the desert, but entire populations, were yet to be exposed to Gospel preaching. As a result, the most probable explanation is that their lack of knowledge of the Gospels is due to original sin (74).

Abdelnour clarifies that Islam does not expressly endorse the concept of original sin and instead emphasizes the salvation of individuals through faith and moral conduct. The Muʿtazili theology made notable observations regarding the status of individuals who had not received any word of the Quran or Prophetic report. They advocated for complete autonomy for humans in both good and evil doings. According to them, the primordial human disposition *fitrah* does not have intrinsic imân (goodness) or inherent kufr (evilness) in it (126). The newborn is born in a pure and neutral state, with no experience of religion or disbelieve. After reaching maturity, the child's comprehension of belief or disbelief becomes clear. Likewise, they argued that if those individuals adhered to any divine revelation or even employed basic rationality, they would discover fundamental principles such as the Unity of God. They could be saved and would not be questioned about the theological matters they were never informed about.

**Part III:** Salvation in Modern Catholicism and Modern Ašʿarism

In the third part when the monograph embarks on a comparison between Ašʿarism and Catholicism, and particularly the Vatican with al-Azhar, the author demonstrates his understanding of the potential risk of imposing distinct attributes from one tradition onto the other approach. He clearly shows sensitivity towards such risk and warns his reader to be cautious of such juxtaposing (12). Perhaps Vatican is functionally more influential and rather monolithic than Al-Azhar which represents ‘the four schools of Sunnī Islamic jurisprudence (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Šāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī), and the seven main Ṣūfī orders’ (166), has a distinct blend of its own.

The modern period of rather an accepting age, particularly exposed in the scholarship of Louis Massignon, who marks a *mystical bent* in Catholic Theology of salvation. The author underlines the personal incidents and important milestones of the theologians and Church fathers in footnotes as well as in the main text, according to the required need to the topic. For instance, 'In Baghdad, Massignon was the guest of a noble Muslim family who showed him Arab hospitality and enormous compassion. This revelation caused Massignon to 'reconsider his ethical values' (111). It demonstrates that the author correctly emphasizes the importance of living a moral and ethical life, as well as the impact of compassion and humility in any comparative theology inquiry. This is how Massignon's scholarship and legacy influenced the *Magisterium* of the Second Vatican Council (115). The author explains how Church accepted and took step further in accepting other religions especially Islam in her ecclesiastical framework known as *Lumen gentium*[[2]](#footnote-2)(1964), as well as in a comprehensive phrase of the Declaration on the Relation of the Catholic Church with Non-Christian Religions, referred to as *Nostra aetate[[3]](#footnote-3)* (1965). The author advances the role of Massignon in these venerating remarks of II Vatican Council for Muslims and emphasizes the significance of a "sincere heart" in the church's view of salvation, allowing for a new phase of investigation into acceptance and humility-based theology.

In conclusion, the author reminds us that Catholic theologians, albeit attempting to find solutions to the question of the virtuous pagan, ‘never separated soteriology from epistemology’ (156) implying that God's grace and the reward of afterlife can only be acquired through Jesus Christ. The author contends that the traditions in issue oscillate between poles of inclusivism and exclusivism. They neither acknowledge nor accept pluralism as a standard discourse for their salvific theologies. The profound inquiry into the nature of existence beyond death is extensively explored in theological traditions, which may provide a sense of purpose in this life span and a value in our relation with the humanity at large. This brief review cannot fully capture the depth and meticulousness of the large monograph. However, it effectively encourages readers to go deeper into the realm of soteriological and eschatological theologies. Further investigations into salvation in mystic theologies, as well as a generic shift in salvific methods of subsequent faith traditions, must be explored cross-culturally as having both theological and anthropological importance.

1. It bears a notable resemblance to the Q. 13:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2:16 “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3 “The Church has also a high regard for the Muslim. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to his faith Muslims eagerly link their own.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)