



Muhammad as a Religious “Classic”:

David Tracy, Comparative Theology, and the Prophet of Islam

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Abstract

This paper argues that Prophet Muḥammad—and, consequently, prominent Muslim portrayals of him and Islamic texts about him—can be viewed as a “religious classic” within the framework of the Catholic comparative theologian David Tracy. After giving an overview of Tracy’s notion of the *classic* and its relevance for comparative theology, I apply Tracy’s understanding of “the three Jesuses” to the case of Muḥammad to demonstrate how he functions as a *classic* in the Islamic tradition. I then argue that specific Islamic texts and practices that center around him qualify as *secondary, mediating classics* and, drawing on Tracy’s criteria of “adequacy” and “appropriateness,” I give the case study of the *Shifā*, a well-known work on the Prophet by the twelfth-century *Sunnī* jurist and thinker, Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ. In arguing that Muḥammad functions as a *classic*, this paper provides a theological and theoretical foundation for those seeking to construct projects of Catholic comparative theology that center around the Prophet of Islam and his significance in Muslim thought, spirituality, and ritual.

Keywords: *Muḥammad, David Tracy, Comparative Theology, Religious Classic, Shifa*

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“To Muslim devotees, the importance of Muḥammad goes well beyond the temporal contingency of the present-day world. As exemplified in the *Tashahhud*, wherein Muslims address the Prophet directly, Muḥammad—though no longer physically alive—is nonetheless understood by his followers to be fully present and “living,” albeit on a different plane of existence. Muslims orient themselves to the Prophet Muḥammad with a love and intimacy that rejects reducing his prophetic role to a mere set of historical events.”¹

1. Introduction

When Muslims visit the holy city of Medina, they go to the green-domed mosque to meet the Prophet. Though he died nearly a millennium and a half ago, believers travel to his burial place to greet him, offer prayerful blessings, converse with him, or ask for his intercession.²

Some *ḥadīth* traditions assert that Muḥammad can reply from the grave with salām, or greetings of “peace,” because, in a sense, he is still alive.³ Even after death, he somehow remains a living presence to Muslims, whether in Medina or beyond. As an Urdu poet once put it, “Do not ask me, friend: ‘Where is Muhammad?’ / Hidden in my heart, there is Muhammad! Is there a need to wander to Medina? Here and there—apparent is Muhammad.”⁴ As a Catholic theologian who studies Islam, I have been struck by the reality that for my Muslim friends and colleagues—and for the *ummah* the world over—Muḥammad has this enduring relevance and spiritual power, centuries after his death. More than someone who occupied a moment in history, he is a palpable point of connection for billions of people who feel deeply tied to him and who seek to encounter him through various religious practices and traditions.

¹ Abbas Barzegar, “The Spirituality of Hadith,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality*, ed. Vincent J. Cornell and Bruce Lawrence (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2023), 48.

² Marion Holmes Katz, “The Prophet Muḥammad in ritual,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad*, ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 193.

⁴ Quoted in Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 194.

What is someone like me, a Catholic theologian who seeks to interpret the Islamic tradition through the lens of my own religion, to make of this? How can a comparative theologian begin to reflect on the enduring significance of Muḥammad for Muslims?

To begin answering these questions, I argue in this paper that Prophet Muḥammad—as well as prominent Muslim portrayals of him and Islamic texts about him—can be viewed as a “religious classic” through the framework of the Catholic comparative theologian David Tracy.⁵ After giving an overview of Tracy’s notion of the *classic* and its relevance for comparative theology, I apply Tracy’s understanding of what he calls “the three Jesuses” to the case of Muḥammad to demonstrate how he functions as a *classic* in the Islamic tradition. I then explain how Islamic texts and practices that center on him qualify as *secondary, mediating classics*, and I present a case study of one prominent work, the *Shifā* by the twelfth-century *Sunnī* jurist and thinker Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, drawing on Tracy’s criteria of “adequacy” and “appropriateness.” In arguing that Muḥammad functions as a *classic*, this paper provides a theological and theoretical foundation for those seeking to construct projects of Catholic comparative theology that center around the Prophet of Islam.

“...Prophet Muḥammad...can be viewed as a ‘religious classic’ through the framework of the Catholic comparative theologian David Tracy.”

2. David Tracy’s Approach to Comparative Theology

The late American Catholic theologian, David Tracy, spent much of his career reflecting on the reality of religious diversity, both within and between religious traditions. As he sees it, the task of a theologian is to find a kind of order in the relationships between God, the self, and the world⁶—the last of which includes other religious traditions. To do this, theologians need what Tracy calls an “analogical imagination.”

⁵ This paper is an adaptation of a chapter of my PhD dissertation. Jordan Denari Duffner, “Muḥammad’s Character as ‘Fruit of the Spirit’: Catholic Pneumatology and Portrayals of Islam’s Prophet” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2023).

⁶ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 423.

He contends that we only understand through analogy—by using what we do know to come to some understanding of that which we do not. Analogy allows for a degree of comparison while still honoring alterity and otherness; analogies are not similarities, but similarities-in-difference.⁷ Analogical language allows us simultaneously to avoid the reductionism that sees other traditions as simply “pale copies” of our own;⁸ to honor a tradition’s authentic differences; and to guard against the temptation to project a false or overstated otherness onto another religious community,⁹ while still engaging that tradition dialogically and theologically. To quote Tracy, “differences need not become dialectical oppositions but can become analogies...Such an analogical imagination, at its best, can affirm the remarkable unity-in-diversity of reality without reducing all reality to ‘more of the same.’”¹⁰

“To quote Tracy, “*differences need not become dialectical oppositions but can become analogies...Such an analogical imagination, at its best, can affirm the remarkable unity-in-diversity of reality without reducing all reality to ‘more of the same.’*”

Tracy’s approach is meant to be a middle way between, on the one hand, a homogenizing approach that has characterized much past reflection on religious plurality, and on the other hand, the “cultural-linguistic” approach of George Lindbeck¹¹, which understands religions as discrete languages or idioms that shape the way we experience and think about the world. As Lindbeck sees it, each religion is utterly unique from the others, and the experiences of each community are thus distinct from those of the others. The consequence of this model is that the experiences of religious people cannot be communicated or comprehended outside their own cultural-linguistic sphere.

⁷ David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990), 42.

⁸ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹ See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster: Westminster Press, 1984).

Their religious experiences cannot be translated into another idiom because the experience—generated by internal discourse—disappears. Tracy objects to this consequence of Lindbeck’s model because it makes comparative work impossible. He also objects to its positing a unidirectional thrust in which the doctrines and rituals (the religious “grammar”) shape one’s religious experience. In contrast, Tracy’s approach recognizes a bi-directional, mutual shaping of experience and the doctrines, rituals, etc.

3. The Religious “Classic”

The linchpin of Tracy’s mediating strategy is the notion of “the classic.”¹² Tracy develops his understanding of the *classic* through his engagement with Hans-Georg Gadamer¹³, who uses the term “classical” not to denote something from a particular time period, but rather to refer to a work that is culturally and historically significant and has been passed down.¹⁴ Here, he also draws on the work of Mircea Eliade, who coined the term “hierophany” to name “expressions” or “modalities” of “the sacred.”¹⁵ For Tracy, “the classic” is a text, person, song, image, melody, ritual, symbol, or event that expresses both an “excess” and a “permanence” of meaning.¹⁶ By “excess,” Tracy means that there is a multiplicity—indeed, an infinite number—of possible interpretations of a *classic*. Like works of art, classics grab us, draw us in, and “demand” to be interpreted anew in our present situation.

“For Tracy, ‘*the classic*’ is a text, person, song, image, melody, ritual, symbol, or event that expresses both an ‘excess’ and a ‘*permanence*’ of meaning.”

¹² Tracy also uses the term “focal meaning” as a synonym for “classic.”

¹³ Stephen Okey, *A Theology of Conversation: An Introduction to David Tracy* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 64.

¹⁴ Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 65. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004).

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1959), 116–18.

¹⁶ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 68, 102.

Because there is no definitive single reading of classics, they have “permanent timeliness”¹⁷ and can shape anew any context in which they are engaged. Classics are also, as Tracy says, “disclosures of truth”¹⁸, able to speak to discrete situations while remaining universally relevant and retaining lasting authority. For Tracy, there is an experience of transcendent truth when encountering a *classic*—in other words, the universal is expressed in the particular.¹⁹ Classics emerge from traditions (cultural or religious), but they also, in turn, shape those traditions. Traditions themselves are not static content but rather a process of passing down beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Even as classics arise from and shape their tradition of origin, they are not the property only of said group or tradition. Classics can speak to, have relevance for, and be reinterpreted by anyone, even the “religious other.” Tracy also discusses the production of classics, arguing for two key elements or processes. First is what he calls “intensification.” As an interpreter of Tracy, Stephen Okey puts it, a *classic* “is not a mundane, everyday expression of truth. Rather, it is a radical experience of truth that can reveal the boundaries of everyday life”²⁰, produced by someone who has transcended their own current horizons. Because of this, *classic* persons are often saintly figures or geniuses.

¹⁷ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 102.

¹⁸ Ibid., 115.

¹⁹ In the later years of his career, Tracy’s “classic” morphs into “the fragment,” due in part to his desire to avoid the elitist notions behind the idea of the *classic*, as well as in response to postmodern thought (David Tracy, *Fragments: The Existential Situation of Our Time: Selected Essays*, Volume 1 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020)). Both the *classic* and the fragment are “human expressions that are capable of revealing something universal precisely through their intensified particularity” (Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 63). There is not a fixed number of classics; they could be infinite in number. The name fragment also helps account for the recognition, among postmodernists, of the radical plurality and alterity that define the contemporary world. As his career progresses, Tracy resists more and more the totalizing philosophical/theological perspectives. But he also seeks to avoid the postmodern approach, which would uphold fragments solely to oppose modernism. Tracy’s view is one he terms “theological-spiritual.” Fragments convey “the infinite, the mysterious, the beyond” to people (Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 71). The infinite is distinguished from “totality,” which is closed rather than open-ended. Understood this way, the fragment allows us to see how particularities can be disclosive of infinity; a concept of totality would not allow for this. He also notes that God is not a bounded totality, but infinity, or the (unbounded) whole. “The theological fragments he (Tracy) focuses on represent expressions (phenomena) in which the infinite that is beyond human grasp is encountered” (Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 73). Among all of these fragments, there is no longer a “critical correlation” between these and the contemporary situation, but rather a simple bringing them together “without rendering a new totality system” (Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 73).

²⁰ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 125; Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 67.

Classics, in turn, prompt these kinds of intense, limit-experiences in others, those people who encounter them. The second element of the production of classics is “distanciation”: classics must be released by their creator to be expressed to and interpreted by the community. For a text, this distanciation would consist of the publication and reception of the text by others, while for a *classic* individual, one’s death would mark the start of this distanciation.²¹

Religious classics, according to Tracy, are a special class. Religious classics “will involve a claim to truth” and speak to “the whole” of reality, and also are experienced as being conveyed from and “by the power of the whole.”²² It is “a genuine manifestation of the whole from the reality of that whole itself,”²³ and conveys a sense of “radical mystery.”²⁴ For those who claim them, religious classics are imbued with a higher level of authority and are “grounded in the inherent structure of reality itself.”²⁵ Tracy does not attempt to provide a universal definition of religion, and a *classic* does not have to make explicit reference to God or a divinity to qualify as “religious.” But Tracy does believe that there will at least be “family resemblances,” to use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s term, between the “limit-experiences” had by individuals and communities, whether they claim a “religious” affiliation.²⁶

4. Jesus Christ: The Preeminent Christian Classic

For Christians, Tracy writes, there are many texts, persons, songs, images, melodies, rituals, symbols, or events that can qualify as religious classics, but the *Christian religious classic* par excellence is Jesus Christ.²⁷ Even outsiders to the Christian tradition will recognize the importance and centrality of Christ, maybe even offering their own reflections on his significance.²⁸

²¹ Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 67; Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 126.

²² Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 163.

²³ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 168-69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁶ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 92–93.

²⁷ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 233–234.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

In making the determination that Jesus Christ is the prime *Christian classic*, Tracy explains that he considered other candidates, the first of which he names as “the doctrine of the Spirit.” Still, he settles on the doctrine of Christ, arguing that all other Christian symbols make their ultimate reference back to Christ: e.g., “the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ” [emphasis mine].²⁹

Tracy emphasizes that the *Christian classic* is both the “person and event” of Jesus Christ. What does he mean by this? By *classic* person, he is referring to “a real human life in history and in a particular place,”³⁰ who, by “the particularity of their [life], discloses a potentially universally accessible truth.”³¹ By “event,” Tracy means not only something that took place in the past (the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus) but also something that can occur over and over again in time for countless people. Christians (and others) can encounter the *classic* of Jesus in their own context.³² This encounter with Christ is made possible through the “mediation” of secondary *classic* expressions, namely, the church, scripture, and tradition, which themselves are disclosive of God in Christ. The task of the theologian is to discern the relationships between these classics in a coherent way by making use of historical-critical, literary-critical, social-scientific, and other methods.³³

Tracy also argues that there are three distinct “focal meanings” of Jesus³⁴ and that the relationship among these three needs to be acknowledged and addressed by theologians in a particular way. The first Jesus is “the Jesus witnessed to by the apostolic witness”³⁵—in other words, the Gospel and New Testament writings.

“By ‘event,’ Tracy not only means something that took place in the past...but also something that is able to occur *over and over again in time* for countless people.”

²⁹ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 241n1.

³⁰ Okey, *A Theology of Conversation*, 101.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 102.

³³ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 239.

³⁴ Ibid., 425.

³⁵ Ibid., 239.

Then there is the historical Jesus—what we can know about Jesus of Nazareth “through modern historical-critical methods.”³⁶ For Tracy, this historical Jesus can actually speak to and adjust the former, because it “functions...as a continuation of the early apostolic witness”³⁷ by helping us to understand the man Jesus of Nazareth. The third is the “actual Jesus,” the one believed in by Christians, mediated by the tradition, and “remembered by the church”³⁸—the Christ. This is the Jesus relevant for theology, the Jesus who is present in the “event of Jesus Christ”:

...the Jesus remembered by the tradition and community as a representative of God’s own presence among us and as mediated to individuals and community in all the classic words, sacraments and actions expressing the Christ event in the present community, in conformity with the original apostolic witness.³⁹

5. Interpreting and Comparing Classics

Heavily shaped by the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, Tracy is acutely aware that the classics (such as the actual Jesus of the Christian tradition) undergo constant interpretation and reinterpretation. It is the task of the theologian to make their own interpretation in light of those made by others. The goal of this interpretive process is not to reach an endpoint or to seek to exhaust the meaning of a *classic*. (If that were possible, the text/person/event/etc. would not be a *classic*!) Rather, the goal is an ever-deepening understanding of God, oneself, and the world.

“...Tracy is acutely aware that the *classics*...undergo constant *interpretation* and *reinterpretation*. It is the task of the *theologian* to make their own interpretation in light of those made by others.”

³⁶ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 239, 428.

³⁷ Ibid., 239.

³⁸ Ibid., 236.

³⁹ Ibid., 239.

The above discussion of the classics is not only pertinent to systematic Christian theology—for “critically correlating” the Christian classics, as Tracy would put it—but also to theology that engages religious plurality.⁴⁰ Indeed, for Tracy, Christian systematic theology cannot cut itself off from interreligious engagement because the task of theology is always to engage the current situation and the broader world in which theologians find themselves. Taking up both the Christian classics and the classics of other religions through the analogical method enables theologians to do so.⁴¹ As Tracy sees it, a person can only begin to understand another person’s experience of living in accord with a “focal meaning” through their own analogical experience. Thus, Christians bring Jesus Christ and other Christian classics into conversation with the classics of other religious traditions.

These “analogies do not cancel out real differences” but rather “clarify them.”⁴² Engaging in dialogue with an analogical imagination can alert us to the “similarity in difference”⁴³ that we may not have been attentive to otherwise.

⁴⁰ Tracy outlines a method for interpreting a *classic*, which includes “four moments.” First, before conscious engagement with the *classic* even begins, we bring our existing preconceptions and assumptions to it. These include our general life experiences as well as our thoughts on the classic itself. Then comes our actual encounter with the classic, which is experienced as “some resonance to, or even some shock of recognition into a radical gift and demand disclosed” (Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 131). The third stage is the real dialogical engagement with the *classic*, what Tracy calls the “game” (Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 114). The *classic* “grips” us, and we are no longer self-conscious but fully immersed in the game, not thinking of ourselves. Fourth and finally, we engage with the community’s interpretation of the object/person/etc. is a classic, asking how others read it, and how this perhaps challenges our own reading. In articulating this method, Tracy is drawing on Gadamer’s hermeneutics of conversation. As he puts it, “the word ‘hermeneutical’ best describes this realized experience of understanding in conversation” (Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 101).

⁴¹ Tracy distinguishes the analogical and the dialectical. The former can be more cataphatic and seeks analogies for the event’s experience in relation to the rest of reality. Analogies allow us to identify similarity-in-difference. This kind of conceptual language is exemplified in Neoplatonic and Thomist theologies, as well as in those of more recent theologians such as Schleiermacher and Rahner (See Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 408–14). The latter interpretive option stresses transcendence and otherness and is exemplified by figures such as Luther and Barth, as well as liberation theologians. Later in his work, Tracy comes to refer to this as the mystical-prophetic approach (See Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 414–19). Though all theological discourse needs both, Tracy himself prioritizes the analogical. Without analogy, dialectical language loses any connection to reality and makes communication across differences impossible. He does acknowledge, though, that without the dialectical approach, analogical language risks identifying the analogy with ultimate reality.

⁴² Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 450.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 408.

Christians must not only be open to better understanding the classics of the religious other, but also to their own. Tracy writes that “any theological focal meaning will find itself transformed, sometimes even negated, as the journey into the fuller range of classical expressions, the core symbols of the particular religious tradition going forward.”⁴⁴ This is true of both intra- and interreligious engagement.

How should a theologian select classics for the comparative, analogical endeavor? Tracy offers a few guideposts or sets of criteria. The first category is the criterion of adequacy to experience. The concern here is whether a claim can be “validated” against our human experience.⁴⁵ This can be done with reference to the five senses (sense-experience), but also through non-sensuous means, with reference to moods, feelings, and attitudes.⁴⁶

“How should a theologian select classics for the comparative, analogical endeavor? Tracy offers a few guideposts or sets of criteria.”

The latter (non-sensuous) is most important, because it is this that captures “the immediate experience of the self-as-self.”⁴⁷ This experience is mediated by “particular expressions,” which can be linguistic (concepts, metaphors) or not (images). The degree to which an expression is meaningful depends on how well it discloses our “immediate” or “authentic” lived experience.⁴⁸ Thus, the criteria of adequacy to experience involve phenomenological modes of analysis which look at how well these expressions are able to mediate this experience of self-as-self.

The second major set of criteria that Tracy lays forth concerns appropriateness to the tradition. This deals with “the meanings involved either explicitly or implicitly in the significant texts, actions, gestures, and symbols of the entire Christian tradition.”⁴⁹ The question becomes how to discern what is significant from the tradition and how it relates to the other elements.

⁴⁴ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 450.

⁴⁵ Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 66.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 69.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 72.

When discussing the criteria of appropriateness, Tracy focuses on scripture, and particularly on the New Testament texts, as a *secondary classic* that can then be brought into dialogue with the expressions of authentic human experience captured by the first set of criteria. These two sets of criteria, or “sources of theology”⁵⁰, are often in tension, and yet it is necessary to undertake the analogical exercise to “correlate”⁵¹ the “core symbols in the full range of the Christian tradition” and the “realities of the contemporary situation.”⁵²

In his book *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Tracy offers further criteria, or hermeneutical categories, for bringing the analogical imagination to interreligious cases. These are drawn and adapted from William James. The first is what he calls “suggestive possibility” or “openness to mutual transformation.” For Tracy, it is important that the theologian is able to “acknowledge that other world of meaning as, in some manner, a possible option for myself.”⁵³ This implies both a similarity and a difference in the analogical focal meanings: “what once seemed merely other now seems a real possibility and thereby, in some manner, similar to what I have already experienced (including religiously).”⁵⁴ The second criterion is “coherence with what we otherwise know or more likely believe to be the case.”⁵⁵ Tracy is concerned that we are able, by empirical or rational means, to identify—at least to some degree—a “rough coherence” between the classics or conceptions that are being put into dialogue.⁵⁶ The example Tracy gives is Christian love and Buddhist compassion. The choice to compare these two is valid, though the analogical process may reveal less similarity than was originally assumed when pairing them. The third criteria for Tracy are the “ethical-political” consequences. Interreligious dialogue on beliefs and traditions should have a bearing on how religious people live in the world.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 79.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 423. An additional criterion to consider is logical coherence—whether there is a logic to cognitive claims (Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 70–71).

⁵³ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 41.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁷ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 46–47. For an overview, see also David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 721.

“In his book *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Tracy offers further *criteria*, or *hermeneutical categories*, for bringing the *analogical imagination* to *interreligious cases*.”

In Tracy's writing on dialogue with other religious traditions, he is very concerned to affirm and protect the alterity, or otherness, of the other tradition. He has observed a “constant Christian temptation to project a Christian consciousness upon the other.”⁵⁸ By contrast, he recognizes that other cultures are neither “stepping stones” nor “pale copies of Western modernity,”⁵⁹ and he criticizes what he sees as that tendency to see other religions this way, as in the work of the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner and others. At the same time, he acknowledges that Christians have often turned Muslims (and Jews) into a projected other, denying or ignoring many of the similarities (or similarities-in-difference) that exist across these monotheistic traditions.

6. Muḥammad as a Religious Classic

As a historical figure who became a living presence at the center of the Islamic creed, ethical tradition, and spirituality, the Prophet Muḥammad qualifies as a *religious classic*, expressing both an excess and permanence of meaning. Muslims down the centuries have interpreted the Prophet in myriad ways: as a moral model, a spiritual guide, an intercessor, an embodiment of divine light, etc. As conveyed at the beginning of the paper, Muḥammad is not just remembered as a man who was influential in his own day, but someone who, for Muslims, is still alive in a sense.

“Muslims down the centuries have interpreted *the Prophet [Muḥammad]* in myriad ways: as a *moral model*, a *spiritual guide*, an *intercessor*, an *embodiment of divine light*, etc.”

⁵⁸ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, 4–5.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1.

The Prophet Muḥammad can be encountered today through one's imagination, prayer, rituals, engagement with *ḥadīth* traditions⁶⁰, or other embodied practices understood to transmit the Prophet's blessing, or *baraka*.⁶¹ As Lamin Sanneh, a former Muslim and late Catholic theologian, wrote, Muḥammad's "historical companionship ceased with his death [but] continued beyond the grave to touch with his spiritual presence a vast portion of the human race."⁶²

Muḥammad, like Jesus in the Christian tradition, is both a *classic* person—a relevant historical figure—and an event—someone whom Muslims encounter in the here and now. In this way, Muḥammad has, within Tracy's framework, a permanent timeliness; he never becomes irrelevant or purely historical. And however one interprets or experiences the Prophet, he retains a kind of ultimate authority, serving as the link between Muslims and God. As a *classic*, Muḥammad's particularity also discloses and connects the Muslim to the universality and infinity of the divine. This is evidenced through the Islamic creed—"there is no god but God and Muḥammad is God's messenger"—as well as Qur'ānic and *ḥadīth* passages that convey that the act of following Muḥammad constitutes being in right relationship with God. Both *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) discourses on Islam point to the centrality of Muḥammad in Muslim self-understanding and to the community's ability to access the divine.⁶³ It is not my intention to argue that Muḥammad is the prime *Islamic classic* to which all others refer—though a very good case could be made for this.

⁶⁰ "The significance of the [*ḥadīth*] Tradition is thus the sense that it preserves the Prophet alive in the midst of the believers, available still to be consulted on any and every question. In this light, Muhammad's death became irrelevant" (John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 21).

⁶¹ For examples of the "presence" of the Prophet in Muslim doctrine and practice, see Denis Gril, Stefan Reichmuth, and Dilek Sarmis, eds., "The Prophet between Doctrine, Literature and Arts: Introduction to Volume I," in *The Presence of the Prophet in Early Modern and Contemporary Islam*, vol. 1 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2022), 14–34.

⁶² Lamin Sanneh, "Muhammad, Prophet of God, and Jesus Christ, Image of God: A Personal Testimony," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8, no. 4 (October 1984): 171.

⁶³ One example of the emic Islamic discourse comes from Fethullah Gulen, who writes: "The Messenger is the most polished mirror in which God's Names and Attributes are reflected to the highest degree. As the perfect manifestation of these Names and Attributes, an embodiment of the Qur'an and Islam, he is the greatest and most decisive and comprehensive proof of God's Existence and Unity, and of the truth of Islam and the Qur'an. Those who saw him remembered God automatically. Each of his virtues reflected a Name or Attribute of God and is a proof of his Prophethood" (Fethullah Gulen, "His Generosity," fgulen.com, September 18, 2001).

The Qur'ān, as divine revelation and scripture for Muslims, is also a good candidate for the status of a “classic.” While not diving into these arguments, I would assert that both the Prophet and the Qur'ān are major, and perhaps the two most major, classics of the Islamic tradition. This would comport with Shahab Ahmed's understanding and definition of Islam, which is “hermeneutical engagement with the Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of the Revelation to Muhammad.”⁶⁴

“...Shahab Ahmed's *understanding and definition of Islam*,... is 'hermeneutical engagement with the *Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text of the Revelation to Muhammad*.'”

Tracy's discussion of the three “focal meanings” of Jesus⁶⁵ also illuminates the nuances of the case of Muḥammad and the fact that there are multiple Muḥammads. First, there is the Muḥammad witnessed to by the early community and preserved in the earliest texts of the tradition. This corpus of early texts would be debated among Muslims (and certainly by non-Muslim scholars), but it would likely include the Qur'ān. Though the compilation of the *ḥadīth* texts and *sīra* literature took place over a century after the Prophet's life, many might also include these sources in this first category. Second is the “historical Muḥammad”—the facts that can be known about him through the methods of contemporary historical-critical study. As Tracy points out, insights from this realm of study can be integrated into understanding the first Muḥammad if believers or theologians are interested in engaging with it.

Third is the “actual” Muḥammad, the one mediated by the Islamic tradition and clung to by Muslims. This Muḥammad is, in reality, many Muḥammads, as he has been reinterpreted and experienced as an event many times over. Muslims have engaged this “actual” Muḥammad in various ways—from their interest in the minute details of Muḥammad's physical appearance, daily habits, and other aspects of his life; beliefs and practices surrounding the notion of Muḥammad as primordial light or intercessor; or the importance and use of poetry, visual art, or purported relics of the Prophet's body in Muslim spiritual practice—and more.

⁶⁴ See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 363.

⁶⁵ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 425.

This “actual Muḥammad” is the one primarily relevant for theology—at least for comparative theology. Still, this Muḥammad cannot be totally divorced from the other two, especially given that some of the earliest texts on Muḥammad were penned relatively late after his life. In one of his most famous books on Islam, *The Call of the Minaret*, Anglican Islamicist Kenneth Cragg argues for the *classic* status of Muḥammad in the Islamic tradition in a way that mirrors Tracy’s approach. His lengthy reflections are worth quoting in full:

The Muhammad of Tradition belongs to all ages of Islam inasmuch as each of them returns in some measure to him as its criterion of all that it approves... It can hardly be doubted, however, that the process is in some sense reciprocal. It is not simply that the historical Muhammad fashions the values and standards of the centuries, but that the centuries, in their turn, make and define the traditional Muhammad... It may be argued that all great personalities who belong to the ages are reinterpreted in new lights, and their ‘legend’ is not always strictly tested by their historical role. But it can also be argued that these posthumous achievements are part of the historical role itself, when viewed from a broader perspective. Historians are obliged to take note of what the communal memory affirms to have been, as well as what the chronology contains. There are few personalities for whom this double duty is more important than in respect of the human founder of Islam.⁶⁶

7. Mediations of Muḥammad: Secondary Islamic Classics

For Christians, an encounter with the *classic* of Jesus Christ is mediated through *secondary Christian classics*, whether they be texts, practices, rituals, or other expressions. The same is true of Muḥammad—Islamic texts, oral traditions, practices, and material culture, which offer particular interpretations or expressions of the preeminent *classic* of Muḥammad, are the medium through which Muslims encounter the Prophet. For a theologian who seeks to engage the Prophet in a comparative project, *secondary classics* must be identified.

⁶⁶ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, Third Edition (Oxford: One World, 2000), 93.

They will also convey the kind of excess and permanence of meaning that Tracy describes and must satisfy his criteria of “appropriateness to tradition” and “adequacy to experience.” One such *classic* Islamic text revolving around the Prophet is the twelfth-century *Sunnī* jurist and thinker Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ’s *Kitāb Al-Shifā Bi-Ta’rīf Huqūq al-Muṣṭafā Shifā*, or “The Book of Healing in Recognizing the Rights of the Chosen One,” known simply as *The Shifā*.⁶⁷

“...Anglican Islamicist Kenneth Cragg argues for the *classic* status of *Muḥammad* in the Islamic tradition in a way that mirrors *Tracy’s approach*.”

A lengthy work on the Prophet Muḥammad meant to inculcate in believers a deeper love of the Prophet, the *Shifā* has remained relevant for centuries for a vast range of Muslims, who have re-engaged and re-interpreted the text in their own contexts. As Matthew Anderson writes, “there can be little question that *al-Shifā* succeeded in presenting a vision of the Prophet Muḥammad which achieved a kind of canonical significance across much of this Islamic world.”⁶⁸ The *Shifā* was not intended simply to provide information about the Prophet Muḥammad, but also to facilitate a kind of personal encounter with this *classic* figure for Muslims. For both the author and audience of this work, the Prophet—though deceased—is a kind of living persona to whom Muslims still have access.

Speaking to Tracy’s notion of intensification, it is not possible to know the precise life experiences or interior states of mind that led Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ to pen the work, but given the vivid textual portraits of Muḥammad that he paints in the work, it would not be a stretch to assume that the qadi had a deep love for the Prophet that could push a person toward the kind of limit-experiences Tracy describes. As for distancing, Muslims have engaged the work in ways that the author likely could not have predicted or perhaps even would not have approved.

“..., the *Shifā* has remained relevant for centuries for a vast range of Muslims, who have *re-engaged* and *re-interpreted* the text in their own contexts.”

⁶⁷ ‘Iyāḍ ibn Mūsā al-Yaḥṣubī, *Muhammad Messenger of Allah: Ash-Shifa of Qadi 'Iyad*, trans. Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley, 2nd ed. (Norwich, United Kingdom: Diwan Press Ltd., 2011).

⁶⁸ Matthew M. Anderson, “Ethical Dimensions of Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ’s *al-Shifā*,” in *Key Classical Works on Islamic Ethics* (2024), Chapter 10, 229.

As a *classic* should, the *Shifā* also conveys something of the universal (God) through the particular (Muḥammad). Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino observes that “the *Shifā* argues that the quality of a believer’s relationship to God is dependent upon the quality of his relationship to the Prophet,”⁶⁹ and that “proximity to the Prophet implies proximity to God.”⁷⁰ Put another way, “through the Prophet Muḥammad the believer has access to a privileged relationship with God.”⁷¹ Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ conveys this by offering the well-known and widely invoked verse: “Say, ‘If you love God, follow me [the Prophet], and God will love you...”⁷²

For the purposes of comparative theology, the *Shifā* also satisfies Tracy’s criteria. It is “appropriate to the tradition” in that the *Shifā* occupies a dominant place and has developed a normative status in the history of the tradition and is tied explicitly to one of its foundational classics, the Prophet. It also satisfies Tracy’s criteria of “adequacy to experience” because it has been cherished by many Muslims across time and space.⁷³ In my Ph.D. dissertation and forthcoming book, I engage the *Shifā* in a project of Catholic comparative theology, looking at it in light of *secondary Christian classics*.⁷⁴ There, I also note how *Shifā* satisfies Tracy’s specific criteria related to interreligious dialogue, namely that it deals with the “ethical-political.” The *Shifā* is intended not only to facilitate Muslims’ proper relationship to Muḥammad (i.e., to love him more deeply) but also to enable Muslims to model their own behavior after his noble character, which is characterized by generosity, humility, kindness, and other qualities.

“[*Shifā*] also satisfies Tracy’s criteria of ‘adequacy to experience’ because it has been cherished by many Muslims across time and space.”

⁶⁹ Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino, “Theology of Veneration of the Prophet Muḥammad: Knowledge and Love in the *Shifā* of al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 544/1149) between Ḥadīth, Philosophy and Spirituality,” in *The Presence of the Prophet in Early Modern and Contemporary Islam*, ed. Denis Gril, Stefan Reichmuth, and Dilek Sarmis, vol. 1 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2022), 189.

⁷⁰ Vimercati Sanseverino, “Theology of Veneration of the Prophet Muḥammad,” 190.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Qur’ān: 3:31; al-Yaḥṣubī and Bewley, *Muhammad Messenger of Allah*, 226. [Part II, Chapter 2, § 4]

⁷³ Maribel Fierro, “The Public Accountability of a Marie Curie Fellowship,” in *Islamic Books: A Research Blog about Manuscripts, Printed Books, and Ephemera in Arabic Script*, April 12, 2019.

⁷⁴ Duffner, “Muḥammad’s Character as ‘Fruit of the Spirit.’”

8. Conclusion

In seeking to provide further theological groundwork for Catholic comparative theology of Islam, this paper has applied David Tracy's notion of the "classic" to an Islamic case, arguing that the Prophet Muḥammad can be considered a preeminent *Islamic classic*. Carrying an "excess and permanence" of meaning for Muslims, the Prophet has been continually reinterpreted and engaged by Muslims. This engagement yields *secondary classics* on the Prophet, including texts such as Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's *Shifā*. I also transposed Tracy's notion of the three "focal meanings" of Jesus to the case of Muḥammad to show that the Prophet of Islam is significant beyond the question of his historicity. This framework supports Catholic theologians in engaging the classics of Muḥammad in their own endeavors to make meaning of Muḥammad's significance for Muslims—whether from his place in history, his resting place in Medina, or his presence in the hearts of believers.

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