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BOSTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, AND INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES MEDIA

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AN OPEN-ACCESS, PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATION OF HEBREW COLLEGE,
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THE JOURNAL OF INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

This issue marks the second published under our new operating structure alongside Interreligious Studies Media. We continue to transform our organization to facilitate a sustained stewardship of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* and its sibling media: Interreligious Studies Press, Inter/Sections podcast, State of Formation blog, and more.

We will continue to share more in the coming months. However, for now, I introduce this current issue, which features four articles and six book reviews.

In “Christopraxis and Qur’anopraxis: A Comparative Study on Practical Theology as Lived Experience with the Divine Action,” Siavash Asadi places a novel term, “Qur’anopraxis,” in dialogue with Christopraxis to frame practical theology as a lived encounter with divine action, i.e., “God’s coming to people,” through a Gadamerian hermeneutic and critical-realist lens. By comparing Jesus’ role in Christianity with the Qur’an (and the *sunnah*) in Islam and mapping first- and second-order “emmanual” experiences, the article advances a method for interreligious practical theology that keeps the theory–praxis dialectic at its core.

Alison Forster, in “Cataphatic *Śūnyatā*? A Pure Land Alternative to Dialogue Between Eckhart and Japanese Buddhism,” reframes Buddhist–Christian dialogue by moving beyond the familiar paradox-of-language lens to a “dharmalogical hermeneutic” that foregrounds lived subjectivity and its apophatic–cataphatic tilt. By setting Ueda Shizuteru’s apophatic Zen against a Pure Land–inflected, cataphatic reading of *śūnyatā*, she argues that Meister Eckhart’s theology stands closer to emptiness than often assumed, which opens fresh, compassion-forward pathways for interreligious comparison.

In “Fraternal Pluralism: Pope Francis’s Contributions and Precedents,” Matthew Cavedon traces Pope Francis’s “fraternal pluralism,” a thick, encounter-driven Catholic vision of religious difference, back to Vatican II and the magisterium, showing how it matures earlier “thin” pluralism into appreciative, cooperative relationships. Surveying non-Christians, other

Christians, and dissenting Catholics, he argues this paradigm is here to stay, expanding Catholic engagement from ecumenism to ecological kinship even as it stops short of an internal governance model.

“A Kantian-Type Moral Argument for Postulatory Religious Pluralism: Elements of Christianity and Sufism as Postulated Religious Beliefs in Contemporary Western Culture,” by Joseph Prud’homme, recasts the Kantian moral argument as a *postulatory* case for theism, claiming that agents are morally warranted to affirm God (and to do so in congregationally embodied ways) because such belief reliably fortifies moral life (through free-will affirmation, divine accountability, forgiveness, awe, and communal support). Extending from general theism to particularity, it proposes a postulatory religious pluralism in which elements of Christianity and Sufi Islam can be affirmed in parallel, stimulating moral excellence while prioritizing the practical over creedal and addressing worries about inconsistency and heteronomy.

The issue closes with six book reviews:

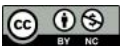
- *Everyday Encounters: Humanizing Dialogue in Theory and Practice*, by Hans Gustafson; reviewed by Renee L. Bowling
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- *Beyond Dialogue: Building Bonds Between Christians and Muslims*, by Craig Considine; reviewed by Ryan Keating
- *The Paradox of Trauma and Growth in Pastoral and Spiritual Care: Night Blooming*, by Mary Beth Werdel; reviewed by Kevin McCarty
- *Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World*, by Korie Little Edwards and Rebecca Y. Kim; reviewed by Thomas Goodhue

This issue would not have come together without the proficient and superb work of Lydia Bremer-McCollum (Assistant Editor), Sze-Long A. Wong (Design and Production Editor), Mark Spinnenweber (Graduate Research Fellow), and Aubrey Chavez (Graduate Intern). My sincere gratitude is extended to all of them.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
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ARTICLE

Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis: A Comparative Study on Practical Theology as Lived Experience with the Divine Action

Siavash Asadi

Abstract

Inspired by the concept of Christopraxis, this paper introduces Qur'anopraxis for the first time, establishing a dialogue between the two through trusted epistemologies. Qur'anopraxis focuses on divine action as “God’s coming to people” as manifested in the Qur’an. To develop Qur'anopraxis, this study employs the methodological framework of Christopraxis from a trans-religious perspective and utilizes a Gadamerian hermeneutic that acknowledges the fluid nature of reality across different contexts. Christopraxis is centered on emmanual experiences, in which individuals engage in concrete, tangible encounters with Jesus Christ, while Qur'anopraxis similarly presents divine action through experiences with the Qur’an. By comparing Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis, this paper underscores the analogous roles of Jesus in Christianity and the Qur’an in Islam in interpreting first and second order emmanual experiences.

Keywords

practical theology, Christopraxis, Qur'anopraxis, divine action, emmanual experiences

Introduction

“Practical theology,” developed primarily by Friedrich Schleiermacher, has been an integral part of systematic Christian theology since the early nineteenth century. For most Christian theologians, particularly within the context of twentieth-century Protestantism, practical theology is defined by its emphasis on the local congregation, pastoral care, preaching, and apologetics. In contrast, the term practical theology has not gained widespread acceptance among Muslim theologians, as there is no clear understanding of it in an Islamic context. Practical theology in Islam is commonly associated with jurisprudence (*fiqh*) or the rules of sharia that govern the actions of Muslims and Muslim communities in everyday life.

Practical theology extends beyond the actions of believers to encompass the broader dimensions of divine agency. It includes God’s creative, guiding, and sustaining actions toward all creation, as well as the salvific work directed toward believers. The most pivotal divine act within the Christian tradition is embodied in Christ, particularly through the foundational events of atonement and salvation that are offered to all humanity—or at least to all who believe. In parallel, the Qur’an represents a profound expression of divine action in Islam, where God communicates with humanity and offers guidance toward redemption. In this paper, I shift the focus beyond these primary acts of divine intervention to explore the notion of divine action as “God’s coming to people” in tangible, lived experiences—a phenomenon I refer to as “emmanual experience.”¹

Given that the emmanual experience has been largely overlooked in historical Islamic practical theology,² I propose the term “Qur’anopraxis”

1 In the literature of Christopraxis, particularly in the works of Tanya Luhrmann and Andrew Root, the experience of God’s coming to people is often referred to as evangelical experiences. However, in Christian theology, the term evangelical encompasses a range of meanings and nuances, and there are more precise terms within Christian thought that could be used. Furthermore, the Greek term *euangelion* (from which the English term evangelical is derived) means good news, a meaning that does not entirely align with this paper’s intended usage. As such, the term “emmanual” is employed in this context to denote such experiences rather than evangelical. Emmanuel is a Hebrew term that translates to “God is with us” or “God with us.” This name is most notably found in the Bible, specifically in the Book of Isaiah (7:14). In Christian theology, Emmanuel symbolizes God’s incarnation—God coming to dwell in human form through Jesus Christ, offering salvation to His people.

2 We will take a simplified approach and examine all practical aspects of Islamic theology under the term “Islamic practical theology,” even though this terminology is not commonly used.

to articulate a facet of Islamic practical theology focused on divine action as manifested through the Qur'an. Coined for the first time in this paper, Qur'anopraxis offers a unique lens for understanding the relationship between believers and the Qur'an within the Islamic tradition. This concept acknowledges the multifaceted nature of religious practice and underscores the dynamic interplay between divine action and human agency in Islam.

To maintain methodological coherence, this paper follows the procedural framework established by systematic Christopraxis to systematize the concept of Qur'anopraxis.³ By its very nature, Islamic theology possesses an expandable capacity to draw from the achievements of modern Christian practical theology while upholding Islamic principles and concepts.⁴ Furthermore, Islam allows for the discussion of its practical doctrines alongside those of Christianity, facilitating the development and enhancement of Christian practical theology. Therefore, this paper focuses on Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis—two features of Christian and Islamic practical theology that center on divine action—as gateways to fostering dialogue between Christianity and Islam on the topic of practical theology.

The primary question this paper seeks to answer is: What is Qur'anopraxis in the context of Islamic emmanual experiences, and how does it compare to Christopraxis, particularly within the Lutheran tradition? Before addressing these questions, however, we must consider three other points into consideration. First, it is essential to clarify the epistemological frameworks upon which our approach is grounded. Second, we need to explore the relationship between theory and praxis, as religious praxis is

3 Christopraxis has gained prominence among Lutheran practical theologians, particularly following Andrew Root's introduction of the concept in *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 1991). This article draws on the framework Root established there as an appropriate foundation for Qur'anopraxis. However, the term Christopraxis holds other significant connotations. See, for instance, Edmund Arens, *Christopraxis: A Theology of Action* (Fortress Press, 1995), 69. Arens writes: "precisely because God never appears thematically in Jesus' parables, they make it possible to thematize God in a new way. This does not occur in such a way that where human beings act, the action under discussion would actually be God's. Instead, the statement runs in the opposite direction: God acts where human beings do God's will." This approach diverges from the direction taken in the present paper.

4 At times, I use the term "Lutheran" instead of "Christianity" because the concept of Christopraxis discussed in this paper is framed within the Lutheran tradition. However, I refer to Christianity when addressing the broader aspects of the religion. Similarly, since Qur'anopraxis can be adapted within both Sunni and Shia sects, I use the term Islam to denote this context.

rooted in theories that shape believers' mental, behavioral, and cultural identities. In other words, we must examine how a theory translates into praxis within a specific context. Third, we should compare the roles of Jesus Christ in Christianity and the Qur'an in Islam to provide a comprehensive understanding of divine action as God's coming to people in the form of an emmanual experience.

1. Epistemological Framework

Real emmanual experiences in Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis cannot effectively be interpreted through a lens that views reality as a fixed, non-competing entity perceived in the same way by everyone. As Frithjof Schuon states, "any truth can in fact be understood at different levels and according to different conceptual dimensions."⁵ Instead, a fluid approach, characteristic of postmodernism⁶ and often referred to as fluid reality, provides a more suitable framework for understanding these experiences. As Jean-François Lyotard articulates:

In postmodernity, reality is seen as fragmented and constructed through language and discourse. There is no single, unified reality, but rather multiple, competing realities based on different perspectives and narratives.⁷

In this context, Hans Georg Gadamer suggests that understanding and interpreting reality is not about grasping an objective truth but engaging with the meanings and contexts through which reality is experienced. Gadamer emphasizes the interpretive process and the dialogical nature of understanding rather than the pursuit of objective reality. For him,

5 Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, introduction by Huston Smith (Quest Books, 2005), 1.

6 I acknowledge that the debates surrounding postmodernism, most prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, may not seem like a fresh topic for discussion. However, I use the interpretive framework as a means to engage with the diverse approaches to reality that postmodern thought offers. This exploration allows for a nuanced understanding of how multiple perspectives can coexist and inform our interpretations of meaning in various contexts.

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 60.

understanding is about experiencing reality in the fullness of its meaning, not merely perceiving it objectively.⁸

This means that one of postmodernism’s primary functions is to move reality beyond the confines of objectivity. It “rightly rejects the myth that all knowledge is objective.... We are involved as moral and personal agents in all that we know.”⁹ From this perspective, reality does not present itself equally to all; rather, it is deeply intertwined with cultural, psychological, sociological, and historical backgrounds, influencing the personality of the experienter.

I contend that this approach does not necessarily lead to relativism regarding reality itself or the rejection of any objective reality. Fluid reality signifies how reality manifests itself differently for individuals based on their traditions, fostering a positive form of religious pluralism. This perspective is, indeed, epistemological rather than ontological. As emphasized in the quotes from Schuon and Lyotard, “truth” can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Schuon illustrates this claim of “exoteric” by stating:

The exoteric claim to the exclusive possession of a unique truth, or of Truth without epithet, is therefore an error purely and simply; in reality, every expressed truth necessarily assumes a form, that of its expression, and it is metaphysically impossible that any form should possess a unique value to the exclusion of other forms; for a form, by definition, cannot be unique and exclusive, that is to say, it cannot be the only possible expression of what it expresses.¹⁰

In essence, people may encounter the same reality in diverse forms and expressions. Here, we align with critical realism as articulated by John Searle, “realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are.”¹¹ Furthermore, the acquisition of knowledge is not confined to reasoning or public, repeatable experiences. Blaise Pascal’s assertion (which predates postmodernism) that “the heart has its reasons which reason cannot know” underscores this point, according to Ray Anderson.¹²

8 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (Continuum, 2004), 262.

9 Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Fortress, 1991), 20.

10 Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 18.

11 John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (Free Press, 1995), 155.

12 Ray Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 20. See also Blaise Pascal, “Pensées (Thoughts)” in

Gadamerian hermeneutics regarding fluid reality thus create an appropriate environment for interreligious dialogue regarding emmanual experiences in Christianity and Islam.¹³ This interaction ideally leads to a transcendent unity of religions, often referred to as the Perennial Wisdom. Perennial Wisdom lies not in religions' doctrines but in their shared quest for the divine, revealing a universal truth that transcends individual traditions and speaks to the common yearning of the human spirit. As Schuon states:

There should now be no difficulty in understanding that the Divinity manifests Its Personal aspect through each particular Revelation and its supreme Impersonality through the diversity of the forms of Its Word.¹⁴

Therefore, the expectation arising from Gadamerian hermeneutics in interreligious dialogue on practical theology, supported by Andrew Root's critical realist perspective, emphasizes:

The placing of trusted epistemology in discourse with other people's trusted epistemologies, respecting that we both trust and believe our own epistemologies but recognize that our trusted epistemologies see reality in distinctly different ways.... It reminds us that we share the limitation of our deeply held epistemologies in possessing all of reality.¹⁵

This is not a superficial or compromised form of religious pluralism; rather, it reflects a profound understanding of the relationship between the emergence of reality and the traditions through which that reality is revealed to humanity—especially when discussing the phenomenon of God's coming to people.

Pensées (Thoughts) and Other Writings, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford Press, 2008), 278.

13 In section 4.1 of this paper, the intricacies of Gadamerian hermeneutics will be discussed.

14 Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 26.

15 Root, *Christopraxis*, 239.

2. Theory and Praxis

Modern definitions of practical theology vary within the Christian context.¹⁶ I pay particular attention to Karl Immanuel Nitzsch's definition,¹⁷ as he emphasizes the theoretical nature of practical theology, describing it as "theory of ecclesial processes."¹⁸ Henk de Roest explains Nitzsch's idea about the nature of practical theology as follows:

Practical theology is a *science* of its own, in which insights from other sciences and knowledge from non-ecclesial experiences are necessary.¹⁹

In these two quotations, the terms "theory" and "science" convey the idea that practical theology fundamentally represents a type of knowledge that describes theological praxis. Nitzsch's definition could be adapted to "the theory of theological praxis" in order to apply it more broadly across other religions. This distinction between practical theology and theological praxis is significant; the former relates to the cognitive realm, while the latter emerges in human behavior. This aligns closely with Don S. Browning's notion of practical reason, where he states:

By focusing on practical reason, I mean to point to the use of reason to answer the questions, What should we do? and How should we live?²⁰

Such a meticulous distinction between "practical theology as theory" and "theological praxis" brings us closer to what we mean by Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis. Although Christopraxis is typically regarded as practical

16 Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 24–26.

17 Karl Immanuel Nitzsch was a significant figure in the development of practical theology. He emphasized the importance of applying theological concepts to everyday life and practice, focusing on the integration of faith and action. Nitzsch believed that practical theology should address real-world issues and serve the needs of the community, making theology relevant and accessible. He advocated for a theology that is not only theoretical but also deeply engaged with the practical aspects of human existence, emphasizing the role of the church and the importance of pastoral care.

18 Karl Immanuel Nitzsch, *Praktische Theologie. Erster Band. Einleitung und Erstes Buch. Allgemeine Theorie des Kirchlichen Lebens* (Adolph Marcus, 1847), 29.

19 Henk de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology*, vol. 8 of *Theology in Practice* (Brill, 2020), 95.

20 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Fortress, 1991), 10.

theology within the Christian tradition, it is crucial to clarify and underscore that, in this paper, it fundamentally pertains to the theory of divine acts—acts that are directly related to and concretely experienced by the faithful.²¹ The practical application of this theory allows individuals to engage in a direct, embodied experience of Jesus Christ. Similarly, by introducing the term Qur'anopraxis, I do not aim to refer to actions based on the Qur'an. Instead, Qur'anopraxis denotes the theory of divine acts as embodied in the Qur'an, which can be reflected in the believers' interaction with the Qur'an through outward expressions and practical manifestations. Indeed, Qur'anopraxis, as the theory of divine acts, results in lived experiences and embodied interactions that individuals cultivate with the Qur'an in their daily lives.

At a deeper level, the dynamic interrelation between theory and praxis, as articulated in Karl Barth's teachings, serves as a foundational conviction (or theological axiom): "praxis and theory, church and theology, love and knowledge, simply cannot be set over against one another."^{22, 23} Anderson emphasizes this idea, stating:

Theory and practice inform and influence each other in such a way that all practice includes theory, and theory can only be discerned through practice.²⁴

While this interrelation can be applied generally to praxis and theory, it gains particular significance when theory refers specifically to practical theology as the "knowledge" of theological praxis. The significance of this dialectical relationship becomes especially evident in religious rituals, where believers find themselves immersed in a fusion of theory and praxis. A quintessential example of such rituals in Christianity is the Eucharist, or communion, which facilitates a direct, embodied engagement with Christ. The Eucharist symbolizes the tangible manifestation of Christ's body and blood, consumed in remembrance of his sacrificial act. Through this communal act of worship, believers not only recall the historical event of Christ's crucifixion but also participate in a living encounter with the divine through the physical elements of bread and wine. In the Eucharist, theory transcends

21 While it is possible to broaden the scope of Christopraxis to include the study of believers' responses and reactions, such considerations are of secondary importance for the purposes of this paper.

22 Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

23 Hence Barth's careful specification of his theological project as church dogmatics.

24 Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 21.

mere intellectual abstraction; it is actualized and embodied through the lived experience of the faithful. The sacrament thus serves as a profound existential moment, drawing the faithful into the mystery of Christ's presence and inviting their active participation in the divine life. Through this sacred practice, believers come to experience the living reality of Christ's role in their lives, thereby transforming their theoretical understanding of his significance into tangible, spiritual praxis.²⁵

Barth, moreover, asserts the precedence and dominance of praxis over theory, viewing the understanding of Christ's role—the light of life—as “a theory which has its origin and goal in praxis.”^{26, 27} In the realm of Christopraxis, this represents the highest level of interrelation between theory and praxis. We may further posit that the understanding of Christ's role itself can be regarded as praxis; when theory is understood, it is fundamentally practiced. However, by understanding, we do not refer solely to a mental action reflecting an external phenomenon. Understanding, as defined by Gadamerian hermeneutics, constitutes a state of human existence intrinsic to human experience.²⁸ In this framework, understanding occurs in a dialectical interplay between human and the being that reveals itself through existence. Thus, Barth's perspective can be expanded to include the assertion that “the understanding of Christ's role is itself a form of praxis.”²⁹ When Christ's role is revealed to humans and understood, theory is governed by praxis, ranging from praxis as the foundation of theory to the dominance of praxis over theory.

In the Islamic context, the understanding of the Qur'an as the light of life,³⁰ akin to Christ as he is described in the Bible,³¹ can likewise be discerned through the graded dominance of praxis. This concept is evident in Qur'anic verses that convey imperative propositions, as the meaning

25 However, the correlation between praxis and theory varies based on context and subject matter. For example, if theory pertains to theoretical dogmatic theology, this relationship may not be as closely tied.

26 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/3, eds. Geoffrey Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (T & T Clark, 1955-1961), 79.

27 Browning criticizes Barth for adopting a theory-to-practice perspective. Regardless of the accuracy of this critique, we are inspired by Barth's emphasis on the interrelation and domination of praxis over theory.

28 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 62–65.

29 It appears from Barth's words that understanding Christ's role is theory, but we distinguish between *theory* as theory and *understanding of theory* as praxis.

30 Qur'an calls itself the Light (4:174).

31 John 1:4

of such propositions implies actions that can only be comprehended in a practical context. For instance, God commands Muhammad³² in his initial experience of receiving revelation to “read³³ in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clinging mass.”³⁴ Abdel Haleem describes this experience as follows:

Muhammad’s own account survives of the extraordinary circumstances of the revelation, of being approached by an angel who commanded him: “Read in the name of your Lord.” When he explained that he could not read, the angel squeezed him strongly, repeating the request twice, and then recited to him the first two lines of the Qur’an.³⁵

The revelatory experience of Muhammad emphasizes the practical nature of understanding the Qur’an, illustrating that comprehension is deeply rooted in action. God’s command to Muhammad to read signifies that his existence is immersed in the understanding of God’s words. This understanding, as a transformative state of being, is itself viewed as a form of praxis. In other words, the imperative verb “read” signifies that Muhammad must engage in praxis to comprehend God’s words; however, understanding these words is itself a form of praxis. In this revelatory experience, divine action is imparted to Muhammad along with the directive to read—a human action necessary for grasping God’s message. Thus, God encourages a dynamic interaction by commanding Muhammad to read in order to enhance Muhammad’s understanding through divine-human action. Consequently, the imperative statement “read in the name of your Lord who created man from a clinging mass” and the declarative statement “your Lord created man from a clinging mass” differ significantly within the context of practical theology.³⁶ Based on Shahab Ahmed’s terminology, this

32 For the sake of brevity, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) will be referred to simply as “Muhammad” in this paper.

33 The Arabic term *iqra’* may be more accurately translated as recite rather than read. Nevertheless, we opt for the translation read in order to maintain consistency with Abdel Haleem’s rendition in the aforementioned quotation.

34 Qur’an, 96:1–2

35 The Qur’an, *Oxford World’s Classics*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press, 2004), xiv.

36 Understanding as praxis, within a hierarchical framework, certainly depends on the personality and spiritual characteristics of the Qur’an’s audience. It is evident that the prophetic experience of understanding—in terms of its depth and intensity—stands incomparable to that of others, while similar experiences may occur for other individuals, albeit at a lesser level of intensity and depth.

represents a form of hermeneutical engagement that involves bringing “one’s Self into the process of truth-making and meaning-making from a source.”³⁷

Another illustrative example is the foundational verse that articulates the fundamental Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*: “Say, ‘He is Allah, the One.’”³⁸ Commentators have grappled with the word “say” in this verse, as it could be expressed more directly as a declarative sentence: “He is Allah, the One.” However, given the primacy of praxis, say can be understood as an imperative that introduces *tawhīd* in a practical manner. This verse is not merely an informative statement or a simple command from God; it also exemplifies the most effective process of understanding *tawhīd* practically, woven with theoretical implications.

Verses that commence with say—for example, “say, ‘I seek the protection of the Lord of humans’”³⁹ and “say, ‘I seek the protection of the Lord of the daybreak’”⁴⁰—underscore the significance of recitation in the Qur’an as a form of spoken language. Spoken language, as Gadamer asserts, serves as the medium through which human life is fully experienced.⁴¹ Additionally, speech act theory⁴² posits that words serve not only to convey information but also to perform actions. Notably, John Searle’s five categories of illocutionary speech acts highlight the performative power of the term say; the importance of recitation in the Qur’an creates an environment where divine action, in the form of the Qur’an, is disseminated among people through verbal communication and practical manifestations of assertive, commissive, directive, declaratory, and expressive acts.

A final example of the primacy of praxis is found in the Qur’anic verse that explicitly directs theory to be shaped, caused, and governed by theological action:

37 Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 345.

38 Qur’an, 112:1

39 Qur’an, 114:1

40 Qur’an, 113:1

41 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 42–47.

42 For a short review of Searle’s speech act theory see Daniel Vanderveken and Susumu Kubo, “Introduction,” in *Essays in Speech Act Theory* (John Benjamins, 2002), 1–21

Do right and piety⁴³ for [the sake of] Allah; [then] Allah teaches you. And Allah is Knower of all things.⁴⁴

According to this verse, praxis is not only the origin and goal of theory but also the means by which theory is received from God, distinguishing it from all other sources. Other verses reinforce this concept, such as “Who does right and piety for [the sake of] Allah, [then] Allah will appoint a way out for him.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, although the Qur’an serves as guidance for humanity,⁴⁶ “God causes many to err by it (the Qur’an) and many He leads aright by it! But He does not cause to err by it (any) except the transgressors.”⁴⁷ In these verses, the interaction between theory and praxis becomes more pronounced. This interaction is rooted in both human and divine actions (the Qur’an), while the superiority of divine action remains evident.

These examples demonstrate that in both Christopraxis and Qur’anopraxis, theory and praxis are intricately intertwined and capable of developing dialectically in an ascending trajectory. This is particularly evident when one considers that theory, understood as a mode of “understanding,” is itself a form of praxis—one that actively shapes and informs human existence. Therefore, emmanual experiences—understood as divine action and central to both Christopraxis and Qur’anopraxis—are formed and interpreted through the theory-praxis relationship. This connection becomes stronger and deeper as the role of both is enhanced in everyday life.

The relationship between praxis and theory is seen more clearly when viewed through Anderson’s lens that says, “theory can only be discerned through praxis.”⁴⁸ This relationship may further illuminate the discussion of the Qur’an as a text, contrasting its fixed, immutable nature with its multifaceted functionality in the lives of believers and communities. To reconcile this contradiction, we can draw on Barth’s understanding of the word of God, which he views as something addressed to humanity from an external perspective. This perspective entails an irreducible “over-againstness” that restricts and governs our comprehension of God.⁴⁹ He

43 The Arabic *Tāgwa* does not have a straight translation in English. We use the words “right” and “piety” together to approximate the meaning of *Tāgwa*.

44 Qur’an, 2:282

45 Qur’an, 65:2

46 Qur’an, 2:185

47 Qur’an, 2:26

48 Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 21.

49 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/2, 340.

emphasizes the idea that God exists as a distinct and transcendent being, “over against” humanity, and highlights the fundamental otherness of God in relation to human experience and understanding. Nonetheless, it imposes a non-negotiable demand that shapes and guides human action.

We can, similarly, assert that the reality of the Qur’an (as God’s words) and the deeper layers of its meaning remain inaccessible to the ummah with an ordinary understanding, despite Muhammad’s prophetic experiences. However, the demand for understanding that shapes and guides human action spreads among the ummah through the recitation and repeated engagement with Qur’anic verses in daily prayers and other religious rituals. In other words, praxis provides believers with a means to achieve deeper levels of understanding of the reality of the Qur’an, demonstrating that this journey is endless and continuous. Nevertheless, the highest level of the Qur’an, often referred to as the “Preserved Tablet” (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), is incomprehensible to anyone but God. What was revealed to Muhammad represents a descended level that can be expressed in words. As one Qur’anic verse states, “Truly We sent it down in the Night of Power.”⁵⁰ Seyyed Hosein Nasr and his co-authors comment on this verse, noting that:

This is understood to be the first stage of revelation from the Preserved Tablet to the lowest heaven, that of this world, or more specifically to the House of Might (*bayt al-‘izzah*), which is in the lowest heaven.⁵¹

Although the verb *anzalnā* in this verse translates to “We sent it down,” it signifies a specific, immediate revelation in contrast to the gradual process of revelation (*tanzīl*). This suggests that during the Night of Power, the entire Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad, after which it was subsequently conveyed gradually over the span of twenty-three years. While there is no definitive consensus regarding the nature of this immediate revelation, one could imagine the possibility of Muhammad comprehending the entirety of the Quran at once, within a meta-spatiotemporal context where the elasticity of time does not constrain the revelation experience, allowing him to intuitively grasp all underlying truths prior to the textual manifestation. On this basis, the ascending path moves from the surface of the Qur’an toward the Preserved Tablet. This journey requires believers to engage in praxis,

50 Qur’an. 97:1

51 Seyyed Hosein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, *The Study Qur’an: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015), 1540.

progressing from lower levels to higher ones while never fully grasping the Preserved Tablet but rather drawing closer to it.

3. Jesus Christ and the Qur'an

Root identifies a neglected aspect of practical theology—the importance and priority of divine action—as a key motivation in the development of Christopraxis:

I argue that practical theology has been magnificent at articulating rich approaches to human action but has been deficient, as I hope to show, in articulating divine action in the same depth.⁵²

Similarly, a parallel deficiency can be noted within Islamic discourse. While there has been significant progress in articulating rich approaches to human action, there remains a lack of depth in articulating divine action, especially in divine action as God's coming to people.

The notion of divine action as God's coming to people varies in form and description between the Lutheran tradition and Islam. In Lutheran thought, this action is performed by the Son—who is the revealed, incarnate Father—acting in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁵³ The Father, in this framework, transcends human experience. As Pete Ward notes:

God is known only through God's own self-revealing. This is seen first and foremost in Jesus Christ.... The reality of God comes before and beyond all expression and all knowing.⁵⁴

In Islam, the reality of God is also not directly experienced by humans; rather, only the manifestations, effects, and revelations of God can be partially understood. Thus, the transcendent manner of God's coming to believers is embodied in the Qur'an.

52 Root, *Christopraxis*, x.

53 Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 24.

54 Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology, Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Baker Academic, 2017), 29.

The role of the Qur'an in Islamic practical theology surpasses that of scripture in Christianity, where it functions more as an intermediary.⁵⁵ Instead, the Qur'an can be likened to Jesus Christ in Christianity, which is why we introduce the term Qur'anopraxis. Therefore, while the words of Muslim scholars such as Shaykh Faheem are entirely accurate, they do not capture the full picture when he states:

It is as clear as day that the Qur'an should not be viewed as a 'mere book' which is to be ceremonially 'recited,' but it is indeed a book which must be 'read' and well understood if we are to gain perspective on the subject matters discussed therein.⁵⁶

This view, while valuable, can be further enriched by recognizing that engaging with the Qur'an is not merely an intellectual exercise—it is a dynamic encounter through which God's words come alive and actively resonate within the lived realities of individuals.

It is understandable that the divine action represented by the coming of the Qur'an to people has often been overlooked by Muslim theologians since Qur'anopraxis is less tangible compared to Christopraxis. Jesus Christ, as the incarnate God, can be perceived and encountered directly. In her recent work, Tanya M. Luhrmann emphasizes making God real is a central aim of practical theologians. She asserts that “the basic claim is this: that God or spirit—the invisible other—must be made real for people, and that this real-making changes those who do it.”⁵⁷ She further explains that “what it means for gods and spirits to feel real is that humans feel a responsiveness, an aliveness.... This is why gods and spirits must be made real.”⁵⁸

55 In Christian terms, scripture is often referred to as the “witness without parallel” to Jesus. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/2, 563. Moreover, although scripture plays a crucial role in this revelation, its function as a normative, apostolic deposit of truth is essential for a hermeneutic of Christopraxis. See: Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 30.

56 Shaykh Faheem, *The History and Compilation of the Qur'an* (Islamic Lifestyle Solution Publication, 2014), 24.

57 Tanya M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton University Press, 2022), xii.

58 Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 157.

Understanding the ministry⁵⁹ of a text, however, is a complex task. To achieve this understanding in the Islamic context, we must examine the nature of the Qur'an. What legitimizes the ministry role of the Qur'an is that it is not merely a written text; it was originally revealed orally, as Nasr mentions:

The Quran was an oral revelation in Arabic first heard by the Prophet and later written down in the Arabic alphabet.⁶⁰

To analyze Nasr's position, let us revisit the verse, "read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clinging mass." The question that emerges from this verse is: what was inscribed, possibly on a tablet, that the angel Gabriel instructed Muhammad to read or recite? In subsequent verses of the same chapter, God asserts that He "taught by the pen,"⁶¹ prompting many Qur'anic commentators to interpret read as interacting with a written source. As Daniel Madigan argues, this source can be understood as an unseen aspect of the *kitāb* (book) that is frequently referenced in the Qur'an.

This is the very question that confronted the commentators as they examined the beginning of the text proper: "that is the *kitāb* about which there is no doubt: guidance for the God-fearing." They were puzzled by the use of *dhālika* ("that") rather than *hādhā* ("this") at the beginning of Q 2:2.⁶²

Though commentators have attempted to argue this refers to other chapters of the Qur'an or even the Gospel or Torah, Madigan logically proposes that *dhālika* refers to a reality behind and beyond the visible text "between the

59 I use the term "ministry" in this paper within an Islamic context, drawing conceptually on Root's use of the term in Christian theology. In the preface to *Christopraxis* (p. xii), Root writes: "God is minister. People in my interviews who spoke of evangelical experiences, of encountering divine action, spoke of this action coming to them as ministry—either through the feeling of God's care and healing or through the ministerial activity of another (or themselves to another) that mediated the depth of divine encounter." While his usage emerges from a Christian framework, I adopt a parallel understanding in the Islamic context, where ministry refers to relational, experiential, and often embodied acts through which divine presence and care are mediated in lived human experience.

60 Nasr et al., *The Study Qur'an*, xxiii.

61 Qur'an, 94:4

62 Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 62.

two covers.”^{63, 64} Consequently, the tablet takes on a metaphorical meaning, symbolizing the realm in which the truths of the Qur’an exist, and read connotes contemplate or intuit, allowing one to perceive those other worldly realities. God’s words, then, are initially truths existing in that realm and later made manifest as linguistic terms and sentences. Drawing on Shahab Ahmed’s work, these meta-spatiotemporal truths could be regarded as the “pre-text” components of Islam, in which the universal and eternal truths of revelation existed prior to the textual form known as the Qur’an.⁶⁵

This allegorical understanding of the tablet and pen is further highlighted in Sufi interpretations, especially those of Ibn al-‘Arabī. In his view, the divine truth is manifested in the cosmic order through the intermediary of the Muhammadan truth, with the Muhammadan light serving as the conduit for the flow of divine grace into the realms of beings. Referring to the verse “[swear to] *nūn*, the pen, and what they write,” Ibn al-‘Arabī states: “Then, the pen of will is dipped into the ink of knowledge, and the force of power writes upon the tablet of existence...”⁶⁶

Therefore, what Muhammad was instructed to read were, in fact, the mysteries of existence, drawn from its tablet; this enabled him to attain higher existential levels and greater capacity for divine knowledge. From this perspective, revelation consists of two aspects: the descent of truths and the ascension of Muhammad into the divine realm to grasp and capture those meanings and realities. The Qur’an hints at Muhammad’s ascension when it mentions his heavenly journey:

Immaculate is He who carried His servant on a journey by night from the *Masjid al-Ḥarām* to the *Masjid al-Aqsā*, whose environs We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.⁶⁷

63 The same question arises for other verses, such as 10:1, where the Quran says, “Those are verses of the Wise Scripture.”

64 Nasr employs the term “Cosmic Qur’an” (*al-qurʿān al-tadwīnī*) to denote the pre-textual truths, and the term “written Qur’an” (*al-qurʿān al-tadwīnī*) to refer to the Scripture itself. See Nasr et al., *the Study Qur’an*, xxvi.

65 Ahmed clarifies that by “pre-text revelation,” he is not referring to the Preserved Tablet. However, in light of Madigan’s explanations, the concept of pre-text aligns closely with *dhālika al-kitāb*, which can be interpreted as the Preserved Tablet. See: Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 347.

66 Ibn al-Arabī. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*. Vol. 1. (Ālibayt li-Ihyā’ al-Torāth Institution, 2002), 3.

67 Qur’an, 17:1

While most commentators interpret the *Masjid al-Harām* and *Masjid al-Aqsā* as references to physical places (two significant mosques for Muslims), a Sufi perspective may uncover a deeper meaning based on the roots of these words. From a Sufi perspective, *Masjid* literally refers to the position of *Sajdah*—the ultimate state of humility, submission, and devotion before God—and *Masjid al-Harām* represents this position, which is forbidden for all other beings to enter. *Masjid al-Aqsā*, in contrast, symbolizes the position to which God carries his servant, Muhammad, to the furthest, even infinite, levels of *Sajdah*, revealing to Muhammad his verses and signs. In this interpretation, the two dimensions of revelation are realized simultaneously, asserting that Muhammad's ascension is indeed an act of God's grace and mercy.⁶⁸

Building on this, the *sunnah* of Muhammad is considered a form of text and can be regarded as a type of the Qur'an; they are, in essence, two faces of the same coin. The *sunnah* is a manifestation of the Qur'an, realized not in written form but through Muhammad's words and actions. From my perspective, the term Qur'an encompasses both texts: the scripture and *sunnah*. Thus, in the Qur'anopraxis, I regard not only the scripture but also Muhammad's *sunnah* as God's action, possessing the same nature but differing manifestations in the scripture and *sunnah* and rooted in the pre-text truths. As a result, the Qur'an possesses qualities that go beyond typical textual expectations. Most notably, the Qur'an is described as a living text since it refers to itself as Spirit.⁶⁹ God's revelation through this living Qur'an, including the written text and Muhammad's *sunnah*, elicits specific actions. The sayings of Muhammad, in particular, introduce the Qur'an as an intercessor,⁷⁰ and the Qur'an itself confirms its healing power.⁷¹ Moreover, recognizing the Qur'an as a living, active source of guidance and mercy⁷²

68 Although this process is dedicated to Muhammad at its highest level, the path is not closed to others; there is no obstacle to experience this, albeit on a lower and less potent level than Muhammad's experience. Indeed, the truth of the Qur'an exists along an expansive and infinite spectrum; its praxis varies depending on the capacity and ethical development of its audience.

69 Qur'an, 42:52. Some commentaries argue that "Spirit" is Gabriel in this verse. Some others, however, believe that it mentions the Qur'an. Regarding the grammar and linguistic considerations, it is highly likely that the second one is true.

70 Muhammad Ibn 'Isā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan (Traditions)*, Vol. 4. (Dār al-Fikr Publications, 1982), 238.

71 Qur'an, 17:82

72 Qur'an, 31:2–3

illuminates the theological understanding of God's action through the agency of the Qur'an and the concrete experiences arising from its praxis.⁷³

Therefore, similar to Luhrmann's observations in a Christian context that emphasize the need for gods and spirits to be made real, the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition must be regarded not only as a holy text but also as a living entity embodying all its described properties and attributes. The Qur'an, written or realized by Muhammad, represents the highest manifestation of God and the sublime expression of God's word. Interestingly, it refers to Jesus as the Word of God,⁷⁴ highlighting a significant similarity between the Qur'an and Jesus Christ.⁷⁵ Regardless of the various commentaries and interpretations regarding the nature of this "Word," it serves as a common point for understanding both Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis across these two traditions.

4. Emmanual Experiences

Religious experience⁷⁶ serves as the backbone of practical theology in the contemporary contexts of both Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis. Specifically, emmanual experience refers to an understanding of God's ongoing work in a believer's life and God's coming to people, emphasizing "the centrality of the commitment to a God who comes to us."^{77, 78}

73 Although this paper acknowledges that the term Qur'an encompasses both scripture and the *sunnah*, the following discussion and examples primarily focus on the scriptural form of the Qur'an rather than the *sunnah*. This is because the reported experiences of God's coming to people are predominantly discussed in relation to scripture.

74 Qur'an, 4:171; 3:45

75 See John 1:1. This is referred to as the "Two Words Analogy," where both Christians and Muslims avoid a direct inquiry and instead draw a parallel, comparing Muhammad to Mary and the Qur'an to Jesus, the Incarnate Word. For further insights and alternative perspectives, see Axel M. Oaks Takacs, "The Prophet Muhammad Between Lived Religion and Elite Discourse: Rethinking and Decolonizing Christian Assessments of the *uswa hasana* Through Comparative Theological Aesthetics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 34, no. 3 (2023): 245–84.

76 The term religious experience is an ambiguous one with a wide range of extensions. I use it to mean emmanual experience, which I will explain further.

77 Root, *Christopraxis*, xi.

78 Root argues that many individuals have had concrete, lived, and real experiences. He focuses on experiences where individuals encounter Jesus Christ, dedicating

The moments of emmanual experiences often involve revelation, enlightenment, and transformation, significantly impacting the individual's faith and worldview. However, despite the prevalence of such experiences in everyday Muslims' lives, Muslim scholars have rarely provided a systematic framework for understanding and interpreting them within Islamic theology. While the Qur'an emphasizes personal piety, reflection, and spiritual growth—and numerous Islamic traditions underscore the importance of spiritual experiences—there is a notable gap in scholarly discourse regarding their systematic analysis. This gap highlights the urgent need for further exploration of emmanual experiences within the Islamic tradition as they hold profound implications for understanding faith and spirituality among Muslim believers.

Throughout Islamic history, many believers have encountered profound spiritual experiences through engaging with the Qur'an and interacting with fellow believers. God's coming to people is manifested primarily through religious experiences, which may occur in Islamic contexts as general recitations of the Qur'an—spoken by individuals or conveyed through the text itself—or as otherworldly sounds encountered by specific people in particular situations. Given the fundamental Islamic belief that the Qur'an is composed of God's direct words,⁷⁹ every form of recitation can be understood as a kind of divine action—one of many ways through which God interacts with believers. When divine action is understood as God's coming to people, all these expressions of the Qur'an can be seen as tangible manifestations of that encounter.

These manifestations of the Qur'an can be understood as emmanual experiences that share the characteristic and nature of religious experiences through the Qur'an. Muhammad's experience in the Cave of Ḥirā' exemplifies a pivotal moment of divine encounter that shaped the course of religious history. It underscores the themes of revelation and the transmission of divine guidance to humanity, central to Islamic faith traditions.

One of the most significant emmanual experiences in the Lutheran tradition occurred in Martin Luther's own life through his recitation of scripture and direct encounter with it. While this experience is not unique, it bears a notable similarity to the Qur'anic encounters that take place in

significant portions of his work to reporting interviews with those who have had emmanual experiences. See Root, *Christopraxis*, 42–51.

79 Some prominent Muslim intellectuals, such as Abu Zaid and Soroush, reject this idea. See Ferry Muhammad Syah Siregar, *Nasr Hāmid Abu Zaid on Tafṣīr, Ta'wīl, Qurānic Hermeneutic Discourses* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

an Islamic context. It shows that in the Lutheran tradition, God's coming to people can occur not only through the physical presence of Jesus but also through the Bible as the Word of God, paralleling the Islamic experience. For many Lutheran believers, much like Muslims, reading the Bible transcends mere intellectual exercise; it becomes a profound spiritual encounter. Passages resonate deeply with their current life situations, offering insight and direction. This phenomenon is often described as the Holy Spirit working through the scriptures to communicate directly with the reader.

Luther's "Tower Experience" occurred while he was a monk at the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, studying the Bible—particularly the book of Romans—and grappling with concepts of righteousness and divine justice. Troubled by the belief that he could never be righteous enough to earn God's favor, he eventually understood the principle of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*). He realized that righteousness is granted by God through faith in Jesus Christ, not earned through good works. This revelation was transformative, becoming a cornerstone of his theology.⁸⁰

God comes to Luther in this emmanual experience, affirming a profound commitment between him and God. Though Luther did not report a direct vision of Jesus Christ, this experience occurs through his engagement with scripture and is akin to an encounter with Christ himself. Such moments of divine revelation can lead to significant life changes, fostering renewed dedication to spiritual practices, ethical living, and community service. The Bible becomes a living document, actively shaping the lives and hearts of those who engage with it.

In the Lutheran context, the significance of experience is evident in the models proposed by Browning and Anderson. Browning positions experience at the core of his compelling and critical model, while in Anderson's revision, experience is replaced with a concept of Christopraxis that emphasizes the presence of Christ in the lives of believers. He refers to experience as the praxis of encountering Christ, which is already active in the believers' lives.⁸¹

Luther's experience parallels my concept of Qur'anopraxis, where one form of emmanual experience arises through encounters with the holy scriptures that serve as a conduit for individuals to connect with the divine. When believers read and meditate on the scriptures, they often report a deep sense of God's presence and guidance. This engagement enables them

80 Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 71–74.

81 Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 30.

to experience God's wisdom, love, and power in an intimate way, and it brings profound peace, comfort, and clarity that reinforces their faith and commitment to living according to God's will.

While the specifics of Luther's and Muhammad's experiences differ in their theological and historical contexts, both illustrate the profound impact of divine encounters on individual believers and the broader religious communities they inspired. As Luhrmann notes, the possibility of emmanual experience is plausible, and its reality cannot be dismissed.⁸²

That, after all, is the point of experimental evangelical⁸³ spirituality: to experience God—an external invisible presence—interacting with one through phenomena one would ordinarily interpret as internal and self-generated.⁸⁴

While this is a humble, minimalist position, it implies a theoretical framework for interpreting encounters with the specific reality of God coming to people. To fully understand these experiences, we must clarify our approach to reality and determine what we mean when we assert that “evangelical experiences are real.” Inspired by Browning and Root, I adopt the perspective of Gadamerian hermeneutics to interpret evangelical experiences, while using Anderson's insights to provide a lens for exploring the reality of these encounters.

4.1. *Gadamerian Hermeneutics*

Although Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics and reality is situated outside the realms of theology and religion, I draw on his insights in a religious context to elucidate the concepts of Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis. Following Root's interpretation, I adapt Gadamer's framework to explore how these practices engage with divine action and the experiences of individuals within their respective faith traditions. This application highlights

82 Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 227–66. She argues that the people who have religious experiences are not crazy, and their experiences are possibly real.

83 To maintain the exact wording of the direct quotation, the term “evangelical” is used.

84 Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 69.

the relevance of Gadamerian hermeneutics in understanding the dynamic interplay between textual interpretation and lived religious experiences.

Martin Heidegger notably shifted the focus of hermeneutics away from a primary concern with the methods or foundations of research in the arts and humanities. Instead, he employed hermeneutics in his inquiries into what he called the “being” or “existentiality” of human existence.⁸⁵ Building on this foundation, Gadamer’s hermeneutics center on existential praxis; this focus makes his perspective particularly suitable for explaining emmanual experiences. He emphasizes that understanding is always situated within a specific historical and cultural context, and the interpreter’s background significantly influences their interpretation. This context must be considered in the process of understanding.⁸⁶

Gadamer also emphasizes that understanding is a dialogical process. It involves a conversation between the interpreter and the text or subject, where meaning is negotiated and constructed through interaction. Within this framework, sublime praxis emerges as a dialectical experience, enhancing human capacity to discover existents in specific situations. These discoveries occur within historical contexts and traditions; however, it is important to note that in Gadamerian hermeneutics, history and tradition do not necessarily refer to events long past. Instead, Gadamer highlights the nature of human experiences that are perceived within the flow of time and connected to the past, regardless of how long ago it was. It is essential to recognize that the object—whether Christ or the Qur’an—can never be fully grasped due to its ongoing “effective history.”⁸⁷

The idea of being situated within a stream of time as a fundamental aspect of human experience makes Gadamerian hermeneutics particularly relevant for interpreting experiences related to Qur’anopraxis. From this perspective, a written tradition becomes contemporaneous with the present moment, allowing awareness to connect with that tradition. This process enables the reader to move beyond reliance on oral and ephemeral events, expanding their horizons of discovery through the history encapsulated in the written text. This interaction not only activates a sacred text like

85 Theodore George, “Hermeneutics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia Philosophy* (Winter 2020 edition), Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, eds., <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/#:~:text=Heidegger%20defines%20inquiry%20into%20the,in%20the%20arts%20and%20humanities>.

86 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 240.

87 In Lutheran emmanual experiences, the presence of Christ is engaged dialectically with the experienter, who discovers Christ according to their own capacity.

the Qur'an within its effective history but also facilitates a metatextual experience that reveals deeper layers of meaning. On this basis, in Qur'anopraxis the reader engages not merely with the text itself but with the divine speaker behind it.

Gadamerian hermeneutics also introduces the concept of the “fusion of horizons,” a phrase that frequently appears in Browning’s work.⁸⁸ The term horizon denotes the range of vision or perspective that an individual brings to a text, idea, or situation. Gadamer asserts that understanding is achieved not by simply adopting another’s perspective but by merging one’s own horizon with that of the other. This fusion leads to a richer and more comprehensive grasp of the subject being studied.⁸⁹

Browning employs this notion to integrate the horizons of religious traditions and human ethical actions, shaping a practical theology that centers on ethics as the essence of practical wisdom. However, when constructing Root’s Christopraxis and what I term Qur'anopraxis, Gadamer’s framework proves more advantageous than Browning’s. The concept of horizon fusion emerges when Gadamer denies a strict subject-object relationship between the experiencer and the experienced.⁹⁰ Instead, the experiencer and the experienced engage in a questioning dialectic, where the horizon of the experienced becomes accessible, allowing the experiencer to expand their own horizon. This process results in a true fusion of horizons. The term expansion indicates that the experiencer does not abandon their horizon; rather, they achieve a richer, deeper understanding of themselves through this unique fusion of horizons. Consequently, experiencing Christ or the Qur'an—essentially, the fusion of human and divine horizons—leads to a profound discovery of the self that resonates with the divine horizon.

4.2. *Types and Examples of Emmanual Experiences*

In the proposed Christopraxis and Qur'anopraxis framework, emmanual experiences can be classified into two types. The first, termed first-order emmanual experiences, occurs through a supernatural or meta-mundane

88 Gadamer first encountered the concept of horizon in Husserl’s writings where it referred to the limitations that restrict meaning. However, he reinterpreted this concept through his own hermeneutic approach, shifting from an opposition of horizons to a fusion of them.

89 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268–70.

90 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 284.

event. These experiences are distinctly otherworldly. In contrast, the second-order emmanual experiences are characterized by a more natural acquaintance with the divine. Though these experiences may appear ordinary, they represent a transformative encounter with God, orchestrated by divine intent to alter the individual profoundly.

Both types of emmanual experiences share adjectives such as concrete, lived, and real; both facilitate a deep spiritual transformation. The key distinction lies in their manifestation and the degree of supernatural involvement. First-order experiences often arise unexpectedly and marked by God's direct intervention, such as meeting Jesus Christ, hearing an otherworldly voice reciting Qur'an, or witnessing a supernatural sign during spiritual contemplation. Second-order experiences, conversely, are typically more mundane occurrences, e.g., hearing someone read the Bible or the Qur'an aloud or reflecting on the text personally.

Most of the interviews that Root presents in his work, *Christopraxis*, refer to second-order emmanual experiences.⁹¹ One specific emmanual experience that Root highlights is the concept of being present with others in community. He illustrates this through stories of individuals who engage deeply with those around them, fostering genuine relationships that reflect Christ's love. He describes, for example, scenarios in which youth leaders or mentors invest time in young people's lives—not just to impart knowledge but to share in their joys and struggles. These relational dynamics create a space for transformative encounters with God.

Another significant emmanual experience involves the act of suffering within a community. Root emphasizes how shared experiences of grief and hardship can deepen relational bonds and foster a stronger understanding of God's presence. He shares stories of congregations coming together to support members facing significant challenges, such as illness or loss. In these moments, the church acts as a support system, embodying Christ's love and compassion. This collective experience of suffering not only provides comfort but also transforms how individuals perceive God—shifting from an abstract concept to a tangible presence felt through the love and care of others. This idea underscores that God is encountered not only in personal

91 Root does not explicitly name the first and second orders of emmanual experiences. His criteria for categorizing these experiences focus on external elements, such as presence among others and the act of suffering. However, to align with the purpose of this paper, I will present my own categorization.

devotion but also in the shared life of the community, where love and empathy are manifest expressions of Christ's work.⁹²

To illustrate first- and second-order emmanual experiences in the Islamic context, I will present one example from each category involving well-known figures, thereby ensuring credibility and minimizing potential bias from personal interviews.⁹³ One notable instance is that of Bahā' al-Dīn Khorramshāhi, a prominent Iranian writer and translator. He recounts his experience as follows:

I bought a pair of soccer shoes with a strong, hard tip. One night, my sons wanted me to go out with them to play. Although I was busy, I agreed. When I came out of my room, I noticed what I thought was a pillow under the blanket in the hall. I decided to kick it to test my new shoes. As I ran toward it, a voice resonated in my heart, reciting: "[Believers] are those who avoid vain deeds."⁹⁴ I had never memorized this verse; it was repeated in a heavenly tone distinct from my own. The voice halted me, and to my shock, I realized that the "pillow" was my youngest son, Ḥāfīz, who had fallen asleep under the blanket. Had I kicked it, I would have harmed my own child.⁹⁵

This exemplifies what Root refers to as an emmanual experience, substituting Christ with the Qur'an. In this profound moment, Khorramshāhi received a direct divine message through an extraordinary revelation of the Qur'an, reflecting a fusion of his horizon with that of the text.

The second example involves Dr. Gary Miller, a mathematics and logic lecturer at Toronto University. His transformative experience occurred in 1977. He initially approached the Qur'an with the expectation that it would be nothing more than an antiquated text, authored fourteen centuries ago—likely filled, he assumed, with references to deserts and archaic cultural

92 Root, *Christopraxis*, 42–51. Since the interviews and explanations are presented in his book, I will not report them here.

93 Since this research introduces the Qur'anopraxis for the first time, I preferred to use an analytic-descriptive method. Analyzing the results of my interviews using the method of grounded theory will be published in another paper.

94 Qur'an, 23:3

95 This is a brief report of what Khorramshāhi said in his interview. The complete interview is in Persian. Khorramshāhi, "A Miracle for Bahā' al-Dīn Khorramshāhi, Translator of the Holy Qur'an," *aparat.com*, Tehran, July 2, 2014, 6 min., 10 sec. <https://www.aparat.com/v/uCP8X>

norms.⁹⁶ However, he was astonished by what he discovered. Compelled by curiosity, he began reading the Qur'an more carefully, intent on finding inconsistencies or errors. Instead, he was profoundly struck by a verse—Sūrat al-Nisā' (4:82)—which states: “Do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from any other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction.”⁹⁷ Commenting on the Qur'an's remarkable style, Dr. Miller notes its extraordinary quality: the Qur'an not only conveys specific knowledge but does so while explicitly asserting that such knowledge was previously unknown to the reader. This distinctive feature, he argues, is unmatched in any other text and reflects a unique and compelling literary and epistemic character.⁹⁸

While this experience does not involve direct supernatural sights or sounds, it indicates a significant discovery of divine presence and action. Through the Qur'an, Miller underwent an existential transformation, expanding his horizon to align with that of the text. His reflective engagement with the Qur'an became the source of his understanding and action, showcasing the dynamic interaction between the experiencer and the experienced.

Conclusion

In examining emmanual experiences through the lenses of Christoph Praxis and Qur'anopraxis, we uncover a rich tapestry of divine encounters that transcend cultural and religious boundaries. Both first-order and second-order experiences illustrate the profound ways in which individuals engage with the divine, whether through extraordinary supernatural events or through everyday moments of reflection and community interaction.

The integration of Gadamerian hermeneutics enables us to appreciate these experiences as deeply situated within the historical and cultural contexts of the believers, emphasizing the dialogical nature of interpretation. This perspective highlights the fluidity of reality and acknowledges the multiplicity of viewpoints, fostering a more nuanced understanding of faith that celebrates both individual and communal dimensions.

96 Gary Miller, *The Amazing Quran* (Abul Qasim Publishing House, 1992), 3.

97 Miller, *The Amazing Quran*, 11.

98 For more information, see: <https://blog.une.edu.au/new-england-muslims/2017/11/06/gary-miller-the-man-who-challenged-the-quran/>

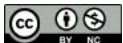
Importantly, this exploration encourages interreligious dialogue by illuminating the shared quest for the divine across traditions. The notion of a transcendent unity of religions reveals that, while doctrines may differ, the underlying pursuit of truth and connection with the divine resonates universally. This invites us to engage with one another in meaningful ways, seeking common ground in our experiences of God's coming to people.

As we continue to explore these emmanual experiences, we open ourselves to profound insights and a deeper understanding of each other's faith narratives. By fostering an environment of mutual respect and dialogue, we not only enrich our own spiritual journeys but also contribute to a broader conversation that celebrates the diverse ways in which humanity seeks the divine. In this light, our work emphasizes the transformative power of these encounters, encouraging all to pursue deeper connections with God and with one another.

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ARTICLE

Cataphatic *Śūnyatā*? A Pure Land Alternative to Dialogue Between Eckhart and Japanese Buddhism

Alison Forster

Abstract

Much of the dialogue relating to the tension in apophatic Buddhist philosophy is framed in discourse around language. The aim of this paper is to change the conversation. This paper is primarily concerned with the tension between apophatic and cataphatic hermeneutics embedded in the discourse. I argue there is a dharmalogical hermeneutic that is embedded in the discourse of Buddhist philosophy. There is a subjectivity of one's own experience and views that is reconciled with Buddha-dharma. Accordingly, in the discourse of non-duality, there will be an apophatic or cataphatic emphasis embedded in the discourse, determined by one's dharmalogical hermeneutic. This respective apophatic or cataphatic emphasis is not only dharmalogically relevant, but also affects the dialogue between Eckhart and Japanese Buddhism. The cataphatic alternative from a Pure Land perspective presented here locates Eckhart's theology in closer proximity to *śūnyatā* than its apophatic counterpart.

Keywords

non-duality, negative theology, meontology, *śūnyatā*, Meister Eckhart, Pure Land Buddhism, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Ueda Shizuteru, Kyoto School, metaphysics

From the Paradox of Language to Hermeneutics: Changing the Conversation

Much of the dialogue relating to apophatic Buddhist philosophy is an explicit discussion of the paradox of language. Edelglass suggests that apophatic discourse is both liberating and ensnaring, but more importantly, the relevant question is not “what does it say?” but rather “what does it do? What are some of the things it can do?” or “what can one do with apophatic discourse?”¹ It is about the way language functions in Buddhist philosophy. Much of this literature also relies on primary sources like sutras or koans, though there are exceptions like Ralf Müller’s treatment of “Silence in Language.”² Garfield and Huntington both engage in a hermeneutic or exegetic treatment of Nāgārjuna,³ though this is ensnared by debates about historical context, and the form of Nāgārjuna’s language. I don’t dispute that apophatic discourse is both liberating and ensnaring, but my focus is on the discourse of contemporary Buddhist commentators, rather than the Buddhist canon. Though language is the foundation of this paper, it is not the topic. The topic is rather what’s conveyed hermeneutically by language, particularly by contemporary Buddhist philosophers, and how this affects dialogue with Christian speculative mystics like Eckhart. I argue there is a dharmalogical hermeneutic that is embedded in the discourse of Buddhist philosophy. There is a subjectivity of one’s own experience and views that is reconciled with the teachings of Buddha-dharma, in a similar fashion to the hermeneutics of Christian theology. Accordingly, in the discourse of Buddhist non-duality, there will be an apophatic or cataphatic emphasis embedded in the discourse determined by one’s dharmalogical hermeneutic. This respective apophatic or cataphatic emphasis is not only dharmalogically relevant, but also affects the dialogue between Eckhart and Japanese Buddhism. The cataphatic alternative to existing dialogue presented here locates Eckhart’s theology in closer proximity to *śūnyatā* than its apophatic counterpart. I first provide a reading of Eckhart, situated in Sermon 87 and Sermon 9. This is followed by an exegesis of

- 1 William Edelglass, “‘That Is Why The Buddha Laughs’: Apophasis, Buddhist Practice, and the Paradox of Language,” *Journal of Dharma Studies* 1, no. 2 (2019): 201–14.
- 2 Ralf Müller, “The Articulation of Silence in Language,” in *Tetsugaku Companion to Ueda Shizuteru: Language, Experience, and Zen*, ed. Ralf Müller, Raquel Bouso, and Adam Loughnane (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 201–223.
- 3 C. W. Huntington, “The Nature of the Mādhyamika Trick,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2007): 103–31; Jay L. Garfield, “Turning a Madhyamaka Trick: Reply to Huntington,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36, no. 4 (2008): 507–27.

Ueda Shizuteru's comparison of Eckhart with Zen as a paradigmatic case, demonstrating that Ueda's depiction of non-duality has an apophatic emphasis and accordingly a greater distinction between Buddhist non-duality and Eckhart. Though Ueda's text is based in Zen I am not suggesting that an apophatic hermeneutic is synonymous with Zen. I then present a cataphatic hermeneutic of *śūnyatā* and non-duality from a Pure Land perspective and relate this to Eckhart's theology, while I would again refrain from equating a cataphatic hermeneutic with the Pure Land sect. Finally, while I advocate for a cataphatic hermeneutic herein, this is not to argue that a cataphatic hermeneutic is more adequate or authoritative than an apophatic hermeneutic. It is simply to present an alternative to much of the existing dialogue, thereby demonstrating that neither hermeneutic is authoritative.

Meister Eckhart's Theology

In East-West dialogue, Eckhart is a popular figure for comparison, hence his role in this work. Rudolph Otto has compared Eckhart's theology with Vedanta, and specifically within Buddhist-Christian dialogue, he has been compared with Zen by Catholic monk Thomas Merton, and Zen philosophers including D.T. Suzuki, Keiji Nishitani, and Ueda Shizuteru. Keiji Nishitani offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between Eckhart and Zen, however, a limited number of pages are devoted to Eckhart in his most widely available English translation, *Religion and Nothingness*. The bulk of his attention to Eckhart is given in *God and the Absolute Nothing*, which has yet to be translated into English. Ueda Shizuteru has gained wide notoriety in discussions of Eckhart and Zen, and is referenced by Bernard McGinn, John D. Caputo, and others who write works primarily devoted to Eckhart. Shizuteru offers a unique perspective as a Zen scholar with a command of Middle High German, writing his dissertation on Eckhart alone.

The essence of Eckhart's theology lies in non-duality, expressed in his notion of the Godhead, ground (MHG *Grunt*), and in detachment (MHG *Gelassenheit*). What Eckhart posits is that the infinite ground for "God" in the form of the Trinity is the Godhead which lies beyond or underneath the creator God. The Godhead exists as an infinite, absolute potential, but has no attributes. It is infinite nothingness. It cannot be reduced to a finite concept and thus negates all qualities except its existence. In Sermon 13b, Eckhart says, "Where the Father bears His Son in the innermost ground, this nature flows in there. This nature is one and simple. Something may

here peep out or hang on it, but that is not this One.”⁴ The “something” that “peeps” out are attributes or qualities we layer on top of God, but as Eckhart says, this is not the One. This infinite ground of oneness, which is nothingness, accordingly has no cause. When we say God is infinite nothingness, we mean that God has no boundaries; God exists, but yet is not substantive. God does not stand in relation to anything. God has no boundary, no substance, no attributes, an absolute negation. Yet God exists so in the negation of the negation, the ground of nothingness of God has a perfect and absolute essence of fullness.

But the affirmation of perfect fullness is the explanation for creation. God’s nature is an inner boiling (Lat. *bullitio*), which is the source of a boiling over (Lat. *ebullitio*) that is creation. Thus the abyss of “grunt” is dynamically co-identified with *bullitio*, ultimately resulting in *ebullitio*, thus sustaining non-duality, but the consequence is cataphatic. Eckhart says, “God created the world, not out of any lack in Godself which God hoped to fill up a why, but out of the welling up within Godself of God’s own life which spills over into creatures ... [The Trinity, and by extension] creation is the overflow, the spilling over of this inner life-process into time and number and multiplicity.”⁵ There is no logical or conceptual explanation for creation other than the essence of perpetual fullness, which, of course, is inexhaustible because it is infinite. God has no “why,” God does not “act” for any end outside Godself, and if we are one with God, neither should we. For this reason he says, “[o]ut of this inmost ground, all your works should be wrought without Why.”⁶ Here he does not mean acting out of irrationality, but rather that our actions should spring from this ground of God, which is non-rational or not rational, but not arbitrary. This is to say that we are not sanctified by our works, but our works are sanctified by us, through “being.” This is possible because for Eckhart, our soul shares “a little spark” or in other words, the *grunt* of God. The little spark is not representative of divine nature, but rather the deeper ground that allows God to rise up in the soul. Our innate capacity to be related to God in God’s naked being is unrelated to anything else. He says:

4 Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York: Crossroads, 2009), 108–9.

5 John D. Caputo, “The Rose is Without Why: Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” in *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 109.

6 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 110.

Whoever would exist in the nakedness of this nature, free from all mediation, must have left behind all distinction of person ... Go right out of yourself for God's sake, and God will go right out of Himself for your sake! When these two have gone out, what is left is one and simple.⁷

It is this negation of "creatureliness" that allows the essence of God's ground to boil up, arriving at a point where Eckhart and God are neither two nor one, but two in one ground. What is left that is one and simple is the fused ground. Creatures are entirely dependent on God, in the same way that a white thing cannot exist without the fundamental essence of whiteness as a potential, but all white things have the essence of whiteness. He asserts that "my ground is God's ground and God's ground is my ground."⁸ They are one in ground, yet there is still "my" ground and "God's" ground, in the same manner that waves are one with the ocean, yet distinct and finite.

Acting from creaturely faculties such as the senses or discursive reasoning relates us only to creaturely things. Eckhart says that "a creaturely image deprives you of the whole of God. As soon as this image comes in, God has to leave with all His Godhead. But when the image goes out, God comes in."⁹ The problem arises when we layer attributes upon God, turning God into a dualistic object that we can possess, or attempt to possess. When God becomes an object, specifically an object of desire, we are separated from God by nature of the fact that a subject is separated from an object. In Eckhart's words, "if a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies, or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head and shoving Him under a bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God, who lies hidden in it."¹⁰ This separation stems not only from our objectification of God, but our reification of ourselves as separate and distinct subjects which are preoccupied with creaturely things. Thus, he advocates for *Gelassenheit*, or detachment, so that God can work without creaturely interference.

Eckhart's most renowned sermon, *Beati Pauperes Spiritu Quia Ipsorum Est Regnum Caelorum* (Sermon 87, "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit") is summarized in the exhortation, "A poor man is one who wants nothing, knows nothing,

7 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 109–110.

8 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 109.

9 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 110.

10 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 110.

and has nothing.”¹¹ He proclaims, “[w]hile I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth.”¹² Eckhart here is his *own* cause, because his own cause is the little spark of God’s ground. He knows himself, but only through his bare being, unrelated to anything else. He goes on, saying “what I wanted I was and what I was I wanted, and thus I was free of God and all things ... *then* I had a God.”¹³ Only when he has relinquished the last trace of wanting God through *any means*, and come to rest in naked being can he be totally free to enjoy truth in being what he is. That is, when he is liberated from creaturely things, he still participates in them, but the ground from which he participates is God’s ground. The soul must abandon the blockage or obstacle of God entirely in order for God’s ground to rise and unite with the soul. The affirmative requires an absolute negation of the affirmative, emblematic of non-dualism, but accordingly, the consequence is affirmative.

Eckhart’s quintessential passage is found in his section on “having nothing,” for it is in this section that mystic union is described most clearly. He says:

When I flowed forth from God, all creatures declared,
 “There is a God”; but this cannot make me blessed, for with
 this I acknowledge myself as a creature. But in my breaking
 through, where I stand free of my own will, of God’s will,
 of all His works, and of God himself, then I am above
 all creatures and am neither God nor creature, but I am
 that which I was and shall remain for evermore ... for this
 breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one.
 Then I am what I was, then I neither wax nor wane, for then
 I am an unmoved cause that moves all things.¹⁴

In spite of the lofty description in the passage, Eckhart has cast off any trace of attachment to God, and thus cast off any attachment to transcendent or ecstatic spiritual experience. He is describing liberation—liberation that comes in the form of returning to a very ordinary existence. Eckhart’s notion of *Gelassenheit*, or letting go, is total and absolute. He is free of God himself, and only upon this last surrender can we return to the ordinary and

11 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 420.

12 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 421.

13 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 421.

14 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 424.

the everyday. Mystic union remains, because the union is not a permanent non-dual experience. Mystic union is the acceptance of the totality of dualism and non-dualism that is “being.” That final surrender is the breaking-through, *not* the ecstatic experience of non-dualism. We must first embark on a spiritual path that involves some aim to take the first step. Only after we have wanted to know God, can we let go of that desire for God and walk the full circle to return to the everyday in mystic union. This reading is supported by Eckhart’s sermon on Martha and Mary from Luke 10:38 (sermon 9).

Many of Eckhart’s contemporaries argued for the superiority of contemplative life using the story of Martha and Mary, claiming that Mary, who sat peacefully at Jesus’ feet was the virtuous character in the story, while Martha, who busies herself in the kitchen to attend to Jesus, was chided by him.¹⁵ In sermon 9, Eckhart offers a radically different reading of this passage. Although he concedes that Mary and Martha are both virtuous, he argues that it is Martha in her mature wisdom who is more spiritually developed. According to Eckhart, Martha did not ask Jesus to tell Mary to help her out of anger or resentment, but rather from a desire to help Mary develop spiritually. He says:

Hence her words, “Lord, tell her to help me,” as if to say, “my sister thinks she is able to do what she wishes to do, as long as she sits and receives solace from you. Let her see if it is so: bid her get up and go from you.” The latter part was kindly meant, though she spoke her mind ... We suspect that she, dear Mary, sat there a little more for her own happiness than for spiritual profit. That is why Martha said, “Bid her rise, Lord,” fearing that by dallying in this joy she might progress no further.¹⁶

And:

[Mary] was filled with joy and bliss and had only just entered school, to learn to live. But Martha stood there in her essence, and hence she said, “Lord, bid her get up,” as if to say “Lord, I do not like her sitting there just for joy. I want her to learn life and possess it in essence: bid her arise that she may be perfect.”¹⁷

15 John D. Caputo, “Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” *The Thomist* 42, no. 2 (1978): 204.

16 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 84.

17 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 89.

This precisely echoes the former reading of Eckhart’s “breaking-through.” While spiritual bliss and ecstatic union are noble, we must also be free of their pursuit to become fully mature and ‘break-through’ into the ordinary work of preparing food in the kitchen. When Jesus responds to Martha’s request for Mary’s help, he says “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42 NRSV). Eckhart reads this not as a rebuke, but as a form of reassurance that her sister would grow spiritually as she desired. He draws careful attention to her being named twice by Jesus. He explains by saying:

Why did he name Martha twice? He meant that every good thing, temporal and eternal, that a creature could possess was fully possessed by Martha. The first mention of Martha showed her perfection in temporal works. When he said ‘Martha’ again, that showed that she lacked nothing pertaining to eternal bliss.¹⁸

She is named once in a temporal sense, and once in an eternal sense. For Eckhart, Martha has walked full circle to be free of God. She has embraced temporal duality and eternal non-duality, discursiveness and contemplation. In Buddhist terms, she exists as she is, whether that be in relative reality or absolute reality. When Jesus says only one thing is needed, he is not referring to Mary’s form of discipleship. He is referring to the *one* ground of God and Martha, where “*I* and *you* are once embraced by the eternal light, that is *one* ... one becomes two, two is one.”¹⁹

For Eckhart, we must be in the kitchen *however* we come to the kitchen, be it in illusion, or enlightenment. Truly to address the dualism between the relative reality of “self” and the absolute reality of “no-self”, we must embrace both as Emptiness. The only way to “break-through,” to crack open the shell of ego, is to accept that ego will *always* remain. When we surrender not only our ego, but also our effort to absolve ourselves of our ego—this is the total negation required for a complete affirmation that shares the affectivity of Meister Eckhart. The all-encompassing non-duality not only embraces non-duality, but duality *and* non-duality. This is Martha in the kitchen, and it must be affirmative since it encompasses *both* relative and absolute reality.

18 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 85.

19 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 86 (author’s emphasis).

An Apophatic *Śūnyatā*: Ueda on Eckhart

Ueda Shizuteru and his philosophy exudes an apophatic emphasis resulting in a larger distinction between Zen and Eckhart. Ueda's penetration of Buddhist philosophy is evidenced in the skill with which he portrays it. There is no critique here. Nor am I suggesting that his apophatic emphasis is corrupt or unfaithful to Buddha-dharma, in spite of a de facto violation of the Heart Sutra—this is inevitable. However, the exegesis is presented as universal, when in fact there is a dharmalogical hermeneutic embedded in the text. A cataphatic emphasis is also equally authoritative, and acknowledging our subjective orientation toward the Buddha-dharma is necessary to maintain a critical stance. Ueda summarizes his comparison of Eckhart and Zen by saying:

In Eckhart's German-language sermons one repeatedly finds statements which could be valid word-for-word translations from Zen texts ... [A]ll these elements ... find their correlations in Zen Buddhism. This is not to deny that between Meister Eckhart's mysticism and Zen a certain difference is retained, which on the one hand, in relation to the similarities, can appear quite small. On the other hand, however, these differences can appear quite large, so large in fact, that these similarities become completely meaningless.²⁰

It is also noteworthy and relevant to this discussion that he acknowledges the specific character of Zen within the larger Mahāyāna setting, saying, "Apart from the fact that, in relation to other historical forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism and other non-Buddhist religions, Zen Buddhism exhibits very few such personalistic elements, for Zen Buddhism, it comes down to a matter of overcoming such elements."²¹ Conversely, his Kyoto school counterpart Nishitani Keiji refers to Buddhist philosophy as "personally impersonal."²² Ueda draws the conclusion that in spite of their parallels, the return to the actuality of the world in the completion of the breakthrough is more radical in Zen than in Eckhart's thought. But Ueda's approach to *śūnyatā* is not necessarily authoritative for all Buddhists.

20 Ueda Shizuteru, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism in Comparison with Zen Buddhism," trans. Gregory S. Moss, *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (May 2022): 128–52, at 128–29.

21 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 129.

22 Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 60.

In Gregory Moss' translation, Ueda compares Joachim Bueckelaer's painting of Martha and Mary (Figure 1), which is influenced by Eckhart's sermon on the subject, and a Zen painting by Ryokai of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism from the thirteenth century (Figure 2), drawing out the distinctions between Zen and Eckhart's theology.²³



Figure 1. Joachim Bueckelaer, *The Well-stocked Kitchen, with Jesus in the House of Martha and Mary in the Background* [*De welvoorziene keuken*], Oil on Panel, 1566 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-1451), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bueckelaer,_Joachim_-_Well-Stocked_Kitchen,_and_Jesus_in_the_house_of_Martha_and_Mary_in_the_background,_the.jpg.

23 In Bueckelaer's painting, Martha is prominently preparing the meal in the foreground, and her figure is large, as the focus of the painting. Conversely, Mary and Jesus are painted very small in the background. The attention and space given to Martha indicate that the nothingness of the Godhead is expressed positively in her ordinary preparation of food. She is far away from Jesus and has thus completely let go of God. The negative expression of the Godhead is expressed through the smallness of Jesus and his place away from the activity. Martha is not God, as Jesus is, but the nothingness of the Godhead expressed in the depiction of Jesus takes its form far away as Martha, the human being. Thus, we have both the nothingness of the Godhead and the fullness of the Godhead expressed through Jesus and Martha respectively, and though distant in their visual depiction in the painting, Martha and God in the form of Jesus are actually united in their ground which is beyond any visual depiction.



Figure 2. Liang Kai, *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting Bamboo*, Ink on Paper, thirteenth century, (Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, TA-143), https://www.tnm.jp/modules/r_collection/index.php?controller=dtl&colid=TA143&t=type&id=11&lang=en.

Ueda's key observation is that the ultimate implication would be to remove Jesus from the picture entirely. He says:

Despite his negative theology and theory of attributes, Eckhart does not draw the implication that personalistic theism should be overcome. Eckhart was not able to draw this last inference, and he did not want to. This implication is not expressed in this painting; the picture still contains too much, namely the form of Jesus. Here it comes down to the return of God to the non-pictorial nothingness of the Godhead; thus, Jesus is painted small, but he is still there.²⁴

For Ueda, Eckhart's statement that "his ground is God's ground" would need to be restated in a way that did not name or include God for it truly to reflect the character of Zen. If Eckhart's theology can be described as neither one, nor two, but two as one; for Ueda, there is only zero as one, or perhaps zero as infinity.

In contrast, Ryokai's painting contains only the man. It is a stark portrayal of Emptiness. As Ueda summarizes:

Here God has completely disappeared. Neither any trace of the divine nor any trace of his disappearance remains. Only mere emptiness remains. God has completely "un-become," in order to speak in comparison with Eckhart's terminology. The Emptiness belongs to the essence of Zen painting. It is an expression of the radically executed pictorial nullity of transcendence, or rather for the turning back of transcendence to pictorial nullity itself to the nothing, to that which is beyond transcendence.²⁵

In this painting, it is the absence of presence, the absence of pictorial depiction that signifies the nothingness of the Godhead. In a positive sense, the Godhead is the man, alone and working in his way. The man is cutting bamboo, and that is all. Ueda's description not only seems to highlight the absence of God in the painting generally, but specifically the solitude of the man: "He appears in such a way as though he were the only being, the most real being, in the infinite Emptiness; and this he really and truly is."²⁶ Here

24 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 130.

25 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 132.

26 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 132.

not only the absence of any personal or transcendent force or being, but the absence of anything or anyone else aside from the man. There is a sense of solitude in Ueda's description, and while the implication of this solitude is neither positive nor negative, the description is stolid and barren. This impression only intensifies as his analysis continues. He says:

However, this is no solipsistic self-absolutization of the man. To the contrary, in virtue of first becoming completely empty and *annihilated* he has come to himself, as he works in this way and is dependent upon nothing ... The man is the nothing ... He is himself, but from the outset his self has been completely penetrated by the Emptiness. That means: in the Emptiness the man himself is completely empty.²⁷

For Ueda, the man is annihilated and all that remains is the shred of him being himself. The affirmation of "he is himself" is overshadowed and qualified by the fact that "from the outset his self has been completely penetrated by the Emptiness." In the last sentence of the quote, there is no affirmation even that "he is himself," only that he is completely empty.

For Eckhart, the essence of God, which is nothingness, is given the designation "the One," and while Ueda concedes that Eckhart is clear that "the One" is nothingness, he maintains that "the number one lies at the ground of the concept of the One. One cannot completely separate the number one from the concept of 'the One,' although Eckhart claims that the One contains nothing numerical in itself."²⁸ Ueda's observation is valid, but it also needs contextualization, since we can only presume that Eckhart's designation of "the One" specifically, as opposed to zero as it is in Zen, is influenced by the neo-Platonism in which Christianity is steeped. It would be exceedingly counterintuitive to use another designation in Eckhart's milieu. Ueda contrasts this with *śūnyatā* in Zen, which is related to the term *śūnyajm*, *shunyajm* or zero in mathematics.²⁹ But contrary to Suzuki or Nicholas of Cusa even,³⁰ Ueda does not provide a counterpart to zero that mirrors its negation with an affirmation. Thus, to bring his comparison to its conclusion, Eckhart's "One" is understood to be affirmational while Ueda's "zero" is negational. Bracketing the fact that they are intended to signify the

27 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 132 (emphasis mine).

28 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 133.

29 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 133.

30 Suzuki says zero equals infinity, and Cusa says the maximum coincides with the minimum.

same paradox, the respective designations each fall either cataphatically or apophatically.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle in non-dualism is the problem of how, and even if, to speak about the absolutely ineffable. There is no dispute that Eckhart indeed did speak and preach about the ineffable. He made assertions about that which cannot be related, or ascribed attributes. The more radical approach of Zen, for Ueda, staunchly supports the view that any assertion of the Truth destroys the absolute, and this is reflective of his apophatic hermeneutic. There are countless Zen koans and dialogues to support this, and Ueda provides an example:

Monk: What is the meaning of the fact that the patriarch³¹ originally came from the West?

Zhaozhou: The oak tree in front of the garden.³²

Ueda explains that the monk is asking about meaning in the sense of intention, but the answer is provided in meaning. The monk is asking a question of “why.” For Zen though, and Eckhart too, there is no answer to questions presupposing a “why” or a reason. This however does not signify a lack of meaning in the patriarch coming to Japan. The only answer is that things are as they are. Mountains are mountains, and water is water; thus the Zen master gives a response in this fashion: The oak tree in front of the garden is as it is. The question presupposes a logical intention, and the answer is provided through non-rational meaning, since there is no answer to the question in an intentional sense driven by reason. Ueda correlates this question to the Christian soteriological question of “why did God become a man?” While God had no intention or reason for becoming man, this does not mean there is no meaning to be found in God becoming man. Ueda first refers to a logical answer by Eckhart, “He became a man in order that he may give birth to you, his one and only begotten Son, and nothing less.”³³ Then he refers to Sermon 21, where Eckhart says that God is without a why. The obvious similarity here is that the plenitude of God and the suchness of phenomena have no logical intention or reason, but they are not without meaning, and Ueda’s explication reflects this. Where Ueda draws the distinction between Eckhart and Zen is not the fundamental meaning of the answer to these questions, but the way in which the questions are answered. In Eckhart’s case, the response of “without why” is “more of an

31 By “patriarch” the monk is referring to Bodhidharma.

32 Ueda, “Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” 136.

33 Ueda, “Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” 137.

immediate negation of the question itself than an answer ... [and] does not allow the questioner any room for a further inquiry back into God, and corresponding to this, for the unfolding of doctrine."³⁴ It sustains the logical form of inquiry of the original question. He contrasts this with the form Zhaozhou's response, who rather than giving a negative logical response to the question, responds positively, but in a way that is disconnected from the logical form in which the question is asked. The Eckhart-inspired Angelus Silesius says, "The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms."³⁵ Ueda ultimately concludes that for Eckhart truly to mirror Zen he would have provided a response in the form of Silesius' "it blooms because it blooms," or better yet for Ueda, "the rose."³⁶ Ueda acknowledges that Eckhart preaches that humans should work without why so that the birth of God, who works without why, can take place in the soul, saying:

In this way, the response "without why" contains a power within itself to help free the questioner from positing the question "why" and to help him to enter directly into the thing itself, which he attempts to grasp in a misguided way with the question "why?"; directly into the thing itself, that is, in the way such that the thing in question, the incarnation of God, is fulfilled straightaway in the questioner himself.³⁷

Ueda does not note, however, that while Zhaozhou's response of "the oak tree" may help free questioners from their search for "why," it does not guide the questioners to penetrate into the thing itself, as Eckhart does. What *is* implied though, is that Zhaozhou's response adheres more strictly to the realm of non-duality. While this may be the case, it is also the case that Silesius and others understood Eckhart's meaning deeply enough that they themselves were able to frame it non-dualistically anyway. Given that non-dual meaning is indeed conveyed, how important is maintaining a non-dual vehicle to convey it? Ueda claims that "Zen has its essential place outside of 'doctrine,'"³⁸ but the strict adherence to avoiding any assertions about the

34 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 139.

35 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 140.

36 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 143.

37 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 139.

38 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 138. Ueda adds later that "the first example from Eckhart treated above, where the question 'why' and the answer 'for this reason' speak with each other about God, which means they both together make God into an object of discussion. At the same time, the distance to God offers the space for the content of the doctrine, which the 'why' and the 'for this reason,'

absolute, and the rigidity of non-dual language is doctrinal in nature, even if it is not formal or explicit doctrine in the traditional sense. Ueda sees any trace of duality as something to be “overcome.”

This absolute adherence to strict non-duality supports the notion that his particular vision of Zen is in fact much more rigid than he acknowledges. While doctrine as a phenomenon is not problematic in and of itself, if the doctrine of anti-doctrine is adopted, as it seems he has, we encounter an altogether different problem. Non-duality and negative theology exist in a spectrum of speaking and not speaking, and an apophatic hermeneutic is aligned with a strict allegiance to silence about the ineffable. Ueda disavows speaking in any way about the absolute, but the discourse in which he engages through the chapter is a way of speaking of the absolute. He devotes a significant volume of text to the “is without why” of Silesius in order to support his argument. But what of the second statement: “it blooms because it blooms”? He devotes significantly less attention to this statement, and even though it has no subject or predicate, there is no reification of God here. I would argue this answer gives more insight into the question of “why did God become man?” than “the rose.” The resistance to speak at all about the absolute is not only rigid, but for some it also creates more obstacles for the seeker to overcome the rational intent of the question, and penetrate the meaning of the ineffable.

Ueda concludes the paper by contrasting the metaphysical nature of the Godhead with Zen:

Eckhart says: God un-becomes, and therewith he calls the nothingness in which God un-becomes, “Godhead.” This indicates that he continues to experience nothingness from the standpoint of God as the ground of God, not nothingness as such. The nothingness, however, into which God un-becomes, as such no longer allows the position to exist from which to determine the nothingness as Godhead. Eckhart does not say: nothingness, as happens in Zen, but rather: God is a nothingness. Here we must ascertain a decisive difference. This difference is to be worked out in closer detail. What is God? Eckhart responds: God is (in his essence) a nothingness. What is God? A Zen-master would respond: nothingness ... Eckhart conceives of the

working together in their logical co-ordination, unfold into the system of doctrine” (Ueda, “Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” 138–39).

Absolute with the concept of substance, while Buddhism conceives of it by means of the category of “relation.” Because of the consequential deployment of the category of “substance” and the radical application of “substance” to God, Eckhart had to view the essence of God as the “pure substance simpliciter,” which is empty of every property-determination.³⁹

We may wonder whether the Godhead for Eckhart was nothingness only as it relates to its place as the ground of God, but there is something else at hand. Ueda follows this discussion with the classic Zen teaching that “the rose is not the rose, but the rose is as the rose.” There is a pairing of being with non-being that is a dynamic identity in this formulation of *śūnyatā*. So comparing the “being” of God with the Zen “non-being” of nothingness is not a parallel comparison. The ground of the “non-being” of the Godhead is paired with the “being” of God. God is, because it is paired with the non-being of the Godhead in the same way that mountains are mountains precisely because mountains are not mountains.⁴⁰ Undoubtedly, Eckhart emphasizes “being” while Ueda emphasizes “non-being,” and the pairing of God and the Godhead may be slightly more dualistic since Eckhart distinguishes between the two. Being and non-being are God and the Godhead, while in Zen the pairing of being and non-being are both present in one thing, the rose. But the pairing of being and non-being is the same: God *is*, because the Godhead is not (naught). One can either emphasize the pairing of being and non-being, or the distinction that they are united as one in the rose, but co-identified in God and the Godhead. Ueda focuses on the latter, and thus finds more distinction. While I acknowledge the distinction, I would emphasize the pairing of being and non-being as that is the fundamental essence of non-duality. The essence is prioritized over the vehicle to the essence.

Ueda’s comments on Eckhart’s theology are valuable, but the implications he makes highlight a rigid non-dualism, and subtly emphasize the apophatic aspect of *śūnyatā*. Indeed, personal theism is part of Eckhart’s theology. What is important is that his ground is *God’s* ground, and despite the fact that God’s essence is absolute nothingness, he still chooses to designate it “the One.” Eckhart indeed lies on the side of the cataphatic

39 Ueda, “Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” 147–48.

40 Masao Abe, “Kenotic God and Dynamic *Śūnyata*,” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 3–65, at 28.

in comparison with Zen, but what I dispute is Ueda's statement that "Zen Buddhism breathes the same spirit as Meister Eckhart's mysticism, but the former leads the spirit to a much more radical consequence, just as much on the way of negation as well as on the way of affirmation."⁴¹ Ueda's depiction subtly violates co-identity of Emptiness too, as will any depiction; this is no failure on Ueda's part. The only problem is that it *claims* to sustain a balanced emphasis. Ueda's hermeneutic of Emptiness emphasizes the way of negation, while Eckhart emphasizes the way of affirmation. Ueda claims that: "Through his work and as his work the world worlds,"⁴² but there is nothing in the painting to show the "world worlding." The world consists of more than just the man, but there are no birds, no trees, just an empty sky, the man, and his bamboo. Ueda claims that "the universal relation itself is not a pre-existing order of being, but rather a dynamic event of being in relation to and with one another."⁴³ If this is the case, then why is the man so utterly alone in the painting? The man and his bamboo in the absence of anything else depicts an acutely contracted immanence. If the world is world-ing, the man is working as he works, there is also the mountain-ness of the mountains, the tree-ness of the trees and the sky-ness of the sky, so that pure immanence is as much expansive as contracted. In the absence of this expansive immanence, we lose an aspect of the affirmative nature of suchness, which results in a much more barren solitude than a full one. If, as Ueda says, "everything depends upon the unity of the infinite negation and the simple affirmation,"⁴⁴ the *simplicity* of the affirmation is engulfed by the *infinitude* of the negation. Ueda's apophatic emphasis is most apparent in his discussion of the unbecoming of God:

Now, with the un-becoming of God into nothing, the human being, God's son, as well as the life of God, dies. It is "a great death," as it is called in Zen, the most extreme self-alienation of the human being. There is, to speak with Eckhart, a "desert," where no life lives any more, neither human nor divine, where no creature can "green," as it would in God ... In the pure nothingness, in which God and the human being un-become together, the rose is also completely annihilated.⁴⁵

41 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 133.

42 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 132.

43 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 148.

44 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 136.

45 Ueda, "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism," 146.

It is clear from this vivid description of annihilation, desert, and death, that Ueda finds liberation in the apophatic aspect of *śūnyatā*. But if not only God and man are nothing, but the rose is annihilated too, what is left? Ueda might say nothing but the man cutting bamboo, but this seems insufficient cause to celebrate, in light of the complete annihilation of everything else. Even within Zen, Ueda's prose sounds much different from Nishitani's affirmation of God's world in Dostoyevski's *House of the Dead*.⁴⁶ An apophatic hermeneutic also lends itself to a static ontology, but for the cataphatic counterpart, a liberation worthy of complete annihilation can be only an all-encompassing affirmation. In some sense it seems as though Ueda finds his liberation through "the great death" alone, but I would argue that the value of the "great death" lies in what is revealed in a complete stripping—and that is the all-embracing compassion of suchness.

A Cataphatic *Śūnyatā*

The emphasis on the affirmational aspect of *śūnyatā* is more pronounced in the speculative form of the Pure Land tradition⁴⁷ where the aspects of compassion and wisdom are fundamentally entangled and inherent in *śūnyatā*. While the evidence here largely draws from this tradition, a cataphatic *śūnyatā* is not defined by sectarian affiliation.

T'an-luan was an early Pure Land master who aimed to reconcile the story of Dharmākara with the Mahāyāna understanding of reality, and Shinran Shonin shared his views. In their explication, the formless body of *dharmakāya* is manifested in the forms of Amida Buddha and his Pure Land. Shinran quotes T'an-luan when he says:

Because true reality is formless, true wisdom is no-knowing.
Uncreated dharma-body is the body of dharma-nature.
Because dharma-nature is tranquility, dharma-body is
formless. Because it is formless, it never fails to manifest

46 Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 8.

47 For background information on the Pure Land Tradition, see: James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, eds. *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011); Dennis Hirota, "Japanese Pure Land Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/japanese-pure-land/>; Dennis Hirota, *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism: Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

every kind of form. Therefore, the adornment of the Buddha's features and marks is itself dharma-body.⁴⁸

The mind of faith which is directed to us by the “other power” of Amida Buddha's vow is nothing other than Buddha-nature. This demythologizing approach means that the subject of faith and the object (Amida Buddha) are identical, but beyond this, that any distinction between the subject and the “form” of the Pure Land becomes extinct once we realize the Pure Land and enlightenment. In the explication by Sung-Hee Keel:

Faith in Other Power has ultimately no place once the Pure Land is realized ... Nor is there really any room in the world of realization for the story of Bodhisattva Dharmākara ... [T]here definitely exists an ontological disparity between the world of the Pure Land story and the world of realization. The latter cancels out the former ... It is no more than a dream, except it has within it the power to wake people up from it! It is a dream from which one has to wake up, but nonetheless a necessary dream!⁴⁹

Thus in this demythologization, the story of Amida becomes meontological. Yet nonetheless, liberation is based on form—the form of Dharmākara and his vow, and the form of the Pure Land. In spite of its compatibility with Mahāyāna teachings on *śūnyatā*, the emphasis on form is indispensable.

From another perspective, Takeuchi Yoshinori's essay *Buddhism and Existentialism*, while undoubtedly existential, explains the cataphatic nature of Absolute Nothingness:

God is at once Being-itself and Absolute Nothingness. As Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being, so Absolute Nothingness transcends mere non-being ... For God in his very nature is com-passionate to the suffering of all beings. In the case of Absolute Negativity the significance of transcendence and participation is of course different from that in the case of Being-itself ... God is at once Being-itself and Absolute Nothingness. *It is understandable that I prefer the latter designation, because Absolute Nothingness as Absolute*

48 See-Hung Keel, *Understanding Shinran: A Dialogical Approach* (Fremont: Asian Humanities Press, 1995), 158.

49 Keel, *Understanding Shinran*, 161.

*Negativity (that is, the negation of negation) at the same time implies the former, the affirmative.*⁵⁰

Takeuchi himself states that the value of Absolute Nothingness or negation lies with its consequence—the affirmative. He says, “this standpoint of compassion must be in its very nature devoid of any standpoint.”⁵¹ The compassion of Absolute Nothingness is non-relational, yet is the foundation for the plenitude of Eckhart’s God, and the annihilation of suffering, thus it must be ground—the same ground as Eckhart’s Godhead.

We see the affirmational and liberational nature of *sūnyatā* again in the simple poems of a *myōkonin*, or lay saint, Saichi Asahara. Living an everyday existence of a simple wood carver, yet pure in devotion to the dharma, Saichi *lived* the dharma, writing his poems with regular spontaneity on his wood shavings. This lived experience of the dharma as a part of everyday life is at the heart of the Shin tradition and closely reflects Eckhart’s theology. He writes:

“O Saichi, do you recite the Nembutsu only when you think of it?
 What do you do when you do not think of it?”
 “Yes, [well,] when I do not think of it, there is
 The ‘Namu-amida-butsu’ [just the same]—
 The oneness of ki and ho;
 Even my thinking of [the Nembutsu] rises out of it.
 How thankful I am for the favour!”
 “Namu-amida-butsu, Namu-amida-butsu!”⁵²

“O Saichi, I am the most fortunate person!
 I am altogether free from woes of all kind,
 Not at all troubled with anything of the world.
 Nor do I even recite the ‘Namu-amida-butsu’!
 I’m saved by your mercifulness [O Amida-san!]
 How pleased I feel for your favour!
 ‘Namu-amida-butsu!’”⁵³

50 Takeuchi Yoshinori, “Buddhism and Existentialism: The Dialogue between Oriental and Occidental Thought,” in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honour of Paul Tillich*, ed. Walter Leibrecht (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 291–318, at 302 (emphasis mine). I use the same system of capitalization as the original text.

51 Takeuchi, “Buddhism and Existentialism,” 312.

52 D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 156.

53 Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 142.

For Saichi, there is no practicing or not practicing. Even when he is not thinking of the Nembutsu, the Nembutsu is still there because it compassionately embraces the relative and absolute. When he is not thinking of the Nembutsu, the wisdom and compassion of absolute nothingness that is incarnated in the Nembutsu arises spontaneously because its realization or its resurfacing is only possible because he is not practicing, and its revelation is inherently affirmative because of its spontaneous presentation. His pervasive exclamation marks are expressive of its affirmative nature. They are affirmative of his liberation while simultaneously and freely acknowledging his blind passions and ego. Because he has surrendered even his will to practice, he is freed of the circular trappings of ego, yet simultaneously liberated by the vow of Amida Buddha. Thus, he is grateful and continues to practice, but he “stand[s] emptied of [his] own will . . . he is beyond all creatures,”⁵⁴ and he is neither “Amida Buddha nor himself” but “naked being.” He is his “own cause according to [his] essence, which is eternal.”⁵⁵ For Eckhart, the eye through which he sees God is the same eye through which God sees him, and Saichi expresses this identity of ground almost precisely:

When I worship thee, O Buddha,
This is a Buddha worshipping another Buddha.
 And it is thou who makest this fact known to me, O Buddha!
 For this favour Saichi is most grateful⁵⁶

And:

The Oya-sama who never fails me
 Has now become myself,
 Making me hear his Name—
 The “Namu-amida-butsu.”⁵⁷

Moreover, for Eckhart, the soul cooperates to allow for God’s ground to spring up within him, but the breaking through is ultimately dependent on the fundamental essence of *grunt*. For Saichi too, it is the vow that allows him to see that he is a Buddha worshipping another Buddha, but this reflective worshipping is also the vow itself. The Nembutsu is both the vehicle to liberation and the liberation itself; for Eckhart, God is both the place in which he works and the work itself.

54 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 424.

55 Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works*, 424.

56 Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 140 (emphasis mine).

57 Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, 146.

Amida Buddha is the manifestation of the inherent capacity to awaken. The truth must be *em*-bodied. It is the relationship between the essence of whiteness and a white thing for Eckhart. It is the ceaseless emptying action of the Godhead that dissolves polarities of subject and object. It is easy to internalize “emptying” as a negation, but if emptying is framed as “spilling over” or “embodying,” it now takes on an affirmational quality. The cataphatic essence of Buddha-nature, *śūnyatā*, Amida Buddha, practice—in their total, ultimate, profound affirmation, they are also oblitative. The oblitative cataphatic aspect of *śūnyatā* is seen clearly and intuitively in Thomas Merton’s *Asian Journal*:

All matter, all life is charged with *dharmakaya* ... [E]verything is Emptiness and everything is *compassion* ... The purpose of Madhyamaka is not to convince, but to *explode* the argument itself. Is this sadism? *No, it is compassion.*⁵⁸

While an apophatic hermeneutic emphasizes equanimity, the cataphatic hermeneutic emphasizes affectivity. From the cataphatic perspective, Emptiness is all embracing. In its totality it manifests just as much in illusion as in realization. Thus it must inherently contain compassion. Realization is possible only because illusion exists, and whenever we notice, whenever we practice, whenever we wake up, this is the inherent wisdom that is also manifested in suchness. Realization is fundamentally affirmative: It is the “aha!” of *prajñā*. When revelation occurs, when we see what was hidden, there is the joy and elation vividly portrayed in Saichi’s poems. Simultaneously, it cannot exist without a state to awaken from, which is included in the non-dualism *of* dualism *and* non-dualism. In this way even illusion becomes affirmational. It is not compassion in an anthropomorphic sense, but in the same way that the fullness of the Godhead is part of its fundamental essence, this fundamental fullness is engulfing. The fundamental essence of boundless all-encompassing-ness must therefore be compassionate. Once the Nembutsu is understood, even the apophatic nothingness of *śūnyatā* becomes engulfed in a broader, even more ultimate affirmation of the dynamic identity of emptiness and fullness. The vow of Amida Buddha is incarnated when it is identified with the believing mind. The universal mind of Amida Buddha is not identical with the mind of the individual, but rather in the way that a wave is related to an ocean, they are both the ocean, but the wave is also distinct. It is the same relationship

58 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 235, 118 (emphasis in original).

of Eckhart's Godhead of whiteness that is carried in white things. When Eckhart says "*my* ground is *God's* ground," it is the same ground: Eckhart is Eckhart and God is God, but the source, which is the essence of nothingness and fullness, is the same.

We see in the poems of Saichi Asaharu and Takeuchi the deeply personal and affective nature of their faith, but their faith is nonetheless meontological. The fundamental nature of the dharma is the origin or cause of the work of Amida Buddha's vow and the essence of Amida Buddha is ground. While essence is often associated with being, in this case it is the essence of non-being since it is meontological.

A: Zen Master was once asked:

Q: What is Tao?

A: It is one's everyday mind.

Q: What is one's everyday mind?

A: When tired, you sleep; when hungry, you eat.⁵⁹

I do not dispute that when we experience liberation or divine wisdom, we simply exist in its naked being. The problem comes in the final answer of the koan. When tired, you sleep; when hungry, you eat—is this what liberation is? To experience and accept the everyday truly, to return after Eckhart's breakthrough: When tired, we find refuge and rest in sleep, when hungry, we relish the satisfaction of eating. In grief, in spite of any equanimity or acceptance of existence, it is still personal and affective. To erase the affectivity of naked being is to destroy our sacred humanity. Regardless of our everyday experience as painful or joyful, there is affirmation in its affectivity. As the Zen saying goes: "Do not squander your life," or in Jesus' words: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 NRSV).

An apophatic *śūnyatā* is no more or less veridical than a cataphatic *śūnyatā*. Both have a place in the constellation of discourse on *śūnyatā*. Whether one gravitates toward unflappable equanimity or human affectivity is simply a matter of orientation. They are two ways to frame the picture. All are true, but none as true as the Heart Sutra, and this is not a problem. Ultimately, whether one chooses to emphasize negation or affirmation in non-dualism comes down to a matter of personal theological or dharmalogical orientation. Certainly, they are dynamic identities, and either

59 D.T. Suzuki, "Wisdom in Emptiness," in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1968), 134.

one without the other nullifies the liberation itself, but the emphasis on one or the other is part of what distinguishes different Buddhist philosophers and characterizes Buddhist sects. But correspondingly, it also determines how much distance we perceive between Buddhist philosophy and speculative Christian mystics like Eckhart.

It seems fitting to conclude with Takeuchi's Shin Buddhist adaptation of Christian doctrine. He says:

I do not deny that there is a basic difference between the compassion of Buddhism and the agape of Christianity ... But common to all is the great law of love as it is voiced by Jesus in his commandment, "Love your neighbor and even your enemies." Still more, its outstanding characteristic is the manifestation of the pure religious heart overflowing as a stream of spontaneous sentiments that contains within itself and transforms into the indicative the moral imperative: "Thou shalt love." ... The unconditional imperative, "Love your enemy," if restated in full, should be: "As your sins are forgiven you by God, so forgive you the sins of your enemy." When this oughtness of love is perfectly obeyed, there gushes forth a stream of spontaneous love. It is a command (the oughtness as the Buddha's voice), but in my response to it my whole person becomes love ... *Therefore the ground of all being is and is not. For it is precisely on this ground that the communication of redemptive love cuts its way through ...* Man in his compassion pardoning his enemy's sin should not be indifferent to the judgment of right and wrong, even in his act of pardoning. Religious love is not a simple case of non-resistance ... In the awareness and repentance of sin and sin's solidarity, the Buddha and I, my fellow beings and I, are revived in my consciousness, all enwrapped in great Compassion. Thus we all are thankful and grateful toward each other and all toward the Buddha.⁶⁰

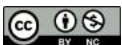
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60 Takeuchi, "Buddhism and Existentialism," 315–18 (emphasis mine).

philosophy, Buddhism, consciousness and mental health. They are grateful for the guidance of their MTS supervisor Dr. Sean McGrath, who was influential in their scholarly development.



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ARTICLE

Fraternal Pluralism: Pope Francis's Contributions and Precedents

Matthew P. Cavedon

Abstract

The late Pope Francis wrote at length about human fraternity. This article calls his approach to interreligious relations “fraternal pluralism.” It goes beyond thinner forms of pluralism, rejoicing in encounter, sharing, and collaboration. Fraternal pluralism is not new to the Church. It grows out of historical roots as interpreted, refined, and sometimes radically reoriented by the Second Vatican Council. Catholics have been living it ever since. This article begins by situating fraternal pluralism among other understandings of pluralism, including earlier Catholic ones. It then turns to three different categories of “others”: non-Christians, non-Catholic Christians, and dissenting Catholics. Fraternal pluralism shows these people appreciation, cooperation, and respect. Next, the article asks where fraternal pluralism might go. Retreat from it is unlikely, as is its translation into an internal governing model for the Church, but fraternal pluralism is already developing into a way to think about non-humans.

Keywords

Pope Francis, pluralism, fraternity, Catholic social teaching, interfaith, ecumenism, dissent, religious liberty, Vatican II, Second Vatican Council

Introduction¹

The late Pope Francis envisioned human fraternity in his 2020 encyclical, or teaching letter, entitled *Fratelli Tutti* (“All Brothers”).² The encyclical builds from the teachings of the twentieth-century Second Vatican Council (commonly referred to as “Vatican II”). What this article calls the modern Catholic Church’s “fraternal pluralism” also reflects lived histories. This article explores how fraternal pluralism guides the Church’s relationships with three categories of people: (1) non-Christians; (2) non-Catholic Christians; and (3) dissident Catholics. Fraternal pluralism positively embraces each group in a different way, teaching appreciation for non-Christian religions, unity among Christians, and respect for personal conscience.

As the three main sections below discuss, each teaching reflects aspects of earlier Church history and a different Vatican II document, and each can be illustrated with a modern example. The final section suggests directions fraternal pluralism could go in the future, taking note of Pope Francis’s ecological thought and inconsistent responses to dissent. First, though, the next section discusses pluralism, the hierarchy of Catholic doctrines, and *Fratelli Tutti*.

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- 1 For Father Francis X. Clooney, in gratitude. The phrase “fraternal pluralism” is inspired by Terence Sweeney’s description of Pope Francis’s “fraternal liberalism.” Terence Sweeney, “We Are Family: On Fraternal Liberalism,” *Church Life Journal* (June 16, 2022): <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/we-are-family-on-fraternal-liberalism/>. This paper was presented at the 2024 ICLRS Conference at Notre Dame Law School. I thank my wife Julie and daughter Ellie for helping me love better. Thanks to David O’Brien for his excellent research assistance, and to Matthew Nolan, Luke Dickens, and the editors for their helpful feedback. This work was supported by the McDonald Agape Foundation and a Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy Research Fellowship.
 - 2 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (hereinafter *Fratelli Tutti*), encyclical letter, Vatican website, October 3, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. See also Elizabeth Huddleston, “A Very Short Guide to Understanding the Scope, Purpose, and Doctrinal Weight of Papal Documents,” *Church Life Journal* (March 25, 2024): <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/a-very-short-guide-to-understanding-the-scope-purpose-and-doctrinal-weight-of-papal-documents/>. Huddleston writes that encyclicals give “comprehensive teaching and guidance on contemporary issues” and “carry significant doctrinal weight.”

I. Background: What is fraternal pluralism?

A. Fraternal pluralism is particularistic yet thick

Fraternal pluralism does not abandon traditional claims of religious particularity, but it does call for deep encounter and shared social responsibility. A more radical *theological* pluralism is promoted by John Hick and Paul Knitter.³ Hick asserts that traditional claims of Christianity's divine priority are obsolete.⁴ Knitter takes theological modesty as a reason to prioritize "practical cooperation and the dialogue of life as religious persons struggle to create a better world."⁵

Radically revisionist Christian theology is not part of the Church's fraternal pluralism. The Church maintains its particularistic claim to be the "chosen depository for the message of salvation," ordained by God to "baptize all."⁶ The Church does reject an "exclusivist" theology that claims all non-Christians necessarily go to Hell. However, while some Catholics embrace theological pluralism, most Catholic theologians are inclusivist—they believe non-Christian religions represent genuine human strivings for God, but are imperfect, incomplete, and inferior.⁷

The Church engages in interreligious relations without endorsing universalism.⁸ In this regard it is similar to some varieties of pluralism

3 Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis Books, 2002); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

4 Hick, *Christian Theology of Religions*, 15.

5 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 4.

6 Carlos Hugo Parra-Pirela, "Toward Religious Pluralism and Catholic Diversity: Catholic Involvement in the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 49, no. 3 (2020): 49–71, at 49.

7 Zbigniew Kubacki, "Religious Pluralism from the Catholic Point of View," *Verbum Vitae* 39, no. 2 (2021): 527–542, at 527, 529, and 533; see also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Dominus Iesus" on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, declaration, Vatican website, August 6, 2000, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html. Regarding the special case of Judaism, see generally Benedict XVI, "Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise *De Iudaeis*," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 45 (2018): 163–184.

8 See, e.g., Sameer Advani, *Ratzinger on Religious Pluralism* (Emmaus Academic, 2024), 14.

described by political philosophers. For instance, Will Kymlicka's pluralism envisions public support for the persistence of diverse cultural identities.⁹ Sustained engagement between groups is a key feature of fraternal pluralism. Charles Taylor's pluralism focuses on the importance of interactions between individuals and communities, arguing that identities emerge through continuous, intercultural encounter.¹⁰ *Fratelli Tutti* in particular embraces this reality.

Another way of situating fraternal pluralism contrasts “thin” and “thick” pluralism. Thin pluralism simply recognizes and tolerates the existence of different groups holding different normative values within a society.¹¹ Thick pluralism features “energetic engagement” with such diversity.¹² This includes encounter and ongoing relationships, as well as the pursuit of mutual understanding and cooperation.¹³ Thick pluralism is compatible with prioritizing particular religious truth claims. It is “the encounter of commitments”—dialogue necessarily involves two distinct voices.¹⁴ Fraternal pluralism is thick. It reflects the Church's commitment to engaging others in a spirit of solidarity, mutual care, and shared moral action.¹⁵ This model, while relevant for a globalized world, has historical foundations within Catholic practice and thought.

B. Fraternal pluralism developed from an earlier, thinner Catholic model

Thick pluralism had a false start among American Catholics in the late 1800s. In 1893, Catholics participated heavily in the Parliament of World's

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- 9 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 95–106.
- 10 Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, expanded edition, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton University Press, 1992), 95–106.
- 11 See, e.g., H. S. Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals and the Invention of Pluralism in France,” *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (2021): 497–519; Martin Rhonheimer, *The Common Good of Constitutional Democracy*, ed. William F. Murphy Jr. (Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 306. Rhonheimer (who, incidentally, is a Catholic priest) defines pluralism as “internal variety—religious, ideological, also ethnical—to a determined political culture” (306).
- 12 “About the Pluralism Project,” The Pluralism Project, accessed June 30, 2024, <https://pluralism.org/about>.
- 13 “Pluralism Project.”
- 14 “Pluralism Project.”
- 15 See Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008), 1.

Religions, a landmark interfaith assembly in Chicago.¹⁶ They wanted to highlight the Church’s compatibility with American religious freedom and democracy.¹⁷ Remarks sent there by Cardinal James Gibbons, the archbishop of Baltimore, endorsed interreligious relations happening on the basis “of charity, of humanity, and of benevolence.”¹⁸ However, Pope Leo XIII wrote to discourage Catholic participation in future conferences of this kind, proposing instead that the American Church allow others to attend *Catholic* meetings that discuss faith and morals.¹⁹ This idea reflected thin pluralism—recognition of religious diversity in the United States—but not a thick pluralism marked by mutuality.

Thin pluralism yielded fruit of its own. Pope Benedict XV’s humanitarian aid to all during the First World War inspired the raising of a monument to him in Istanbul.²⁰ During the same conflict, Catholic U.S. military chaplains worked closely alongside their Protestant and Jewish counterparts.²¹ In the midst of the Great Depression, representatives of these three communities jointly lobbied Congress to establish economic relief programs.²²

Catholic intellectualism reflected these developments. Before and during the Second World War, Jacques Maritain and other French thinkers advanced thin pluralism as a way of harmonizing two goals: Catholic acceptance of the secular French state and state acceptance of Catholic participation in public life.²³ This pluralism did not represent a deep desire for encounter across difference, but instead was meant to rebut secular individualism and defend the Church’s autonomy in a hostile political context.²⁴ It also focused on different civil institutions, rather than different

16 Parra-Pirela, “Toward Religious Pluralism,” 53.

17 Parra-Pirela, “Toward Religious Pluralism,” 53.

18 James F. Cleary, “Catholic Participation in the World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 55, no. 4 (1970): 585–609, at 595.

19 See Francis J. Connell, “Pope Leo XIII’s Message to America,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* 109 (1943): 249–253.

20 John Pollard, *The Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism, 1914–1958* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 57.

21 David Mislin, “One Nation, Three Faiths: World War I and the Shaping of ‘Protestant-Catholic-Jewish’ America,” *Church History* 84, no. 4 (2015): 828–862, at 828.

22 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Manufactures, *Federal Emergency Measures to Relieve Unemployment: Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Manufactures United States Senate*, 72nd Cong., 1st sess., 1932, S. Doc 4076, 7–8.

23 Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals,” 505.

24 Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals,” 505, 512.

religious and ideological groups, although Maritain and his allies did accept that the Church would be treated equally with other “spiritual families.”²⁵

Maritain’s pluralism spread through Western Christian intellectual circles. T. S. Eliot attributed pluralism to Maritain, as did the early Italian Christian Democrat Luigi Sturzo.²⁶ Without specifically mentioning pluralism, Pope Pius XII hinted at it during the Second World War when he invited “all men of good will” to cooperate in rebuilding the world.²⁷ French Catholic social activists embraced pluralism in the postwar 1940s and 1950s.²⁸ In 1950, the Vatican encouraged ecumenism.²⁹ Maritain’s thin pluralism was thickening into the fraternal pluralism of Vatican II (1962–1965) and beyond.

C. *Fraternal pluralism is authoritative Catholic doctrine*

Why does fraternal pluralism deserve to be treated as authoritative, rather than the thin pluralism of some earlier Catholics or the theological pluralism of some modern ones? Answering that question requires considering the Church’s hierarchy of teachings. Leading medieval Catholic theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that theologians’ authority derives from that of the Church, so Church authority holds precedent over Catholic intellectuals.³⁰

Vatican II confirmed longstanding doctrine that the Holy Spirit aids the Church in faithfully transmitting and interpreting Christian tradition.³¹ The specific organ for this is the worldwide College of Bishops, united with the pope, which exercises “supreme and full power over the universal Church.”³² This power “is exercised in a solemn way” in a Church council—such as

25 Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals,” 505, 512.

26 Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals,” 515.

27 Parra-Pirela, “Toward Religious Pluralism,” 54.

28 Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals,” 516.

29 Parra-Pirela, “Toward Religious Pluralism,” 54–55.

30 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benzinger Brothers, 1911–1925), II-II, q. 10, art. 12, resp.

31 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (hereinafter *Dei Verbum*), Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican website, November 18, 1965, paras. 8–10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

32 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (hereinafter *Lumen Gentium*), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican website, November 21, 1965, para. 22, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

Vatican II—and Catholics owe conciliar teachings concerning faith and morals “the submission of faith.”³³ The Church’s authority is also exercised, albeit less authoritatively, through the pope’s ordinary “magisterium,” or regular public teaching, toward which Catholics are to show “reverence.”³⁴

For these reasons, the fraternal pluralism set out by Vatican II and modern popes should be treated as authoritative Catholic teaching. This is true even though fraternal pluralism is a modern formulation. Vatican II recognized the Church’s authority to develop Christian doctrine.³⁵ The development of doctrine is a theological subject with a rich history.³⁶ Pope Francis himself relied on the classical theology of development proposed by the fifth-century Saint Vincent of Lérins, who said doctrine grows similarly to how seeds become plants and children become adults—gradually, organically, and while conserving earlier judgments.³⁷ Similarly, the theologian Yves Congar, who had a major influence on Vatican II, taught that a seed’s “fullness and perfection” is revealed over time as it develops “progressively and by stages.”³⁸ In the words with which Pope Saint John XXIII opened Vatican II, Catholic doctrine is not merely a “museum-piece” to be guarded.³⁹ It has vitality. Fraternal pluralism is a development of earlier doctrines, but it is nonetheless authentic Catholic teaching.

33 *Lumen Gentium*, paras. 22, 25.

34 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 25; see also *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Vatican website, 750.1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib3-cann747-755_en.html#BOOK_III.

35 *Dei Verbum*, para. 8.

36 One classic analysis is John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

37 Thomas G. Guarino, “Pope Francis and St. Vincent of Lérins,” *First Things*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/08/pope-francis-and-st-vincent-of-lrins>.

38 Jordan A. Haddad, “St. Bonaventure’s Medieval Theory of Doctrinal Development,” *Church Life Journal* (June 24, 2024): <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/st-bonaventures-medieval-theory-of-doctrinal-development/>; see also James T. Keane, “Yves Congar, Vatican II’s Greatest Theologian,” *America: The Jesuit Review* (Dec. 5, 2023): <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2023/12/05/cbc-column-yves-congar-246645>.

39 John XXIII, “Opening Address to the Council (October 11, 1962),” Catholic Culture, <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3233>.

D. *Fraternal pluralism is voiced by Fratelli Tutti*

Fratelli Tutti articulates the essence and thickness of fraternal pluralism. Pope Francis writes that fraternity requires more than civil toleration and political equality.⁴⁰ Fraternity “enhances” these norms through education, dialogue, and mutual relationship.⁴¹ Such practices orient freedom to love, rather than letting it be the mere condition for individual autonomy or even exploitation.⁴²

Fraternal pluralism does not merely recognize differences—it rejoices in them. Communication involves finding gifts and opportunities for growth in cultural and experiential variation.⁴³ Constructive dialogue means “readiness to give and receive.”⁴⁴ It requires respect for differing opinions and recognition that even conflicting ones may reflect “legitimate convictions and concerns.”⁴⁵ People should be encouraged to contribute to public debate, as society benefits from reasoned deliberation.⁴⁶ These benefits extend to listeners, who can come to understand others’ positions, “to seek points of contact, and above all, to work and struggle together.”⁴⁷ Frank and inclusive public discourse furthers the cause of truth and keeps groups from pursuing only their own interests.⁴⁸

Society should be thought of as a polyhedron, not a set of separate groups or one neat form.⁴⁹ Every position, including those on the edges, forms the shape of the whole, and no person’s perspective is superfluous to society.⁵⁰ No one person or group should claim to have the whole truth, as this “would lead to nullifying others by denying their rights.”⁵¹ People should live out fraternal pluralism by internalizing different perspectives and being “passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone.”⁵²

40 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 103.

41 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 103.

42 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 103.

43 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 117 (citation omitted).

44 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 199 (citation omitted).

45 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 203.

46 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 203.

47 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 203. (citation omitted).

48 *Fratelli Tutti*, paras. 203, 211.

49 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 215.

50 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 215.

51 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 221.

52 *Fratelli Tutti*, paras. 216, 221.

Pope Francis indicates as a model for all social encounters the fraternal pluralism developed by Vatican II and in recent lived examples. It has already been present in how the Church approaches non-Christians, non-Catholics, and Catholic dissenters. The sections below turn to fraternal pluralism in these contexts.

II. Fraternal pluralism means appreciating non-Christian religions

The Church has always held doctrinally that no one can be coerced into becoming Christian. At Vatican II, this blossomed into a positive appreciation for non-Christian religions. Fraternal pluralism toward non-Christians is illustrated well by the last will and testament of the 1990s martyr Dom Christian de Chergé.

A. The Church has always doctrinally rejected coerced conversion

To be sure, Catholics have committed brutal attacks and intense persecutions against followers of other religions.⁵³ However, these have frequently been opposed by other Catholics.⁵⁴ Formal Church doctrine has consistently rejected coerced conversion to Christianity.⁵⁵

The earliest Christian history foreshadowed fraternal pluralism. Jesus taught that the day was coming when Jews and non-Jews would unite to

53 See, e.g., Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2018); Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard A. Wiegers eds., *The Expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain: A Mediterranean Diaspora* (Brill, 2014); Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); cf. Matthew P. Cavedon, *From the Pope's Hand to Indigenous Lands: Alexander VI in Spanish Imperialism* (Brill, 2023), 39–44. The last source describes how the Spanish ordered Indigenous peoples to submit to their papally granted imperial authority or be conquered.

54 See, e.g., Cavedon, *From the Pope's Hand*, 33–35 and 63–72; Kopstein and Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence*, 8, 103; David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Academic Studies Press, 2010), 247–48 and 259–60. Berger discusses Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's opposition to anti-Jewish violence.

55 See David M. Lantigua, *Infidels and Empires in a New World Order: Early Modern Spanish Contributions to International Legal Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 32–33.

worship God “in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23).⁵⁶ He also said that though listeners of his who refused to repent had “no excuse for their sin,” this would not have been so had he not “come and spoken to them” (John 15:22). Jesus rejected missionary violence. After being turned away from a Samaritan village, two of the apostles asked Jesus, “do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?” (Luke 9:54). Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:55). The Apostle Paul, who condemned idolatry, delivered an address at the Areopagus in Athens going even further toward fraternity. He recognized in the Athenians implicit faith in the one God, saying non-Jews might “even perhaps grope for [God] and find him,” citing as evidence Hellenic literature and a pagan altar dedicated to “an Unknown God” (Acts 17:22-31).

Later generations of Christians were more hostile to other religions. Judaism occupied an ambivalent position. Both Jesus and Paul engaged in polemic against some Jews—but they did so *as Jews*.⁵⁷ Early Christian writers, like many Jewish ones of the time, were quick to condemn religious diversity, but these critiques implicitly reveal that diversity was common.⁵⁸ So does archaeological evidence of religiously mixed neighborhoods and families.⁵⁹ This changed as the Roman Empire formally adopted Christianity. In the fourth and early-fifth centuries, Saint John Chrysostom described Jews as “beasts unfit for work, they are fit for killing.”⁶⁰ He wanted to “stitch shut the mouths of the Jews,” though apparently he did not endorse literal murder and, besides, these comments targeted Judaizing Christians.⁶¹

Chrysostom’s contemporary, Saint Augustine, showed greater tolerance, proposing that God willed for Jews to survive (albeit not thrive) until the end-times so that they would unintentionally bear witness to Christianity’s truth.⁶²

56 All biblical quotations are from the *New American Bible*, Revised Edition (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2011), which is approved by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

57 Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (Yale University Press, 2010), xiv.

58 Fredriksen, *Augustine*, xiv.

59 Fredriksen, *Augustine*, xviii.

60 Kristine T. Utterback and Merrall Llewelyn Price, “Introduction,” in *Jews in Medieval Christendom: “Slay Them Not,”* eds. Kristine T. Utterback and Merrall Llewelyn Price (Brill, 2013), 2.

61 Utterback and Price, “Introduction,” 2; see also Chance Bonar, “John Chrysostom’s *Homily against the Jews* 8 as a Response to Antiochene Jewish Healthcare,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 16, no. 2 (2023): 378–406, at 378–379.

62 Utterback and Price, “Introduction,” 3.

Augustine understood Judaism as originating in divine revelation, enjoying divine protection from violence, and aiding the Church by proclaiming the prophecies Jesus fulfilled.⁶³ This approach was far from fraternal pluralism, but it did inspire some later Christians to reject violence against Jews.⁶⁴

However, other Romans did not have the right to practice their religions at all. Augustine backed the suppression of paganism.⁶⁵ Still, forced conversion remained condemned—if not out of direct respect for non-Christians, then out of the need for sincerity in Christian conversions.⁶⁶

The writings of the medieval theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas combined respect for other religions with a rejection of forced conversion. He believed God can be known through human reason.⁶⁷ Ignorance of Christianity is culpable only if people reject faith due to intellectual pride, and if non-believers are damned, this is because they lack the faith that would let them avoid other sins.⁶⁸ Aquinas recognized the “implicit faith” of those who await “fuller instruction” in religion.⁶⁹ Conscious faith had to be accepted voluntarily. Non-Christians were “by no means to be compelled to the faith,” as belief “depends on the will.”⁷⁰ Nor could Christians punish non-believers for spiritual crimes.⁷¹

For all this, Aquinas did not extend fraternal pluralism to non-Christians. He believed religious disputes should ideally be undertaken only by well-formed Christians, as less-confident ones could succumb to error by listening to others’ perspectives or befriending them.⁷² Civil authorities should protect Christians’ faith by restraining blasphemies and “evil persuasions.”⁷³ Non-Christian and non-Jewish rites should be suppressed where doing so

63 Fredriksen, *Augustine*, xii.

64 Fredriksen, *Augustine*, xi (discussing Bernard of Clairvaux, whom a contemporary rabbi called “a decent priest”).

65 Fredriksen, *Augustine*, xii.

66 See Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800* (Yale University Press, 1995), 31.

67 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 12, art. 12, resp.

68 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 1, resp., ad 3.

69 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 4, ad 3 (discussing the Roman centurion Cornelius’s encounter with Saint Peter, narrated in Acts 10).

70 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 8, resp.

71 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 9, resp.

72 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 7, resp.

73 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 8, resp.

is not civilly disruptive or harmful to evangelization.⁷⁴ Aquinas justified Christians going to war where necessary to prevent others from hindering the faith.⁷⁵ However, he affirmed that war captives should not be coerced into converting and rejected the baptism of Jewish children without parental consent.⁷⁶

Insisting that no one could be forced to become Christian while calling for the suppression of other religions' practices, and even for some religious wars, may seem contradictory. One synthesis was proposed by the medieval Pope Innocent III, who rejected *direct* but approved of *indirect* religious coercion, like using “the force of law and fear of punishment” to “remove obstacles” to conversion.⁷⁷ Indirect coercion remained an influential doctrine in the centuries that followed.⁷⁸

So did hostility toward other religions and endorsement of civil restrictions on them. Pope Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* condemned the ideas that: every person “is free to embrace and profess that religion which, led by the light of reason, he may have thought true”; people “may in the practice of any religion whatever ... attain eternal salvation”; and “good hopes should be entertained concerning the salvation” of non-Catholics.⁷⁹ Granted, even pre-Vatican II commentators understood these condemnations as contextually limited. In 1912, the *Catholic Encyclopedia*—noteworthy, an American publication—observed that in context, the first idea above rejected an argument that human reason *unaided by God* could lead to right religious judgment.⁸⁰ That source also anticipated Vatican II's recognition that different religions address similar questions and may have a “civilizing influence.”⁸¹ The same era even saw some strides toward fraternal pluralism. In 1927, Americans established the anti-bigotry Permanent

74 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 11, resp.

75 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 8, resp.; cf. Berger, *Persecution*, 247 (noting that Bernard of Clairvaux likewise taught that Jews and “subjugated pagans” should be tolerated).

76 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 12, resp.

77 Cavedon, *From the Pope's Hand*, 16 (citing Lantigua, *Infidels*, 40).

78 Cavedon, *From the Pope's Hand*, 65, 69, 71 (noting early criticism of indirect coercion by the sixteenth-century bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas).

79 Pius IX, *The Syllabus*, in *The Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius IX and the Syllabus of Modern Errors* (James Miller, 1864), paras. XV–XVII.

80 Anthony Haag, “Syllabus,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14368b.htm>.

81 Charles Francis Aiken, “Religion,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12738a.htm>.

Commission for Better Understanding Between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.⁸²

However, after Catholic participation in the 1893 Parliament of World's Religions, discussed in Part I.B above, the Church stayed away from fraternal pluralism. Though it always treated consent as necessary for conversion, it narrowly cabined this doctrine. While it at times backed some tolerance for non-Christians, it was hostile toward their religions. These attitudes prevented fraternal pluralism from truly flowering, despite some scriptural and other warrants for it. The doctrinal obstacles were not cleared away until Vatican II.

B. *Vatican II positively appreciated non-Christian religions*

Vatican II evaluated other religions positively and rejected indirect coercion. Religious liberty is discussed in Part IV below. The key Council document concerning appreciation for other religions is *Nostra Aetate*.⁸³ *Nostra Aetate* did not emerge from a vacuum. Congar saw God's hand in historical affairs that affect the development of Christian doctrine.⁸⁴ As discussed above, American and French thinkers before the Council tested thicker versions of pluralism, while Pope Pius XII invited all people of good will to help rebuild world order. In 1960, two years before the Council, John XXIII befriended Jules Isaac, a prominent French Jewish scholar.⁸⁵

Another influence on *Nostra Aetate* was Boston's Cardinal Richard James Cushing, discussed more in Part IV.C below. He flew across the Atlantic to confront the Council: "How many [Jews] have suffered in our own time? How many died because Christians were indifferent or kept silent? If in recent years, not many Christian voices were raised against those injustices,

82 "Isaac Landman," Jewish Virtual Library, 2007, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/landman-isaac>.

83 Second Vatican Council, *On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* *Nostra Aetate* (hereinafter *Nostra Aetate*), declaration, Vatican website, October 28, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

84 Haddad, "St. Bonaventure's Medieval Theory."

85 Anthony J. Cernera, "The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University: An Example of Fostering Dialogue and Understanding," in *Examining Nostra Aetate After 40 Years: Catholic-Jewish Relations in Our Time*, Anthony J. Cernera, ed. (Sacred Heart University Press, 2007), 143–4.

at least let ours now be heard in humility.”⁸⁶ Cushing, too, was moved toward fraternal pluralism partly by historical contingencies: his own brother-in-law was Jewish.⁸⁷

Inspired by Cushing, Maritain, Aquinas, and others, the Council promoted positive appreciation for other religions. While *Nostra Aetate* did so most thoroughly, the Council’s dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, is also important. The latter document teaches that the Jewish people remain “most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues.”⁸⁸ It continues that Muslims “along with us adore the one and merciful God,” while God is also near “those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God.”⁸⁹ *Lumen Gentium* says people can be saved who “sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”⁹⁰ Even those lacking “an explicit knowledge of God” can receive salvific aid when they “strive to live a good life.”⁹¹

Lumen Gentium does not endorse theological pluralism. It laments that “often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, serving the creature rather than the Creator.”⁹² It affirms that the Church “snatches” people “from the slavery of error and of idols and incorporates them in Christ”—embracing “whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples” so that this “is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man.”⁹³ At the same time, the Church does appreciate all goodness and truth as given by God to prepare people for the fullness of religious truth.⁹⁴

86 A. James Rudin, “55 Years Ago, a Cardinal’s ‘Special Reverence’ for the Jews Redeemed ‘*Nostra Aetate*,’” *Religion News Service*, Oct. 28, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/10/28/55-years-ago-a-cardinals-special-reverence-for-the-jews-redeemed-nostra-aetate/>.

87 Eugene J. Fisher, “Brief Notice,” *Catholic Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (2012): 842.

88 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 16; cf. Romans 9:1–11:36.

89 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 16; cf. Acts 17:22–31.

90 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 16; cf. Matthew 5:10, 25:31–46; Romans 2:14–16.

91 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 16.

92 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 17.

93 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 17.

94 *Lumen Gentium*, para. 17.

Nostra Aetate's fraternal pluralism prioritizes common ground and fellowship among religions with greater emphasis.⁹⁵ God extends his goodness to all people, and all religions seek answers to the ultimate questions of human existence.⁹⁶ Throughout history, people have discerned a supernatural power, and sometimes even God.⁹⁷ Religions arising within "an advanced culture" have addressed divine matters in sophisticated ways.⁹⁸ These include Hinduism's "inexhaustible myths," "thorough searching philosophical inquiry," asceticism, and devotionalism; Buddhism's awareness of the world's transience and inadequacy; and other religions' efforts to "counter the restlessness of the human heart."⁹⁹

The Church "rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions," and "regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."¹⁰⁰ Catholics should engage in interfaith dialogue and collaboration, as well as "recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values," cherished by adherents to other religions.¹⁰¹

Nostra Aetate singles out for special closeness Muslims and Jews. In addition to the shared monotheism noted by *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate* recognizes Muslims' reverence for Jesus and honor toward the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁰² The Council asks Catholics and Muslims to "forget" past hostilities and "work sincerely for mutual understanding," social justice, morality, peace, and freedom.¹⁰³ Regarding Jews, *Nostra Aetate* says the Church "cannot forget" that she received revelation through them—God's covenantal people—and even now "draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles."¹⁰⁴ In order to cultivate "mutual understanding and respect," the Council encouraged careful study and "fraternal dialogues."¹⁰⁵ It also

95 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 1.

96 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 1.

97 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2.

98 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2.

99 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2.

100 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2.

101 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 2.

102 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 3.

103 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 3.

104 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4.

105 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4.

rejected any categorical condemnation of Jews based on Jesus's crucifixion.¹⁰⁶ *Nostra Aetate* closed with explicit fraternal pluralism, saying Catholics "cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man."¹⁰⁷

Nostra Aetate has borne fruit. The Vatican now has an office dedicated to interfaith dialogue.¹⁰⁸ In 1986, Pope Saint John Paul II went to the Synagogue of Rome and blessed the Jewish people, part of a lifetime of working to strengthen ties.¹⁰⁹ The same year, he convened leaders of different religions for a "world day of prayer."¹¹⁰ In 2001, he became the first pope to visit a mosque.¹¹¹ More recently, *Fratelli Tutti* recalled how the medieval friar Saint Francis of Assisi went to Islamic Egypt, seeking to avoid "arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake."¹¹² The encyclical ends with interfaith and ecumenical prayers, as does Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*.¹¹³ In 1993 and 2023, the Parliament of World's Religions returned to Chicago, both times featuring heavy participation from Catholic hierarchs.¹¹⁴ The Church has shown fraternal pluralism to non-religious people, too. In 2011, Pope Benedict

106 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 4.

107 *Nostra Aetate*, para. 5 (citing 1 John 4:8).

108 "Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue," Roman Curia, Vatican website, accessed July 9, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/romancuria/en/dicasteri/dicastero-dialogo-interreligioso.index.html>.

109 Harold Kasimow, "Pope John Paul II: A Jewish Perspective on a Polish Catholic Saint," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48, no. 3 (2013): 410–416, at 410 and 413.

110 Peter Admirand, "Rifts, Trust, and Openness: Pope John Paul II's Legacy in Catholic Intra- and Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 4 (2012): 555–574, at 555 and 565; see also John Paul II, "Address to the Representatives of the World Religions (Assisi, Italy, Jan. 24, 2002)," https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020124_discorso-assisi.html; Benedict XVI, "For the 20th Anniversary: Interreligious Prayer Meeting for Peace, Assisi," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 September 2006, 3, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/for-the-20th-anniversary-interreligious-prayer-meeting-for-peace-assisi-6150>.

111 Alessandra Stanley, "Pope, in Damascus, Goes to a Mosque in Move for Unity," *New York Times*, May 7, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/07/world/pope-in-damascus-goes-to-a-mosque-in-move-for-unity.html>.

112 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 3.

113 *Fratelli Tutti*, para. 3; Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (hereinafter *Laudato Si'*), encyclical letter, Vatican website, May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

114 Blase Cupich, "Address to the Conscience Plenary," (speech, Chicago, IL, August 13, 2023), Parliament of the World's Religions, <https://parliamentofreligions.org>.

XVI's Vatican opened the "Courtyard of the Gentiles," a forum for dialogue with non-believers.¹¹⁵ Before he became pope, he published a dialogue with Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas.¹¹⁶ Fraternal pluralism toward non-Christians is now common.

C. Dom Christian de Chergé showed Muslims fraternal pluralism

Another example comes from a much quieter corner of the Church. In 1996, Algerian Islamist militants declared that they had killed seven French Trappist monks they had taken captive two months earlier.¹¹⁷ Controversy remains as to whether another party, possibly the Algerian military or even the French government, caused their deaths.¹¹⁸ Either way, the brothers' superior, Dom Christian de Chergé, left behind a last testament.¹¹⁹ His words embody fraternal pluralism. Chergé wrote that it was "important to state" certain things in the event of his killing, because he could not "rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder" and so viewed with "scorn."¹²⁰ He recognized that were he murdered, it could be by someone who "says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam."¹²¹ "For me," he continued, "Algeria and Islam are something different; they are a body and a soul."¹²² Chergé found "so often" among Muslims "that

org/2023-chicago/cardinal-blase-cupich-addresses-the-conscience-plenary/; Parra-Pirela, "Toward Religious Pluralism," 45–69.

115 John L. Allen Jr., "Courtyard of the Gentiles' Promises Boost to Catholic Pride," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 18, 2011, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/courtyard-gentiles-promises-boost-catholic-pride>.

116 Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, English ed. (Ignatius Press, 2006).

117 Christian de Chergé, "Last Testament," *First Things*, August 1, 1996, foreword, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/08/last-testament>.

118 Margot Patterson, "The Last Monk of Tibhirine: 'God Drove that History,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/last-monk-tibhirine-god-drove-history>; "Execution of French Monks in Algeria, the Details," *Middle East Monitor*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180329-execution-of-french-monks-in-algeria-the-details/>; Pierre Longerey, "Official Version of Events Leading to 1996 Beheading of French Monks Challenged," *Vice*, July 3, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d3988a/official-version-of-events-leading-to-1996-beheading-of-french-monks-challenged>.

119 Chergé, "Last Testament," foreword.

120 Chergé, "Last Testament."

121 Chergé, "Last Testament."

122 Chergé, "Last Testament."

true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother’s knee, my very first Church.”¹²³ To those who would treat his martyrdom as proof that he was “naive or idealistic,” Chergé said it would instead allow him, “if God wills,” to “immerse my gaze in that of the Father.”¹²⁴ This would fulfill his fraternal pluralism—letting him “contemplate with [God] his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.”¹²⁵ Chergé ended his words with an appeal to his foreseen killer, whom he called “the friend of my final moment”: “Yes, for you also I wish this ‘thank you’—and this *adieu*—to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours. And may we find each other, happy ‘good thieves,’ in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen.”¹²⁶

Chergé gave his last testament to fraternal pluralism. In 2018, he and his companions were beatified by the Church, the next-to-final step before canonization as saints.¹²⁷ The men were commemorated in the award-winning 2010 film *Of Gods and Men*.¹²⁸ The two surviving monks relocated to Morocco.¹²⁹ One of them, Father Jean-Pierre Schumacher, later recalled that the monks had gone to Algeria to live alongside the local Muslims, not proselytize them, and had called the army and the Islamist rebels alike their “brothers.”¹³⁰ He remembered their monastery as a divinely consecrated “image of reconciliation” and inspiration for dialogue.¹³¹ An icon, as it were, of the Church’s fraternal pluralism toward non-Christians.

123 Chergé, “Last Testament.”

124 Chergé, “Last Testament.”

125 Chergé, “Last Testament.”

126 Chergé, “Last Testament.” For a translation of Chergé’s spiritual writings, see *Christian de Chergé: Spiritual Writings*, trans. and eds. Christian Krokus and Habib Zanzana, (Orbis, 2025).

127 Patterson, “Last Monk.”

128 Étienne Comar and Xavier Beauvois, *Of Gods and Men*, directed by Xavier Beauvois (2010; Why Not Productions, Armada Films, and France 3 Cinéma), film.

129 Patterson, “Last Monk.”

130 Patterson, “Last Monk.”

131 Patterson, “Last Monk.”

III. Fraternal pluralism means seeking Christian unity

Catholics historically understood other Christians as fellow believers, but suppressing heresy took precedence over tolerating differences. Vatican II shifted the priority to unity and reconciliation. Unique commemorations of saints promoted by Pope Francis illustrate fraternal pluralism toward fellow Christians.

A. *Suppressing heresy took precedence over toleration*

Divisions among Christians are as old as the faith. Saint Luke's Gospel recounts Saint John the Apostle telling Jesus he saw an exorcist "casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow in our company" (Luke 9:49). Jesus criticized John, because "whoever is not against you is for you." (Luke 9:50). John's Gospel, meanwhile, has one of Jesus's last prayers on earth being a petition that believers "may all be one ... that the world may believe that [God the Father] sent me" (John 17:21).

Early Catholics did see other Christians fraternally in some regards. Augustine wrote: "Whether *they* like it or not, those who are outside the church are our brothers."¹³² He urged Catholics to have charity for all, especially those "joined with us in professing faith in Christ, our head," yet "divided from the unity of his body."¹³³ True Christian fraternity would cease only "when *they* no longer say our Father."¹³⁴ *They* say Catholics "are pagans" and try to baptize them anew, but the Church acknowledges *their* baptisms and marriages.¹³⁵ Whenever other Christians seek distance, Catholics reply, "we have everything to do with you, for we are one in our belief."¹³⁶ Augustine hoped that God would someday grant non-Catholic Christians repentance, but until then, Catholics must "show them great love and abundant compassion," praying for them ardently.¹³⁷

However, Augustine also wrote against tolerance. In a letter, he explained that he saw many former Donatist Christians become ardent

132 Augustine, *Discourse on Psalm 32*, <https://www.reason2bcatholic.com/2024/07/09/divine-office-whether-they-like-it-or-not-those-who-are-outside-the-church-are-our-brothers-2/> (emphasis added).

133 Augustine, *Discourse on Psalm 32*.

134 Augustine, *Discourse on Psalm 32*.

135 Augustine, *Discourse on Psalm 32*.

136 Augustine, *Discourse on Psalm 32*.

137 Augustine, *Discourse on Psalm 32*.

Catholics thanks to legal measures against heresy.¹³⁸ This caused him to stop thinking coercion would result only in insincere conversions.¹³⁹ It could set heretics free from social pressure, unexamined customs, and other causes of religious complacency.¹⁴⁰ Christian rulers should “serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause.”¹⁴¹ As for those killed by Catholic coercion, the Church “soothes and cures the sorrow of her maternal heart by the thoughts of the deliverance of” others, “especially when she considers that those who are lost perish by a death which they brought upon themselves.”¹⁴²

Augustine accused the Donatists of violence, which may be important context for this teaching, but it was ultimately understood more globally.¹⁴³ Centuries later, Aquinas described how the Church ostracized those who corrupt Christianity (heretics) or abandon it (apostates).¹⁴⁴ They should “be submitted even to bodily compulsion.”¹⁴⁵ Their very nearness to the Church justified intolerance—they could justly be forced to “fulfil what they have promised” through baptism and “hold what they, at one time, received.”¹⁴⁶ Whenever heresy could be suppressed without harm to believers, this should be done.¹⁴⁷ Heresy objectively deserves death.¹⁴⁸ The Church did extend heretics two warnings, but afterward, the need to protect other Catholics from them was paramount.¹⁴⁹ Aquinas rejects fraternal pluralism here: whatever benefit Catholics receive from dialogue with heretics is insignificant compared to the harm this can do.¹⁵⁰

138 Augustine, *Letter 93*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, trans. J.G. Cunningham, (Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), paras. 16–17, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102093.htm>.

139 Augustine, *Letter 93*, para. 17.

140 Augustine, *Letter 93*, paras. 17–18.

141 Augustine, *Letter 93*, para. 19.

142 Augustine, *Letter 185*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, trans. J.R. King, (Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), para. 32, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102185.htm>.

143 See Peter Iver Kaufman, “Donatism Revisited: Moderates and Militants in Late Antique North Africa,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, no. 1 (2009): 131–142, at 131, 133.

144 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 21, art. 9, resp.

145 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 21, art. 8, resp.

146 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 21, art. 8, resp. and q. 12, art. 2, resp.

147 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 8, ad 1 and ad 4 (citing Augustine, *Letter 185*, para. 32).

148 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 11, art. 3, resp.

149 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 11, art. 3, resp. and art. 4, resp.

150 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 11, art. 3, ad 2.

Augustine and Aquinas wrote long before the Protestant Reformation. Conflicts following it killed many people and reshaped European politics.¹⁵¹ The resulting 1648 Peace of Westphalia let civil rulers decide what kind of Christianity would be practiced in their realms.¹⁵² Despite this norm of homogeneity, coexistence remained a reality in many places, and even an occasional ideal.¹⁵³ Fraternal pluralism, though, remained far off, and the Church's priority remained suppressing heresy.¹⁵⁴ Animosity toward other Christians predominated into the twentieth century.¹⁵⁵

B. Unitatis Redintegratio *centered the search for unity*

This began to change before Vatican II. Catholics in Belgium and the United States undertook political activities with Protestants.¹⁵⁶ Saint Maria Elisabetta Hesselblad, a convert from Swedish Lutheranism, dedicated her vocation as a nun to Christian unity and defended the rights of Protestants, as well as sheltering Jews during the Holocaust.¹⁵⁷ The Second World War ironically again proved a catalyst for fraternal pluralism, though this time, the development came inside the Axis. A concentrated effort at Catholic-Protestant reconciliation began in the 1930s among sympathizers of the

151 See generally Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

152 Nexon, *Struggle for Power*, 265, 280–81.

153 David M. Luebke, *Hometown Religion: Regimes of Coexistence in Early Modern Westphalia* (University of Virginia Press, 2016), 5; Ulrich L. Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 48–67.

154 Udi Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Violent Birth of European Religious Pluralism,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 3 (2019): 511–538, at 511, 516; Lehner, *Catholic Enlightenment*, 68; Leo XIII, *Libertas*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, June 20, 1888, para. 35, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_20061888_libertas.html; Pius IX, *Syllabus*, paras. LXXVIII–LXXIX.

155 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 514, 525; Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, “Ecumenical Pilgrimage toward World Christianity,” *Theological Studies Journal* 76 (2015): 503–530, at 515–16.

156 Henry Haag, “The Political Ideals of Belgian Catholics (1789–1914),” in *Church and Society: Catholic Social and Political Thought and Movements, 1789–1950*, ed. Joseph N. Moody (Arts, Incorporated, 1953), 281–98; Francis Downing, *American Catholicism and the Socio-Economic Evolution in the U.S.A.*, in *Church and Society*, 843–904.

157 Patty Knapp, “St. Maria Elizabeth Hesselblad Witnessed to the Power of the Resurrection,” *National Catholic Register*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/st-maria-elizabeth-hesselblad-witnessed-to-the-power-of-the-resurrection>.

Third Reich who sought a united Christian front against liberal and Jewish influence.¹⁵⁸ Several Catholic theologians thought an ecumenically united Nazi Germany could mirror the Church's search for Christian unity.¹⁵⁹ Ecumenism and anti-Semitism were connected.¹⁶⁰

Some early Catholic ecumenists, including Congar, were anti-Nazis.¹⁶¹ After the war, though, he worked alongside former Nazis and collaborationists.¹⁶² Ecumenists set aside their wartime hostilities to build anti-communist, conservative political organizations, including Christian Democratic parties.¹⁶³ Christian unity became a powerful response to decolonization in mission territories and the perceived threats of resurgent Islam, indigeneity, and dharmic religions.¹⁶⁴ Ecumenism at times aimed at “dismantling some hierarchies in order to bolster others.”¹⁶⁵ In a less defensive posture, ecumenism was also seen as a way of making Christianity more credible (recalling Jesus's prayer in John 17:21 linking unity to persuasiveness) and adapting to a changing world.¹⁶⁶ Senegalese Catholic Alioune Diop opposed colonialism, but saw Christian unity as a move toward fellowship among people of different cultures and religions.¹⁶⁷

Vatican II adopted fraternal pluralism toward non-Catholic Christians. Pope John XXIII invited them to observe the Council.¹⁶⁸ Its key document concerning Christian unity is *Unitatis Redintegratio* (“The Restoration of Unity”).¹⁶⁹ It describes divisions among Christians as unholy, scandalous, and harmful.¹⁷⁰ It credits God for moving believers toward unity.¹⁷¹ *Unitatis*

158 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 512, 520.

159 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 520.

160 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 522.

161 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 523.

162 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 524. For other contemporary Catholic efforts at ecumenism, see Chia, “Ecumenical Pilgrimage,” 516–17.

163 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 512.

164 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 513, 530–31.

165 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 513.

166 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 528, 532–33.

167 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 531.

168 Chia, Chia, “Ecumenical Pilgrimage 518.

169 Second Vatican Council, *Decree on Ecumenism* *Unitatis Redintegratio* (hereinafter *Unitatis Redintegratio*), Decree, Vatican Library, November 21, 1964, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

170 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 1.

171 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 1.

Redintegratio confirmed the Catholic Church’s special role.¹⁷² However, it also accepted partial responsibility for divisions and decreed that Christians who are not born Catholic are not culpable for the fractures.¹⁷³ The Church recognized that Catholic failures have done harm.¹⁷⁴ The Council cited Augustine to say Catholics love “as brothers” their fellow Christians, who are in imperfect communion with the Church through baptism.¹⁷⁵

Vatican II then turned to the gifts other Christians hold. They share in the Scriptures, God’s grace, the Holy Spirit’s gifts, and liturgical rites that foster holiness and salvation.¹⁷⁶ The Council urged that “Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage” found in other communities.¹⁷⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio* said anything “truly Christian” can aid Catholics’ own faith.¹⁷⁸ It identified as preconditions for fraternal pluralism Catholic self-denial, humility, gentleness, and “brotherly generosity.”¹⁷⁹ Catholics should “get to know the outlook,” beliefs, history, and lives of other Christians.¹⁸⁰ Bishops should authorize suitable people to engage in formal ecumenical dialogue.¹⁸¹ Foreshadowing the move by Pope Francis discussed below, the document also invited the Church to honor the martyrdoms of non-Catholics.¹⁸²

Unitatis Redintegratio has proven influential. At the end of Vatican II, Pope Saint Paul VI invalidated the 1054 ruling declaring Eastern Orthodox Christians to be in schism from the Catholic Church.¹⁸³ His pressure led Spain, Portugal, and Italy to broaden religious liberty.¹⁸⁴ Vatican appointees now work at the World Council of Churches, and Catholics have held formal international dialogues with most other large Christian communities.¹⁸⁵

172 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 2.

173 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 3.

174 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 4.

175 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 3 (citing Augustine, *Letter 93*).

176 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 3.

177 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 4.

178 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 4.

179 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 7.

180 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 9.

181 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 9.

182 *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 4.

183 Chia, “Ecumenical Pilgrimage,” 518.

184 Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants,” 535–36.

185 Chia, “Ecumenical Pilgrimage,” 519–20; see generally Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, 20th Anniversary ed., (Lutheran World Federation, 2019); John Long, “A

C. Pope Francis showed fraternal pluralism by commemorating saints

Fraternal pluralism has also inspired spiritual developments.¹⁸⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio* said other Christians' patrimony could aid Catholic spirituality, and it specifically invited commemoration of saints across Christian divides. Pope Francis took both calls seriously. Much of his focus was on martyrs. In his homily concluding 2015's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, he preached on fraternal pluralism, recalling that Jesus had "no problem dealing with Samaritans, who were considered by the Jews to be heretics, schismatics, others."¹⁸⁷ Christians should likewise welcome encounters with people who are different from them.¹⁸⁸ Jesus said God must be worshipped in "spirit and truth," so Christians must set aside divisions.¹⁸⁹ Christian unity does not come from debate and "subtle theological discussions"; believers will still be "discussing" these matters when Jesus returns at the end of time.¹⁹⁰ Instead, Christians should trust the Holy Spirit to lead them to mutual encounter and even "challenge."¹⁹¹ The mystery of divine love is the ultimate ground of Christian unity, and it is stronger than any divisions.¹⁹² Echoing twentieth-century missionary ecumenism, Pope Francis also said "proselytism and competition" weaken Christian evangelization and witness.¹⁹³

He closed by turning to "our martyrs, the martyrs of today."¹⁹⁴ They are "killed because they are Christians."¹⁹⁵ Those who kill them "make no distinction" between Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and others.¹⁹⁶ Christians would do well to recognize "the ecumenism of blood."¹⁹⁷ In 2023, Pope Francis made that recognition concrete. He placed on the Catholic

Century of Catholic-Orthodox Relations," *One*, July 2005, <https://cnewa.org/magazine/a-century-of-catholic-orthodox-relations/>.

186 See Matthew P. Cavedon, "How Is Eastern Christianity Affecting Pope Francis's Priorities?," *Canopy Forum*, January 26, 2023, <https://canopyforum.org/2023/01/26/how-is-eastern-christianity-affecting-pope-franciss-priorities/>.

187 Francis, "An Ecumenism of Blood," *L'Osservatore Romano*, January 30, 2015, 8, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/ecumenism-of-blood-7277>.

188 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

189 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

190 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

191 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

192 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

193 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

194 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

195 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

196 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

197 Francis, "Ecumenism of Blood," 8.

liturgical calendar a commemoration of twenty-one Egyptian Christians martyred by Islamic State militants in Libya.¹⁹⁸ These martyrs were not Catholic, but Coptic Orthodox.¹⁹⁹ Pope Francis added their names during a meeting with their own Pope Tawadros II, “as a sign of the spiritual communion that unites our two churches.”²⁰⁰

Pope Francis has acknowledged other Christians as models for Catholics, too. He named as a doctor of the Church—the highest theological honor—a medieval Armenian Apostolic Christian, Saint Gregory of Narek.²⁰¹ Addressing the U.S. Congress, he commended Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.²⁰² As Vatican II invited, fraternal pluralism toward other Christians is stimulating Catholic spirituality.

IV. Fraternal pluralism means honoring personal conscience

Fraternal pluralism applies even when the Church approaches Catholics who reject its teachings. This article’s next section addresses the more complicated issue of perceived internal dissent, but the present section explores a different issue, politics. Historically, the Church accepted limits on the coercion of those who disagreed with its teachings and taught that even an incorrect conscience must be respected. Vatican II strengthened these doctrines by rejecting all civil coercion in religious matters. This had an immediate impact in Massachusetts, as Cardinal Cushing endorsed liberalization of birth-control laws. Fraternal pluralism means respect for the conscience of Catholics who part ways with the Church.

198 Cindy Wooden, “United in Prayer: Pope Adds Coptic Orthodox Martyrs to Catholic Calendar,” *Catholic News Service*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/united-prayer-pope-adds-coptic-orthodox-martyrs-catholic-calendar>.

199 Wooden, “United in Prayer.”

200 Wooden, “United in Prayer.”

201 Kevin J. Jones and Ann Schneible, “Meet St. Gregory of Narek, the Newest Doctor of the Church,” *National Catholic Register*, February 24, 2015, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/meet-st-gregory-of-narek-the-newest-doctor-of-the-church>.

202 “Read the Full Text of Pope Francis’ Address to US Congress,” *Catholic News Agency*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/32682/read-the-full-text-of-pope-francis-address-to-us-congress>.

A. The Church accepted limited government and the primacy of conscience

Catholicism has long supported limits on government coercion and insisted that conscience is binding, even if it goes astray. The earliest Christians assumed division between the Church's spiritual jurisdiction and the state's ability to use physical coercion. Jesus taught that a sinner who refused to obey the Church's judgment should be treated like a non-believer or civil servant—which assumes room in civil society for dissidents (Matthew 18:15-17). He told people to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but to God what belongs to God (Matthew 22:21). Likewise, Paul ordered that a man guilty of incest be handed over to pagan Roman authorities “for the destruction of his flesh” (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). The first Christians were persecuted by the state—they were not its sovereigns.

Catholics eventually gained political power, of course. Even at the height of the Middle Ages, though, intellectuals continued to endorse limits on government force. Aquinas supported bans on blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy, as discussed above in Part III.A. However, he also favored other personal freedoms. He understood governments as imitating God's divine rule of the universe, but God tolerates some evils for the sake of greater goods and to prevent greater evils.²⁰³ He cited Augustine for the idea that outlawing prostitution would lead only to more dangerous lust.²⁰⁴ Human laws should refrain from attacking every vice and acknowledge that most people are imperfect.²⁰⁵ Human laws should “chiefly” prohibit vices that harm other people and would destroy society, like murder and theft.²⁰⁶ Doing more than this may make people resent the law altogether.²⁰⁷ Aquinas also accepted good-faith disagreements among Catholics as normal when not concerning “things necessary to salvation” or arising from “undue obstinacy.”²⁰⁸ Governments should quell civil strife and sedition, as well as outright heresy, but avoid undue paternalism.²⁰⁹

While not accepting civil religious liberty, Aquinas held conscience in great respect, even where it led Catholics into error. Human reason is

203 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 11, resp.

204 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 11, resp.

205 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 96, art. 2, resp.

206 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 96, art. 2, resp.

207 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 96, art. 2, ad 2.

208 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 37, art. 1, resp.

209 See Matthew P. Cavedon, “Early Stirrings of Modern Liberty in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Politics and Religion* 16, no. 4 (2023): 567–584, at 572–73.

fallible.²¹⁰ Still, it puts judgments forward as required by truth, and God is true.²¹¹ Therefore, “to scorn the dictate of reason”—even where it is objectively wrong—“is to scorn the commandment of God.”²¹² If people are negligent in forming their consciences, they are liable for that.²¹³ However, innocent ignorance is also possible, and someone who honestly follows a mistaken conscience is morally excused.²¹⁴

Jesus rejected violence, set the outer bounds of Christian dispute as treating someone like an outsider—and modeled radical love for outsiders. Paul urged Christians to accept civil government, not impose physical coercion through the Church itself. Aquinas respected civil liberty in some regards and revered conscience. Vatican II wove these strands into an endorsement of religious and conscientious civil liberty.

B. *Dignitas Humanae confirmed respect for dissenting conscience*

One important contributor to the Council’s key text, *Dignitatis Humanae*, was Father John Courtney Murray.²¹⁵ An American Jesuit, Murray loved his country’s religious freedom, believing it to be deeply consistent with Catholic thought.²¹⁶ Although the American Founders were mostly Protestants and Deists, they drew on the Western tradition of freedom, which was itself inspired by Catholicism.²¹⁷ America recovered that tradition in enshrining religious liberty, and Murray worked to recover it for the Church.²¹⁸ His role

210 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, I-II, q. 19, art. 5.

211 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, I-II, q. 19, art. 5, ad 1.

212 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, I-II, q. 19, art. 5, ad 2.

213 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, I-II, q. 19, art. 6, resp.

214 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, I-II, q. 19, art. 6, resp.

215 See generally Joseph A. Komonchak, “The American Contribution to *Dignitatis Humanae*: The Role of John Courtney Murray, S.J.,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24, no. 1 (2006): 1–20.

216 See John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Sheed & Ward, 1960).

217 Kenneth L. Grasso, “‘Building Better Than They Knew’: John Courtney Murray on Catholicism, Modernity, and the American Proposition,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 4, no. 1 (2007): 163–198, at 190–91.

218 Komonchak, “American Contribution,” 18; see also Benedict XVI, “Address to the Roman Curia Offering them His Christmas Greetings,” address, Vatican website, December 22, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html (“The Second Vatican Council ... has recovered the deepest patrimony of

is more evidence of Congar’s theory that doctrinal development is driven partly by “historical contingencies.”²¹⁹

Dignitatis Humanae prized conscience. It described people as able to “act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty.”²²⁰ In turn, people demand freedom concerning “the quest for the values proper to the human spirit,” especially in religious matters.²²¹ This reflects conscience’s duty “to embrace the truth . . . and to hold fast to it.”²²² This obligation comes only as the truth “makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.”²²³ People have an inviolable right to immunity from human religious coercion.²²⁴ This divinely granted liberty protects beliefs and actions, both individual and collective.²²⁵

Reason and conscience are formed for right judgments through fraternal pluralism—“with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.”²²⁶ Once people believe they have discovered truth, they must personally commit to it and integrate it into their lives through their consciences.²²⁷ This duty further justifies fraternal pluralism, as people naturally seek to share their religious beliefs with others.²²⁸ Further, governments should foster fraternal pluralism by favoring religion.²²⁹ This can only properly be done while recognizing human freedom and equality.²³⁰

the Church. By so doing she can be conscious of being in full harmony with the teaching of Jesus himself as well as with the Church of the martyrs of all time.”).

219 Haddad, “St. Bonaventure’s Medieval Theory.”

220 Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae: On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious* (hereinafter *Dignitatis Humanae*), Declaration on Religious Freedom, Vatican Library, December 7, 1965, para. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

221 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 1.

222 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 1.

223 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 1.

224 *Dignitatis Humanae*, paras. 1–2.

225 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 2.

226 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 3.

227 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 3.

228 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 3.

229 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 3.

230 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 6.

Responsibility for fraternal pluralism falls to “the whole citizenry, upon social groups ... and upon the Church and other religious communities.”²³¹

Fraternal pluralism extends even to those who dissent from the Church. No one can be socially coerced into remaining in a religious community.²³² Catholicism involves “reasonable and free submission of faith.”²³³ Because God wants service “in spirit and in truth,” people are “bound in conscience but they stand under no compulsion.”²³⁴ Fraternal pluralism and respect for conscience are divinely ordered, even though Catholics have sometimes forgotten this.²³⁵ Religious liberty is a necessary foundation for the growing fraternity of people of different nations, religions, and cultures, and it is required out of respect for conscience.²³⁶

C. Cardinal Cushing showed dissenters fraternal pluralism

Dignitatis Humanae had a direct and immediate impact on Massachusetts’s legalization of artificial birth control. In 1948, Cardinal Cushing persuaded voters to reject a contraception-legalization referendum.²³⁷ In 1962, he reiterated his stance.²³⁸ A year later, though, he began to move toward fraternal pluralism. He granted that there was “much that is good” in criticism of Church doctrine by the Catholic physician John Rock, who invented hormonal birth control.²³⁹ The Cardinal disagreed with Rock’s theological arguments, but expressed hope that his policy proposals “could contribute to the establishment of peace in our pluralistic society.”²⁴⁰ Instead of condemning Rock, Cushing said people like him could help the Church develop its own thinking through dialogue.²⁴¹

231 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 6.

232 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 6.

233 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 10.

234 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 11.

235 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 12.

236 *Dignitatis Humanae*, para. 15.

237 Seth Meehan, “From Patriotism to Pluralism: How Catholics Initiated the Repeal of Birth Control Restrictions in Massachusetts,” *Catholic Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (2010): 470–498, at 475–76.

238 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 477.

239 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 479.

240 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 479 (citation omitted); see also John Rock, *The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor’s Proposals to End the Battle over Birth Control* (Knopf, 1963).

241 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 479.

Cushing stopped fighting liberalization.²⁴² He said he would not “enter into a political phase of this subject” because he respected “individual religious consciences.”²⁴³ Other Catholics also urged the Church to take this stance for the sake of pluralism.²⁴⁴ At the end of 1964, Cushing advised Massachusetts’s other bishops that the Church would accept legalization, based on “respect for the varied consciences present in a pluralistic society.”²⁴⁵

Cushing publicly endorsed legalization starting in 1965.²⁴⁶ The following year, a Catholic professor at Boston College led the Planned Parenthood League’s successful legislative lobbying.²⁴⁷ Cushing concluded that Catholics “do not seek to impose by law their moral views on other members of society,” recognizing that the modern Christian “lives in a society of differing beliefs, a pluralist society,” and so he “must be prepared and ready for friendly discussion with those whose views of life and its meaning are different than his own.”²⁴⁸ Once *Dignitatis Humanae* was released, Cushing backed a specific legalization bill.²⁴⁹ He had Murray draft the Archdiocese’s language on the issue.²⁵⁰

Was this episode only the crescendo of 1960s liberalism? To be sure, the consensus that legalized birth control in Massachusetts did not last long. Internally, the Church reaffirmed the immorality of birth control in 1968.²⁵¹ Cushing died in 1970.²⁵² Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized

242 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 482.

243 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 481 (citation omitted).

244 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 484, 486–87.

245 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 487.

246 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 470–71, 476, 497.

247 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 470–71, 476, 497.

248 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 471, 476, 494 (citations omitted).

249 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 476.

250 Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 476.

251 Paul VI, “*Humanae Vitae* on the Regulation of Birth,” encyclical letter, Vatican library, July 25, 1968, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html; see also James T. Bretzke, “Moral Theology and the Paradigm Shift of Vatican II,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, eds. Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (Oxford University Press, 2023), 421–22. Bretzke notes Pope Paul VI’s rejection of the contrary recommendation of a papal study commission.

252 See Violet Hurst, “The Life of Cardinal Richard Cushing,” *The Pilot*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.thebostonpilot.com/article.php?ID=188790>.

abortion nationwide in *Roe v. Wade*.²⁵³ This catalyzed the pro-life movement. While the movement did not argue for the liberalization of laws governing a perceived private vice, neither did it retreat from fraternal pluralism. The movement was itself made up of Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Jews, and other Americans, representing different religious commitments and political persuasions.²⁵⁴ It also argued from grounds compatible with pluralism, asserting that fighting abortion was a matter of defending human rights, not of restricting conscience for the sake of exclusive Catholic concerns.²⁵⁵

Catholics did not abandon their commitment to civil respect for religious and conscientious liberty. In a context the Church considers more similar to contraception than to abortion, homosexual activity—a private sin, rather than violence against another—the Vatican has criticized government bans since 2008.²⁵⁶ The Church has also condemned “unjust discrimination” on the basis of sexual orientation since the time of Pope John Paul II.²⁵⁷ Theological dissent can meet with dialogue and encounter

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- 253 *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), overruled by *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, 597 U.S. 215 (2022).
- 254 Daniel K. Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement Before Roe v. Wade* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–4, 8.
- 255 Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 4–9; see also Matthew P. Cavedon, “The Admissibility of Christian Pro-Life Politics,” *Canopy Forum*, October 19, 2022, <https://canopyforum.org/2022/10/19/the-admissibility-of-christian-pro-life-politics/>.
- 256 “Pope Francis Says Homosexuality Is a Sin But Not a Crime and Criticizes ‘Unjust’ Anti-Gay Laws,” *Associated Press*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/pope-francis-homosexuality-not-crime-criticizes-unjust-anti-gay-laws-rcna67352>; Celso Perez, “Zero Tolerance: Why Catholics Must Condemn Anti-Gay Violence,” *America*, November 25, 2014, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/zero-tolerance> (Celso surveys bishops’ worldwide advocacy on such laws—some of it in favor, but much of it opposed); compare “Conference President Criticizes Supreme Court Decision,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 23, 2003, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2003/conference-president-criticizes-supreme-court-decision> (noting criticism of U.S. legalization by then-Bishop Wilton Gregory) with David Crary, “Social Issues a Priority for Cardinal-to-Be Wilton Gregory,” *Associated Press*, Oct. 30, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/religion-race-and-ethnicity-slavery-social-issues-sexual-abuse-by-clergy-6c0f6e6db26050f7499229557ebf9b6a> (noting, decades later, that Gregory has “drawn notice for his relatively inclusive approach for LGBT Catholics”).
- 257 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita: On Human Dignity*, Declaration, Vatican website, April 2, 2024, para. 55, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html (quoting *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), para. 2358); cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the

as well. As archbishop of Munich, Joseph Ratzinger reportedly agreed with the Vatican's decision to condemn the theologian Hans Küng.²⁵⁸ As Pope Benedict XVI, he dined with Küng, and the two issued a joint statement about ethics, science, and faith.²⁵⁹

Fraternal pluralism has proven possible even in the context of blasphemy. After terrorists killed a provocative group of French satirists in the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Paris archbishop Cardinal André Vingt-Trois affirmed the right to criticize the Church.²⁶⁰ (Regrettably, Pope Francis both condemned the attack and said there is no right to “make fun of faith,” implying that those who do so may “get a punch in the nose.”²⁶¹) French Catholic commentator Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry quipped: “A century ago, the cardinal’s predecessor would undoubtedly have thought that *Charlie Hebdo* should be shut down as a measure of public safety. And a few centuries before that, his predecessor might have put [its authors] on the rack.”²⁶² Gobry continued that he appreciated some of *Charlie Hebdo*’s humor and, because of *Dignitatis Humanae*,

as much as I am a man of Christ and a man of the church—
because I am these things—I am also a man of Enlightenment
liberalism. That is why I see an attack against people with
whom I disagree on almost everything as an attack on my
values, on what I believe in and cherish.²⁶³

Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” letter, Vatican website, October 1, 1986, para. 10, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html (“The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.”).

- 258 Richard McBrien, “Pope’s Meeting with Father Küng Is Significant,” *Catholic Courier*, December 21, 2009, <https://catholiccourier.com/articles/popes-meeting-with-father-kung-is-significant/>.
- 259 McBrien, “Pope’s Meeting.”
- 260 See Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, “How the Catholic Church Made its Peace with Charlie Hebdo,” *The Week*, January 11, 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/532003/how-catholic-church-made-peace-charlie-hebdo>.
- 261 Elizabeth Dias, “Pope Francis Speaks Out on Charlie Hebdo: ‘One Cannot Make Fun of Faith,’” *Time*, January 15, 2015, <https://time.com/3668875/pope-francis-charlie-hebdo/>.
- 262 Gobry, “How the Catholic Church.”
- 263 Gobry, “How the Catholic Church”; see also Rhonheimer, *Common Good*, 307–08. Rhonheimer writes: “Christian secularity, as I understand it, means to develop one’s Christian identity and to realize one’s Christian vocation ... by fully accepting—informed and enlightened by historical experience—this secularity as a

Yes, fraternal pluralism is more than mere civil tolerance, but politics is one way of encountering others and so part of the “Christian struggle to learn to love.”²⁶⁴ Love fails when politics devolves into bullying, demonization, exclusion, destruction, and arrogance.²⁶⁵ Fraternal pluralism means dialogue, self-examination, and solidarity across differences.²⁶⁶ It requires a “modern Christian citizen for whom . . . pluralism is not simply nuisance or even outrage, but who feels at home in it.”²⁶⁷ It happens when the Church does not merely acquiesce to changes in society, but defends legitimate freedom for those who differ from its teachings. Catholics respect dissenters’ religious liberty and conscientious rights.²⁶⁸ They practice fraternal pluralism within society as a whole.

V. How might fraternal pluralism grow?

How might fraternal pluralism develop going forward? Retreat from it is unlikely. So is its translation into a model for internal Church governance. However, Pope Francis used it as a model for rethinking humanity’s place in creation.

A. Retreat from fraternal pluralism is unlikely

Some believe Vatican II must be reinterpreted in a radically narrower way, but this is unlikely. Several antiliberal Catholic “integralists” read *Dignitatis Humanae* as letting governments forbid the preaching and public practice of

political value and considering this acceptance as a [sic] integral part of one’s self-understanding as a Christian.”

264 Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 197; Rhonheimer, *Common Good*, 290–91 (urging that Catholics offer politics “the wisdom of our faith and tradition” in a way that respects moral pluralism).

265 Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 198.

266 Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 198; Rhonheimer, *Common Good*, 335 (“[The political value of autonomy . . . also includes a moral substance, of precisely a *political* morality. It is moreover the expression of an ideal of social life, of coexistence, and of cooperation among citizens, and even, especially in the case of religious freedom, of a specific conception of the human being and of the relation of his freedom to truth.”).

267 Rhonheimer, *Common Good*, 314.

268 See Tom Bailey and Michael D. Driessen, “Engaging Post-Secularism: Rethinking Catholic Politics in Italy,” *Constellations* 24, no. 2 (2017): 232–244, at 238–39.

non-Catholic religions.²⁶⁹ Others support civil bans on heresy and restricting citizenship to baptized Christians.²⁷⁰ Still others endorse religious liberty for non-Christians as a matter of principle, but religious toleration among baptized Christians only as a matter of practicality.²⁷¹ Integralists may rely on Vatican II's focus on *governmental* limits, seeing them as implying that *the Church* retains coercive power in reserve.²⁷² They also emphasize history.²⁷³ Contrary interpretations of Vatican II—including by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI—have focused instead on freedom, human dignity, and the Gospel, as well as the “combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels” undergirding doctrinal development.²⁷⁴

Which side of this sometimes-esoteric debate is stronger textually is moot.²⁷⁵ As leading integralist Pater Edmund Waldstein has noted, *Dignitatis Humanae*'s straightforward text has caused the Church to enthusiastically support religious liberty.²⁷⁶ For seven papacies over the course of six decades, the Church has practiced fraternal pluralism. As Aquinas argued in addressing non-Christians' rights: “The custom of the Church has very great authority and ought to be jealously observed in all things,” and “we ought to abide by the authority of the Church rather than by that of an Augustine or a Jerome or of any doctor whatever.”²⁷⁷ The Church boasts of its fraternal

269 Thomas Storck, “Recent Discussions of Religious Liberty,” *The Josias*, June 3, 2021, <https://thejosias.com/2021/06/03/recent-discussions-of-religious-liberty/>.

270 Xavier Focroulle Ménard and Anna Su, “Liberalism, Catholic Integralism, and the Question of Religious Freedom,” *BYU Law Review* 47, no. 4 (2022): 1171–1219, at 1207 (citing Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Editiones Scholasticae, 2020), 116–17).

271 Thomas Pink, “The Right to Religious Liberty and the Coercion of Belief: A Note on *Dignitatis Humanae*,” in *Reason, Morality, and Law: The Philosophy of John Finnis*, eds. John Keown and Robert P. George (Oxford University Press, 2013), 435, 441.

272 Thomas Pink, “*Dignitatis Humanae*: Continuity after Leo XIII,” in *Dignitatis Humanae Colloquium* (Dialogos Institute, 2017), 144–5.

273 See generally Edmund Waldstein, “Religious Liberty in the Light of Tradition,” in *Integralism and the Common Good: Selected Essays from The Josias: The Two Powers*, vol. 2, ed. P. Edmund Waldstein (Angelico Press, 2022), 255–89.

274 Benedict XVI, “Address”: John Paul II, “Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization,” address, Vatican website, October 5, 1995, paras. 12, 15, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_05101995_address-to-uno.html.

275 Contrast Kevin Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 31 (assuming the integralist reading to be plausible) with Rhonheimer, *Common Good*, 429–54 (criticizing it).

276 Vallier, *All the Kingdoms*, 289.

277 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 10, art. 12, resp.

pluralism and practices it across different settings. Fraternal pluralism represents the approach of the Gospels, and it has foundations in leading Catholic authorities. The Church adopted it after long experience with more hostile approaches. It is here to stay.

B. Adoption of fraternal pluralism internally is unlikely

Some critics would have the Church embrace fraternal pluralism as an internal model.²⁷⁸ This is unlikely, too. The most prominent effort is Germany’s Synodal Way, an attempted form of power-sharing where the laity can override bishops’ decisions.²⁷⁹ Established in 2019, the Synodal Way has sought to redefine Catholic approaches to doctrine, sexuality, and the sacraments.²⁸⁰ It has endorsed women’s ordination, blessings for same-sex unions, and the reexamination of priestly celibacy.²⁸¹

Pope Francis opposed the Synodal Way, describing it as elitist, divisive, and counterfeit Protestantism.²⁸² He approved a ruling that it lacks governing authority.²⁸³ He also rejected other varieties of internal pluralism. In 2021, he ended fourteen years of widespread availability of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass.²⁸⁴ His rationale was “to promote the concord and unity of the

278 Gerald A. Arbuckle, “The Synodal Way: Catholic Identity or Identities?,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 101 (2024): 86–103, at 100–2.

279 Jonathan Liedl, “German Synodal Way Approves Same-Sex Blessings, Lay Preaching, and Reexamination of Priestly Celibacy,” *Catholic News Agency*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253842/german-synodal-way-approves-same-sex-blessings-lay-preaching-and-reexamination-of-priestly-celibacy>.

280 “The German Synodal Way: A CNA Explainer,” *Catholic News Agency*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247992/the-german-synodal-way-a-cna-explainer>.

281 Liedl, “German Synodal Way.”

282 Hannah Brockhaus, “The Vatican’s Statements on the German Synodal Way: a Timeline,” *Catholic News Agency*, November 21, 2023, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/256069/the-vatican-s-statements-on-the-german-synodal-way-a-timeline>.

283 AC Wimmer, “Pope Francis Decries German Synodal Way as ‘Neither Helpful Nor Serious,’” *National Catholic Register*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/pope-francis-decries-german-synodal-way-as-neither-helpful-nor-serious>.

284 “Traditional Latin Mass Restrictions: Here’s What You Need to Know,” *Catholic News Agency*, December 18, 2021, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/249927/pope-francis-traditional-latin-mass-restrictions>.

Church.”²⁸⁵ There was irony in this—Pope Benedict XVI made that liturgy available precisely for the sake of “avoiding discord and favouring the unity of the whole Church.”²⁸⁶ Commenting on U.S. critics of his papacy, Pope Francis said there “is a very strong reactionary attitude” in the American Church, one that lives “by ideologies” and not Catholic doctrine.²⁸⁷

Pope Francis showed more openness to internal pluralism he deemed inclusive. He oversaw a “Synod on Synodality,” which urged “openness to listening and accompanying all.”²⁸⁸ The Synod noted the need to listen to “people who feel marginalized or excluded from the Church because of their marriage status, identity or sexuality,” and help them “feel safe, be heard and respected, without fear of feeling judged.”²⁸⁹ It warned against governing in a way that is “oppressive rather than liberating.”²⁹⁰ Fraternity was central to the Synod. Additionally, moral and philosophical difference was a setting where Pope Francis seemed more comfortable with internal pluralism. He did not criticize American Jesuit James Martin’s promotion of LGBT acceptance.²⁹¹ He wrote that Catholics “are capable of carrying out

285 Francis, *Traditionis Custodes: On the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970*, Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio*, Vatican website, July 16, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html.

286 Benedict XVI, *Summorum Pontificium: On the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970*, Apostolic Letter Issued *Motu Proprio*, Vatican website, July 7, 2007, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html; see also Francis X. Rocca, “The Pope Lets a Thousand Liturgies Bloom,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2009, electronic edition, W13 (noting that Benedict XVI let converts from Anglicanism keep “many of their traditional prayers and hymns in their own specially designed dioceses”).

287 Cindy Wooden, “Pope Says There Is a ‘Strong Reactionary’ Element in U.S. Catholic Church,” *Catholic News Service*, August 28, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/pope-says-there-strong-reactionary-element-us-catholic-church>.

288 XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report* (hereinafter *Synodal Church in Mission*), report, Vatican Website, October 4–29, 2023, pt. 1, sec. 1, para. (e), <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

289 *Synodal Church in Mission*, pt. 3, sec. 16, para. (h).

290 *Synodal Church in Mission*, pt. 3, sec. 16, para. (k).

291 “Pope Sends Letter to Fr. James Martin on Homosexuality and Sin,” *Vatican News*, January 28, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-01/pope-francis-letter-james-martin-homosexuality-sin-lgbtq.html>; cf. Damiano Migliorini, “LGBT Catholics: A Paradigmatic Case of Intra-Confessional Pluralism,” *Theology and Sexuality* 25 (2019): 111–130, at 112 (noting “the often-underestimated diversity

their own discernment in complex situations,” whereas the Church is “called to form consciences, not to replace them.”²⁹² Pope Francis appeared to want openness to difference, but not as to differing opinions on openness itself.

How Pope Leo XIV will receive and transform this legacy remains to be seen. Pope John XXIII affirmed that within the Church, the rule should be “in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.”²⁹³ This is easier posited than defined, but it will evidently remain the Church’s rule.²⁹⁴ Fraternity toward outsiders means generosity, but within a family, it implies more discipline, unity, and correction (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1).²⁹⁵

C. *Development of fraternal pluralism toward other creatures is underway*

Fraternal pluralism has already developed outward to yet remoter margins. Pope Francis was well-known for his particularly close association with the margins of *human* society.²⁹⁶ He took fraternal pluralism even further

and pluralism that exist within every religion, confession, and community (not to mention theological faculties”).

- 292 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican website, March 19, 2016, para. 37, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.
- 293 John XXIII, Ad Petri Cathedram: *On Truth, Unity and Peace, in a Spirit of Charity*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, June 29, 1959, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_29061959_ad-petri.html, accord *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 4 (“All in the Church must preserve unity in essentials. But let all, according to the gifts they have received enjoy a proper freedom, in their various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in their different liturgical rites, and even in their theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail.”).
- 294 Cf. Meehan, “Patriotism to Pluralism,” 494. Meehan quotes Murray, “Preface,” in *We Hold These Truths*, x (writing that pluralism “implies a disagreement and dissension within a community. But it also implies a community within which there must be agreement and consensus”).
- 295 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, June 29, 2009, para. 2, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (“[C]harity has been and continues to be misconstrued and emptied of meaning, with the consequent risk of being misinterpreted, detached from ethical living and, in any event, undervalued ... Hence the need to link charity with truth ...”).
- 296 See, e.g., Andrea Riccardi, *To the Margins: Pope Francis and the Mission of the Church* (Orbis, 2018).

than this. In *Laudato Si'*, he noted how his namesake, Francis of Assisi, believed “each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection.”²⁹⁷ Fraternity is feeling “intimately united with all that exists,” and it inspires “sobriety and care” toward other beings and created things.²⁹⁸ Every creature is “the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world.”²⁹⁹ Humans should contemplate “how everything is interconnected.”³⁰⁰ Holiness develops when a person “enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures”—including “brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”³⁰¹

Fraternal pluralism possibly stretches still further. Jesuit José Funes, then-director of the Vatican Observatory, said an alien might well qualify as an “extraterrestrial brother.”³⁰²

Conclusion

Every norm is built on narratives.³⁰³ Fraternal pluralism has grown from Catholic tradition as interpreted authoritatively by Vatican II and in lived examples.³⁰⁴ It has supplanted earlier hostility and coercion. While the Church is unlikely to adopt it as a rule for internal governance, it remains a resource for more radical encounters with humans—maybe even non-humans. Catholics are taught by the Church to rejoice that others are brothers and sisters all.

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297 *Laudato Si'*, para. 11.

298 *Laudato Si'*, para. 11.

299 *Laudato Si'*, para. 77.

300 *Laudato Si'*, para. 138.

301 *Laudato Si'*, paras. 92, 240; cf. Matthew P. Cavedon, “Dominion and Stewardship: Imaging God in Creation,” *Canopy Forum*, May 22, 2025, <https://canopyforum.org/2025/05/22/dominion-and-stewardship-imaging-god-in-creation/>.

302 “Vatican Astronomer Says If Aliens Exist, They May Not Need Redemption,” *Catholic News Service*, May 22, 2008, <https://catholicreview.org/vatican-astronomer-says-if-aliens-exist-they-may-not-need-redemption/>.

303 Robert M. Cover, “Foreword to the Supreme Court 1982 Term: *Nomos* and *Narrative*,” *Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 1 (1983): 4–68, at 4.

304 Haddad, “St. Bonaventure’s Medieval Theory.”

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ARTICLE

A Kantian-Type Moral Argument for Postulatory Religious Pluralism: Elements of Christianity and Sufism as Postulated Religious Beliefs in Contemporary Western Culture

Joseph G. Prud'homme

Abstract

Moral arguments for the existence of God have been a recurring form of apologetic. Perhaps the most widely known moral argument—at least among philosophers and theologians—is that of Immanuel Kant. In this work, I develop a form of moral argument that shares the logical structure of Kant's version, or what I call a 'Kantian-type' moral argument. The argument I set forth vindicates the rationality, within a Kantian framework, of belief in a supremely moral creator as that belief is internalized from within a variety of theistic traditions. I develop this claim by reference to how core aspects of Christianity and Sufism cohere with a Kantian-type moral argument for a theistic God. Lastly, I show the appeal of this argument for key elements in contemporary Western culture.

Keywords

Immanuel Kant, moral argument for God, Christianity, Sufism, practical postulates

Introduction

Contemporary Western nations have seen a significant decline in the professed belief in God. In the United States, although professions of atheism and agnosticism remain relatively rare, the rate of those identifying as either atheist or agnostic has doubled in the past two decades.¹ The rate of growth is even greater throughout Canada and Western Europe.² As sociologist Ryan Burge remarks, this trend indicates a culturally significant openness to atheism and agnosticism across Western societies.³ Writing in substantial measure in response to these developments, philosophers of faith have advanced new defenses of belief in God in our era of mounting religious skepticism. Prominent scholars have renewed the cosmological argument,⁴ the teleological argument,⁵ and the ontological argument.⁶

Renewal has also been seen in versions of the moral argument. In their important book, *The Moral Argument: A History*, David Baggett and Jerry Walls demonstrate how the moral argument has taken, and continues to take, a variety of forms.⁷ Within the analytic philosophy of religion, one of the most common is an ontological expression of the argument, one that addresses moral realism and asks which metaphysical view—theism or materialism—best coheres with moral realism.⁸ Other forms include the idea that if morality represents a command, then morality requires, by logical

- 1 J.M. Twenge, R.A. Sherman, J.J. Exline, J.B. Grubbs, “Declines in American Adults’ Religious Participation and Beliefs, 1972–2014” *Sage Open* 6, no. 1 (2016): 1–13.
- 2 See for example Stephen Bullivant, “Europe’s Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014–16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops,” Report of the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society (St. Mary’s University Twickenham and Institut Catholique de Paris, 2018), <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf>.
- 3 Yonat Shimron, “More Americans are Becoming Secular, Poll Says,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/12/17/secular-pew-poll/>.
- 4 See Robert J Spitzer, ed., *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 2010).
- 5 See C. Stephens Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford, 2012).
- 6 See for example Alexander Pruss, “The Ontological Argument and the Motivational Centres of Lives,” *Religious Studies* 46 (2010): 233–249.
- 7 David Baggett and Jerry Walls, *The Moral Argument: A History* (Oxford, 2019).
- 8 David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford, 2011).

deduction, a certain kind of moral lawgiver.⁹ A further version addresses the phenomenon of human awareness of moral facts and argues, in turn, that this sense of apprehending moral facts is especially surprising and calls for an appropriate explanation, one theism best provides.¹⁰

Another form of the moral argument can be called the Kantian-type moral argument. As philosopher Andrew Chignell remarks, a Kantian-type moral argument has the following general feature: “it starts from facts about my moral obligations, hopes, and needs, and concludes with the claim that I have defeasible moral justification for faith/trust/acceptance (*Glaube*, or ‘Belief’) ... regarding what exists, even in the absence of sufficient epistemic grounds.” Holding moral justification for belief in what exists, as opposed to a scientific or metaphysical justification, constitutes no affront to reason since, on a Kantian-type argument, claims about how the world actually is based on scientific or metaphysical analysis are seen as highly questionable, whereas at least basic moral obligations are not. Hence, rational agents are entitled to postulate—to hold by moral justification—beliefs such as that a God of a particular nature exists and that features of rational moral agents, such as their free will and immortality, are true—all, notwithstanding the absence of compelling proof in a traditional sense.¹¹ For, the ultimate foundation for *Glaube* in such positions is not theoretical proof but the positive impact belief in them has on our ability to perform binding moral duties.

The Kantian-type moral argument can be expressed in a number of different forms. The one most commonly associated with Kant himself pertains to the *summum bonum*, usually defined as that condition wherein happiness is experienced by all rational beings in proportion to moral desert. The *summum bonum* is seen as a goal required to be set by our practical reason, given the drive for systematicity Kant sees as inherent in the operation of our reason. On this view, if what reason demands is not capable of being realized, our reason would produce a morally absurd outcome, since moral agents would not be able to truly see themselves as obligated to do what they register to be impossible. If that were so, individuals would begin to question moral reasoning, judging it quite capable of “misfiring.” Such an erosion in the confidence in moral reason would cause our moral

9 Mark C. Murphy, *God and Moral Law: On the Theistic Explanation of Morality* (Oxford, 2011).

10 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2004).

11 Andrew Chignell, “Demoralization and Hope: A Psychological Reading of Kant’s Moral Argument,” *The Monist* 2, no. 106 (2023): 46–60, 47, 46.

lives to lose the rigor that comes from reason's demand for consistency as encapsulated in the categorical imperative—the idea that we must act only on maxims or principles that could stand as universally applicable laws. This erosion would permit individuals more easily to excuse self-exempting behavior—notwithstanding the recognition that doing so is unreasonable—since individuals could always tell themselves that perfect consistency in moral action (i.e. that one must not make selfish exceptions from moral demands to satisfy strong desires) is just another misfiring of reason. As such, to sustain a rigorous commitment to morality requires that we assume that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnibenevolent God exists who assists our efforts to realize the *summum bonum* by overcoming what we as finite beings cannot achieve. This supplies the “moral justification” for belief in God.¹²

This argument has been the object of extensive analysis, with most scholars either viewing the *summum bonum* as not a true demand of reason¹³ or arguing that a firm attachment to the *summum bonum* is inconsistent with other aspects of Kant's moral philosophy, such as his view that when acting morally agents must set aside considerations of personal happiness.¹⁴

However, a Kantian-type moral argument can be expressed in a form that does not directly address the *summum bonum*. Instead, the argument can focus squarely on the difficulty of sustaining a life committed to morality's demands—demands that, by requiring universality in actions, preclude special appeals to personal interests and selfish passions. As Karl Ameriks defines this form of the argument, a Kantian moral apologia can be based solely on “a realistic view of human psychology”¹⁵ in relation to what John Silber calls “the requirement” to “procure the moral law's ... influence over practice.”¹⁶ Chignell aptly calls this “a psychological reading” of Kant's

12 For a classic articulation of the argument in this form, see Wood's interpretation of Kant as advancing a *reductio absurdum practicum*. Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Cornell University Press, 1970), *passim*.

13 See Thomas Auxter, “The Unimportance of Kant's Highest Good,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979): 121–134.

14 See L. W. Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1960), 244–45.

15 Karl Ameriks, “Reality, Reason, and Religion in the Development of Kant's Ethics,” in Benjamin J. Bruxvoort Lipscomb and James Krueger, eds., *Kant's Moral Metaphysics* (De Gruyter, 2010), 23–47, 47

16 John Silber, “The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics,” *Ethics* 73 (1963): 179–191, 180; and Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 389 (*GW* unless otherwise noted). See also Rex P. Stevens, *Kant on Moral Practice: A Study of Moral Success and Failure* (Mercer University Press, 1981).

moral argument for God.¹⁷ On this view, to remain committed to morality, individuals must hold that a God exists who aids us in our moral lives in such ways as rewarding moral behavior and reinforcing the importance of moral actions by announcing morality in the form of divine commands. These beliefs are seen as supports aiding one consistently to act for the sake of moral duty, and are thus claims individuals are entitled to hold by “moral justification.”

The works addressing this form of a Kantian-type moral argument have largely been consumed with showing how it is not unreasonable to read Kant as making this type of argument—that to read him in this way does not evidence debilitating inconsistency within his moral thought. It has therefore been lacking one very important element: any attempt *to defend* this argument beyond demonstrating its consistency with Kant’s moral philosophy. It is as if the writing in this area is more concerned with defending Kant the thinker—by showing he did not produce arguments riddled with contradictions—than with defending the argument itself.¹⁸ In this work, on the contrary, I take the question of whether such an argument is perfectly consistent with Kant’s moral writings to be less important than whether such an argument is intellectually persuasive and potentially capable of arresting the recent declines in belief in a theistic God.

To this end, in sections II and III, I first defend an expression of a Kantian-type moral argument for general moral theism using evidence derived from social science data and research in moral and empirical psychology. I argue that strong evidence connects belief in God to moral advancement, while also showing the importance of congregational religious

17 Chignell, “Demoralization and Hope: A Psychological Reading of Kant’s Moral Argument.”

18 For example, one such defense of Kant’s moral argument for God, which sees Kant defending belief in God as part of warding off “frustration and disappointment” with the world, rests content only with arguing that such a view is not “extravagant” within a Kantian framework, and that it makes Kant’s moral argument “something more interesting” than is recognized by its critics. David Sussman, “Something to Love: Kant and Faith in Reason,” in *Kant’s Moral Metaphysics*, 133–148, 148, 134. Further, John Hare, in a work defending the coherence of a Kantian moral argument centering around the requirements of “perseverance in the moral life,” makes only one faint reference to “interesting empirical evidence” that could support the moral argument. John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford, 2002), 91 fn.51, 92.

affiliation for consistent moral action—a timely claim in Western societies where, among those still professing belief in theism, rates of congregational disaffiliation have steadily increased.¹⁹ As such, agents committed to moral rigor are entitled to postulate the existence of a generally theistic God who should be revered in a congregational setting.

In Sections IV-VI, I next argue that belief in a concrete manifestation of the general theistic framework further enhances moral behavior, and that it should for this reason also be postulated. I then argue that various theistic traditions and practices equally can assist a robust moral life, a point which has not been developed in detail in the literature on the moral argument.²⁰ I argue, based on a close review of sacred texts and leading theological thinkers in each tradition, that elements within Christianity and Sufi Islam each support moral strength. Further, I maintain that such pluralism of theistic beliefs and practices can be postulated by different people at the same time without any scandal to reason, as long as the coexistence of various religious communities only aids moral behavior. In turn, I argue that this can be seen as true, since the coexistence of different morally empowering theistic belief systems can stimulate competition for moral excellence. These sections, in sum, serve to defend what I call postulatory religious pluralism.

In section VII, I argue that the specific Kantian-type moral apologia I develop is one likely to resonate well with key elements in contemporary Western society and is thus an especially appropriate argument to meet current challenges. The reason for this lies first in the general features of Kantian thought, and, second, in specific features of this moral argument. As to the argument's general Kantian framework, this coheres with what Juergen Habermas has called the "Kantian cognitive attitude" among many in the West²¹—an attitude conjoining high confidence in the clarity and certainty of moral judgments with a deep skepticism of metaphysical claims.

19 Twenge, Sherman, Exline, and Grubbs, "Declines in American Adults' Religious Participation," 1–13.

20 Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs—two of the most prominent commentators on Kant's moral argument—mention in their work, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, only that Kant's moral argument, in their judgment, permits "any historical faith" to be seen as a "candidate" for being a faith that properly empowers moral action. They then argue that Christianity can serve this function, while leaving entirely unexamined the question of whether any other religious traditions can do so as well. Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2008), 198.

21 Juergen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Polity, 2004), Chapter 8, "The Boundary between Faith and Knowledge: On the Reception and Contemporary Importance of Kant's Philosophy of Religion," 209–248, 228.

Yet, western culture is not entirely as Habermas would like: it is not based solely on secular rationality as many, at times vague, religious elements still run deep in western culture. Yet for many in the West, a religious claim could only be adopted if it could be shown to affirm religious pluralism, given the rising embrace of religious pluralism occurring across many western nations. What is more, survey data in several western countries indicates a special openness to Sufism, a point that partly justifies the special attention given to it in this work (with the large number of adherents of Sufi and Sufi-inspired movements being another²²). Lastly, many throughout the contemporary West remain committed to capitalist concepts of competition, seeing competition as an engine of progress, which is a belief, in turn, that can facilitate an openness to viewing religious competition as beneficial. These dynamics, taken together, can enhance the appeal of the moral argument, permitting it to serve for many as an effective defense of theistic belief in the contemporary West.²³

To guide our assessment, I first provide an outline of this moral argument in full.

I. An Outline of the Moral Argument

- a) Many individuals recognize that they are subject to strong moral duties, and that these duties call for a lifetime of moral action, with true moral action requiring concern for the moral good itself rather than concern for instrumental gain.
- b) The call of moral conscience, so understood, is registered by many as a deeply important and urgent call.
- c) Many individuals also recognize that humans face many temptations, and have a certain kind of constitutional weakness, in terms of reliably performing moral duty and doing so for the sake of the moral good.
- d) Agents who recognize an urgent call for a life in conformity

22 By some accounts, approximately half of the world's Muslims practice some variety of Sufism. See Dale Hadaway, *The Muslim Majority: Folk Islam and the Seventy Percent* (B&H Academic, 2021), 40.

23 To this extent we can think of my argument as a form of contextual apologetics, defining this to mean an approach that secures "beachheads" in a particular milieu for the position being missioned. See, Benno van den Torren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-cultural Dialogue* (Continuum, 2011).

to moral duty so understood, face a collateral duty to do all they reasonably and ethically can to live according to this call; they must confront, as best they can within these restraints, the challenge of living life morally.

- e) Humans cannot know the world as it exists in itself, and thus cannot acquire knowledge of whether a God exists, nor what the true nature of human capabilities are.
- f) Since humans are unable to have knowledge of these things, there is no prohibition per se on assuming that a God exists or assuming that individuals possess certain capabilities.
- g) Postulating the existence of entities such as a God and the existence of certain human capabilities is extravagant, unwarranted, and potentially dangerous unless doing so is tightly connected with improving moral behavior.
- h) Moral agents who believe that a God of a certain kind exists, and also that certain human capacities exist, are greatly benefited in the performance of their moral duties.
- i) Moral agents as described in premises d-h are, therefore, under a presumptive moral obligation to postulate the existence of such a God and such human capacities as described in premise h, as long as these agents are capable of sustaining these beliefs for a sufficient period of time for the beliefs appreciably to improve their moral behavior. That is, they are presumptively morally obligated to assume that a God and certain human capabilities as described in premise h do exist, but only on the further condition that they can overcome a potential difficulty arising from the postulated character of their beliefs, namely, the difficulty that these beliefs might always be recognized as only the agents' mental constructions, which could make holding them with sufficient strength and for a sufficient time unlikely.
- j) Agents can hold to belief in a posited God and in posited human capabilities sufficiently for these beliefs positively to inform their moral behavior.
- k) If it is possible to deepen further the faith one holds in the content of premise h such that these beliefs become more secure, doing so becomes an additional duty.

- l) Believing in a particularized manifestation of the theistic framework found in premise h would facilitate a deeper level of belief in the framework and thereby advance moral behavior. As such, individuals face a presumptive moral duty to postulate a particularized embodiment of the theistic framework, were such manifestations to exist.
- m) There are multiple concrete manifestations that equally serve to deepen faith in the general theistic framework.
- n) Reason imposes no requirement for singularity in this context, and so a plurality of moral theisms instantiating the general theistic framework is not extravagant or unjustifiable.
- o) Those who recognize an urgent call of conscience to perform throughout their lives moral behavior, and moral behavior done for its own sake, face, therefore, a presumptive moral demand to postulate the existence of such a God, and such human capabilities, as found in premise h and as concretized in those beliefs expressed in premise m.
- p) This presumption can be defeated, but only if an alternative set of beliefs to those described in premises h or m can provide as good or superior a degree of moral assistance; and the burden of proof will fall on those who so allege, given the weight of the evidence supplied in defense of these two premises, coupled with the need for caution lest the performance of moral duties be compromised.

II. Starting the Defense

Since I am working in the context of a Kantian-type argument, I shall in this work assume premises a-g, which together form core elements of any argument of this type. The question I first address relates to premise h. To vindicate this premise, we must be able to answer affirmatively the following question: is there a concept of God and of human capabilities the belief in which we can, on a sufficiently rational basis, conclude will assist the performance of our moral duties? I believe there is, as can be seen in reference to the following six beliefs about God and human capacities, and their corresponding influence on moral behavior.

1. *A God Gifts Us the Power to Combat our Many Moral Weaknesses*

If we could strongly affirm to ourselves that we are capable of living life morally in a full and robust way, and so can transcend our selfish desires and follow morality in the fullness of the moral mindset—the mindset of doing what is moral for the sake of moral goodness—our moral lives would be fortified. A powerful way to affirm this about ourselves is to see our capacity to follow moral demands as itself a gift of a God. Seeing ourselves as having been gifted by a divine source the power to overcome the tugs impressing on us from those forces referenced in premise c would aid our ethical striving. Indeed, if we see our own inner nature as approximating to some degree, by dint of a divine gift, the capacity for free action and moral strength possessed by a moral creator God—one who freely creates us and who is a powerful moral being— these beliefs would morally invigorate us.

Empirical research supports this inference. First, a “substantial body of scientific research” has highlighted the “prosocial benefits”—that is, the morally enhancing impact—of believing in our own free will.²⁴ Baumeister et al., among other researchers, have demonstrated that people who believe in free will exhibit higher prosocial and also altruistic behavior.²⁵ According to Baumeister, believing in free will increases one’s “motivation and willingness to make [moral] efforts, therefore resulting in higher self-control,” which enhances moral action.²⁶

Yet, there remain difficult burdens that confront us daily in the effort to live life morally. Believing firmly in our ability to act freely and morally does not itself remove the force of the personal urges and self-serving passions that beset us; such beliefs can weaken the force of these obstacles, but they do not remove them. Indeed, the research of J.B. Miles has shown that merely possessing a belief in one’s free will often only have relatively

24 Emilie A Caspar, Laurène Vuillaume, Pedro A Magalhães De Saldanha da Gama, Axel Cleeremans, “The Influence of (Dis)belief in Free Will on Immoral Behavior,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, no. 20 (2017): 1–9.

25 R. F. Baumeister, “Free Will in Scientific Psychology. *Perspectives in Psychological Science* 3 (2008): 14–19; T. F. Stillman, R.F. Baumeister, K.D. Vohs, N.M. Lambert, F.D. Fincham, L.E. Brewer L. E., “Personal Philosophy and Personnel Achievement: Belief in Free Will Predicts Better Job Performance,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1 (2010): 43–50.

26 Baumeister, “Free Will in Scientific Psychology”; Caspar et al., “The Influence of (Dis)belief in Free Will,” *passim*.

minor—although real—morally enhancing effects.²⁷ Hence, adding to the belief in one's free will the conception of one's free will as being precious, and precious because a divine gift, will augment the morally beneficial consequences of simply believing one has free will.

2. *God as a Demanding Source of Moral Law*

An additional way by which our moral lives would be annealed would be for us to hold that the God who gifts us free will also speaks directly to our conscience the instruction always to follow moral duty, a command we hold to be a grave matter of deep importance to God. The seriousness of a divine command can be imparted in a number of ways. Two stand out. First, a God could communicate the seriousness of his moral commands by indicating that he sees all our actions and also all of our thoughts—all our morally relevant thoughts and actions being worthy of his examination. Second, the God could punish us on the basis of our immoral thoughts and actions and reward our moral thoughts and behavior. In turn, agents who hold these convictions are likely to experience enhanced moral motivation and resulting ethical behavior.

This contention is supported by empirical research in moral psychology. Research measuring moral behavior has shown that those who have, proximate to the moment of moral decision making, the idea in mind of a God observing and judging their behavior, have higher rates of moral action. In their influential work, “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality,” Ara Norenzayan and Azim Shariff demonstrate that those who act with a sense that a moral God is watching and judging what they do are, indeed, more likely consistently to act morally than those without this belief.²⁸

3. *Yet a God Who Avoids Heteronomy by Counseling and Modeling Motivational Compartmentalization*

We must now attend to a potentially vitiating conclusion derivable from what we have so far advanced: having actions informed by a sense that God is

27 J.B. Miles, “‘Irresponsible and a Disservice’: The Integrity of Social Psychology Turns on the Free Will Dilemma,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 52 (2013): 205–218.

28 Ara Norenzayan and Azim F. Shariff, “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality,” *Science* 322 (2008): 58–62, 62.

watching us and judging us could entail what Kant calls “heteronomy”—the conducting of moral commands out of a desire other than respect for moral goodness, such as avoiding punishment or earning favor—which would result in behavior inconsistent with the genuine demands of the moral life as defined in premise a. If this is so, thinking of an all-watchful, morally righteous judge who assigns or allocates rewards and punishments would be no support to our moral life, so defined. But here we must draw important distinctions.

First, the idea of seeing moral duty as a divine command, watched over by a morally zealous and interactive God, should be conceived only as a belief to be prevailed upon in addressing the precarity of our moral lives—that is, the ease with which we can and do fail to do our moral duty. With this in mind, an initial compatibility of moral actions being done for their own sake and seeing moral action as a command of an all-watching God surfaces. The idea of seeing morality as a divine command can be construed as a belief there to be seized upon if and when we lose the proper moral framework—if and when we lose the framework of doing moral goodness in a way that Kant calls “autonomously,” or for its own moral sake. Since such moral autonomy is, we can assume by premise c, bold and precarious work, having a belief in a God who commands us to assume the vantage point of acting according to what is moral for its own sake is especially useful for those times when we need to be stirred to resume just this mindset.

However, what being able to seize upon the idea of a God who commands moral duties as a way to incite us to reassume just this autonomous mindset presupposes, is a certain kind of doublemindedness. It requires that when we *are* stirred to act for the sake of the moral good, we can submerge our belief in moral duties as externally imposed commands. It presupposes that we are capable of compartmentalizing our moral minds. As such, having a belief in a God who imprints this capacity for doublemindedness within us, and who also models it for us, and by these two means empowers us to maintain that we too can be doubleminded in just this way, would be morally fortifying.

4. A God Who by Knowing Not Only Our Actions but Our Innermost Motivations Can Judge if We Have Transitioned to the Full Moral Mindset

Implicit in what we have said so far is the following conclusion, which, when made explicit, shows itself to be a further aid to the moral life. Specifically, in those moments of moral weakness when we are seeking to regain the

moral perspective and thus regain our autonomy, we would further be morally fortified should we believe that God will see whether we make this transition, being under the watchfulness of a God who sees not only our external actions, but our innermost motivations. To be sure, we cannot focus on divine watchfulness at the moment of our moral decisions lest we fall into heteronomy, but in those moments—alas, likely to be many—when we are falling away from a full moral stance, it is empowering for us to say to ourselves that we are being watched as to whether we transition into the position of moral autonomy—which, again, when entered into, submerges considerations of rewards and punishments, given a sense of ourselves as capable of the appropriate doublemindedness.

5. *A God Who Forgives while Remaining Morally Demanding*

Although these considerations will empower our moral life, the difficulty of consistent moral action drives us to ask if we are able to provide to ourselves any further assistance in our moral labors. Here I believe we helpfully can refer to arguments Kant develops in his own work on moral thought and theology. In addition to advancing much of what we have developed above,²⁹ Kant addresses another important factor involved in moral strength: the morally debilitating consequences of not understanding oneself as a recipient of divine forgiveness when one fails to adhere to moral duties. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant reflects on “the human being’s hope of absolution from his guilt,” and how failure to reduce or eliminate the weight of moral guilt “might be disadvantageous to reason in many respects, most of all morally.”³⁰ Kant is here suggesting that those who can feel a sense of “absolution” before the bar of “divine justice” will experience enhanced moral behavior. Specifically, Kant is arguing that the failure to act consistently out of moral motivation can engender feelings of guilt that can imperil further moral action, whereas a sense of divine forgiveness, subsequent to moral failings, can empower a resumption of moral action. It

29 See especially the *Metaphysics of Morals* [hereafter *MM*] in which he asserts: “the moral law stands over” our natural and socially reinforced impulses as an “accuser,” and “the accuser would certainly lose every time” were it not seen as the voice of “an external source.” This external source must in turn be a God: “conscience must be conceived as the subjective principle of being accountable to God for one’s deeds.” Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7:250, 7:252.

30 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* [hereafter *Rel.*], trans. Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (Harper and Row, 1960), 6:76.

is for this reason that we can affirm Patrick Frierson's claim that "Kant seems to think that the belief in divine mercy is rationally required by anyone seriously pursuing personal [moral] virtue."³¹

Importantly, however, any sense of divine forgiveness must be construed by moral agents always as coming from the will of a being who embodies and desires justice: it can never be construed as a gift of divine indulgence mitigating the requirement ceaselessly to endeavor to live life morally. This absolution, instead, must be seen as a means by which ceaseless moral improvement is furthered. And Kant believes just this.

Kant's argument has been reinforced by research in contemporary moral psychology. A sense of having been genuinely forgiven by a divine source has been shown to decrease immoral behavior among those experiencing guilt for prior moral wrongs. This is firstly due in part to how self-punitiveness, or the desire to punish oneself in response to immoral behavior, is a frequent result of acts of immorality agents feel they have not fully been forgiven for. As Lydia Woodyatt and Michael Wenzel have established, self-punitiveness is often causally associated with "avoidance [of others], egocentric focus, and negative relational outcomes" in the form of decreased empathy.³² These features over time "undermine" ethical behavior.³³ In addition, research by Neal Krause has shown that when morally erring individuals see God as the being who forgives them, a particularly strong psychological effect ensues. His research shows that "people who believe that they have been forgiven by God" have a greater reduction in self-punitiveness than those whose sense of forgiveness comes only from efforts to forgive themselves. Since self-punitiveness undermines moral behavior as shown in the findings both of Krause and Woodyatt and Wenzel, a feeling of divine forgiveness will enhance moral behavior.³⁴

Moreover, Kant argues in his *Lectures on Ethics* that "proper self-respect" is related to sustained moral activity, and that "proper self-respect" has two dimensions: a sense of humility and a sense of noble pride at one's continued moral exertions despite prior moral failings. Kant writes that "humility ... is inspired by how in the light of the law of morality, which is holy and perfect

31 Patrick R. Frierson, "Providence and Divine Mercy in Kant's Ethical Cosmopolitanism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 24, no. 2 (2007): 144–164, 156.

32 Lydia Woodyatt and Michael Wenzel, "Self-forgiveness and Restoration," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2013): 225–259, 254–255.

33 Woodyatt and Wenzel, "Self-forgiveness," 231.

34 Neal Krause, "Religious Involvement and Self-forgiveness," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017): 1–15.

... our defects stand out with glaring distinctness in comparing ourselves with this standard of perfection”; but additionally, when we persevere despite prior failings, we stir in ourselves “true, noble pride.” These two factors—humility and a certain kind of pridefulness—together form the “elements of proper self-respect.”³⁵ This sense of proper self-respect, Kant argues, propels further moral behavior.

This conclusion is also reinforced by work in contemporary moral psychology. Robin Dillon has shown that a strong sense of being forgiven tends to generate what she labels “humble self-respect”: a feeling of self-respect, because the forgiven agent does not wallow in a sense of being “bad,” and also because the agent feels a measure of pride at the prospect of continuing self-improvement; yet a humble sense, because of the recognition by the agent of her moral failures. This feeling of “humble self-respect,” Dillon finds, is morally invigorating, since it reduces arrogance and stimulates a desire for moral advancement.³⁶

A further point, however, must still be confronted. If an enhanced belief in our own abilities to be moral can threaten to cause a debilitating self-reproach, could it also be that a strong sense of others’ abilities to be moral would cause us to reproach them, and thus cause lapses in moral judgment that could take the form of an overly vindictive attitude to those who fall morally short? We could hope one’s sense of being forgiven that comes from the beliefs we have just sketched would transfer into a similar forgiving attitude to others, such that overly vindictive responses to the failures of others would be arrested. However, the “crooked timber” of humanity is such that we should not expect this conclusion always to inform individual behavior.³⁷ Indeed, social science data suggest that an enhanced belief in *others’* having a strong capacity for self-control, which is associated with a belief in *their* free will, can incline many to be especially punitive toward those who are so perceived.³⁸ As such, the problem emerges that a strong belief in free will (in this case, that of others) could be morally *harmful*.

35 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Hackett, 1980), 126.

36 Woodyatt and Wenzel, “Self-forgiveness,” 254, 230–232; and Robin S. Dillon, “Self-forgiveness and Self-respect,” *Ethics* 112, no. 1 (2021): 53–83, 82–3.

37 Kant uses the phrase “crooked timber of humanity” in his 1784 essay, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose.” Moreover, the ease of humans believing in self-exemption or self-preferencing, and its associated idea of holding to “forgiveness for me, but not for thee,” is a cornerstone of Kant’s view of mankind’s moral difficulties, difficulties he comes to call our “radical evil.”

38 F. Krueger, M. Hoffman, H. Walter J. Grafman, “An fMRI Investigation of the Effects of Belief in Free Will on Third-party Punishment. *Social Cognitive and Affective*

In response to this problem, the belief that the forgiving God extends forgiveness not just to oneself or to one's family, tribe, or clan, but to all whom one comes in contact with—while remaining at the same time morally demanding of all individuals—would have a morally edifying impact, as it could stay the hand of immoral vindictiveness.

6. *A God who Counsels the Reinforcing Power of Congregational Religious Life*

Can we take things even further in advancing the bold and precarious work of living life morally? Kant thinks so. He holds that congregational religious life can enhance fidelity to moral duty.³⁹ Here, again, empirical evidence supports his contention. Congregational religious activity, at least of a certain kind, has been shown to enhance certain moral and morally relevant actions.

Social and psychological science supports this conclusion in at least two ways. First, a line of research advanced by Norenzayan, Shariff, and others, discloses what we can call the amplifying effect of congregational religious participation on religious ideas. That is, repeated practice of congregational activity wherein religious images—be they communicated verbally or through representational art or liturgical ritual—are made central, empowers individuals to be able more readily to bring to mind these religious ideas throughout their lives.⁴⁰ “Repeated religious rituals” serve to embed “religious reminders” that can underscore one's religious ideas; therefore, evidence suggests that the more one attends “religious services or engages in ritual performance” the more likely one is to bring to mind one's image or conception of God.⁴¹

The implication of this in the context of the religious ideas we have itemized is apparent: engagement in congregational affiliation which expresses the ideas of God that we have summarized—a God who gifts us the capacity to be moral, who commands moral duty, yet who affirms our motivational compartmentalization, and who is both morally demanding and ever-forgiving—serves to reinforce these very ideas, and allows

Neuroscience 9 (2014): 1143–1149.

39 See Kristi Sweet, *Kant on Practical Life: From Duty to History* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 181–183.

40 Martin Lang, Panagiotis Mitkidis, Radek Kundt, Aaron Nichols, Lenka Krajčíková and Dimitris Xygalatas, “Music as a Sacred Cue? Effects of Religious Music on Moral Behavior,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, article 814 (2016): 1–13, 2; Norenzayan and Shariff, “Origin and Evolution,” 62.

41 Norenzayan and Shariff, “The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality,” 62.

one to bring them into greater focus across one's life. Hence, given the positive impact these ideas have been shown to have on ethical behavior, congregational participation is, in effect, a moral multiplier.

Second, the work of Krause, Hill, and Ironson demonstrates that attendance in communal religious activities in which “spiritual support” is extended to participants is causally related to increased expressions of having compassionate and forgiving beliefs and behaviors.⁴² Spiritual support is defined as “informal assistance that is provided by fellow church members with the explicit purpose of increasing the religious belief and behaviors of the support recipient.”⁴³ They show that individuals “who receive more spiritual support” within the social context of congregational participation have a “greater likelihood of adopting the social virtues” of both compassion toward others and forgiveness of others.⁴⁴ This work reinforces earlier findings by Krause that “study participants who receive spiritual support” in congregational settings “more often tend to be more compassionate”⁴⁵; and his 2016 work showing that “people who receive more spiritual support are more likely to forgive others.”⁴⁶ Under the conditions of the intersection of spiritual support and a communal religious setting, individuals often experience increased pro-sociality, such as a tendency to be patient, to forgive, and to be compassionate.

Importantly, forgiveness and compassion toward others very often empower individuals to execute moral duties. Kant himself notes specifically the importance of compassion to the reliable and consistent exercise of moral obligations. In *MM*, he argues that it is a “duty to sympathize actively in the sufferings” of others. Why? It is such precisely because compassion with the sufferings of others is a useful tool to enhance moral behavior. We must “cultivate,” Kant says, “compassionate ... feelings in us, and make use of them as so many means” to our moral improvement.⁴⁷ In fact, Kant goes so far as to say that compassion stirs in us the power “to do what

42 Neal Krause, Peter C. Hill, Gail Ironson, “Evaluating the Relationships among Religion, Social Virtues, and Meaning in Life,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 41, no. 1 (2019): 53–70.

43 Neal Krause, *Aging in the Church: How Social Relationships Affect Health* (Templeton, 2008), 6.

44 Krause, Hill, Ironson, “Evaluating the Relationships among Religion,” 64.

45 Neal Krause, “Assessing the Religious Roots of Volunteer Work in Middle and Late Life,” *Research on Aging* 37 (2015): 429–463.

46 Neal Krause, “Compassion, Acts of Contrition, and Forgiveness in Middle and Late Life,” *Pastoral Psychology* 65 (2016): 127–141.

47 *MM*, 250–51.

the representation of duty alone would not accomplish.”⁴⁸ Such is high praise indeed of the morally vivifying prowess of personal compassion. In turn, since this important engine of sustaining moral motivation has been shown, by the research of Krause, Hall, and Ironson, to be augmented by communal religious affiliation and participation involving the extending of spiritual support, belief in a God who calls us to engage in just this kind of congregational activity would empower our moral lives.⁴⁹

One final point concerning congregational participation merits attention. Congregational religious life has a tendency to elevate as inspiring role models exemplars of the faith. Their ennobling example helps to sustain the faith of the group. If these exemplars also embody moral excellence, congregants’ faith in the possibility of moral excellence will be enhanced. Kant himself notes the importance of moral exemplars in the Doctrine of Method in *MM*: “good examples (of exemplary conduct) . . . serve as proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty.”⁵⁰ Religious communities that extol moral exemplars will all the more reinforce the moral vivacity of their members.

III. A Sustainable Set of Beliefs Over Time

We have shown that were we to have a belief in a divine being of the sort specified above, and of such associated human capacities as also described, these beliefs would anneal our moral life. We have also assumed premises f and g—the claims that belief in this being is warranted, and not extravagant,

48 *MM*, 250–1. For this reason Kant further says that “it is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist.” *MM*, 6:457.

49 The arguments in this section are all consistent with correlational data that shows those who attend religious services more often commit fewer crimes. See Elizabeth Kelly, Joshua R. Polanin, Sung Joon Jang, and Byron R. Johnson, “Religion, Delinquency, and Drug Use: A Meta-Analysis,” *Criminal Justice Review* 40, no. 4 (2015): 505–523, 506, 505. These points are also consistent with the more general point that correlational data shows an association between identifying as a religious “none” and higher rates of committing rape. Philip Truscott, “Rape, Suicide, and the Rise of the Nones,” *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* 14, no. 2 (2004): 34–58. We must recognize, of course, the limitations of this data given the difficulty of establishing causation and the many factors involved in avoiding or committing crimes.

50 *MM*, 6:480.

given our nescience about the world of external objects (including our own genuine capabilities) and given the connection between these beliefs and moral improvement. Yet, just how realistic is it that we could hold belief for any sustained period of time in a being, and in human capabilities, which we concede are only our own practical postulates? Just saying it would be morally helpful to have these beliefs, and that it is epistemically permissible to hold them due to our nescience about the world “in itself,” does not establish that we are *psychologically* capable of forming, and holding over time, these beliefs, given their status as suppositional tools to our own moral improvement. As A. W. Moore remarks in reference to Kant’s argument for the practical postulation of God, free will, and immortality, such is “one of the most basic questions concerning the postulates.”⁵¹ This question takes on an added force in the contemporary context of rising skepticism of religious claims among many of our family members, our neighbors, and our fellow citizens, and given the various, and now-deeply entrenched cultural patterns favoring irreligion (such as licentious popular entertainment). Surely these militate against belief in a moral God, and a fortiori our belief in a postulated moral God, by the way they could drive us to remind to ourselves the purely suppositional status of our religious beliefs.

The intensity of congregational participation, with its reinforcing prowess, supplies part of an answer. But the creep of the “problem of postulation” can also enter congregational life, eroding over time a community’s strength of faith. History, after all, is replete with congregational religious movements which have perished. So, something more is needed than just congregational religious activity.

Here, it is important to note that recent work in empirical psychology shows that repeated experiences of awe can elicit an openness of mind to there existing an external creator. Moreover, this openness to the genuine existence of a creative force can be sustained over time even within a Kantian framework, due to how a reduced requirement for cognitive closure is also associated with repeated exposure to events or phenomena internalized as awe-inspiring. And a range of liturgical religious practices can elicit just such feelings of awe. Empirical research by psychologists Piercarlo Valdesdo, Jesse Graham, and Andrew Tix has found that a sense of awe is doxically related to an increased belief in an external supernatural creative

51 A. W. Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant’s Moral and Religious Philosophy* (Routledge, 2003), 166.

force.⁵² This research documents that awe-inspiring beauty or sublimity can elicit a conviction that what one sees is the product of an external creative agent. They find that “experiencing awe, compared with other emotional states, heightened participants ‘agency detection,’” that is, their openness to believe in an externally real, “supernatural” agency who, by “intentional design” is responsible for that which is registered as awe-inspiring.⁵³ One tends to see, in other words, the hand of a God at work in the objects that fill one with awe.

However, within the framework of a Kantian-type argument, this sentiment is likely to elicit a deep feeling of inconsistency. The feelings of awe allow us to be pulled toward thinking of the existence of an external creative force, yet by the premises of our Kantian-type argument, we have no basis for holding that one actually does exist beyond the morally supportive effect believe in this being elicits. Yet just here we should note that further empirical research supports the prowess of awe to minimize demands for rigid logical congruence and to enhance the capacity to live amidst paradox. N.M. Shiota, et al. have shown that when “individuals become accustomed to the psychological consequences associated with the state of awe” they are “less likely to demonstrate ... a need ... for cognitive closure.”⁵⁴ D.M. Webster and A.W. Kruglanski have provided a widely cited definition of cognitive closure as “discomfort with uncertainty and desire for consistency.”⁵⁵ Based on the interaction among these findings, individuals who experience awe are often placed in a frame of mind that inclines them to believe in an external causal agent, and, if this feeling of awe continues through multiple iterations, such agents tend to become less demanding of holding a complete set of internally consistent beliefs. In the context of a Kantian-type argument, these findings entail a strengthening of one’s ability to live amidst the ambiguity and uncertainty of a felt belief in an external agent and the limits of knowledge as expressed in premise e. The latter would not exile the former. In such a condition of living amidst paradox and

52 P. Valdesdo and J. Graham, “Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency Detection,” *Psychological Science* 25 (2014): 170–178, 177. See also Andrew Tix, “Overwhelmed by Greatness: The Psychological Significance of Awe in Christian Experience and Formation,” *The Table*, Center for Christian Thought, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, October 26, 2015.

53 Valdesdo and Graham, “Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency,” 171.

54 Valdesdo and Graham, “Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency,” 170 referencing N.M. Shiota, D. Keltner, A. Mossman, “The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept,” *Cognition and Emotion* 21 (2007): 944–63.

55 D.M. Webster and A.W. Kruglanski, “Individual Differences in Need for Cognitive Closure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67 (1994): 1049–1062, 1049.

uncertainty, an opening would be achieved for practical faith to take lasting root.⁵⁶

For these reasons, moral agents can be said to have a duty to “seek out” not only “the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found” (a duty Kant holds we have in relation to compassion) but also to seek out liturgical religious events that would elicit repeated experiences perceived as awe-inspiring.

IV. The Doxastic Force of Particularity

The question now emerges whether individuals should postulate anything more specific regarding a divine being and human capacities beyond what has so far been sketched. It might at first seem that all rational agents should postulate is one divine force with the attributes itemized above, a being naked of any further characteristics. However, this claim must be subjected to a rational examination of the human condition. Such examination strongly suggests that most individuals need particularity in their religious lives; such particularity deepens their faith. As such, since faith in the general theistic framework can enhance moral behavior and should be postulated on this basis, that which enhances this faith further should also be postulated, as expressed in premise k. The result is a presumptive duty to postulate religious particularity. This presumption could be defeated by a showing that faith in the general theistic framework alone is possible to be as deep or deeper without a particular manifestation of it, but, for the sake of upholding moral duty, the defeater should be acknowledged only upon a compelling showing.

56 Moreover, it is possible to see a mutually reinforcing relationship among awe, morality, and belief in God. Research on awe also suggests it has an independent causal effect on moral behavior. In one study, research participants writing about a personal experience involving awe reported feeling less impatient and said they were more likely to give time and money to a worthy cause—inclinations supportive of following moral laws. It seems not only the case that the more one experiences awe, the more one is open to practical faith, and that the more one is open to practical faith the more one is empowered to act morally; but also, the more one experiences awe, the more one is directly inclined toward ethical behavior. See M. Rudd, K.D. Vohs, and J. Aaker, “Awe Expands People’s Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being,” *Psychological Science* 23 (2012):1130–36.

One way we can appreciate the power of particularity in religious life is by referring to the arguments Kant himself makes to this effect.⁵⁷ These are especially probative because of Kant's high estimation of rational uniformity—which, after all, is the core of the universalizability principle at the heart of his ethical system. If a thinker as prone to conceptualizing in terms of universality comes to acknowledge the importance of religious particularity for sustained religious belief (which in turn is a deep support to moral behavior), this would provide highly suggestive evidence for the prowess of particularity in religious life.

Kant remarks in *Religion* that “no doctrine exclusively based on reason would seem to the people to make an unalterable norm; they demand a divine revelation, hence a historical authentication of its authority through the deduction of its origin.”⁵⁸ As Marcello Pera states in summary of Kant's position, “If God is to be intended as ‘one who knows the heart’ and rewards and punishes, and if His commands are to be considered as our duties, the duties we living creatures ought to follow here and now, then He needs to manifest himself and we need to give Him a face and a voice.”⁵⁹ This for Kant is simply an unavoidable “natural need” for the vast majority of humans.⁶⁰ Hence, Pera continues, “[p]ure rational religion,” or what we have called the general theistic framework, “cannot merely be an abstract doctrine referring to an abstract God worshipped in an abstract way in abstract temples. Pure rational religion does not warm up men's hearts as it ought to if they are to feel their moral duty.” People need “something that the senses can hold on to” and so need “a visible church.”⁶¹ As Kant reiterates, “due to a peculiar weakness of human nature, pure faith can never be relied on as much as it deserves.”⁶² And so “Kant does not feel that such a universal faith can establish community and be successfully propagated without the help of a historical faith.”⁶³ Hence, for Kant it is “a fact ... that by their very nature

57 Hegel also supplies extensive argumentation about the need for concrete instantiations of what reason establishes; see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Oxford, 1977), 329, 335, 340, 464.

58 *Rel.*, 6:112.

59 Marcello Pera, “Kant on Politics, Religion, and Secularism,” in “Universal Rights in a World of Diversity: The Case of Religious Freedom,” *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity. The Case of Religious Freedom, Acta 17* (Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 2012): 546–577, 562.

60 *Rel.*, 6:109.

61 *Rel.*, 6:109, 6:158.

62 *Rel.*, 6:103.

63 Firestone and Jacobs, *Defense*, 194.

human beings, made of blood and flesh, need somewhat more than rational religion.”⁶⁴

But what specific form will this more-than-abstract religion assume? Kant argues that the “ordinary human being will every time understand [the divine] by his own ecclesiastical faith, which is the one that falls within the grasp of his senses.”⁶⁵ Hence, “some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used.”⁶⁶ That is, a faith ready at hand must be adopted as long as its substantive content is morally empowering. To be sure, any historical faith must be tested to see if it is in harmony with moral duty,⁶⁷ and only those conceptions of the divine and those liturgies in service of them which are compatible with morality are worthy of a moral man’s worship. But worthy indeed are those which inspire our moral vocation. To this extent, therefore, individuals can be seen as presumptively morally obligated to postulate, and congregationally to revere, a God understood within morally enhancing elements or sub-traditions of distinctive historical faiths. That is, were such to exist.

V. A Plurality of Instantiations: Elements in Christianity and Sufism

This presumptive duty would be impossible were no historical, particular faiths ready to hand for individuals to embrace which satisfy these criteria. However, there are, in fact, multiple traditions which contain substantial elements that instantiate the general theistic framework, and so can be adopted for the purpose of solidifying the performance of moral duties. To illustrate the pluralism of moral theisms consonant with moral duty, I briefly survey elements within both Christianity and Sufi Islam that meet the requirements above, and which are ready to hand and thus meet the requirement of relatability to personal and cultural experience. What follows is not at all intended to be a comprehensive survey of these two great religious movements, but simply a short survey of illustrative examples taken from within their theologies that exhibit the morally supportive features that we’ve described above. Nor is the claim that these characteristics are necessarily exclusive to these two movements.

64 Pera, “Kant on Politics,” 562.

65 *Rel.*, 6:109.

66 *Rel.*, 6:109.

67 Firestone and Jacobs, *Defense*, 198.

1. *Elements in Christian Traditions*

Elements within Christianity parallel so much of what a morally responsible person is pulled to postulate. First, in Christian theology we can see a divine source of our reason and moral freedom. One example of this idea can be found in the writings of St. Athanasius. In *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the incarnation of God in Christ is seen as serving in substantial part “to re-educate humanity about its nature.”⁶⁸ Athanasius writes, “in creation, God bestowed upon human beings the impress of His own image, a share of the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him, [humans] themselves become reasonable.”⁶⁹ We were created by God “in integrity” so to be rational, free beings.⁷⁰ Moreover, as the “divine pedagogue of the world, the creator took on a human body in order to show us [or remind us] of our dignity and honor”—including our ability to resist the “dehumanizing habits” that come from our “pursuit of inferior things.”⁷¹ The incarnation, for Athanasius, restores and thereby “re-educates” us to the recognition both of our nature as sharing in the “reasonable being of the Word” and the sweeping power we have to set aside irrational temptation and to live life morally.

Second, in Christianity moral commands originate from a divine source; and the commands are communicated as being grave and serious. For example, one without fidelity to Christian moral commands becomes, Christian scripture relates, like salt which has lost its savor now to “be trodden under foot of men” (Matt 5:13). Moreover, God “loves those who pursue righteousness” (Prov 15:9). Further, God’s very nature brings these commands to our consciousness as matters of the utmost importance: His law is “righteous altogether” (Ps 19:9), and his Son is the full righteousness of God Himself (2 Cor 5:21).

In addition, a substantial measure of internal purity understood as the absence of self-serving motivations is commanded by God: loving actions are to be done for no selfish advantage, as the “new commandment,” to “love others as I have loved you,” (John 13:34) entails, given the kenotic sacrifice of Christ for others, a self-sacrifice of one’s own self-preferring passions. To

68 Frederick D. Aquino, “The Incarnation: The Dignity and Honor of Human Personhood,” *Restoration Quarterly* 42, no. 1, is. 5 (2000): 39–46, 41.

69 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi* (MacMillan, 1946), 3:28; Aquino, “Incarnation,” 42.

70 Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Doctrine* (Oxford, 1997), 89.

71 Aquino, “Incarnation,” 44–5.

this we can add the admonition of Paul: “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor” (1 Cor 10:24). Further, these commitments are to be pursued without moral holiday: “be ye perfect,” Christ commands, “just as your father in heaven”—unblemished before all ages—“is perfect” (Matt 5:48). There are no moral sabbaticals for faithful Christians. Over against this, God also keeps a constant and watchful eye on humans, as all we do is done under his careful attention to the actions of every individual: “For his eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps” (Job 34:21).

Third, Christianity overlaps with the understanding of moral psychology that arises within the thought sketched above. As we described, we should think of ourselves as agents possessing psychological and motivational compartmentalization. Yet we see in Christianity just such compartmentalization. For the commands of God and their associated divine superintendence are, in aspects of Christian thought, conjoined with a certain doublemindedness. In Matt 6:3, Jesus is held to state, “But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth” (6:3). This passage can seem strange, since the phrase, “the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing,” seems to depict an uncommendable lack of coordination, but Jesus is commending just this very lack. Yet when we see this passage in light of the exegesis of it advanced by Floyd Filson, and also in light of the first Johannine Epistle, as well as other aspects of Jesus’ teachings, we can see the passage expressing a commendation of a kind of internal doublemindedness. As Filson argues, the passage indicates that giving to those in need should come as automatic, without the “mental calculus” of seeing it as a divine command.⁷² To the question of why we should act without such a mental calculation, 1 John provides an answer: commands produce fear as they issue from a superior with authority to punish; yet, Christian love acts on its own without fear, since “there is no fear in love;” instead, “perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). As such, perfect loving actions are to be done without consideration of their status as fear-inducing divine commands. However, at the same time, Jesus does speak of moral acts precisely as commands of God, as in Matt 15:4 where he underscores what “God commanded,” saying love and respect your father and mother; and, more generally, when at Matt 5:17 he says that his ministry affirms all the “law,” seeking not to destroy divine commands but to fulfil them. Plus, he himself issues his own (divine) commands, such as the command to reconcile with others before giving offerings (Matt 5:23-24). The teachings of Jesus, along with the faith in Jesus exegeted by Filson and described in 1 John, disclose, therefore, a powerful capacity for individuals

72 Floyd Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (A. & C. Black, 1960).

to exercise doublemindedness: morality, in some sense, can be seen and acted upon as an external command of God while, at other times, complete morality can be acted upon as the uncommanded actions of a loving agent. Just as described in the general theistic framework, so in Christian moral theology, divine commands are present, but they can serve to move us into assuming a moral posture that can subsequently become untinged with any measure of threat or command, and so can be free of heteronomy. Such is what it can mean for the left hand not to know what the right hand is doing.

Moreover, doublemindedness can be seen as re-doubled in terms of the ability to draw moral strength from a motivation for reward when needed, but to put that aside when the autonomous moral frame of mind has been restored. Jesus leaves his followers *both* with the command that they act lovingly without expectation of reward—as even sinners expect rewards (Luke 6:32-36)—*and* the command that they store up their treasure in heaven, where neither raiders nor rust can deprive them of their desert (Matt 6:19-21). Yet Jesus does not command the impossible. How else could his burden be easy and his yolk be light (Matt 11:30)? Jesus' commands thus serve to empower agents in the conviction that they *can* act both from a concern for an externally granted reward *and* from a love of what is good.

Fourth, we also saw that our moral life would be fortified were we to underscore to ourselves that the line between command-driven, reward-seeking, and punishment-avoiding actions and those which are fully autonomous is a line ever-watched over by God. As useful to us as divine commands, rewards and punishments in reference to moral actions can be, they must ultimately be transcended. Having before our minds, before the moments of full moral decision making, the concept of a God who judges whether we are in fact autonomous or whether we remain in our hearts driven by heteronomy, underscores to us the need to cultivate autonomous decision making, as God will always know if we make this transition. Yet, once more, elements within Christianity provide just such a conception. As expressed in the Letter to the Hebrews, “everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (4:13), as God is “discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12).

Fifth, in Christian theology, we also see a concept of God as a being who forgives while remaining morally demanding—another enabling aspect of the moral life. Jesus, according to Matthew's gospel, tells his listeners that they are called to forgive, as God forgives us, “not seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matt 18:22). Yet, although the Father's forgiveness remains ever-constant, after each transgression for which we are forgiven, we are

called anew to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Should we not see that our forgiveness is conjoined with a command to stop doing that which requires forgiveness, we would earn the rebuke of Paul: “do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience”? (Rom 2:4). Such a concept of forgiveness—one that still demands continuing moral striving—again evinces our capacity for mental compartmentalization: we are beings charged by God to focus on the seriousness of moral action by reference to His commands, His rewards, His punishments, and His nature, yet we are also commanded, and so must be capable of, prescinding from these considerations during moral decision making. In turn, after we morally fail (as we inevitably will), we are also able to regroup in reliance on divine forgiveness, as a way to re-commit ourselves to actions unalloyed by divine sanction, command, or fear and without presumption that are moral duties are in any sense lightened by the fact that God will, after all, surely forgive us when we fail as long as we sincerely repent. The left hand of knowing God’s great forgiveness does not know what the right hand of the grave seriousness of each moral act is doing.

Moreover, within Christianity can be found an idea of divine forgiveness as universally capacious—as not limited to any one family, tribe, or clan. Indeed, “who is my father and my sister, my mother and my father,” Jesus asks—so to underscore the breadth of his vision of the kingdom of God (Matt 12:48-50). Contained within its breadth can be discerned a conception of divine forgiveness not limited to an in-group holding to a particular creed, for “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).⁷³ Elements in Christianity can thus empower the staying of an immoral measure of vindictiveness at the moral faults of others by recognizing all as extended in some sense the forgiveness of God.

Sixth, as we saw, moral enhancement can accrue through participation in congregational religious life, fortifying one’s commitment to the complex of morally supportive concepts we enumerated. Christianity can also be read as instructing (at least most) followers to engage in congregational expressions of the faith. God can be found not only in the solitude of personal prayer, but “when two or more are assembled in my name” (Matt 18:20). Indeed, the assembling of the faithful is especially commended in First and Second

73 For a detailed treatment of forgiveness for those outside one’s fold in Christianity and other world religions, see Anne-Marie Ellithorpe, Laura Duhan-Kaplan, Hussam S. Timani, eds., *Multireligious Reflections on Friendship: Becoming Ourselves in Community* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

Thess. where Paul especially recommends the communal enterprise of extending spiritual support, admonishing the faithful to “strengthen the fainthearted,” and for Christians to become “imitators and models” so that, by collective efforts, “your faith may grow more and more” (1 Thess 5:14, 1:6-7; 2 Thess 1: 3).

As part of this congregational involvement, religious exemplars who embody these religio-moral ideals are very often extolled. In Catholicism, for example, the general importance of saintly role models is widely known. Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Ratzinger) famously argued that (in part) “the only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to ... the saints the Church has produced.”⁷⁴ Relevant in our context might be men such as St. John Baptist de La Salle, who was devoted to learning, selfless in his commitment to expanding education, unafraid to challenge received opinions in his work as a scholar and educator, unyielding in his moral devotion, and a champion of free will and personal responsibility in opposition to the necessitarianism of others, including the Jansenists.⁷⁵ Each of these are attributes that underscore the moral vocation of humankind as understood in premises a-c. As such, saints elevated in congregational life are ready at hand to advance a moral faith.

Seventh, we must address the question of how to sustain the faith in these concepts over time. In this respect, we argued for the importance of awe and beauty in religious life. Such are also given a pride of place in many expressions of the Christian faith. As Tix argues, “[t]he Bible teaches that sensitivity to awe is a virtue that may be cultivated.”⁷⁶ For example, “individuals are encouraged to ‘be stunned and amazed’” (Isa 29:9) and to “‘stop and consider God’s wonders’” (Job 37:14).

Further, this high place for awe and wonder in the Christian life has often been connected with congregational activity. Indeed, Tix reminds us that many Christian communities have “design[ed] worship services with individuals’ experiences foremost in mind. Prayerful music, meditative silence, and the intentional use of darkness and light” all find a place throughout Church history in “stimulating awe during worship,” as does “focusing the content of services on the mystery and awesomeness of God.” Indeed, one might bring to mind again the second half of the famous

74 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, ed. Vittorio Messori (Ignatius, 1985), 129–130.

75 See “Saint John Baptist de La Salle,” uCatholic, April 7, 2025, <https://ucatholic.com/saints/john-baptist-de-la-salle/>.

76 Tix, “Overwhelmed by Greatness.”

statement of Pope Benedict XVI just referenced: in a sense, Benedict continues, “the only really effective apologia for Christianity” consists also “in ... the art which has grown in [Christianity’s] womb.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Benedict maintains, “Better witness is borne to the Lord by the splendor of...art which ha[s] arisen in the community of believers than by clever [arguments of apologetics].”⁷⁸

Moreover, just here we can see a virtuous circle. For the two elements of Benedict’s apologia are interconnected. The saints are those with a majestic radiance of life resulting from unsurpassed holiness, and they can elicit in turn a sense of spiritual awe.⁷⁹ As psychologist Barbara Fredrickson describes awe, it also includes the emotion experienced when individuals “are overwhelmed by greatness,”⁸⁰ which can include the greatness of a moral life. The long tradition of admiring the majestic holiness of saintly lives across Christian denominations evidences the deeply rooted character of this recognition of awe-inspiring moral beauty. In turn, this feature of Christianity would reinforce the way by which, in the context of a Kantian-type argument, awe can stimulate and deepen belief in God as an external creative force despite the limitations of our theoretical knowledge.

Finally, Christianity can be seen as endorsing the claim that a holy, awe-filled sense of beauty engenders a rejection of the drive for rigid cognitive closure. John Paul II’s 1999 “Letter to Artists” expresses just this idea. “Beauty,” John Paul II writes, “is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence.”⁸¹ And as we saw, such openness to mystery and transcendence minimizes the demand for rigid coherence, which, in the context of a Kantian-type argument, would assist the mind to hold together the nescience about the world in itself and the dissonant sense that a creative force inhabits the realm of “things in themselves.”

77 Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 129–130.

78 Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 129–130.

79 See Robert McSwain, “Exploring Human Goodness as Evidence of God,” Templeton Religion Trust, <https://templetonreligiontrust.org/explore/the-saint-is-our-evidence/>.

80 Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity, and Thrive* (Crown/Harmony, 2009), 46. See also Tix, “Overwhelmed by Greatness.”

81 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” Vatican website, April 4, 1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html#.

2. *Elements in Sufism as a Parallel Moral Theism*

We also see each of these aspects of theistic faith in elements within Sufi movements. First, in Sufi (as in effectively all Islamic) thought God is the source of moral laws. Sufism emphasizes this fact with tremendous devotion. Further, these moral commands are in effect ordinary moral rules—commands consistent with the judgments of most of fellow humanity. In fact, the contemporary Sufi-inspired political and religious scholar Muqtedar Khan has reminded us that the ordinary moral judgments found in much of the Decalogue are also expressed in the Shari’ah.⁸² Indeed, as leading Sufi thinker Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, in Sufism special focus is often placed on such traditional virtues as “charity, nobility, sincerity, and truthfulness.”⁸³ This catalogue of conventional moral rules also includes in Sufism a great respect for the freedom of others. Such respect for the freedom of others arguably reaches its pinnacle in *Ihsan*, or the idea, perhaps especially prominent within Sufi Islam, of doing beautiful deeds. As Khan maintains, “the high road” of *Ihsan* repudiates “harshness, intolerance, compulsion and violence.”⁸⁴

Relatedly, these divine commands are ones to which individuals must at all times see themselves as bound. “It is not possible to follow the Sufi path ... without following the injunctions and teachings” of the divine author of moral laws, Nasr writes.⁸⁵ We thus “can never transcend the Divine Law.”⁸⁶ Moreover, these are communicated to us as grave commands. One way this is expressed is by reference to God’s very nature. For he is *nafas al-Rahman*,

82 Muqtedar Khan, “Shariah is Based on the Ten Commandments,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 2010.

83 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (HarperOne, 2007), 126.

84 Muqtedar Khan, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan* (Palgrave, 2019), 2. Another way this respect for the freedom of others is manifested is through the high esteem accorded the teachings of Jesus among many Sufis. Sufi leader M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, in fact, holds that “Jesus is the soul of Allah.” M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, *Islam and World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi* (Fellowship, 1987). To be sure, some Sufi orders became fiercely dedicated to fighting to advance *Dar al-Islam*, as noted *infra*. Such, however, is strongly repudiated by many contemporary Sufis. Nasr remarks how Sufism is opposed to “puritanical reformism now called by many fundamentalism” (*Garden*, 154) found in Wahhabism and other movements prone to “violently” defending the faith (*Garden*, 155). It is *this* Sufism the moral person would postulate.

85 Nasr, *Garden*, 56.

86 Nasr, *Garden*, 86.

or “infinite goodness,” as Nasr defines *al-Rahman*.⁸⁷ At the same time, as the *Fatihah* relates, God is the “master of the day of Judgment,” when we shall be exposed to eternal reward or punishment. What is more, in Sufism, divine judgment is often stressed as a way to underscore “the utmost importance of our life here on earth,” underlining how our moral actions or immoral misdeeds have consequences of the greatest seriousness, which in turn emphasizes “the grandeur of the human state”: our moral decisions *matter*.⁸⁸ In Sufism a corollary of our actions mattering and bearing grave significance is that they are conducted by a divinely bestowed capacity for free will and the ability to meet our moral demands.

As to possessing free will, Nasr remarks, “the part of us that seeks to control our temper must be distinct and not determined by the part of our soul that is angry and needs control.”⁸⁹ As he continues, “we possess a will that is free. Otherwise the moral bearing of our actions would be meaningless.”⁹⁰ Possessed of free will, humans are responsible for what they do.⁹¹ Yet this is no spare and ungrounded belief in the freedom of the will. As H. Nur Arturan remarks, Allah “has given the final choice to His servants. As we believe, human beings are the only creatures to have been given free will and a freedom of choice.”⁹² Indeed, in Sufism we see an emphasis on how God gifted to humans the capacity to fulfill all that morality demands. There is, in fact, in humans a specific power to overcome immorality. As Arturan maintains, humans have the power to become “released from the bondage of worldly needs and desires.”⁹³

On these bases, Sufism shares with the broader Islamic tradition a high estimation—within the limits of our finite nature—for the stature of humankind. The angels, in fact, are to serve man,⁹⁴ the angels being creatures who do not even know their own names, as do humans (Qur’an 2:33). Indeed, our divinely gifted capacity to be free and ethical entails that man is a “being created to be able to be addressed by God and to address Him in turn,”⁹⁵ God having created a rational being in humans

87 Nasr, *Garden*, 15.

88 Nasr, *Garden*, 18.

89 Nasr, *Garden*, 8.

90 Nasr, *Garden*, 84.

91 H. Nur Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.” July 9, 2005. Conference of the Tariqa Alawyyia, <https://www.mevlana.ch/en/sufism-and-freedom-h-nur-arturan-2015/>.

92 Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.”

93 Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.”

94 Qur’an 2:30: humans, not angels, act as God’s vicegerents on earth.

95 Nasr, *Garden*, 17.

“worthy of being His interlocutor, a being reflecting all the Divine Names and Qualities.”⁹⁶ Our bearing the imprint of the creator’s freedom means precisely what the Sufi writer Abu’l Shasan Shushtari relates: “Truly, I am a wondrous thing.”⁹⁷

Additionally, God in Sufism avoids suborning heteronomy. Our moral injunctions, founded on God’s will, are to be done for many Sufis with a certain kind of doublemindedness that preserves our autonomy. In its fullest expression, *Ihsan* requires, as many Sufis maintain, that one answer in the negative the question asked in Qur’an 55:50: “Is there any reward for *Ihsan* except *Ihsan*?” Reward from God for beautiful actions is misplaced once one’s focus is fully on making oneself spiritually perfect. Or, as the great Rabia Adawiyya of Basra, so highly admired among Sufis, expressed: “O God, if I worship Thee for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, grudge me not thy everlasting beauty.”⁹⁸ As contemporary Sufi scholar Samuel Mills reiterates: “for the real disciple, devotion is its own reward.”⁹⁹ Nasr reiterates this by affirming that the Sufi “performs an act of goodness not for the sake of recompense but because of goodness itself.”¹⁰⁰

Yet, most Sufis still affirm the traditional teaching of plentiful divine rewards for those who submit to the will of Allah. There is thus a sense

96 Nasr, *Garden*, 96.

97 Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology*, trans. M. Lings (Islamic Texts Society, 2006), 87.

98 Quoted in Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Routledge, 2008), 51.

99 Samuel L. Mills, “The Hardware of Sanctity: Anthropomorphic Objects in Bangladeshi Sufism” in *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, ed. Helene Basu, Pnina Werbner (Routledge, 2002), 31–54, 31. For a less scholarly source on this concept see, “Forgiveness Despite Repeated Sins,” *Islamonline*, <https://islamonline.net/en/forgiveness-despite-repeated-sins/>.

100 Nasr, *Garden*, 87. See also Javad Fakhkhar Toosi, Asyraf Isyraqi Jamil, and Asyraf Isyraqi Jamil, “Accepting the Autonomy’s Pillar ‘Freedom of the Will’ in Moral Education Based on Islamic Mysticism: The Capacity of South East Asia’s [sic],” *Journal of Islamic Educational Research* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1–10, 7: “Islamic mysticism is exactly in line with [Kantian] deontology by put[ting] the motive at the highest level,” which is “equivalent to that found in the theory of autonomy. Therefore, we believe that by introducing a model of Islamic mysticism in moral education, education can be driven more towards [Kantian] autonomy”; and “Islamic Mysticism opens the way for acceptance of [a] pillar of autonomy (freedom of the will),” and thus has “a great capacity to interact with [Kant’s theory],” 2.

of *taqwa*, which can be defined as a condition capable of “comb[ining] reverential fear of God with purity of action,” in the sense of having a feeling of oneself as being under divine command *and* having a detachment and interior dedication to goodness for the sake of goodness.¹⁰¹ A certain doubleness of mind is evident, therefore, in Sufi movements. One way to see this is expressed by Martin Lings in his classic commentary on Sufism. He quotes an assemblage of Quranic passages thusly: “Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance of God? Call upon Him in fear and in eager desire; [and] call upon God in humility and in secret.”¹⁰² He then maintains that in Sufi theology, the reference to secrecy refers here not to other watching humans, but to one’s own ego—which is held secret from, or separated from, one’s own search for God in furtherance of a selfish motive to advance our desires or to avoid punishment. Such motivations are “excluded from participating in the profoundest invocations” of Allah.¹⁰³ In answering how this doublemindedness is psychologically possible, Lings draws precisely the point expressed in Christian scripture: that the self is a compartmentalized soul such that we can “Let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth,” with “the left hand” being the selfish “human ego”¹⁰⁴ and the right hand being that part of us capable of a sense of *hal*, a term which can be interpreted as relating to awe (about which we will have more to say below), and which can be defined as that state wherein one is “calm, contented, and reassured, [with] the overwhelming sense of the divine presence fill[ing one’s] heart with the kind of awe that is *free from fear*.”¹⁰⁵ Through *hal*, the devotee can be lifted to the sense of being God’s loving craftsmanship free of worry or dread over the possibility of divine punishment; heteronomy, therefore, becomes banished. The human person, in sum, can be both admonished by fear-inducing divine commands and love God and his law for their own sake.

Further, in Sufism, as in the general moral theistic framework we outlined, and also as in the aspects of Christianity we emphasized, God always knows our innermost motives and not merely our external actions,

101 Nasr, *Garden*, 95.

102 Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* (Islamic Texts Society, 2023 [1973]), 89; Qur’an 13: 28; 7: 56; 7:55.

103 Lings, *What Is Sufism*, 90.

104 Lings, *What Is Sufism*, 90.

105 *Britannica*, “ḥāl, Ṣūfism,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hal>. Emphasis added. This condition parallels what Qur’an 89:27 calls “the tranquil soul,” as opposed to “self-reproaching soul” spoken of in Qur’an 75:2. That humans can be described as having two souls points toward the kind of doublemindedness that we are addressing.

and so He can judge if we have transitioned into the full moral mindset—that mindset uninfluenced by rewards and punishments. Highly prized in Sufism is the interior purity of conduct—actions that may not be detectable by “outward appearance,” but which “give life” to persons.¹⁰⁶ For, “God judges our actions by our intentions.”¹⁰⁷ Sufi al-Mushasibi (whose very name means “someone who examines his conscience”) stressed this point by highlighting how individuals must be “constantly scrupulous” of “their inner motives for their actions.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Qur’an 9:105 holds, “Soon will you be brought back to the Knower of what is hidden and what is open, then will He show you the truth of all that ye did.” Hence, in Sufism God knows if we have transitioned from the lower position of acting out of fear or expectation for reward to the higher morality of acting on moral laws for its own sake. And just this knowledge of Allah’s watchfulness can help us while in the former, as we work to enter the latter.

In addition, in Sufism God is a being who forgives yet remains ever-demanding. Qur’an 39:53 says: “O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” God’s mercy is so pronounced that, as one Sufi reading has it, God sends down a “Theophany of Merciful forgiveness” as a continuous manifestation of his forgiving nature.¹⁰⁹ The great Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi in his famed *Mathnawi* writes: “Come... Our covenant is not of desperation. Even if you have broken your vows a hundred times, Come, come again.”¹¹⁰ Although as Nasr relates, “some [men and women] who repent may well go back to their old ways and repent again”—that is, they may become presumptuous of God’s clemency—“God does not like such a pattern in the life of a person determined to follow the path leading to Him.” Allah’s moral demandingness is unmoving and his forgiveness conjoined with what in Christianity is Jesus’ command—to go and sin no more. Nevertheless, he is “always aware of human weaknesses, and is forgiving,”¹¹¹ always giving us second chances.

106 Arturan, “Sufism and Freedom.”

107 Nasr, *Garden*, 84.

108 Carole Hillenbrand, *Introduction to Islam: Beliefs and Practices in Historical Perspective* (Thames and Hudson, 2015), 198.

109 Quoting Islamic convert and long-time Muslim Chaplain at Londonborough University, Daud Matthews, “Forgiveness Despite Repeated Sins,” *Islamonline*, <https://islamonline.net/en/forgiveness-despite-repeated-sins/>.

110 Quoted in Iftikhar Tariq Khanzada, “Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi’s Whirling Dervishes,” *Liberty Voice*, 23 October 2013, <https://guardianlv.com/2013/10/maulana-jalaluddin-rumis-whirling-dervishes/>.

111 Nasr, *Garden*, 130.

Further, this forgiveness is not limited to an in-group of blood or creed. For Allah is *Al-Ghafoor* and *Al-Rahim*—the Most Merciful. Rumi’s thought in particular is, in a way, universalistic regarding the scope of divine love and forgiveness: the passage just cited continues

Come! Come! And still come, whatever you may be ...
A fire worshipper, an idolater or if it is nothing you believe,
Our lodge is not that of despair, so come.

Yet, again, the moral demands remain despite the capacious forgiveness and loving solicitude of the benevolent creator. As Nasr continues, “the Sufis, who aspire to enter the Garden of Truth, emphasize the Divine Mercy and compassion ... without in any way forgetting the significance of inner discipline and the necessity of living according to God’s laws, thus abstaining from actions that might incur His wrath.”¹¹²

What is more, in Sufism as in the elements of Christianity we have surveyed, God calls us to bring these religious ideas to mind by congregational support and participation. Congregational faith is certainly found across Islam, yet it perhaps is most especially pronounced in Sufism. This is evident in Sufism’s strong congregational element in the form of membership in a *tariqa*, or brotherhood/sisterhood,¹¹³ and participation in a *tekke*, or lodge. As Nasr remarks, “it is generally a requirement” for Sufis “to seek to follow Sufism [by] finding a functioning order,”¹¹⁴ in the form of a congregational association dedicated to the Sufi path (there being only limited exceptions). This is so in part because, just as the research of Norenzayan, Shariff, and others finds, “repeated religious rituals” serve to embed “religious reminders” into the life and thought of congregants. Among Sufis it is often held that the “goal” of Sufi congregations is precisely that of bringing to mind “the remembrance of God, *dhikr Allah*.”¹¹⁵ Further, one critical aspect of Sufi congregational life is the extension of dedicated support to a *mureed* (novice) by a community’s *shaykh* (spiritual leader and teacher) and by one’s personal *murshid* (spiritual guide) under whom one seeks

112 Nasr, *Garden*, 93.

113 For female leadership in Sufism see such works as S.B. Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India* (University of Texas Press, 2002); female saints are also revered, including such leading 20th century figures as Sayyidh FatimahYashrutiyah.

114 Nasr, *Garden*, 190.

115 Nasr, *Garden*, 117.

counsel and “spiritual practice.”¹¹⁶ The empirical work of Krause, showing that “participants who receive spiritual support” in congregational settings deepen their religious convictions, resonates powerfully with Sufi experience. In sum, a gathering of Sufis (*jalwah*) is “a sacred gathering that fortifies one’s inner life.”¹¹⁷

This fortifying element has also been achieved in part by how Sufis have long extolled saints who serve as proof of the possibility of spiritual and moral progress. The *walāya*, or saints, are a core aspect of Sufism in most of its iterations. As described by Ahmet Karamustafa and others, as Sufism emerged as a form of mass piety “people reputed to be friends of God [saints] both living and deceased captured the imagination and devotion of Muslims from all walks of life and exercised an unprecedented degree of influence in society.”¹¹⁸ Sainthood retains its important role to this day.

In addition, Sufism often expresses a profound respect for and engagement with beauty and that which is awe-inspiring. The connection between beauty and *deen*, or Islamic faith, is certainly not unique to Sufism, but Sufism often treasures an especially intense connection with awe and beauty. As Nasr maintains, “Sufis seek to cling to ... the beautiful.”¹¹⁹ Doing so reinforces the mind’s orientation—just as Tix’s research shows—to the transcendent, since “one of the functions of beauty in human life is to bring about remembrance of that Celestial Beauty” of the divine creator.¹²⁰ These sentiments, so open to the power of the feeling of awe, very often find expression in Sufi congregational activity. From the whirling dervishes, to the *sama*—or the hearing of beautiful ritual music which can elicit, in Ghazali’s words, “serenity ... awe ... and softening of the heart”¹²¹—the inclusion of awe-instilling states can perhaps be called a cornerstone of much in Sufi theology. Indeed, as Nasr recounts, “in Sufism aesthetics is not separate from spiritual disciple,” a discipline so often congregational in form.¹²²

116 Nasr, *Garden*, 32.

117 Nasr, *Garden*, 115.

118 Side Emre, *Ibrahim-i Gulshani and Khalwati-Gulshani: Order Power Brokers in Ottoman Egypt* (Brill, 2007), 8.

119 Nasr, *Garden*, 56.

120 Nasr, *Garden*, 76.

121 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, vol. 2 of *Ihya ulum al-din* (1940), *Kimiya-yi sa’ddat*, ed. Ahmad Aram (Markazi, 1954). See also Leonard Lewisohn, “The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā’ in the Persian Sufi Tradition,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6 (1997): 1–33.

122 Nasr, *Garden*, 72. And just as we previously referred to the possibility of awe itself reinforcing morality, this too can find expression in Sufi thought. Since “one of the

Indeed, elements within Sufism place a special attention to the beauty and awe-inspiring potential of communal services and their congregational environments, and their powerful impact.

Moreover, Sufistic appreciation of beauty often circles back to the beauty of a congregationally affirmed and notable exemplar. Sufis will often extend reverence for the awe-inspiring beauty of the holiness radiating from various *awliyā*, (saints), who have a majestic “beauty of character,”¹²³ by reference to which Sufis “derive special inspiration.”¹²⁴ These individuals reinforce the commitment to moral rigor of the congregants.

Lastly, Sufism frequently seeks to cultivate a mindset resistant to cognitive closure, or the narrow search for rigid coherence. Openness to awe can facilitate this transcending of cognitive closure, as seen in how adept Sufis, who have experienced *hal*, can speak of “unknowing,” and can have the ability to “speak in silence of the mystery of existence.”¹²⁵ Further, as many great Sufis have held, the true *fuqarā* (the spiritually poor, a common term for Sufis, which itself bears a paradox as the Sufi is also, as previously noted, a most “wondrous thing”) must be a person capable of realizing that “to be really ‘here’ is also to be ‘there’ and to be ‘there’ is to be really ‘here,’” and must be able to affirm that “the Garden [of divine truth] is at once beyond us and within us.”¹²⁶ Such paradoxical sentiments resist the reduction of our experience to one logical plane and so free the Sufi from cognitive rigidity—just as in the elements of Christianity we surveyed, and as is necessary in the context of a Kantian-type moral argument to ensure the persistence of postulatory faith.

All of the above has only been an abbreviated survey of some of the elements in Christianity and Sufi Islam that are consistent with the general theistic framework developed in sections II and III.¹²⁷ However brief, the

functions of beauty in human life is to bring about remembrance” of God (Nasr, *Garden*, 76), given that bringing God frequently to mind has been shown in the empirical research noted above to enhance moral behavior, a Sufi’s experience of awesome beauty will also aid the moral life.

123 Nasr, *Garden*, 74,77.

124 Nasr, *Garden*, 151.

125 Nasr, *Garden*, 9, 44.

126 Nasr, *Garden*, 116.

127 To be sure, Sufism has found expression in forms a strict moral conscience, such as defined by Kant, might find particularly objectionable, including statements by famed Sufis that seem to collapse transcendence and immanence, which could be seen as inspiring a kind of moral antinomianism. One might reject as a morally dangerous form of mystical fanaticism the so-called “drunken” Sufi expressions

survey should suffice to highlight how traditions within Christianity and Sufism are capable of postulated assent, and are ready at hand in our world.

VI. Aporias of Postulated Pluralism and Their Resolution

Puzzles may be thought to beset a religious perspective allowing for the legitimacy of different people positing different religious views. Two aporias, which can be seen to build on each other merit further attention.

First, the religions might well in some ways be mutually inconsistent. If so, then it could be argued that special concern must be taken to avoid falling into the difficulties expressed in premise g. This premise holds that postulating the existence of entities, such as a God and the existence of certain human capabilities, is extravagant, unwarranted, and potentially dangerous unless doing so is tightly connected with improving moral behavior. A necessary implication of this premise is that postulation must work no moral hazard; it must never harm moral behavior, but only ever clearly advance it. If two religions, which may have substantive tensions between them on particular theological assertions, can both be “true,” in a postulated sense, this might incline the mind to accept bald contradictions. Such might create a moral hazard by undermining the commitment to moral integrity, perhaps allowing one, slowly and subtly, to accept that one could both be moral and a bit immoral without much problem—since contradictions just don’t matter. A bitter moral consequence might ensue should one be able to say, with Whitman: “do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.”¹²⁸ Has a path toward

claiming to “be”—in some sense—God, e.g. al-Hallāj’s expression, “I have become the One I love, And the One I love has become me!” Hallāj, *Dīwān*, trans. H. Mason in L. Massignon, *The Passion* (B.78) 3, 42. Might a drunken Sufi, by becoming in a way equivalent with the eternal creator who is the author of moral commands, see himself as the creator of his own values? To this Nasr reminds us that in Sufism, as expressed by leaders such as abu l’asan al-Shadhili, we can never give ourselves over to a desire for union with God in a way that would reject our status as servants of Allah, or *ubudīyyah*; as such, “we must realize that as servants we can never become the Lord.” Hence, “we can never transcend the Divine Law,” as we must always recognize “the total independence of the Divine Principle” (Nasr, *Garden*, 12, 86, 42).

128 *Song of Myself* (1855), 51.

a Nietzschean transcendence of a strict duality between good and evil been cast before our feet? How could such *help* morality?¹²⁹

We can express a response to this concern by emphasizing an element central to a Kantian-type moral argument: the primacy of the practical.¹³⁰ Questions of creed must be secondary to the enterprise of empowering the moral conscience. It is precisely because Kant himself assumes the primacy of the practical that he can state in *Religion*: “Whether the devout individual makes his statutory visit at church or undertakes a pilgrimage to the sanctuaries in Loreto or Palestine; whether he takes his formulas of prayer to the heavenly with his lips, or by means of a prayer-wheel ... it is all the same and of equal worth.”¹³¹ Moreover, the religious person who has experienced the full potential of awe will be especially able to prioritize the practical even if it entails a lingering sense of paradox.

Yet these considerations give rise to a second puzzle. Would the primacy of the practical over considerations about whether creeds are compatible or incompatible imply that it is unimportant to ask which of the morally empowering faiths is “truer”? If so, this perspective might be thought inconsistent with the very mechanisms by which postulated faith was given its durability: the conjunction of the doxastic force of particularity and the power of aesthetic appreciation to secure sustainable belief. Would not the conjunction of these produce a sense that the particular creed to which one is captivated by the force of aesthetic attachment is, in some way, more in line with external reality—is, in some sense, truer? That is, postulated faith must be rendered strong by reference to a belief in its external truth, but

129 We can recall Francisco Goya’s revelatory masterpiece titled “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” found in the 48th plate from his series “Los Caprichos” of 1799.

130 As Frederick Rauscher remarks, “the primacy of the practical” in Kantian thought means that “when the moral agent is faced with a moral decision, the practical interest in determining action ignores and even trumps *any* theoretical claims.” Rauscher, “The Priority of the Practical and the Fact of Reason,” *Naturalism and Realism in Kant’s Ethics* (Cambridge, 2015), 81, emphasis added. This would include claims about the compatibility of varying religious creeds.

131 *Rel.*, 6:173. In fact, Kant in Chignell’s words “even seems to concede that practical reason does not” univocally dictate the postulation of any God at all. This is so since, as Kant notes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, reason “cannot prove—that is, set forth sufficiently on objective grounds—the *impossibility*” of a robust conscience and all that this entails, being empowered by the postulation of some intrinsically moralized “universal laws of nature” (5:145, emphasis added) that would be a replacement for God. Since the recognition of this possibility does not stop Kant from postulating God, Kant implicitly concedes the practical rationality of postulational pluralism. Chignell, “Demoralization and Hope,” 52.

will this very strength cause inconsistent faiths quarrelsomely to fight? If so, might this cause its own offense to premise g—the premise holding that postulating beings or creeds, etc., “must work no moral hazard?” For, doesn’t a claim to be the truer religion work to stir up animalistic passions? Hasn’t the history of religious divisions taught us that adhering to a sense of one’s faith as superior to all others can inflame passions that that can override the demands of moral conscience?¹³²

We can see a way through this second puzzle by cojoining Kantian insights with teachings derived from the insights of religious pluralism itself. Namely, Kant at various points judges religious claims on the basis of whether they can be seen as compatible with what a supremely moral creator would do. Judged on this basis, reason can establish that it would not be incompatible with such a being for there to be a plurality of morally empowering religious options. As Qur’an 49:13 states, “O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.” As many Islamic scholars have recorded, this passage very plausibly can be read as indicating that a pluralism of religious groups is intended by Allah as a way to stimulate competition in righteousness among them.¹³³ Indeed, as the liberal and neo-liberal traditions in economics have—or so they tell us—established, competition can breed excellence.¹³⁴ Based on viewing the pluralism of morally fortifying faiths from the perspective of a fully rational God, surat *Al-Hujurat* (49) ayat 13, read as an invitation to compete for greater levels of moral righteousness among parallel moral

132 These passions have bedeviled even Sufism and those adhering to the understanding of Christianity sketched above. See, for example, Harry Neale, *Sufi Warrior Saints: Stories of Sufi Jihad from Muslim Hagiography* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and Mark Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (University of California Press, 2015). These elements form no part of the postulated beliefs advanced in this argument—but their psychological potency requires careful attention.

133 In the influential exegesis of the Qur’an *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* we read, “The real thing that makes one person superior to others is that one should be more God-conscious, a greater avoider of evils, and a follower of the way of piety and righteousness,” <https://suraHQuran.com/tafsir-english-aya-13-sora-49.html>.

134 This idea of beneficial competition is found not only in liberal and neo-liberal economics, but also in the educational theories of the Renaissance period. As historian James Hankins points out, Renaissance teachers often sought to inspire a *generosa aemulatio* (noble rivalry) between pagan classical leaders and the young Christian leaders under their instruction. Hankins, “Was Renaissance Virtue Politics a Failure?” *The Good Society* no. 31, is. 1–2 (2022): 184–198.

theisms, would be just what we would expect from a morally demanding God.

Viewed in this way, a condition with a plurality of morally empowering faiths could be seen both as a condition where each faith claims to be truer than all the others, and thus as standing in competition with all others, while this competition would remain peaceable, since it would only be by a competitive showing of “the fruits” (Matt 7:16-17) of moral righteousness that one faith could prove itself to be “truer” than any sister theism (in the limited sense of truth that aesthetic appreciation allows moral agents to adopt). The agonistic quarrel over truth would be channeled to a competition over moral righteousness.

VII. The Allure of Key Premises in Western Culture

The intellectual climate that shapes many in the contemporary West makes the argument I have advanced one that can potentially resonate with significant numbers of people across Western culture. This is so for at least the following eight reasons.

1. *The Contemporary High Estimation of Moral Rigor*

No matter what the status of moral life in the aggregate is in the United States,¹³⁵ what Habermas sees as part of contemporary Western culture—that our society has a commitment to strong moral claims—remains true inasmuch as contemporary society still widely applauds the person of strong moral character. Indeed, the frequent surveys indicating and bemoaning a reduction in moral life in the United States¹³⁶ speak to this high estimation: we bemoan the absence of what we applaud.¹³⁷

135 See “US Moral Freefall—Survey Finds America’s Traditional Moral Pillars are Fading Away,” American Worldview Inventory, Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, 2 June 2020, <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2020/06/02/us-moral-freefall-survey-finds-americas-traditional-moral-pillars-are-fading-away>.

136 See, for example, Megan Brennan, “Views of State of Moral Values in U.S. at New Low,” *Gallup*, June 9, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/506960/views-state-moral-values-new-low.aspx>.

137 Habermas’s contention that Western life has a high estimation of the power of moral conscience is revealed in part by the rising political polarization in the United States which so often is driven by strongly held, but diverging, claims of moral rectitude concerning such matters as abortion.

2. *Skepticism of Theoretical Knowledge*

Yet at the same time, we also see as quite prevalent in the contemporary West the second component of the “Kantian mindset”: a deep skepticism of metaphysical truth-claims about God or human “nature.” Evidence of such skepticism can be seen all around us. We need itemize only a few aspects of the turn from metaphysics that is so powerful an element in much of the contemporary Western world. John Rawls, for example, in his influential political philosophy prescinds from any metaphysical claims on the basis of what he labels “the burdens of judgment,” which together constitute, for him as for so many others, insuperable obstacles to incorporating rationally based arguments about God or our true “human nature” into precincts beyond the purely personal.¹³⁸ To this extent, the Western mind inclines in the direction of a Kantian argument and its negative view of claims truly to know if a God exists.

3. *The Resulting Kantian “Cognitive Attitude” in the Contemporary West*

Key elements of contemporary Western culture, Habermas notes, are “an expression of a cognitive attitude that combines a genuine openness to the pessimistic objections of theoretical reason [to acquire broad metaphysical truths, such as that a creator God exists] with the optimistic determination of an unbowed practical reason.” Many in the West, for the reasons we have noted, possess just this kind of “Kantian mindset,” making a Kantian-type argument potentially quite attractive.¹³⁹

4. *Confidence in the Theoretically Unsupported*

Moreover, we can add to what Habermas described an openness by many in the West to postulating morally salutary claims about the universe. Doubtless, one of the most influential and inspiring individuals of the past six decades has been Martin Luther King Jr. On March 25, 1965, having completed

138 In his influential *Political Liberalism* (Columbia, 1993), Rawls lists among these insuperable challenges the conflicting nature and complexity of evidence; the disagreements about the relative weight that different considerations should carry; the indeterminacy of concepts and conflicts of interpretation; and how the evaluation of evidence is influenced by subjective experiences, 55–7.

139 Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 228.

the third Civil Rights March to Montgomery, King asserted, on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol¹⁴⁰ that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Such an assertion has become foundational to the thought and aspirations of many, including former President Barack Obama, who repeated the claim on numerous occasions. It is, however, a metaphysical assertion which transcends empirical evidence. So do claims of being on “the right side of history,” commonly invoked in politics today. These are postulated beliefs akin to belief in God in a Kantian-type account: they are held because of their mobilizing and bracing effects. The soil has been tilled, therefore, for a postulatory moral argument for God.

5. *Increasing Embrace of Religious Pluralism in a Society not Thoroughly Secular*

In the United States, despite growing political divisions, overall the country has increasing numbers who embrace religious pluralism. According to one survey, about two-thirds of Americans say that the fact that “the United States has a diverse population, with people of many different races, ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds,” makes the country stronger, including 40% who say it makes the country “much stronger.”¹⁴¹ This includes majorities of all religious groups. Indeed, only a minority of Americans—43%—now believe that being Christian is “somewhat or very important to being truly American”—substantially down from 53% in 2015.¹⁴² Such an embrace of religious pluralism does not bespeak a society indifferent to religion and spirituality, as a substantial majority of Americans (79%) believe there is “something spiritual beyond the natural world.”¹⁴³ A moral argument for God welcoming of parallel theistic expressions can thus find deep roots in contemporary American soil.

140 Rev. King would make this assertion on many other occasions, including during his last speech on March 31, 1968 at the Washington National Cathedral. See “Theodore Parker and the ‘Moral Universe,’” *NPR*, September 2, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/09/02/129609461/theodore-parker-and-the-moral-universe>.

141 “New Polling Shows Pluralism is Still a Core American Value,” Interfaith Alliance, November 4, 2021 <https://www.interfaithalliance.org/new-polling-shows-pluralism-still-a-core-american-value/>.

142 “New Polling,” Interfaith Alliance.

143 “God, Spirits and the Natural World,” Pew Research Center, May 6, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/05/06/god-spirits-and-the-natural-world/>

6. *Rising Western Interest in Sufism*

Additionally, according to the Pew Research Center, in many Western nations “there are signs of a broader groundswell of popular interest in [Sufism],” including “the noticeable popularity” of some Sufi leaders such as Hamza Yusuf, director of the Zaytuna Institute in San Francisco.¹⁴⁴ The openness to spirituality in general that many western individuals still possess, coupled with an appreciation of Sufism in particular, makes an argument referencing Sufism potentially appealing to a growing number.

7. *A Culture in which Acceptance of Competition is Common*

So can an argument that welcomes competition as a force for progress. Indeed, as George Monbiot maintains, so much in the contemporary West is predicated on a celebration of competition, with the West being a culture that “sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations,”¹⁴⁵ and extols it as a force for progress. In this context, that a God would stir parallel faiths to compete, as *Al-Hujurat* maintains, for higher levels of moral righteousness fits our climate of opinion.

8. *Defeasible Humility and a Soft Condemnation of Atheism and Agnosticism*

The argument I have advanced supports the conclusion that individuals are presumptively morally irresponsible if they do not seek to acquire moral faith. However, we must hasten to add that there are likely some individuals who can defeat this presumption and live a robust moral life without moral faith. This argument, after all, is a defeasible one. It makes no harsh rebuke of non-believers. It thus potentially can resonate well in the context of our culture of rising disbelief, where explicit or implicit rehashings of Psalm 14:1—that only a fool disbelieves in the rational evidence for God—strike so many as grating and condemnatory, and so fall on rocky soil. Nevertheless, the argument does support just what George Washington, a contemporary

144 “Sufi Orders,” Pew Research Center, September 15, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-sufi-orders/#fn-73945-39>.

145 George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism—the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>

of Kant, counseled of his fellow countrymen: “let us with *caution* indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.”¹⁴⁶

The bold and precarious work of living life morally requires just this care and caution.

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¹⁴⁶ George Washington, “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp, emphasis added.

BOOK REVIEW

Everyday Encounters: Humanizing Dialogue in Theory and Practice

By Hans Gustafson. Fortress Press, 2025. ix + 189 pp. ISBN: 9798889832393. \$30.00 (paperback); \$27.99 (e-book).



Hans Gustafson's pocket paperback begins with a disclaimer, with the author conveying that dialogue is not an area of his practice or strength. Rather, the book began as a chapter in another of the interreligious scholar's projects during the pandemic and US racial reckoning, then grew into a book in its own right. These origins are important to frame what follows as an introduction to dialogue in theory and practice from a perspective of humility, though the author is, of course, the esteemed Director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interreligious Studies at the University of St. Thomas. *Everyday Encounters* marries breadth of exposure to perspectives on dialogue with concision and readability in Gustafson's synthesis and articulation of the aims and methods of dialogue. In doing so, he draws on sources from key dialogue centers, multiple religious and nonreligious traditions, and from Global North and South scholarship.

Organizing the *what*, *why*, and *how* of dialogue into a succinct five chapter guide, Gustafson outlines the sometimes contradictory aims parties can bring to multiple kinds of dialogue, including religious, then explores the nature of dialogue and how it is distinguished from other forms of communication. Additional chapters cover generally agreed-upon ground rules and maxims to “create environments conducive to constructive human connection” (130). The chapter on maxims draws from Patricia Ryan Madson's work in the world of dramatic improvisation before Gustafson closes philosophically on the implications of dialogue. The book's structure, flowing from descriptions of dialogue and its goals to its methods and promising practices, follows a logical sequence for this short intro to the topic. While the inclusion of quips from the world of improv was surprising, it corresponds to the author's desire to humanize the subject. However,

anecdotes with situational guidance from practitioners may have served a more directly relevant function.

As a quick read and pocket guide for the reader first engaging in dialogue or incorporating its practices into everyday encounters with difference, the book lives up to its namesake. By not intending a comprehensive overview of theory or approaches, but a more pragmatic introduction, the author achieved the twin aims of accessibility and utility for a lay reader: *Everyday Encounters* orients the reader to the topic while offering selective footnotes for further exploration. While the book provides an overview of key perspectives and a sampling of methods for the reader to consider alongside their own preferences for dialogue, it is neither positioned nor functions as a systematic review of dialogue theory or practice.

Regarding readership and usage, the book is a helpful tool for those who work in dialogue spaces and desire to provide context for encounters, such as raising the possibility of disparate aims. An included chart that distinguishes dialogue from debate is particularly useful as a preface to dialogue in academic settings. One can imagine the first few chapters appearing on undergraduate syllabi for interreligious and civic engagement courses and suggested as pre-reading for dialogue-oriented events. The practicality of the work makes it likely to be picked up by early career chaplains and interreligious workers while also appealing to a general reader who wishes to increase their awareness of and openness to encounter in everyday life. In this sense, the book very much lives up to its promise. It is a good beginning point for those considering how to approach dialogue together and to surface potential differences in presumed goals and methods, so that these may be discussed and agreed upon in advance.

Along with the benefits this book offers practitioners and the public, there were some missed opportunities. I wished the author would have given more space to the dynamics that can occur in dialogic encounters, both positive and negative, and what can be done to redirect, reframe, or open new possibilities. This would have increased the volume's appeal. Specifically, one common goal of dialogue that the book points to repeatedly is to humanize the other in the service of authentic human connection. Gustafson invokes the mantra, "humanize, humanize, humanize" (80) but falls somewhat short of the subtitle goal to humanize dialogue in theory and practice by not including reference to socially just or decolonizing dialogic practices that lead to greater humanization. The book elevates encounter as a tool for peace but does not speak to the cultural or structural violence inherent in the local or diasporic socioreligious contexts where dialogue takes place. The author recognizes the ubiquity of power dynamics but

focuses on human interconnectedness and each participant's responsibility to seek equality in encounter rather than their responsibility to acknowledge inequality experienced by the other in society as part of a commitment to authentic encounter.

Another missed opportunity was the lack of question prompts at the end of individual chapters or in an appendix, which could be used in a course, multi-day dialogue event, or with a potential dialogue partner. Given the work's brevity, a list of prompts and resources for training or further reading would have been appropriate to include at the end.

Gustafson's book meets the layperson curious to know more about the *what, why, and how* of dialogue to build their understanding of and capacity for skillful everyday encounters. The established dialogue practitioner familiar with the perspectives, centers, and voices referenced is not the intended audience for this book. Instead, the book is a welcome addition as a readable introduction for members of the public curious about dialogue. Practitioners may find it useful in training students and facilitators, complementary to in-house trainings in postures and protocols. There is the possible downside that a brief introduction to dialogue, absent an opportunity to practice and receive feedback, could leave readers feeling overconfident in their knowledge or skill. The author's tone, positionality, and humility mitigate this, as do his pointing to the importance of personal disposition, self-awareness, and empathy along with the need for a lack of self-interest in the outcomes of dialogue. Gustafson's *Everyday Encounters* strikes a delicate balance between appreciation for right motivations, knowledge, and interpersonal skill in this brief introduction to the theory and practice of dialogue.

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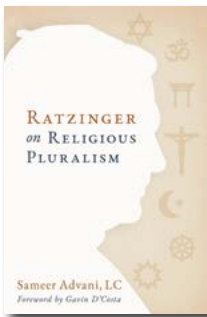


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BOOK REVIEW

Ratzinger on Religious Pluralism

By Sameer Advani, LC. Emmaus Academic, 2024. xviii + 493 pp. ISBN: 978-1-64585-423-4. \$49.95 (hardcover); \$49.95 (e-book).



Optimism that most of humanity will be saved, the possibility of formally recognized groups of Catholics incorporating their Muslim and Buddhist heritages, belief that Neo-Scholasticism is too abstract and impersonal: these may not be what one would expect to find in a book about the views of “God’s rottweiler,” especially one written by a priest of the highly traditional Legion of Christ (349). But then, as Pope Francis said, Catholics believe in “the God of surprises.”¹

This book is adapted from the doctoral dissertation of Fr. Sameer Advani, who teaches theology at the Legion’s university in Rome. Religious diversity is a lifelong interest for Advani, who was raised in Dubai by a Catholic mother and a father who converted to the faith from Hinduism. Advani surveys half a century of Joseph Ratzinger’s (Pope Benedict XVI’s) writings on religious difference, ranging from published scholarship and missives to public addresses and German-language archival materials. He organizes his findings into two parts, the first on modern realities and Christian varieties of religious pluralism, the second detailing Ratzinger’s thoughts on non-Christian religions. Each of these parts is divided into three sections, respectively taking stock of Ratzinger’s phenomenology, philosophy, and theology. Advani also sets out his own reflections under separate headings.

1 Francis, “God of Surprises,” morning meditation, Vatican website, May 8, 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2017/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20170508_god-of-surprises.html

Advani's research and sense of organization are praiseworthy—Part I ends *exactly* halfway through the book. The book shows how Ratzinger earned his reputation as a theological titan; he deftly analyzed thinkers ranging from Radhakrishnan to Immanuel Kant to Karl Barth. In doing so, Advani says Ratzinger arrived at two attitudes. Ratzinger rejected “vertical” pluralism that takes different religions as equally valid paths to salvation, but he embraced a “horizontal” one that appreciates diversity as forming greater unity (14). Vertical pluralism was unacceptable because it conflicts with the Church's particular role in salvation history and its divine mandate to evangelize the world. Horizontal pluralism was necessary because God's love reaches every person and people.

Ratzinger wrestled, then, with the dual evils of religious indifference and religious arrogance. His middle way defended the Church's claims to a privileged position while also saying interreligious dialogue could reshape it. For instance, he credited dialogue with East Asian religions for Catholics' renewed emphasis on interiority and silence. He believed that slowly, lovingly accompanying other religions through history would lead the Church to accept into itself the goodness found in them and so become more truly “catholic.”

This cosmopolitan portrait of Ratzinger may be unfamiliar. After all, in addition to the canine nickname mentioned above, critics called him the “Grand Inquisitor” and even the (nakedly ethnically derogatory) “Panzerkardinal” (17). That says more about the critics than about him. A certain strand of theological liberalism believes itself to be the only acceptable way to navigate human difference, insisting that unless all religions are believed to be equally valid and essentially identical, imperialism and violence will follow. Of course reactionary attitudes exist, in the Catholic Church as elsewhere. But the reduction of every conservative view to rigid narrowness flattens intellectual landscapes. It also does misinformed violence to the reputations of people like Ratzinger, who aimed to synthesize contemporary insights with longer-standing religious commitments.

There are several noteworthy limitations to Advani's book. To address substantive matters first, this study is concerned entirely with Ratzinger. Neither Pope John Paul II nor Pope Francis appears in any detail. Advani relies almost entirely on Ratzinger's glosses in describing other thinkers. While that is a testament to Ratzinger's learning and does keep the focus on how he received others' ideas, it also prevents Advani from doing more than just pointing out where Ratzinger oversimplified others. Advani leaves for future work the ways Ratzinger's thought developed internally over time, placing passages from the 1960s alongside ones up through the

2010s. Advani also believes Ratzinger's thoughts on Judaism and Christian ecumenism require too much separate study to include them.

Most glaringly, Advani restricts himself to the world of words. Pope Benedict XVI delivered an address at the University of Regensburg where he quoted a Byzantine emperor's critique of Islam. Death threats, church burnings, two murders, and many protests followed. The episode receives only brief references here—that is not nearly enough attention.

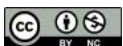
Stylistically, this book could have used more of a post-dissertation tune-up. Many thinkers are referenced only by last name. The book's title is questionable, given that Advani gives multiple definitions of pluralism, some of which Ratzinger rejects in favor of "plurality." Advani also has some literary oddities, like often calling Ratzinger "the German" and translating terms too obliquely. And surely even a celibate cleric could render *autoerotisme spirituel* as something more ... suggestive than "narcissism" (62).

What Advani does render well is his thesis: Ratzinger defended core Catholic convictions while appreciating religious plurality. Surprising though it may be, Advani recovers Ratzinger as an important resource for Catholic engagement with religious diversity.

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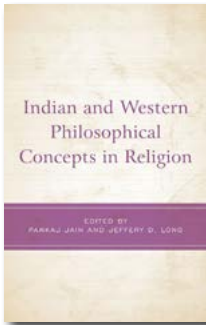
BOOK REVIEW

Indian and Western Philosophical Concepts in Religion

Edited by Pankaj Jain and Jeffery D. Long. Lexington Books, 2023.

Explorations of Indic Traditions: Theological, Ethical, and Philosophical.

172 pp. ISBN: 9781793623164. \$95.00 (hardcover); \$85.50 (e-book).



This book is an important contribution in the unlearning of “imperialism of categories” or the academic practice of imposing concepts on the other that impacts the understanding and professional practice relating to religious studies (1). The exploration of Indic categories, arising from Indic systems, offers alternative theories and methods absolutely necessary in contemporary settings such as chaplaincy and interreligious dialogue. It is important to shift our mindsets from extrapolation (using two points to draw a line assuming that all other points fall on this line) to one of expansion (using deep cases on which meditation, reflection and contemplation can broaden understanding). Thus, learning becomes a model of taking actions that evolve our consciousness in a type of insight described by Al Collins (40–41).

This book adds to a kinship of work that contributes to the decolonization of religious studies by incorporating non-Western perspectives and challenging traditional Western-centric approaches, such as *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* by Tomoko Masuzawa¹ and *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith.²

Seven chapters are organized in two parts. Part one includes chapters one (“The Dialogical and Therapeutic Paradigms in Indian Philosophy”), two (“Samkhya/Yoga as an Indian Religious and Cultural Science”) and three (“The Notion of Play in Gaudiya Vaisnavism”). In Chapter one,

1 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

2 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

Bouthillette explores how dialogue, dialectic, and disputation are an essential methodology of the therapeutic journey of life. In Chapter two, Collins illuminates the importance of seeing enjoyment as both the road to consciousness and the latter's effect. In Chapter three, Olson presents three Western thinkers' notions of play (Huizinga, Turner, and Derrida) and highlights how Kaviraja's Eastern thought brings a missing role of play in renewal and spiritual transformation. These three chapters begin to crack open the metaphorical windows so that fresh air can come in and blow new life into our approaches.

Part two includes chapters four "Dharma: A Short History", five "Anthropology and Religious Studies through Buddhist Lens", six "Non-Reductive Integral Pluralism", and seven "Mahayana Buddhism and the Social Sciences". In Chapter four, Jain demonstrates how Hindus of different backgrounds (different languages, jati/varna, and regions) subscribe to a concept of order with each group (and person in that group) holding a unique understanding of what constates this overall orientation such that a word "dharma" can have over sixteen meanings. In Chapter five, Hongladarom presents an evolution of academic studies through the introduction of the Buddhist teaching of Emptiness, which allows the observer to become one with the observed such that the gap between, for example, anthropologist and phenomenon disappears. In Chapter six, Long helps us engage our humility to turn from hegemonic, reductionism as a methodological approach to complex phenomenon, and rather embrace a multiperspectival and pluralistic approach to truth. In Chapter seven, Clammer explores how the tenets of social science might change if we began with the concept of dependent co-arising rather than independent individualism, and is a requisite as current social sciences are failing to deliver equality, social justice and ecologically responsible systems. These four chapters each made me cry out "yes!" and at one point clap my hands so loud my officemates asked me what I was reading that freed such spontaneous expression.

In conclusion, all the authors are held by the editors in a playful dialogue that engages words, energy, concepts and mind-body-spirit-soul to allow the reader to expand rather than extrapolate, to grow dynamically in consciousness rather than drawing straight lines through concepts as if they are static. There are many beautiful insights that will open up your thinking to add new perspectives to religious studies and reinterpret concepts beyond "mental categories only" (90).

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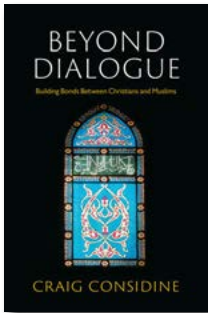


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BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Dialogue: Building Bonds Between Christians and Muslims

By Craig Considine. Polity Press, 2025. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5095-5528-4.
\$24.95 (paperback); \$20.00 (e-book).



Craig Considine is a Roman Catholic sociologist at Rice University with an enduring interest in interfaith dialogue. In this latest book, he uses the acronym DEUCE to outline five principles (Dialogue, Education, Understanding, Commitment, Engagement) that he describes as a “mechanism to build more bonds between Christians and Muslims, and subsequently between the West and the Ummah” (2).

The book is structured thoughtfully, with each of seven chapters focused on a geographic region: the Arabian Peninsula, Europe, Asia Minor, South Asia, Africa, the United States, and Israel and Palestine. He includes a short summary of key historical events and factors impacting Muslim-Christian relations in those regions. Each chapter is titled with a single word beginning with the letter “H”: humanity, hybridity, heterogeneity, honor, harmony, healing, and holiness. The author uses the title as a key concept for examining the relevant issues and advancing the state of Muslim-Christian relations.

Each chapter is divided into three parts, corresponding to three paradigms through which to view the kinds of Muslim-Christian engagement happening in the region addressed in the chapter. The first part, “Clash of Civilizations,” highlights examples of conflict, oppression, or injustice between Christians and Muslims. In the second part, “Dialogue of Civilizations,” the author highlights examples of mutual understanding and relational connections across Muslim and Christian communities. And in the third part, Considine gives examples of what he calls the “Synthesis of Civilizations,” which he describes as cooperation and “civic synthesis” among Muslims and Christians to “create a new kind of community” that aspires to more than mere mutual understanding.

The careful structure adds to the usefulness of the book for future reference and commends it as a worthy addition to reading lists for students and interested readers. Sometimes, however, the author seems to be a victim of his rigid structure. By insisting on using an “H” word as the title and key sociological concept for each chapter, he has to interpret or apply those concepts in ways that sometimes feel awkwardly shoe-horned to fit the context. For example, he applies the term “holiness” in a way that just seems synonymous with his “DEUCE” perspective. The ideas in the chapter are valuable, but they fit awkwardly under the heading of holiness, a concept which otherwise has a robust history of usage in both Muslim and Christian literature.

Considine thinks of his “Synthesis of Civilizations” as a unique contribution to the field of Muslim-Christian engagement. While his use of that term may be unique, promoting greater degrees of collaboration and cooperation between Muslim and Christian communities, particularly in civic and social spheres, and in a way that deeply influences both communities, is not a novel approach or goal in the world of interreligious engagement. The content of those sections in each chapter is encouraging, as the author cites examples of this kind of cooperation, and his insights about the possibility of future engagement are also worth considering.

It is admirable that Considine rejects a “syncretistic” approach to dialogue and is explicit about not promoting a synthetic new religious system composed of a blend between Muslim and Christian doctrines and practices. However, his use of “pluralism” as a religious term is somewhat ambiguous, at least from a philosophy of religion perspective. He describes pluralism as a step beyond “tolerance” and goes on to characterize it as the “process whereby human beings of diverse backgrounds embark upon the ‘energetic engagement’ with religious diversity” (4). Seeking out experiences of cultural diversity and “engaging energetically” with people of different faiths is a crucial virtue for participants in interreligious dialogue. And pluralism is sometimes used to mean just that kind of engagement. However, I think it is important to distinguish it from the more technical philosophical and theological context where religious pluralism refers to an epistemological claim that more than one set of religious propositions or systems can have equal claim to truthfulness, even when they appear to contradict one another. That kind of religious pluralism is sometimes taken as a precondition for interfaith dialogue, which undermines the potential value of dialogue, since a vast majority of Christians and Muslims will never be religious pluralists. I think Considine’s thesis is consistent with a “confessional” approach to dialogue that doesn’t require Muslims and

Christians to abandon the conviction that their respective religious systems are uniquely true; and it may be helpful for him to make that distinction or even include a more theological refutation of “syncretism” and (this kind of) religious pluralism.

The historical overview of each geographical region is informative and successfully inspires hopefulness for greater degrees of understanding and cooperation among Muslims and Christians. Having lived in Turkey and Cyprus for many years and studied the political and religious landscape of those places, I am more qualified to weigh in on those sections. I heartily agree with the author’s criticism of Erdoğan, although I think he doesn’t go far enough in exposing how detrimental his regime has been to religious freedom.¹ The murder of a Catholic priest,² an Armenian journalist,³ and three Protestant Christians⁴ in recent years reveal inadequate systems of protection and justice and alarming levels of government cover-up and collusion. Since 2016 hundreds of foreign Christians have been targeted and deported as “threats to national security” simply for associating with Turkish Protestant churches or organizations. This includes non-Turkish Christians who are married to Turks.⁵ The author’s treatment of the Gülen movement might also benefit from a bit more nuance. It is undeniable that Erdoğan served the Gülenists up as a convenient scapegoat after the failed coup attempt in 2016, but it also seems evident that prominent members of the movement were, in fact, involved in the attempted coup; and in the years leading up to those events Gülen seemed eager to leverage his religious

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- 1 See: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Country Update: Turkey (Türkiye): Religious Freedom Conditions in Turkey*, by Susan Bishai. Y 3.R 27:19/T 84/, 1095-A-06, Government Publishing Office, 2024. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/2024%20Turkey%20Country%20Update_0.pdf.
 - 2 “Priest’s murder sparks press anguish,” *BBC News* February 7, 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4689172.stm>
 - 3 “Turkey: ex-police heads jailed over 2007 journalist killing,” *AP News*, March 26, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-police-journalists-istanbul-trials-fe8185f3e04b8294d90fe6951de5b4>
 - 4 “Turkish police probe Bible killings amid shock,” *Reuters*, August 9, 2007. <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/turkish-police-probe-bible-killings-amid-shock-idUSL1975999/>
 - 5 See the US State Department’s 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, *Turkey (Türkiye) 2023 International Religious Freedom Report*. Government Publishing Office, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/>

influence for political power.⁶ At the conclusion of the book, Considine announces that he has joined an organization founded by Enes Kanter Freedom, a Turkish-background former NBA player in the United States who has also been open about his affiliation with the Gülen movement in the past.⁷ An unqualified endorsement of that movement isn't likely to engender trust among the majority of Turkish Muslims.

Similarly, the section about Cyprus could benefit from more nuance, particularly from a Turkish Cypriot perspective. The author distinguishes between "Christian Cypriots" and "Muslim Turks" on the island as if the Turkish Cypriot population is somehow less legitimately "Cypriot" than their ethnically Greek counterparts (74). A vast majority of Greek Cypriots are happy to acknowledge that they share a common Cypriot identity with Turkish Cypriots who have been on the island for centuries. A few pages later the author does use the term "Muslim Cypriot," presumably to refer to Turkish Cypriots, but again the term is insufficient, since there are many Turkish Cypriots who are also Christian. For residents of the island, the choice of vocabulary is a matter of no small importance. Similarly, the author sides unambiguously with the Greek Cypriot version of events surrounding the division of the island in 1974 and characterizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as "belonging to Turkey" (76). Citizens of the TRNC would almost unanimously (and correctly) reject that characterization, and this chapter would likely alienate a Muslim audience in Cyprus. The "Synthesis of Civilizations" section of this chapter is excellent, however, and offers a helpful overview of some key issues and events while also providing fodder for fruitful discussion and development.

One of the most encouraging elements of the book is the author's willingness to recognize the minority Christian populations in the regions he highlights in each chapter. He directly addresses the persecution and oppression of Christians around the world and takes seriously the often small and embattled communities of local Christians who have converted from Muslim backgrounds. And, of course, he has an equally direct and honest approach to the history of discrimination and exploitation of Muslims in places like the United States.

6 Leela Jacinto, "Gülen admits meeting key figure in Turkey coup plot, dismisses Erdogan's 'senseless' claims," *France24*, July 18, 2017. <https://www.france24.com/en/20170718-gulen-admits-meeting-key-man-turkey-coup-plot-dismisses-erdogan-senseless-claims>

7 "NBA star Enes Kanter cuts ties with family over Gülen," *BBC News*, August 9, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37024429>

Considine's book is overwhelmingly successful in providing an overview and a way forward for Muslim-Christian engagement, notwithstanding the need for more nuance in the sections mentioned above. Detail and nuance are difficult to capture in a book with such a broad scope and this volume will undoubtedly be helpful to readers as an introduction and as a reference.

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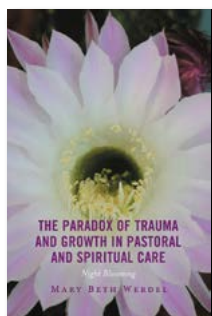


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BOOK REVIEW

The Paradox of Trauma and Growth in Pastoral and Spiritual Care: Night Blooming

By Mary Beth Werdel. Lexington Books, 2024. Emerging Perspectives in Pastoral Theology and Care. xv + 113 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4985-1993-9. \$90.00 (hardcover); \$81.00 (e-book).



Dr. Mary Beth Werdel, director of the Mental Health Counseling and Spiritual Integration and Pastoral Care programs at Fordham University, continues her long-standing research on posttraumatic growth (PTG) using her analogy of night blooming. Her scholarship explores the intersection of spirituality and wellbeing during times of loss, stress, and trauma. In this 2024 publication, Werdel asks a deeply human question: *how do we confront suffering when we don't know what to say?*

Originally introduced in the 1990s by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, the concept of PTG refers to the possibility of positive psychological change following trauma. Werdel frames PTG as a paradox, the tension between trauma and growth, and offers a compassionate, research-informed perspective aimed at pastors, psychologists, clinicians, caregivers, and all who practice deep listening. She writes, “[W]hile pain and suffering are not the thesis statement of life, the space where suffering, spirituality, and growth meet can be a liminal space ...” (x).

Her central aim is to explore this paradox, drawing attention to both the barriers and pathways to PTG, and the ways in which spiritual and religious frameworks can either enrich or hinder that process. Early in the book, she challenges spiritual caregivers who have, in her view, outsourced knowledge of trauma to counselors and psychologists. In turn, she urges mental health professionals not to dismiss the spiritual dimension of care. “[There] must be at least a knowledge of both areas,” she writes, “so that caregivers do no harm” (xii).

In chapter one, Werdel begins with trauma itself, insisting that the study of trauma is not just important, it's an ethical imperative. She unpacks the definitions and impacts of trauma, emphasizing its effects on the body and relationships. Chapter two explores the concept of paradox. Drawing on second-wave positive psychology, she highlights the complexity of emotions, and warns against three key risks in misunderstanding PTG: oversimplifying the search for meaning, narrowing definitions of wellbeing, and undermining resilience. Chapter three introduces the book's central metaphor, night blooming. Like rare flowers that bloom only in darkness, PTG is portrayed as a process that often unfolds slowly and quietly, under difficult conditions. This imagery carries into chapter four, where Werdel explores how lived experiences of religion and spirituality shape the PTG process. The final chapter, "Witnessing the Night Bloom," offers guidance for those who accompany others through trauma. Here, Werdel insists that engaging the paradox of PTG is "less of a skill to be learned and more a way of thinking to nurture within the professional listener" (74).

Drawing from over 30 years of PTG research, as well as her own clinical and academic experience, Werdel delivers a compelling and necessary read for caregivers across disciplines. She substantially succeeds in her goal: to show that paradox is not something to be resolved, but embraced, that psychology and spirituality are intertwined in the human search for meaning.

With clarity and depth, she demonstrates how interpersonal, intrapersonal, and systemic factors shape the possibility of growth after trauma. The result is a book that leaves readers with a renewed perspective and a practical, trauma-informed approach to care. One that is as deeply human as it is hopeful.

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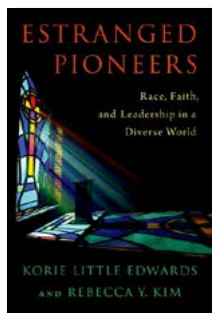


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BOOK REVIEW

Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World

By Korie Little Edwards and Rebecca Y. Kim. Oxford University Press, 2024. ix + 204 pp. ISBN: 9780197638309. \$30.99 (hardcover); \$15.99 (e-book).



Good research sheds light on some questions and raises others where further study is needed. This book does both of these things. Edwards and Kim conducted extensive interviews of senior pastors of multiracial churches across the United States. Though limited to Christian congregations, their study has implications for religious leaders in other faiths and those who lead interreligious organizations. Both ecumenism and multifaith work, after all, require us to confront racism.

Denominations often celebrate how multiethnic and multicultural they are, but Edwards and Kim emphasize that “heading a multiracial church is difficult for all pastors, regardless of their race, religious affiliation, or other identities” (3). This work takes a toll on them, and pastors of color pay an additional cost: they are welcomed less warmly than white clergy, supported less by their home churches, less often assumed to be trained and competent, and expected to conform to white culture. For women, it is doubly hard: one female pastor reports that she finds it harder to be accepted as a clergywoman than as someone who is Black.

Edwards and Kim find this pattern consistently, regardless of the ethnicity of either cleric or congregants, despite the fact that they also find pastors of color are better prepared to bridge divisions and minister in settings different from their backgrounds: they have had to develop greater multicultural competency than white peers to make it through school. The authors argue persuasively that this experience and the disproportionate burdens borne by clergy of color make them “estranged pioneers” in multiracial ministry.

The authors also identify dynamics that we should all consider in cross-ethnic relationships. Pastors of color usually come from communities that accord them high status and expect their flocks to do what they say; white people often resent pastors they perceive as dictatorial and do not typically show parsons the same respect. When I headed to seminary, people asked my mother, “Couldn’t he do better?”

Pastors of multiracial congregations, the authors point out, are often desperate to find supportive peers and mentors who understand the challenges they face. What they often find, however, is that white laity presume that they have the right to criticize, judge, and correct clergy, which leaders of color resent. As, I would add, do most white parsons, even if we have come to expect it. Whether in congregations or interreligious settings, we all would do well to temper how we disagree with leaders, lodge complaints, and offer unsolicited advice.

This book makes important contributions but is confusing at times. It is misleading to say, “mainline Protestant pastors and Catholic priests are assigned to their congregations by denominational leaders, superintendents, directors, or bishops” (19). This is not the process for Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Reformed, United Church of Christ (UCC), or many other mainline clergy. They associate a congregational call system with evangelicalism, which hardly fits the UCC, and argue that it gives clergy “greater agency when choosing the type of congregations they want to lead” (40). Really? Perhaps to the extent that the marketplace allows. My seminary classmates went wherever they could find a job, and women and people of color had less choice than I did.

Edwards and Kim conclude that “multiracial churches are products of white Christian hegemony” (153), without having offered any proof. Perhaps such congregations are shaped by the dominant culture, but does this mean that they perpetuate white dominance? Is this the case where Christianity was planted by people of color, such as the United Methodist congregations I served in Hawai‘i, founded by Japanese missionaries? Is it true of diverse congregations in historically Black denominations? The church where I currently worship certainly has been changed for the better by Black clergy who have led it. Could not multiracial congregations undermine racism?

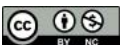
This study suggests additional topics that are ripe for exploration. How do the initial misunderstandings and adjustments faced by clergy of color in new positions compare with the “shakedown cruise” in any new pastorate? (We sometimes joke in my denomination that it takes a year for a new pastor and the congregation to get to know each other—and another two to get

over it.) The authors ask pastors what attracted them to multiracial work and why they stick with it but not what gives them joy and hope, what they have learned from parishioners of other cultures, or how this ministry has helped them to grow. It also would be fascinating to learn how leaders of other faith communities navigate ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. The astonishing diversity of many mosques and Bahá'í spiritual assemblies suggests they may have something to teach the rest of us.

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