INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

Journal of Interreligious Studies

Issue 45 | March 2025

2023 Engaging Particularities Conference

Special Issue

Visions and Visionaries: Animating Texts, Liberative Experiences, Contemporary Realities

An open-access, peer-reviewed publication of Hebrew College, Boston University School of Theology, and Hartford International University for Religion and Peace

INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES
Journal of Interreligious Studies

THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES
Published by Hebrew College, Boston University School of Theology, & Hartford International University for Religion and Peace

We remain grateful to Dr. Stephanie Varnon-Hughes and Rabbi Joshua M. Z. Stanton for their vision and commitment to interreligious engagement by founding the Journal under its original title, the Journal of Interreligious Dialogue, in 2009.

ISSN 2380-8187 irstudies.org

THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

ISSUE 45 | MARCH 2025

SPECIAL ISSUE

**20TH ANNUAL
ENGAGING PARTICULARITIES CONFERENCE
BOSTON COLLEGE, MARCH 12-13, 2023**

**Visions and Visionaries:
Animating Texts, Liberative Experiences, Contemporary Realities**

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Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 1
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

Issue 45 is a special issue dedicated to the 20th Annual *Engaging Particularities* Conference of Boston College.[1] The organizers of the conference invited select speakers to convert their presentations into academic articles. The process resulted in four articles that broadly represent the conference theme and overall tenor of the conversations. I am grateful to the Guest Editor, Domenik Ackermann of Paderborn University (Germany), for his time and experience gathering these articles. A more formal and detailed introduction to the special issue is found in his introduction that follows. This is now our fifth special issue dedicated to the conference over the past few years. The editorial team and staff at *Journal of Interreligious Studies* remain committed to this ongoing partnership with *Engaging Particularities* and look forward to special issues dedicated to the conference in the future.

Three book reviews follow the articles:

- *Beyond Binaries: Religious Diversity in Europe*, edited by Joshua Ralston and Klaus von Stosch and reviewed by Domenik Ackermann
- *Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist Chaplaincy in Higher Education*, by Gregory W. McGonigle and reviewed by Soren M. Hessler
- *Elonei Mamre: The Encounter of Judaism and Orthodox Christianity*, edited by Nicholas de Lange, Elena Narinskaya and Sybil Sheridan and reviewed by Gavin D'Costa

I am grateful for the meticulous editing, layout, and design work performed by Lucinda Mosher (Senior Editor) and S. Aaron Wong (Research Fellow). The editorial team and staff have several issues in the works and so we expect a busy year ahead. For now, we hope you find this issue intellectually insightful and illuminating.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Interreligious Studies

1 For details, see https://www.engagingparticularities.com/2023-conference.

Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 2–4
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

Visions and Visionaries: Animating Texts, Liberative Experiences, Contemporary Realities

We live in a world of deep space telescopes and electron microscopes—a world in which we seem to be able to see everything that is. We also navigate a precarious balance—teetering between sustainability and catastrophe, democracy and authoritarianism, pluralism and fundamentalism, progress and revanchist chauvinism. These observations may lead us to ponder how we will confront such a moment from theological perspectives—especially when considering the nature of our pursuit of interreligious dialogue and mutual learning. For two decades, the *Engaging Particularities* conference had given graduate students and emerging scholars an avenue for discussing current trends and themes—and their own research—in the fields of comparative theology, interfaith studies, comparative religions, and related disciplines. Clearly, its twentieth iteration would require a theme capable of opening the discussion to address the current technological, political, and ideological realities. Hence, for the convening in March 2023, participants were invited to focus on "Visions and Visionaries: Animating Texts, Liberative Experiences, Contemporary Realities."

The theme for 2023 had an eschatological touch with good reason. On the one hand, it acknowledged the juncture at which conference participants currently found themselves globally, politically, and environmentally. When looking into the past of many religious traditions, moments of similar gravity were met by visionaries, prophets, and visions that carry a way forward. Often, the past may hold keys for moving forward into the future. How, then, could visionaries and visionary texts speak to this juncture of our time? On the other hand, this theme reflected, perhaps inadvertently, questions about the directions in which comparative theology and interreligious studies are headed. Again, to envision the next generation of research, one may need to look back into history to learn from the past. This special issue comprises peer-reviewed article versions of select presentations from the twentieth

Engaging Particularities conference. Its four articles reflect the rich spectrum of approaches and scholarship emerging from our discussions. We invited thoughtful contributions from the conference that, in our view, prompted us to think critically and rethink some of the questions posed.

In "Material Encounter: The Agency of Objects in Otherworldly Experiences," Joseph Kimmel argues that physical objects mediate visionary and otherworldly experiences. He compares a passage in the Testament of Solomon regarding a ring inscribed with the divine Name YHWH to an amulet from the Black Sea region that contained incantations. Kimmel provides a convincing analysis and comparison, demonstrating that the inscription of divine names was seen to transfer divine power to humans in various ancient traditions. His approach also reflects a frequent new shift in comparative theology, particularly in challenging binaries between body and mind, as well as the spiritual and physical realms.

Catherine Cornille's contribution, "Models of Convergence in Comparative Theology," encourages us to reflect on the field of comparative theology by examining its emergence. Cornille discusses how all comparative theological discourses imply a notion of convergence and outlines various models of such convergence. She argues that comparative theology "requires some sense of commonality with other religious traditions, whether in shared questions, a shared origin, similar processes of religious reasoning, and/or a shared destiny and goal" (11). Thus, the idea of convergence may serve as a motivation to identify such commonality.

In "Blessed be the Strangers," Azeel Azab argues that the eschatological Islamic idea of strangerhood, derived from a hadith, provides a conceptual history that can be used to create an ethical framework for addressing what Azab describes as the "Anthropocenic moment" of our time (3). Azab provides compelling examples of how the embodiment of strangerhood can manifest in practice.

Finally, Zachary Taylor's contribution, "Time and the Ethical Subject," compares Emmanuel Levinas's idea of "diachronic time" with Augustine's understanding of time and subjectivity. It asserts that Levinas's notion of diachronic time, where subjectivity is formed in an immemorial past and shaped by encounters with others, informs Augustine's belief that the human subject is established in an eternal relationship with God. Through Levinas's lens, Taylor presents an Augustine who emphasizes that worshiping God includes, and even requires, ethical action and social responsibility.

I am grateful for the time and patience the authors of these articles invested in compiling their thoughts, and I am delighted by their rigor and

the excellence of the contributions that address the specifics. Of course, the conference and proceedings would not have been possible without my dear friend and co-organizer, Greg Mileski, who especially spearheaded its execution. I am grateful as well to Dorie Goehring, Megan Hopkins, Shinjae Lee, and Jess Navarette for the time they dedicated to making the conference possible. Finally, many thanks to Axel Takacs for allowing us to publish these articles in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*.

Domenik Ackermann
Guest Editor

Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 2–4
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

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Domenic Ackerman
Guest Editor

Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 5–18
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

ARTICLE

Material Encounters: The Agency of Objects in Otherworldly Experiences

Joseph L. Kimmel

Abstract
Against the notion that otherworldly experiences are entirely ethereal, this article argues that physical objects crucially mediate such experiences. I do so by comparing sacred artifacts from two ancient contexts: the early Christian *Testament of Solomon* and a first-century (BCE) amulet dedicated to Helios. I discuss both resonances and dissonances between their respective depictions of materiality's critical role in facilitating otherworldly encounters and then apply this comparative analysis to contemporary conversations in neo-materialist philosophy.

Keywords
Testament of Solomon, amulet, ring, neo-materialism, names

Visions, dreams, mystical encounters: we tend to think of such experiences in highly ephemeral, immaterial terms, so much so that such experiences are often associated with being "out-of-the-body," removed from physical reality, divorced from "base" materiality which, it is assumed, may impede one's lofty, otherworldly quest. But in our efforts to preserve a pure pathway up to supernatural realms, how have we overlooked the potential for objects themselves to facilitate this journey? How have we endorsed the false dichotomy of mind versus body, and more generally the spiritual versus the physical—false binaries which foster a certain myopia towards the otherworldly power of seemingly mundane, physical objects? This

article will offer a corrective to this false dichotomy by comparing two texts which prominently feature particular physical materials connecting humans with superhuman beings, like demons and deities. In so doing, the article will show how specific objects enable "visionary experiences," a phrase I interpret in a general sense to mean vision-expanding encounters with typically invisible beings.

More specifically, I will first discuss how the early-Christian text, *The Testament of Solomon*, portrays a particular ring, inscribed with the omnipotent name of YHWH, which enables King Solomon to summon, interrogate, and compel behavior from certain demons. This text then will be compared with a first-century amulet from the Black Sea region—an amulet which promises, through its materially inscribed invocations, to unite the amulet's wearer with the sun god (Helios) himself, granting the wearer both a transformative ontological experience and an otherworldly power beyond one's wildest dreams. Finally, in my conclusion, after discussing how these two textual objects—the ring and the amulet—echo and contrast each other, I will finish by highlighting areas of mutual relevance between these ancient artifacts and contemporary neo-materialist voices around questions of the agency of materiality and the ability of objects to "do things" in our world. More specifically, I will show how the artifacts examined below both enhance and challenge the core contentions of neo-materialist philosophers. Jane Bennett, for example, has cogently argued that nonbiological matter functions just as agentively upon its environment as do the biological forces—plants, humans—which are more commonly recognized as agents.[1] This article will support this view by demonstrating the agency of ancient nonbiological objects, but it will also challenge and nuance neo-materialist arguments by showing how the artifacts discussed below act agentively not through materiality alone but by pairing the material with the linguistic, and the physical with the ontological. That is, the objects analyzed in this article will be shown, à la Bennett, to be material agents, but moving beyond Bennett, their agency will be demonstrated to flow at least in part through the linguistic and ontological dimensions of divine names.[2]

1 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

2 Thus, the argument I aim to make in this article overlaps with Jeffrey J. Kripal's work on the "superhumanities," particularly in how the possession and use of an empowered object enables humans to transcend the limits of their humanity. While my focus is primarily upon the artifacts' capacities to access otherworldly, "divine" power, the examples surveyed below present human beings attaining this superior power in order to overcome the limits of human power and ontology. See, Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities*

The Testament of Solomon

The Testament of Solomon, a Christian text whose earliest elements date from the first to fourth centuries CE, offers a poignant example of a vision-expanding object through its depiction of a very special ring acquired by King Solomon early in the narrative.[3] According to the story told in this *Testament*, a young boy working for Solomon in the construction of the Temple is harassed each night by a demon named Ornias. The demonic affliction causes the boy to grow thinner and thinner until finally his emaciated state catches Solomon's eye, and the king asks the boy the reason for his suffering. Upon hearing of the boy's demonic oppression at the hands of Ornias, Solomon turns to God in prayer, imploring God to grant Solomon power over the demon so that he may alleviate the young boy's suffering. Finally, after many petitions, the archangel Michael appears to Solomon, bearing "a ring, having a seal consisting of an engraved stone."[4] Michael then tells Solomon, "Take this gift which the Lord God … has sent to you, [and] when you bear [that is, wear] this seal of God, you shall imprison all the demons, both female and male, and with their help you shall build Jerusalem [that is, the Jerusalem Temple]."[5]

Solomon then gives this divine ring to the afflicted boy and instructs him in the following manner: "Then I [Solomon] said to him [the boy]: At the moment the demon appears to you, fling this ring into his chest, and say to

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.)

3 The provenance and dating of this work are notoriously complex and unresolved. While some scholars contend that a single, complete version emerged within the first few centuries of the Jesus movement, others argue that this text is a mishmash of components whose respective dates range from antiquity into the medieval era. For the former view, see C. C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1922); Todd Klutz, *Rewriting the* Testament of Solomon*: Tradition, Conflict and Identity in a Late Antique Pseudepigraphon* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005). By contrast, the latter position is expressed in Sarah L. Schwarz, "Reconsidering the *Testament of Solomon*," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 16 (3) (2007): 203–37. The standard critical edition of the *Testament of Solomon* (*TSol*) is the one established and edited by McCown based on fourteen Greek manuscripts. McCown's critical edition served as the basis for the influential translation by D. C. Duling featured in James Charlesworth's edited collection of "Old Testament Pseudepigrapha." Duling's translation is the source of the references in this article. See D. C. Duling, "Testament of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume One: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2010), 935–87.

4 Duling, "Testament of Solomon," 962.

5 Duling, 962.

him, 'Come, Solomon summons you!'…" The boy then takes the ring and does as he is told, and thereby immediately gains power over the previously oppressive demon. As the text reads, once the boy shoves the inscribed ring from God into the demon's chest, "the demon screamed and said to the little boy, 'Why have you done this? Remove the ring and give it back to Solomon, and I shall give you all the silver and gold of the earth.'"[6] The boy refuses to be bought off, however, and through the power of the ring, he forces Ornias the demon to appear before Solomon. Solomon, in turn, then utilizes the ring to compel Ornias to summon other demons, like Beelzeboul. Coerced to appear before Solomon, Beelzeboul is then forced—ultimately, again, under the power of the ring—to submit to an interrogation in which Beelzeboul must reveal its particular demonic activities and which specific angel has the ability to thwart its demonic power. After disclosing this secret and valuable information, Beelzeboul is then conscripted to assist in the Temple's construction by cutting massive marble stones.[7]

By linking this "magic" ring with King Solomon, the *Testament* taps into a deep reservoir of traditions celebrating the otherworldly power of this exalted Israelite monarch. These traditions ultimately stemmed from Solomon's biblical association with profound wisdom (1 Kings 4:29–34). But while the biblical account centers upon Solomon's mastery of earthly matters (for example, his knowledge of plants and animals), this worldly wisdom was expanded—beginning in the Second Temple Period but stretching well into late antiquity and beyond—to include esoteric, "magical" knowledge.[8]

6 Duling, "Testament of Solomon," 962.

7 While beyond the scope of this article, such compelled revelation of personal, compromising information has important links both to early Christian exorcistic pericopæ (for example, Mark 5:1–13) and to Louis Althusser's theory of *interpellation*. For scholarly analyses of these resonant phenomena, see Joseph Kimmel, "Demons Seeking Identity?: The Psychic Life of New Testament Exorcisms," *JBL* 143 (1) (2024): 85–104; Kimmel, "'What is Your Name?': Names Comparatively Compelled in Christian and Buddhist Texts," *JIRS* 40 (December 2023): 65–71; Kimmel, "Coercive Names: Interpreting Mark 5:1–13 with Althusser's 'Interpellation,'" *Biblical Interpretation* 31 (2023): 356–73.

8 Solomon's association with esoteric knowledge and so-called "magical" power is evident both in ancient Jewish texts, like Josephus' *Antiquities* (see 8.2.5), as well as Greco-Egyptian ritual papyri (see, for example, PGM IV.859, IV.3039, and XCII.5). The *Testament of Solomon* built upon, and advanced, this body of Solomonic traditions, which continued to expand throughout antiquity in Jewish and Christian communities, eventually appearing in Islamic ones as well. This interreligious attraction to Solomon as a purveyor of otherworldly power also appears prominently in the medieval period, with numerous "magical" works, apocryphally ascribed to Solomon, composed in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic (Duling,

Here Solomon's use of superhuman power is depicted within a retelling of the famous story of his construction of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 6). But in so doing, the *Testament* also communicates an array of intertwined ideas concerning demons and angels, sickness and health, and the powers of otherworldly forces—including onomastic and astrological ones—which may be harnessed by humans with divine help.[9]

But even more to the point of this article, in the *Testament of Solomon* we also see an explicit example of an object which bears the capacity to transform. Through the power of the supernatural ring, given specially to Solomon by God via the archangel Michael, Solomon gains access into the demonic world and, moreover, receives power over demons such that he can compel them to appear before his throne, divulge sensitive and compromising information about themselves, and serve—apparently against their will—in the building of the Jerusalem Temple.[10] Moreover, the *Testament* strongly suggests that crucial to the ring's transformative power is the engraved stone at its heart, as evidenced by the archangel Michael's comment that by means of the "seal of God," Solomon would be able to imprison and compel all demons. Through this allusion to God's "seal," the *Testament* employs royal imagery in order to make its point, viz., just as a monarch's power over his or her realm is conveyed by the royal seal, through which objects (for example, letters, correspondence) are stamped in order to imbue them with royal authority, so too is the ring of God stamped with God's own seal in order to imbue it with God's almighty power. Admittedly, there is no scholarly consensus over what exactly this seal looked like. While some manuscripts assert that the seal is a pentagram (a belief which gave rise to the pentagram's association with magical, and even occult, power, starting

"Testament of Solomon," 956).

9 Schwarz, in fact, argues that one of the earliest strands of this work is these very spells, which were traditionally associated with Solomon's otherworldly power and used, in part, to ward off demonic attacks. Moreover, Schwarz contends that as the *Testament* was emended over the centuries, the spellbook core eventually came to be set within the narrative framework of the Temple's construction story, thereby advancing the text towards its final version (Schwarz, "Reconsidering," 208).

10 The use of rings to channel otherworldly power was not limited in antiquity just to this particular narrative. Numerous examples of actual ancient rings, inscribed with divine names and other empowered features, indicate that Solomon's ring in the *Testament* is by no means an isolated phenomenon or a merely imaginative literary flourish. A substantive overview of the ancient gemstones inscribed and then set in rings can be found in Véronique Dasen and Árpád M. Nagy, "Gems," in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 416–55.

especially in the medieval period), some of the *Testament*'s earliest versions suggest that the "seal of God" refers to the Divine Name.[11] This reading, moreover, is supported by Talmudic traditions in which Solomon's special ring is explicitly described as having the Name of God engraved upon it.[12]

Names Inscribed for Protection: A First-Century BCE/CE Amulet from Pontus

This association between a particular name and otherworldly power is also evident on Hellenistic amulets found widely throughout the ancient Mediterranean, including amulets specifically focused on providing protection for their wearers through the inscription of specific divine names.[13] An example of this kind of "name-based" protective amulet

11 Duling, "Testament of Solomon," 962 fn. k.

12 See *Tractate Gittin*, folio 68a: "Solomon thereupon sent thither Benaiahu son of Jehoiada, giving him a chain on which was graven the [Divine] Name and a ring on which was graven the Name and fleeces of wool and bottles of wine." Solomon's enduring appearance across both Jewish and Christian texts (and other artifacts, like amulets) featuring otherworldly power, as well as the references to Solomon in the ritual papyri (see fn. 8), points to the "shared magical culture of late antiquity," as described by scholars like Joseph Sanzo and Ra'anan Boustan. Their excellent, co-written article stresses "the fluctuating nature of religious idioms and communal boundaries" (219) in late antique contexts where individuals were often more interested in ritual efficacy than sectarian borders. That is, the effectiveness of a given technique, such as invoking Solomon's name, often was valued much more highly than policing the theological boundaries around which tradition "owned" a particular technique. See Ra'anan Boustan and Joseph E. Sanzo, "Christian Magicians, Jewish Magical Idioms, and the Shared Magical Culture of Late Antiquity," *HTR* 110 (2) (2017): 217–40.

13 This phenomenon of written names used specifically for protection, that is, protection via onomastic "power," appears ubiquitously in antiquity on other objects as well. In addition to amulets, this use of written names is seen, for example, on certain Aramaic incantation bowls, which were inscribed with a spell to protect against demonic attack and placed beneath one's home. The belief that such protection was secured because of the power of a particular name in the bowl's incantation is evident, for example, on the 5th bowl analyzed by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked in their *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1985), 158–63. Using the language of divorce documents and "ban formulas" to remove any harmful spirits from a household (as well as denying them entry), the bowl also incorporates an *historiola* about a particular rabbi (Rabbi Yehoshua' bar Perahya) who successfully overcame a certain "lilith" infamous for strangling humans. The bowl recounts that while the lilith initially refused to submit because Rabbi Yehoshua' "did not

can be seen on a silver *lamella* of twenty lines discovered rolled-up, having been placed in a bronze tube and deposited in a grave in the Pontic city of Amisos, near the southern coast of the Black Sea.[14] Although its discovery in a grave is reminiscent of a primary delivery method for curse tablets, both John Gager and Roy Kotansky identify this artifact as an amulet—a conclusion supported by its bronze tube (for ease of wearing) and its emphasis on protection rather than cursing.[15] Paleographical analysis identifies the amulet's script as "round, somewhat cursive," and based on comparisons with the scripts of Egyptian papyri, dates this artifact between the first century BCE and first century CE.[16]

The text of this amulet runs from left to right in straight lines across the piece as seen in the following image:[17]

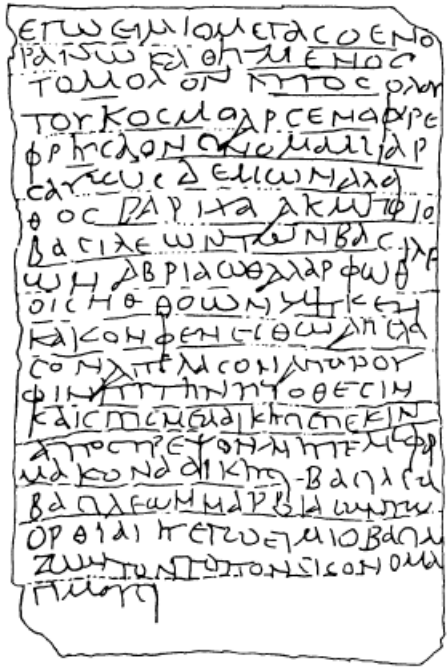
know her name," the rabbi eventually secured control over her by writing her name into a ritual "deed of divorce." By thus retelling this story, this apotropaic bowl both underscores the importance of names for channeling protective power against liliths specifically, while also attempting to access this power for the bowl's own protective purposes through the recounting of this particular *historiola*. In conjunction with the bowl's own repeated invocations to particular angelic and divine names (for example, "name of Gabriel," "name of Yeho'el," "Yah," "Sabaoth"), its inclusion of this *historiola* points to an attempt to activate the power of Rabbi Yehoshua'—secured via his writing of a lilith's name on a divorce decree—and to apply this power to the bowl's apotropaic purpose within its particular context. On the ritual functions of *historiolae*, see David Frankfurter, "Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells," in: *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power,* ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 455–76. On this particular bowl, in addition to Naveh and Shaked's text, see also, John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 229–31.

14 For previous scholarship on this artifact, in addition to the texts by Gager and Kotansky cited below, see, Sophrone Pétridès, "Amulette judéo-grecque," *Echos d'Orient* 8 (51) (1905): 88–90; Richard Wünsch, "Deisidaimoniaka," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 12 (1909): 24–32; Karl Preisendanz, "Die griechischen und lateinischen Zaubertfeln," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 9 (1928), 132; John Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 157–59. Please note that this article's analysis of this artifact draws directly upon part of the fourth chapter of my dissertation: Joseph L. Kimmel, "Power in the Name: Towards a Theological Posthumanism" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2023); see also: Kimmel, *Power in the Name: A Comparative Analysis of Onomastic Invocations* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

15 Gager, *Curse Tablets,* 225–26; Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae, Part I: Published Texts of Known Provenance* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 1994), 181–82.

16 Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 182.

17 Kotansky, 184.



The text reads as follows: "I am the Great One who sits in heaven [upon] the moving vault of the whole cosmos, *Arsenophris*, [whose] sure name [is] *Miarsau*, like the good *daimon*, *Barichaa Kmeph*, the one who rules over kings. *Abriaoth*, *Alarphoth*, *oi Seth*, the one who is. Let harm appear no longer! Drive away, drive away the lawsuit [or, "curse"] from Rufina![18] And if anyone shall injure me henceforth, turn [that one] away![19] And may no poison harm me, the King of Kings, *Narbiaon to orthiare.* I truly am the one acting as king in the region, in the name of Mousa."[20] While the numerous divine names,

18 See John Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 225.

19 Or, following Gager, "revert [it, i.e. the curse] back to him/her;" see John Gager, 226. But compare Kotansky's rebuttal of this reading in favor of a rendering that focuses not on a past curse but rather on any injury directed henceforth toward the wearer of the amulet; see Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 190.

20 Εγω ειμι ο μεγας ο εν ου- / ρανω καθημενος / το μολον κυτος ολου / του κοσμου Αρσενοφρε- / φρης σαον ονομα Μιαρ- / σαυ ως δεμων αγα- / θος Βαριχαα Κμηφι ο / βασιλε[υ]ων των βασιλε- / ων Αβριαωθ Αλαρφωθ / οι Σηθθ ο ων μηκετι / κακον φενεσθω απελα- / σον απελασον απο Ρου- / φινης την υποθεσιν / και ει τις με αδικησι επεκινα / αποστρεφον μητε με φαρ- / μακον αδικησι βασιλεα / βασιλεων Ναρβιαων τω / ορθιαρη εγω ειμι ο βασιλι- / ζων τον τοπον

clauses, and injunctions packed tightly onto the surface of this amulet are individually fascinating and collectively important for the artifact's intended effect, my focus will center specifically on the text's first reference to "ονομα" (line 5) in the explicit linking of this term with ritual power.

The amulet's opening gambit makes a play far beyond the realm of mortals, as the text pronounces its wearer to be the "the Great One who sits in heaven [upon] the moving vault of the whole cosmos" (lines 1–4). Thus equating the wearer with the sun god, the text subsequently remains at this lofty, divine level for roughly its first half (until the μηκετι of line 10), before rapidly descending back to Earth in its description of the mundane threats feared by Rufina, the amulet's owner (lines 10–16). It then concludes by raising Rufina's status up yet again, not quite as high as heaven but still to the level of an almighty monarch ("King of Kings"), empowered "in the name" of Mousa, an actual queen of the Pontic city of Kios (lines 16-–20).

More specifically, the amulet's opening lines assert an astounding set of claims about Rufina, the object's wearer. Through a series of appositional phrases, the "I" which opens the amulet's text is identified as the sun god himself. This equation is accomplished through a series of heliocentric allusions, including the activity of sitting in heaven on the "moving vault" (το μολον κυτος [line 3]) of the cosmos, along with the divine names of Arsenophris, Miarsau, and Kmeph. Kotansky's analysis of this amulet elucidates that all three of these names essentially refer to a single solar deity, the divine figure whom Rufina ritually becomes by wearing this particular amulet inscribed with its specific set of names and claims. More precisely, the description of the "great one who sits in heaven" is a reference attested in the ritual papyri to Helios.[21] This solar deity, whose Egyptian equivalent is Re, is again referenced by the name "Αρσενοφρεφρης" (Arsenophrephreis, lines 4–5), an elongated version of the divine name "Arsenophre" (alternatively, Arsenouphis), which translates to "the good watcher, Re."[22] This solar reference is further echoed two lines later as the text associates the amulet's wearer with "Kmeph," a deity whose description as a "good *daimon*" (δεμων

εις ονομα- / τι Μουσι (Please note that since the text of this amulet is unaccented, I have chosen not to insert accents of my own when quoting from this artifact in order to preserve its original appearance.)

21 See, for example, PGM IV.1622, where Helios is described as "the great one in heaven" (τὸν μέγαν ἐν οὐρανῷ).

22 Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 185–86. This divine name also appears in ritual papyri in reference to a god who provides "favor" (χαριτήσιον): see, for example, PGM XII.182–83: "Κύριε, χαῖρε, τὸ χαριστήσιον τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῆς οἰκ[ουμένη]ς· οὐρανὸς ἐγένετο κωμαστήριον Ἀρσενοφη, ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν οὐρανί[ων θεῶν...]"

αγαθος) is paralleled in other ritual texts that invoke the sun god.[23] Moreover, Kmeph himself is directly related to the solar deity in texts like PGM III.142, on gemstones, and later by Neoplatonists like Iamblichus.[24] Finally, this Kmeph is associated with the "Miarsau" of lines 4–5 by Philo of Byblos, who mentions a Phoenician deity of a similar name (M[ε]ισωρ or Μεισωρα) as being related to Kmeph.[25] Thus, through these multiple allusions to the sun god, the amulet asserts that its wearer (the "εγω" of line 1) is this all-powerful deity.[26]

Most important for our concerns, however, is that this identification between the solar deity and Rufina occurs not only through an equation of beings (for example, via the "εγω ειμι" clause in line 1), but also via the adoption of another's "name." This renaming of Rufina—Rufina assuming the "sure name of Miarsau"—is accomplished ritually as Rufina wears this amulet on which "ονομα Μιαρσαυ" has been written. Through the writing and wearing of this divine name, Rufina comes to assume this name and thereby the identity (and authority) associated inextricably with it. The

23 See, for example, PGM IV.1705–12: "ναί, κύριε Κμήφ ... ὁρκίζω γῆν καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ φῶς καὶ σκότος καὶ τὸν πάντα κτίσαντα θεὸν μέγαν Σαρουσιν, σέ, τὸ παρεστὸς Ἀγαθὸν Δαιμόνιον, πάντα μοι τελέσαι διὰ τῆς χρείας τοῦ δακτυλίου τούτου ἢ [λίθ]ου."

24 PGM III.142: "ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ ἁγίου φέγ[γ]ους, ὁ κ[ύ]κλος ὁ π[υ]ροειδὴς...Κμηφ, ὁ ἔκλαμπρος Ἥλι[ος]." Regarding gems, Kmeph is typically depicted in the lion-headed serpent form of Chnoubis with the rays of the sun (that is, Helios; Amun-Re) glowing around his head. See discussion and accompanying images of this figure in: Dasen and Nagy, "Gems," 428. Regarding Iamblichus, see, for example, Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* VIII, 3, 263. For a recent scholarly edition of this text, see: Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013). See also: Dennis C. Clark, "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2) (2008): 164–205.

25 See discussion in Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 186.

26 One way to conceptualize Rufina's ontological change is via the ritual "subjunctive" ("as if") framework advanced by Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon in their landmark study of ritual, in which they posit that rituals (such as wearing an amulet with divine inscriptions) enable practitioners to create "as-if" worlds—alternate realities which one may inhabit with different personas and which offer one different sets of possibilities. It could, in theory, be the case that the amulet literally changes Rufina's ontology such that by wearing it Rufina transforms into the sun god in a this-worldly (that is, literal) sense. I suspect, though, that her ontological change is more so in the ritual realm of the subjunctive, as described and analyzed by Seligman and his colleagues. See Adam B. Seligman, et al, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

inscription of "ονομα Μιαρσαυ" (lines 5-6)—rather than just "Μιαρσαυ"—makes explicit that the wearer is assuming the "name" of a deity, a "name" described as "sure" (that is, certain, reliable). This description strongly suggests that the wearer believes certain qualities to inhere within this specific name, and moreover that by writing and then wearing "the name" (presumably also with the deity's other names inscribed on the amulet), one adopts the name for oneself. Becoming thereby the deity to whom the name refers, Rufina simultaneously acquires access to that deity's qualities and immense array of powers.

Moreover, the ritual transformation enacted in the amulet's first half, in which beleaguered Rufina becomes the sun god with the name (and associated attributes and powers) of Miarsau (that is, Kmeph; that is, Arsenophris) via the writing and wearing of this divine identification, is echoed in a counterpart ritual in the amulet's closing lines. There the εγω ειμι ("I am") of the artifact's opening line is restated, harkening back to that initial transformation of Rufina before enacting a different, complementary one. As with the first transformation, this closing metamorphosis occurs through the writing and wearing of a new identity. But whereas the first change happens via the power of an asserted, written equation between Rufina and a deity—albeit one that occasions the adoption of a new (divine) name (that is, Miarsau)—the closing transformation occurs squarely and explicitly because of the authority inherent to a particular *human* name.

In the amulet's final lines, Rufina again asserts her authority in her attempt to rebuff the attacks against her. This time, however, she does not identify herself as Miarsau, but instead as the "King of Kings" (βασιλεα βασιλεων) who "acts as king in the region" (ο βασιλιζων τον τοπον). On what basis does she claim this powerful identity? Rather than grounding her claim solely in another "εγω ειμι" assertion (as in the opening lines), here the text supplements such an appeal via the explicit reference to the "name" of another, invoking the "name of Mousa" (ονοματι Μουσι) in order to assert the legitimacy of Rufina's claim to royal authority.[27] This

27 Kotansky identifies this "Mousa" as the daughter of Mithridates VI (135–63 BCE), king of Pontus and powerful antagonist of the Roman imperial forces in Asia Minor until his death (likely by suicide) following the rebellion of his armies at the behest of his son, Pharnaces II. In regard to Mousa, Kotansky notes that she "was apparently a powerful enough ruler in her own right to issue coinage carrying her own portrait and legend: ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ ΜΟΥΣΗΣ ΟΡΣΟΒΑΡΙΟΣ" (see Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 195; also: Thomas Corsten, *Die Inschriften Von Kïos* [Inschriften Griechischer Städte Aus Kleinasien Bd. 29; Bonn: Habelt, 1985], 42). A significantly different interpretation of this name, however, is offered by Gager,

remarkable assertion illuminates the intimate imbrication of names and power in Rufina's context: specifically, that while in point of historical fact, Rufina never literally was granted the authority to "act as king in the region" by Queen Mousa, nevertheless through the ritual invocation of Mousa's name as the basis for her claim to royal authority, Rufina understands herself to have accessed a power inherent to the "name" which is useful in repelling lawsuits and poison. That is, regardless of any (lack of) historical connection between Rufina and Queen Mousa, the fact that Rufina went to the trouble of purchasing an amulet which claims almighty authority for her "in the name of Mousa" speaks volumes to Rufina's perception of the link between names and power. As seen on other ancient artifacts, where divine names are written and worn in order to attain powerful benefits, here too the ritual writing and subsequent wearing of an "ονομα" (specifically that of "Mousa") invokes a notable figure's authority in order to gain protective power against life-threatening dangers.[28] In sum, this amulet features the writing and wearing of powerful, even divine, names in order to enable their wearer not only to access the authority of the names' referents, but even to effect an ontological change of identity whereby Rufina ritually becomes a much more powerful figure. No longer a vulnerable victim of lawsuits and potential poison attacks, Rufina ritually utilizes the authority of inscribed names (first of Miarsau and then of Mousa) to become the sun god and the "King of Kings," identities imbued with almighty power to vanquish any and all threats.

who reads "Μουσι" as a reference to Moses (see Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 225). While Moses' name is occasionally invoked in ritual papyri (see, for example, PGM V.110; VII.619; XIII.1ff [the famous "Eighth Book of Moses"]), it is unlikely to be the referent of "Μουσι" in this amulet. Among other reasons, it makes far more sense that an amulet found in Pontus would invoke, for the purposes of ritual authority, the name of an actual Pontic ruler, rather than that of a famous figure from ancient Israel. For further analysis of this name and a lengthy rebuttal of Gager's position, see Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 194–95. On Moses celebrated as a powerful wonderworker, see: Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, esp. 134–61. See also Pliny's association of Moses with a particular "branch of magic" (*magices factio*) (*Naturalis Historia* XXX.11).

28 See, for example, the array of amulets presented in Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets.* For a specific example featuring Aphrodite's name invoked on an amulet to grant "favor and success" to the amulet's wearer, see Kotansky, 216; also, Kimmel, "Power in the Name," 142–50.

Comparative Considerations and Contemporary Conversations

Considered alongside each other, the Helio-centric amulet and Solomon's divine ring both echo and contrast each other with respect to materiality's facilitation of visionary (and more generally, otherworldly) experiences. On the one hand, both objects suggest in common that specially-inscribed materials—particularly ones which feature specific, empowered names—channel access into transcendent experiences for their human wearers. In the *Testament of Solomon*, this access is facilitated (in at least some traditions) by the almighty name of YHWH inscribed on Solomon's special ring, and it enables Solomon to summon demons, interrogate them, discover valuable and secret information about them (that is, their names), which then, finally, can be used to compel the demons to perform certain actions, including the construction of the Jerusalem Temple. Similarly, in the case of the first-century (BCE) amulet, again it is the wearing of specific, divine names that garners superhuman power and transcendent experiences for the amulet's owner. While the divine name in this case is not YHWH but various references to Helios, nevertheless their presence on the seemingly mundane object enables a supernatural experience: not the summoning and manipulating of demons but rather than transformation of the female amulet-wearer herself (Rufina) into the male sun god (Helios), complete with all his attendant power.

Finally, how might these powerful and empowering objects converse with contemporary neo-materialist thinkers in accounting for why and how things happen? Jane Bennett, for instance, has insightfully drawn attention to the distributed agency of nonbiological matter (for example, rocks) in its assemblaged relationships with both human and other nonhuman actors. Through the framework of "thing-power," Bennett argues that material objects "exceed their status as objects and…manifest traces of independence or aliveness." Moreover, they can "become vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own."[29] Further explicating her "thing-power" theory, Bennett explains how things—incorrectly relegated to the category of merely inert objects—actually act upon their environments, doing so not as isolated actors but always in assemblage with other inanimate agents, as well as animate ones (for example, plants, people).

In a similar manner, the Helio-centric amulet can be understood to be much more than a mere "object." According to Bennett's theory of "thing-power," the amulet acts through its very materiality upon its surroundings

29 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

in a vast array of possible ways. When the light hits it at a certain angle, for example, the amulet's gold gleams, catching the eye of a passerby, who turns her head and decides she too would like to own such an attractive item. But on certain hot days the amulet's metal prickles against its owner's skin; the heat, gold, and skin interact with other agents (for example, the owner's stress at having a rough day at work, the cries of her infant child) which collectively cause the amulet owner to feel overwhelmed and weary. In all these possible ways, and many others, the materiality of this amulet affects its environment.

But these material and environmental effects are not the only ways the amulet acts. In addition to these, this amulet acts by means of the names with which it is inscribed. As with Solomon's ring, it is the onomastic features—etched into the Pontic amulet—which, at least allegedly, are key to the object's supernatural effects. Through these material names, the amulet bears a power capable of altering the very ontology (including the gender) of its wearer, transforming her from a mere mortal into the god whom the amulet names and, in turn, supplying her with access to superhuman abilities. Thus, while neo-materialists like Bennett are right to emphasize the agency of overlooked objects, like rocks, their agentive contentions would benefit from attention to ancient artifacts—like amulets and rings—whose divine names utilize a material force which is also linguistic and ontological in order to summon, compel, protect, and transform.

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Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 19–36
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

ARTICLE

Models of Convergence in Comparative Theology

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Abstract
As comparative theology focuses primarily on getting a handle of the concrete data of another religion in order to bring them into fruitful comparison with one's own tradition, the ultimate goal of the exercise often remains unspoken or fades from the immediate demands of responsible scholarship. However, implicit in all comparative theology is some notion of the way in which different religious beliefs cohere in the past, the present, or the future. This paper sketches various models of convergence of religions and their implications for the way we do comparative theology.

Keywords
convergence, fulfillment, mysticism, eschatology, Christianity

> Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love. At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.
>
> —Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Omega Point"[1]

1 From chapter 2 of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1938).

The field of comparative theology has evolved rapidly since the late twentieth century. It has spread into multiple directions, engaging a large number of traditions or sub-traditions in a variety of ways. From a primary focus on scriptural traditions, it has emphasized the importance of also considering oral traditions, and from a primary focus on texts, it has emphasized the importance of also looking at ritual practice as a source of comparative theological engagement. From general theological ideas about other religions, it has emphasized the importance of careful and expert study of particular texts or practices of another tradition, bringing them into dialogue with elements in one's own tradition. From the suspicion that it is a distinctly Christian, even Catholic exercise, scholars of other traditions have come to engage in comparative theology from within their own normative framework.[2] There have been debates about the nomenclature of comparative theology and whether comparative theology requires a home tradition.[3]

In all these important debates about comparative theology, we tend to forget the big picture. To what end? What is the ultimate purpose of it all? Where do we see the religions or religion going with the help of comparative theology? These are questions comparative theologians don't often ask, as most of us tend to be bogged down in the study of another religion and in detailed comparative theological exercises. But these bigger questions were raised by early pioneers of comparative theology, many of whom did comparative theology before the modern discipline was established. Consequently, I thought it useful at this twentieth anniversary of Engaging Particularities to look backward in order to look forward, and retrieve some of the ideas of original visionaries to consider whether they may continue to serve as a source of inspiration for why and how we do comparative theology today.

2 See Klaus Von Stosch, "Is Comparative Theology Catholic?" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24 no. 1 (2014): 59–67. See also, Francis Clooney, "Is Comparative Theology Catholic? Expectations Regarding the Comparativist" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (2014): 18–26; and Marianne Moyaert, "Comparative Theology as a Catholic Theological Enterprise," in *Theology Today* 76, no. 1 (2015): 43–64.

3 On the notion of *home* in comparative theology, see the entire issue of *Toronto Journal of Theology* 39 no. 1 (2023). For more general methodological discussions of comparative theology, see Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Chichester: Wiley, 2020); see also, Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Awareness of the reality of religious plurality from the beginning led to visions of the convergence or the unity of religions. This is reflected in Teilhard de Chardin's expression, drawn from the Pauline author of Colossians 3:1-11 and made famous mainly through its use as the title of Flannery O'Connor's story.[4] But it also accords with the natural religious idea of a unified understanding of truth and vision of reality. Any truth that is divided cannot be ultimate or absolute. Some may locate the unity of religions in the past, in present experiences of ultimacy, or in a utopian future. Visions of the convergence of religions are often colored by the religious commitments and presuppositions of the visionary. The examples I use here are drawn mostly from within the Christian tradition and from Christian comparative theologians. But I believe that it is possible to broaden the picture and see their visions as a set of models that may be applicable to any religious tradition and consider how each might affect the way in which comparative theology is done.

While discussing these visions of the convergence of religions, it is also good at the outset to remind ourselves of the hypothetical nature of this exercise and of the unpredictability of the actual form of the possible convergence of religions. Comparative theology involves a process of change and growth through engaging other religions, and this quote by another important pioneer, Raimon Panikkar, offers helpful caution:

> Of course with the passage of time the encounter of religions and cultures will bring about the death of religions as we know them. They will be 'resurrected' in new forms, having perhaps a new life which we would hardly recognize. But if the very nature of life is change, who is to say when, at exactly what point, Hinduism or Christianity has 'died'? Only a sizeable temporal distance permits that kind of judgment, whereas we are caught up now in the ongoing process.[5]

4 Flannery O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge: Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965). Colossians 3:1 begins with "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" and ends with "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (3:11).

5 Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman &Todd, 1964), 94.

My reflections may be regarded as a commentary on the above quotes by Teilhard and Panikkar. It is also an homage to my teacher and mentor, Frank De Graeve, S.J. (1926–1993), who passed away more than thirty years ago and whose vision of the ultimate convergence of religions remains compelling.

Convergence into One's Own Religion

Probably the most common way of envisioning the convergence of religions is in terms of all religions coming together and finding their fulfillment in one's own religious tradition. This fulfillment approach to religious diversity is particularly prevalent in universalistic traditions which view their own convictions as the culmination of everything that went before, and view everything that came after as a degeneration or misinterpretation of the truth. It is reflected in Psalm 86:9, which states that "all the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name," and reiterated in the vision of Revelations 15:4 "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All the nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." Many religions anticipate the coming of a messianic figure who will inaugurate the end of time and/or a new age. For some, the fulfillment of all religions has already occurred, at least in part, in time, while others are anticipating a future fulfillment and convergence, largely in terms of their own religious convictions. Some religions may understand the idea of convergence in more individual and gradual terms, as individual souls transmigrate until they realize their highest state in one's own religion. In this vision, all believers and all religions are to ultimately come under the umbrella of one's own tradition.

This vision of the convergence is reflected in the classical inclusivist approach to religious diversity, which is held not only by theologians, but also by some of the early historians of religions. For example, Friedrich Max Muller, the father of the comparative study of religions, and founder of the Sacred Books of the East translation project, believed that the scholarly study of religions would provide evidence of the final and fulfilling truth of Christianity:

> The Science of Religion will for the first time assign to Christianity its right place among the religions of the world; it will show for the first time fully what was meant by the fullness of time; it will restore to the whole history of the

> world, in its unconscious progress toward Christianity, its true and sacred character.[6]

This notion of religious convergence has shaped the way in which comparative theology has been done by its earliest pioneers, and it continues to color the approaches of some comparative theologians. It is reflected in the very book titles of some of the precursors of the discipline, in John Nicol Farquhar's *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913) and in Pierre Johanns' *To Christ through Vedanta* (1930). These are works of comparative theology in that they took other religions, in these cases Hinduism, seriously, studied them, and engaged them in a constructive way from within the horizon of one's own tradition. A recent example of this approach may be found in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's work *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.* Here, he touches on general Christian topics—trinity, creation, atonement, salvation, and so on—exploring how they manifest themselves in other traditions, and what Christianity might learn from them. He acknowledges the importance of "careful attention to the details of investigation, respectful honoring of the otherness of other traditions and their representatives."[7] But he also insists that the enterprise of comparative theology requires "bold but humble arguing for one's deepest convictions."[8]

The way in which comparative theology is done from this vision of convergence may be visualized in terms of a triangle or cone in which the comparative theologian is situated at the peak or summit, certain of the ultimate truth of his or her own tradition. He or she looks down on the religious landscape and assesses the teachings and practices of other religions mainly in terms of their conformity to, or at least resonance with, one's own. This means that the topics selected for comparative work will be determined by their similarity or analogy with one's own set religious convictions. It also means that one's understanding or interpretation of the other will be framed in terms of one's own religious premises. Though all comparative theology involves some degree of reinterpretation or redescription of one tradition in terms of another, it makes a difference, as Hugh Nicholson has pointed out, which traditions does the redescribing:

> If comparison is understood as a way of construing or redescribing one thing in terms of another in order to

6 Friedrich Max Muller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (1967–1975).

7 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 9.

8 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology.*

> highlight aspects of the former that are of particular interest to the scholar, then it makes a difference which of the two terms is being redescribed, and conversely, which is providing the redescription. The point of comparative redescription is to transform one's understanding of the former for a particular purpose. The purpose may be either to overcome the incomprehensibility of an unfamiliar phenomenon, or, alternatively, it may be to unsettle a sense of familiarity that has dulled one's perception of a phenomenon.[9]

With comparative theology done from this model of convergence, it is always one's own tradition that does the redescribing, for one's own theological purpose. This does not mean that comparative theologians might not learn from other religious traditions. Even in focusing on certain selective topics and interpreting them in one's own religious and theological terms, new insights may emerge, and traditional ways of understanding and acting enriched. Kärkkäinen also suggests that one's convictions may be "reshaped, sometimes even radically altered."[10] Hence, a fulfillment approach to comparative theology does not always involve a complete domestication of the other, or a flat reduction of the other to one's own preconceived views. But one's own religion will remain the ultimate criterion, both epistemologically and theologically, through which other religions are studied and evaluated.

The strengths of this approach to comparative theology involve clarity and directionality in engaging the other religion. If one of the challenges or problems for comparative theology involves the sheer endless possibility of topics and traditions to engage, this approach at least limits the choice to topics that resonate with or may enhance one's own basic convictions. It also provides clear norms for how to adjudicate the truth of other religious traditions, as well as a community of likeminded thinkers who may support one another. Though one might view the process of redescription of the other as an example of religious hegemony, it may also reflect an attitude of transparency which acknowledges the inevitability of religious and theological prejudice.[11]

9 Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 130.

10 Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology*, 6.

11 At the end of *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, Kärkkäinen admits that theological convictions are "situated and fallible in nature," that they are "always

The weakness of this approach, however, involves an inability or unwillingness to understand the religious other on its own terms and to allow one's own tradition to be challenged and changed in more than cosmetic ways. This idea of the convergence of all religions in one's own may be readily subject to critiques of hegemony and the instrumentalization or domestication of other religious traditions. If other religions are believed implicitly or explicitly to simply culminate in one's own, now or at the end of time, there is little reason to take them seriously on their own terms, or to acknowledge them as viable dialogue partners with their own legitimate questions and theological positions. These critiques may be only partly abated by the fact that most religious traditions approach religious others and comparative theology from within these same presuppositions. It ultimately limits the possibilities or opportunities for genuine learning from the other.

Mystical Convergence

Another way of envisioning the convergence of religions is in terms of a presumed common mystical ground or goal. Here, religions are seen to emerge from similar mystical experiences and/or to culminate in mystical states that are believed to be the same across religious traditions. The differences between religious traditions, beliefs, and practices, are considered to be secondary and ultimately immaterial in light of their deeper or higher mystical unity. This is the view of the so-called perennial philosophy, which is associated with figures such as Aldous Huxley, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, Radhakrishnan, and contemporary figures such as Reza Shah-Kazemi and Robert Forman.[12] These thinkers comb through mystical

tentative and suggestive" and that "disagreements and different viewpoints belong as an essential part of the inquiry" (Kärkkäinen, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, 277).

12 Huxley defines perennial philosophy as "the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being" (Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* [New York: Harper, 1945, 2009], vii). Whereas comparative theology is often regarded as a quintessentially Christian enterprise, it is interesting to note that many perennial philosophers were Hindu (Vivekananda, Coomaraswamy, Radhakrishnan) or Muslim (Guenon, Schuon, S.H. Nasr, and Shah-Kazemi). The idea of a mystical convergence of religions is often regarded as a typically Hindu or Vedanta conception of the ultimate ground and goal of religious life. It is often depicted as a mountain in which different religions represent different paths leading to the

texts to find expressions and ideas that resemble or resonate with one another and that would point to a unifying experience which is regarded as the ground or goal of all religious life. The vision is expressed in the title of Schuon's famous book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1984).
The domain of mysticism and mystical experience represents a compelling focus for imagining the convergence of religions. It is undeniable that mystical accounts in different traditions exhibit many similarities, not only with regard to the description of the experience (which is generally said to be ineffable), but also with regard to the various disciplines or paths and practices that are designed to prepare for the experience (asceticism, humility, surrender), as well as the fruits of the experience (equanimity, wisdom, detachment, compassion, etc.) The fact that monastics and mystics of different religious traditions seem so easily to understand one another and pray or practice together reinforces the idea of a possible convergence of religious traditions in a common mystical origin or goal. It has been noted that "the mystics often share more with each other, even though they spring from different religions and religious backgrounds…than do the mystics and 'believers' who belong to the same confession."[13] Though some traditions approach mysticism with some degree of suspicion, mystics are often regarded as having attained the highest level of spiritual or religious realization, and thus represent the ultimate ideal.

It is clear that mystical ideas and texts have had a particular appeal for comparative theologians. Many of the early pioneers of comparative theology were particularly drawn to mystical thinkers and traditions. Louis Massignon (1883–1962), who is often regarded as a precursor of Muslim-Christian comparative theology, focused his major work on the early Sufi mystic al-Hallaj.[14] Early Hindu-Christian comparative theologians such as Henri Le Saux (1910–1973), Raimon Panikkar (1928–2010), and Sara Grant were involved mainly with the Hindu traditions and experiences of non-duality.[15] Christian missionaries and theologians engaging Buddhism were

ultimate realization of the non-duality of Atman and Brahman, as reflected in the writings of Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan. It is also reflected in the image of various religious teachings as derived from so many blind men touching an elephant and describing it from their own limited angle.

13 Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism. The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 38.

14 Louis Massignon, *Hallaj. Mystic and Martyr,* translated, edited and abridged by Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

15 Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux), *Saccidananda. A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (London: ISPCK, 1974. Henri Le Saux, *Souvenirs d'Arunachala* (Paris: Epi, 1978). Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis

inspired primarily by Buddhist mystical teachings and practices. In Japan, William Johnston, SJ (1925–2010), Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, SJ (1989–1990), and Oshida Shigeto (1922–2003) integrated Zen Buddhist teachings and practices into their own spiritual life and discipline.[16] And in his exploration of other religions, the famous Christian monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) was also mainly interested in the Sufi tradition of Islam, the Taoist tradition, and the non-dualist traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.[17] In one of his last sermons, he referred to the deep unity between monastic traditions and experiences in "soft" perennialist terms when he stated that:

> Without asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the "top," the transcendent or mystical level—that they all start from different dogmatic positions to "meet" at this summit—it is certainly true to say that even where there are irreconcilable differences in doctrine and in formulated belief, there may still be great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience.[18]

Comparative theologians continue to be drawn by mystical texts and traditions. Not only does the work of the early pioneers of the discipline who

Books, 1994), *Christophany. The Fullness of Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013). Panikkar's work offers insight into a possible difference between non-dualism and perennialism. Though both are oriented toward a non-dual understanding of ultimate reality, non-dualists like Panikkar still emphasize the need to express this non-dualism from particular religious and philosophical perspectives. Perennialism, on the other hand, seeks to transcend and minimize religious particularities. This difference is also expressed in the disagreement between Abhishiktananda, who emphasized the experience of the absolute "beyond name and form" and Panikkar who "emphasized the cosmic dimension, ultimately integrating it into his cosmotheandric vision" (Bettina Baumer, *Fullness of Life* [Mumbai: Somayiya Publications, 2008], 185–86). See also Sara Grant, *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dualist Christian* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

16 William Johnston, *Christian Zen: A Way of Meditation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997). Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, *Zen: Way to Enlightenment* (Taplinger, 1968). Oshida Shigeto published only in Japanese, but a good discussion of his life and work may be found in Katrin Amell, "The Dominican Vincent Oshida Shigeto, a Buddhist who has Encountered Christ" in *La Vie Spirituelle* 731 (1999): 355–68.

17 Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961); *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965); *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968); *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1975).

18 *Thomas Merton*, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, 312.

focused on mystical texts (such as Raimon Panikkar or Massignon) continue to inspire younger generations, but many focus on mystical figures and ideas in the various religions. John Keenan and Joseph O'Leary, for example have used Buddhist notions of emptiness and two truths to reinterpret Christian texts and teachings; Michelle Voss Roberts's early work *Dualities* focuses on Hindu mystic Lelleshvari and Christian mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg; Frank Clooney's book *His Hiding Place is Darkness* deals with Hindu and Christian mystical experiences of divine absence; and the notion of non-duality is part of a continuing research project among a new generation of comparative theologians.[19] Works by D.T. Suzuki and Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt have focused on Buddhist-Christian mysticism, mainly lifting up the similarities between mystical texts in the two traditions.[20]

Here, comparative theologians focus mainly on the similarities between mystical texts and traditions, as well as on the distance between experience and expression, which in turn may serve to support the malleability of religious forms and frameworks. Comparative theology focusing on mystical texts and figures may lead to the rediscovery of neglected or marginalized mystics (such as Marguerite Porete or Jean Pierre de Caussade), and/or to the appropriation of certain spiritual practices further developed in another religious tradition.[21] The approach has also led to new attitudes toward doctrinal and metaphysical systems as a whole and to the experimentation with new hermeneutical frameworks. As a result of engagement with mystical texts and traditions, some comparative theologians have come to approach doctrines not as fixed and firm expression of ultimate reality but rather as conventional expressions, as skillful means which, though necessary and important, should not be equated with ultimate reality itself.[22] This in turn has led to attempts to reinterpret religious texts and teachings through the hermeneutical framework of other traditions so as to release or shed new light on their mystical or spiritual contents.

19 Jon Paul Sydnor, Anthony Watson, et al, *Nondualism: An Interreligious Exploration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023).

20 Daizetz T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Buddhist and Christian* (New York: Harper, 1957); Paul Mommaers and Jan Van Bragt, *Mysticism, Buddhist and Christian* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

21 Comparative theologians such as Won Jae Hur, Matthew Vale, and Greg Mileski are, in particular, looking into what Christianity might learn from Buddhist Dzogchen ideas and practices.

22 Joseph O'Leary, *Conventional and Ultimate Truth: A Key for Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

The strength and appeal of this approach to comparative theology lies in the undeniable similarities between elements of mystical texts, teachings, and practices, which offer a ready bridge (or *tertium comparationis*) for further exploration of similarities and differences, and for theological and practical learning from one another. It also allows for considerable theological creativity as the emphasis on the ineffability of ultimate reality and the difference between experience and expression prevents one from "investing too heavily in doctrinal fixation."[23] There is also less concern with the problem of religious hegemony and domestication, as mystical experience tends to function as religious equalizer.

While the idea of a mystical unity of religions may provide a ground and a focus for doing comparative theology, it also presents certain challenges and limitations on the practice. The relativizing of religious doctrines may generate a loss of interest in or commitment to doctrinal development and growth. If all religions are ultimately oriented to a unified and unifying ineffable experience, then the religious differences and particularities may no longer matter very much, and the effort to engage the teachings and practices of another religion in a constructive way may seem superfluous.[24] The idea of a mystical common ground and goal moreover privileges a non-dualist worldview in which distinctions between religions are illusory and meant to be erased or to disappear in the sea of non-duality. Comparative theology requires belief in the importance of proper theological understanding and commitment to advancing it. This presupposes that one takes seriously the historical, ritual, and practical expressions of a tradition as meaningful and possibly constitutive of the experience itself. In the end, the idea of a mystical unity or convergence of religions remains a conjecture, as Thomas Merton, who himself was rather sympathetic to the idea, also admits:

> It must certainly be said that a certain type of concordist thought too easily assumes as a basic dogma that "the mystics" in all religions are experiencing the same thing

23 Joseph O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 251. Also "Skillful Means as a Hermeneutic Concept" in C. Cornille and C. Conway, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 179.

24 This is also the gist of Mark Heim's critique of the attitude of religious pluralism, which itself draws significantly from the idea of a mystical convergence of religions. See Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 145.

> and are all alike united in their liberation from the various doctrines, explanations and creeds of their less fortunate coreligionists…This has never been demonstrated with any kind of rigor, and though it has been persuasively advanced by talented and experienced minds, we must say that a great deal of study and investigation must be done before much can be said on this very complex question…Since the personal experience of the mystic remains inaccessible to us and can only be evaluated indirectly through texts and other testimonials, it is never easy to say with any security whether what a Christian mystic, a Sufi, and a Zen master experience is really the same thing.[25]

Eschatological Convergence

A third way of envisioning the convergence of religions focuses not so much on the convergence of religions in one's own tradition or in a purported universal mystical ground or goal, but rather on a future eschatological reality, which lies beyond any existing system of belief and practice. In sketching this model of convergence, I draw from my own teacher, Frank De Graeve, SJ (1926–1993), who himself was strongly influenced by Teilhard de Chardin and Raimon Panikkar, and who, as was custom in the late twentieth century, developed his views in a set of theses on the relationship of Christianity to other religions.[26] I will first briefly comment on the theses dealing with the convergence of religions and then discuss their implications for comparative theology.

Frank De Graeve was trained in classics, anthropology and theology, and studied with some of the great scholars of his time: Guiseppe Tucci (Buddhism), Mircea Eliade (Comparative Religion), Evans-Pritchard (Anthropology). He was a brilliant theologian, savant, and poet.[27] He chose

25 Thomas Merton, "Introduction: A Christian Looks at Zen" in John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (Yangmingshan, Taipei: National War College, 1967), 9.

26 Frank de Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S.: Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Encounter" in *Louvain Studies* 7 (1979): 314–325. Besides the four theses of Rahner, there are the five theses of Gavin D'Costa, and the ten theses of Jan Van Bragt who rightly points out that "it is good scholastic practice, and, while laying the writer wide open to critique, it is conductive to further discussion"(Jan Van Bragt, *Toward a Theology of Religions* [Tokyo: Oriens Institute, 1984], 5).

27 He wrote hundreds of haikus and published dozens of spiritual poems in Flemish

to devote his life to serving others, more than to publishing.[28] The few scholarly works he published, however, clearly demonstrate his scholarly erudition and theological creativity. Having immersed himself deeply in the study of Buddhism and Hinduism, and having developed great fondness for the richness of other religions, he developed a notion of the eschatological convergence of religions that would engender a sense of unity between religions without abandoning religious diversity and particularity.

Grounded in the Christian tradition, De Graeve naturally drew from its symbolic and religious framework to envision and to name the future convergence: "The fulfillment and consummation of all religions is what could be called 'Christ-ianity,' the integration of the religious intentionality in the growth of the once-for-all redeemed mankind toward the 'full adulthood' of Christ, the 'pleroma of God.'" The term "Christ-ianity" is here borrowed from Colossians 2:8–3:11 and Ephesians 1:9–23, and used as "a theological stenogram for Christ's anonymous presence in all religions, really the 'Christ-ness' of religion."[29] The mention of anonymous presence of Christ is of course immediately reminiscent of Rahner's "anonymous Christian."[30] However, De Graeve's understanding of Christ was less determined by specifically Christian connotations, and more aligned with Raimon Panikkar's notion of a Cosmic Christ who is beyond any particular religious determination, and who represents "the Christian symbol for the whole of reality," and "the symbol of the *mysterium coniunctionis* of divine, human and cosmic reality."[31] In representing an eschatological reality, no single religion, including Christianity, may here claim monopoly over the notion or the understanding of Christ. All religions are thus moving toward the common destiny or convergence in Christ. This may be visualized as a

pastoral publications.

28 During his vacations, he served at Holy Angels parish in Chicago.

29 Frank de Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S.: Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Encounter," 321.

30 De Graeve criticized Rahner's expression on linguistic grounds since an anonymous person knows who he or she is, while others do not, whereas Rahner uses it in reverse.

31 Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 143–84. Panikkar himself, in turn, drew inspiration from Henri Le Saux/Abhishiktananda (1910–1974) who also came to understand Christ as the symbol of the unity and unicity of ultimate reality itself:
As truly as the unicity of God, the unicity of the symbol of Christ is of a transcendental order and cannot be compared or opposed to any other symbol, equally transcendent in as far as it also attempts to express the totality of Being. Abhishiktananda, *Intériorité et Révélation*, Sisteron: Presence, 1982, p. 202

triangle or a mountain in which all religions are moving toward the peak, without any religion fully grasping or controlling the meaning or reality of the ultimate convergence. This does not mean that all religions need to be regarded as equidistant from the peak. Each religion will naturally regard itself as higher or closer to the ultimate truth, and its own teachings and practices as a fuller reflection of the ultimate truth. This is why many religions regard themselves as the fulfillment of other religions.

In also using the language of fulfillment, De Graeve, however, also recognizes the irreducibility of one religion to the other, and the ultimate fulfillment as an eschatological reality: "The relation of Christ-ianity to the religions (and Christianity), one of fulfillment to previous phases of growth, is characterized by a dialectic of incarnation (i.e. really present in the human sphere) and transcendence (i.e. never exhaustively present in the human sphere, never utterly reducible to it)." Different religions are thus pyramids of different heights within the larger pyramid, all moving together toward ultimate fulfillment. De Graeve refers to this movement as a process of conversion: "The 'conversion' to which all religions, including Christianity, are constantly called, is not so much a 'turning away' from, as a 'turning to'; conversion is convergence." Conversion here involves moving closer to ultimate truth by moving closer to one another. This involves a process of purification in which each religion abandons its negative prejudices toward one another and recognizes the possibility of learning from one another. As the various religions learn from one another, they also move gradually closer together until they all find their culmination in the eschatological fulfilment. This fulfilment, however, does not erase the particularities or distinctions between religions: "The variety of religions, as the variety of existential situations themselves, is a sign of creative abundance that is supposed to enhance unity, and not necessarily a sign of particularism that precludes it." Like Teilhard, De Graeve thus envisioned religions preserving their particularity in the eschatological fullness of time since, as he put it suggestively, "history is not the only cause of plurality." The realization of Christ-ianity thus consists for De Graeve of a celebration of diversity in which each religion might have integrated the best of other religions and made it their own.[32]

This approach to the convergence of religions takes seriously the particularity of religions, their incompleteness and the possibility or necessity of learning from one another. The comparative theologian is here not at

32 Frank de Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S.: Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Encounter," 314–325.

the summit of the mountain but in "medium res," trying to contribute to the development and growth of her own tradition through engaging the wisdom of other religions. As Panikkar put it, we may be "caught up now in the ongoing process" and do not know for sure where this religious change will take us.[33] This is one of the elements which distinguishes this model from the first model of simple convergence into one's own religion. As the future remains unknown, no religion may claim a definitive vision of the final convergence. At the same time, each tradition will inevitably envision the ultimate convergence in familiar terms, and in some degree of continuity with the truth as it is known. Moreover, each religion will place itself highest on the hierarchy of religions, or closest to the state of eschatological fulfillment.[34]

Though comparative theologians rarely speak of the convergence of religions, this model accords well with the way much confessional comparative theology is practiced. It starts from the presumption that there is much to learn from the texts, beliefs, and practices of other religions, which presupposes that they are grounded in certain common questions or concerns, and/or oriented toward the same goal. Most comparative theologians recognize elements of similarity in the conceptions of the ultimate reality in various religions. Though affirming the distinction of Hindu and Christian conceptions of God, Martin Ganeri, for example, explicitly uses the language of convergence when describing various aspects of Christian and Hindu theology.[35]

The possibility of learning from other religions also presumes the humble recognition that one's own religion does not have the fullness of truth, or cannot be simply equated with the final goal, and that other religions have something distinctive to contribute to one's understanding of the truth. Following this model, comparative theologians may nevertheless remain committed to the normative truth of their own tradition, either out of a belief that it is superior, or out of epistemological humility, and engage

33 Raimundo Panikkar, *Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 94.

34 It is this type of equivalency which saves this model from the type of hegemony that may characterize the first model of convergence. While believers cannot but imagine a final convergence in terms borrowed from their religious lexicon, those terms may themselves evolve and change and are thus not to be simply or simplistically associated with notions of hegemony.

35 Martin Ganeri, *Indian Thought and Western Theism* (London: Routledge, 2015), 88, 95, 144.

other religions from their own perspective and with their own theological questions. The truth or validity of other religions may still be assessed on the basis of one's own criteria, and elements of truth of other religions interpreted or adjusted to one's own framework. However, as religions adopt elements from one another, they also inevitably change and grow to increasingly resemble one another; and criteria of discernment may themselves shift and change in the process of learning.

The idea of the eschatological convergence of religions provides a strong motivation for engaging in comparative theology. The claim about the unity of truth, as well as the belief or hope that all religions are moving closer to that eschatological oneness, should drive theologians to more actively explore other religions in order to advance one's own religious understanding. Whereas the differences between religions tend to dissolve in the mystical model of convergence, this model may serve to deepen, broaden, and enhance the particularity of each religion, as each maintains its distinctiveness in the state of eschatological convergence. It thus counters any fears of loss of identity or continuity.

This model of convergence takes seriously the grounding of the comparative theologian in a tradition and the openness to other religious traditions. There is also a religious logic and coherence to the idea of religions moving closer together through dialogue and comparative theological engagement. As religions absorb elements from one another, they naturally move closer toward one another, and to the ultimate truth.

Conclusion

In order to engage in constructive theological dialogue with other religions, comparative theology requires some sense of commonality with other religious traditions, whether in shared questions, a shared origin, similar processes of religious reasoning, and/or a shared ultimate destiny and goal. Among these, the idea of the ultimate convergence of religions forms a powerful motivation to constructively explore the teachings of other religions in order to find a common purpose and/or learn from one another. It is true that comparative theologians rarely speculate on the question of the convergence of religions, absorbed as they tend to be with engaging particular texts, teachings, and practices in their own and another tradition. However, in exploring various possible approaches to the convergence of religions, it becomes evident how each might affect the way in which

comparative theology is approached, as well as in which direction of convergence particular approaches might tend.

Each of the approaches to the convergence of religions also roughly coincides with the classical paradigms in theology of religions: convergence in one's own religion with exclusivism (or closed inclusivism), mystical convergence with pluralism, and eschatological convergence with a form of open inclusivism (or what Jacques Dupuis might call inclusivist pluralism). A focus on convergence, however, sharpens the question onto the ultimate purpose of comparative theology, where the respective religions stand in relation to that ultimate purpose, and how one might thus engage other religions.

If the idea of convergence involves all religions coming to their fulfillment in one's own religious tradition, then comparative theology will mainly involve discerning and affirming areas where other religions already largely correspond with one's own—and building on that correspondence. If the focus is on a past or future mystical convergence of religions, comparative theology will mainly focus on mystical texts and practices that already reflect or anticipate that convergence. If the convergence lies in an eschatological future that no tradition owns, but that each tradition may anticipate or hope for based on their own revelations, then comparative theology may be done in a constructive way, using the religious tools of discernment provided by one's own tradition without precluding the possibility of change and growth.

This latter model of convergence has been my own inspiration and motivation for engaging in comparative theology. It was handed down to me by my teacher, Frank De Graeve, who declared himself to be standing on the shoulders of giants—which allowed him to "no longer be dwarfed by their height, but able to look a little beyond their own horizons to the new one that would be mine."[36] I hope this sketch of the various models of convergence also help you to find your own horizon from which to engage in comparative theology.

RR

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36 Frank De Graeve, "From O.T.S.O.G. to T.A.S.C.A.S. Eleven Theses toward a Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue," 316.

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Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 37–70
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

ARTICLE

Blessed Be the Strangers: An Islamic Ethical Framework for the Anthropocene

Aseel Azab-Osman

Abstract
This paper considers a famous eschatological Prophetic ḥadīth, 'Blessed be the strangers', to develop an Islamic ethical framework for the Anthropocenic moment. I survey Islamic sources to offer a phenomenological portrait of strangerhood, ranging from classical Islamic literature, homiletics, prophetic reports, and modern reflections by Muslim scholars and ethicists. I argue that to perceive the world physically as strangers, to embody the speed, unfamiliarity, and sensibilities of a stranger, can cultivate ethical practices that better attend to structural violence and harm, and are better capable of reducing and redressing it. Specifically, I aim to contribute to the growing inter-religious effort to resist 'structural evil'. I demonstrate how the central importance afforded to avoiding harm in Islamic law makes the latter an untapped resource for creatively resisting harm structurally. I suggest that the ethics of strangerhood allow practitioners to develop the attunement necessary for tapping into law's potential for structural change.

Keywords
Islamic ethics, subjectivity, strangerhood, phenomenology, speed, attunement, harm, repair

Reorienting

All is not well in the world. In the wake of a global pandemic, the continued unfolding of Palestinian genocide, and the pernicious persistence of racial capitalism, white supremacy, and ecological destruction, religious traditions have been forced to reckon with this contemporary moment through new terms and scales.[1] The highly complex, integrated, and structural form of human violence against other humans and the more-than-human world is forcing a rethinking of religious ethics in order to rise to the gravity of the occasion, implicating how religious practitioners think about theology, human agency, eschatological temporalities, and visions for the future, earthly and otherwise. While there seems to be no agreement on when this Anthropocenic epoch began, the term is used to define a period in earth's history where human agency begins to play an equal role to natural forces, becoming a geologic actor through "the mining of fossil fuels, the production of nuclear waste, littering of the oceans, and other activities."[2] As contentious as its definition and timeline may be, the concept

1 In using the term genocide, I am following the formal reports of several respected organizations and institutions. Amnesty International, in its December 2024 report, concluded that Israel's actions in Gaza, including the widespread targeting of civilians and destruction of essential infrastructure, constitute genocide ("Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza," https://www.amnesty.org). Similarly, in its report dated 14 November 2024, the United Nations Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices asserted that Israel's methods, such as the use of starvation and deprivation of essential resources, align with the legal definition of genocide ("UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war," https://www.ohchr.org). The Associated Press reported on December 19, 2024, that Human Rights Watch asserted that Israel's restrictions on water and other resources in Gaza amount to acts of genocide ("Human Rights Watch says Israel's restriction of water supply in Gaza amounts to acts of genocide," by Adam Geller, https://apnews.com). Finally, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, also concluded in a March 2024 report that Israel is engaging in genocidal acts against Palestinians (Francesca Albanese, "Anatomy of a Genocide—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, March 25, 2024 [https://www.ohchr.org]).

2 Delf Rothe, "Governing the End Times? Planet Politics and the Secular Eschatology of the Anthropocene." *Millenial Journal of International Studies* 44 no. 2 (2020), 146. See also Paolo Bocci, "Planting the Seeds of the Future: Eschatological Environmentalism in the Time of the Anthropocene," *Religions* 10, no. 125 (February 2019), 1-14.

of the Anthropocene helpfully identifies the scalar magnitude of human intervention in the world that distinguishes our contemporary moment.

In critical studies of post-colonialism and racial capitalism, the Anthropocene is entangled in the history of colonialism as an act of expansivist pillage. As colonialism created the conditions for the global development of capitalism, it subjected more and more peoples and land to the logic of market commodities, and "destroyed the biodiversity it encountered."[3] Given the systemic nature of these global transformations, theologians and religious ethicists are rethinking human moral agency. Specifically, they attempt to situate a believer's agency in the world against what Cynthia D Moe-Lobeda calls "structural evil."[4] Under current global conditions, it is argued that we cannot continue to think about ethics in terms of individual virtues and failures, or privatized notions of sin, love, and spirituality. In the same vein, Axel Takács argues that "between historical consciousness and political theory, society has the tools to recognise that injustice, inequity, and violence . . . [are produced through] systems and structures of economic and political power [which] nefariously oppress the marginalised in ways beyond the powers of the healing ointment of individual acts of charity."[5]

Outside of academia, important voices have been spreading the gospel of structural evil/sin, such as the joint effort led by Pope Francis and al-Azhar's Grand Rector Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, outlined in the Vatican document *Fratelli Tutti*.[6] Yet across the world, the business of empire continues as usual. What is missing from this vision? Perhaps the answer is to be sought in how we should and should not think about eschatology, divine agency, and human responsibility. Moe-Lobeda argues that a deprivatisation and revision of "the basic flaws of Christian ethics" is necessary to cultivate a "critical mystical vision" that enhances a believer's capacity to see "what is … what ought to be … and God's presence within creation."[7] Takács insists on an ethical commitment to individual "virtues and charities" in tandem with imperatives for "political movements of liberation sanctified by a spirituality that

3 George B. Handley, "What Else Is New? Towards a Postcolonial Christian Theology for the Anthropocene." *Religions* 11 no. 225 (May 2020), 5.

4 Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 19.

5 Axel Marc Oaks Takács, "Drawing Near to God, Drawing Near to Others: On *Fratelli Tutti*, Friendship (*walāya*), and Muslim-Christian Co-Resistance," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 32, no. 1 (2022), 55.

6 Takács, "Drawing Near to God," 33.

7 Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 19.

renders us helpless without God."[8] Likewise, Paulo Bocci cautions against a pessimistic and fear-driven vision of eschatology that motivates an escapist focus on the afterlife, a starkly different understanding that early Christian's belief in a "promise of radical change and of the revelation of the secrets written in heaven."[9] For Delf Rothe, thinking about the Anthropocene in apocalyptic terms that advance an "we are all in this together" narrative "conceals social antagonisms in the present"—which are the continued legacies of the European colonialism—and the ecological devastation colonialism already subjected many peoples across the world to.[10] Likewise, Takács warns against neoliberal visions that "blind us to the production mechanisms of economic and political inequality."[11]

Taking my cue from these projects, I argue that the Islamic notion of strangerhood offers a rich conceptual history from which to draw an ethical framework sensitive to our Anthropocenic moment, and deeply attentive to the structural terms of modern evil. Following in these thinkers' footsteps, I outline productive ways of thinking about eschatological visions of strangerhood in order to sustain the kinds of theological and political tensions necessary for applying this ethical vision to everyday practice. These tensions include individual vs. collective practice, divine vs. human agency, and public vs. private ethics. I suggest that the entanglement of ethics and legal norms in *sharīʿah* (divine law), and the centrality of the concept of *ḍarar* (harm) in Islamic law afford a new avenue for addressing the structural nature of sin/evil head-on. However, in order to fully appreciate and activate this resource, I suggest that we think about strangerhood as a phenomenological state of being.[12] Put simply, if structural evil endures partly through its invisibility, I look to strangers to ask how their perception of their surroundings can cultivate an embodied practice of deep vision, allowing us to develop attuned perceptual capacities and moral competencies, unlocking the structural potential of Islamic law. I begin

8 Takács, "Drawing Near to God," 55.

9 Bocci, "Planting the Seeds of the Future," 10–11; Rothe, "Governing the End Times?" 157.

10 Rothe, 146.

11 Takács, 34.

12 This is a work of constructive theology firmly within Sunni discursive traditions, that is nevertheless concerned with ethical subject formation and offering a framework for a good life for whomever may wish to engage with it, on their own terms. I therefore take liberty with pronouns to reflect that I acknowledge my own positionality and my interlocutors' and that I appreciate thinking about human collective action interreligiously, and I use honorifics throughout the essay that reflect my own relationship with historical Islamic figures.

with a review of popular (mis)visions of Islamic eschatological literature and the place of strangers therein. Next, I review the conceptual history of the Islamic stranger to ground my phenomenological intervention. I then turn to apply this conceptualization to practice, selecting the example of socio-economic harm to reflect on how Islamic law can generate collective resistance to structural evil, powered by strangerhood-based *baṣīra* (deep vision).

Eschatological Visions

Muslims have always engaged the vast Islamic tradition to make sense of their contemporary moment, to relate it to the early Muslim community and the historical context occupied by the Prophet (*ṣ*) and his Companions.[13] They seek guidance on how Islamic history has unfolded, on the place of the "now" in that history, as well as on the question of how Muslims can best conduct themselves in their given contexts, developing appropriate ethical practices. Eschatology, or the branch of Islamic thought concerned with the signs of the end times, is one resource on which Muslims have consistently mapped their realities.[14] Across Islamic history, Muslim scholars and lay believers alike have opined about their historical moments, wondering if they were living during the End Times.[15] Although I do not speculate about the temporal location of our moment on eschatological timeline, I find this literature useful for its identification of increased practices of harm and

13 This symbol *ṣ* denotes the honorific *ṣallā -llāhu* ʿalayhī *wa-sallam* (peace be upon him).

14 For conceptual and creative purposes, I am only interested in those Islamic eschatological traditions concerned with the end of times building up to but excluding any concepts of Armageddon and episodes from the Afterlife. In the language of the tradition, I am concerned with the "Lesser Signs" that are associated with a rise in corruption (*fasād*), and which precede the appearance of the Anti-Christ and the return of the Messiah. For a list of the Lesser Signs, see Bronislav Ostřanský, "The Lesser Signs of the Hour: A Reconstruction of the Islamic Apocalyptic Overture," *Oriental Archive* 81, no. 2 (2013), 235–382. For a more general investigation of the topic, see Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

15 As Cook notes—and I would qualify as most but not all—lesser signs "consist of events that almost everyone can agree are actually happening. In reality they have always been true…during every generation of Islam…as is clear from reading the historical literature of Islam" (David Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature* [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005], 50).

corruption.[16] If we are to construct an ethical framework that seriously meets the challenge of our present moment, and the unprecedented scale of harm that we can empirically observe around us, we must draw on the relevant conceptual resources. In its attention to harm and the sustained Islamic imperative to act ethically despite human and cosmic finitude, I find eschatological traditions suitable for the task.

One such eschatological tradition consists of a prophetic *ḥadīth* (report):

بدأ الإسلام غريبا وسيعود غريبا، فطوبى للغرباء.

Bada'a al-Islām gharīban wa sayaʿūdu gharīban fa-ṭūbā l-il-ghurabā'.

Islam began as strange, and will become once again strange;
so blessed be the strangers.[17]

Narrated through multiple chains of transmission, the identity of the strangers varies from one narration to the other. In his study on this *ḥadīth*, Youshaa Patel notes that in narrations where the Prophet is asked to divulge who the strangers are, he is reported to have said 1) "those who have left their tribes;" 2) "reformers at a time when the masses have become corrupt;"

16 Eschatological traditions emerged with and were subjected to the same disciplinary formation of the Ḥadīth corpus and sciences that developed, for example, in contradistinction to prophetic biography (*sīrah*), the discipline of exegesis, or the customs (*sunan*) of early companions, jurists and caliphs writ large. The eschatological corpus is thus to be found in the compilations of *ḥadīth*, the most famous of which, for example, is al-Bukhārī's book of trials (*fitan*) (no. 94) in his larger *Ṣaḥīḥ* canon, or the book of the same name in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (book 41), or the more recently discovered and published manuscript that is dedicated exclusively to the topic: *Kītāb al-Fitan*, by Naʿīm bin Ḥammād al-Marwāzī, ed: Samīr bin Amīr Al-Zuhairī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Tawḥīd, 1991). For an outline of the development of the *Ḥadīth* discipline, see Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); see also Christopher Melchert, *Formation of Sunni Schools of Law* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); also G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance, and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

17 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 130–31, *kitāb al-*īmān, *ḥadīth* no. 232, *ḥadīth* no. 145 and 146; Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾut et al., 50 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risala, 1995–2001), 6:325, ḥadīth no. 3784, 11:230–31, report no. 6650; Abu Abd Allah Muhammad b. Yazīd al-Qazwīnī, Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, ed. Bashshar ʿAwwad Maʿrūf, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1998), 5:468–69; Abu ʿIsā Muḥammad b. ʿIsā al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-kabīr*, ed. Bashshar ʿAwwad Maʿrūf, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1996), 4:371–73, *abwāb al-*īmān, section 13, ḥadīth no. 2929 and 2630.

3) "those who love my Sunna and teach it to others;" 4) "A virtuous minority amidst a corrupt majority;" and 5) "fugitives of faith. They will gather with Jesus, the son of Mary, on the day of judgment."[18]

Standard Sunni interpretations of the *ḥadīth* in modern popular platforms highlight the prediction that Islam will become an unconventional practice near the end times, such that very few people will remain steadfast in the faith, that these Muslims will be marginalized in society and will be considered strange and foreign from mainstream culture and practice.[19]

18 Youshaa Patel, "'Blessed are the Strangers (*ghurabā'*)': An Apocalyptic Hadith on the Virtues of Loneliness, Sadness and Exile," in *Hadith Commentary: Continuity and Change*, eds. Joel Blecher and Stefanie Brinkmann (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 85.

19 By *standard* I am here referring to a number of nonacademic or scholarly discourses where I locate this practice: in Friday sermons and popular preaching, in contemporary online Muslim apocalyptic literature, and in everyday conversations with and amongst Muslims, particularly on Islamic blogs and platforms. Martin Nguyen notes the continued "figurative allure of these ḥadīths…in contemporary Muslim discourses. They punctuate Friday sermons, religious study circles, and the rhetoric of popular preachers and spiritual teachers." See Martin Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal: the displaced, the racially disenfranchised, and the Islamic prophetic," in *Multi-religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds., Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (New York: Routledge, 2021), 138. As for the second category, Ostřansky correctly identifies the modern rise and genealogy of this genre, which draws as much from classical eschatological traditions as it does a "set of Western borrowings" as it runs against the conceptual and functional limitations of the former. See Ostřansky, "The Lesser Signs," 235. Cook further highlights the limits of drawing inferences about popular eschatological belief from these select but easily accessible print and online publications, given the dearth of research on popular belief, particularly on the reception of modern apocalyptic scenarios of the kind he studies in his monograph. See Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature*, 230. For a very recent example of the conventional rhetorical tropes, the approach of identification, as well as some critical departures, see the following lecture given by Omar Suleiman, a popular and sophisticated Muslim preacher in the US, on the topic of companionship in strangerhood: "Be in This World a Stranger or a Wayfarer" (www.youtube.com). While the notion of strangerhood is present in *Shīʿī* thought, and my analysis has been met favorably among *Shīʿī* colleagues, I exclude it from the present analysis for two reasons. First, I am far less familiar with secondary scholarship on, as well as primary sources of, *Shīʿism*. Second, the concepts of occultation (*taqiyyah*) and the absence of the Imam complicate the notion of strangerhood as they implicate—with respect to matters of justice, loyalty, and devotion—individual Shīʿī believers and the community as a whole differently and offer a rather different and distinct eschatological vision. For studies on contemporary Shīʿī apocalypticism, see David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2021); Cook. "Messianism in the Shiite crescent," in

This interpretation can be of tremendous comfort and encourage patience in the face of real ostracization and persecution experienced by many Muslim communities around the world. As Ostřanský's study of Islamic apocalypticism notes, this mode of thought emerges as a "mythical and rhetorical solution to the problem of evil in a world created and led by the Divine Will, with apocalyptic discourse resolving this problem of evil by proposing that the final judgement is fast approaching, which will result in the forces of evil receiving their punishment while the forces of good will reap their reward."[20]

While I do not disavow this interpretation, given that oppressed Muslims draw comfort and inspiration from it, I find some of the uncritical assumptions made by Muslim scholars and lay believers with respect to this *ḥadīth* to be antithetical to the Islamic work of ethical cultivation of a virtuous self. As both Cook and Ostřanski note in their studies, one of the most common ways modern Muslims read these traditions is to identify themselves with a particular group, or to identify, often in the context of criticism and polemics, their opposition with a group that is condemned to failure or punishment. Consider for instance, condemnations of Saudi Arabia's mega urban expansion of the area surrounding the *kaʿba*, the sacred site of Mecca, as the actualization of the prophecy that in the End Times the barefoot nomads and sheepherders (that is, the people of the Arabian Peninsula) will erect high buildings.[21] Furthermore, traditional Muslim scholars have condemned the democratization of access to religious knowledge in eschatological terms, invoking the tradition predicting that critical matters of religion will become delegated to people who are modest in learning, as well as "fools or simpletons."[22] As for self-identification: in some Salafi circles, this involves adopting the markers of "the victorious group (*al-ṭāʾifa al-manṣūrah*)" and "the saved sect (*al-firqa al-nājiyah*)."[23] Nguyen notes that "the estrangement at the heart of the hadith [of the strangers] validated the estrangement felt by foreign fighters willing to fight and die for the Islamic state."[24]

Current Trends in Islamist Ideology 11 (2011), 117; and the last section of Chapter 6 in Bronislav Ostřanský, *The Jihadist Preachers of the End Times: ISIS Apocalyptic Propaganda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

20 Ostřansky, "The Lesser Signs," 262.

21 Cook, *Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature,* 51; Ostřansky, 258.

22 Ostřansky, 262; Cook, 50.

23 Ostřansky, *The Jihadist Preachers of the End Times*, 7.

24 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 137.

Simply identifying with a social or religious group found in eschatological portraits is a static and passive reading of the *ḥadīth* that claims knowledge of the identity of self and other. This is not an ethically attuned orientation; it further fails to offer an agential and critically reflexive approach to these traditions as ethical resources, viz., to live ethically in the world today, if we take the prophetic charge seriously. Then, instead of resorting to identity politics, we must ask, "how does one become a stranger?" I believe it is significant that the Prophet (*ṣ*) used a formulation that emphasized an agent, a stranger, over its quality, strange/strangeness. This implies that the emphasis should be on the characteristics, behaviors, and practices of that person who is called a stranger—in other words, their ethical and spiritual subjectivity. Instead of assuming that we already are strangers, accepting it as an eschatological designation or a social marker, I argue that our intention should be to *become* strangers, intentionally inhabiting and embodying strangeness as a prophetic *praxis,* where *prophetic* denotes a social-critical posture and an ethical sensibility rooted in religious commitment.[25]

To do so we first must conceptualize the strangers: what do they look like, how do they relate to themselves and others, how do they think, behave, and conduct themselves in the world? Drawing on a number of premodern portraits, the early Muslim community, and modern sociological reflections on the figure of the stranger, I offer a set of characteristics that I believe define a stranger's subjectivity. I then use this portrait to revisit the ethico-legal concept of *ḍarar*. I illustrate how a believer's embodiment of stranger subjectivity can help us achieve better understanding of the scale and reach of harm we practice on a daily basis, which I believe is unprecedented and specific to our historical moment. While harm is a ubiquitous concept in Islamic ethico-legal thought, I consider questions of moral theory, ontology, and epistemology embedded in this apparently straightforward moral principle. Drawing inspiration from Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, and configuring the relationship between strangerhood and harm,

25 I use *praxis* to refer to a practice that is informed by some kind of a conceptual framework. Regarding *prophetic,* see Mark Cladis, "Romantic Nature," in *Nature and Literary Studies,* eds. Peter Remien and Scott Slovic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 156. Martin Nguyen highlights the distinction between using the term *prophetic* to refer to emulating the prophet's custom as opposed to inheriting the theological marker and role of prophethood—a distinction that I follow: "From the religious standpoint, I am using 'prophetic' in its sense of *sunna* (prophetic custom) rather than *nubuwwa* (prophethood). In other words, I use 'prophetic' according to its ethical dimensions within Islam, rather than its religious one." Martin Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 147.

I redefine harm as the underlying logic of domination characterizing the Anthropocene. By considering the entanglement of law and ethics, I intend to show how behaving like strangers should first be understood as a collective praxis of the whole Muslim community, not the work of the marginalized, and second, how it can help us, in our varying individual and collective capacities as stewards, to become attuned to redressing harm wherever it exists in our milieu, replacing it with practices that are *ṭayyib* (that which is beneficial, good, or wholesome in acquisition or production).

Portrait of a Stranger

The figure of the stranger has been known to humankind perhaps since time immemorial. It appears frequently in Near Eastern cultures, particularly with respect to norms and rules of moral conduct.[26] The Biblical tradition addresses the duties of mercy and hospitality towards strangers, and the Old Testament particularly reminds the Israelites "that they themselves once lived a life of misery and oppression, languishing in a foreign and hostile land."[27] Several prophets have been physical strangers (in escape or exile) as well as being estranged from their people for a part of their journey: Ibrāhīm (*ṣ*), or Abraham, parts way with his idolatrous community and establishes *tawḥīd* (monotheism) "as a stranger in a foreign land;"[28] Yūsuf (*ṣ*), or Joseph, is estranged from his family for years, and experiences both trials and blessings throughout his stay in Egypt; Mūsā (*ṣ*), or Moses, escapes Egypt when he is warned Pharoah is conspiring to kill him and dwells as a stranger in Madyan for at least a decade; and Yūnus (*ṣ*) or Jonah, is forsaken when he abandons his people, devoured by the whale, before he repents, is forgiven, and is sent to lead another community. In Pre-Islamic Arabia, the *gharīb* (stranger) was both a problem and a common literary trope.[29] Members of Arabian society "recognized and pondered" the problem of the stranger "as an intruder

26 Joseph Ellul, "'The Stranger Who Visited Me:' The Concept of Hospitality in Islam," in *Le Migrazioni Umane Nel XXI Secolo* 1 (February 2014), 43.

27 Ellul, 43.

28 Ellul, 44.

29 The noun form of the word means "the stranger or foreigner," while the adjective has a wider semantic range that includes (as Lewis explains) "foreign, alien, peculiar, exotic, remarkable....It derives from an Arabic root (gh-r-b) which evokes exile or diaspora, being far from home; as well as oddity, peculiarity, uniqueness, and marvel; and the western compass point." Franklin Lewis, "Response," in *Multi-religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds. Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (New York: Routledge, 2021), 149.

among genuine tribal members," while they worried less about the individual who intentionally left his clan.[30] In poetry, the separation of the lover from his beloved configured the lover into a stranger, if only "in the imagination." It is perhaps this tradition that spurned depictions of the stranger as one that dwelled in misery.[31]

In medieval Islamic thought, the stranger held a distinctive socio-religious valence, or what Yousha Patel refers to as a "broader episteme in premodern Muslim social imagination."[32] In his study of the stranger, Franz Rosenthal argues that ideally, no Muslim was ever a stranger in the land of Islam, since the marks of belonging were drawn differently than they are by nationalities and state borders today.[33] Yet, the figure of the stranger continued to generate contemplative thought. The stranger was pitied for his weakness and lack of protection. An individual was afforded dignity and respect amongst his family and people, and found nothing but a humbled status, vulnerability, and more often than not, poverty, in strange lands.[34] On the other hand, one reason for which one could become a stranger was to escape tyranny or injustice at home.[35] Gradually, the stranger became a fecund literary category that made its way to a number of Islamic writing genres and disciplines, particularly *ḥadīth* and the literary genres of *adab* (prose and belles-lettres). While scholars of *ḥadīth* were concerned with strangerhood in terms of piety and early community politics, the concept of the stranger developed further in literary genres in alignment with the expansion of those disciplines beyond the conventions and cultural needs of the scholars and piety-oriented.[36] Accordingly, we see in the work of *ḥadīth* compilers and commentators, such as Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), reflections on strangers as a "small group of the righteous amongst a large group of the wicked" and strangerhood as a "call to forsake divisive

30 Franz Rosenthal, "The Stranger in Medieval Islam," in *Arabica* 44, no.1 (January 1997): 35–75 at 39.

31 Rosenthal, "The Stranger in Medieval Islam," 40.

32 Patel, "Blessed are the strangers," 80.

33 Patel, 36.

34 Patel, 44, 48.

35 Patel, 50.

36 For more on these disciplinary and historiographical developments, see Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (1994); Christopher Melchert, "The piety of the Hadith Folk," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, No. 3 (August 2002): 425–39; and Armando Salvatore's "Secularity through a 'Soft Distinction' in the Islamic Ecumene? *Adab* as a Counterpoint to *Shari'a*," in *Historical Social Research* 44, No. 3 (2019), 35–51.

forms of particularism."[37] Conversely, in the 10th century, the "literature on exile and alienation began to emerge as a genre of its own in Arabic."[38] The most remarkable extant example is the *Book of Strangers*, an anonymous compilation of fragmentary graffiti left by strangers across Islamic lands. The verses reflect on the stranger's "fundamental dilemma of belonging," for the stranger, unlike most people, "belongs nowhere."[39]

The figure of the stranger denoted aspects of human alienation from the world and longing for the Divine; the stranger could thus be approached through the register of piety. Estrangement became a metaphor for humanity's temporary stay on earth. In that sense, Muslims specifically, and humanity in general, are strangers "always and everywhere."[40] Rosenthal traces this general principle to the inward religiosity cultivated by "ascetics and mystics [who] adopted it not only as a metaphor but also as a lifestyle. To be a stranger, in this reading, is to be a stranger from this world, because one actually belongs to another one. To exercise a deliberate distance from the pleasures of the world, and instead, to dedicate oneself fully to God, was the ultimate marker of estrangement.[41] A Muslim, in this conception, is always already a stranger as much as they are in this world, but not of it.

Strangerhood provided premodern Muslims with a common conceptual language and a powerful rhetorical tool. Unsurprisingly, the exact contours of the term were contested and contextualized to meet different purposes. As Patel notes, the figure of the stranger was used to encourage the cultivation of virtue and "spiritual detachment."[42] After the 10th century, scholarly interest in the concept begins to revolve around defense of different narratives of early Islamic history and orthodoxy. In fact, "nearly all commentators" reflected on their condition as strangers, as "outcasts whose virtue was unknown to the ignorant masses."[43] Returning to the *ḥadīth* of *gharābah*, it is worth remembering that the different narrations glossed the meaning of strangerhood differently, allowing narrators to choose an interpretation that "aligned best with their subjective worldview, rhetorical

37 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 141; for an overview of this topic, 141–43.

38 Franklin Lewis, "Response," in *Multi-religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds. Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (New York: Routledge, 2021), 153.

39 Patel, "Blessed are the Strangers," 80.

40 Patel, 55.

41 Patel, 59.

42 Patel, 82, 94.

43 Patel, 96.

objectives…[and] social circumstances."[44] In drawing on this *ḥadīth*, I employ my own rhetorical gestures in order to constructively place it in conversation with the Anthropocene.

Accordingly, for my purposes there is more to the stranger than its premodern registers. Seeing Muslims as always already strangers does not map onto the *ḥadīth* adequately. If that were the case then identifying Islamic practices with strangeness would have been invariable throughout history, unlike the three segments the *ḥadīth* describes. In the words of the Prophet, Islam began as *gharīb,* and it began as such with him and the handful of Companions who believed in his message. The designation was not solely one of identity, migration, or occupation of strange lands. The majority of the early Muslims were Arabs, natives of the tribes of Mecca. Nor were they simply orienting themselves away from the pleasures of the world. They did not, like the later ascetic, travel as nomads, enacting what it meant to be a stranger to the entirety of the world. The early Muslims remained in Mecca for the first ten years of the propagation of Islam. The first *hijrah* to Ethiopia was a very short episode in the 22-year span of revelation. Even with the more substantial *hijrah* to Medina, they were not strangers in foreign terrains. Nor were they necessarily on the margins of their communities: they varied in degrees of wealth and social status, some were Arabs, and many were *mawāli* (clients of Arab tribes, thus much lower in rank and socio-economically vulnerable).[45]

What then was *gharābah* (strangerhood) in nascent Islam? A stranger imports qualities into the group which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.[46] In the first instance then, the Prophet Muhammad (*ṣ*) was a stranger when he received transcendent revelation, an unusual source of knowledge for his community. Yet the content of revelation was not

44 Patel, "Blessed are the Strangers," 86.

45 This portrait and the following paragraph draw on my readings of Qur'anic verses revealed in the Meccan period, as well demographic information and the general timeline that appears in Sunni literature, particularly the biographies of the prophet, and which is not necessarily the subject of controversy for scholars disinterested in the Orientalist question of the origins of Islam. I am also restricting my timeframe to the very earliest period to avoid conflicting accounts due to sectarian debates; as far as I know the claims in this paragraph are not sectarian (that is, accepted by one sect but rejected by another). Nevertheless, this is not a historical analysis of the origins and early years of Islam in seventh-century Arabia—for neither is this the purpose of this paper nor does the scope and space limit allow for such a tangent.

46 Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in Kurt Wolff, translator, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402.

entirely foreign; it had precedent, not only in the revelations of the (Jewish and Christian) *ahl al-kitāb,* or *People of the Book*, with whom the Arab had reasonable interactions, but also the larger cosmology of Divine revelation, which the Qur'an frequently invokes as carrying signs for those who contemplate.[47] It was not the novelty of the Qur'anic revelation that made Muhammad (*s*) a stranger, but that revelation oriented him away from his people's idolatrous practices, and by questioning the legitimacy, epistemology, value, and benefit of these practices, he compelled his people to confront themselves and the constructed nature of those practices. He exercised a social, if not physical, distance from their practices that questioned their familiarity and made him conceptually a stranger amongst his people. As Cynthia Coe notes, what drives the fear of the stranger is not simply the fear of that which is foreign and unknown, but it is a fear about how a certain kind of foreignness can have the effect of dissolving established boundaries between that which is designated as familiar vs. unfamiliar, with all the political, economic, and moral implications of these social designations. "It is a fear that we might no longer feel at home in our own city."[48] It is precisely this last notion that drives my particular configuration of spatial and conceptual strangerhood here.

The more revelation the Prophet (*s*) received, the more his practice sought to deconstruct and de-normalize the customs of pagan Arabia. It took the form of critiquing their idolatry, which rationalized their tendencies to exploit and harm. More and more verses condemned prevalent manifestations of greed, abstinence from charitable giving and redistribution of wealth, the usurpation of the rights and inheritances of orphans, the burying alive of newborn females, Arab prejudice or discrimination against non-Arabs, and other injustices. Islam (and the early Muslims) started out as a *gharīb* in that it estranged itself from the very conditions in which it emerged and confronted them where necessary. Although the Prophet's (*s*) followers were part of that pagan community, they distanced themselves from its practices, defamiliarizing years of embodied habits by examining its harmful consequences and questioning its legitimacy.

Based on these portraits I now outline the practices I take to be central to a stranger subjectivity today. I divide these into two components: their comportment, and the effect of that comportment on their surroundings.

47 On this matter, see Chapter 1 of Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*.

48 Cynthia D. Coe, "Strangers and Natives: Gadamer, colonial discourse and the politics of understanding," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35, no. 8 (2009), 931.

There are three main qualities I wish to highlight regarding the distinctive comportment of the stranger. First, the stranger is always seeing things as if for the first time. Much as actual strangers must assess the unfamiliar terrains or communities they stumble upon with novel eyes, so does a stranger amongst their community approach the unfamiliar with a strange distance in order to more *profoundly see* and *deeply understand* where these practices came from, what sanctions them, and whether they beget benefit or harm. Second, strangers are at the threshold of their community, constantly measuring the practices in their milieu with the yardstick of revelation. They defamiliarize the familiar to ask: what forms of *jāhiliyyah* (a kind of tyrannical injustice against oneself and others, rooted in ignorance) are prevalent in my environment today and how might I be participating in it?[49] How close am I to the prophetic ideal? How can I draw closer? If the non-believers of seventh century Mecca had their *patriarchy*—the "forefathers" they so frequently invoked whenever the Prophet (*ṣ*) condemned a practice as harmful or unjust against God or His creation, and so did the various groups who came before, whose stories are narrated in the Qur'an—then who are the patriarchs of my society's practices? Third, because strangers do not have the privilege of familiarity and believing they safely know their surroundings comfortably well, they are invariably slow in their actions, having to deliberate, investigate, and draw on disparate sources of information in order to make decisions.

With regard to the effect of their comportment upon others, their presence "embodies otherness…upsetting [the] previously unproblematic existence" of those among whom they dwell.[50] It raises concerns about

49 Qur'anic use of the term contrasts it with Islam, justice, and makes it synonymous with doing injustice to oneself by worshipping false deities, rejecting revelation, or otherwise incurring God's anger and desertion.

50 Tibor Dessewffy, "Strangerhood Without Boundaries: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge," in *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996), 604. While hospitality is a corollary topic to the figure of the stranger, I do not directly consider it in my analysis as it usually pertains to how one is supposed to behave towards the stranger, less so how one can enact strangerhood oneself. Indeed, the plea for hospitality is a continuous one of compassion and a taming of the self from subjecting the stranger to "myriad judgments" simply by virtue of being a stranger. See Cynthia Coe, "Strangers and Natives," 922. That being said, the hospitality with which we may be exhorted to treat strangers shares in some similarities with what I take to be the emergent sensibilities that one cultivates by virtue of behaving like strangers in their own milieu—an attuning to others and one's relationship to them, a defamiliarization of habit and many unexamined given, and a critical interrogation of what the self knows and what it is ignorant about. In her analysis of Gadamerian hermeneutics (which is self-reflexive on questions of pre-judgments

the established socio-economic relations and their viability and stability.[51] Importantly, recognizing their vulnerability and unfamiliarity with their surroundings, strangers eagerly seek the kindness and friendship of others and identify with alterity. Contrast this vision of raw vulnerability with the experience of a tourist, whose passport affords a guarantee of a return to their country, whose experience of the place they are visiting may be mediated through guides and travel agencies, and who have the luxury of remaining at a surface-level engagement with their surroundings. Instead, this perception of fragility may encourage strangers to "expand [their] circle of friends beyond those who share [their] socio-economic, racial, and religious identities."[52] If the tourist is guaranteed safety through their ability to opt out of their trip whenever they so choose, a stranger's security is better sought in deepening ties of intimacy with their surroundings.

How do these qualities compound into an ethical praxis? In an essay on the sociology of knowledge, Tibor Dessewffy identifies the lack of customs as the one aspect that drastically differentiates a stranger's experience from their former everyday life:

> We can no longer rely on the *routines* that help us through the labyrinth of everyday communication; the automatisms that smoothly control our behaviour are no longer operative. The newcomer, from the moment he realizes that he has fallen into a foreign environment, becomes tense and *alert*: he must begin to *learn.*[53]

This emphasis on alertness, the need to learn, and the inability to fall back on routine, results in the stranger developing a more perceptive, critical, and intimate knowledge of their surroundings and the often-invisible relations that constitute the fabric of their social reality. It results in a temporary

and how we come to understand phenomenon), Cynthia Coe argues that this framework is "therapeutic." While it does not guarantee proper treatment of strangers, "it goes some way towards understanding it," for the "ideal of dialogue" and constant engagement with the other that it presents makes us more humbly aware of our "historically effected consciousness, [our] own finitude and the heteronomous origins of our attempts at understanding, [and makes it] less likely to impose our fantasies upon others when we are aware that they are fantasies" (Cynthia Coe, "Strangers and Natives," 931).

51 This was a recurrent, though implicit theme in Rosenthal's exploration of medieval Islamic literature of strangers, which I considered above.

52 Takács, "Drawing Near to God", 44.

53 Dessewffy, "Strangerhood Without Boundaries," 605.

removal of the "veil of familiarity"—not for the intent of alienation, isolation, or physical distance, but to interrogate how much about our reality we truly know and understand, and to yield a more authentic, attuned, and critical form of empathy.[54] I take this deeper way of seeing and exercising *baṣīrah* (discerning vision) to develop a dynamic and aware engagement with the world and its surroundings, of the kind the Qur'an encourages humankind to practice with its exhortations: do you not see, do you not think/contemplate, do you not discern?

The portrait I offer here shares many features with two contemporary Anglophone reflections on the stranger by scholars who identify as Muslim: Ebrahim Moosa and Martin Nguyen. Both scholars are concerned with finding correlations between the perennial category of the stranger and modern iterations as a starting point for thinking about ethical application to contemporary questions: for instance, invoking the *ḥadīth* of strangerhood, Moosa "understands the hadith to be speaking to Muslims today and gesturing to cycles of religious renewal,"[55] while Nguyen states that "at the most basic level, the desperate migrant is the Gharib defined by the Arabic lexicographers as the 'one who is far from home.'"[56] They are both also concerned with extrapolating features to a stranger comportment that surpass the spatial and physical element of being a foreigner in a foreign land/among foreign peoples. For instance, Moosa employs the notion of exile, to which a stranger is often subjected, as a resource for struggling against colonial epistemicide.[57] He finds in physical exile the leaving of one's home, interacting with different peoples and climates "in order to see the world through the lenses of new experiences," which lend, in their richness, the stranger subject the ability to "speak truth to power."[58] Yet again, the very experience of exile is what counts for Moosa, whether one "embraces physical exile, or if exile is experienced merely as a mental estrangement from society or community;" ultimately, the value of a subject that behaves

54 Cladis, "Romantic Nature," 151. For reflections on the perils of superficial, quick-fix, and identification-driven empathy that often results in the very annihilation of the other who is the object of empathy, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), particularly the discussion in chapter 1.

55 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 139.

56 Nguyen, 141.

57 The term denotes the figurative "killing" of a particular epistemology and ways of knowing that are intimately tied to or associated with ways of being and beliefs, often Indigenous and subjected to modern colonialism.

58 Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 278.

as though they are in exile is in their ability to "view things in a way that a domesticated and complacent gaze may fail to observe."[59] Nguyen thinks about strangerhood multivalently: Muslims are strangers in as much as "we are being asked to refocus on the life to come…our home, so to speak, lies not in this world…but with God in the Hereafter." Notwithstanding, he argues that the Prophetic conduct suggests that "our humanity is best fulfilled when we [simultaneously] actively embrace and inhabit the life of the stranger."[60]

While indebted to these studies, I aspire to go beyond them in how I conceptualize the stranger grounded in a concern to offer a framework general enough that it can be adopted and fine-tuned by all Muslims, irrespective of their positionality. While Moosa's conceptualization of strangeness centers resistance to colonial epistemicide and Nguyen's "that space of minoritization and marginalization," my conceptualization goes beyond the limits of spatial marginalization. First, this limit places the burden of responsibility on a select few, whereas I propose a communal praxis carried out by every individual. Afterall, if learning from the disenfranchised can sober others to their privilege, how can the disenfranchised themselves actively take up the strangerhood agency? Second, thinking about strangers as individuals on the outside risks slipping into physical isolation and alienation. I prefer to think of strangers as inhabiting a liminal space, akin to Moosa's concept of the *threshold*, with one foot in and the other outside of the community's customary boundaries. Finally, Nguyen draws primarily from the experiences of the displaced and the racially disenfranchised, encouraging us to provincialize our experiences and to identify with alterity. In thinking about strangerhood perceptually, I wish to highlight the inverse relationship between speed and depth.[61] As a measurement of the relationship between distance and time, speed denotes how quickly or slowly we spend in any given place, with any given person. Since deep and empathetic intimacy can only result from sustained engagement, attention, and attunement, speed emerges in this understanding as an ethical practice. Granted, not everyone can afford to sustain a slow

59 Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination,* 279.

60 Nguyen, "Sunni Islam and the estranged ideal," 141.

61 My thoughts on ethics as a perceptual practice draws from Sandra Laugier's work on Ordinary Language Philosophy, the ethics of care, the invisibility of gendered care work, and ethics as a perceptual practice; see Sandra Laugier, "The Will to See: Ethics and Moral Perception of Sense," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34, No. 2 (2013), 1–19; and "Wittgenstein and Care Ethics as a Plea for Realism," *Philosophies* 7, No. 4 (2022), 1–18.

mode of survival to the same degree. Nevertheless, grounding stranger ethics in perceptual and temporal practices opens up the spaces where this sensibility can be cultivated beyond spaces we typically think of as transformative of our worldviews. It is also my hope that grounding intimacy in the practice of deep and intentional familiarity can offer a way to think about intersectionalities and hierarchies of vulnerability; for example, how an exploited worker can identify and rectify in themselves gender or racially based acts of harms against others.

Strangers Today

In this section I illustrate by way of example how seeing and orienting ourselves towards the world in the manner of strangers can help us recognize the specific forms of harm that are simultaneously produced by and producing our daily practices. I focus on examples of socio-economic relations that enable the modes of production and consumption characteristic of the capitalist world economy today, because these relations are the most invisible to our view. There is something especially dangerous about these modern practices, in as much as causing harm is not only a by-product of their operation, but is also inherent to their logic. Sustaining the cycles of production and consumptions at their current speed, global reach, and magnitude, is only possible through mechanisms that systematically neglect or oppose the welfare and benefits of certain human populations, animals, and environmental ecologies—all of God's creations.

Why is being attentive to harm such an urgent ethical matter for Muslims, and why do I emphasize our responsibility to become better aware of it? Harm is a category that occupies an integral and important position in Islamic discourses. How Muslim scholars have thought about it and its corollary, *maṣlaḥa* (benefit), reflects early developments in Islamic moral theory and theology, later developments in Islamic law, and modern intellectual responses to colonialism and modernity. The Arabic term denoting harm, *ḍarar*, is a multivalent term that lexically denotes "harm, injury, hurt, mischief, or damage."[62] In Islamic law, the term refers to whatever causes injury, damage, ailment, or prevents the attainment of benefits and general welfare.[63] As Luqman Zakaryah notes in his study

62 Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book 1 (Lebanon: Librairie du Luban, 1968), 1796.

63 Mathew Hanser, "Understanding Harm and its Moral Significance," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 22, No. 4 (August 2019), 859.

of Islamic criminal law, "*ḍarar* is precisely the opposite of *nāfiʿ* (benefit)."[64] Beyond this tautology however, harm is that which is inflicted on others, and which constitutes an infringement of their rights. The question of harm, then, necessarily implicates notions of justice and injustice. If justice is understood as the upholding of rights and the execution of obligations that brings about an orderly society and maintains a balance of rights and responsibilities, then the accrual of benefit and the prevention of harm can be understood as both the outcome and the purpose of the dispensation of justice.[65] It appears that a utilitarian framework underlies Islamic ethico-legal thought. However, a crucial distinction lies between moral epistemology (how we know what is good) and ontology (the nature of the good and who assigns it). If in a utilitarian framework harm and benefit are defined as the maximization of pleasure and reduction of pain, Islamic thought corresponds good and evil with benefit and harm, understood in terms of individual and communal well-being.[66]

I suggest that understanding the relationship of harm to justice in Islamic thought is better sought if we compare it to Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach. In her recent book *Justice for Animals*, Nussbaum argues that "a society is minimally just only if it secures to each individual citizen a minimum threshold amount of a list of central capabilities, which are defined as substantial freedoms, or opportunities for choice and action in areas of life that people in general have reason to value."[67] Nussbaum is concerned with showing that injustice against an animal is constituted as any act of harm or more generally wrongdoing, either deliberately or through neglect, that prevents it from "striving to get something at least reasonably significant to her life."[68] I read Nussbaum's framework to be compatible with the Islamic conception of harm. She gestures to the "good ends" that constitute a life properly lived by a given animal, without necessarily locating the epistemic source of that goodness in any religious

64 Luqman Zakaryah, *Legal Maxims in Islamic Criminal Law: Theory and Applications* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 145.

65 For a review of conceptions of justice, governance, and the good life in medieval political thought, in the influence of the Greek tradition of political theory, see Charles E. Butterworth, "Ethics in Medieval Philosophy," *The Journal of Ethics* 11, No. 2 (1983), 224–39; see also Patricia Crone's *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2004).

66 George Hourani, *Two Theories of Value in Medieval Islam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 270.

67 Martha Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 80.

68 Nussbaum, 6.

thought. Nussbaum's recognition that each animal, then, has a "form of life" resonates strongly in my mind with the Qur'anic injunction that God's creatures are "nations like yourself [that is, humans]" (Q 6:32). She explains that this form of life "involves a set of important goals towards which they thrive…each animal is a teleological system directed towards a set of good ends centering around survival, reproduction, and, in most cases, social interaction."[69] In relocating the definition of harm and benefit away from the subjectiveness and anthropocentric reference of pleasure and pain, her framework allows us to think theistically (and hence Islamically) about the immorality of domination. If every individual, human, animal, or otherwise, has a form of life endowed by God, that constitutes a particular life cycle and divine regime, then domination leads to harm whenever this divine order or life-law is disrupted, the life of the individual in question is diverted towards exploitative purposes, and the set of rights endowed it by God are transgressed.[70]

What, then, is the moral significance of harm in our contemporary moment? Many studies, scholarly and journalistic articles, and reports, too numerous to be exhaustively referenced here, have been written about the various ways global economies are based on and perpetuate harmful practices. These studies identify harm being directed towards human populations, particularly working class and post-colonial populations, domesticated animals for human consumptions, and the larger ecologies of wild animals, plants, land, and other living organisms.[71] Mohamed Ghilan for instance offers a detailed public-facing study of the different forms of harm inherent to practices in the food industry that inflict undue pain and suffering on animal populations, particularly those reared on mass-scale factory farms.[72] Here as in many industrial settings, cutting costs in order to

69 Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals,* 1.

70 For more on the idea of harm as a loss of certain things that are good to have, see Mathew Hanser, "Understanding Harm and its Moral Significance."

71 See Lia Blanch and Amin Amirul's report on Bangladesh's Garment Industry for International Union Rights "The Right to Strike" 20, no. 2 (2013)l, 12–13; see also Anu Muhammad, "Wealth and Deprivation: Ready-made Garments Industry in Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* (August 20–26, 2011), 23–27. For a broad overview and emphatic case studies on the question of animal welfare in the Anthropocene, see Martha Nussbaum's *Justice for Animals*, particularly the Introduction and Chapter 1.

72 Mohamed Ghilan, "The Halal Bubble and the Sunnah Imperative to Go Vegan," *Al-Madina* (May 16, 2016), www.almadina.org.

maximize profits is achieved at the expense of humane treatment of animals, and the provision of safe conditions and fair compensation for workers.[73]

Others have pointed to the global garment industry, where once again accumulating more and more profit takes the shape of employing cheaply produced but toxic dyes, growing materials that deplete natural resources on which smaller communities rely for their livelihood, and offshoring production to the Global South where primarily female labor is severely underpaid and overworked to produce non-durable items in very dangerous working conditions, often leading to mass accidents and deaths.[74] Moreover, these items are deliberately designed to be non-durable so that they can be sold cheaply enough to generate a continuous profit-generating demand. Overproduction means that most items produced on a mass scale end up in landfill sites. We can draw similar conclusions on almost all modern industries that employ extractive practices, depleting and permanently damaging ecosystems, and instigating competition over resources leading to conflicts and civil wars, particularly in post-colonial countries, thus expanding the category of *al-mustaḍʿafūn* (those who are weakened and disempowered).[75]

From these diverse sources I want to focus on what makes these modern practices so unprecedented in the magnitude and extent of harm they generate. Our age is not the first where humans have on occasions found it profitable to inflict harm on God's creation. For example, a couple of studies authored by Necmettin Kizilkaya on animal welfare in premodern Islamic legal manuals identifies instances where Muslim jurists name and prescribe certain behaviors in human-animal relations such as "allowing animals to rest, not overloading them, and not harassing them [that] are related to the basic Islamic principle of preventing harm."[76] Kizilkaya further

73 Ingrid Mattson, "Eating in the Name of God," *Islamic Horizons* (March/April 2010), https://isna.net.

74 See, for instance, in descending order of recency: Human Right Watch's reports on labour rights in the garment industry, https://hrw.org; Kieran Breen, "Cleaning Up Fast Fashion," *RSA Journal* 166, No. 2 (2020), 34–37; "Fashion's tiny hidden secret," United Nations Environmental Program website (March 13, 2019); Daniel Soyer, "Garment Sweatshops, Then and Now," *New Labour Forum* 4 (Spring–Summer 1999), 35–46.

75 For an overview of theories of resource extraction and ecologically unequal exchange, see the section on extractive industries in Thomas K. Rudel, J. Timmons Roberts, and JoAnn Carmin, "Political Economy of the Environment," *Annual Review of Sociology* (August 2011), 225.

76 Necmettin Kizilkaya, "They Are Communities Like You[:] The Rationale for Animal Rights and Welfare in Islamic Civilization," İnsan *Ve Toplum Dergisi* 11, No.

mines juristic opinions dispensed at the request of individual Muslims in the Ottoman period regarding fair treatment of animals to highlight that a robust and attentive understanding of animal welfare can be found in premodern juristic writing that is responding to very real instances of harm involved in the extraction of benefits such as farming and trade.[77] These non-binding opinions were also supplanted with legal regulations and codes as part of the Ottoman administration, particularly of the markets.[78]

That's not quite what we are dealing with today. The key difference which characterizes our era as Anthropocenic is domination. It is a condition under which social relations are realigned and human relationship to the more-than-human world is reconfigured in ways that are primarily extractive, instrumental, and constitute unequal exchange. In these conditions, many "forms of life" are entirely purposed to instrumentally feed into, support, and sustain an ever-expansive regime of market-constructed desires masquerading as needs.[79] They are, in fact, "false needs" which Herbert Marcuse, in his *One-Dimensional Man*, juxtaposes with "true needs"—those "vital human requirements for food, lodging, clothing, and meaning at some ecologically sustainable level of culture."[80] Underlying this regime is a conceptual framework that is centered on constructed notions of efficiency and scarcity. I say constructed because it is the discursive result of the invasion of a neo-Malthusian "vernacular" to political, social, and administrative structures and functions, sustaining the belief that "socio-ecological relations must be understood through a naturalized vocabulary of limits…decline and collapse."[81] Tied to this framework is how we approach technology and technical advances as a "means to conquering [this] scarcity."[82] This technological rationality, and the concomitant instrumental approach to science and nature is so discursively powerful that, in our

2 (June 2011), 14.

77 Necmettin Kizilkaya, "Be Gentle to Them: Animal Welfare and the Protection of Draft Animals in the Ottoman fatwā Literature and Legislation," *Religions* 11, No. 10 (2020), 518.

78 Kizilkaya, "Be Gentle to Them," 9.

79 "[F]alse needs...are imposed on individuals not to meet truly vital requirements but rather to perpetuate the powers and privileges of vested interests that benefit from such domination and destruction," Timothy W. Luke, "One-Dimensional Man: A Systematic Critique of Human Domination and Nature-Society Relations," *Organization and Environment* 13, No. 1 (March 2000), 100.

80 Luke, 97.

81 Jonathan Beacham, "Organising food differently: Towards a more-than-human ethics of care for the Anthropocene," *Organization* 25, No. 4 (May 2018), 534.

82 Luke, 99.

Anthropocenic moment, it has also become our political rationality.[83] It is precisely the exploitation of nature in advanced industrial society that produces an immediate surplus of material wealth that structures political practice (in both democratic and undemocratic societies) and empowers the "vested controlling interests to co-opt, buy-off, or immobilize" demands for liberation and an alternative regime of care for oneself and others.[84]

While there is no consensus on the exact nature and directionality of the causal relationship between technological change and the development of Capitalism, it is reasonable to extrapolate from this analysis that technological capability is at least one of the factors that enables the current reconfiguration of relationships I discussed in the previous paragraph. I do not find anything especially or distinctly pernicious in the nature of modern humans; our conception of modernity as exceptional is only true discursively, and to be sure, Qur'anic conception of man as a species, while predominantly negative, does not differentiate between epochs. Humanity's struggle against its insatiable tendencies is the same, regardless of time, space, and context. It is an insatiability that is composed of haste, anxiety, myopia, forgetfulness, and a constant search for what is more, and which may manifest whether one had at his disposal a rudimentary tool of technology or the means of industrial societies. But the shape, form, and outcome of this insatiability will differ depending on the material capabilities available at hand.[85]

As a regime of domination undergirded by the expansive technological capacity for environmental engineering and manipulation, what makes the Anthropocene distinctive is that humanity's self-interest becomes expressed exclusively as a function of the exploitation of other humans and the more-than-human world. If, in pre-capitalist societies the self-interest of its members was, for the most part, aligned with their limited resources (in terms of ownership of animals and land, workers in their employment and slaves or servants in their care, and their surrounding environment), precisely because the material conditions of their moment allowed for certain configurations of inter-human and human-nature relations, then modern technologies of production, by constantly invading previously unproductive social and physical spaces, repurpose the various "forms of life" and their

83 Luke, 99.

84 Luke, "One-Dimensional Man," 98.

85 For Qur'anic description of the nature and tendencies of humankind, see Asad's translation of 10:12, 17:11, 17:83, 17:100, 21:37, 39:8, 41:49-51, 70:19, 89:15, 90:4, 95:4-6, 96:6, 100:6, and 103:2.

teleological end-goals for the sole purpose of surplus accumulation. In other words, if premodern livelihood depended on respecting natural cycles of growth and restoration, if limitations on both resources and mobility enforced socio-economic practices that were in harmony with the welfare and reasonable treatment of workers, animals and the surrounding environment, then the constellation of technologies associated with modernity, by contrast, unleashed restrictions on mobility and access to resources.[86] Consequently, production could be reorganized on mass scale and at higher speeds, supporting the accumulation of massive wealth, profits, and luxuries, which in turn became the defining characteristics of human interest in the modern era, or Marcuse's "false needs." This is not an argument for technological determinism if by that one means that our contemporary moment was always inevitably meant to emerge as it has; nor is it a call for an uncritical eco-maternalism, an approach that "risks romanticizing 'nature' as purely benevolent."[87] Rather, it is a recognition of the importance that material conditions play in the shaping of history, and what distinct configurations of life, ideas, and even morality, these conditions enable. Being and behaving as a stranger means that we must recognize the perniciousness of the underlying logic of capital and the structuring of modern life, as well as how far we directly or indirectly contribute to and profit from this configuration. This knowledge, this new way of seeing, demands nothing short of experimentation in alternative ways of organizing and configuring social and economic activities that will necessarily be smaller, less "productive/efficient," and slower.[88]

How can this new way of seeing come about? Despite the ubiquity of harm in modern socio-economic practices, many of us remain unaware of it, perhaps for a whole lifetime. That is because the complex nature of social organization, the division of labor and the urban expansions that support our current existence, and the speed with which modern life operates, all keep us removed at a distance from most sites of production, where most harm is being inflicted. Imagine a model of livelihood where small communities lived and worked in close proximity to each other and

86 For example, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2014), particularly Chapter 1, which considers Capitalism's constant onslaught upon sleep as a previously untapped unproductive spatio-temporal aspect of a worker's day, constantly seeking ways that allow workers to reproduce and sustain themselves, as well as consume, with less and less sleep.

87 Beecham, "Organising food differently," 542.

88 For an ethnographic example of what alternative food organizing looks like, see Beacham's "Organising food differently."

to where their commodities were being produced and consumed, where neighbors knew each other and could easily observe each other's livelihood practices. Now imagine our moment, where many of the basic life processes like food cultivation and processing, garment production, waste disposal, etc., are either happening in large factories, in faraway areas, or even overseas, where the only thing that stands for these complex socio-economic relations and practices in our sight is the commodity we buy in the supermarket or, perhaps now more frequently, online. This distance that affords us to make quick consumer decisions, to buy things on the go, to not worry about basic life processes so that we can get on with our work or other responsibilities, is the exact distance that also hides the relations of harm we regularly, and usually unknowingly, support or benefit from.

Here is where I find behaving as strangers to be useful in both revealing these hidden practices, and in thinking about how to ethically respond to them. A stranger is slow, they do not buy the first thing they see on the shelf, and do not click the buy online button in the blink of any eye. They deliberately pause to ask what's behind the commodity they are viewing or holding in their hand. They behave as if they are buying an item for the first time, every time. Because they are strangers, and therefore have neither knowledge, familiarity, nor custom to fall back onto, they take the time to learn about things around them. They wish to see things deeply and clearly, and so they try to identify the invisible relations hidden within a familiar-looking environment. Strangers, because they are not habituated or accustomed to their surroundings, despite how familiar and natural those may seem, are always questioning the nature of their reality.

Just as these practices allow us to better understand our social milieu and the forms of harms we might not be attentive to, they can also guide more thoughtful, reflective, and ethical consumption. Again, making slow decisions after much research and contemplation on what ethical businesses or sources are available to deal with, buying durable items that will last longer and do not need quick replacement with more perishable items, prioritizing mending items over replacing them, finding non-harmful ways to dispose of waste in their vicinity, looking out for the disempowered in their community, frequently checking on their working conditions, using their connections and relations to advice and admonish those they have access to take better care of their employees, to improve their business practices and to alleviate forms of harm—all of these are examples of every day ethical practices mediated by resolute and deliberate slowness and attention to ourselves, our impact on others, and our surroundings.

While strangerhood is a universal injunction, it is all the more imperative for those of us who profit from the comfort that these modern socio-economic practices afford us. Precisely because we do not have to worry about the provision of many of these basic life processes, because we now know at what expense it has afforded us comfort, and because we now understand how the infliction of harm has been the organizing principle of modern human livelihood, to live ethically as Muslims requires the patient and persevering intention to engage in the world against the deeply ingrained logic of self-interest and greed. It requires pushing back, each according to their subjective capacities, against forms of ease that we identify as harmful to others, and to continuously seek ethical alternatives that prioritize welfare and harmony of well-being within human populations and across humans, animals, and the environment alike. What these actions that are intended to remove harm will look like, will depend on the subjective position of each individual and the resources and power communities possess. As Ingrid Mattson notes, ethical responses range from developing and consuming alternative ethical sources to engaging "broader policy discussions about these issues and promote legislation regulating the [industries] at large."[89]

Strangers All

I wish to return to Islamic law in order to revisit how individual ethics can be translated to collective efforts to resist structural evil. During the post-classical period, jurists developed a philosophy of divine law, denoting the underlying objectives of legal rulings, and the extent to which new rules could be developed. Central to this formulation are notions of the attainment of benefit and the prevention of harm.[90] Thus al-Ghazālī, and

89 Mattson, "Eating in the Name of God," 24.

90 The place of benefit and harm in Islamic law is a fascinating reflection of the entanglement of theology, law, and moral theory, and particularly of the enduring Muʿtazilī influence in Islamic thought. George Hourani identifies two theories of value, the Muʿtazilī framework may be called objectivism, whereas theistic subjectivism is most closely associated with the Ashʿarīs (Hourani, *Two Theories of Value*, 269). The distinction ties in the two schools divergent conceptions of God, emphasizing some of His attributes over others, moral ontology, epistemology, and the problem of evil. Muʿtazilīs, often referred to as rationalists by modern scholarship, understand moral value to be inherent to the object/act that is discernible by the ʿaql (a discerning faculty) or what we call the mind; for them, humans are entirely responsible for their actions, so that punishment and reward is entirely the result of their deeds in the world, and thus they emphasise God's

later Al-Shāṭibī, canonized the concept of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* (objectives of

justice and wisdom. Justice meant that God would not punish or reward unless the human was allowed absolute free will, and wisdom entailed that what was morally good or bad corresponded to what was beneficial and harmful to humans, and that similarly, divine law prescribed what was good/beneficial and proscribed what was evil/harmful. Ashʿarīs on the other hand, take issue with the Muʿtazilī implication that God is held to objective rules of morality, and right and wrong. They, on the other hand, emphasise His omnipotence, and locate the nature of good and evil in what He defines as such (Hourani, 270). While Muʿtazilism was primarily a theological movement, it was clear that they supplied a theory of ethics that allowed the jurist, as a human being, the capacity to discern the moral nature of things, and subsequently an objective good "including a real public interest and real justice," and thus it could potentially support *ijtihād alraʾy*, or the exercise of judgment (Hourani, 272). The only obstacle to that theory is that while human reason may be able to discern the good and evil that pertained to welfare in this world, the mind could not opine on what constituted benefit and harm for the soul in the afterlife. This is one of the reasons Hourani offers to justify the eventual Ashʿarīs victory over Muʿtazilī moral thought. But I take there to be a clear and enduring Muʿtazilī influence that has been "domesticated" in Islamic law precisely through the adoption of benefit and harm as the conceptual and discursive foundation undergirding the objectives of Islamic law. Ahmed El-Shamsy traces Muʿtazilī influence in the learning and formative studies of a generation of Shafʿī scholars who were some of the first to write on the *uṣūl al-fiqh*, or theory of jurisprudence (Ahmed El-Shamsy, "The Wisdom of God's Law: Two Theories," in A. Kevin Reinhart and Robert Gleave, eds., *Islamic Law in Theory* [Leiden: Brill, 2014], 20). While Wael Hallaq has spoken generally of the Great Synthesis of traditionalism and rationality in his book *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), El-Shamsy highlights the specific Muʿtazilī value to the Shafʿīs: the Muʿtazilī inheritance of a sacred law that promotes human benefit "served to justify both the overall rationality of the and the practice of analogical reasoning" (El-Shamsy, 20). While El-Shamsy notes the utility this moral theory played in justifying analogy, he argues that consideration of benefit did not, in practice, play an important role "in the actual process of legal reasoning," not until, at least, the work of later Ashʿarī Shafʿīs, such as Al-Ghazali. Ashʿarism had, under Muʿtazilī intellectual pressures, conceded to the idea that although God was beyond the realities of law and ethics and thus was not held to any rules of morality or reason, He had nevertheless made it a habit of the universe that harm and benefit correlated with the prescribed and the proscribed. For more on this, see Aaron Zysow, *Economy of Certainty*, chapter 4 (Oxford University Press, 2013). El-Shamsy traces this in the work of Al-Ghazālī who offered, not a rationalist Muʿtazilī, but a "quasi-empiricist" argument whose "basis in Ashʿarī voluntarism necessarily precluded the assumption of a priori structure or aims within the law, but it left open the possibility of discovering such a structure through observation of the law itself" (El-Shamsy, 32). El-Shamsy sees in this development the Ashʿarī the final severance of law and theology, which allowed benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) to be understood not as a matter of theology, but a legal concept that only required probabilistic induction to be epistemically acceptable, whereas knowledge in the

[divine] law) where "rules of Islamic jurisprudence are laid down to attract benefits and to eliminate hardship, in order to protect the five necessities of life recognized by Islam: religion (*dīn*), life (*nafs),* offspring/lineage (*nasl*), wealth/property (*māl*) and intellect ('aql)."[91] Al-Ghazālī complements the five objectives with three-part scale of priorities, again inferred from the legal corpus: divine law ensures that people's welfare is met by providing for i) *ḍarūriyyāt* or those things considered necessary for their survival, b) *ḥājāt* or those things that underlie the functions of, or bring about the necessities, and c) *taḥsīniyyāt* or those aspects that beautify life and add to comfort and ease. Another emergent sub-genre in legal thought systematized what came to be known as legal maxims, which function as "the frame of reference for substantive legal cases."[92] Zakariyah draws on theological and jurisprudential articulations to define legal maxims as "legal rules, the majority of which are universal, expressed in concise phraseology, depicting the nature and objectives of Islamic Law and encompassing general rules in cases that fall under their subject matter."[93] Legal maxims, while an inductive legal construct, are useful in that they can bring back the jurist's mind to the first principles of law, amidst the continuous expansion in size and complexity of the legal corpus.[94] A particularly relevant legal maxim is *al-ḍarar yuzāl* (injury/harm should be removed).[95] What generates wide recognition for this maxim and its applicability in Islamic jurisprudence is that "it has its roots firmly in Qur'anic injunctions and in the traditions of the Prophet," [96] such as the famous *ḥadīth* "*lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār"* (no harm should be inflicted or reciprocated).[97] While it may seem like a straightforward maxim, a number

realm of theology required certainty (El-Shamsy, 34). Moving forward, *maṣlaḥa* became a tool of legal reasoning and the derivation of new (analogical) laws responding to new developments. For an intellectual history of *maṣlaḥa*, see Felicitas Opwis, *Maṣlaḥa and the Purpose of the Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

91 Zakariyah, *Legal Maxims,* 158.

92 Samy Ayoub, "'Neither Desiring It, nor Transgressing Its Limits:' Ethical Hierarchy in Islamic Law," in *Islamic Law and Ethics,* ed. David R. Vishanoff (Washington, DC: IIIT, 2020), 34–51 at 35.

93 Zakariyah, *Legal Maxims,* 40. Jurists and theologians have slightly different conceptions pursuant to their disciplinary conventions and their way of deriving knowledge. Thus, a legal maxim is "either 'a general theorem which applies to all of its related particulars' or 'a general rule which applies to its particulars in order to deduce rules from it;'" Zakariyah, *Legal Maxims,* 36.

94 Zakariyah, 56.

95 Zakariyah, 162.

96 Zakariyah, 159.

97 Ḥadīth no. 2340 in Muhammed ibn Yazīd al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan Ibn Māja*, ed. Muhammed Fu'ād 'Abdulbāqī (Dār Iḥiyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, n.d.), 784.

of subsidiary injunctions are also taken into consideration when deriving or discerning a legal ruling pertaining to the question of harm. Some of these include the injunctions that the harm is not to be removed by another harm; that, if necessary, a larger harm may be removed by a lesser harm; that a personal harm can be incurred if it prevents a public harm; and if an action will bring about both harm and benefit, that the prevention of harm be prioritized.[98] To further complicate the picture, there are at least two other legal maxims that seem to temper and balance out this injunction to remove harm. One is "hardship begets facility,"[99] the other that "custom is authoritative."[100] The first expresses the idea that rules should be alleviated or adjusted so as to bring ease in exceptional cases of hardship; the second recognizes that a community's customs, defined as "practices that have *penetrated* deep among people by recurrence and are *acceptable* to people of *sound* nature" are a recognized source of legal authority.[101]

What this means for our purposes is that the juristic process of deriving new laws to respond to changing circumstances and new realities is not as simple as identifying harm and eliminating it. The legal and political minds that govern a community must be attuned to the nature of the emerging harmful practices, their extent, what objectives of the law they are hindering, and what legal maxims are relevant to addressing them, all in an act of balancing and prioritizing benefits and harm. However, this process will not achieve the kind of reckoning and reconfiguration if we rely on superficial vision. If we as communities continue to think in terms of scarcity, of what is "approved by reason"—bearing in mind that reason is instrumental in the Anthropocene—or what the majority of humankind today finds "acceptable,"[102] then many of the forms of harm we have examined in the

98 In his Chapter 6 of *Legal Maxims in Islamic Criminal Law*, Zakariyah identifies these submaxims in his study: a) harm should be prevented as much as possible (*aḍ-ḍarar yudfa' bi-qadr al-imkān*), b) greater harm should be prevented by committing a lesser injury (*aḍ-ḍarar al-ashadd yuzāl bi-ḍ-ḍarar al-akhaff*, c) personal injury should be incurred to prevent general injury (*yutaḥammal aḍ-ḍarar al-khāṣṣ li-daf' ḍarar* 'āmm), and d) preventing evil is better than attracting benefits (*dar' al-mafāsid aw-lā min jalb al-maṣāliḥ*).

99 Muḥammad Ibn Bahā' al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Manṯūr fī l-Qawā'id*, 2nd edition, Taysir F.A. Maḥmūd, ed. (Kuwait: Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs, 1405), 3:169.

100 Luqman Zakariyah, "Custom and Society in Islamic Criminal Law: A Critical Appraisal of the Maxim 'al-'Ādah Muḥakkamah' (Custom is Authoritative) and its Sisters in Islamic Legal Procedures," *Arab Law Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2012), 76.

101 Zakariyah, "Custom and Society in Islamic Criminal Law," 77.

102 Zakariyah, 79.

earlier section can be justified away as necessary or collateral harm that cannot otherwise be changed lest it interrupt the higher order necessities of life as we have come to know it. For the juristic endeavor to rise to the occasion, and, to my mind at least, remain committed to the spirit of the law, those involved in the process must themselves cultivate strangerhood. They must exercise a critical distance from customary practices and must recognize the ways in which domination structures and configures harm in a way that requires a strong departure from the micro-level (context specific and individual) approach to cases of harm that characterizes the Muslim *qāḍī* (judge) and his *fatwā* (legal opinion). In communities governed by Islamic law, this endeavor must engage and encourage questions of the true needs of the community's members, of the "forms of life" that need to be sustained and protected within it, and of the potential for experimenting in different scales and speeds of sourcing public goods, and various registers of social organization and alternative forms of life that brings us closer to fulfilling our trust.

We can establish from this foray that the identification, measurement, and assessment of what is harmful are all processes involved in the production of jurisprudence, a practice that is central not only to the regulation of Muslim communities and public order, but also the individual believer's life. Therefore, knowledge of the present forms of socio-economic harms, the practices that enable them, and how and why these practices come about, strike me as necessary components for determining legal rulings as a form of resisting structural evil. This intricate connection between the legal and the ethical, the result of the intricate and interconnected development of Islamic moral theory, theology, and law, is one way that the ethical work of strangerhood can be elevated from the typical individual locus of ethics to becoming a collective praxis and a communal ethic.

Returning

In an article on the pursuit of happiness, Muslim legal scholar Khaled Abou El-Fadl states that Muslim theologians have always conceived of a process where a Muslim's reflection and deliberation would lead to the "realization of the importance of goodness, [so that] the seeking of knowledge… would lead to a comprehension of the moral good."[103] I have argued that to be a stranger is more than an eschatological identity or a designation of

103 Khaled Abou El-Fadl, "The Pursuit of Happiness: Islamic Ethics for the Modern World," *ABC Religion and Ethics* (Sept. 4, 2018), www.abc.net.

otherness. To be a stranger is to embody a particular prophetic praxis with clear characteristics and behaviors. It is to approach our very livelihood with slow, deliberate, and reflective distance, and to take seriously our duty by genuinely and constantly learning about what practices inflict harm and what we can do to eliminate it. This duty, in its essence, is the same as when it was first revealed. However, just as the *jāhiliyyah* (ignorant injustice) of each age manifests differently, so must our duty to transform ourselves and society meet the complexity and magnitude of this injustice. While I have illustrated the use of this framework with the example of socio-economic practices, I imagine it to be necessary and applicable to all our relations and practices, private and public.

It is reasonable to ask, however, whether doing this work will truly lift forms of harm or will merely allow us to refrain from inflicting harm. My response to this question is tentative. No community can erase all forms of harm. We also cannot know how much communities can do to successfully influence national and transnational policies, or if most of the harm we have so far incurred is fully reversible. Islamic eschatological discourse points towards increased corruption and the proliferation of sins and harm leading to the Day of Judgment. My understanding, however, is that the potential failure of our actions to attain the desired outcomes in this world does not negate the responsibility to perform them. In this light, I understand God's reassurance that people are only held accountable to their capabilities.[104] I see their ethical obligation to address harm to be according to what subjective privileges they have at their disposal—be they of class, knowledge, access to finance and policy resources, political freedom, and so on. The impossibility of total repair and redress of harm is irrelevant to our ethical obligations, because the *grammar* of Islamic eschatology, and Islamic practice in general, is that of intentions and principles, not outcomes.

Cultivating the way of the stranger is to commit oneself to a life-long endeavor of balancing hope with a generous—as opposed to self-flagellating—investigation of one's complicity. But we learn from strangers how to sit with uncertainty. Strangers bide their time, they know their place in the world is constantly changing, as are their circumstances and their fortunes. Being a stranger may therefore also help us ground our actions in an acceptance of the fluctuation of power and capabilities. Within this discursive logic, the Prophet is reported to have said:

104 *lā yukallif Allāh nafsan illā wus'ahā* (Qur'an 2:286), that is, "God does not demand of anyone that which they are not capable [of doing]."

إِنْ قَامَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَفِي يَدِ أَحَدِكُمْ فَسِيلَةٌ، فَإِنِ اسْتَطَاعَ أَنْ لَا تَقُومَ حَتَّى يَغْرِسَهَا فَلْيَغْرِسْهَا

In qāmat al-sāʿah wa fī yadi aḥadikum fasīlah fa-in istaṭāʿa an-lā taqūma ḥattā yaghrisahā fa-l-yaghrisahā.

If the Final Hour comes while you have a shoot of a plant in your hands and it is possible to plant it before the Hour comes, you should plant it.[105]

And it is within this *grammar* that we may understand the following orientation towards intentional action in the world:

وَإِذْ قَالَتْ أُمَّةٌ مِنْهُمْ: لِمَ تَعِظُونَ قَوْمًا اللَّهُ مُهْلِكُهُمْ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا قَالُوا مَعْذِرَةً إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ. فَلَمَّا نَسُوا مَا ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ أَنْجَيْنَا الَّذِينَ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ السُّوءِ وَأَخَذْنَا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا بِعَذَابٍ بَئِيسٍ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ.

Wa-idhā qālat ummatun minhum: lima taʿẓūna qawman allāhu muhlikuhum aw muʿadhibuhum ʿadhāban shadīda qālū maʿdhiratan ilā rabbikum wa laʿallahum yattaqūn. Fa-lammā nasū mā dhukkirū bihi anjaynā alladhīna yanhawna ʿan *alsū' wa akhdhnā alladhīna zalamū bi-ʿadhābin ba'īs bimā kānū yafsuqūn.*

And whenever some people among them asked [those who tried to restrain the Sabbath-breakers], "Why do you preach to people whom God is about to destroy or [at least] to chastise with suffering severe?"—the pious ones would answer, "In order to be free from blame before your Sustainer, and that these [transgressors, too,] might become conscious of Him. And thereupon, when those [sinners] had forgotten all that they had been told to take to heart, We saved those who had tried to prevent the doing of evil, and overwhelmed those who had been bent on evildoing with dreadful suffering for all their iniquity" (Q 7:164–65, Asad translation).[106]

105 Hadith No. 9 in Muhammad Nasir Al-Din Al-Albani, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥah*, volume 1 (Riyadh: Maktabat al-mʿārif), 38.

106 In my reading, the response of the group designated as the subject in these verses places the emphasis on both intentionality and deontological obligation, as well as uncertain yet enduring hope in the sinner's potential good, rather than on purely or exclusively consequential outcomes.

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Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 71–93
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

ARTICLE

Time and the Ethical Subject: Emmanuel Levinas and Augustine of Hippo in Conversation

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Abstract

"Diachronic time" represents the provocative culmination of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical approach to temporality. Time as diachrony is the time of responsibility; as such, diachronic time is central to Levinas's description of the self as responsible, or for-the-other. This paper examines how diachronic time closely resembles the temporal structure which constitutes the Augustinian subject. To establish the central role of diachronic time in Augustine, I first demonstrate that his account of the human creature's creation by God in the atemporal *conditio*, or initial foundation, of *creatio ex nihilo* attests to the Levinasian notion of the immemorial past. Then, based on Augustine's doctrine of the image of God, I conclude that the human subject is constituted in an immemorial relation of love with God. This discussion ultimately posits that the Augustinian subject is relationally constituted in an immemorial past that is not an extension of the past-present moment of time-consciousness, a central feature of diachronic time. One upshot of this comparative analysis is that it problematizes the proto-Cartesian interpretation of the Augustinian subject offered by recent scholars. In addition, a Levinasian lens helps us recover an Augustine who stresses how we worship God through love in action on behalf of our neighbor.

Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas, Augustine, time, diachrony, responsibility, subjectivity, image of God

Time is a fundamental aspect of human subjectivity and perhaps the most basic horizon within which humans perceive, think, and act. Consequently, philosophers often link time and subjectivity with respect to time-consciousness: how the subject experiences time, how it temporalizes itself and the world around it, or how it exists as a unified self across time. Yet there is another, less frequently scrutinized temporal dimension of subjectivity that concerns the time of the self's constitution: when the self becomes a self. This paper takes as its point of departure this latter approach to time and subjectivity in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Augustine of Hippo. I demonstrate that the temporal structure that Levinas claims constitutes the human subject—what he calls "diachronic time"—closely resembles the temporal structure which constitutes the Augustinian self.[1] Given the unmapped associations between Augustine and Levinas in the scholarly literature on time, this comparative study links two thinkers rarely put into conversation about an important theme in their work.[2] It also builds

1 I would like to thank Daniel Weiss, Howard Pickett, and Jeffrey Kosky for conversations over several years that were the genesis of this essay. I would also like to thank Matthew Eaton and another anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments and constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this article. Their thoughtful suggestions helped improve the overall quality of the final manuscript.

2 Jean-Luc Marion owes much of his analysis of *Confessions* to Levinas in *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Neil Curtis also claims that Jean-François Lyotard owes much of his *ethical* analysis of *Confessions* to Levinas, even if Lyotard never cites Levinas himself. See Curtis, "The Time of Confession: Lyotard on Augustine," *Time and Society* 12, no. 2–3 (2003): 189–207; Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). Marion's commentary informs this study more explicitly than Lyotard's unfinished essay. Beyond these (explicitly or implicitly) Levinasian treatments of Augustine, one other notable essay comes from Thomas J. J. Altizer, who draws sharp contrasts between Levinas's "pre-primordial ethics" and Augustine's "subject-centered ethics." For Altizer, a core aim of Levinas's project is to unthink the "subject of consciousness" established by Augustine as what would become the dominant conception of subjectivity in Western Christianity and, ultimately, modernity. Insofar as this study problematizes the idea that the Augustinian subject is founded on its self-reflexive relation to itself and not on a prior, primordial relation to another, it contests Altizer's characterization of Augustinian selfhood, albeit not in explicit conversation with his work. At the same time, Altizer draws a notable parallel between the "pre-primordiality" of Augustinian predestination and Levinasian responsibility that potentially maps onto the diachrony schema I identify in both thinkers. How exactly to understand the conceptual relationship between predestination, responsibility, and diachrony on the terms I outline in this essay presents an opportunity for further inquiry that draws on Altizer's perceptive comparative analysis. See "Ethics and Predestination in Augustine and Levinas,"

upon recent scholarship to renew emphasis on the ethical importance of time in Levinas and offers a new interpretation of implicit diachrony in Augustine.

This paper has two principal movements. In the first movement, I present Levinas's account of diachronic time and outline its ethical implications for the responsible subject. To underscore the radical and unprecedented character of Levinas's account of diachronic time in relation to alternative philosophical conceptions, I also contrast it with Levinas's interpretations of Aristotelian and Husserlian views of time. In the second movement, I defend my central claim: that diachronic time plays a central, if implicit role in the Augustinian subject's constitution, even if Augustine does not thematize the subject's time as diachrony. To conclude, I indicate how this comparative study of Levinas and Augustine complicates a proto-Cartesian interpretation of the Augustinian subject. I also briefly identify how a Levinasian lens enriches our interpretation of Augustinian ethics and helps correct for a common misinterpretation of the Bishop of Hippo.

Levinas on Time as Diachrony

Emmanuel Levinas once stated that the "essential theme of my research is the deformalization of the notion of time."[3] While this may be so, Levinas's philosophy of time is rather mysterious and evolved over the course of his career.[4] In "Diachrony and Representation," *Otherwise Than Being*, and other late-period texts, Levinas describes time as "diachrony"—that is, a temporality that resists synchronic representation in consciousness and which comes from the other, rather than from the retentions and protentions of time-consciousness, as in Edmund Husserl's philosophy of lived time. To better understand what Levinas means by time as "diachrony," or simply "diachronic time," and to situate this account in the philosophical discourse

in *Levinas and the Ancients*, ed. Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 230–42.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Other, Utopia, and Justice," in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 232.

4 Despite the centrality of time to Levinas's philosophy, few Levinasian scholars have tackled this complex subject. Exceptions include Eric Severson, *Levinas's Philosophy of Time: Gift, Responsibility, Diachrony, Hope* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013); Yael Lin, *The Intersubjectivity of Time: Levinas and Infinite Responsibility* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013); Cynthia Coe, *Levinas and the Trauma of Responsibility* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

on time to which it responds, I briefly review two philosophical conceptions of time from Levinas's critical perspective. The first comes from Aristotle, whose philosophy of time has exercised immense influence on the Western philosophical tradition, and the second comes from Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenological analyses of internal time-consciousness dramatically problematize Aristotelian assumptions about time yet remain, in Levinas's view, overly individualistic.

On Levinas's interpretation of Aristotle, the latter conceptualizes time as a neutral backdrop upon which experience unfolds, punctuated by a series of now-points or discrete time-slices. From this Aristotelian perspective, time orders experience in physical reality, and one can therefore study time apart from the subjectivity of lived experience. In this sense, time is objective rather than subjective, and objective time helps us keep track of what is before and what is after.[5] Levinas calls this "spatialized time" insofar as time is a neutral horizon "like space, made of invariable instants which repeat themselves, where all novelty would be reducible to these old elements."[6] With such an emphasis on "now" moments, Aristotle prioritizes presence at the expense of the past and future in his philosophy of time: "Time is the same everywhere, for the 'now' itself is identical in its essence . . . [and] it is the 'now' that marks off time as before and after."[7] Time, in other words, is comprised of a series of infinitely repeatable and self-identical present moments that only differ from one another insofar as they come before or after a particular now-point. As Cynthia Coe explains, Aristotle's conception of time understands the "past and future [as] modifications of the present moment, the 'now' that alone exists…Time becomes the linear order in which objects appear and events take place."[8] In his own account, as we will see, Levinas seeks to disclose a subjective—or rather, intersubjective—temporal structure from which Aristotle's measurable objective time ultimately derives. Levinas's notion of time as diachrony likewise rejects the preeminence of the present moment, the "now."

Edmund Husserl's phenomenological analyses of lived time marked a notable shift in philosophy away from the notion of objective time as a neutral backdrop comprised of discrete time-slices to one of internal time-consciousness as a condition for the possibility of our subjective (that

5 Aristotle, *Physics*, Volume I: Books 1–4, trans. P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 220a.

6 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Old and the New," in *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 129.

7 Aristotle, *Physics*, 219b.

8 Coe, *Levinas and the Trauma of Responsibility*, 3.

is, psychological) and objective (that is, world-time, clock-time) temporal experience. Whereas Aristotle views time as an objective form within which experience unfolds, Husserl insists that consciousness itself has temporal determinants and, as such, temporalizes the phenomena which appear in its intentional horizon. To underscore why such a view of internal time-consciousness is warranted, Husserl points to the example of a melody: Because a melody is a unity in time with temporal extension (by virtue of which Husserl calls it a "temporal object"), consciousness must have such a structure so as to perceive the melody's temporality.[9] Yet, if we try to explain how consciousness apprehends a melody with recourse to an Aristotelian view of time, we cannot make sense of how one could experience a melody as such, and not simply a succession of discrete tones or notes. That is, insofar as Aristotle understands time as an empty container of undifferentiated and unrelated now-points, he cannot explain how consciousness unites temporally differentiated notes into a coherent whole distended across a stretch of time. For Husserl, we therefore need a theory of time that provides an adequate account of duration and succession as these apply to our experience of a temporal object like a melody.

To make sense of how consciousness apprehends a temporal object like a melody, Husserl makes a crucial distinction between the temporality of the object itself and the temporal determinants inherent to any act of perception. "It is indeed evident," Husserl writes, "that the perception of a temporal Object itself has temporality, that perception of duration itself presupposes duration of perception, and that perception of any temporal configuration whatsoever itself has its temporal form."[10] In other words, in order to experience a temporal object like a melody *as* temporally extended yet nevertheless unified, consciousness must extend beyond the now and in such a way that it retains the temporal order of the notes and schematizes their relation to the now. To hear a melody *as* a melody, I must be able to hold onto the notes in consciousness that I have just heard in the order in which I heard them, *and* I must be able to continuously modify those notes' orientation to whatever note I presently hear.

Husserl therefore claims that for consciousness to extend beyond the now in its act of perception is for it to stretch the present beyond itself into what has just been and what is about to come in what he calls "retention" and "protention," respectively. Husserl also adds a third moment to this

9 Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), 70.

10 Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 42.

ecstatic movement, called "primal impression," which marks the part of consciousness that is specifically oriented toward the now-point of the temporal object—like, for instance, one note in a melody. He therefore offers a tripartite structure of internal time-consciousness, each of whose moments cannot be separated from the other two. "Lived experiences… must be extended in this fashion, that a punctual phase can never be for itself," Husserl asserts, contra the Aristotelian time-slice view of time.[11] In other words, the now-point of primal impression never appears in isolation, separated from the retention of past now-points and the protention of those still to come. Famously, Husserl describes the present of internal time-consciousness as "the nucleus of a comet's tail of retentions," each of which refers to a past now-point in the apprehension of a temporal object.[12] Consequently, "in every point there is an extension and in the extension there is the 'appearance'" of a temporal object like a melody.[13] This extension is like a stretch of time, or duration, in which Husserl proposes phenomena manifest to consciousness. As Jeffrey Kosky explains, "phenomena submit to the operations of consciousness where the present is stretched and space is made for phenomena to appear."[14]

In sum, for Husserl, internal time-consciousness determines the time of phenomena and, in what becomes a central point of criticism for Levinas, consciousness assumes an active role with respect to this temporalization.[15] That is, while Husserl insists that consciousness passively first receives a "primal impression"—an actual experience that marks the momentary instant, such as one note in a melody—he focuses primarily on how the spontaneous work of consciousness extends a stretch of presence via the modification of this impression by consciousness.[16] Thus, contra Husserl's own insistence on the passivity of consciousness with respect to the primal impression, the real work of consciousness in temporalization is active. If retention is an intentional act as Husserl claims, and it is only via retention that presence as a stretch of time is possible, then temporalization, and hence any apprehension of the primal impression whatsoever, is determined by and in consciousness.[17] Husserl explicitly attests to such a view when he writes,

11 Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 70.

12 Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 52.

13 Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 54.

14 Jeffrey Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 78.

15 Kosky, *Levinas*, 77.

16 Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 131.

17 Husserl speaks of "retention as proper intentionality." See *Phenomenology*, 52. Noted

"Temporal Objects…spread their contents over an interval of time, and such Objects can be constituted only in acts which likewise constitute temporal distinctions."[18] Consciousness therefore assumes an active, constitutive role through which it temporalizes itself and what it apprehends. It actively determines the time of phenomena such that phenomena only have time from consciousness.

Levinas much admires Husserl's phenomenological analyses of time-consciousness, which he interprets as an important philosophical advancement beyond the "spatialized time" of Aristotle.[19] Nevertheless, despite his praise for Husserl's efforts to account for what makes Aristotelian, objective time possible, he critiques Husserl's philosophy of lived time on at least three fronts. First, Levinas insists that Husserl's account of internal time-consciousness is overly individualistic and hence fails to account for how time-consciousness is constituted in and through an intersubjective relation between the subject and the other. For Husserl, consciousness is "self-contained" and impenetrable; its time is therefore "mine" and my consciousness is what allows phenomena to appear.[20] For Levinas, the time of the other precedes time-consciousness as a condition for its very possibility, such that there is, as it were, a deeper, more primordial temporality that Husserl's phenomenological reduction overlooks.

Second, and relatedly, Levinas criticizes the active role Husserl ascribes to consciousness with respect to temporalization. Rather than constitute its own time, Levinas maintains that the subject receives its time from the other insofar as time is constituted through the subject's relation with the other person. As John Llewelyn explains, the time of the other person cuts through every moment of the subject's recollectable time situated within the porous horizon of internal time-consciousness.[21] This irruption of the other's temporality into the subject's temporality forms a new temporal dimension that Levinas terms "diachrony," or "through time" (from the Greek prefix

by Kosky, *Levinas*, 79.

18 Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 61.

19 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Work of Edmund Husserl," in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 76–77.

20 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*: *First Book*, trans. Fred Kersten (London: Routledge, 1982), 153.

21 John Llewelyn, "Levinas and Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 136.

dia), as opposed to "synchrony," or "identical time" (from the Greek prefix *syn*).[22]

Finally, Levinas claims that, for all Husserl's attempts at the deformalization of time, the latter still maintains the hegemony of the present in his analysis of the tripartite structure of internal time-consciousness and, in so doing, denies alterity within time. Levinas asserts that, in Husserl's philosophy of time, "the identity of pure consciousness carries within itself…all transcendence, all otherness: 'all exteriority' is reduced to or returns to the immanence of subjectivity." On such a view, "the first person present" is most fundamental to "the systematic unity of consciousness…into the present, or the synchrony…of the system."[23] Thus interpreted, Husserl is not so far from Aristotle in the way he enthrones the present at the expense of the past and future as genuinely different temporal registers. Levinas therefore seeks a more primordial account of time that undermines the preeminence of the present and, consequently, of the self-possessed subject. With a clearer view of the philosophies of time with which Levinas is conversant in his deconstructive efforts, we can now turn to his constructive account of time as diachrony.

Levinas's conception of "diachronic time" strives to correct for these perceived deficiencies in Husserl's account of internal time-consciousness. For Levinas, time is "diachronic" in that it is composed of multiple times, each of which is not the same as or an extension of another temporal dimension. On the one hand, diachrony refers to how the present time of consciousness has an "immemorial" past that is the condition for its possibility, such that this "immemorial" past has no temporal connection with the past-present moment (what was once and is not now) that consciousness can remember. On the other hand, diachrony also refers to an utter disjunction between the present time of consciousness and the "pure future," which Levinas describes as a future that will never become my present and is hence a future that remains inexorably futural.[24] In this paper, I am principally concerned with diachrony as it denotes the immemorial past.[25]

22 Lin, *The Intersubjectivity of Time*, 107.

23 Levinas, "From One to the Other: Transcendence and Time," in *Entre Nous*, 137.

24 Emmanuel Levinas, "Diachrony and Representation," in *Time and the Other*, 115–16.

25 There is, undoubtedly, much to say about the "pure future" of Levinas in comparison with Augustine's conception of the future. That said, the pure future is even more mysterious than the immemorial past in Levinas's philosophy. As Eric Severson observes, "Levinas hesitates…to speak with much specificity about the

For Levinas, diachronic time explains why the subject lacks reflexive self-constitution but is constituted in a face-to-face encounter with the other, an ethical relation that creates and individuates the responsible subject. To understand this, we must first briefly canvas Levinas's philosophy of the face. For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter between the self and other is the provenance of philosophical reflection that truly embraces the alterity of another human person. In this encounter, the face of the other is an epiphany or revelation that invites me into an ethical relation insofar as it bestows on me responsibility to and for the other, even to the point of her death.[26] In the face-to-face encounter, the subject is confronted with what Levinas calls the "essential poverty"[27] of the face of the other, which issues a command, "You shall not commit murder"—a plea that imposes an asymmetrical ethical obligation on the subject.[28] Responsibility is thereby bestowed in the subject's unchosen need to respond to this plea on behalf of the other. On the one hand, Levinas stresses that the face of the other is not a phenomenon, as if it were a visible part of the human body perceived by the "I"; he states that the face of the other is "neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelopes the alterity of the object."[29] The face is not, in other words, an intentional object of consciousness, which subsumes that which falls within its horizon into what Levinas calls the "same," the realm of the "I," in contrast with the alterity of the other. "The face with which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face," Levinas explains. "To hear [the other's] destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible."[30] On the other hand, Levinas repeatedly stresses that the face-to-face between self and other is a fully embodied and corporeal encounter, such that "the whole body—a hand or a curve of the shoulder—can express as the face."[31] The face-to-face

diachrony of the future" in his later work. See Severson, *Levinas's Philosophy of Time*, 265.

26 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 194–219; Levinas, "From One to the Other: Transcendence and Time," in *Entre Nous*, 145.

27 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1995), 86.

28 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

29 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

30 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.

31 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 262. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 89–93.

encounter is thereby at once an affective relation between bodies and a non-phenomenal event that resists any attempt to reduce it to an encounter with a particular face seen in the world.

To speak of the "self's" encounter with the face, however, is to betray the transcendental nature of the face-to-face relation vis-à-vis the constitution of the responsible subject. That is, for Levinas, the encounter with the face of the other is akin to the condition for the possibility of subjectivity, characterized by Levinas as responsibility, or being-for-the-other.[32] Rendered differently, the subject discovers herself as always already responsible as a result of the embodied, face-to-face encounter with the other, such that subjectivity *is* responsibility. As Levinas puts it, "the more I return to myself, the more I divest myself…of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible…I am 'in myself' through the others."[33] In other words, to be responsible, or for-the-other, is not a particular act undertaken on behalf of the other at some point in time—it is simply to be oneself.[34] How can this be? For Levinas, diachronic time describes this "an-archic" constitution of the responsible subject prior to the incarnation of a conscious "I" and its self-reflection, willfulness, and freedom.[35] Insofar as diachronic time posits an absolute past with no temporal connection with the past-present moment accessible to consciousness, it introduces a before or beyond time in which the face-to-face encounter incarnates the subject as responsible. Consciousness can never remember this encounter, since it was not yet "born" and could not thereby

32 Levinas, it should be noted, does not employ this distinctively Kantian language. In fact, he stresses that the relationship of proximity with the other in the face-to-face is "an extremely urgent assignation—an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment. This anteriority is 'older' than the a priori." See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 110. Nevertheless, the more familiar Kantian language of transcendental idealism helps convey some of what Levinas is after here.

33 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 112.

34 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 117.

35 Levinas uses the language of "an-archy" as part of the diachrony schema to describe the absolute or immemorial past. For Levinas, the ἀρχή (*archē*; Greek for "beginning" or "origin") refers to the awakening of subjective consciousness and thus the beginning of the durative present associated with time-consciousness. The an-archy of the face-to-face encounter thereby refers to the *pre*-original beyond time prior to consciousness in which this affective encounter "takes place." The ἀρχή of the subject is, as a result, rooted in its an-archic encounter with the other that constitutes the self as responsible. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 99–102. See also Matthew Eaton, "An-Archy and Awakening: The Ethical and Political Temporalities of Christology and Pneumatology," *Heythrop Journal* 60, no. 4 (2018): 625–26.

witness its own birth as a responsible self.[36] Levinas calls this "time" or, more appropriately, this "beyond time," the immemorial past—immemorial because the subject cannot and could never possibly remember it, even if its recollective memory were perfect.[37]

Diachrony therefore refers to why consciousness cannot represent to itself the moment when it became a responsible self. For Levinas, this capacity would amount to synchrony rather than diachrony. Synchronic time implies that consciousness can, in principle, represent to itself in the present any of its past experiences. Whereas diachronic time is constituted intersubjectively and consists of multiple, irreducible temporal dimensions, synchronic time is constituted in and by the solitary subject and enthrones the "systematic unity of consciousness…into the present."[38] Levinas disputes that synchronic time is the most basic time of the subject, since he claims that synchronic time presupposes a deeper, more primordial temporality constituted intersubjectively in relation to the other. While Levinas values Edmund Husserl's efforts to locate the most basic time in the subject, rather than in some external horizon within which the subject exists, he ultimately wants to radicalize Husserl's efforts to move beyond—or rather, before—time-consciousness.

While the immemorial past in which the subject is constituted is inaccessible to memory, Levinas claims that the immemorial encounter with the other leaves a "trace" that *reminds* the subject of its constitution as responsible for the other. The concept of the "trace" is central to Levinas's mature philosophy. It is not an empirical imprint discovered in the world, "for any such imprint is a mere *effect* of a causal process" within the phenomenal realm, as Edward Casey observes.[39] Rather than an empirical trace, Levinas insists on a more primordial trace that "escapes all ordinary causal and representational formats" yet functions as "an essential supplement of the memory of the absolute past."[40] Paradoxically, the trace

36 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 139.

37 That is, even if the subject were not constrained by the limitations of the human capacity of memory and could remember *all* its past-present moments, it still could not remember its immemorial constitution as responsible. The immemorial past is of an utterly other temporal order than that of consciousness.

38 Emmanuel Levinas, "From One to the Other: Transcendence and Time," in *Entre Nous*, 137.

39 Edward Casey, "Levinas on Memory and the Trace," in *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, ed. John C. Sallis, Giuseppina Moneta, and Jacques Taminiaux (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 247.

40 Casey, "Levinas on Memory and the Trace," 249.

of the other is "the presence of that which…has never been there, of what is always past" and hence transcends recollection.[41] As a non-representable reminder of a past that was never present, the trace testifies to how the other inhabits a time not my own, a time that transcends the cause-and-effect temporality in which consciousness recollects and anticipates in the stretch of Husserlian time-consciousness.

Levinas claims that the responsible subject encounters the trace of its immemorial constitution as the diachronic reverberation of another's face into the present, which he insists is *traumatic*.[42] The trace, he writes, is "a disturbance of the rememberable time"[43] that reminds me of the immemorial "trauma of persecution" insofar as it refers to responsibility for the other conferred prior to any free choice.[44] In other words, the trace of responsibility is traumatic because it reminds the responsible subject of an event not found in memory, an event that transcends the cause-and-effect temporality of synchronic time, which imposes on the subject an infinite responsibility for the other of which she has just been made aware.

Consequently, even the supposedly self-possessed subject who believes that her ethical obligations derive from the self-legislation of her autonomous will encounters in the trace a traumatic reminder that she is, at the very core of her selfhood, responsible to and for the other, and that this responsibility is imposed prior to her freedom.[45] The trauma of responsible subjectivity is not limited to an encounter with the other I can never remember, buried in the oblivion of an immemorial past; it is repeated whenever I experience the trace of that encounter in the durative present of time-consciousness, when my sense of sovereign subjectivity and self-possession is disrupted by the proximity of the neighbor.[46] This is a direct consequence of diachronic time: if the subject is constituted as responsible in an immemorial past yet encounters in the trace a reminder of that immemorial relation, then responsible subjectivity entails a repeated, recurrent encounter with the other "now," within the mode of totality, that resurrects the trauma of an

41 Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 63.

42 My analysis of the trauma of the trace is influenced by Coe, *Levinas and the Trauma of Responsibility*, 52–57.

43 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 89.

44 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 198, n. 27.

45 Responsible even to the extent that she is responsible for the death of the other in what Levinas calls "substitution" in *Otherwise Than Being*, 99–129.

46 On this point, see Coe, *Levinas and the Trauma of Responsibility*, 55.

encounter "then," within the unrepresentable and non-thematizable mode of infinity. Diachronic time, then, not only refers to the immemorial past of the self's constitution but also, as Cynthia Coe observes, to "an oscillation in which the subject's ordinary self-possession is repeatedly interrupted by responsibility," constantly reminded that it is for-the-other.[47] In the simplest terms, diachronic time explains how the subject is responsible, that is, obligated to and for the other, not as a corollary of its autonomy but as a consequence of the other's demand—a demand that is always already "older" than subjectivity itself.

Diachrony and Augustinian Subjectivity

I now aim to show how diachronic time plays a central, if implicit role in the Augustinian subject's constitution, even if Augustine does not explicitly thematize the subject's time as diachrony. Whereas the Levinasian subject is constituted as responsible in an immemorial encounter with the human other, the Augustinian subject, I maintain, is constituted as lover in an immemorial relation with God.[48]

To be constituted diachronously, the Augustinian subject must have an immemorial past in which it was intersubjectively constituted that is not an extension of the past-present moment that consciousness could, in principle, remember. In his account of the human creature's creation, Augustine offers evidence that implicitly attests to just this sort of immemorial relation. Recall, first, that Augustine insists in Book XI of *Confessions* that God inhabits a radically different time than the finite time of the human subject.[49] The eternity of God is neither the privation of time distended into present, past, and future, nor even a permanent present, since the present, as one part of finite, created time, is created and therefore not God.[50] God, then, "precedes" the world and the created time of the subject in a non-temporal sense nevertheless "prior" to creation.

47 Coe, *Levinas and the Trauma of Responsibility*, 48.

48 I am attuned to the precarity of the term, "subject," in Augustinian scholarship. See John Cavadini, "The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine's Thought," *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 119–32. Therefore, while I use terms such as "self" and "subject," my description of such concepts attends to the fractured and unstable nature of this subject that Cavadini seeks to recover.

49 Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.13.15–16.

50 Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 198.

Therefore, when God creates, he does so in a beyond time, and in this beyond time—what Augustine calls the *conditio*, or initial foundation, of *creatio ex nihilo*—God creates the human creature's body and soul. That God creates the human soul in an atemporal creative act is true on each of the different views Augustine considers toward the creation of the soul and its relationship with the human body, whether that be traducianism, creationism, or some iteration of embodiment by pre-existent souls.[51] In view of the radical disjunction between the beyond time of God and the created time of the subject, the question then arises as to when subjectivity "happens," as it were. When does the self become a proper self? Augustine expresses uncertainty in response to this question. In *Confessions* Book I, he asks God "whence I came to be in this mortal life" since "I do not know where I came from." He specifically queries what came before the time he spent in his mother's womb: "Was I anywhere, or even someone (*aliquis*)? I have no one able to tell me that—neither my father nor my mother nor the experience of others nor my own memory."[52]

51 The creationist view posits that God creates the human soul at the time of conception. Augustine worries that creationism subverts the completeness of the primal creation and implies that material corporeality is the means by which humans inherit Adam's sin. The traducianist view posits that each soul is produced by its parents just like its body, albeit nevertheless derived—that is, traduced—from Adam's soul, itself created by God. As with the creationist view, its materialist implications disturb Augustine. On both views, however, God creates the human soul in an atemporal creative act: on the creationist view, this takes place whenever God creates a new human soul; on the traducianist view, this took place once, when God created Adam's soul. See Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (London: Duckworth, 1987), 18–20; Ronnie Rombs, *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2006), 179–80. Despite his uncertainty on the topic of souls in his mature reflection on creation, Augustine nevertheless lends considerable support to the view that God creates the human soul and body in the *conditio* of *creatio ex nihilo*, albeit in two different respects. On this view, articulated most fully in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, God creates both soul and body in the primary creation or *conditio* (initial foundation): The soul is created in its full reality and the body in its *ratio causalis* (causal plan) (10.3.4, 7.24.35). In other words, it is in God's *administratio* (creative administration) of the universe when God animates the human creature's corporeal body with a soul, yet it is in the atemporal beyond time synchronous with the *conditio* when its soul is created (5.11.7). Nevertheless, we can still state that on this view, God creates the human creature (on the one hand *actually*—the soul—on the other hand *providentially*—the body, to be formed later) in God's atemporal beyond time concurrent with *creatio ex nihilo*.

52 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.6.7–9. All translations from *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), with some modifications.

One could interpret this text as representative of Augustine's uncertainty about the more specific question of the pre-existence of the soul and when the soul animates the body.[53] On a certain level, he *is* concerned about animation, since animation, as he implies in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, is a precondition for selfhood.[54] Yet, I would offer that in this text, Augustine is less interested in the ontic question about when, specifically, the conditions for selfhood are realized, and more interested in the mysterious provenance of subjectivity. Was I "me" before I was an infant? If so, was I "me" in my mother's womb? Could I have been "me" before this, somehow prior to embodiment?[55] Who can tell me when I became "me" except you, God, since I cannot remember it, and no one else can know, not even my parents? His concern with whether he was "someone" or "anyone" (*aliquis*) prior to his conception reflects an aporia, not just with respect to doctrinal uncertainty about souls and animation, but also with respect to what it means to be a self with subjectivity.

Importantly, Augustine does not resolve this aporia. In fact, in the conclusion to this aporetic section, he wryly remarks that "you [God] may smile at me for putting these questions. Your command that I praise you and confess you may be limited to that which I know."[56] The point, it seems, is that finite humans can never know an answer to the sort of question Augustine poses here in *Confessions*. Yet one plausible interpretation of the aporia is that finite humans can never know such answers because there *is* no definitive answer to this question, as it is a mistake to identify any single, ontic moment as that in which one becomes a self. Presumably, subjectivity manifests at some point "between" the creation of body and soul in the atemporal *conditio* and embodied self-awareness. Yet Augustine's aporia

53 As does Chadwick, *Confessions*, 6, n. 7.

54 That is, even if the doctrine of the soul described at the end of fn. 51 implies that the soul has some sort of pre-corporeal existence, Augustine rejects the view that a pre-embodied soul possesses a life or self of its own; it is a mistake to believe that created souls have "some form of life to perceive, believe, and understand" prior to embodiment (*De Genesi ad litteram*, 6.6.9). If this were true, it would imply that the soul knows beatitude before it enlivens a body, which would mean that it leaves a superior life of happiness for an embodied life in search of happiness, which, for Augustine, is an untenable conclusion. Therefore, the pre-corporeal soul is neither equivalent to embodied human nature, which consists of both body and soul, nor equivalent to human *subjectivity*, because, unable "to perceive, believe, and understand," the pre-existent soul does not have a self.

55 Augustine explicitly rejects this last possibility in *De Genesi ad litteram*, 6.6.9. See fn. 51.

56 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.7.9.

indicates not only that such a "between" moment is unidentifiable and thus unknowable but also, perhaps, that there never *was* such a moment, that it was *never* once present in his life narrative.

Here, I detect implicit diachrony with respect to subjectivity. Cast in diachronic terms, Augustine points to a temporal lapse between the lived immediacy of subjectivity and the atemporal beyond time in which the conditions for human subjectivity—body and soul—were created by God. Rendered differently, the moment "between" the creation of the human creature in the *conditio* and embodied self-awareness—that is, the "between" moment when the human creature becomes a subject—has no temporal connection with any past-present moment in the life of the human subject. This "between" moment is, in other words, immemorial, that is, a not-memorable, non-empirical moment inaccessible to consciousness. We can, therefore, cautiously state that Augustine's aporia in Book I of *Confessions* about the inception of selfhood, coupled with his speculative remarks on the creation of the human creature, lend credence to the view that the human subject is constituted in an immemorial past in relation to God, the divine other, its creator. With this much established, we can more closely attend to the latter half of that claim, namely, how the subject is constituted *in relation* to God.

For Augustine, the human subject is constituted in relation to God because humans are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*).[57] We can understand the sort of dynamic relation between God and the subject inscribed by the image of God with respect to two, interrelated ideas. First, Augustine understands the image of God to denote human subjectivity's provenance or source in God. In his *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis*, he writes:

> And God said, "Let us make the human to our image and likeness (*ad imaginem et similitudinem*)." Every image is like that of which it is an image, *yet not everything which is like something is also its image*. Thus, because in a mirror or in a picture there are images, they are also like. But if the one does not have *its source* from the other (*si alter ex altero natus non est*), it cannot be said to be the image of the other. It is only an image, then, when it is [lit.] pressed out (*exprimitur*) from the other.[58]

57 My interpretation of Augustine's conception of the image of God draws on Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's* De Trinitate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 233–98.

58 *De Genesi ad Litteram imperfectus*, 16.57. My translation and emphasis.

Now, this relation of origin between the human creature and God inscribed by the image of God could be interpreted exclusively in causal metaphysical terms, such that humans have their source in God insofar as God causes and sustains human existence. In this case, the immemorial relation between God and the human subject would differ notably from the Levinasian immemorial encounter, because for Levinas, this relation constitutes the subject in terms of relational selfhood and *not* in terms of ontological existence. On the one hand, Augustine no doubt holds this view: God *does* create and sustain human existence.[59] Yet, for Augustine—and this is the second idea to which I want to call attention—the image of God *also* refers to the human creature's intersubjective selfhood constituted in relation to the divine.

That the image of God implicates relational human subjectivity becomes clear in view of how Augustine compares the image of God in the second person of the Trinity to this image in the human person. Whereas the Son of God *is* the image of God and thus immutably and eternally adheres to God the Father in love via the Holy Spirit, human creatures are *to* or *toward* the image (*ad* plus the accusative in Latin), and therefore are called to draw toward this image in imitation of that same love.[60] Consequently, to be created *ad imaginem* not only means that one's existence has its source in God; it also inscribes within human creatures what Rowan Williams calls an innate "God-directedness."[61] To be created *ad imaginem Dei* denotes (i) the *imago* itself (the Son), (ii) its source (God the Father), and (iii) the love by which the Son adheres to the Father, that is, the Holy Spirit—in sum, the Trinity—as the human creature's ultimate end. Therefore, for Augustine, our constitution as *imago Dei* means that our subjectivity comes from God and, in addition, that God calls us to continuously constitute this subjectivity, which we do not possess as some static essence, but for which we must strive in a constitutive relation of imitative love.[62] Put differently, I am who I really am (toward the *imago Dei*) to the extent that I am aware of and adhere to my relation with God, whose perfect, triune, and constitutive love is that by which I become myself (as *ad imaginem*), and, moreover, that toward which I strive in imitation.

59 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 22.4.

60 Regarding the Son, see Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.17.27. Regarding human creatures, see Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus*, 51.4; *De Trinitate*, 7.6.12; Gioia, *Theological Epistemology*, 238.

61 Rowan Williams, "Augustinian Love," in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 195.

62 Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 255–56.

Augustine's conception of the *imago Dei* as inherently relational means that the immemorial past in which the subject is constituted entails an *intersubjective* relation between God and the human subject. The *immemoriality* of this relation speaks to the always-already nature of the subject's relation to God. Just as there is no point in the life of the human subject when it "becomes" a subject, there is no point in its life when it is not *ad imaginem*, and therefore not in relation with God.

Moreover, the human subject's relation with God as *ad imaginem* is characterized by love all the way down: love is that *by which* one draws toward the image of God, and perfect, triune love is that *toward which* one strives. Therefore, we can conclude that the Augustinian subject, whose end is love, is also constituted by love.[63] The subject is a subject *qua* lover, for whom love is its source, self, and end. And this has two, interrelated ethical implications. First, constituted by love *ad imaginem Dei*, the human subject is *for*-God, such that it should love God alone as its ultimate end. Yet to be constituted by love *ad imaginem Dei* also means, second, that the subject is by necessity *for*-others, since the love by which the subject becomes itself is, as from and of God, *also* love for what is not God. As Williams explains, for Augustine, "God desires to be God *for* what is not God."[64] Hence God, as the source of all love, both renders possible and commands the love of human persons.[65] To be constituted *ad imaginem Dei* is, therefore, to be for God and God's creatures in terms of the imitative love by which one strives toward the perfect love of the Trinity.

Implications

To conclude, I want to underscore two broader implications that follow from the comparative analysis I have undertaken. The first is that, for Augustine no less than Levinas, the ethical obligations constitutive of what it means to have a self derive from a primordial relation with another. This upshot is particularly relevant because several commentators have identified in Augustine the semblance of a proto-Cartesian subject.[66] Conversely, the

63 Augustine, *Tractatus in Epistolam Ioannis*, 10.4.

64 Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 73; Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 1.31.34.

65 Matthew 22:37–40; John 13:34; Augustine, *Tractatus in Epistolam Ioannis*, 10.3.

66 See Wayne Hankey, "Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More Than a Source of the Self," *Augustinian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2001): 65–88 for one notable example.

relational aspects of the Augustinian self that I have emphasized bolster an anti-Cartesian interpretation and call into question proto-Cartesian identifiers. For example, whereas some scholars stress that both thinkers share an affinity for immediate self-presence, I have stressed that diachronic time renders the Augustinian self other to itself at the very heart of its subjectivity.[67] Similarly, whereas scholars in the proto-Cartesian camp identify radical- or self-reflexivity supposedly evidenced by the inward turn toward *memoria* in Book X of *Confessions*, I have underscored how, for Augustine, created subjectivity is incomplete and directed toward the divine other in an erotic movement of transcendence.[68] My view consequently supplements interpretations of Augustine that question his affinities with Descartes.[69]

The second implication that follows from my comparative analysis concerns how a Levinasian lens enriches our interpretation of Augustinian ethics. For Levinas, time as diachrony bears upon the inseparability of responsibility for the other and God insofar as the latter is linked with the concept of the trace and its immemorial referent. In "Meaning and Sense," Levinas writes that the face of the other is itself *in* the trace of an "absence" he associates with the immemorial past. "The face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly past Absent…which cannot be discovered in the Self by any introspection…No memory can follow the traces of this past. It is an immemorial past."[70] He then proceeds to characterize this immemorial absence as "illeity" (*illéité*), a neologism formed from the French pronoun *il* or the Latin *ille* that, for Levinas, indicates the third-person-ness within the face-to-face encounter in the second person.[71] Michael Morgan explains that this "illeity of the third person"[72] expresses "the dimension of universality and objectivity even within the utterly particular intersubjective encounter of

67 Hankey, "Between and Beyond," 76; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 133.

68 Hankey, "Between and Beyond," 73–74; Taylor, *Sources*, 130–31, 137, 143.

69 See, for example, Rowan Williams, "The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in Augustine's Trinitarian Thought," in *On Augustine*, 155–170; Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's* De Trinitate; James Wetzel, "The Force of Memory: Reflections on the Interrupted Self," *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 147–159; Cavadini, "The Darkest Enigma," 119–32.

70 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 60.

71 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 12; Michael Morgan, "Levinas on God and the Trace of the Other," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Michael Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 330.

72 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 61.

an I and a you. This is the third person in the second person, so to speak."[73] As Levinas puts this point in "Enigma and Phenomenon," "A You is inserted between the I and the absolute He," where the "He" (*Il*) here reflects illeity.[74] For Levinas, there is a sacredness or divinity inherent in this third personness manifest in the face-to-face relation between self and other insofar as it invests this relation with a kind of ultimacy that constitutes the self as responsible. Put (perhaps too) simply, illeity expresses a transcendence that underwrites the obligation to and for the other in responsible subjectivity.

To indicate the sacred or divine nature of the third personness expressed by illeity, Levinas turns to explicitly theological language. In the conclusion to "Meaning and Sense," he describes illeity as "the God who passed," a reference to Exodus 33:18–23, when God passes before Moses and reveals God's back to him.[75] "The God who passed," however, is not another "Thou," nor is God a kind of metaphysical or ontological fact. As Levinas writes elsewhere, God "is neither an object nor an interlocutor"—neither an "it" one can possess nor a person to whom one answers.[76] Rather, God is "other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with the other, and different from every neighbor."[77] This God who is neither an "it" nor a "Thou" "shows himself only by his trace," that is, the face of the other, and thus "to go toward Him is not to follow this trace, which is not a sign; it is to go toward the Others who stand in the trace of illeity."[78] Or, as Levinas puts it in "God and Philosophy," God "is Good in just this eminent sense; He does not fill me up with goods but compels me to goodness, which is better than goods received."[79] While a more fulsome examination of Levinas's conception of God stands outside the scope of this study, we can state that, for Levinas, the immemorial constitution of the subject as responsible to and for the other implicates an absolutely remote and utterly transcendent third person-ness, or illeity, that summons the self to responsible relation. In a theological register, Levinas denominates this third person-ness "God." God and responsibility, therefore, are necessarily and inextricably intertwined. Indeed, for Levinas, God comes to mind *only* in the face as a trace of an

73 Morgan, "Levinas on God and the Trace of the Other," 339, n. 30.
74 Emmanuel Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 77.
75 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 64.
76 As noted by Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 191.
77 Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 141.
78 Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 64.
79 Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 141.

immemorial past that calls forth a responsibility for the fragile mortality of another human person.[80]

In view of the comparative analysis I have undertaken in this essay, I would offer that Levinas reminds his Christian readers that the obligations constitutive of subjectivity are ultimately ordered toward both God and neighbor and that these two cannot be neatly separated. While, for Levinas, God is not another other to whom I am responsible but the absent other who inclines me to responsibility for the mortality of human others, his claims about the inseparability of God and responsibility nevertheless prompt Christians to recall resources in their own tradition that similarly underscore how our face-to-face encounters with other humans instantiate the ultimate relation between the self and the divine.[81] Indeed, Levinas's insistence on this point spurs us to better appreciate Augustine's often-overlooked contention that there simply *is* no love of God separate and apart from the love of neighbor.[82] In a sermon on Matthew 25:31–36, the story of the Final Judgment, in which Jesus indicates that those who have performed the material acts of mercy did so not only on behalf of society's most marginalized members but also unto Jesus himself, Augustine implores his listeners to love their neighbor in concrete, compassionate action.[83]

80 Matthew Eaton, "Theology and An-Archy: Deep Incarnation Christology following Emmanuel Lévinas and the New Materialism," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32, no. 1 (2016): 7.

81 I here borrow language from Kosky in describing Levinas's understanding of God. See Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 191.

82 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 8.5.12.

83 Notably, the inextricable link Levinas posits between God and responsibility informs his positive assessment of Matthew 25. In an interview toward the end of his career, Levinas identifies a certain resonance between the spirit of Matthew 25 and his own philosophy as well as its ecumenical potential in discussions with Christians. "I cannot describe the relation to God without speaking of my concern for the other," Levinas states. "When I speak to a Christian, I always quote Matthew 25; the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor; in the other, there is a real presence of God." See Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous*, 109–110. In a similar vein and ostensibly with an eye toward Matthew 25, Levinas elsewhere claims that "what I say about the face of the neighbor, the Christian probably says about the face of Christ." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 280. While Levinas, who was Jewish, insists that Matthew 25 was already anticipated by Isaiah 58, which equates the true worship of God with similar material acts of compassion and the liberation of the oppressed, he nevertheless asserts that Matthew 25 is "literally true." See Jeffrey Hanson, "Levinas and Christianity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emmanuel Levinas*, 423.

> Now here we are already, by God's goodness, in winter. Think about the poor, how Christ in his nakedness is to be clothed…Listen to the judgment he is going to pass: *When you did it for one of these least of mine, you did it for me* (Mt. 25:40). You are all looking forward to greeting Christ seated in heaven. Attend to him lying under the arches, attend to him hungry, attend to him shivering with cold, attend to him needy, attend to him a foreigner. Do it, if it's already your practice; do it, if it isn't your practice.[84]

Augustine subtly implies in this sermon that his listeners have a somewhat otherworldly conception of their relation to the divine. While they look forward to a joyful encounter with Christ in heaven, he exhorts them to bear witness to the presence of Christ in the vulnerable and afflicted whom they encounter every day. In this sermon, Augustine echoes his powerful claim in *City of God* that *latreia*, the true worship of God alone in contrast with idolatry, necessarily encompasses both the love of God and the love of neighbor, such that religious piety is ultimately inextricable from the human good.[85] In these and similar texts, we encounter an Augustine very much attuned to how the diachronic constitution of the subject *qua* lover does not simply bear upon its relation with the divine other but necessarily implicates its relationship with other humans, especially those in need. A Levinasian lens helps us recover an Augustinian ethics that stresses how we worship God *through* love in action on behalf of our neighbor, in contrast with characterizations of Augustine that mistakenly attribute to him an otherworldliness that obfuscates the material needs of the other.[86] Perhaps more importantly, such a lens reminds Christians that the love of God should not and fundamentally cannot come at the expense of the love we owe our neighbor, in whose face we encounter the Word of God, Christ himself.[87]

84 Augustine, *Sermons, Vol. II: Sermons 20-50*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 1990), 25.8.

85 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 10.5, 10.6.

86 For representative accusations of otherworldliness in Augustine, see Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 198), 123–41; Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 551, 528–29, 552–55.

87 In the same interview in which he commends Matthew 25, Levinas states: "I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God." While we cannot know for sure, Levinas seems aware of the Christological

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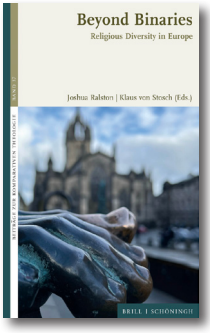
resonances of the "Word of God" for Christians, particularly insofar as this remark immediately follows his reference to Matthew 25. See Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," 110.

Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 94–96
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Binaries: Religious Diversity in Europe. Edited by Joshua Ralston and Klaus von Stosch. Leiden: Brill, 2023. xvi+187 pages. Hardcover $100; ISBN 978-3-506-79155-9.



This volume addresses intersections between politics and religious discourse in Europe. Based on the assumption that religion and secular society are traditionally conceived as two opposing binaries, the editors and contributors of this volume aim to show how comparative theological inquiries, as well as critical theological engagement, can move the discourse beyond these perceived binaries (x). The editors offer three case studies with contributions from renowned scholars from Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish traditions. These aim to show that the binaries of secular versus religious spheres do not treat religious discourse accurately.

Case Study 1 seeks to define a nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in Europe. In his essay "Muslim Migration and Borders of (Christian) European Identity," Joshua Ralston highlights inconsistencies in the political discourse regarding Muslim immigration and the Christian identity of Europe. The recent migration crisis (2015–2018) shows, according to Ralston, that cultural and religious arguments mark the political discourse. These arguments cannot be understood through the existing secular-religious binary lens but must be viewed within the larger context of tensions within political liberalism (4). Political parties construct Christian-nationalist identity politics to counter a perceived danger from Islam. A comparative theological approach to Islam and the liberal traditions of Europe that refuses the binaries and reimagines the relationship between Europe, Islam, and Christianity can help deconstruct the ongoing tensions.

Johannes Süßmann's contribution—"When did Europe become Identified with Christianity?"—takes a historical approach to the European identity as Christian by looking at how the motif of Christian Europe was

used in the past. Contrary to many political claims, Süßmann argues, the term was not used to define Europe against the rising Islam. Rather, the political debate utilizes the terminology as a means to "other" Islam. In his contribution "Bioethical Questions in the Perspective of Comparative Theology," Karsten Lehmkühler proposes to utilize comparative theological hermeneutics in the field of Christian ethics that would provide "better *mutual knowledge and comprehension*" in the political discourse (33). Through the question of whether the human embryo has a soul in engagement with Islam, he shows how Islamic perspectives enrich the public debate and could advance policy changes in European countries.

Case Study 2 deals with analyses of idolatry from various theological perspectives. Klaus von Stosch's contribution "Kampf der Idolatrie" defends a modern approach to criticizing idolatry. Contrasting Jan Assmann's remarks against idolatry critique, von Stosch offers the perspective of how the critique against idolatry from political-theological and liberation theological standpoints can stabilize minorities in society (63). Daniel H. Weiss offers a view on the critique of idolatry through rabbinic understandings in the Mishnah. His essay "Idolatry and Pluralism in Jewish Traditions" analyzes teachings in Mishnah Avodah Zarah that show that the rabbinic stands in the Mishnah are not a mere "watering down" of violence against idols and idol-worshippers compared to the Bible. Instead, arguments emphasize that as God orders the universe as God sees fit (74), likewise, Israel does not need to intervene in the practice of idol-worshippers. Weiss shows measures where rabbinic thought emphasizes a peaceful, non-violent convivence.

Case Study 3 deals with questions of a future of tolerance and religious diversity. The essay titled "Der friedensfördernde Konflikt mit Gott" by Elisa Klapheck is dedicated to the relationship dynamics between humans and God. Klapheck presents five key rabbinic concepts that implicitly or explicitly contribute to a Jewish worldview of democratic, secular understanding with other traditions. She argues that the Jewish traditions have a potential for a "theology of secular society" (107), in which the struggle with God is not only a prerequisite for a relationship with God but also "a possibility for building bridges to other religions" (107).

Another case for living diversity in the future is Roland Stolte's presentation of the concept of the project "House of One," which is currently under construction in Berlin. Stolte argues that the House of One has the unique potential to shift the binaries of religion in society in two ways. First, religions come into public focus as co-builders of the project. At the same time, this house becomes a place of interest for various societal

systems. Stolte states this new public view is a paradigm shift in interfaith dialogue. Second, dialogue happens in a new spatial environment through this House of One. Religions do not merely "come together" for dialogue but are already together in one place.

Marianne Moyaert's contribution, "Aktive Toleranz und der politische Umgang mit religiöser Gewalt," concludes this section. Moyaert attests that there is a broad interest in educating students, emphasizing plurality and religious tolerance. She argues that such emphasis can potentially train young people to become "citizens of the future" ready to live in a pluralistic society (137). However, Moyaert also cautions that political rhetoric that promotes active tolerance may "flatten" the general discourse (147). Such a generalization may emphasize similarities but smooth out cultural differences. The overarching goal of educating students, Moyaert asserts, is, then, to equip students to critically reflect and question the status quo of society, as well as its social prerequisites and its power dynamics (158).

The present volume successfully provides a range of angles from which comparative theological methods can address lived interreligious experiences in society. This compilation shows that comparative theological inquiry is a useful way to address the contemporary challenges of lived religion in a secularized society. Thus, its findings are also valuable in the North American context, where the dynamics of secularism and an increasing influence of conservative-nationalist Christianity on the political debate influence identity politics and diversity.

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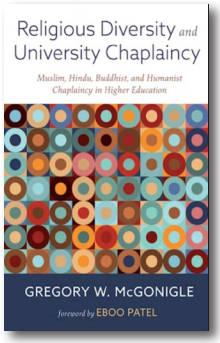
Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 97–100
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

BOOK REVIEW

Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist Chaplaincy in Higher Education. By Gregory W. McGonigle. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2024. xiv + 138. $39.00 (hardcover); $24.00 (paper); $24.00 (ebook). ISBN 978-1-6667-3820-9.



Gregory W. McGonigle traces the emergence of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist chaplaincies in higher education in the United States and provides the first systematic review of the contours of these programs while thinking about the facilitation of the multiplication of these chaplaincies in the future. An expansion of McGonigle's Doctor of Ministry project at Boston University, the volume is a must-read for college and university chaplains committed to moving more fulsomely into a multifaith staffing model. McGonigle, an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, has been a pioneer in establishing and expanding multifaith chaplaincy staffing models at colleges and universities across the country for the past twenty years. While the volume leans into McGonigle's extensive chaplaincy experience at Emory University, Tufts University, Oberlin College, and University of California, Davis, and as past president of the National Association of College and University Chaplains, the deep insights into the intricacies of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist chaplaincies come from interviews conducted with a series of chaplaincy professionals in each of these traditions.

In a brief foreword, Eboo Patel establishes the shifting religious demographics of the United States, noting that there are now as many Muslims in the United States as ELCA Lutherans and twice as many Buddhists as Episcopalians. McGonigle's volume is a response to the explosive growth of non-Christian religious traditions in the United States and the presence of adherents from these traditions increasingly present on college and university campuses and a desire for higher education institutions to provide real communities of belonging for practitioners of minoritized religious traditions.

The volume is organized with an introduction providing some of McGonigle's professional background and a brief survey of the higher education chaplaincy landscape, followed by individual chapters on Muslim chaplaincy, Hindu chaplaincy, Buddhist chaplaincy, and Humanist chaplaincy, and a conclusion looking to the future "as American higher education seeks to serve its changing demographics and all students" (122). Each chapter begins with a history of higher education chaplaincy in that tradition, often noting that the number of full-time professionals in these traditions across the country could be counted on one or both hands, and then puts at least three contemporary religious life professionals in the tradition in conversation with one another exploring professional preparation and formation, day-to-day rhythms and responsibilities distinct to chaplaincy in that tradition, and challenges particular to chaplaincy in the tradition, while also exploring visions for the future of chaplaincy in that tradition.

In the Muslim chaplaincy chapter, Omer Bajwa, Muslim Chaplain at Yale University; Celene Ibrahim, former Muslim Chaplain at Tufts University; and Nisa Muhammad, Assistant Dean of the Chapel at Howard University elucidate the unique opportunities chaplaincy facilitates for Muslim women for leadership within the American Muslim community and the important work that Muslim chaplaincy has done to combat anti-Muslim stereotypes both in the academy and in broader American public discourse since the events of September 11, 2001. McGonigle also pays particular attention to the emerging visions of Muslim chaplaincy for the future, especially as Pew projects that Muslims will outnumber Jews in the United States in the next twenty-five years.

In the Hindu chaplaincy chapter, Vineet Chander, Coordinator of Hindu Life at Princeton University; Vrajvihari Sharan, Director for Dharmic Life at Georgetown University; and Asha Shipman, Director of Hindu Life at Yale University reflect on their complex relationships with the notion of "Hindu chaplaincy" and the various ways in which their professional offices are constructed and described at different institutions to provide legibility of their roles to Hindu college and university constituencies. The formation of the North American Hindu Chaplains Association (NAHCA) in 2020 serves to facilitate ongoing conversations within the Hindu community of religious professionals about appropriate professional formation and relationships with other Dharmic communities—Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs.

In the Buddhist chaplaincy chapter, John Bailes, Buddhist Chaplain at Wellesley College; Rod Owens, activist and author; Doyeon Park, Buddhist Advisor at Columbia University and New York University; and Upali Sraman, former Buddhist Chaplain at Tufts University discuss bringing

mindfulness practices to larger publics and the capacity for chaplaincy to inculcate resiliency in students and staff. The chapter also focuses on the unique challenges of shifting from communities of practice often adjacent to colleges and universities to having paid positions within the university community.

In the Humanist chaplaincy chapter, Ryan Bell, Humanist Advisor at University of Southern California; Vanessa Gomez Brake, Associate Dean of Religious Life at University of Southern California; Walker Bristol, former Humanist Chaplain at Tufts University; Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Chris Stedman, former Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and Yale University identify the exceptional challenges of seeking to serve a community of people who may not even recognize the language of "Humanist" for their own spiritual/religious orientation. McGonigle writes that "there is less of a traditional path toward professional Humanist chaplaincy than there is for any of the other traditions explored in this book" (90). That said, he provides significant exploration of the quirks and challenges of developing further Humanist chaplaincies and the difficulties in appropriately staffing these chaplaincies.

In his conclusion, McGonigle writes that the process of putting together the volume has been invaluable in his own work as a university chaplain and dean of religious life. Indeed, the volume's greatest contribution is in mapping "the histories, the preparation, the responsibilities, the challenges, and the opportunities experienced by chaplains of traditions being added to multifaith teams" and identifying who a school might recruit for these roles and how these programs could be shaped (123). While the volume was clearly written with the guild of college and university chaplains in mind, it will prove useful to chaplains in other settings who are seeking to diversify traditionally Christian and Jewish chaplaincy staffs. In the broader landscape of interreligious leadership literature, McGonigle's volume is an important contemporary case study of the continued challenges of working across lines of religious difference in chaplaincy at America's selective liberal arts colleges and research universities.

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Note: In Fall 2024 as preparation of this review was in progress, Hessler joined the faculty of Candler School of Theology at Emory University where McGonigle serves as Dean of Religious Life and University Chaplain.

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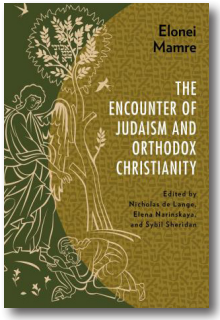
Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2025, Issue 45, 101–103
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

BOOK REVIEW

Elonei Mamre: The Encounter of Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. Edited by Nicholas de Lange, Elena Narinskaya & Sybil Sheridan. Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022. 206 pages. £77.00. ISBN 9781978715987.



This volume is published along with a sister volume: *Tois Pasin ho Kairos: Judaism and Orthodox Christianity Facing the Future* (2023), which examines challenges posed to both faiths by the changing world in which they are both situated. The volume under review here examines several neuralgic theological issues that reside in the complex layers of Jewish and Orthodox dynamics. It is particularly complex for three reasons. First, one element of the Orthodox world, the Moscow patriarchate, is generally hostile to this project. The Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Aleksi II delivered a speech to rabbis in New York in 1991, breaking the ice, calling Jews "brothers" and strongly rejecting antisemitism. He received a very critical reception from the Russian Church abroad and within the Moscow patriarchate. The Constantinople patriarchate has been more positive. Most of the Orthodox contributors to this volume come from western theological contexts. Second, while most mainstream Christian denominations (Roman Catholic and Protestant) have condemned supersessionism (the notion that the Jewish covenant with God is invalid and no longer relevant) in its multiple forms, the Orthodox Church has not done so. This is in part because of its special anchorage in liturgy and tradition, and thus its resistance to shed or edit that patrimony. While being a possible weakness, it is also a great strength in treasuring the past and thus resisting over-quick dismissal of such treasures. As a Latin Roman reviewer, I have learned much from this conserving instinct. Third, because of the geographic history of Jewish persecutions at the hands of Christians, this is a dialogue with very painful and difficult memories. Hence, this volume is a treasure, for it marks a thoughtful attempt by both Jews and Orthodox Christians to address theological issues that have generated

hostility, but which nevertheless provide the resources to bring these communities together.

The collection contains most helpful and penetrating essays on the following topics: mysticism, apophatic theology, the unity of God, the contrasts of law and grace/love, supersessionism (sadly, without any matching piece reflecting on Jewish supersessionism), anti-Jewish prejudices within Christian sources, icons and idolatry, worship, and the blood libel. These essays vary in length and focus. Some topics are addressed from both Jewish and Christian perspectives; with others, the focus is on Orthodox Christianity.

One cannot summarise in a short review every essay, but on every topic, it is fair to say that new ground and the breaking of stereotypes is achieved. There is no attempt to compromise on one's own tradition in trying to move the dialogue and understanding forward. Jewish objections to icons, for example, is questioned both on historical archaeological grounds (early Byzantine Judaism) as well as a careful selective reading of rabbinic texts and Jewish theology. The Orthodox theology behind icons is well explicated and we see a rich opening for further conversation on this matter. Or, looking at a strident anti-Jewish voice such as Ephrem the Syrian, one is reminded how the context helps to understand (though not necessarily to endorse) that voice.

This kind of critical thinking about tradition is vital. Interestingly, the Jewish contributions come from a variety of traditions; but, at times, the Orthodox Jewish tradition—which mirrors some of the dynamics of the Orthodox Christian—shows signs of rethinking that are perhaps required from each tradition. For example, one finds the *Aleinu* prayer in the British Orthodox prayer book has omitted words that Christians might find offensive: where "the nations of the world" are viewed as those "who worship vain and worthless beings and make supplication to a god who cannot save." The smallest changes in prayer are destined to have a far greater impact upon communities than theologies (which are less widely engaged with). This leaves us with a question: How many other elements of the tradition must such a change require? Does one have to reject Maimonides's view of Christians as a result? What of various Talmudic sources that suggest otherwise? Of course, this entire dialogue requires the revisiting of traditions of thought and practice.

I think the volume would have benefitted from a single essay on the great Russian theologians who had made tentative moves in their theologies of Israel and the Jewish people. The invisibility of this tradition is odd. This is

a small matter of omission, but the creative and welcome commission of this volume is something that any reader will enjoy and praise.

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