

Article

Dialogue Between Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah

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Abstract

The central objective of this study is to demonstrate the possibility of constructive dialogue between Christianity and Islam through a comparative examination of two concepts closely related to the transmission and expansion of religious faith: mission and da'wah. Although both terms refer fundamentally to the communication of one's faith to others—and may, therefore, appear to be associated with a logic of competition between religions—each also contains an intrinsic dimension of respect for the other. This dimension becomes particularly evident when their authentic meaning is understood not in terms of coercion or violence, but as a form of witness expressed through one's way of life. Moreover, these concepts should not be interpreted solely as activities directed toward those outside the religious community. They also function as dynamics addressed to the believing community and to the individual believers themselves, with the purpose of deepening, renewing, and revitalizing faith. In this sense, the Christian notion of first proclamation—understood qualitatively as a renewed encounter with the Gospel—and the Islamic understanding of da'wah directed to the *umma* as a call to spiritual conversion reveal a significant point of convergence. This shared perspective may, therefore, provide an important foundation for constructive dialogue between the two religious traditions.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam; testimony of the faith; first proclamation in qualitative sense; Da'wah directed toward Muslim; comparative theology

1. Introduction

The fundamental principles of both Christian mission and Islamic da'wah are rooted in the communication of one's faith to others. A notable common foundation between the two traditions lies in the shared conviction that the essence of faith must be proclaimed continually and universally. Within a multi-religious context, however, this conviction may appear to generate competitive tension rather than mutual collaboration. For instance, within certain Christian theological frameworks, mission has at times been associated with the conviction that explicit adherence to the Christian faith is absolutely necessary for individual salvation, including for followers of other religions. Similarly, in some contexts, da'wah has been interpreted either as an attempt to impose the Islamic faith or as a religious justification for hostile or coercive actions toward adherents of other religions. Since interreligious dialogue is founded upon mutual recognition and understanding, mission and da'wah may initially seem unrelated—or even opposed—to the goals of dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

The first significant academic initiative devoted to exploring the possibility of dialogue between Christianity and Islam concerning the question of mission and da'wah may be traced to a meeting held in Chambésy, Switzerland, in 1976. The gathering brought together



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fourteen scholars representing the two religious traditions and was jointly organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Islamic Foundation. Its purpose was to improve Christian–Muslim relations during a period marked by tensions arising, on both sides, from distorted perceptions of the religious other. Specifically, the meeting sought to address “grievances on both sides” (Castro 1976, p. 365). Consequently, in the same year, the WCC journal *International Review of Mission* devoted its entire issue 260 to research papers presented at the meeting on Christian mission and Islamic da’wah. One of the principal points of contention concerned the interpretation of Christian missionary activities directed toward the conversion of Muslims and, correspondingly, the understanding of da’wah as the propagation of Islam within predominantly Christian contexts.

In 1982, the Islamic Foundation also published a collection of the proceedings of the Chambésy meeting under the title *Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah*. For a more detailed examination of the Chambésy initiative and the subsequent development of reflection on this topic, the article by Kerr (2000), who participated in the meeting, constitutes a particularly valuable resource. Seeking to address the mutual fear associated with proselytism, Kerr argues that Christian–Muslim relations should also be examined in light of broader factors capable of promoting closer relations between the two religious traditions, such as their social contexts, religious witness, and cooperation for the common good. Among more recent contributions, the anthology edited by Ghiloni (2022) is also worthy of attention, although its comparative scope extends beyond Christianity and Islam to include other religious traditions.

It is worth noting that, within research on this subject—particularly among Christian scholars—da’wah has often been treated as a concept corresponding to that of Christian mission, understood as an activity aimed at the numerical growth of the religion (cf. Scantlebury 1996; Johnson and Scoggins 2005; Woodberry 2009; Muelman 2011). This interpretive approach has had both positive and negative implications for the study of mission and da’wah. On the one hand, it has facilitated the development of comparative research on the two concepts. On the other hand, it has contributed to a reductive understanding of da’wah, which encompasses a significantly broader range of meanings within Islamic thought and practice. A further consequence of this interpretive framework is that it brings the conflictual dimension of the relationship between mission and da’wah into sharper focus. Tensions may arise between the two religious traditions over the possibility of gaining new adherents or losing existing members through conversion to the other faith. According to Scantlebury (1996), however, such tensions do not arise directly from the teachings intrinsic to Christianity or Islam. Rather, they are shaped by external dynamics, including historical experiences, political factors, and prevailing social conditions.

In this context, the present study seeks to demonstrate that a more thorough theological examination of the principles of mission and da’wah reveals that neither concept entails the compulsory imposition of one’s religion upon others, nor does either serve as theoretical justification for coercion. On the contrary, both presuppose, in their most authentic sense, respect for the other. To this end, this study aims to identify and clarify the “common ground” between the Christian mission and Islamic da’wah through a comparative analysis developed in two distinct sections. The first section argues that contemporary Christian theology does not reduce mission to the efforts of Christians to transmit their faith to others. Rather, mission is understood as an expression of the Trinitarian God’s love for the whole of humanity. The mission of the Church and of individual Christians, therefore, consists in making this divine dynamic present and operative within the world. From this perspective, interreligious dialogue acquires its authentic significance as an integral dimension of missionary activity, existing in a complementary relationship with the proclamation of the Gospel. The second section demonstrates that an examination of the original meaning of the

term da'wah reveals a paradigm that extends beyond the mere propagation of Islam. It also encompasses attitudes of respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence within multi-religious contexts. This understanding of da'wah, grounded in its original forms and meanings, may find a particularly significant contextual application in Indonesia and Malaysia. This research will examine several significant examples drawn from these two contexts.

The discussion of mission will be situated primarily within the broader theological development of the Catholic Church, while also taking into account relevant strands of Protestant thought. Within the comparative framework, the analysis of da'wah will draw on the influential scholarship of Matthew J. Kuiper and on the contributions of Muslim researchers working in Indonesia and Malaysia. Through this approach, this study contends that the communication of faith reveals its deepest meaning only when it is expressed through witness, which requires a profound respect for others, rather than through coercive or violent means. This shared characteristic may provide a valuable foundation for reflecting on mission and da'wah within the context of interreligious dialogue.

Finally, it is important to note that both mission and da'wah possess a dynamic orientation toward the renewal of the believer and of the religious community itself. In other words, these concepts are not directed exclusively toward an "external" dimension oriented to others: they also contain an "internal" dimension that calls individuals and communities to reflect on, deepen, and renew their own faith. The present study focuses on this latter dimension, with particular reference to the Christian first proclamation understood in a qualitative sense and to da'wah as a call addressed to Muslims themselves toward an authentic conversion and renewed fidelity. The qualitative significance of the first proclamation lies in its primacy and enduring relevance throughout Christian life: it must be continually reappropriated by believers in order to deepen and revitalize their faith. Similarly, an essential dimension of da'wah is its orientation toward the Muslim faithful themselves, who are called to renew and strengthen their devotion to Allah. These shared convergences make possible not only a comparative theological analysis of the two concepts but also a constructive dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

2. Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue—A Theological Reflection

The recipients of Christian mission cannot be identified simply as "those who do not believe in Christ." In the contemporary world, increasingly marked by religious diversity, the coexistence of Christians and members of other religious traditions has become an undeniable social and cultural reality. At the same time, Christian theology itself has gradually developed a deeper awareness of the historical, cultural, and theological value of other religions. In light of these developments, reflection on the missionary approach toward followers of other religions can no longer be confined to univocal and reductive categories such as "non-believers" or "pagans."

Historically, Christianity has often adopted a negative or exclusivist stance toward other religious traditions. This position is exemplified by the axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, which was reaffirmed in particularly emphatic terms by the Catholic Church (cf. [Council of Florence 1442](#), n. 1338). The evangelization of Latin America, which was accompanied by profoundly negative consequences, including the suppression and destruction of local cultures, reflected an exclusivist understanding of mission. Although exclusivist attitudes no longer constitute the predominant theological orientation within Christianity, they remain present in certain contemporary Christian contexts. Such perspectives may still be found in particular Protestant communities, especially among some Evangelical and Pentecostal groups that emphasize the absolute and exclusive validity of the Christian faith. Within Catholic theology, moreover, debate has persisted regarding whether explicit adherence to the Christian faith is necessary for individual salvation. This

question has significant implications for the theological interpretation and practical exercise of mission (cf. [Villaforita 2020](#), p. 223).

This study takes as its point of departure a recent perspective that interprets the phenomenon of religious plurality as an expression of God's "voluntas permissiva" ([Pope Francis 2019](#)). Its aim is to analyze the significance of interreligious dialogue within the broader context of Christian mission. This study will focus specifically on the theological perspective of the Catholic Church.

2.1. The Broader Meaning of the Christian Mission and Religious Traditions

Traditionally, mission was understood primarily as the spread of the Christian faith to peoples and regions where it had not yet been established. Many well-known missionaries—such as Francis Xavier, Daniel Comboni, William Carey, and Amy Carmichael—dedicated their lives to this task and helped shape the classical understanding of mission. From this perspective, the central purpose of mission was the conversion of non-Christians through the proclamation of the Gospel. Mission was, therefore, closely associated with journeys to distant lands where Christianity had not yet taken root and was usually entrusted to specially trained missionaries. Within the Catholic Church, the term mission began to be used in this specific sense in the sixteenth century, particularly under Jesuit influence. Later, the establishment of the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in 1622 significantly contributed to the development of the *missiones ad gentes* and to the worldwide dissemination of the Christian faith. Even today, this institution continues to play an important role in missionary activity.

The understanding of mission as an activity specifically oriented toward the spread of the Christian faith, as affirmed by both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches, is rooted in the divine mandate attributed to Jesus Christ. In Matthew 28:19, the disciples of Jesus are commanded to "go [...] and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Likewise, Acts 1:8 present the proclamation of the Gospel "to the ends of the earth" as a constitutive dimension of Christian mission. Indeed, the profession of Christian faith, as it emerges from the New Testament, consists in accepting in one's heart the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, to whom all things and all human beings belong (cf. [Rudvin 1982](#), p. 19).

The missionary imperative, which compels Christians to communicate their faith to all people, including those who belong to other religious traditions, gives rise to a potential tension between Christianity and other religions. The ultimate objective of mission, understood as the baptism of all humanity, appears to be a reality that must be interpreted through an eschatological lens. This is due, at least in part, to the enduring reality of religious pluralism, which has emerged as a *de facto* condition involving believers and religious leaders alike. Nevertheless, the practical difficulty of realizing the literal aim of mission does not invalidate the divine command to which Christianity remains bound. Indeed, the fundamental responsibility of the Church is to enable, at all times and in all places, an explicit encounter with Christ (cf. [Esquerida Bifet 1992](#), pp. 71–75). Within this framework, followers of other religions, including Muslims, are understood as recipients of the Gospel message or, more precisely, as potential recipients of baptism, regardless of the fidelity they maintain toward their own religious traditions.

When addressing the question of mission in relation to followers of non-Christian religions, it is important to recall that the understanding of mission has expanded significantly in contemporary Christian theology. Today, the concept of mission as an ecclesial activity directed toward the numerical growth of the Christian community no longer exhausts the full semantic range of the term. Its meaning has broadened: mission is no longer understood solely as a specific and institutional action of the Church, but as a constitutive principle of

its very existence. In the Catholic context, this development found decisive expression in the Second Vatican Council and in subsequent theological reflection. These developments have made it possible to interpret mission as an expression of the Church's vitality and its orientation toward the fulfillment of God's salvific will. This shift can be described, in fact, as a "transition from the original conception of mission as a "concrete action to be carried out" to its contemporary interpretation as a "way of being" that authentically reflects the fundamental identity of the Church" (Chung 2025, p. 246).

To examine this semantic expansion of mission more closely, it is useful to refer to reflections contained in the ecclesial documents of the Catholic Church. First, in the conciliar decree *Ad Gentes*, the concept of mission is articulated in relation to the Trinitarian foundation of ecclesial existence. The origin of the Church is inseparably linked to the Trinitarian dimension of God: the Father sends the Son and, together with the Son, sends the Holy Spirit in order to communicate himself to all humanity. The Church, situated within history by the Triune God, is entrusted with the task of actualizing this divine dynamism—particularly through the action of the Son and the Holy Spirit—on the basis of the Father's universal love for all humanity. Within this framework, ecclesial mission is understood as a manifestation of divine love that cannot be reduced to the mere proclamation of the Gospel. Mission consists in enabling all people to participate in God's love, so that the Gospel may become "a leaven of freedom and progress in human history, [...] of brotherhood, of unity and of peace" (Second Vatican Council 1965b, n. 8). The well-known affirmation that "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature" (Second Vatican Council 1965b, n. 2) marks the beginning of this paradigm shift, which was subsequently developed in post-conciliar theological reflection.

A similar observation can be made with regard to Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, promulgated in 2013. In this document, mission is implicitly reaffirmed as something that cannot be reduced either to proclamation or to ecclesial structures but is instead presented as a way of being for the Church, one that dynamically involves every Christian in daily life. This understanding is encapsulated in the expression "a Church which goes forth," (Pope Francis 2013, nn. 20–24) which has since become one of the most recurring motifs in contemporary Catholic discourse. The image of "going forth" symbolizes a dynamic openness toward others, in contrast to every form of isolation and self-referentiality. In the context of mission, this movement suggests an existence characterized by openness and by the joy of the Gospel.

Furthermore, from this perspective, believers of other religious traditions are regarded as partners with whom Christians may share this same joy, while also recognizing the values present in other religions "in their different ways of living, thinking and speaking" (Pope Francis 2013, n. 250). It is also worth noting that, within this document, interreligious dialogue is presented as a legitimate activity of the Church within the broader framework of mission, understood as a dynamic expression of the love of the Trinity. This perspective suggests that the Spirit of Christ may be at work among the followers of other religions through their own sacred signs, rites, and expressions. Finally, the exhortation dedicates two paragraphs—numbers 252 and 253—to emphasizing the importance of dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

In this regard, the concept of *Missio Dei*—that is, the mission of God, originally developed within Protestant theology—assumes particular significance. This concept underscores that the true subject of missionary activity is not the Church as an institutional entity, but God himself. In other words, the foundation of missionary dynamism does not lie in an ecclesiastical initiative motivated by the desire for institutional expansion but derives from divine love extended to all humanity. According to the theological perspective of Moltmann (1977, p. 64), "it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill for

the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way.” In a similar vein, it is useful to recall David Bosch’s distinction regarding the use of the term. The singular “mission,” when referring to God, is primary, whereas the plural “missions,” referring to ecclesial activities, is derived from the *Missio Dei* (cf. Bosch 2011, pp. 398–402).

From a contemporary Christian perspective, mission is therefore not limited to the preaching of the Gospel with the aim of baptizing those who do not profess the Christian faith. It is instead shaped by the very nature of God’s action, expressed through the language of a movement of love. This movement encompasses the eschatological horizon of the Kingdom and the gift of salvation, as well as the witness of love, the courage of forgiveness, the sharing of life, and the humility of listening, among other expressions (cf. Colzani 2010, p. 24). Considering this principle, dialogue with followers of other religions constitutes an indispensable component of Christian mission.

2.2. *The Relationship Between Evangelization and Interreligious Dialogue in Theological Reflection*

A crucial element in any reflection on mission, particularly in relation to members of other religious traditions, concerns the relationship between interreligious dialogue and the proclamation of the Gospel. This relationship invites reflection on whether priority should be accorded to one of these two dimensions over the other. As noted above, the contemporary understanding of mission includes dialogue with other religious traditions as an integral component of ecclesial activity. Nevertheless, this development raises an important question regarding the attitude Christians should adopt toward followers of other religions: in encountering them, should the disciples of Christ prioritize dialogue and respect for their faith, or should they consistently pursue the proclamation of the Gospel? This question is not entirely new, especially within the Catholic context, since it has accompanied the Church’s support for initiatives promoting interreligious dialogue from its earliest stages.

The Second Vatican Council (1965a, n. 2) marked a profound transformation in the Catholic Church’s attitude toward other religions, as expressed in the conciliar affirmation that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.” At the same time, evangelization, grounded in the proclamation of the Gospel, constitutes the Church’s fundamental grace, vocation, and deepest identity, as affirmed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (cf. Pope Paul VI 1975, n. 15). The relationship between these two dimensions—the recognition of authentic values in other religions and the continuing centrality of proclaiming the Gospel to all humanity—gave rise to apprehension that the latter might be diminished or marginalized within the Church’s mission. This concern is expressed clearly in questions raised by two popes of the second half of the twentieth century, Pope Paul VI (1967) and Pope John Paul II (1990, n. 4): “Does the dialogue [...] that the Church today wishes to establish with all forms of civilization not hinder her proselytism and oblige her to respect the religious freedom of others?”; and again, “Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant? Has it not been replaced by inter-religious dialogue?”

The initial approach of Catholic theology to this issue may be summarized by the expression “two separate approaches.” This formulation refers to two distinct attitudes adopted by Christians toward followers of other religions: on the one hand, proclamation, regarded as the primary task; on the other, dialogue, understood as a secondary option. Consequently, dialogue was often conceived as a secondary path to be adopted only in situations where proclamation was considered impossible or particularly difficult. This approach is implicitly reflected in Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, in which the possibility of dialogue is introduced only after the affirmation of the Church’s duty to proclaim the Gospel to followers of other religious traditions (cf. Pope Paul VI 1964, nn. 111–12). The

sequential structure of these two paragraphs may, therefore, be interpreted as suggesting that dialogue becomes necessary where proclamation cannot take place. An even more explicit formulation appears in a document published in the 1960s by the Secretariat for Non-Christians, now known as the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. In this text, proclamation is defined as a “divine mission,” whereas interreligious dialogue is described as a reality situated “on a human level” ([Secretariatus pro non Christianis 1967](#), p. 9):

In its interactions with adherents of non-Christian religions, the Church does not restrict itself exclusively to proclamation (kerygma) and witness (martyrdom), which constitute its fundamental mission of divine origin. Today, moreover, [the Church] exhorts Catholics [...] to establish an existential dialogue on a human level, characterized by frank and friendly contact, aimed at the common promotion of the good according to the Gospel.

In contrast to this model of “two separate approaches,” contemporary Catholic theology—thanks in part to the contributions of numerous scholars—maintains that interreligious dialogue is an integral dimension of Christian mission, on an equal footing with evangelization. In order to provide an overview of the Catholic perspective on this issue, it is useful to consider the development of the reflections proposed by the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue.

First, the document *The Attitude of the Church Toward the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* outlines a perspective in which dialogue may be understood as an expression of the Church’s mission. More precisely, the document clarifies that dialogue between the Church and other religions is grounded in faith in divine providence, through which God calls all humanity to himself. In other words, it affirms that the primary foundation of dialogue lies in faith in God, who draws every human being into his love, including non-Christians, and who leaves traces of divine grace within them (cf. [Secretariatus pro non Christianis 1984](#), n. 22). As the title of the document itself suggests, this represents an initial development of the concept that interreligious dialogue constitutes a component of Christian mission.

A particularly significant statement on this theme is found in John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*¹ published in 1990. In this text, the Pope explicitly affirms that interreligious dialogue is not merely an external or subsidiary aspect of the Church’s mission but an integral component of its evangelizing process. The most important passage is worth recalling: “Inter-religious dialogue [...] understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment [...] is not in opposition to the mission ad gentes; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions” ([Pope John Paul II 1990](#), n. 55). This statement clarifies that interreligious dialogue should not be conceived simply as a strategy for peaceful coexistence, nor as a secondary option dictated by diplomatic concerns, but as an attitude theologically grounded in the awareness of divine action, which excludes no human being.

The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* further suggests that dialogue and proclamation together contribute to the fulfillment of Christian mission. Reiterating that the foundation of Christian mission consists in the realization of God’s salvific plan in the world, the document clarifies that both proclamation and dialogue are ordered, each in its own way, to this end. The proclamation of the Gospel remains a cornerstone of Christian witness, as it announces Christ the Savior. At the same time, through constructive dialogue with non-Christians, Christians are led to recognize and appreciate the signs of divine action present within the complexity of human experience. Thus, through dialogue with various religious traditions, the Church comes to understand “all that God’s action through Jesus Christ in his Spirit has accomplished and continues to accomplish in the world and in the whole of humankind” ([Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991](#), n. 50).

At the basis of this positive appreciation of religions in Catholic theology lies the reference to the universality of God's salvific will. This universality may be summarized as follows: God wills the salvation of all human beings; consequently, the divine economy of salvation does not exclude those who belong to other religious traditions. When non-Christians are considered within this salvific plan, the elements present in their religions may be understood as possessing positive values insofar as they point toward this plan, manifest its action, and derive their meaning from it. In this framework, interreligious dialogue acquires an authentic and relevant theological significance, since it is defined as an activity aimed at discovering the "seeds of the Word in people's hearts and in the religious traditions to which they belong" (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991, n. 82). Accordingly, *Dialogue and Proclamation* concludes that the relationship between dialogue and proclamation stand in a constitutive relationship: all Christians are personally called to engage in both paths in order to fulfill the one mission of the Church.

The proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Savior of humanity, when presented to adherents of non-Christian religions in a coercive manner due to its claim to absoluteness, may give rise to opposition or tension; this is also evident in relation to Muslims. However, Catholic theology does not consider the annunciation of the Gospel—understood as leading the recipient explicitly into the ecclesial community—as the sole mode of Christian mission, especially with regard to believers of other religious traditions. It also includes dialogue with them within the same missionary mandate. From this perspective, the understanding of *Missio Dei* further clarifies the central place of interreligious dialogue as a fully missionary activity of the Church. Dialogue and proclamation are thus understood as complementary dimensions in the service of God's mission, mutually cooperating and reinforcing one another. While the proclamation of the Gospel has historically been regarded as the fundamental action that safeguards Christians' identity, its centrality remains essential in the realization of the *Missio Dei* in the world. At the same time, this does not diminish the importance of dialogue with followers of other religions. Such dialogue contributes to the realization of God's mission by enabling Christians to discern the presence of divine love for all humanity, even beyond the visible boundaries of the Christian religion.

2.3. A Church That Grows Through Attraction

Contemporary interpretations of Christian mission move beyond the traditional understanding of mission as solely the proclamation of the Gospel and embrace a broader range of Christian activities, including interreligious dialogue. The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ undoubtedly remains a fundamental Christian obligation and a foundational principle of the faith. This remains true even in encounters with individuals who adhere to other religious traditions, such as Muslims. Simultaneously, Christians are likewise called to foster interreligious dialogue in such contexts. The dialogical attitude envisioned within this perspective is not merely a human disposition directed toward peaceful coexistence. Rather, it constitutes an expression of faith, theologically grounded in the universality of God's salvific will. Consequently, the posture Christians are called to adopt in their interaction with non-Christians takes the form of a dual commitment in which proclamation and dialogue must be held together. This involves bearing continual witness to faith in Christ while also respecting the religion of the other, in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the universality of God's love.

Modern spiritual figures within the Christian tradition, including Henri Le Saux and Thomas Merton, maintained that a more authentic and profound Christian faith can coexist with a greater openness toward others. Their personal experiences themselves testify to this conviction. In particular, Le Saux argued that the "deep sphere" of Christianity and other religions constitutes the only possible meeting place in which authentic interreli-

gious dialogue can flourish. From his perspective, the encounter between religions is “an unsought happening as soon as two people longing for God meet one another” (Le Saux 1969, p. 63). This vision is grounded in the conviction that recognizing the meaning of other religions and approaching them with a dialogical attitude are rooted in faith in a divine action that transcends human understanding. In other words, the more deeply one enters into the contemplation of God’s transcendence, the more capable one becomes of perceiving the universality and inclusivity of divine action. Such contemplation does not lead to withdrawal into oneself or into one’s own religious identity; rather, it fosters a deeper openness toward others and toward their religious traditions.

In light of these considerations, it may be argued that, from a Christian perspective—and particularly from a Catholic standpoint—interreligious dialogue constitutes a form of missionary activity comparable to the proclamation of the Gospel. In this regard, it is significant to recall the well-known statement of Pope Benedict XVI (2007), later echoed by Pope Francis (2014): “The Church does not grow by proselytizing, but by attracting.” This formulation succinctly captures the central argument of the present study. In a multi-religious context, followers of Christ are called to live dialogue as an indispensable dimension of mission, entrusting to God the discernment of the times and manners in which the explicit proclamation of the Gospel should take place. This call does not imply a renunciation of proclamation, which remains a fundamental component of Christian mission. Rather, it suggests that Christianity grows most authentically through attraction: when the faith is genuinely witnessed in the lives of believers, it develops not purely in numerical terms but above all in its capacity to participate in the fulfillment of God’s will in the world.

3. Da’wah and Islam’s Relationship with Other Religions—From Theoretical Foundations to Practical Examples

The term da’wah derives from the Arabic root *d’w*, which fundamentally conveys the ideas of “invitation” and “call.” It is frequently used to designate a reality that may, in certain respects, correspond to the Christian concept of mission, especially when mission is understood as an activity directed toward the spread of faith (cf. Denny 1987, pp. 244–45; Scantlebury 1996, pp. 254–57; Johnson and Scoggins 2005, pp. 8–9; Woodberry 2009, pp. 67–69; Muelman 2011, pp. 236–39). Although da’wah assumes different meanings depending on the context, in its primary sense it may be defined as the act of communicating and promoting the Islamic faith.

With regard to the presence of religions other than Islam, including Christianity, this understanding of da’wah may appear to constitute an obstacle to the development of dialogical relationships. From this perspective, followers of other religious traditions may be considered not so much as partners in dialogue, but rather as recipients of Muslim proselytism. Indeed, in relation to other religions, da’wah is at times interpreted from an exclusivist Islamic perspective as an instrument of opposition. For instance, it has also been associated with justifying the coercive propagation of Islam and, in its most reductive interpretation, with *jihad*, understood primarily as armed struggle against non-Muslims (cf. Ali Hirsi 2017, pp. 15–18, 39–41). Such an approach may contribute to the emergence of conflicts and tensions carried out in the name of Islam in various regions of the world.

A more careful examination, however, reveals that the principles of da’wah and interreligious dialogue can coexist within the Islamic perspective. This becomes particularly evident in multi-religious contexts, where Islam is called to interact peacefully with other religions and to encourage forms of cooperation with them.

3.1. *The Original Meaning of Da'wah in a Multi-Religious Context—Foundations*

The manner in which da'wah is articulated in contexts marked by the presence of other religions has been one of the most significant issues in Islam since its origins. Indeed, the historical milieu in which Muhammad established the Islamic religion was characterized by a considerable degree of religious diversity. The Prophet and his companions encountered and interacted with followers of other religious traditions, most notably Christianity and Judaism. Consequently, any examination of da'wah directed toward non-Muslims requires careful consideration of early Islamic history, as reflected in Islam's foundational scriptural sources.

One of the most significant principles of da'wah presented in the Qur'an² is found in Sura 16:125: "Call (people) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching." From this verse, the initial image of da'wah that emerges in the Qur'anic text is that of invitation or call addressed toward individuals to encounter Islam. A particularly important point is that this invitation, oriented to non-Muslims, is grounded in an explicit divine mandate. This principle remains equally valid in multi-religious contexts, where da'wah is directed toward followers of other religious traditions. In this regard, the Qur'an contains numerous passages concerning the relationship between da'wah and believers of other faiths, often referred to as "Christians," "Jews," and "People of the Book."

A preliminary reading of Qur'anic verses concerning other religions may lead the reader to conclude that da'wah is associated with an exclusivist or critical attitude toward them. One of the most significant examples can be found in Sura 9, in a verse referring to the "People of the Book," namely Christians and Jews. This passage contains an exhortation to fight those who do not accept the Islamic message: "Fight those of the people of the Book who do not (truly) believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax promptly and agree to submit" (Q 9:29). With regard to Jews, the Qur'an also contains specific passages that have been interpreted as expressing a rejection of da'wah. In these texts, Jews are portrayed as having compromised their relationship with God through their failure to remain faithful to His commandments. The following statement illustrates this tendency and contributes to a critical depiction of the group in relation to the Islamic proclamation: "They distort the meaning of (revealed) words and have forgotten some of what they were told to remember: you (Prophet) will always find treachery in all but a few of them" (Q 5:13). Moreover, Sura 3 contains particularly severe expressions addressed toward those who reject the message of Islam, as illustrated by the reference to "news of agonizing torment" (Q 3:21). Certain verses appear to extend this judgment to Christians as well. For example, Sura 9 states "The Christians said, 'The Messiah is the son of God' [...]. May God thwart them! How far astray they have been led!" (Q 9:30).

The verses cited above, which articulate critical judgments toward followers of other religious traditions, may appear to hinder the development of dialogical relations between Muslims and adherents of other faiths. When these passages are interpreted as conveying a predominantly negative view of other religions, they may lead to an understanding of da'wah as an invitation to move beyond a condition perceived as erroneous or deviant. Consequently, da'wah may come to be understood as a call to pass from a state regarded as false or imperfect to the truth of Islam, thereby implicitly positioning the religion of the invited person as something to be surpassed.

A broader reading of the Qur'an, however, reveals passages that not only express critical judgments toward non-believers but also affirm respect for followers of other faiths. For instance, Sura 2 states the principle that there should be "no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256), thus emphasizing that an authentic response to the call to faith must arise from the free and sincere consent of the recipient. Accordingly, a form of da'wah imposed by

force would be incompatible with its genuine meaning, as explicitly articulated in the injunction “Call (people) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way” (Q 16:125). Within this framework, verse 46 of Sura 29 is particularly relevant: “Argue only in the best way with the People of the Book, except with those of them who act unjustly. Say, ‘We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God is one (and the same).’” This passage highlights the possibility of engaging followers of other religions through a respectful and dialogical approach grounded in the recognition of a shared belief in the one God.

Furthermore, the indication found in Sura 3 is likewise significant, insofar as the ultimate judgment concerning the refusal of the invitation to Islam is entrusted to God himself (cf. Q 3:176). This orientation is also evident in Muhammad’s conduct regarding peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews who did not accept his message. Such an approach suggests that those engaged in *da’wah* are not authorized to condemn individuals who do not respond to the invitation, since final judgment belongs exclusively to God. From an Islamic perspective, God alone is capable of rendering the ultimate judgment on human choices. Consequently, the role of the *da’i*—the one who invites—is characterized by a twofold responsibility. On the one hand, the *da’i* is called to present the Islamic faith with conviction to those to whom it is directed. On the other hand, the *da’i* must respect the freedom of those who do not accept this invitation, allowing them to remain faithful to their own religious tradition.

At the heart of Islam’s attitude of respect and tolerance toward other religious traditions lies its understanding of the human being. From the Qur’anic perspective, humanity is described as God’s successor or vicegerent on Earth. In this regard, the divine words pronounced at the creation of humanity are particularly significant: “I am placing a successor [*khalifah*] on earth” (Q 2:30). Here, the term *khalifah* refers to the human being entrusted with the divine responsibility of caring for the Earth and cooperating in the realization of God’s will within history. The human being is, therefore, understood as a subject endowed with freedom and, at the same time, charged with responsibility for the moral choices and actions through which the order and fulfillment of the world may be advanced. Accordingly, the relationship between the individual and God is founded upon a free and conscious response. In this context, religious coercion appears incompatible with the dignity and responsibility that God has entrusted to human beings (cf. Al-Faruqi 1982, pp. 33–34).

In light of the preceding discussion, it may be observed that the Qur’an presents two dimensions of *da’wah* in a multi-religious context that can appear to stand in tension with one another. The central issue for interreligious dialogue lies in the fact that, although the Qur’an contains critical expressions toward other religions, its broader orientation cannot be fully reduced to an exclusivist stance. Within this framework, the question arises as to how this apparent tension between the two dimensions of *da’wah* should be understood.

Matthew J. Kuiper’s study offers an important interpretation of this question. The American scholar begins from the hypothesis that the Qur’an, when considered in isolation, is insufficient as the sole source for identifying the original spirit of *da’wah*. In order to address this limitation, he develops an interpretive framework that situates *da’wah* within a broader corpus of sources from the Islamic tradition. This framework adopts a historical approach, analyzing the formation of *da’wah* within the early *umma*, especially in relation to other religions. More specifically, Kuiper’s argument is supported by an examination of extra-Qur’anic sources, such as the Hadith and the Sira, which provide important insights into the life of Muhammad and the practices of early Islam (cf. Kuiper 2021, pp. 40–41). His analysis suggests that the two seemingly divergent attitudes—the respectful and the exclusivist—may be interpreted as the result of a historical transformation experienced by the early Islamic community between the Meccan and Medinan phases.

According to this interpretation, the form of da'wah characterized by respect and tolerance reflects the situation of the early Muslim community, when it existed as a religious minority within a pluralistic environment. In this position of weakness, the practice of da'wah required a more cautious and dialogical approach. Since this orientation emerged during the period in which the Prophet proclaimed his message in Mecca, it may be described as the "Meccan pattern" of da'wah (cf. Kuiper 2021, pp. 42–48). By contrast, it is possible to hypothesize that more coercive elements were introduced for political reasons, particularly as the Islamic community sought to consolidate its authority in the territory under its control and gradually assumed the role of an emerging power. This development occurred primarily during the period in which Muhammad led the community in Medina, that is, following the Hijrah³. By analogy with the terminology used for the Meccan period, this orientation may be described as the "Medinan pattern" of da'wah (cf. Kuiper 2021, pp. 48–59).

Against the background of Kuiper's interpretation, it is worth noting that the emergence of a more exclusivist attitude may be attributed to the process by which the early Islamic community consolidated its identity within the multi-religious context of seventh-century Arabia. The critical expressions attributed to Muhammad are not limited to the two Abrahamic religions; rather, they are directed in even more polemical terms against polytheists, in relation to whom the Prophet was called to define the identity of the emerging religion. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that such hostility reflects the concrete circumstances faced by Muhammad and his companions, particularly the conflict with the polytheistic communities that dominated Mecca at the time. In its primary sense, da'wah consists in the act of calling and inviting non-Muslims to Islam and, therefore, presupposes a distinction between Islam and other religious traditions. In this context, an exclusivist attitude toward other religions may have contributed to the clearer definition of Islamic identity and to the formation of the *umma* as a distinct community characterized by its own faith and religious practice (cf. Kuiper 2018, pp. 23–24).

Kuiper's research focuses on analyzing the transformation of da'wah between the two phases of early Islam, without offering a normative judgment regarding the model of da'wah that the Muslim community ought to adopt. His conclusion concerning so-called "dawalogy" is limited to emphasizing the plural and open character of da'wah, which he describes as a reality marked by "open-endedness" (Kuiper 2018, p. 41). Nevertheless, it is worth considering the hypothesis that the form of da'wah that emerged during the Meccan period is closest to the original spirit of Islamic preaching. This approach, shaped within a context characterized by the presence of diverse religious traditions, appears particularly relevant to contemporary multi-religious societies as well. From this perspective, the original spirit of da'wah may be understood above all as an invitation and as a witness to faith in Allah.

3.2. Multicultural and Multi-Religious Da'wah—Examples

The Prophet Muhammad's willingness to adopt a peaceful attitude toward those who did not accept his message constitutes a foundational element for understanding da'wah as being oriented toward peaceful coexistence between Muslims and followers of other religious traditions in multi-religious contexts. As noted above, the early Muslim community practiced da'wah from a perspective grounded in respect and tolerance, within a setting marked by religious pluralism, particularly in relation to Christians and Jews, who continued to profess their faith for various reasons. This attitude was not limited to monotheistic communities; it also extended, in certain circumstances, to polytheists, as stated in Sura 9: "If any of the idolaters should seek your protection (Prophet), grant it to

him so that he may hear the word of God, then take him to a place safe for him, for they are people who do not know” (Q 9:6).

In the contemporary era, this approach to da’wah, which emphasizes non-violent coexistence, finds support in various parts of the Islamic world, especially in contexts where Islam coexists with other religions. In this regard, the experience of certain Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, is particularly significant. In these contexts, emphasis is placed on the idea that the true value of da’wah does not lie in practices of forced imposition—sometimes described as “rush and push” (Mohd Sharif and Shamsudin 2017, p. 112)—but rather in the lived witness of faith and in the promotion of the common good within society. This approach, serving as a distinct interpretive paradigm, finds expression in several illustrative examples.

The Indonesian sociopolitical landscape is characterized by a complex mosaic of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. From the perspective of religious demographics, Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, with a Muslim population exceeding two hundred million. This numerical predominance, however, does not preclude the presence of followers of other religious traditions. On the contrary, Indonesia exhibits significant religious plurality, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, among others. Although adherents of these religions constitute numerical minorities in comparison with the Muslim majority, they play significant roles across various spheres of the country’s social life. In this context, the understanding of da’wah is not univocal, as diverse positions exist within Indonesian Islam regarding the methods of inviting others to the Islamic faith. This interpretive diversity has generated controversies among Indonesian Muslims and has also shaped the broader national religious landscape, especially in relation to interfaith relations.

A primary issue concerns the tensions arising from a misunderstanding of the nature of da’wah. The fundamental principle of da’wah, or Islamic missionary activity, is the invitation of individuals to embrace the Islamic faith. This invitation presupposes the recipient’s freedom and autonomy, thereby excluding any form of coercion or undue pressure in the process of conversion. However, as some scholars have recently observed (cf. Suaedy 2019; Munjid 2020; Ihsani et al. 2021), the Indonesian context has also witnessed dynamics aimed at imposing Islamic norms on all members of society through governmental authority. The mandatory use of the hijab in educational institutions in certain regions, discrimination in the recognition of marriages involving non-Muslims, and obstacles to the construction of new Christian places of worship serve as emblematic examples of this phenomenon.

The motivation underlying these attempts is often based on the perception of Islam as an alternative cultural system, positioned as a potential replacement for pre-existing local cultural forms (cf. Munjid 2020, p. 57). The concept of “Arabization” effectively captures this tendency. Nevertheless, the attempt to transfer religious models developed in Middle Eastern contexts without adequate consideration of local cultural particularities appears problematic, since it may generate tensions not only at the religious level but also within society as a whole. The purpose of this critique is not to denigrate Arab Islam as such, but rather to question the unconditional imposition of culturally specific models onto different sociocultural contexts. In relation to da’wah, the fundamental criticism of this perspective rests on the idea that its genuine motivation should derive from an authentic experience of faith, rather than from political or institutional authority. From this standpoint, the reception of da’wah should take the form of a spontaneous and deliberate choice, dependent on the recipient’s voluntary and affirmative response. Indeed, throughout Islamic history, whenever da’wah became intertwined with governmental authority—taking the form of a “top-down approach”⁴—the distinction between authentic

and opportunistic conversions has often emerged as a matter of considerable importance (cf. [Kuiper 2018](#), pp. 38–39).

Abdurrahman Wahid, affectionately known by the Indonesian people as Gus Dur, served as the fourth president of the Republic of Indonesia and played a central role in promoting interfaith dialogue in the country. Although his administration was not always praised for its performance in areas such as the economy and diplomacy, its pro-multicultural orientation has been identified as an important factor in fostering greater openness among Indonesians toward the understanding and acceptance of otherness. At the center of Wahid's thought lies the recognition of diversity as a fundamental element of a just society, capable of resisting discrimination based on social class, ethnicity, race, and gender. This vision explicitly extends to religious diversity; accordingly, da'wah, reinterpreted by Wahid through a multicultural lens, became a central theme in his intellectual and political thought.

Wahid's understanding of multicultural da'wah is founded on the distinction between religion and culture. Although closely connected, religion and culture are not identical realities. Cultures are dynamic and continuously evolving formations, whereas religion—particularly in its foundational doctrine—is not subject to the same degree of historical variability. The capacity of religion to provide believers with stable principles of life depends precisely on this permanence. Consequently, religion offers a necessary foundation for the development of a just and morally oriented existence. The role of religion in relation to culture should therefore not be understood in terms of replacement but rather in terms of inspiration and moral guidance. According to Wahid, the universality of Islam is to be understood with reference to its timeless message, which is capable of transforming human life, rather than to the external forms manifested in the cultures historically associated with it (cf. [Munjid 2020](#), pp. 58–59).

From these premises, Wahid develops his reflection on Islam's approach to a given cultural and religious context. Although da'wah is understood by Muslims as an invitation to truth, it does not entail the eradication of other religious traditions or the standardization of faith. Rather, it is to be exercised in a multicultural manner that affirms and respects religious diversity. He stated "It is true that Qur'an and Hadith say that Islam is the revelation of the truth. However, we should not forget that while saying so, there is no negation to the right of those with different beliefs" ([Wahid 1980](#), p. 109). Wahid's perspective on fidelity to Islam thus differs from a purely institutional or administrative conception of religion. Instead, he locates such fidelity in the internalization of religious principles, including its doctrines and fundamental pillars (cf. [Ihsani et al. 2021](#), p. 111). Consequently, he concludes that the essence of da'wah does not lie in the imposition of administrative policies by authoritative institutions, but rather in the genuine witness of devout believers.

Malaysia, which is geographically proximate to Indonesia, exhibits several comparable dynamics concerning the nature of da'wah within a multi-religious context. Although the Malaysian Constitution formally recognizes Islam as the official religion of the state, non-Malay ethnic groups generally adhere to other religious traditions, including Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. As a result, the practice of da'wah in Malaysia carries significant social and religious implications. On the one hand, it may generate tensions or controversies within society; on the other, it may also become an opportunity to promote interreligious harmony and to overcome both existing and potential obstacles. In this context, several recent studies on the subject deserve attention (cf. [Mohd Sharif and Shamsudin 2017](#); [Abdul Kadir et al. 2021](#)), particularly insofar as they emphasize da'wah as a practice embodied in the moral life of Muslim believers.

Some Malaysian Muslim intellectuals emphasize that an approach to da'wah compatible with a multi-religious context must be established in *akhlaq*, that is, the moral sphere of human life. The Qur'anic principle "You order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God" (Q 3:110) expresses the moral orientation of Islam. When this moral orientation is manifested even toward those who do not profess the Islamic faith, it becomes an intrinsic form of da'wah. In this sense, the cultivation of *akhlaq*—through which Islamic moral values, often shared at the broader social level, are promoted—constitutes an effective way of communicating the Islamic message. It is, therefore, not accidental that, in the Malaysian Islamic context, the expression *da'wah bil al-hal*, which may be translated as "da'wah through conduct" or "da'wah through example," is widely used (cf. [Abdul Kadir et al. 2021](#), pp. 852, 857–58). Nevertheless, the question remains as to the concrete forms such communication may take, namely how the authentic realization of the good through lived faith can be made visible in society. Since da'wah concerns every sphere of human life, theological reflection bears the task of clarifying its foundational principle.

This emphasis on da'wah as the construction of the good in society indicates that it is not merely an invitation to adhere to an institutionalized religion. More fundamentally, it constitutes an invitation to the "path of Allah" ([Don and Salamon 2009](#), p. 39). In a multi-religious society such as Malaysia, this form of da'wah generates a twofold effect. First, it contributes to the promotion of interreligious peace by discouraging forms of conflictual proselytism. Second, it enhances the appeal of Islamic faith, since "sincerity at heart is more persuasive than the spoken or written matter" ([Mohd Sharif and Shamsudin 2017](#), p. 107).

The following Qur'anic passage is particularly relevant in this regard: "He [Allah] does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just" (Q 60:8). Drawing on Malaysian studies concerning da'wah in a multi-religious environment, this verse may be interpreted as a legitimate foundation for establishing dialogical relations between Islam and other religious traditions, including Christianity, in two respects. From the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, this divine injunction authorizes a benevolent attitude toward followers of other faiths. It does not solely permit peaceful coexistence; rather, it situates such coexistence within the framework of divine will. From a second perspective, the verse provides a theological basis for interreligious cooperation aimed at the improvement of society, since it recognizes righteous non-Muslims as subjects worthy of divine love.

This reflection is not limited to the Malaysian context; rather, it may be extended to Muslims living in societies characterized by religious plurality. As previously stated, the approach that has evolved within the Southeast Asian context can be regarded as an embodiment of the paradigm, insofar as it mirrors the fundamental orientation of da'wah. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that the two cases examined should not be understood as isolated exceptions within the Islamic world. Muslims are thus called to cultivate harmonious relationships with followers of other religions across social, economic, and political spheres, in order to promote the well-being of the human community through shared charitable initiatives and the defense of law and justice (cf. [Mohd Sharif and Shamsudin 2017](#), p. 104). From this perspective, da'wah is not a tool of separation or opposition but an invitation to encounter and cooperate in the construction of a society oriented toward the common good, in which believers of different traditions may recognize one another as companions on the journey toward truth.

3.3. *Da'wah and Religious Traditions—Toward Interreligious Dialogue*

From an Islamic standpoint, da'wah is regarded as a divine commandment entrusted to the entire Muslim community (cf. [Walker 1995](#), pp. 344–45; [Kerr 2000](#), pp. 153–55;

Wrogemann 2024, pp. 16–20). However, the ways in which it is carried out vary considerably, ranging from coercive forms rooted in institutional authority to forms of personal witness to the Islamic faith. Consequently, da’wah should be understood as the outcome of a critical and reflective process; its content and structure cannot be reduced to a single fixed formulation. In this regard, it is worth noting that, within the Islamic tradition, da’wah is closely associated with the gift of wisdom. The prophets and saints of Allah are portrayed as individuals endowed with wisdom (*hikmah*), insofar as the Islam they proclaim represents an authentically internalized reality rather than uncritical adherence to a single school of thought (cf. Al-Faruqi 1982, p. 35).

Since da’wah is, in principle, addressed to all individuals who share the same human condition, it does not exclude followers of other religions from the category of its recipients in multi-religious contexts. In this respect, it is particularly significant that, in the Islamic view, the relationship between the *da’i* and the *mad’u*—that is, between the one who invites and the recipient of the message—is conceived in terms of love and brotherhood (cf. Mohd Sharif and Shamsudin 2017, p. 109). The twofold responsibility of the *da’i*, consisting in presenting the Islamic faith while respecting the freedom of the listener, is thus realized in an integrated and non-contradictory manner within this relational framework. This perspective suggests that Muslim practitioners of da’wah should recognize that its fundamental essence does not lie in self-assertion, but in the articulation of faith and fidelity to God.

Given the preceding discussion, it is useful to examine the concept of *wasatiyyah*, a foundational value within the Islamic tradition. *Wasatiyyah*, understood as the “moderate path” or “balanced approach,” functions as a counterweight to extremism and fanaticism. This principle also expresses Islam’s capacity to engage constructively with modernity, specifically through coexistence and cooperation with other religions in multicultural and multi-religious contexts. Indeed, the notion of the “middle way,” which implies the rejection of extremes, is closely connected to respect and tolerance for otherness.

One of the most significant Qur’anic passages in which the concept of *wasatiyyah* appears is verse 2:143. This text expresses Allah’s directive concerning the vocation of the Islamic community: “We have made you (believers) into a just community [community justly balanced—*ummatan wasatan*], so that you may bear witness (to the truth) before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness (to it) before you.”

When considered in its historical context, this verse may be interpreted as reflecting the circumstances in which the early Islamic community lived in coexistence with other religions and peoples. From this perspective, the meaning of the community as “balanced” becomes clearer. This balance is expressed through the establishment of relations with other religious communities already endowed with their own scriptures and prophets. In this regard, it is especially significant that the period in which the verse was revealed coincides with the change in the *qiblah*, that is, the direction of prayer for the Islamic community. This shift from Jerusalem to Mecca was not merely a means of distinguishing Islam more clearly from Judaism and Christianity; it also signaled a progressive broadening of the Islamic community’s horizon. Initially situated within the internal context of the Quraysh tribe and marked by the presence of unbelievers and idolaters, the Islamic community increasingly entered into relations with other religious traditions through this transition (cf. Kamali 2015, pp. 17–18).

When the concept of *wasatiyyah* is applied to da’wah, it becomes clearer how da’wah should function within interreligious dialogue. In this framework, da’wah is shaped by the fundamental principle of balance, which stands in direct contrast to any form of unconditional imposition of the Islamic faith. The concluding verse of Sura 109: “You have your religion, and I have mine,” according to studies conducted by Muslim scholars,

does not constitute an expression of religious indifferentism. Rather, it is a principle of mutual respect grounded in the Islamic spirit of *wasatiyyah* (cf. Hanapi 2014, p. 57; Helmy et al. 2021, pp. 383–84). Consequently, Muslim believers are encouraged to seek points of agreement while consciously avoiding extremism. In this regard, it is important to note that a substantial body of Muslim scholarship has examined the relationship between da’wah and *wasatiyyah* (cf. Hanapi 2014; Helmy et al. 2021; Sarim Karimullah 2023). These studies consistently conclude that, “with regards to the inter-religious relationship, *wasatiyyah* is key to the creation of tolerance and harmony at local, national, and global levels” (Helmy et al. 2021, p. 380).

4. Encounter Between Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah

Scantlebury’s study offers a significant framework for examining the sources of tension between Christian mission and Islamic da’wah. Nearly three decades after its publication, her analysis remains an important point of reference for understanding the interaction between these two religious imperatives. The British scholar argues that hostilities between Christians and Muslims in relation to their respective efforts to communicate and extend their faith do not arise primarily from elements intrinsic to either religious tradition. Rather, tensions emerge when adherents of the two religions associate these activities with “outside factors,” (Scantlebury 1996, p. 258) which contribute to the construction of the other tradition as an adversary. Over the course of history, Christianity and Islam have accumulated collective memories of conflict that may intersect with latent forms of hostility within particular political and social contexts. Within these volatile environments, Christian missionary activity among Muslims and da’wah addressed to Christians may be perceived as aggressive or threatening actions directed against the adherents of the other religion. The possibility of losing members to another religious tradition can generate mutual anxiety, while the acquisition of new adherents may, to some extent, foster a sense of religious superiority. In this regard, Scantlebury (1996, p. 265) maintains that the prospect of “losing converts” to another religion constitutes primarily an “emotive issue” for members of both traditions, even when they might theoretically allow for such a possibility.

As discussed in the preceding chapters, Christian mission and Islamic da’wah should not be interpreted as expressions of absolute opposition toward the presence of other religious traditions. Building on this premise, the present chapter seeks to demonstrate the interconnected nature of these concepts as expressions of a dynamic of self-renewal within faith. It further aims to show how this convergence may provide a foundation for the development of theological dialogue between Christianity and Islam. In summary, the Christian notion of first proclamation, understood in a qualitative sense, may be interpreted as a message addressed not exclusively to others, but likewise to believers themselves, with a view to the continuous deepening and renewal of their encounter with Christ. Similarly, da’wah, while presenting itself as an invitation extended to non-Muslims to embrace the *shahada*—the profession of faith in Allah—also functions as a summons directed inward, toward the Islamic community and its individual members, with the aim of reviving and strengthening faith.

4.1. First Proclamation in a Qualitative Sense

The term “first proclamation” is generally defined as the announcement of the Gospel at the initial stage of the evangelizing process, directed toward those who are not yet Christians. In the Christian tradition, this concept is expressed by the term *kerygma*, which denotes the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ—crucified and risen—through whom salvation is offered to all humanity. The primary purpose of this proclamation is to facilitate an initial encounter with Christ for those who have not yet

received the Good News. The beginning of the Christian journey, according to the well-known formulation of Pope Benedict XVI (2005, n. 1), consists in an encounter with the person of Christ: “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” When the message is freely welcomed by the listener, it becomes the foundational principle of a journey of faith that culminates in incorporation into the ecclesial community through the sacrament of baptism. In this sense, the “first” character of the proclamation is understood primarily in a chronological perspective, as the inaugural moment of the evangelizing process.

While retaining its chronological significance, the first proclamation has also come to be interpreted in recent theological discourse in a qualitative sense. From this perspective, the adjective “first” does not simply refer to something situated at the beginning of a journey and subsequently left behind. Rather, it designates that which preserves a lasting primacy throughout the whole of Christian life. The first proclamation, therefore, is not merely the initial threshold of faith but the originating principle that continually sustains, guides, and renews every subsequent expression of Christian existence. Understood in this way, the first proclamation assumes the character of a permanent dynamism through which believers are constantly led back to the essential core of the Gospel, whose relevance and transformative power are incessantly renewed (cf. Chung 2025, pp. 244–45). In this regard, *Evangelii Gaudium* affirms that the first proclamation is “first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another [...] at every level and moment” (Pope Francis 2013, n. 164). Consequently, the recipient of the first proclamation cannot be identified exclusively with the non-Christian population. Even those who have been baptized remain endlessly in need of a renewed reception of the Gospel within the concrete circumstances of their own lives.

As previously discussed, contemporary Christian theology recognizes the proclamation of the Gospel and interreligious dialogue as complementary dimensions of God’s salvific plan for humanity, rather than as opposing realities. When considered from the perspective of the first proclamation in its qualitative sense, this integration assumes particular significance. Dialogue with followers of other religions may, in fact, be understood as a form of qualitative first proclamation addressed to the hearts of Christians themselves. In encountering adherents of other religious traditions, Christians are prompted to examine themselves and to reassess their own commitment to Christ within the context of religious diversity. Dialogue, therefore, can foster a reawakening and deepening of the believer’s consciousness, becoming a privileged place in which the essential core of faith may reemerge with renewed clarity. This dynamic can be illustrated through two specific effects: the broadening of the believer’s perspective and the maturation of faith.

First, Christians are invited to engage in critical self-reflection, a process that can deepen and expand their understanding of faith. The recognition of the religious other fosters a more profound awareness of one’s own identity, especially when the encounter involves a genuine engagement between one’s personal experience of faith and that of another religious tradition. Moreover, contact with other religions introduces Christians to different symbolic, spiritual, and cultural horizons that transcend the boundaries of their customary ways of thinking and believing. Such encounters can cultivate a form of faith that moves beyond an exclusively individual perspective, fostering openness and the capacity to overcome narrow or self-referential viewpoints. The encounter with otherness, by offering the possibility of recognizing the other “as a gift of God, and as someone who calls upon us and asks to be acknowledged,” (Pope Francis 2016) opens new horizons for the Christian conscience. This broadening of perspective is consistent with a

fundamental conviction of Christian theology: that the mystery of God ultimately exceeds all human understanding.

A second effect of interreligious dialogue, understood as a form of first proclamation in a qualitative sense, concerns the maturation of faith. If one of the primary signs of the believer's maturity is the "ability to embody faith as a natural expression of one's own existence," (Meddi 2004, p. 231) then an obstinate refusal to remain open to others may be interpreted as an indicator of immature faith. A profession of faith confined to a purely subjective horizon and oriented mainly toward individual benefit is exposed to the risk of spiritual immaturity. This risk becomes particularly evident when relationships with others are shaped by narcissistic or utilitarian logics. In such cases, the other is reduced to a function of the self rather than being recognized in their inherent dignity (cf. Bissi 2016, pp. 98–100). By contrast, encounters with followers of other religions can become concrete opportunities for personal and spiritual growth, since they introduce Christians to the values of reciprocity, solidarity, and shared life. From this perspective, interreligious dialogue may be understood as a locus in which the first proclamation continues to resonate within the believer, generating profound effects such as the deepening and transformation of faith.

4.2. *Da'wah Addressed Toward Muslims*

The primary meaning of da'wah lies in the call to the *shahada*. Its purpose is to communicate a message capable of guiding individuals toward an understanding of Islamic principles and their gradual integration into daily life. As discussed above, this form of da'wah can also be practiced constructively in multi-religious contexts, where it functions as a witness to one's faith without involving any form of coercion toward others. It should be noted, however, that this invitation or call is addressed not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims themselves. Although da'wah is often associated with the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, its essential scope also includes efforts aimed at promoting a deeper assimilation of faith among Muslims and encouraging a way of life more fully conformed to Islamic principles. In other words, "*da'wah* is necessarily addressed to both, to the Muslim to press forward toward actualization and to the non-Muslim to join the ranks of those who make the pursuit of God's pattern supreme" (Al-Faruqi 1982, p. 35).

In this context, the recipient of da'wah, that is, the *mad'u*, must be understood in a broader sense that also includes Muslim believers. This perspective gives rise to a conception of conversion that is not limited to the movement from outside to inside the Islamic community but is also understood as a return to religious faithfulness and as a process of spiritual renewal. In this regard, it is useful to recall the thought of Ilyas Kandhlawi, the founder of the Tablighi Jamaat movement, whose main objective was to promote the spirit of da'wah within Islam, with a particular emphasis on the inner transformation of Muslims themselves. One of his statements on *tabligh*—understood as the communication of the Islamic message—aptly summarizes this approach: "The purpose [of going] out on *tabligh* journeys is not merely to [...] guide others. In fact, the objective is to reform ourselves" (Ilahi n.d.).

The concept of da'wah directed toward Muslims is closely connected to the theological understanding of faith within the Islamic tradition. Authentic faith is not conceived simply as the acquisition of knowledge or the intellectual comprehension of doctrinal content. Rather, it is understood as a "learned thing" (Al-Faruqi 1982, p. 35), that is, a reality that must be personally learned, internalized, and lived. It follows that belief in Allah takes the form of a continuous process of growth, deepening, and existential conformity to the divine will. Even after entering Islam through da'wah, the believer continues unceasingly to receive an invitation or call to learn and to remember Allah's will, shaping one's own

existence accordance to it. For this reason, da'wah cannot be reduced to an invitation aimed solely at bringing new believers into the Islamic community. It also assumes the meaning of a permanent exhortation to preserve, renew, and revive the lived reality of Islamic faith.

The fact that da'wah cannot be reduced to proselytism also emerges clearly from the Qur'an. A particularly significant example is found in those verses in which the call to faith and religious perseverance is addressed to Muslims themselves, rather than exclusively to non-Muslims. In this regard, Sura 22 states: "Believers [You who have faith], bow down, prostrate yourselves, worship your Lord, and do good so that you may succeed" (Q 22:77). Sura 57 likewise belongs to this interpretive framework, as it articulates even more explicitly the idea of a call to conversion addressed to those who already profess the Islamic faith: "Believers [You who have faith], be mindful of God and have faith in His messenger: He will give you a double share of His mercy; He will provide a light to help you walk; He will forgive you" (Q 57:28).

This perspective is further supported by a theological interpretation of da'wah derived from the Qur'anic text. Indeed, the fundamental meaning of the da'wah undertaken by the Islamic community is rooted in Allah's own da'wah toward that same community of believers, as presented in the Qur'an. In other words, before engaging in da'wah as a service to God, a Muslim must first have received and responded to the da'wah of Allah. In the Qur'an, Allah is depicted as the One who invites all humanity to the "Home of Peace" and guides those who desire it to the "straight path" (cf. Q 10:25). Accordingly, every Muslim engaged in da'wah, even prior to being regarded as a *da'i*, must first be understood as someone who has already been summoned by Allah, the primordial and foundational *da'i*. From this standpoint, it is worth noting that this conception, by grounding da'wah in the divine will, bears a significant resemblance to the Christian concept of *Missio Dei*. In other words, "not unlike the concept of *Missio Dei* in the Bible—wherein God takes the initiative in redemption—God is pictured in the Qur'an as the first and ultimate *dā'ī*" (Kuiper 2018, p. 19).

The notion of da'wah as a summons addressed to Muslims is supported by the Qur'an, indicating that this concept has been significant within Islam since the time of the first *umma*. In the earliest phase of Islam, before its institutionalization in its current sense, this form of internal da'wah played a crucial role in fostering solidarity and cohesion within the emerging community (cf. Kuiper 2018, pp. 24–25). A similar line of reasoning can be applied to contemporary Islam. In the modern Muslim world, where a diversity of interpretations concerning the fundamental essence of Islam is present, the question of the form that this proclamation should take remains of central importance. In this context, particular attention may be paid to the principle "order what is right, forbid what is wrong" (Q 3:110). When applied first and foremost to oneself, this principle can significantly contribute to strengthening the integration and cohesion of the Islamic community. Moreover, this conception of da'wah, precisely because of its internal and formative character, stands in clear contrast to coercive or violent methods. For this reason, it may also be regarded as intrinsically connected to the building of relationships with other religious traditions.

4.3. Dialogue Between Mission and Da'wah—Comparative Theology

The recognition that both Christian mission and Islamic da'wah possess an inherent capacity for self-renewal offers a significant opportunity for fostering dialogue between the two religions. The Christian concept of mission and the Islamic concept of da'wah share the primary objective of communicating their respective faiths to others. However, if these concepts were reduced exclusively to proselytism, they would generate considerable theological tensions within the context of interreligious dialogue. As the preceding analysis

has shown, the situation changes when first proclamation is understood in its qualitative meaning as a permanent message accompanying the Christians' journey of faith and when da'wah is likewise considered in its internal dimension as a fundamental teaching oriented to the continual renewal of Muslims. From this perspective, Christianity and Islam may adopt a more constructive posture toward one another, opening a horizon of theological dialogue based precisely on these convergent elements. In essence, mission and da'wah converge in their shared orientation toward the renewal of both the community and individual believers. This convergence allows for the identification of meaningful commonalities between the two religions and, in turn, supports the development of an authentic theological inquiry. Consequently, what may initially appear as an obstacle in the relationship between Christianity and Islam can instead be reinterpreted as an opportunity to establish a foundation for dialogue, insofar as it reveals a shared "common denominator" between the two religious traditions.

In this regard, it is important to observe that the more the normative core of one's own religion is embodied in an authentic and consistent manner, the greater the capacity to cultivate respect and attentiveness toward the other and toward those who profess a different faith. Indeed, the maturation of faith is closely associated with a deeper awareness of the transcendence of the Absolute. It is, therefore, intimately connected to the recognition that one's personal understanding of God can never be considered exhaustively definitive but remains, in certain respects, inherently limited. Within Christian doctrine, the inexhaustibility of the divine mystery constitutes a foundational principle of faith, which is no less significant than the affirmation of God's complete revelation in Christ. This perspective finds an important correspondence in the Islamic profession of faith in Allah as the transcendent Absolute. In this context, it becomes evident that both Christian mission and Islamic da'wah are intrinsically linked to the humility of the believer. The essential meaning of professing one's faith does not lie in self-assertion but rather in bearing witness before others to an Absolute who, while truly knowable, always transcends the limits of human comprehension.

The present study argues that contemporary comparative theology provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this reflection, since it enables elements from different religious traditions to be brought into a single theological inquiry. Comparative theology may address broad themes such as ultimate reality, love, the human condition, or the knowledge of creation (cf. Sabetta 2025, pp. 7–9). At the same time, it may also focus on more specific questions, such as the comparison between Christian mission and Islamic da'wah, which constitutes the subject of the present study. The primary objective of comparative theology is not the neutral comparison of religious systems, but rather the deepening of the researcher's understanding of their own faith through serious engagement with another religious tradition. This process can foster spiritual transformation. From this perspective, the interaction between elements belonging to different religious traditions becomes especially significant, as it offers new insights capable of enriching one's understanding of faith through dynamics of "intensification and rectification, recovery and reinterpretation, development and reaffirmation of the truth of one or both traditions" (Sabetta 2025, p. 8). In the context of the present research, this deepening of one's own faith takes the form of a conversion to more authentic faith in God, made possible through the effect of first proclamation, understood in a qualitative sense, and through da'wah directed toward the *da'i* himself.

From this perspective, the conclusion toward which this research moves may be described in terms of mutual enrichment between the two religions. Through encounters, Christians and Muslims are able to attain a deeper understanding of both themselves and the other. This process is particularly relevant in contexts where Christians and Muslims

live alongside one another. In such circumstances, the dual responsibility of adherents of both Christianity and Islam toward religious “others” becomes especially evident. On the one hand, they are called to bear faithful witness to their own faith; on the other hand, they are called to sincerely respect the faith of others. The desire to communicate one’s faith must not be founded upon capturing others by force, by religious propaganda, or by means of power (cf. [Pope Leo XIV 2025](#)). Rather, it should be rooted in the witness of an exemplary life characterized by love. When Christians and Muslims engage in genuinely open dialogue, the possibility of renewed hope for a shared future emerges, not only for the two religions but for the whole human family. In this regard, it is fitting to conclude this discussion by returning to the statement placed at the beginning of the *Document on Human Fraternity*, signed by [Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb \(2019\)](#): “Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved.”

5. Conclusions

One of the potential negative perceptions that other religions may hold of Christian mission is the idea that Christian doctrine unconditionally regards every human being as “condemned” on account of original sin and that the theological meaning of mission is based on this assumption. The doctrine of redemption from sin is, of course, an essential element of the proclamation of the Gospel. However, contemporary Christian missiology has increasingly emphasized the proclamation of God’s love as the central focus of mission. From this perspective, Christian mission shares certain points of contact with the Islamic understanding of the human being as God’s *khalifah*. In the Islamic view, human beings are not regarded merely as objects of salvation but also as participants and collaborators in the realization of God’s will. This understanding resonates with the Christian conception of proclamation as witness to divine love, made visible through the lived experience of the believer.

The present study has explored the significance of interreligious dialogue through a comparison between Christian mission and Islamic da’wah. Its findings are particularly relevant in two respects. First, bearing witness to one’s faith and proclaiming it to others does not imply self-promotion or self-aggrandizement. Rather, it constitutes a form of communication grounded in an authentic and personal belief in God. A comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam shows that both traditions profess faith in a God who transcends the full scope of human comprehension. This transcendence likewise exceeds the theological formulations developed within each religious tradition. Indeed, any discourse concerning God necessarily remains open-ended, since all human constructs—whether doctrines, theories, rituals, symbols, or forms of language—are ultimately incapable of fully expressing the mystery and essence of God. In light of this divine transcendence, both religions are called to avoid exclusivist attitudes in their relationships with other religious traditions, especially when such attitudes claim to define the truth of their own faith in absolute and definitive terms.

Second, the fundamental meaning of Christian mission—particularly in its dimension of proclamation—and of da’wah consists, in any case, in the effort to communicate one’s faith to others. This shared dynamic may suggest the possibility of a competitive relationship between the two concepts. In other words, Christian missionary activity and Islamic da’wah may appear to generate a competitive field in which the effective transmission of religious values and teachings becomes a decisive factor in the standing of each religious community. Nevertheless, it is essential that such competition does not degenerate into mutual hostility or into an unconditional desire to prevail over the other. Rather, it should take the form of a “contest” inspired by altruistic love. For this reason, both religions are called to embody, in a genuine manner, the spirit of dialogue and cooperation.

Mission and da'wah constitute foundational dimensions of Christianity and Islam, respectively. At first glance, these concepts may appear incompatible with the development of a dialogical relationship between the two religious traditions. A closer theological examination, however, reveals that they can provide significant grounds for interreligious dialogue, insofar as both entail respect for the religious other and an inward-facing process of conversion and spiritual renewal. Consequently, when Christianity and Islam engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation marked by mutual respect, their encounter can foster a shared intellectual and spiritual space. Within such a space, each religion may articulate its distinctive identity with greater clarity, authenticity, and openness toward the other.

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Notes

- ¹ The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue—now the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue—made a significant contribution to the preparation of the encyclical.
- ² The English translation of the verses of the Qur'an utilized in this study is by Muhammad. A. S. Abdel Haleem and published by Oxford University Press in 2005 (Abdel Haleem 2005).
- ³ Among the Qur'anic verses cited in relation to religious tolerance, the declaration "no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256) occurs in Sura 2 (*al-Baqara*), traditionally classified as Medinan. In Kuiper's theory, however, the expressions "Meccan pattern" and "Medinan pattern" do not imply that all tolerant verses were revealed in Mecca and all intolerant verses subsequently in Medina. Rather, they refer to the changing circumstances of the Muslim community, which underwent a gradual process of consolidation in Medina while continuing, particularly during the early period, to interact with a multi-religious environment.
- ⁴ The terms "top-down approach" and "bottom-up approach," as used by Matthew J. Kuiper, refer to two contrasting models for the implementation of da'wah. In essence, the top-down approach denotes a model of Islamic propagation grounded in state authority and institutional imposition. Conversely, the bottom-up approach describes a process driven by non-governmental initiatives, including schools, commercial activities, public preaching, Sufi movements, and the actions of individual lay Muslims. These initiatives contribute to the transmission of the Islamic faith from the grassroots level upward.

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